Media technologies of the family:
Parental anxieties, practices and knowledges in the digital age

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Abstract

Children and young people’s use of digital media technologies has predominantly been framed in terms of risk, generating a collective anxiety typically expressed through media panics, ‘cyber safety’ information and ‘good parenting advice’ discourse. At the same time, discourses of opportunity frame the purported benefits and competitive advantages afforded by digital media and technologies, especially with respect to young people’s education and future job prospects. This study problematises the relations between the discursive formations of risk and opportunities with respect to children’s use of digital media and parents’ related perspectives, practices and knowledges, and social constructions of the ‘good’ parent who is ‘responsibilised’ for negotiating this tension. It reports on a qualitative analysis of 40 parents of children aged 12-16 to examine their anxieties, practices, knowledges and expectations in relation to their children’s digital media use. It draws on a number of theoretical influences from communications and media studies and parenting literature to critically interrogate popular discourses including those related to ‘media panics’ and the ‘good parent’. This study found that participants’ concerns were framed in terms of a tension between their children’s socio-biological and socio-technological development. Participants assessed the ‘appropriateness’ or not of their children’s activities in terms of whether or not it posed a threat to or an opportunity for their children’s ‘normal’ development. Participants established their own ‘hierarchies of value’, drawing on several criteria, to determine the implicit value and hence appropriateness or not of certain activities.

This dissertation develops two distinct models of parenting to better understand the complexities of parents’ anxieties, practices and knowledges in negotiating the tension between minimising risks while maximising opportunities. The majority of parents adopted an ‘immersive’ style of parenting, immersing themselves in their children’s lives and embracing notions of trust, dialogue and child empowerment. Other parents adopted a ‘methodised’ approach involving adherence to a more structured set of rules and regulations. The primary contribution of this thesis is to problematise simplistic understandings of ‘good’ parenting in the digital age by uncovering the ways that parents themselves have developed their family practices to rely primarily on trust and communication as a way of minimising the risks while maximising the opportunities afforded by digital media technologies.
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the forty parents who gave up their time to discuss their parenting anxieties, concerns, hopes and fears. The candid accounts and experiences so generously shared by parents — some of which were deeply personal — provided the foundations for a rich and nuanced exploration of an issue routinely framed one dimensionally in the media and public discussion. I hope that this work provides some comfort that they are not alone in addressing the challenges of parenting in the digital age.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank Glenda Jeffery, Kerry Deans and Ian Jeffery for their regular child care support, which helped me successfully juggle the competing demands of work, study and parenting. To my own family: Anna, Phil, Andrew and Helen Page, thank you for your ongoing interest, support and belief in me. Special thanks to Dad for copy-editing this thesis (twice) and for his helpful feedback and suggestions.

I’m very lucky to have had assistance and encouragement from a number of knowledgeable and supportive colleagues. Dr Caroline Fisher provided detailed suggestions and feedback on my draft. Professor Deborah Lupton has been a valuable mentor throughout the process, providing guidance, encouragement, and advice as well as friendship. Extra special thanks go to Associate Professor Glen Fuller, in particular for his impressive and ruthless editing skills which helped me to focus my argument and let go of a lot of excess material. Glen went above and beyond in his duty as primary supervisor, and I thank him for his forthright feedback, guidance, encouragement, tolerance, and his continued commitment to my success.

Acknowledgement of previous work

I undertook research at the beginning of my doctoral studies about the sexualised self-representation practices of teenage girls online, which was my original research topic. My research focus changed, however, as a result of early focus group findings. This earlier work, while referred to throughout this thesis, is not reproduced substantively below. It has been published independently in the journal ‘Feminist Media Studies’ (see Page Jeffery, 2017) .

Dedication

To my husband, David Jeffery, thank you for not being like most other husbands. Without your genuine commitment to sharing the parenting and domestic load, this thesis would simply not have been possible. Your patience, encouragement, and love during the years it took to complete this thesis kept me going right until the end.
To my beautiful daughters, Eve and Harriet, I commenced this thesis when you were both still so little, and much of the time I spent researching and writing it could have been time spent with you. I hope, however, that what I have learned in the process will make me a better, and less anxious parent, in the future.

A note on terminology

This thesis uses a number of terms repeatedly throughout which could be referred to in a number of ways. First, in referring to the various devices and technologies discussed by participants I use the terms ‘digital media’ and ‘digital media technologies’. In referring to digital media generally I follow the definition set out by Livingstone, Mascheroni, Dreier, Chaudron, and Lagae (2015, p. 4) which refers ‘to the array of domestic and personal digital and networked devices for information, communication and entertainment’.

My study focused on the concerns of parents of teenagers aged 12-16, however there are times throughout this thesis where I refer to children younger than this, and also refer to ‘adolescents’ and ‘teenagers’. I hope it is clear where I am making distinctions between different age groups, however in instances where I am talking about children under the age of 18 more generally, I refer to them as children and young people. Of course, to parents, their own children will always be their ‘children’ and have been referred to as such.

Participants in my study were all parents. They have been referred to throughout as ‘participants’, ‘parents in my study’ and in some cases, just ‘parents’.
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Introduction

CPJ: Are you influenced by what you hear about in the media? You get little media panics around certain issues – it might be sexting, it might be cyberbullying.

Anna: We’re informed anyway… we tend to find those things are a bit of a beat-up. It’s not that the problem isn’t real, but when you sensationalise it, it’s not helpful.

Anna¹, a 44 year-old mother of a 13 year-old son and 17 year-old daughter, was one of 40 parents of teenagers who agreed to share their anxieties, concerns, knowledges and practices in relation to their children’s use of digital media technologies as part of this study. Some parents shared their concerns and experiences openly in one of the five focus groups that I conducted. Others, like Anna, spoke at length during a one-on-one semi-structured interview with me at a local café. Anna’s response was not unusual. Many parents responded to my questions about the risks purportedly posed by digital media technologies to children and young people in a similar way. While very few dismissed the risks entirely, it was clear that many acknowledged (either explicitly or implicitly) the often exaggerated and ‘sensationalised’ character of media coverage about young people and digital media technologies. The majority of parents did, however, frame their responses in terms of the ambiguity and ambivalence towards their children’s digital media use, reflecting a range of complex, nuanced and at times contradictory perspectives and concerns.

In a larger context, children and young people’s use of media has been a perennial focus of media attention and media panics. Recent headlines warn of the purported risks of digital media technologies, and include: ‘Excessive screen time the enemy of happy families’ (Raggatt, 2016); ‘Screen addiction is taking a toll on children’ (Brody, 2015); ‘Cyber-bullying epidemic’ (Scarr, 2018); and ‘Online evil rife in schools’ (Bita, 2018). From earlier concerns about the potential effects of television due to exposure to violence, sex and other ‘inappropriate’ content, to more contemporary concerns about screen ‘addiction’, online predators, cyberbullying, ‘sexting’ and internet pornography, the purported risks of media to young people are many and varied.

¹ Not her real name. All participants’ names, and those of their children, cited throughout this dissertation have been changed to protect their privacy.
Anna’s response above is representative of how part of this study’s research object emerged as the focus groups and interviews progressed. It became clear that parents’ actual concerns were complex and their responses reflected the ambiguity of their knowledges and anxieties about parenting in the digital age. This research project was initially concerned with parental concerns about girls’ practices of sexualised self-representation online, including ‘sexting’ 2, and the apparent collective anxieties about these kinds of practices that media panics were mobilising. It quickly became apparent, however, that parents weren’t as concerned about this issue as the mass media were suggesting they should be. And while media panics did not appear to be wholly benign in their effects, many parents were, if not dismissive, somewhat resistant to them.

There is a long history of concerns, anxieties and moral panics (Cohen, 2002) about children’s use of media, and these panics have served as catalysts for bringing children’s media use into the public eye (Drotner & Livingstone, 2008), and illuminating the potential social effects of media. The construction of children as a ‘protected species’ — innocent, corruptible and at risk — renders them especially vulnerable to the supposedly pernicious effects of new media and digital technologies, and parents are tasked with governing their children’s activities and behaviours so as to mediate the potential effects. Collective anxieties about children’s relationship with media have been expressed in numerous ways over the decades: through ‘media panics’ (Drotner, 1992, 1999) that typically play out within the mass media; popular discourse (for example, popular books and public commentary); and government attention to particular issues which usually takes the form of policy initiatives that seek to address these concerns.

‘Parenting’ generates a huge amount of popular material. The broader cultural and discursive context for this project was not only framed in terms of moral and media panics (Cohen, 2002; Drotner, 1992) and anxieties but also the popular knowledges and public debates and materials, that emerged in response. Intertwined throughout the broader discursive context is scholarly research, which is often drawn on to inform contemporary debates, policy initiatives, practical advice, toolkits and other resources to help young people navigate the risks and opportunities afforded by digital media technologies. For example, in addition to child and adolescent-centred cyber-safety material, there exists a body of cyber-safety advice

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2 ‘Sexting’ is the practice of sending sexual photos, messages, or videos to another person, typically via a mobile telephone. The term has been in use for more than 10 years, but has changed from referring to text-based exchanges to now including sexual photographs and videos (Albury, Funnell, & Noonan, 2010).
and materials aimed at parents to help them ameliorate the risks of digital media in relation to their own children. At the same time, however, discourses framing the benefits and opportunities afforded by the same technologies suggest that parents need to embrace digital media to ensure their children’s educational success.

Substantial government resources, in Australia at least, are directed towards addressing parental concerns and helping them navigate digital media use in the home, and ‘good’ parents are expected to manage their children’s digital media use to minimise risk while maximising opportunity. If cyber safety resources and advice created specifically for parents fail to resonate with parents’ actual anxieties, knowledges and lived experiences, however, it is unlikely that parents will make much use of them. This indicates a pressing need for research in this area.

The rest of the introductory chapter problematises the ‘good’ parent in the context of children’s use of and access to media technology, and the relationship between parents’ actual concerns and the dominant risk discourse and moral panics, so as to frame an initial investigation of the ‘responsibilisation’ of parenting in the context of competing discourses of ‘good’ parenting. Problematisation broadly defined is ‘an endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of what is ready known’ (Foucault, 1985, p. 9). My broad aim is thus to question the underlying assumptions regarding children and technology (typically made visible via competing discourses of risk and opportunity), and parental responses to them. Problematisation is often understood as a process of social construction (Best, 1993a, 1993b, 1995, 2001; Figert, 1996; Loseke, 1999 cited in Lee 2014). My study problematises the relations between the discursive formations of risk and opportunities with respect to children’s use of digital media and parents’ related perspectives, practices and knowledges, and social constructions of the ‘good’ parent.

Taking into account this context of an initial research interest in moral panics about media technologies and the broader discursive context of popular and research literature pitched as a response, this thesis turns to parents’ own accounts to identify and explore parental anxieties and concerns, including the apparent source of these anxieties (for example, moral panics/public discourse or the everyday lived experiences with their children); how they address these concerns, and the kinds of knowledges generated by parents in negotiating these challenges with their children. As this introduction shall argue and set up for exploration in the rest of the thesis, the accounts provided by parents in this study
demonstrate that ‘good’ parenting is a not a case of doing the ‘right’ thing as much as it is a process of navigating the tensions between the competing and at time contradictory expectations placed on them.

**Problematising the ‘good’ parent**

Parenting has traditionally been distinguished from the practice of child-rearing, and has been understood in terms of protecting children from harm and nurturing, stimulating and socialising the child (Furedi, 2002). The verb ‘to parent’ is relatively new, and interest in the practice of parenting has escalated within the context of a broader shift in the sociocultural context in which parents raise their children (Lee, 2014). Many scholars agree that contemporary discursive constructions of ‘good’ parenting have expanded the expectations placed upon parents so that they are tasked not only with protecting their children from harm, but increasingly with ensuring that they reach their full potential (Faircloth, 2014; Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Furedi, 2002; Hays, 1998; Nelson, 2010).

Shifts in the construction of ‘good’ parenting are also linked to media and technological change. In part, this is about actual changes to technology and their affordances, but it also refers to different ways of understanding technology as a result of discourses of technological innovation framed in terms of opportunity. For example, Willett (2015) points out that ‘good’ parents were expected to limit their children’s exposure to ‘commercial’ television content while attending to their children’s educational needs within the home. Sesame Street, she argues, was a quintessential example of ‘good’ television because it was not commercial and was explicitly educational. Complicating this was the stated original goal of Sesame Street to ‘master the addictive qualities of television and do something good with them’ (M. Davis, 2008, p. 8). Livingstone (2017, p. 3) explicitly acknowledges the competing discourses of risk and opportunity in relation to young people’s use of digital media technologies and its effects on parents, suggesting that ‘[D]igital media somehow intensify parental hopes, fears and ambivalences about risks and opportunities, now and for the future’.

The rapid acquisition of internet-enabled PCs throughout Australian homes in the 1990s and the discourse that accompanied these technological changes left little doubt that it is the (‘good’) parents’ responsibility to regulate and manage their children’s digital media use. A media analysis of newspaper articles about the internet in the late 1990s revealed that parents were expected to take responsibility for mitigating the dangers of the internet to children and young people (Turow, 1999), and those that are seen to shirk their responsibilities are
subjected to judgement and blame. Parenting has thus become a highly moralised affair (Faircloth & Murray, 2015). The comments sections of parenting blogs are replete with criticisms — usually from other parents who consider themselves much more assiduous in this regard — heaping judgement and blame on the actions of parents-at-fault. In addition to government regulators and cyber safety organisations, the media, and other parents, it seems that even children themselves think that it’s the job of their parents to monitor and regulate their own media and technology use through setting limits and rules (Vaterlaus, Beckert, Tulane, & Bird, 2014). Parents and carers therefore bear the brunt of responsibility for enacting and enforcing much of the cyber safety advice, guidelines and recommendations within the domestic sphere.

Dominant discourses about young people and technology represent antinomies that have been constructed by technology evangelists and dissenters (Thomas, 2011), and have been variously referred to as eliciting mild euphoria vs panic (Buckingham, 2007), or optimism vs pessimism (Drotner, 1992). Buckingham (2013, pp. 7-8) is critical of these polarised approaches whereby the discussion oscillates between ‘moral panic and wild euphoria’. He argues:

On the one hand the internet is portrayed as a repository for paedophiles and pornography (along with the occasional terrorist). On the other, it is seen to be all about creativity, liberation and empowerment. Similarly, computer games are either a provocation to violence and a form of mindless ‘dumbing down’, or they are a wonderful new tool for learning. The public debate about these issues often shifts awkwardly between these two registers, with both making alarmist overinflated claims that have little basis in evidence.

Parents are tasked therefore with managing the use of digital media technologies in the home so as to protect their children from the myriad risks and dangers said to be posed by them, while simultaneously harnessing their purported opportunities and benefits.

Parenting and the ‘knowledge gap’

Parents are often contradictorily positioned in popular discourse. Sometimes they are portrayed as quasi-victims as a result of their assumed ignorance, other times they are portrayed as partly responsible due to a perceived lack of knowledge about the potential

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3 Clark (2013) cites the example of the comments section of the New York Times blog Motherlode for examples of how quickly parents judge the parenting practices and philosophies of others. Similarly, Bragg and Buckingham (2013) discuss the UK media ‘blaming the moronic mothers’ (p 4) in response to the alleged sexualisation of children, a topic that was fiercely debated throughout the Anglophone West in the early 2000s.
harm which renders them unable to protect their child from them. This contradiction is often expressed through moral panic discourse, which frames digital risk issues in terms of a deficit in parental (as well as child) knowledge. Thus sometimes parents are seen as the solution, sometimes they are seen as part of the problem (Bragg & Buckingham, 2013). Media panics often focus on tragic events, such as a suicide allegedly due to cyberbullying, to highlight the purportedly grave dangers of certain online practices, and deploy police, educators, child ‘experts’ and other figures of authority as a rhetorical strategy to provide cautionary tales to parents and children alike, emphasising the potentially dire (although usually statistically unlikely) consequences of practices such as sexting, cyberbullying or engaging with strangers online. Media reports often serve to provide the necessary risk-related information to parents, thereby seeking to address the presumed knowledge deficit, and implicitly tasking them with managing the risks of digital media to their children.

The notion of a ‘knowledge gap’ between older and younger generations, including parents and their children, is one that is in part constructed and sustained through public discourse about young people and technology. The discourse of ‘media generations’ frames the challenges and problems of use in terms of knowledge and expertise about how to use and access media technology. The original conceptualisation involved the idea of children and teenagers being more knowledgeable, and in possession of far greater expertise, about all things digital compared to their parents. The observation that generations are no longer defined by war or depression but by media use continues to ring true (Buckingham, 2006; Wark, 1993). For example, Tapscott (2009) referred to young people born in the 1980s and 1990s as the ‘net generation’, and the term ‘iGeneration’ has been used to describe those children born in the 1990s, so called because of their use of iPhones, iPods, iPads and other similar technologies (Waldron, 2012). Generational discourses premised on digital media frame children both positively and negatively in terms of their digital media use and expertise, yet conceptualisations of older generations (including parents) appear more static. Tapscott (1998, pp. 1-2) conceptualised parents as ignorant, and ‘reeling from the challenges of raising confident, plugged-in, and digital savvy children who know more about technology than they do’. This common (mis)conceptualisation is compounded by a more general presumption of parental incompetence which has a history pre-dating the 1970s (Lee, 2014).

Despite these assertions about the generational divide with respect to digital media being several years (in some case, decades) old, the notion of a generational gap nonetheless remains. Popular discourse assumes that parents lack knowledge about what their children do
online, including the kinds of apps and social media platforms they are using, the internet sites they are visiting, their online behaviours and the potential risks of their behaviours. Teenage children, on the other hand, are taken to be knowledgeable about digital media and assumed to possess the required expertise to navigate various online environments, including the internet, social media and online gaming, from various devices, but are assumed to lack knowledge about the risks and consequences of their online behaviours. Susan Mclean (2014, pp. 2-3), (who calls herself ‘Cybercop’) one of Australia’s most well-known cyber safety ‘experts’, in her guide to help parents navigate digital media, argues:

Our children are digital natives, born into a world where they are constantly surrounded by it. They cannot imagine life before mobile phones, iPad or the internet… While kids today are supremely tech-savvy, we shouldn’t confuse this with actual knowledge, an understanding of dangers and risks, cognitive development and maturity. Your children will most probably leave you for dead when it comes to tech use, but what you can assist them with is real knowledge about what cyberspace is, what happens there, how to identify and deal with problems, how to stay safe and how to use some basic common sense.

Generational discourses predicated on technology use are problematic for three key reasons. First, they adhere to an overly simplistic homogenising logic which paints entire generations with the same brush without accounting for diverse practices and backgrounds. Second, they typically adopt a technologically determinist view, an approach which has long been criticised within the academic literature for oversimplifying and overstating the effects of technology (Buckingham, 2006). As Buckingham (2006) argues, these changes are seen to be produced by technology, and do not take into account the social, historical and cultural factors which shape technology use. Third, such discourses tend to construct a firm binary between old and new forms of media (such as television and the internet), whereas old and new media come to co-exist, with new media rarely entirely displacing the old (Buckingham, 2006).

The contradictory positioning of parents in relation to their children’s use of digital media highlights a dichotomy between the figure of the powerful, agentic parent who is able to (and therefore must) exert an authoritarian command and control style of parenting to mitigate risk, and the figure of the relatively powerless, permissive parent struggling against the broader forces of consumerism, sexualisation and technological change. It is a dichotomy that exists in tension with contemporary parenting discourse, which denounces both authoritarian and permissive styles of parenting, espousing instead an authoritative parenting style, characterised by responsiveness, warmth, trust and dialogue (Clark, 2013; Nelson, 2010).
There are two main ways this dichotomy is articulated in discourses relating to parenting: Either in terms of an ‘absence’ in the social relationships underpinning parenting, with either the parents or the children (young or teenagers) absent, or in terms of a generational divide not only between socio-biological generations within a family but also generations of media users.

‘Responsibilisation’ of parenting

Parents are tasked with developing their own understanding and knowledge-based practices for mediating their children’s media technology access and use. Sue Palmer (2006, p. 18) argues in her popular book, *Toxic Childhood*:

Responsibility for rearing children lies, as it always has, with parents. They have to wise up, stop being paralysed by a combination of rapid change, uncertainty and guilt, and concentrate on providing a secure, healthy environment in which their children can grow.

Palmer’s text is an example of what theorists of governmentality describe as ‘responsibilisation’, which has been described as:

\[\text{[P]rocesses of individualisation and standardisation ... [that] incite and encourage the ‘individual as enterprise’ to conduct themselves in accordance with the appropriate (or approved) model of action (Burchell, 1993, p. 29).}\]

With respect to parenting this entails displacing the burden of mitigating the risks to children downward, usually to individual parents, or even children themselves (Oswell, 2008). Within the current context, the increasing complexities and difficulties associated with digital media regulation have meant that the regulation of children’s access to the internet has effectively been devolved to parents under the rubric of ‘media literacy’ (Livingstone & Bober, 2006) and ‘cyber safety’ education. Australian legislation and policy related to digital media and the internet acknowledges the inherent difficulties and thus limitations of government regulation (Roberts, 1995-96), and tasks the Australian Office of the eSafety Commissioner with disseminating online safety information and educational materials to help Australian families manage online risk themselves (*Enhancing Online Safety Act, 2015*). Oswell (2008) suggests that the devolution of regulatory authority downward is indicative of ‘privatisation’ and ‘responsibilisation’, rather than actual parental autonomy and control.

Parents’ actual knowledge about media technology may be far more extensive than that of their children, however the critical point is that the existence of a knowledge gap is posited so as to ‘responsibilise’ parenting as a mode of governmental control. For example, Livingstone
(2017) challenges the notion that parents are digital immigrants[^4], arguing that parents are increasingly confident users of technology, using it in their professional lives and also for socialising and entertainment. The knowledge, or generation, gap is far from uniform, and varies greatly depending on numerous factors, including the socio-economic, educational and professional background of parents (Livingstone et al., 2015). Similarly, Plowman and McPake (2013) suggest that the assertion that all children are digital natives is a myth, with many children learning about digital media from their parents. And with more people becoming parents who were themselves born into the digital age, Livingstone (2017) argues, we may be undergoing a generational shift, and as such should leave the ‘deficit model’ of parenting behind. Knowledge of parenting and parenting subjectivities are thus ‘responsibilised’ as a technique of governmental control (Burchell, 1993; Kelly, 2001).

The logic of responsibilisation draws on normative understandings of what it means to be a ‘good’ parent. Being a good parent in this governmental discourse means performing parenting in such a manner as to demonstrate sufficient responsibilisation by minimising the purported risks posed by digital media to children and young people. Australian cyber safety ‘expert’, Susan Mclean (Twitter handle, ‘Cybercop’), who is frequently interviewed via the mainstream media about cyber safety and other issues, often blames parents for what she sees as failing to adequately regulate their child’s media’s use. This was clearly expressed in a recent tweet in which she responded to concerns about the ‘addictive’ properties of a popular online game:

> For Gods sake who is in charge in that house? Be the parent, say NO, take the console away and change wifi password. Sadly too many parents cant/wont say no then sook and complain when there is an issue (McLean, 2018).

Her tweet was followed by numerous others expressing a similar sentiment, ‘piling on’ and imploring parents to ‘do their job’ and ‘parent’.

The responsibilisation of parenting as a mode of governmental discourse extends this logic of a deficit of parenting knowledge to include opportunities. Within discourses of opportunity, digital media and the internet are presented in celebratory terms, framed as beneficial,

[^4]: The ‘Digital Native’ / ‘Digital Immigrant’ analogy was coined by Marc Prensky (2001) to describe what he considered to be the key differences between generational computer users. Prensky explains that the children and young people of the day were all ‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computers, video games and the internet. He contrasts this with the ‘digital immigrants’ who were not born into the digital world but who later adopted many aspects of the new technology. As ‘immigrants’, this older generation, including parents, must learn and adapt to their environment. However, as Prensky argues, they always retain to some degree, their ‘accent’ – they always have some foot in the past and have an ‘outdated’ language.
empowering and emancipating (Buckingham, 2007), and providing opportunities and advantages for young people. Much of the rhetoric is based on the alleged ‘transformative potential of ICTs’ (Buckingham, 2007), whereby technology is portrayed as a necessary ingredient in raising ‘successful’ children. Parents are expected to provide their children with computers and other digital media, as it is seen as a sign of good parenting (Buckingham, 2007), due to the perceived importance of technology for their child’s educational success. But ‘good’ parents must also manage their child’s use to protect them from risk and harm. Maintaining the delicate balance between allowing for opportunities and managing risks is fundamental to the construction of ‘good’ parenting in relation to the internet (Livingstone & Bober, 2006; Willett, 2015).

Thesis outline

This introduction has highlighted the responsibilisation of parents within the context of competing discourses about what constitutes ‘good’ parenting in the digital age. After reviewing the existing literature and the broader discursive context for my study, the rest of this thesis examines parents’ own accounts about navigating the complex terrain of parenting in the digital age.

Chapter One engages with a range of literature relevant to my thesis topic. This includes the ‘developmental paradigm’ which underscored almost all parental concerns about their children’s use of digital media technologies, the ‘domestication of media and technology’ research, technology within the context of education, as well as relevant governmentality literature to examine parenting as a mode of governance.

Chapter Two outlines my critical and methodological approach to my research, which primarily consisted of qualitative methods including semi-structured, in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Chapter Three explores the tension between technological development and child development. Parents framed their concerns about their children’s engagement with digital media technologies in terms of the tension between these two processes. The discourse of development largely underpins parental judgements about what they consider to be appropriate (or not) activities for their children to be participating in. In this chapter I also explore parents’ apparent scepticism about the ‘ed-techtopian’ discourses of innovation and opportunity that are often espoused and enacted by their children’s schools.
Chapter Four argues that parents established various hierarchies of value, drawing on various criteria, in assessing the relative value of their children’s media use. I develop two models of parenting that group together the different ways parents mediated the risks and opportunities of their children’s use of media technology. Both models draw on a hierarchy of value with regards to assessing their respective children’s use of technology, but do so in different ways and by harnessing different technical and social resources.

Chapter Five explores the various ways in which parents acquired knowledge about their children’s digital media use in response to constructions of the ‘good’ parent as one who monitors what their child is doing. This chapter demonstrates the various difficulties parents experienced in monitoring and mediating their children’s media use. Parents thus resorted to primarily discursive strategies as their main technique of monitoring and mediation.

Chapters Six and Seven explore in detail parents’ concerns about and assessments of the various dimensions of their children’s mediated sociality, and the ways in which particular behaviours reconfigured parents’ hierarchies of value. In Chapter Six I explore parents’ accounts of the various ways in which their children (usually daughters) create shared spaces of intimacy online to connect, maintain friendships, and provide and receive emotional support. Chapter Seven explores what could be considered to be the more negative aspects of mediated sociality, and addresses mediated peer conflict, exclusion, drama, relational aggression and cyberbullying. The forms of sociality explored throughout these chapters could be considered appropriate or not, depending on the particular context and the activity.

Chapter Eight sums up the key arguments from this thesis, draws a number of conclusions, documents the policy implications of my findings, and also identifies a number of future areas for research.
CHAPTER ONE: Problematising parental concerns

Research examining parental concerns, roles and responsibilities about their children’s use of media draws on four broad bodies of literature: i) moral panic and media effects, ii) governmentality; iii) ‘domestication’ theory; and iv) ‘parental mediation’ theory. In this chapter I engage with some of this key literature and demonstrate that despite the attention given to the role of parents within media and popular discourse, there is comparatively little research which qualitatively addresses the issue of parental anxieties and responsibilities about their children’s use of digital media technologies.

Children and young people’s use of media and communications technologies has been framed in much of the research in terms of risk, with parents responsible for ameliorating these risks for their children. As a result, parenting practices are often conceptualised as the outcome of a deficit model of expertise, so that contemporary governance of children is increasingly enacted in response to expert discourses. There is little doubt that the proliferation of multiple discourses about parenting more generally, from the views of ‘experts’, to popular literature, the mass media, advertising and culture more broadly has motivated more intensive forms of parenting (Rose, 1990). Indeed, the governance of individuals through expert discourses is very well-documented. Parents are subjected to an endless stream of so-called ‘expert’ parenting discourse ranging from topics such as breastfeeding, diet, controlled crying, sleep and discipline, to how to raise girls, how to raise boys, and how to manage technology and social media use amongst teens. The ‘expert’ advice espoused throughout the myriad of parenting texts, media and public debate is often highly contested and contradictory, requiring that parents not simply take advice at its word, but evaluate it, thus acting as an ‘informed consumer’ (Murphy, 2003). In doing so, parents are required to negotiate the ‘competing tensions in which parents must ameliorate the risks associated with rapid social change, whilst simultaneously embracing the possibilities such change affords’ (Barr et al., 2012). Navigating this tension makes parenting a complicated and contradictory task (Barr et al., 2012).

The developmental paradigm

The concept of ‘childhood’ — within which children are perceived as a separate category from adults, and thus excluded from a range of ‘adult-like’ activities — is a relatively recent
Still, contemporary conceptualisations of children position them as vulnerable, unable to protect themselves and in need of special care and protection (Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Furedi, 2002). Their behaviours and actions have thus historically been subject to intense governance so as to protect them from harm. The governance of children has many dimensions and actors. While parents (especially mothers) have traditionally born primary responsibility for protecting their children from harm (Wolf, 2011), the behaviours and social experiences of children are also shaped through the education and legal systems (James & James, 2004) and the collective governance of children has been more broadly linked to the welfare of the state (Foucault, Miller, Gordon, & Burchell, 1991; Rose, 1990).

Parental hopes and fears associated with their children’s use of digital media are tied to broader expectations about children’s ‘normal’ development. Children progress through various stages of psycho-social development throughout their school years — from early childhood through puberty to adolescence. The developmental process has several dimensions — including physiological and psychological — and has traditionally followed a discursively constructed linear trajectory comprised of a set of norms for each development phase, social and behavioural expectations, and milestones marking the transition between phases. Jackson and Scott (1999, p. 92) argue:

It is still taken for granted that the process of maturing from child to adolescent to adult unfolds as a series of naturally occurring stages, that there is a ‘right age’ at which children should develop certain competencies and acquire particular freedoms and responsibilities. These assumptions are so pervasive that it is difficult to think outside them, so widely accepted that they have become unquestioned ‘truths’.

The developmental paradigm is thus central to modern constructions of childhood (Holloway & Valentine, 2003). Physiological development is an obvious component of this process, typically marked by milestones such as puberty and the onset of menstruation in girls. The

5 Some scholars suggest that the notion of childhood was reconceptualised, in the UK at least, between the late nineteenth century and the beginning of World War I (Steedman 1990, Gittens 1998, cited in Kehily 2009). Kehily (2009, p. 2) notes ‘[S]tudies demonstrate that concerns with child poverty and ill health produced a significant shift in the economic and sentimental value of children. Over a fairly short historical period the position of working-class children changed from one of supplementing the family income to that of a relatively inactive member of the household in economic terms, to be protected from the adult world of work and hardship (Cunningham 1991). A US-based study elaborates on this theme by indicating that children’s contribution to the family in Western contexts is economically worthless but emotionally ‘priceless’ (Zelitzer 1985).’

6 Erikson (1963), for example, talks about the ‘stages of life’, and identifies eight stages of psychological development, with six of these stages occurring before adulthood.
milestones associated with psychosocial development, however are historically and culturally contingent and have shifted in recent years. The age at which children might first walk or ride to school on their own, for example, may be considered a milestone in a child’s development, one which appears to have been delayed by parents in recent years due to apparent (probably misguided) safety concerns likely mobilised by mass media discourse, resulting in shifting ‘norms’ about what activities are considered safe and appropriate for young children to do.

The discursively constructed psychological norms around ‘desirable’ childhood development are disseminated in numerous ways — through the education of social workers and health professionals, but also through popular literature and mass media debate, in advertising and culture more generally (Rose, 1990). This developmental discourse is premised upon the notion that children should stick to activities (or consume media content) that is ‘appropriate’ to their developmental age (Buckingham, 2007), and thus places obligations upon parents to ensure that their children only undertake and view ‘age-appropriate’ activities and content.

Development perspectives are prominent in professional and public discourse and help shape risk assessment in relation to children (Scott, Jackson, & Backett-Milburn, 1998). Deviations and transgressions from developmental norms often elicit anxiety and ‘heighten risk anxiety’ (Jackson & Scott, 1999). Rose (1990, p. xii) suggests that gaps between the actual behaviours of children and the ideals of these norms are ‘inevitable’. If we accept these claims, then some level of anxiety or concern about children and their ‘correct development’ is almost unavoidable.

The ‘storm and stress’ of governing adolescents

Governing children in the liminal space between childhood and adulthood raises additional issues and challenges for parents. The period of adolescence, like childhood more generally, is socially and culturally constructed (Arnett, 2014; Buckingham, 2000; James & James, 2004; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). It has been described as a time of challenge and turbulence (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000) and ‘storm and stress’ (Hall, 1904) as young people negotiate the boundaries between dependence and autonomy (Kurz, 2002). A period of

7 With respect to media such as movies and games, the Australian Classification Guidelines provide guidance to parents about what types of content may be suitable (or indeed, unsuitable) for children of particular ages. Additionally, popular social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram set lower age limits for users of their platform (currently 13 years of age). In practice, of course, these restrictions are easily and widely circumvented. Changes to the classification categories and guidelines over the years demonstrate the shifting social and cultural norms regarding media content.
liminality and transition, adolescence is characterised by self-discovery, identity-seeking, concern with the self, growing independence, greater engagement with consumer culture, increasing autonomy and risk taking (Arnett, 2014; Livingstone, 1998, 2007a; Owen, 2014; Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009). The liminality of adolescence is typically conceptualised with reference to developmental psychology which seeks to explain how young people transition into adulthood. Heavily influenced by the work of theorists such as G Stanley Hall (1904), Jean Piaget (1969) and Erik Erikson (1963, 1968), maturation into adulthood is framed in terms of a number of natural stages of physical, emotional and cognitive development (Gabriel, 2014).

Teenagers seeking to enact independence by testing boundaries established through parental governance can be contrasted with the younger child in need of protection. The period of transition from ‘childhood innocence’ to the ‘autonomous adolescent,’ signals a shift in the locus of concern away from primarily external threats, where harm may be ‘done to’ children, towards adolescent children putting themselves and others at risk due to their own behaviours and decisions as well as presenting a potential threat to the ‘moral fabric of society’ (James & James, 2004). The partial independence and self-determination enacted by adolescents, as well as the process of puberty and sexual maturation, means that adolescents in particular are viewed as requiring policing for the ‘knowledge they may acquire and the sexual or disruptive behaviours they may enact’ (Livingstone, 1996, p. 11). Thus, the young, passive ‘child in danger’ in need of protection can be contrasted with the older, active ‘dangerous’ child (Oswell, 1998) in need of control and containment (James & James, 2004).

Personal ownership of media dramatically increases in the early teenage years as part of the development of identity (Livingstone, 2007a). This reflects an underlying process of ‘individualisation’, whereby audiences, and the media that service them, are increasingly fragmented and individualised. The contemporary smart phone is the key individualising, privatising, device (Morley, 2006). Within this context, the bedroom, and what Livingstone

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8 Whilst constructions of ‘adolescence’ are historically and culturally determined, it is nonetheless generally acknowledged that the phase denoted by the term is starting earlier than it did a century ago, as puberty begins at a much earlier age in industrialised countries than it previously did. However, if we measure the end of adolescence in terms of accepting adult roles and responsibilities such as marriage, parenthood and full time work, adolescence ends much later than it did in the past, as these transitions are now typically postponed (Arnett, 2014).
(2007a, p. 1) calls ‘bedroom culture’ has become a ‘central location — both physically and symbolically — of media use and the mediation of everyday life’. ‘Bedroom culture’ is characterised by a set of conventional meanings and practices closely associated with privacy, identity and the self. The rise of ‘bedroom culture’ accompanies a broader shift in the consumption of media away from the communal spaces of the living room (for example, where families watched television as a family) towards the consumption of media in the private space of the bedroom (Livingstone, 2007a). This shift from communal to private consumption of media presents significant challenges for parents who are expected to monitor and mediate their children’s digital media use. However, the perceived need for parental mediation of young people’s digital media use decreases as children grow older and parents generally engage in less mediation of older children (Clark, 2011; Duerager & Livingstone, 2012; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011).

Moral panics and media effects

Media commentary and public discourse, including moral panics, invoke the notion of childhood in crisis (Kehily, 2010), as well as a sense of nostalgia that things used to be safer, contributing to a general, unfocused fear that pervades discussions about children, and thus the notion that danger and risk have become a central feature of everyday life (Altheide, 2002). Lee, Faircloth, Macvarish, and Bristow (2014) argue that the concept of risk in recent years has expanded to resonate with parenting culture, and describe the various feelings and responses of parents in terms of ‘risk consciousness’, which is marked by a preoccupation with unwanted or dangerous outcomes that might happen, rather than what is likely to happen.

Thus fear and anxiety have become standard ingredients in contemporary parenting culture in which parents feel that they have less control over their own lives as well as their children’s (Clark, 2013). Parents are said to be increasingly uncertain, overanxious (Nelson, 2010) fearful and paranoid (Furedi, 2002), as they attempt to simultaneously ameliorate risk while embracing change and opportunity. Amongst these discourses of risk and danger, and discursively constructed ideals around ‘good parenting’, it is not surprising that parental anxiety emerges as parents struggle to avoid feelings of guilt, worry, failure and shame (Faircloth & Murray, 2015).

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9 A contemporary manifestation of this fear of ‘childhood in crisis’ cited by Kehily (2010, p. 172) is the UK-based Daily Telegraph Campaign in 2006 to ‘halt the death of childhood’. The basis of this movement was that children had been damaged due to over-exposure to electronic media, lack of play space, and an over-emphasis on academic testing in schools.
There is a distinct pattern to the way moral panics have followed every major technological or media development in modernity. Cohen’s (2002) work on ‘moral panics’ has been so influential that the term has now become part of the standard repertoire of public debate, providing our mass-mediated world with a way of repudiating the forces of hyperbole and hysteria (Garland, 2008). Drotner (1992), arguing that such panics are an inherent quality of modernity, expanded the application of the concept to new media (at the time). Thus media panics are not confined to ‘new’ technologies, with literary texts (including comics) and film also generating their own panics (Drotner, 1992; Springhall, 1998). Yet despite variations in the specific types of media eliciting panic, there remain ‘repetitions and continuities over many generations in the anxieties induced by fears of new technology interacting with revised forms of popular culture’ (Springhall, 1998, p. 136). The persistence and repetition of media panics over the years have generated a ‘diffuse feeling of anxiety’ (Cohen, 2002, p. 7) about children and media, thus laying the foundations for future panics. Yet despite these repetitions, continuities, and similarities, contemporary media panics typically reappear as a ‘new’ and ‘urgent’ problem — as if it were the first time such issues have been publicly debated — that we must take immediate action to address, highlighting an ‘intrinsic historical amnesia’ (Drotner, 1992, p. 610).

There is a link between the ways in which technology, and, in particular, technologies of communication, underpin the reproduction of social norms. In the 1940s, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002) presented a scathing critique of what they termed the ‘culture industries’, which they argued mass-produced a standardised commodity designed primarily to serve capitalist interests, for an audience which was unthinking, passive and had become mere objects of manipulation. More recently, Neil Postman (1985) suggested that the merging of information and entertainment was, in effect, ‘dumbing down’ public discourse. Ivo Mosley (2000, p. 5) lamented the ‘dumbing down’ of culture ‘in all walks of life’ including the media, which seeks the widest audience, creating the ‘lowest common denominator’ effect. Jane Healy (1991) argued that television, video games, and other components of popular culture are distracting our children and jeopardising their ability to process information. Marwick (2008) has used the term ‘technopanics’ to describe panics about new technologies. The concept of the ‘technopanic’ attempts to ‘contextualise the moral panic as a response to fear of modernity as represented by new technologies’ (Marwick, 2008 para 22). Marwick identifies certain characteristics of technopanics. First, they focus on new media forms, which currently take the form of computer mediated
technologies. Additionally, technopanics generally pathologise young people’s use of this media (she cites as examples hacking, file sharing or playing violent video games, but more recent examples of behaviours that are pathologised might include device ‘addiction’, ‘cyberbullying’ and sexualised practices of self-representation).

Marwick (2008) notes that this cultural anxiety manifests itself in an attempt to modify or regulate young people’s behaviours by controlling young people’s use of technologies, or the creators of media products. New communications technologies enable young people to venture into the outside world privately and secretly while in the ‘safety’ of their own home, and to move beyond the ‘sphere of adult control’ (Cassell & Cramer, 2008, p. 70). At the same time, the newfound agency of young people results in a diminution of parental (and societal) control. Thus, panics come to represent power struggles between distinct groups, and the social regulation that typically results. This may take the form of increased parental surveillance, or greater restrictions placed upon the technological agency of young people via legislation or technical solutions, which serve as an ideological safety valve to restore equilibrium (Cohen, 2002).

The potential for media to reconfigure established power relations thus remains at the heart of concerns about disruptions to established social norms, and media panics more broadly.

**Taming new technology: ‘domestication of media and technology’ research**

The family and household have traditionally been the locus for detailed investigations into how people use media and media products in their daily lives. Even before the arrival of television into the home, which transformed the spatial and temporal rhythms of family life (Scannell, 1988), scholars have been researching the ways in which new technologies are incorporated into the domestic sphere. Essentially ethnographic in its approach, this body of literature is commonly referred to as ‘domestication of media and technology’ research, described as a ‘concept within media and communication studies, but also within studies of

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10 It should also be noted that attempts have been made, in response to media panics, to minimise the disruption to social norms posed by the internet and other new technologies through new legislation, policies, and technological solutions which attempt to curb the freedom and agency afforded to young people via the internet. For example, in the US the Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006 requires schools and libraries that receive federal funding to monitor a child’s use of the internet and to put in place filters that prohibit access to commercial social networking site and chat rooms, with some exceptions. The Act is based on three suppositions, of which the final is that ‘with the explosive growth of trendy chat rooms and social networking Web sites, it is becoming more and more difficult to monitor and protect minors from those with devious intentions, particularly when children are away from parental supervision’ (cited in Cassell & Cramer, 2008, p. 64). Within Australia, there is a suite of technological ‘solutions’ ranging from filtering to parental monitoring apps and parental blocks that seek to regulate and restrict young people’s freedom and agency online.
the sociology of technology that has been developed to describe and analyse processes of (media) technology’s acceptance, rejection and use’ (Berker, Hartmann, Punie, & Ward, 2005, p. 1). Domestication research, however, is not always clearly defined, and the boundaries between much of this literature with other research examining media and families are often porous and fluid. Nonetheless, domestication of technology research is useful for framing contemporary issues in terms of the earlier historical contexts within which they typically first emerged. It is within this context that the parental responsibilities and practices about media technology began to develop their contemporary meanings and experiences.

Since the late 1990s, scholars have been particularly interested in examining the ways in which the internet and other digital technologies are incorporated into the temporal patterns of everyday life, and the ways in which they disrupt the temporal rhythms of the household (Lally, 2002). The ‘domestication of media and technology’ approach to studying media use within families acknowledges that it is not just about the use of technology itself, but the ways in which people and social processes change as well. As Sorenson (2006, p. 46) argues, it is a co-production of the social and technical:

The concept of domestication was attractive in two main regards. First, it presupposed that users played an active and decisive role in the construction and patterns of use and meanings in relation to technologies. Second, it suggested that a main emphasis should be put on the production of meaning and identity from artefacts. This meant a fundamental break with technological determinism, as well as a move away from a long-term tendency to interpret technologies in mainly instrumental terms, as purposive tools.

Domestication research thus represents a clear shift away from a technologically determinist model that considers the ways in which technology affects people and leads to broader change and which underpinned the media ‘effects’ model which was characterised by anxiety about how media might affect children. Within the context of digital media and families, domestication research examines how digital technologies are used, and what happens in practice when children, parents and technology come together (Valentine & Holloway, 2001), signalling a shift away from an effects model towards a practice-based model. As Berker et al. (2005) argue, the domestication process is rarely complete, as people and households are

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11 Clark (2013), for example, acknowledges that her work which examines media use within families falls within the boundaries of ‘domestication’, but says that she prefers the term ‘mediatization’, a broader term which encompasses the interaction between uses of digital media and communications technologies and the shaping of the broader media environment. Her problem relates to what she perceives to be the gendered and class based overtones of the terminology, and, more importantly, her suggestion that technology is never actually ‘tamed’ (Clark, 2013, pp. 242-243).
constantly re-domesticating and de-domesticating technologies. More recent studies have ceased to confine their focus to the household, as digital technology use is no longer confined within the spatial and temporal boundaries of the domestic sphere, with digital media such as smart phones, laptops and tablets permeating schools, workplaces and social contexts. As such, more recent domestication research about digital media and families has shifted its focus away from the incorporation of new technologies into daily use, towards the ways in which technologies are negotiated and mediated within the broader social structure of the family (Clark, 2013; Farrugia & Lauri, 2018; Haddon & Holloway, 2018; Haddon & Vincent, 2015).

The earlier domestication research is therefore useful for understanding earlier iterations of contemporary concerns and anxieties of parents, and how parents were tasked with responding to the challenges of technology use by children. The early domestication research captures the era when internet and PC-based technologies were beginning to be embedded into everyday life and becoming important infrastructure within family life. This is especially the case within busy, middle class, ‘dual career’ families who were increasingly relying on digital technologies to help them manage conflicting demands of work and family (Morley, 2006). At least three key studies have investigated the ways in which the internet and computers were incorporated: Elaine Lally’s *At Home with Computers* (2002), Green, Holloway and Quin’s (2004) study about Australian family life and the internet, and *Parenting in the Connected Home*¹² (Shepherd, Arnold, & Gibbs, 2006). Within the international context, Holloway & Valentine (2003) and Facer, Furlong, Furlong, and Sutherland (2003) examined the incorporation of the internet and computers into both the home and school environments through quantitative and qualitative research involving UK based families, while Clark (2013) adopted a qualitative methodology to explore the role and uses of digital media in US homes, paying particular attention to the different class and ethnic backgrounds of the participants. My study, although significantly smaller, bears a number of similarities to Clark’s research, especially with regard to its primary research objectives. The following sections elucidate some of the anxieties and concerns of parents articulated explicitly and implicitly in domestication research with a particular focus on how parents were tasked with responding to these challenges.

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¹² This study looked at media more generally, including television, and was a case study of three Australian families.
Parental knowledge and control

Earlier research about the internet and the family suggests that a perceived lack of parental knowledge about technologies, which at the time were still relatively new, contributed to parents feeling that their sense of control was compromised. This disrupted familial hierarchies of power and contributed to or exacerbated parental anxiety. The rapid pace of technological innovation has been found to undermine parenting confidence (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018) and parents remain uncertain about their knowledge and struggle with the challenge of maintaining authority in an area in which they consider their child to know more than they do (Clark, 2009; Savic, McCosker, & Geldens, 2016). As Clark (2013, pp. 242-243) suggests, technology is ‘always new, untamed, and surprising for families as different children age into the preteen and teen years’.

Lally’s (2002) detailed study about the ways in which computers, or ‘PCs’, were initially incorporated into the domestic household documented various parental concerns about the expensive and largely unfamiliar pieces of hardware that were rapidly taking up residence within family homes. Lally’s examination of Australian families unearthed an apparent anxiety arising from parental perceptions that they lacked the requisite knowledge and that their children knew more about the technology than they did. This created a tension between parents needing to stay in control and their children’s greater knowledge of the computer, which created conflict and parental anxiety. While, as discussed below, the well-publicised internet risks of pornography and online ‘grooming’ were apparent concerns amongst parents in the early days of home internet adoption, early domestication studies suggest that parents actually experienced greater anxiety due to their perceived lack of knowledge about computers, and as a result, felt that their sense of control was compromised. As one of Lally’s participants commented: ‘I sat next to whoever was on it, monitoring my $3000 worth. I was terrified of it, didn’t know what they could do, what they couldn’t do’ (Lally, 2002, p. 19). This mother’s anxieties were allayed, however, when she went and acquired more knowledge through a computer course.

Holloway and Valentine (2003) noted similar concerns amongst participants in their study, in which parents drew on and rearticulated broader discourses about children and computers, including the ‘children as digital native’ construction. Participants in this study discussed their children’s abilities and technological proficiencies, often with great pride, while highlighting their own lack of knowledge about the internet and computers. In this case,
parents’ anxieties about what their children might do or encounter online were exacerbated by their own perceived lack of skills and knowledge. The fears most commonly articulated amongst these parents were those raised in the media.\(^\text{13}\) As Holloway and Valentine (2003, p. 85) note, ‘having little technical knowledge, the internet emerges as a potentially dangerous technology that is out of their control’.

Green et al (2004, p. 90) similarly found that Australian parents were worried that they may not be sufficiently ‘internet savvy’ to prevent their children accessing pornography and other potentially harmful content, leading to a ‘fundamental anxiety that parents’ natural power base will be diminished’. The perceived lack of parental knowledge potentially undermines parental authority (Yardi & Bruckman, 2011) and disrupts existing ‘hierarchies of power’ in the home, whereby parents enact rules to protect their children from potentially harmful content, and parental anxieties are exacerbated by a perceived lack of control due the parents’ ‘technical competencies being surpassed by those of their children’ (Green et al., 2004, p. 90).

Financial cost

Other studies revealed that many parents were more concerned about what their kids could do to the computer, rather than what the computer could do to them, due to the high cost of equipment (Facer et al., 2003; Lally, 2002; Shepherd et al., 2006; Valentine & Holloway, 2001). Home computers during the late 1990s represented a significant financial commitment for most Australian households\(^\text{14}\). Concerns about damage to devices and hardware appear to have mostly disappeared from the relevant literature in recent years, despite the diminishing size and increasing portability of devices making them much more susceptible to loss and damage than their bulkier and less mobile predecessors. While we might speculate that this is because technology is relatively cheaper than it was, it seems more likely that this issue has simply been eclipsed by the plethora of purported risks of contemporary mobile media, meaning that the issue of cost and damage is largely absent from surveys and questionnaires.

\(^{13}\) However, Holloway and Valentine (2003) also found that many parents in their study who were competent computer users did not take media panics about children and computers seriously, dismissing the media as ‘sensationalised’.

\(^{14}\) Computers were substantially more expensive in the late 1990s and early 2000s in real terms compared to the cost of computers today. As Lally notes in her interviews, parents described spending a substantial amount of money on the home computer – around $3000, representing a substantial portion of the household budget. Parents in her study said that sacrifices had to be made to purchase a home computer.
about parental concerns. Some parents have, however, expressed concern about the costs associated with smart phones, such as excessive data or call use (Fletcher & Blair, 2014).

‘Inappropriate’ content

Pornography along with other ‘inappropriate’ content has remained a key concern amongst parents since the introduction of internet-enabled PCs into the ‘safe’ domestic space of the home. For many parents, pornography and ‘inappropriate’ content have been identified as their primary concern (Flash Eurobarometer, 2008; NetRatingsAustralia, 2005). Early research conducted by Turow (1999) indicated that for three quarters of parents, pornography was the issue that elicited the most concern regarding their children’s internet use. Nelson (2010) found that parents across the socioeconomic spectrum expressed an ‘intense anxiety’ about internet pornography. These concerns were often symptomatic of broader concerns about the sexualisation of media culture more generally, and a general ‘coarsening of culture’ that were ‘hastening maturity’ and causing their children to grow up too quickly (Nelson, 2010).

Most parents, especially in the earlier days of the internet, indicated some kind of content concern (NetRatingsAustralia, 2005). Concerns about pornography expressed by parents were sometimes conflated with concerns about violence and other content deemed inappropriate, including ‘obscene language’. Violent content, however, was identified as a discrete issue of concern amongst many parents (and included as its own item in many quantitative surveys and questionnaires), although parents were generally less concerned about it than they were about pornography (danah boyd & Hargittai, 2013; Flash Eurobarometer, 2008; Livingstone, 2007b; Livingstone & Bober, 2006; Sorbring, 2014; Turow, 1999; Turow & Nir, 2000).

‘Inappropriate’ contact

Online ‘stranger danger’, including the spectre of predators and grooming by paedophiles, remains a top-of-mind concern for most parents (danah boyd & Hargittai, 2013; Family Online Safety Institute, 2014; Farrugia & Lauri, 2018; Flash Eurobarometer, 2008; Fletcher & Blair, 2014; Mascheroni, 2014; Nelson, 2010; NetRatingsAustralia, 2005; Ponte & Simões, 2009; Rosen, Cheever, & Carrier, 2008; Shepherd et al., 2006; Sorbring, 2014; Valentine & Holloway, 2001). Some qualitative research indicates that media coverage of the issue, as well as anecdotes from friends and by word-of-mouth, contributed to these concerns (NetRatingsAustralia, 2005).
The issue of cyberbullying is another issue that appears to have remained within parental risk consciousness since the early days of the internet (danah boyd & Hargittai, 2013; Clark, 2013; Davis, 2012; Farrugia & Lauri, 2018; Flash Eurobarometer, 2008; Ponte & Simões, 2009; Shepherd et al., 2006; Sorbring, 2014), although there is comparatively little qualitative data which affords insight into the exact nature of these concerns. Parental concerns about their child being the victim of online bullying were more marked amongst parents from different ethnic backgrounds (danah boyd & Hargittai, 2013; Clark, 2013), as parents perceived online spaces as an extension of real life in which teens experienced racism and other undesirable experiences related to their background or class (Clark, 2013). This is perhaps not surprising as research has indicated that people of colour are more likely to be subjected to racism and hatred online (Daniels, 2009). Other studies reveal concerns about children being socially ostracised, or excluding others (Shepherd et al., 2006). The issue of cyberbullying was surprisingly absent in some quantitative studies, see for example NetRatingsAustralia, 2005 and Rosen et al., 2008, despite prominent moral panics during the last decade about the issue.

Privacy and reputation

Parental concerns about their children’s privacy and the disclosure of personal information have persisted from the early days of the home internet to contemporary digital and mobile media (Clark, 2013; Davis, 2012; Family Online Safety Institute, 2015; Green, Brady, Olafsson, Hartley, & Lumby, 2011; Livingstone, 2007b; Livingstone & Bober, 2006; Madden, Cortesi, Gasser, Lenhart, & Duggan, 2012; Turow, 1999; Turow & Nir, 2000), although privacy related concerns appear to have been overshadowed somewhat by time-related concerns such as perceived ‘excessive use’ in more recent studies. Privacy concerns appear multi-faceted, appearing to stem from a number of broader concerns about the commercialisation of childhood, reputational effects, and personal safety issues including vulnerability to online predators. A significant number of parents expressed concern about their children’s exposure to commercial culture through being targeted by advertisers as a result of the child’s willing disclosure of information (Turow & Nir, 2000), or due to other online activities that reveal detailed information to advertisers (Madden et al., 2012).

The potential reputational effects of disclosing personal information online is increasingly of concern to parents who are fully aware of the potential for children to jeopardise their future employment or educational prospects. These concerns appear much more common amongst
more advantaged families (Clark, 2013; Madden et al., 2012; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011). This shift is likely the result of the advent and popularity of social networking sites such as Myspace, and (later) Facebook which have brought about their own set of concerns (Family Online Safety Institute, 2015; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Rosen et al., 2008; Third, Richardson, Collings, Rahilly, & Bolzan, 2011), including an awareness of the permanence of information posted online (Clark, 2013; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011).

**Excessive use**

Contemporary concerns about ‘excessive use’ or ‘addiction’ tend to be associated more with mobile technologies such as smart phones and tablets due to their portability and individualised use which facilitate constant access (Mascheroni, 2014). However, research indicates that parents have long been anxious about the amount of time their children spend on the internet. Green et al.’s (2004) study about the internet within Australian homes revealed that while parents weren’t *overly* concerned about their children’s use of the internet, they were concerned about their children using the internet excessively. In particular, parents were concerned about the amount of time their children spent online chatting to friends (usually daughters) or playing online games (usually sons). This concern was most marked amongst parents of teenage children (Green et al., 2004).

More recent research similarly points towards parental anxiety and concern regarding the amount of time that their children spent online or with digital media (Clark, 2013; Dias et al., 2016; Family Online Safety Institute, 2015; Farrugia & Lauri, 2018; Haddon & Vincent, 2015; Rosen et al., 2008; Sergi, Gatewood Jr, Elder, & Xu, 2017; Shepherd et al., 2006; Sorbring, 2014; Third et al., 2011) with parents expressing concern that their child’s use was addictive and obsessive (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018; Haddon & Vincent, 2015; Rosen et al., 2008; Sergi et al., 2017). Key issues include that ‘excessive use’ may displace other, more worthwhile activities (Clark, 2013; Livingstone, 2007b; Livingstone & Bober, 2006; Shepherd et al., 2006); lead to passivity or inactivity (Sorbring, 2014; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011); lead to social isolation or compromise face-to-face interactions (Dias et al., 2016; Haddon & Vincent, 2015; Livingstone, 2007b; Rosen et al., 2008; Sergi et al., 2017; Turow, 1999); compromise their child’s physical activity (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2018; Delen, Kaya, Ritter, & Sahin, 2015; Dias et al., 2016; Family Online Safety Institute, 2015;

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15 The issue of ‘excessive use’ or device or internet addiction was missing from some quantitative surveys, including NetRatingsAustralia (2005), and in some cases was articulated in other ways, such as ‘becoming passive or inactive’ (Sorbring, 2014). As such, participants were limited in their ability to raise this as a concern.
Rosen et al., 2008; Sergi et al., 2017), or disrupt ‘family time’ and negatively affect household relations as a result (Holloway & Valentine, 2003).

**Technology for education**

Early studies indicate that concerns about their children’s education became a powerful motivator for parents purchasing home computers (Lally, 2002). As Lally (2002, p. 13) argues, the narrative of educational opportunity and advantage became a: powerful motivational cocktail of parental hopes and fears for their children and the sense of responsibility for providing them with the infrastructural basis they will need to take advantage of life opportunities. To these forces must be added the subtle encouragement given by the school, and the broad sense that these are changes which must be kept up with or risk being left behind.

Thus, providing a computer and other digital devices came to be seen as a sign of good parenting (Buckingham, 2007; Mascheroni, 2014), and computers promptly ceased to be seen as a luxury item or entertainment commodity and became recognised as a necessity (Hynes & Rommes, 2006).

It would appear, however, that the educational and career aspirations these parents have for their children are not consistent with what they consider to be ‘excessive’ device use, as parents from middle and upper-middle class backgrounds expressed particular concern about the amount of time their children spend on devices (Clark, 2013). Excessive use of digital media was seen to be a ‘waste’ or not ‘proper’ use of time, constituted a distraction from schoolwork, encouraged ‘passivity’ and was ‘unproductive’, all of which may undermine their children’s prospects for a fulfilling life, (Clark, 2013). This perspective can be contrasted with parents from less-advantages backgrounds, some of whom saw it as preferable to time spent outside of the home in potentially dangerous neighbourhoods, and in some cases was seen as a path to meaningful employment (Clark, 2013).

**The screen-time debate**

Parental concerns about the perceived excessive amount of time that their children spent on devices should be considered within the broader context of the perennial ‘screen time’ debate and consequent panics. The issue of ‘screen-time’ first emerged with the advent of television in 1949 (Willett, 2015), accompanied by debates about what may be considered ‘excessive’ or ‘appropriate’ for children, as well as the purported risks and merits of television. Parents became worried about whether or not their children’s television viewing might be doing them harm. Advice, guidelines and concrete recommendations for managing screen-time amongst
children have been challenged by the profound technological shift from exposure to interaction. The American Academy of Paediatrics’ (AAP) 2x2 screen time guidelines were recently amended in acknowledgement of the changing nature of children’s engagement with media, and the ‘immersive’ and ‘ubiquitous role of media in children’s lives’ (American Association of Paediatrics, 2016), however some time-based recommendations do remain\(^{16}\).

The changes to the guidelines were welcomed by scholars who identified numerous problems with screen-time guidelines. These include their purported lack of empirical basis, their focus on the quantity of screen time rather than the quality and context of media use, and claims that they likely did more to foster guilt in parents than actually help children (Ferguson, 2017; Livingstone, 2016)\(^{17}\).

Pros and cons of media technology: Parental mediation theory

The challenge for parents then is how to enable children to engage with the affordances of media technologies that relate to positive opportunities, while minimising the negative affordances associated with risks. Parental mediation theory emerged as a response to the negative dimension of this tension and is used to identify how parents utilise different interpersonal communication strategies in mediating and mitigating the potentially negative effects of media on their children (Clark, 2011). Parental mediation theory was originally developed in relation to children’s television viewing practices, in response to widespread concerns about the effects of television on children and how these might be mitigated (Nathanson, 2001a; Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999). Scholars have noted that parental concern about the negative effects of media influence both the style and frequency of parental mediation (Bybee, Robinson, & Turow, 1982; Valkenburg et al., 1999; 2019).

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\(^{16}\) For example, it is still advised that infants and toddlers avoid screens altogether, although video-chatting is acceptable, and ‘high quality’ programs for children 18-24 months are acceptable as long as parents watch with them. For two – five year-olds, the AAP suggests a limit of one hour per day of ‘high quality programming’, and parents should watch and discuss the content with their children. For children aged six or over, parents are advised to set consistent time limits on their children’s media use (but fall short of saying what these might be). The new guidelines also advocate that parents designate ‘media free times’ (such as meal times), and media-free locations in the home (AAP American Association of Paediatrics, 2016). Within Australia, the federal Department of Health provides similar fact sheets and recommendations in relation to screen time. These guidelines recommend no screen time for children under two, less than one hour per day for children two – five, and no more than two hours a day for children five - twelve (Department of Health, 2019).

\(^{17}\) Recent studies have found no association between moderate use of screens (although still in excess of the AAP’s recommended two hour daily limit) and a number of problematic outcomes, and that up to six hours screen time as indicated by TV and computer use is not a risk factor for negative outcomes (Ferguson, 2017).
Van der Voort, Nikken, & Van Lil, 1992). As such, the ways in which parents are mediating their children’s digital technology use has the potential to shed light on the underlying parental anxieties and concerns that shape and determine their mediation. Livingstone and Helsper (2008, p. 3) add that:

mediation is widely seen to capture the parental management of the relation between children and media, usefully, it extends the parental role beyond simple restrictions to encompass also conversational and interpretative strategies.

Much of the parental mediation research has endeavoured to determine the most effective form of mediation in reducing risk and harm to children (see for example Duerager and Livingstone, 2012); while Livingstone et al. (2017a) sought to determine what she calls the ‘holy grail’ of parental mediation — the combination of enabling and restrictive mediation that minimises risks while maximising opportunity. Other research has investigated the role of parental income and education in determining parental mediation styles (Livingstone et al., 2015), as well as the extent to which parenting style as defined by Baumrind (1991) determines parental mediation (Eastin, Greenberg, & Hofschire, 2006). Much of the contemporary parental mediation literature theoretically draws upon earlier influential studies about television. These studies identified three primary strategies through which parents monitored and regulated their children’s television viewing: active mediation (talking with children), restrictive mediation (setting rules), and co-viewing (watching television with children) (Bybee et al., 1982; Nathanson, 1999, 2001b; Valkenburg et al., 1999).

Parental mediation theory in a contemporary media environment recognises that parents attempt to manage not only (and probably to a lesser extent) television, but increasingly

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18 For example, research has shown that restrictive mediation is more frequently practised by parents who are concerned about the negative effects of media (Nathanson, 2001b; Valkenburg et al., 1999). Conversely, we might also posit that ‘participatory learning’ (as identified by Clark) implies positive attitudes and parental endorsement of the content or activity being undertaken, if we extend the findings of Nathanson (2001b) about parental co-viewing of TV content to digital media, whereby parents who participated in co-viewing are more likely to believe that the content can aid child learning. The ways in which parents actively mediate their children’s internet and digital media use (whether they discuss the negative or positive aspects of media) also provide some indications about the perspectives of parents and the nature of their concerns. More recent studies have shown that parents with a greater perception of the risks actually do more enabling but less restrictive mediation (Livingstone et al., 2017a). Livingstone et al. (2017a); Livingstone et al. (2017b) suggest that this might reflect parental attitudes that it is better to be involved in their children’s internet use if they are worried. They do note, however, that as parental risk perception rises even higher, parents intensify both enabling and restrictive mediation.

19 Active mediation is also sometimes known as instructive or evaluative mediation (Valkenburg et al., 1999).
children’s use of digital media technologies including the internet, mobile phones, laptops, tablets and gaming. In her critical interrogation of parental mediation theory, Clark (2011) identifies at least three limitations associated with adapting parental mediation theory for digital media contexts. First, it is rooted in the media effects tradition, therefore it is primarily concerned with the negative effects of media, which may not sufficiently account for the positive attitudes that we know are held by the majority of parents. Second, it is usually more focused on younger (and hence more vulnerable) children considered to be ‘at risk’ of negative media effects. It therefore may not adequately account for the increasing autonomy of teenage children who are typically more trusted to make their own decisions, and the shifting nature of the child/parent relationship. Third, because mediation has been oriented towards television, there are gaps in how the theory might be applied to digital media and the internet (Clark, 2011). As such, ‘enabling mediation’ is more complex than the ‘active’ mediation associated with television viewing, reflecting the greater complexity of mediating the range of activities undertaken with digital media (Livingstone et al., 2017a). The increasingly privatised, individualised and mobile nature of media consumption, (Duerager & Livingstone, 2012) makes children’s activities difficult to monitor, unlike television which, in its early days, was a shared experience occurring in a communal space in the home. The notion of ‘screen time’ in the digital age is likely outmoded altogether, as it privileges ‘quantity’ over ‘quality’, thus ignoring the important issue of how media are used. Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2016) argue that parents should instead be asking themselves and their children questions about screen context, content and connections.

To try to address some of these limitations, more contemporary parental mediation literature has identified additional methods of mediation. For example, Clark (2011) identifies a category of ‘participatory learning’, which involves parents and children interacting together with and through digital media, which is a form of active mediation. Further, Livingstone and Helsper (2008) had previously identified a category of ‘co-use’ (the equivalent of television co-viewing), to describe the activity of parents remaining present when their child is engaging with the media, but not commenting on its content or effects. In more recent literature, however, (Livingstone et al., 2017a) argue that the distinction between active mediation and co-use was no longer applicable, because while parents might watch television with their child without commenting on or discussing what they are watching, this rarely happens when parents engage in digital activities with their children, as decisions need to be made about where to click and what to do.
Parental mediation in the digital age is thus no straightforward task. Many parents feel as though they lack the knowledge and expertise to effectively mediate contemporary digital media technologies, due to their perceived complexity (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). In contrast to one or two televisions in the home, children are using multiple devices both within and outside the home, using technologies in multiple ways, and accessing a vast array of platforms and types of content, some of which are deemed beneficial by parents, some of which are deemed problematic. The opacity around children’s online activities, as well as children’s predilection for simultaneously toggling between various activities such as homework, entertainment, and socialising, makes parental attempts to regulate their children’s media use even more difficult.

Parenting as mode of governance

Parents mediate the social effects of digital media through governance of their children’s behaviours and practices. Children have long been a site of governance. Indeed, Rose (1990, p. 121) argues that ‘childhood is the most intensely governed sector of personal existence’. Many scholars have noted a shift, however, away from child governance primarily to mitigate risk and ensure their safety and wellbeing, towards governance to maximise opportunity for the child (Hays, 1998; Lareau, 2011; Nelson, 2010). This shift towards a more ‘intensive’ contemporary parenting culture is said to be characterised by anxiety and insecurity. Tracing this shift affords us insight into contemporary constructions of ‘good parenting’, and the subsequent expectations and pressures placed upon parents in the digital age.

The discursively constructed obligations placed on parents to develop and refine their own parenting to minimise risk while maximising their children’s potential draws on both aspects of what Ulrich Beck (1992) described as ‘individualisation’, which privileges the individual over the collective and holds the individual as ultimately responsible for minimising risk. This also resonates with Foucault’s notion of ‘care of the self’ and the individual as enterprise, where individuals are expected to continuously reconstruct one’s own human capital, and maximise individual potential (Lazzarato, 2009). As Rose (1990, pp. 10-11) argues:

Technologies of subjectivity thus exist in a kind of symbiotic relationship with what one might term ‘techniques of the self’: the ways in which we are enabled, by means of the languages, criteria and techniques offered to us, to act upon our bodies, souls, thoughts, and conduct in order to achieve happiness, wisdom, health and fulfilment. Through self-inspection, self-problematization, self-monitoring, and confession, we evaluate ourselves according to the criteria provided to us by others.
Foucault’s (1991) influential work on government and governmentality is concerned with the forms of activity that aim to shape, guide or affect the conduct of others. The activities of children are ‘governed’ in the sense that their conduct and behaviours are shaped so as to protect them from harm. Very young children, for example, are initially physically guided while crossing the road and, later taught to look both ways and to cross with care with the aim that they internalise these behaviours and enact them independently later. While this form of governance is concerned primarily with the welfare and safety of the child, Foucault (1991) and Rose (1990) posit that the modern art of government is to develop those elements of the individual to strengthen the collective state. Children are powerful ‘symbols of the future’ (Valentine & Holloway, 2001, p. 71), and their correct governance is necessary for the ‘welfare of society at large’ (Rose, 1990, p. xi). A range of social issues — ranging from crime and juvenile delinquency to military defeat and industrial decline — have been connected with poor child care practices (Rose, 1990). As such, governing occurs through the family (Donzelot, 1980), and the family is a key space through which future productive citizens are ‘made up’ (Bell, 1993). ‘Techniques of the self’ are doubly articulated amongst parents who are expected to cultivate their own parenting subjectivities through introspection, reflexivity and interrogation, to maximise the potential and human capital of their children. This means that parents, in addition to their children, also become subjects of governance as they shape their own parenting behaviours in response to expert discourse grounded in ‘truths’ (Livingstone & Bober, 2006).

In the last few decades there has been a shift in the care and governance of children within middle-class and professional families away from a sole focus on the safety and welfare of the child (and by extension the state) towards more aspirational objectives concerned with maximising opportunity and securing competitive advantage for children. There is a significant body of contemporary literature, both scholarly and popular, that documents this transformation. Rose (1990, pp. xi-xii) notes the shift away from preventing ‘psychological maladjustment through correct procedures of child rearing to new objectives: maximising both the emotional adjustment and the cognitive efficiency of the child through proper management of early relations with the parents and the environment’. Furedi (2002, p. 106) draws a distinction between ‘child-rearing’ and ‘parenting’, where parenting is endowed with ‘profound importance’ because it is purported to essentially determine the traits necessary for a successful life. More recently, Nelson (2010) argued that acute economic uncertainty and the precarity of middle and professional families’ class status have resulted in ‘parenting out
of control’ by concerned adults anxious to secure their children’s educational and competitive advantage in the world. Lareau (2011) describes the ‘concerted cultivation’ of children by parents, to actively foster the child’s talents, opinions and skills. And Hays (1998) identifies a parenting ideology of ‘intensive mothering’, a ‘gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children’. (Hays, 1998, p. x). There has been a recent explosion in popular texts, activities, and games geared towards helping parents achieve this.

It is important to note that ‘intensive’ parenting practices are firmly grounded within middle-class subjectivities (Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Lareau, 2011; Nelson, 2010). In contrast, parenting within working class and disadvantaged families has been found to focus predominantly on providing basic care for the child (Lareau, 2011; Nelson, 2010). Parents who subscribe to intensive parenting ideologies typically adopt a more egalitarian approach to parenting, compared to those from working class and less advantaged backgrounds, and privilege trust, communication and negotiation over a command and control approach to governing children (Clark, 2013; Furedi, 2002; Nelson, 2010).

The major effects of the powerful overarching parenting discourse are two-fold. First, there is an inevitable gap between the discursively constructed ideals, norms and practices associated with ‘good’ parenting and the actual reality of parents’ experiences. This disconnect invokes parental disappointment and guilt, and amplifies natural concerns about the wellbeing of their children to the extent that parents are subjected to an unfocused, generalised sense of anxiety (Faircloth & Murray, 2015, p. 1121), and are becoming increasingly ‘paranoid’ and insecure in their own parenting knowledge and practices (Furedi, 2002). Second, it places more onerous demands on parents who are expected and encouraged to meet these expectations. Instead of simply raising children and ensuring their safety, contemporary parenting discourse encourages parents to spend a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children through educational toys and programs, extra-curricular activities and lessons, and other types of cultural enrichment (Hays, 1998). It is a particular style of parenting that requires a certain level of parental reflexivity, whereby parents are not only expected to engage with expert discourse, but also to evaluate and question it (Murphy, 2003). The result is a cultural understanding that parents (especially mothers) have both a duty and the ability to shape the lives of their children to a very fine degree (Wall, 2004).
Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed a range of literature that relates first and foremost to my primary research object: the responsibilisation of parents with respect to their children’s digital media use and their subsequent anxieties, practices and knowledges. This chapter has demonstrated that children’s use of digital media technologies has been framed primarily in terms of concerns of parents and drawing on a risk discourse that responsibilises parents so they are tasked with mitigating risk. At the same time, a broader cultural shift has resulted in parents also being tasked with maximising their children’s potential. As examined in this chapter, parents are tasked with negotiating this tension through ‘correct’ governance and mediation of their children’s digital media use.

The literature suggests that despite the significant technological change that has occurred over time, from the internet connected home PC to mobile and portable digital media, several issues appear to have remained relatively constant over the years. Parents appear to remain anxious about their perceived lack of knowledge and control of digital media technologies, and the consequent disruption to familial hierarchies of power. Pornography and other ‘inappropriate’ content appear to be keeping parents anxious in relation to their children’s digital media use. Similarly, online predators remain a constant, if unlikely, threat for parents. There is some indication, however, that these concerns, whilst still prominent, are being eclipsed by other concerns such as the perceived excessive media use of their children. And while parents appear to have always been concerned about the amount of time that their children have spent online, these concerns, perhaps unsurprisingly considering the increasingly individualised use of digital media, appear to have intensified, with parents apparently more concerned about this issue than inappropriate content or stranger danger. Cyberbullying, privacy and reputational risk remain familiar concerns, but whether or not parents’ perceptions regarding these issues have changed over the years is difficult to determine.

A broader cultural shift away from ‘child-rearing’ to protect a child from harm, towards more ‘intensive’ forms of parenting concerned with maximising a child’s potential, further responsibilises parents for not only minimising the risks of digital media, but also for maximising opportunity. ‘Good’ parents are expected to fulfil their obligations in this regard through parental mediation of digital media. Existing literature affords some insight into parental anxieties and concerns, the practical steps that parents take to manage their
children’s digital media use, as well as the broader discursive context which responsibilises parents for governing their children to achieve particular objectives. However, many questions remain unanswered. How do parents respond to not only the discourses of risk, but also the discourses of opportunity? How do they resolve the tension between their hopes and fears? What is the relationship between their hopes and fears and the broader discursively constructed expectations regarding both their child’s development, and ‘good’ parenting within this context? In the next chapter I outline my critical approach for exploring these complexities.
CHAPTER TWO: Critical approach

This chapter details the critical approach and research methods used in this study, and the rationale for adopting this approach. Although situated in the disciplinary area of the humanities, this study adopted qualitative research methods commonly associated with the social sciences in the initial stages of the project to create a corpus of materials to analyse, including focus groups and semi-structured interviews with parents. Qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify a number of key themes in the parents’ responses and discussions. Two major research questions were used to frame this part of the research design: 1) What are parents’ concerns and anxieties in relation to their teenage children’s use of digital technologies? and 2) How do parents address and manage those concerns in relation to their children?

The subject of children and technology has generated multiple discourses, frequently infused with hyperbole, which have acquired their own dominant meanings and responses. As documented in Chapter One, moral panic discourses frame the potential risks posed by digital media technologies, while discourses of opportunity frame the potential benefits and the ‘revolutionary potential’ of technology for children and young people. One of my key research aims was to develop a more complex and nuanced understanding of the issues around young people’s use of digital media by exploring parents’ experiences regarding their own children’s use of digital media technologies, and the various meanings which they ascribe to them. Focus groups and interviews were conducted to achieve these research aims.

As foreshadowed in my introduction, there was an emergent character to my research. Rather than data being collected and analysed in its entirety after all focus groups and interviews were conducted, data derived from the first focus groups informed my developing understanding of my research questions and led to further refinement as the study progressed. Thus, data informed the developing hypothesis, and the ideas, themes and theory evolved in interaction with study participants (A. Davis, 2008). Initial focus groups were more concerned with exploring the sexualised self-representation practices of girls. However, as indicated in my introductory chapter, data which emerged from the first focus groups suggested that there was a range of other issues and parental experiences which were more salient. Therefore the conduct and focus of subsequent groups was adapted to facilitate the consideration of a broader set of issues. The emergence of other themes as the focus groups
progressed similarly reshaped the aims and objectives of my overall research object. The evolutionary and iterative character of this kind of research is articulated by Davis (2008, p. 65):

Data is collected through the research process rather than just being collected for analysis. Hypotheses and theories may evolve with the research. Consequently, interview questions and observation practices need to adapt too. Thus, early interviews/observations should be treated as a sort of ‘pilot study’. Now is the time to be critical and make tough decisions if things are not working. The researcher must ask what themes are emerging? What questions are working and what are not? How are the findings supporting or contradicting the starting hypotheses? At regular points it is necessary to keep evaluating the research itself and, if necessary, to adapt and refocus.

Thus, in addition to the two key questions, other questions emerged from the initial interview and focus group discussions and data which were pursued in subsequent interviews and focus groups. These included: What are the kinds of knowledges which are acquired and circulated amongst parents in relation to their children’s use of mobile and digital technologies, including parental ‘ways of knowing’ about their children’s activities? What are the apparent sources of parental concerns and anxieties? Do concerns arise predominantly as a result of their direct, lived experiences with their children, and to what extent do external sources such as media and broader cyber-safety discourse contribute to their anxieties and concerns?

This study was approved by the University of Canberra Human Research Ethics Committee (16-110).

Experience and narrative

There are various dimensions to experience which need to be considered and balanced in qualitative research. Pickering (2008) argues that cultural studies research which endeavours to examine individual experience must not only account for the subjective experiences that are specific to the lived social worlds of individuals, but also acknowledge the shared cultural, social, contextual and ideological structures which underpin, and in some cases constrain, participants’ subjective experiences and their narrative accounts of them. Thus there exists a complex intersection ‘between public culture and private subjectivity’ (Pickering, 2008, p. 18), and we must endeavour to account for (and balance) both in interpreting and giving meaning to subjective experience.
Pickering (2008, p. 27) frames the different dimensions to experience in terms of experience as process and experience as product, which he argues operate within mutual reference to one another. He argues:

We can speak on the one hand of a subject’s immersion in a flow of action, observation or feeling where the meanings of events, encounters, episodes or states of being are relatively inchoate, and not as yet realised in any developed manner that can be carried forwards into the future. On the other hand, we can refer to what is derived by the subject from the everyday reality of the social world they inhabit where the meanings of what has happened are more fully interpreted and assimilated, as the accepted products of experience, against which change and development, or disruption and loss, can be assessed, now and in the future. … Thus experience constitutes the meeting-place of individual perception and cultural meaning, self and symbolic forms, life-story and social conditions of existence. Experience occupies the contested territory between ways of being and ways of knowing.

Qualitative research through focus groups and interviews is often positively framed in terms of ‘giving a voice’ to certain subjectivities and experiences (Coddington, 2017). The products of subjects’ experiences are given structure and meaning through narrative and come to be understood in the discursive forms in which they achieve expression (Pickering, 2008, p. 27). Throughout this thesis, I include many detailed direct quotes from subjects, in order to construct a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of participant experiences expressed through the narratives that they impose on them to give them structure and coherence. However, in making sense of these subjective experiences expressed through narrative, we must also attempt to understand subjects’ experience as process. My analysis and interrogation of participants’ experiences therefore draws on the broader discursive context — including the cultural, social and ideological structures — in which they take place.

**Qualitative research through focus groups and interviews**

My study seeks to gain an in-depth insight into the individual experiences, perspectives, concerns, and practices of parents in relation to their teenage children’s use of digital media technologies, rather than merely surveying previously identified concerns and practices informed by existing discursive constructs about children and digital media technology. To do this, a qualitative research design was adopted. Qualitative research methods enable the elicitation of a wide range of views (Bryman, 2015), provide insight into complex behaviours and thoughts, and show how people make sense of their experiences in a way that cannot be easily provided by other methods (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Morgan & Kreuger, 1993).
I employed both focus groups and in-depth interviews in an attempt to capture the lived experiences of participants, and the meanings parents gave to them from their own perspectives (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). A key difference between focus groups and interviews can be captured in terms of breadth versus depth. Focus groups offer more breadth in terms of participant numbers, and facilitate the exploration of the experiences of a larger number of people (Morgan, 2003). As such focus groups were undertaken initially to enable the identification of a broad range of issues that could be subsequently examined in more detail through interviews.

Focus groups help us understand the different dimensions of experience documented above, by establishing the common discourses which underlie attitudes and experiences (Meyer, 2008), and thus help us to understand the broader cultural and discursive context in which subjective experiences occur. They are also ideal for exploring shared experiences and feelings, and the ways in which these are negotiated amongst others, to reveal divergence or convergence between views (Olafsson, Livingstone, & Haddon, 2013) and the joint construction of meaning (Bryman, 2015). Additionally, focus groups enable observation of social interaction and group dynamics (Morgan, 1988; Olafsson et al., 2013), enabling participants to compare and contrast their views (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) which can reveal whether certain views, experiences and practices are commonly shared amongst participants (by revealing agreement or disagreement amongst participants), and how much significance may be attributed to them. Additionally, the focus group format enables participants to probe each other’s reasons for holding certain views (Bryman, 2015) and provides additional insight into participants’ perspectives and experiences.

The five focus groups that I conducted revealed a number of prominent themes, whereby concerns, experiences and practices emerged which were common to most participants. These initial themes provided a provisional theoretical basis for more in-depth exploration of the issues via both subsequent focus groups as well as one-on-one interviews. In-depth interviews are a useful tool for exploring individual experience, perception and feelings in relation to several topics, especially when some of these issues may be sensitive (Olafsson et al., 2013). Here, the subsequent series of interviews provided the opportunity for more flexible, in-depth and (where required) focused exploration of some of these key themes, and enabled a more comprehensive understanding of key themes. Interviews also surfaced some additional issues, concerns and practices amongst participants.
Focus groups also provided something in return to participants who had generously given up their time to participate in my research. My call for participants highlighted that participants would hear from other parents about parenting in the digital age, and many participants indicated a willingness to attend for this reason. Many parents arrived armed with a pen and paper, and diligently jotted down tips and strategies revealed by other participants for negotiating technology use in the home, and risks about which they had previously been unaware.

Participants and recruitment

My study sought participants who were parents of at least one teenager aged 12-16 years. This age group was selected for a number of reasons. While concerns about children’s use of technology appear to span all child age ranges, different developmental phases and ages typically elicit different anxieties, concerns and practices amongst parents (Sorbring, 2014), partly because of the different activities undertaken by different age groups, and the varying levels of technical, critical and social skills (Holloway, Green & Livingstone, 2013). As documented in Chapter One, adolescence is a period of transition that is subject to numerous complex developments and changes, including the development of sexual identity, and is often characterised as a time of risk (Eccles et al., 1993). Children entering the teenage years are developing greater independence, self-determination and autonomy from parental control, which often leads to family conflict (Eccles et al., 1993). The opacity around teenagers’ activities and media habits means that parents typically know less about what their teenagers are doing.

A call for participants was disseminated via existing social, personal, professional and community networks, and participants were recruited via a combination of purposive and snowballing methods.

Participant details

Participants consisted of 40 parents based in Canberra, Australia, with at least one child between 12 and 16 years of age. Twenty-nine participants were mothers, 10 were fathers, and one was a grandmother who was the primary carer of two grandsons. Most participants were aged in their mid-40s, with a median age of 46. The youngest participant — a step-mother of two teenagers — was 35, and the oldest — a grandmother and primary carer of two teenagers — was 63. Participants had 90 children in total: 42 males and 48 females aged between 2 and 27; 49 of those 90 were aged between 12 and 16 — the target age range of study. Of these 49
children, 30 were female and 19 were male. Two of the participants, Felicity and Peter, were married to each other, however they participated separately (Felicity was part of a focus group, and Peter was interviewed at a later stage).

The vast majority of participants were married (heterosexual), highly educated professionals with a high household income. Ninety per cent of participants were university educated, with 60% of participants holding a postgraduate qualification. Seventy-eight per cent of participants were married, and a further 10% identified as being in de facto relationships. Eighty per cent identified their occupation as professionals or managers. Only one parent (a mother) identified as being a stay-at-home parent. Participants were also relatively wealthy, with 42% of participants indicating household incomes of more than $200,000 per year. A further 12.5% indicated a household income of $150,000 – $200,000 per year, and, a further 25% indicated household incomes of between $100,000 and $150,000 per year. Two participants explicitly identified as being from a different religious or ethnic background, and for one of these participants it was clear that his background shaped his values and beliefs, and thus his concerns about digital media technologies. On the whole, however, I acknowledge that the cohort of participants is relatively homogenous, and that participants from different religious, ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds would have likely revealed different experiences, practices and concerns. Existing research strongly suggests that this is indeed the case (Clark, 2013).

Sample size

I had originally planned on recruiting somewhere between 30 and 50 participants for my study, depending upon the ease or difficulty of participant recruitment, time considerations, as well as the point at which I would reach ‘saturation’ with my data. By the fifth focus group I was satisfied that ‘theoretical saturation’ had been reached. ‘Theoretical saturation’ is where the emerging concepts have been fully explored and no new theoretical insights are generated (Bryman, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). While a few participants did continue to raise new points, these appeared to be more isolated than commonly shared amongst participants.

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20 This is well above average, with only 36 per cent of Canberrans aged 20 to 64 years holding bachelor degrees or above (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).
21 This is well above average, with Census data indicating the median household income amongst Canberran families being $108,500 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).
Focus groups

Five focus groups ranging in size from four to seven participants, totalling 27 participants, were conducted from August to October 2016 at the University of Canberra campus. Focus groups ran for approximately 90 minutes. It has been suggested that the ‘ideal’ number of focus group participants is between six and twelve (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). Taking into account the complexity of the topic, the likelihood of strong parental views, and early indications that parents had a lot to say about the topic, focus groups were kept small to enable all participants sufficient time to discuss their personal accounts, given the relatively short duration of the groups (Morgan & Scannell, 1998). Groups were also large enough to yield discussion amongst participants (Meyer, 2008).

Focus group discussions commenced with me giving a brief overview of my research aims: to explore parental concerns and practices in relation to their teenage children’s use of technologies. I then asked participants to discuss what devices and apps their children used, and followed up with a question about whether or not they had any rules to manage their children’s use of mobile and digital technologies at home. These more general questions were asked initially instead of directly asking parents about their technology related concerns. This reflected my overall approach which, following Bryman (2015), involved willingly relinquishing some control within the focus groups to enable parents’ concerns to surface independently and be discussed amongst participants with as little intervention and probing on my part as possible. Similarly, I enabled discussion to ‘go off on a number of tangents’ to see what they revealed about parental perspectives, concerns and practices, bringing the discussion back on topic only when these digressions did not sufficiently relate to my key topics of interest.

A number of major themes emerged right from the beginning in the first few focus groups: concerns about ‘excessive’ time spent online and on devices; the reliance on digital media for school work; the difficulty of mediating children’s digital media use and enforcing rules; and, concerns about internet pornography distorting sexual norms. In accordance with an inductive theoretical approach, in which research findings guide and generate subsequent theories (Bryman, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 2017) and the emergent character of my research documented previously, subsequent focus groups sought to explore and build on these themes by raising key issues that had emerged from previous focus groups if participants did not raise them. While there were a number of major, recurring themes that were raised in most
focus group discussion by the participants, there were instances where I had to raise one or two themes directly with the group. Additionally, while many of these key themes were raised by participants, they were not always followed up among other participants before moving onto another topic. In these instances, I guided the discussion back to these issues to glean other participants’ views about them. While my approach to facilitating focus group discussion sought to intervene and guide the discussion as little as possible, I was cognisant of ‘straddling two positions: allowing the discussion to flow freely and intervening to bring out especially salient issues, particularly when group participants do not do so’ (Bryman, 2015, p. 509). There were times when intervention was necessary to ensure thorough exploration of key themes, given time constraints.

By the fifth focus group, no new major themes were emerging, and discussion, while still varied, mostly focused on key themes identified in previous focus groups. As such, most parental concerns, practices and strategies revealed by participants were being repeated and little new material was being generated in the focus groups, signalling ‘theoretical saturation’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The focus groups thus served the important function of identifying the key issues, concerns and perspectives amongst participants, while the subsequent interviews afforded more detailed insight into a smaller range of issues and provided the opportunity to explore these in greater depth.

In-depth interviews

Of the 27 focus group participants, I invited seven to participate in in-depth follow-up interviews. Interviews were conducted between December 2016 and March 2017 at a location convenient for the participant. In most cases this was a café, however one interview was conducted in the participant’s home.

Focus group participants selected for in-depth interviews were chosen based on particular experiences they had revealed which I wanted to explore further because they were not fully borne out and explored in the focus group discussions, either due to a lack of ‘shared experience’ or consensus in relation to the issue, and time constraints. This approach of combining focus groups with follow-up interviews enabled a more detailed exploration of the themes that emerged through these discussions.

A further 13 parents who had not participated in a focus group previously, participated in one-on-one in-depth interviews. This was done for several reasons. First, of the focus group
participants, the vast majority were women (25 out of 27). I wanted to capture as many different concerns, views and practices as possible in my study, and considering the persistent gender imbalance in relation to child-care and domestic activities, I anticipated that mothers may have greater knowledge of (and therefore possibly greater anxiety and concern) about their children’s mobile and digital technology related activities. Thus, to achieve greater diversity in my sample, I sought to attract more fathers to my study, and undertook a more ‘male targeted’ recruitment strategy. Recruiting men for my study was more difficult, and scheduling interviews was much easier than arranging a focus group that all fathers were able to attend. Out of all interviews conducted, eight were with fathers, and five were with mothers.

A second reason for engaging in further interviews is that the focus group discussions had focused on a handful of key themes which had a broad consensus amongst participants and which dominated much of the discussion. Individual interviews sought to avoid mutually reinforcing opinions and other group effects that may result from group discussions (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) and which may infer greater legitimacy and importance to certain themes over others. As Bryman (2015) points out, emerging group views may suppress legitimate views held by just one or two participants. Additionally, focus group participants may be more prone to expressing culturally expected views than in individual interviews on the same topic. Further, some participants may not have felt comfortable discussing sensitive topics that inevitably arose in focus group discussion, such as the sexual interests and activities of their children, and pornography.

A series of in-depth interviews was therefore undertaken to address the possible limitations of the focus group discussions. Further, as indicated above, examining some of the key issues that emerged from the focus groups through interviews provided detailed insight into the subjective meanings and interpretations that people gave to their experiences of these issues (Denzin, 1989; Seidman, 1991). Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, with the average being one hour. The precise format of the interviews depended to some extent on the responses and personality of the interviewees themselves. Interviews with less talkative interviewees followed a more structured format because I relied more on an interview guide to elicit responses. The majority of the interviews, however, were less structured in their format, and were broadly guided by a few initial open-ended questions, or an aide-memoire (Bryman, 2015) consisting of a brief set of prompts to ensure that I covered
the range of desired topics. Many of these more unstructured interviews more closely resembled conversations than interviews (Burgess, 1984 cited in Bryman, 2015).

As with the focus groups, I similarly intended to intervene as little as possible, letting participants do most of the talking, and ‘go off on tangents’ to gain insight into what the interviewee saw as relevant and important to the issue (Bryman, 2015). However, I discovered that this is much more difficult in an interview between two people compared to focus groups where other participants often encourage, disagree or lend legitimacy to views shared, thus sustaining ongoing discussion. In some cases, interviewees were very happy to talk at length, requiring little more than non-verbal cues such as nods or brief interjections. However, other interviewees appeared more reluctant to share their views and experiences. In one or two cases, participants implied that their answers did not sufficiently answer my question or might be ‘wrong’ or ‘illegitimate’ in some way. Thus, while I was careful not to influence participants’ views and opinions by expressing agreement or disagreement, there were many times where I found myself sharing similar views and experiences of other participants as a way of engaging with and encouraging participants that their views were valid. Indeed, consistent with Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005), interviews that were more dialogical than ‘detached’ and strictly ‘non-interventionist’ tended to yield richer explanations and insights from interviewees, especially those who appeared less comfortable talking about their experiences. Additionally, where interviewees did not identify key themes that had previously emerged from the focus groups voluntarily, I asked them directly about these issues. This degree of structure was necessary to ensure comparability across all interviews and focus groups (Bryman, 2015).

Transcription and representing participant experiences

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed, resulting in transcripts totalling approximately 190,000 words. All five focus group recordings were transcribed using a professional transcription service, and subsequently checked against the original recording and edited by me to ensure accuracy soon after the conclusion of the focus group. I conducted and transcribed all 13 interviews myself. Certain notable non-verbal gestures were included in the transcriptions where they were considered necessary to the meaning of what was being spoken. These included laughing and hand, body and facial gestures (for example some participants pulled faces or poses when demonstrating female ‘selfies’ or other practices of self-representation). Where participants were cut off or did not finish a sentence, this was
marked with a dash, and minor interviewer interjections (‘hmmm’, ‘yeah’ ‘uh-huh’) were also included. Inverted commas were used to denote reported speech and dialogue that the participant was describing.

Throughout my thesis I have tried to let the participants narrate their own experiences as much as possible by including direct quotes. Quotes have been lightly edited for brevity and clarity, omitting any words or other redundancies that are not essential for understanding the participant’s meaning. However, there are some instances where I have included lengthy, extended quotes from participants. In these instances, participants have narrated anecdotes or addressed multiple issues which I considered to be particularly illustrative or illuminating within the context of my analysis. Ellipses (…) have been used to indicate that parts of what the participant has said have been omitted. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants and their children. The quotes that have been used throughout my thesis have generally been selected for their ability to support and ‘give voice to’ the various themes presented throughout, and because they communicated sentiments, concerns, or experiences that were shared by a number of participants and often communicated them in an interesting or evocative way (Green, 2013). I endeavoured to include quotes from as many participants as possible, however, as might be expected, the Pareto principle was evident as a smaller percentage of participants provided a large percentage of quotable quotes (Green, 2013).

Data analysis

As indicated earlier, focus group and interview notes (and later transcripts) were analysed as soon as possible after the focus group or interview, and prior to subsequent focus groups and interviews. This iterative process enabled the identification and categorisation of key themes immediately after data collection, which then shaped the conduct of subsequent focus groups and interviews, thus reflecting the emergent nature of my research.

Data analysis broadly followed methods set out by Meyer (2008) and Braun and Clarke (2006). Following Meyer (2008), analysis of the focus group and interview transcripts initially adopted an ad-hoc method of meaning generation (Kvale, 1996) which combined different interpretative approaches. Transcripts were carefully read and then re-read, notes were made in the margins and key points (many of which later became themes) were highlighted. In this way, meanings were condensed into summarising statements and categorised, and long passages of speech were reduced to simple categories (Meyer, 2008).
**Process of identification and categorisation**

Issues raised by participants that were potentially relevant to my research object were highlighted in the transcripts and categorised. According to Meyer (2008, p. 82):

> ‘Category’ is a term which covers all kinds of general phenomena, such as concepts, constructs, themes or discourses (Lindlof and Taylor 2002, cited in Meyer 2008). Depending on the research project, certain categories or themes will emerge as more essential than others and become central to the analysis.

I analysed the data at a latent, interpretative level, rather than purely a semantic one (Boyatzis, 1998). This involved looking beyond what participants explicitly said (the product of their experiences expressed through narrative) to attempt to glean insight into their underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the relationship between public culture and private subjectivities (Pickering, 2008). This involved observing and noting participant interaction and responses to each other, but also noting inconsistencies in views and accounts by some participants. Attention was paid not only to what was said, but also what was not said. For example, during focus groups some participants raised topics, issues or particular practices which elicited little to no response amongst other participants. This was contrasted with instances where some issues and topics elicited widespread agreement and supportive responses amongst others. Early identification of categories during the transcription process was recorded in a ‘key issue summary’ index for each participant, which summarised in dot point form the main categories (key issues, concerns, and practices) for each participant.

The summaries from each participant were later consolidated into a table format detailing the demographic profile of each participant, the number, age and sex of their children, whether they participated in a focus group or interview (or both) and the key issues and themes they identified and discussed. This served as a valuable reference for determining which of the participants had shared a particular concern so that I could then identify and further examine relevant transcripts in my analysis of that particular category. This document also detailed key practices by parents, which served as a useful reference for determining the different models of parenting that I develop in the next chapter. Selected data was cut and pasted from the transcripts into a separate Word document which was structured according to the various categories, and this became the basis of subsequent data analysis and theme identification. All focus group and interview transcripts were retained and kept together, and revisited multiple times throughout the project (including three months prior to submitting this thesis),
to ensure that the overall narratives provided by participants were not lost in the subsequent categorisation and analysis of the data (Clark, 2013), or in the writing of the final dissertation.

**Qualitative thematic analysis and discourse analysis**

Once all focus groups and interviews had been conducted and transcribed, and subjected to the initial analysis detailed above, the entire data corpus was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Qualitative thematic analysis (TA) is a method for systematically identifying, organising and offering insight into patterns of meanings across a dataset, and is rapidly becoming recognised as a unique and valuable research method in its own right (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019). It provides a flexible and useful research tool, and can provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun et al. (2019, p. 57) describe the benefits of TA as follows:

> Through focusing on meaning *across* a data set, TA allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences… This method, then, is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of these commonalities.

Thematic analysis can be approached in a number of ways and typically straddles three main continua: inductive versus deductive, experiential versus critical orientation to data, and essentialist versus constructionist theoretical perspectives (Braun et al., 2019). Consistent with my research objective of privileging and exploring the meanings, experiences and sense-making practices of parents themselves, I adopted an inductive form of TA, meaning that various categories and themes were derived from the data and evolved during the data analysis process. It should be noted, however, that analysis is rarely *purely* inductive, as researchers invariably bring preconceived ideas and constructs to their analysis (Braun et al., 2019). In this instance, for example, I was more acutely aware of some of the more common risk issues regarding children and digital media that were documented in the literature review in the previous chapter (such as pornography, grooming and cyberbullying, for example) due to their visibility in popular and media discourse. Acknowledgement of the existing knowledges, interpretations and subjectivities that the researcher invariably brings to the qualitative research process has been discussed in terms of ‘post-positivism’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) Notwithstanding, I remained cognisant that my analytical approach remained predominantly ‘bottom up’, experiential and based on participant accounts rather than my own knowledges and subjectivities as a researcher.
Theoretical principles of discourse analysis were also drawn on in my study, particularly in relation to my analysis of relevant media panics documented earlier, and the construction of young people’s use of digital media use as ‘risky’ and a ‘problem that needs to be addressed’. There are many versions of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003). My analysis was primarily concerned with dominant representations of young people’s use of digital media in the mass media and popular discourse, its dual construction as a problem as well as an opportunity, and instances where participants reproduced or contradicted these representations in their accounts. Discourse analysts acknowledge that language is active, and always attempts to achieve something (Antaki, 2008; Bryman, 2015; Richardson, 2007). Thus, the use of metaphor, analogy, interdiscursivity, and recurring phrases by participants as well as in the media and popular discourse were considered within this context, and whether they served to reinforce or contradict hegemonic social values.

What counts as a theme?

According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82), a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. Clusters of categories that were similar and overlapping were grouped together and described according to broader overarching themes. For example, many participants expressed concern about their children being addicted to devices and technology, and others similarly talked about a perceived lack of balance in their children’s lives due to technology. Both of these concerns were raised early and recurred throughout the focus groups and interviews, representing a patterned response across the entire dataset. Thus, from these categories I identified an overarching theme regarding concerns about ‘excessive’ time online.

Themes were also identified according to whether they directly or indirectly addressed my two primary research questions about key concerns and parental practice. Three key ‘core categories’ were identified from the data and correlated with my key research questions: Parental anxieties; parental practices; and parental knowledges. A number of themes were then identified in relation to each of these core categories. Not all of the identified themes have been explored within the context of my overarching argument throughout this thesis.

Finally, to attempt to explore all dimensions of participants’ experiences where possible I adopted a constructionist approach to the analysis of data and identification of categories and themes. It was particularly striking that many participants talked about high profile risk issues
using similar rhetorical language and narratives that broadly reflected dominant risk discourses, indicating that parents were drawing on a number of ‘public scripts’ (Carey, 1989) when discussing their concerns and practices. For example, numerous participants talked about pornography in terms including that it ‘skews people’s perceptions of what’s normal’, without referencing their own experiences or those of their children. Such a constructionist approach is necessary to explore the sociocultural contexts and structural conditions which shape individual accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which are especially salient considering the powerful and pervasive discourse surrounding children and technology that I have already discussed. Of course, the boundary between parents’ own experiences and the broader discursive context is rarely clearly delineated. Many parents drew on dominant discourses and public scripts as a way of making sense of their own lived experiences, but at the same time, many participants critiqued related panic discourses and resisted media rhetoric.

Limitations
The sociodemographic profile of participants was quite bounded, with the majority of participants being white women aged in their mid-forties with relatively privileged socioeconomic profiles. The results of my study need to be interpreted with this limitation in mind, as much of the existing literature clearly indicates that class and ethnic background influence parenting in various ways, as well as parental concerns about and mediation of digital media (boyd & Hargittai, 2013; Clark, 2013; Livingstone et al., 2015; Nelson, 2010). The apparent lack of diversity in terms of cultural background and class amongst my participants precludes any detailed examination of the role of class or background in parental mediation.

Further, we need to exercise caution in extending the findings of my study to parents more generally. Many of the focus group participants indicated that they were participating because they wanted to hear from other parents about how they manage this challenging issue and learn about potential risks of which they may not have been aware. This suggests a level of interest, involvement and parental diligence which may not be reflective of the general population. Additionally, it’s likely that the study attracted participants who were more concerned about their children’s use of technologies than the average parent. While it is important to be mindful of these limitations in interpreting the results, it should be clear that
statistical generalisability is not a key objective of this research, which is primarily concerned
with producing in-depth and nuanced understandings of parents’ experiences.

With these limitations in mind however, there was clear consensus amongst a significant
number of participants in relation to the key themes that form the basis of the discussion that
follows.
CHAPTER THREE: Development and appropriateness

This chapter explores the relationship between parental concerns and the discourse of development that shapes the experience of parenting and normative expectations of the ‘good’ parent. The discourse of development largely underpins parental judgements about what they consider to be appropriate (or not) activities for their children to be participating in. Deviations or transgressions from the discursively constructed developmental trajectory typically elicit parental anxiety and concern. Existing alongside this discourse of development is the technological development paradigm, the process by which new media technologies are created and adopted. Discourses of technological development, especially in relation to education and pedagogy, are usually framed in positive terms such as progress, innovation, benefit and opportunity (Buckingham, 2007; Selwyn, 2016; Slack & Wise, 2005). Socio-biological development of a child and socio-technological development of technologies are articulated through concerns about whether activities or access to media technology is somehow disrupting their ‘normal’ development. Such concerns are premised upon the assumption that children are not only biologically, but also socially less developed than adults (Holloway & Valentine, 2003) and lack the skills, knowledge and maturity to cope with many of the aspects of digital media and technology that have colonised not just their home and social lives, but also their school lives. Parents have long been concerned about their child’s emotional competence and vulnerability, and their ability to deal with the risks, corruption or abuse that children frequently face online (Holloway & Valentine, 2003).

Parents in this study articulated their concerns about their children’s use of digital media technologies in terms of the appropriateness or not of a given activity. At the end of this chapter I introduce the tension between childhood development and technological development, which parents framed in terms of ‘appropriateness’. The goal of the ‘good’ parent is to facilitate their children’s ‘appropriate’ activities involving digital media technology, while restricting or prohibiting activities deemed to be ‘inappropriate’. Explicit articulations of ‘appropriateness’ amongst participants were almost always raised in the context of representations of young women and the reputational implications of certain representations. Implicit articulations of appropriateness were framed in terms of a range of other concerns and the tension between risk and opportunity afforded by digital media technologies. While parents in this study weren’t overly concerned about their own children engaging in practices of sexualised self-representation, parents nonetheless expressed strong
views about sexualised, provocative or suggestive representations, particularly in relation to
the behaviours and practices of friends of their children. These concerns were highly
gendered, illustrating the fragility of girls’ reputations which could be easily damaged
through ‘careless’ transgressions.

Parents framed their concern about appropriateness in developmental terms in relation to
many risk issues. Many parents implied that their children weren’t old enough, mature
enough, or in possession of the required judgement and common sense to manage many of
the risks of digital media. For example, Richard was particularly scathing in his assessment of
his daughter’s school for its apparent failure to protect its students against the risks of digital
media technologies that he considered the school to be exposing them to:

The facilitation of everything good and bad that’s out there through the way schools
now do business … you’ve got to have an iPad, you’ve got to have a computer,
you’ve got to have connection to the cyberworld, to the digital world, to function. I
am sure, I’m quite confident in saying that the extent to which education is facilitated
has far and away outstripped the educational fraternity’s ability to create the
protections for kids. They’ve really been thrown to the wolves I think in very large
measure. (Richard)

In this instance, Richard was highly critical of his daughter’s school for what he perceived to
be its hasty adoption of digital media for the completion of school work, without providing
the necessary safeguards, an issue which I explore further below. This thesis returns to the
challenges that parents face when attempting to mediate access to media technology in
educational contexts later in this chapter.

In another example, some parents acknowledged that using technologies such as smart
phones was fun and ‘addictive’, with many admitting their own enjoyment and reliance upon
technologies. However, the difference between their practices compared to those of their
children, was according to many parents, their level of maturity, sense of responsibility and
self-discipline which enabled them to recognise when ‘enough was enough.’ Robert
articulated this view as follows:

I don’t think adults are any better these days, we all check our phones first thing in the
morning to see emails, Facebook or whatever, who’s sent you messages, and you’re
probably tapping out at night doing the same deal, but you’ve got a few emotional
tools that you’ve developed over time that help you manage it, and that’s where the
concern is I think with kids, is that they’re, they don’t have those internal control
mechanisms yet through a lack of maturity, to be able to say, ‘Enough of that,’ and
put it to one side. (Robert)
There are multiple dimensions to parental concerns and perspectives regarding this discourse of development and how they are understood in terms of the risks and opportunities of networked media technologies. Many overarching concerns raised by parents can be viewed as posing threats to ‘normal’ childhood development: concerns about the impact of digital media on children’s mental capacities; concerns that mediated social relations between peers might result in cyberbullying and exclusion; and concerns about potential reputational effects. Concerns about pornography and online predators were also framed in this way. Many parents expressed doubt about their children’s ability to distinguish fantasy (in many cases, ‘extreme’ online depictions of sexual activity) with reality, thus leading to concern that online pornography may distort their children’s perceptions about what constitutes ‘normal’ sexual relations. Similarly, some parents expressed concern that their children lacked the maturity, judgement and common sense to recognise when they might be interacting online with someone who was not who they said they were, and hence may be being ‘groomed’. Parents that indicated concern about ‘sexting’ and practices of sexualised self-representation online, acknowledged that their (almost always) daughters were approaching a ‘particular age of sexual experimentation’ where they might feel the ‘urge’ to engage in certain sexualised practices. Conversely, many parents framed a lack of concern in developmental terms, with some parents admitting that they weren’t concerned about pornography or sexting because ‘their children weren’t at that stage yet’. Most participants expressed concern about the impact of digital media on children’s immature, ‘growing brains’, as well as the potential for digital media to limit their attention spans and erode their critical thinking skills. Some parents did concede, however, that their children may be acquiring important ‘multi-tasking’ skills as a result.

Networked technologies, especially the internet and social media, are seen to provide a portal to the outside world and the ‘adult dangers’ that inhabit it, such as predators, pornography, and other forms of ‘age-inappropriate’ content previously relatively inaccessible for children. Children have historically been ‘quarantined’ into specific spaces deemed appropriate and safe, such as homes and schools, yet the internet and other networking technologies bring the outside into the public space of the home (Facer, 2012; Lupton, 1995). In the same way that television changed family life and exposed families to scenes to which they had previously not been exposed (Meyrowitz, 1986), the internet and other networked technologies potentially expose children to ‘inappropriate’ content such as pornography, violence, and online predators that may ‘corrupt’ their innocence.
The following sections of this chapter explore the ways parents articulated their concerns about different dimensions of childhood development and how these normative understandings are threatened by digital media technologies. Many of these issues are returned to and explored in further detail in later chapters. The regulatory norm of ‘appropriateness’ was evident in the many ways that parents articulated concern about their children’s activities. From time management to sociality and educational opportunities parents talked about how there was always a judgement about the value of a given activity and whether it was appropriate for their child’s level of development in the context of the risks and opportunities of the media technology. As documented in the previous chapter, parents’ concerns, practices and experiences related to their teenage children’s use of digital media technologies were explored through focus groups and semi-structured interviews. To be clear, the parental accounts that follow articulate and analyse parents’ experiences of their children’s digital media use, and not their children’s actual use of digital media technologies.

The growing brain: mental capacities and attention

Anxieties about digital media technologies disrupting normal child development include concerns about the potential impact on children’s ‘growing brains’. As foreshadowed in Chapter One, concerns about the potentially ‘dumbing down’ effects of media have a history that predates the internet and other digital media audiences. Collective concerns about new media being the trigger for ‘dumbing down’ culture, however, have shifted from a scholarly and popular concern for the critical capacity of audiences based on exposure to commercialised cultural forms through various iterations to being concerned with new media encouraging a kind of active or wilful displacement of intellectual endeavour. Many participants in my study expressed significant concern about the potential effects of increasing reliance on the internet and digital media for learning and school work on their children’s physical brain development, their capacity to concentrate on tasks for extended periods of time without distraction, their critical thinking skills, and their ability to achieve ‘balance’ in their lives. The perception that children’s brains were still developing physically, and therefore had the capacity to be affected, moulded and impacted in a way that fully developed adult brains couldn’t, was also apparent amongst many participants. Bronwyn articulated this in terms of the ‘re-wiring’ of her daughter’s brain:

"I think it’s changed the wiring of their brains. The wiring in her brain and her ability to think deeply… She argued madly to get Facebook when she was in year six, and that was probably my biggest mistake that I let her do that. Because since then she has..."
basically, I think that her framing of herself, her attention span, her ability to use her brain is all wired to the short-term, quick returns of social media. Getting her to concentrate is hard. (Bronwyn)

Kerry’s main concerns about her three sons’ use of technology related to their ‘addictive cycle’ of gaming, and her perception that they are physically unable to maintain ‘balance’ in their lives and their activities, due to the perceived immaturity of their brains.

My concern is that when you’re doing gaming and social networking, scrolling through Facebook, you can lose track of all balance and priorities in life, and you need something that will allow you to break out of that, in order to make some judgements about how you want to spend your time… They haven’t got the frontal lobes they need to come up with alternatives. (Kerry)

Richard also suggested that young people lacked the capacity to switch off when they needed to:

I think we are all probably on devices more than we should be, but for the kids it’s the lack of mental release from the pressures … being engaged at school is pretty intense at the best of times as you’re going through those formative years, and then having that extend, that pressure extend beyond five o’clock potentially up until eleven o’clock at night when they go to sleep is probably a pressure that they don’t all need. They’ll learn to adapt and be resilient to it, but in the early stages they don’t necessarily have all the mechanism to shut it down when they need to. (Robert)

Sam raised the issue of online engagement potentially impacting his son’s concentration, but appeared to remain sanguine, apparently rejecting moral panics and acknowledging that these issues aren’t new:

My real concern is with the way that – not concern, but I’m quite interested in the way that [his son’s] engagement with the internet is forming potentially a lack of concentration on things or altering the way, I guess thinking patterns or ways of thinking that are very different from reading a book. But not terribly different from watching television, so it’s a bit of rehash of an old argument, those sorts of things. (Sam)

The prevalence of digital media in schools and the increasing requirement that school work be completed and submitted via a device, exacerbated this issue for parents, many of whom blamed their children’s schools for (prematurely) exposing their children to these risks as a result. Parental concerns were primarily expressed in terms of digital media’s potential to compromise children’s capacity to deeply engage with tasks and focus for long periods of time, as they observed their children (allegedly) completing their homework on devices while simultaneously toggling between various other online activities such as social media, instant messaging, and entertainment apps such as YouTube. Implicitly, parents were concerned not
only that it was affecting their ability to complete their schoolwork in a timely manner, but also that it was compromising their inherent capacity to do so:

Just reading really short things all the time, and not being able to focus on a long piece of writing, it’s detrimental to your thought processes in some ways. It kind of stunts, I suppose is the word, your mental capacities. (Marcus)

According to Drotner (1992), media panics assume that children are being exposed to ‘low culture’ through ‘new’ media and this is compromising their very psychological development. In acknowledging that children and young people are continually defined as victims in media panics, she asserts that according to this assumption:

Cultural development and human development are aspects of one and the same process. Children’s cultural edification is part of, indeed proof of, their social elevation. Therefore, their cultural fare must be guarded, watched over and protected, because its composition is vital for their mental growth. Following this logic, if we as adults watch soap operas every afternoon, then our humaneness is gradually undermined. But if children watch soap operas every afternoon, then they never even get a chance to develop this humaneness… Cultural and mental development, according to this belief, are two sides of the same coin. This coin is called ‘enlightenment’ (Drotner, 1992, p. 54).

The advent of the internet and other digital media have brought about a shift in the character of these concerns, away from a form of passive stupidity whereby ‘dumbing down’ is ‘done to’ audiences via exposure to commercial cultural forms and ‘debased’ public discourse, towards collective concern about a more active form of stupidity whereby the internet and digital media are thought to encourage an active or wilful displacement of intellectual endeavour. According to popular narratives, young people these days have come to depend on the instant answers and intellectual shortcuts provided by the internet. Thinking has, so to speak, been ‘outsourced’, or ‘delegated’ to a device. This alleged intellectual abandonment is said to be eroding children’s deep-thinking skills and ability to concentrate. Anxiety about the potential stunting of mental capacities, the shortening of attention spans, and the possible effects on critical thinking skills have thus been revived in a digital age said to be characterised by ‘quick rewards’, shallow thinking and instant gratification.

Driven to distraction

Many parents did not consider their children to have the maturity, responsibility, and mental capacity to juggle competing tasks on one device, and hence were concerned about their children’s capacity for distraction. This was an issue for the majority of parents who reported that their children were required to complete their school work on devices. The capacity for
distraction was evidently a bigger problem for young people who had learning or other difficulties. Vanessa shared the following concerns about her daughter who has learning difficulties:

My daughter is 14 and she’s in Year 8 and has an iPad and an iPhone. She had to have an iPad for school …. That’s where, for me, the whole thing started to get a bit out of control, because she’s expected to do her homework but I’m just not sure how much homework is actually getting done, with this Snapchat thing constantly popping up. And that is what happens, it’s a real interruption to her… She struggles in school and reading and writing is not fun, it’s an absolute chore. She has a visual processing disorder, which I think is the nice new name for dyslexia. So, she battles, concentrating is hard and sticking with it is hard … I go in and say after half an hour, ‘Is that all you’ve done?’ ‘Well, my friends keep chatting,’ … She doesn’t want to be left out of the conversation. It’s really difficult for her. (Vanessa)

Almost all parents described the ease with which their children became distracted, and the difficulty of ‘working out the different boundaries’ between the various tasks and activities that their children were undertaking. This was also exacerbated by young people’s apparent fear of missing out, as well as their ‘constant connectivity’ with their peers, an issue which I explore further in Chapter Six. As Marcus observed in relation to his own son:

He procrastinates a lot, and he’s supposed to work, and he’ll just spend all his time … He’ll do a little bit of work, and then he’ll be like, ‘I need to relax and have a break.’ It’s really difficult because the work tool is the distraction tool. (Marcus)

Marwick and boyd (2011, 2014b) use the phrase ‘context collapse’ to describe the coming together of various identities via social media, and the ways in which social media collapses together different contexts and audiences. This is a useful theoretical concept to apply here if we can broaden its application beyond thinking about social media, identities and audiences, to considering the different contexts of teenage children’s lives – including their mediated social interactions, entertainment, and school related tasks such as homework. As demonstrated by the parental accounts above, these different aspects of teenagers’ lives are merging spatially and temporally via digital technologies. Young people’s leisure time is becoming more ‘curricularised’ (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). The merging of previously separate elements was a cause of concern amongst parents who expressed doubt about their child’s ability to successfully manage these different contexts simultaneously. Getting children to do their homework and focus on a task to completion is hardly a new problem. Yet the merging of different contexts onto one (often small and personal) digital device significantly diminishes the visibility around such activities to parents, hence making
parental regulation and monitoring to ensure that tasks such as homework are completed, more difficult and burdensome. As Kendall said when discussing her 15-year-old son:

I feel really resentful that that element of control’s been taken out of my hands. I’m not saying that we should go back to the old-fashioned way of doing everything by hand. The reality is if he was doing his homework by hand, I can have a look at his book, and go, ‘Is this what you’ve done in an hour?’ Whereas, he can easily pull up a word doc that he’s had done for three days. I don’t look over his shoulder all the time. He’s 15 and he’s in Year 10 … but I know there’s lots of time being spent on YouTube that should be spent studying. (Kendall)

Felicity and Louise shared similar views:

Well everything’s about the homework this year, but all the homework is done on the device. But I don't see it, whereas last year he brought it home, every week, I could see it, we could do it, I’d know what he had to do. (Felicity)

My older daughter needs to have computer access for their homework. All of the homework communication is on the device. But the expectation that all communication from the teachers is on the device and all of their homework is on the device means that it's really undermined the parents' ability. And so when I say, ‘Give me your iPad, I’ll put it in the living room,’ and she's, ‘I have to do my homework.’ I admire everyone who manages to impose those time limits. Part of the battle is legitimate, on their part, because they do have to do their homework. But of course, by that stage they’ve faffed around on YouTube for god knows how many hours. But yeah, it's very difficult. (Louise)

Marcus pointed out that completing homework on a device requires a particular level of ‘self-discipline’ that he implied is difficult for children and young people to exercise. Complicating this, he added, was a ‘seductive’ and ‘powerful autonomy’ that can be experienced by children online that is otherwise not typically experienced by them:

It requires a level of self-discipline for a kid. It’s so seductive, you can watch videos, you can talk to people … it’s a space where they can feel powerfully autonomous. So once that autonomy can be located outside then maybe it will be less seductive. But until they learn how to drive or move out or do stuff … (Marcus)

As can be seen from these parental accounts of their experiences with their children, many parents implied that their children’s capacity for distraction and lack of focus was due in large part to their lack of maturity, experience, judgement, and not-yet-developed sense of responsibility. As James pointed out earlier, adults similarly face the temptations of social media and YouTube when doing their work but are considered to be mature and responsible enough to manage distractions. Children and young people, on the other hand, are considered to have not yet developed these capacities.
A minority of parents did, however, acknowledge that their children’s negotiation of these ‘collapsing contexts’ may actually help their children develop skills to manage competing demands. Thus, while parents were clearly concerned about digital media disrupting ‘normal’ learning and development, some parents considered that digital media might provide their children with a valuable opportunity to develop the ‘self-control’ and ‘multi-tasking’ skills needed for future study and work. Peter, for example, said:

I think it’s good in a way, it’s probably teaching them, and they probably don’t realise it, to have that cross-over of your personal and work life, or your personal and school life which I think everyone’s challenged by at the moment. Connectivity and devices have become such a part of our life that it’s very hard to draw a line between when you’re working and when you’re playing. I think everyone’s got to learn to manage that. So, I think it’s good for them to start learning that from a young age – self-control. (Peter)

Therese, while expressing clear concern about the potential of digital media to distract her daughters from their schoolwork, also grasped onto the possibility that her daughters may be learning important skills which she implied many adults did not have, presumably because they had not grown up with technology. She did not, however, seem entirely convinced by the argument:

I’ve read reports and studies that say these kids are able to multi-task. They can have Facebook open over here and be concentrating and they can see that and go back to it, but there are studies that show that it takes adults 15 minutes to get back into the zone once they’ve been interrupted by an email of something …Maybe that being constantly online, constantly having lots of different little bits of information coming at you, maybe they have learned to actually focus really, really well so that they can look at something and then come back to this and be immediately focused again. I don’t know, maybe. (Therese)

These accounts suggest that while many parents expressed concern that digital media technologies may be compromising their children’s learning and development, some were hopeful that they may provide an opportunity for development. This belief was premised on the assumption that the use of digital media technologies for learning and school work afforded children the opportunity to develop ‘multi-tasking’ skills that may help them manage the inevitable future competing demands of study and work.

Critical thinking

Similar to concerns about digital media compromising children’s ability to effectively complete tasks without distraction, parents also expressed concern that digital media technologies and the internet were compromising their children’s critical thinking skills.
These concerns appeared to be premised on the view that the ability to think critically is a skill that is learned and developed through childhood. As Evelyn said:

The technology is so tactile and user-friendly, I think this rush to embrace it, particularly in primary school is actually detrimental because they don’t know how to be critical about what they’re seeing. (Evelyn)

Parental concerns about digital technologies compromising their children’s critical thinking skills similarly implied that children were developmentally more susceptible to the ‘dumbing down’ effects of the internet because (according to some participants) it was ‘all they knew’, and ‘no-one used books anymore’. Rather than the internet being viewed as providing an additional source of information, a perspective that many parents implicitly held, children’s critical thinking skills were being compromised because they only used the internet, in their view an implicitly inferior source of information to books. Evelyn enthusiastically recalled an experiment that her daughter had done at school which involved ‘testing liquid and stuff’ and did not involve computers or technology. She implied that such ‘offline’ activities were important because:

I don’t want them seeing that everything’s online, because they will forget how to write. And I think they lose a bit of critical thinking about what’s put in front of them. (Evelyn)

Larissa and Sam expressed similar views:

I mean, they’ve got access to so much but often it’s just not contextualised, they’re just finding bits and pieces and things like that and they actually don’t have a good overview of how it all fits together… Don’t you worry about what that means for the analysis and deep thought and understanding how it all fits together? (Larissa)

My key concern is the modes of thinking, the modes of engaging are very different. I think it’s that thing of having a lot of surface engagement with something but no depth. But my concern more is that a very broad surface level of thinking without any depth or critical understanding, that’s a very different experience when you’re reading a book, or reading something in a different format… And I just wonder what the effect is going to be on this generation. (Sam)

Such views imply a belief that children need to firmly establish the key foundations of learning ‘offline’ before migrating to digital technologies. In other words, children must be allowed to follow the ‘normal’ developmental learning trajectory, which encompasses mastering fundamental ‘offline’ tasks such as handwriting, reading books, and completing homework using a pen and paper first. Parental concerns about the introduction of digital media into their children’s school lives appear to be premised upon an implied belief that digital media were interrupting and thus jeopardising their normal developmental trajectory,
resulting in ‘stunted’ mental capacities, and the inability to focus on tasks for lengthy periods of time. As Evelyn said, ‘I think they’ve got to get the foundations right, and I think they can skip that if they’re just given a tablet’.

James identified a broad range of perceived benefits and risks associated with the use of digital media for the completion of school work, from the access to information, to the distractive potential, to concerns about the erosion of critical thinking, and ‘intellectual laziness’:

> It’s just phenomenal to see the way our kids approach assignments now compared to the way I used to do it 500 years ago, and I think that their access to information and resources now is just amazing … but there are all the risks associated with that. There might not be the academic rigour, there’s lots of opportunity for intellectual laziness to occur, you could just take someone else’s work and pass it off as your own very easily. There’s also all the distractions because you can just pull up Facebook when you’re halfway through an assignment. So, I think there’s both opportunities in this space with the changing technologies but there’s also some threats. (James)

Many parents thus framed their concerns about the potential for digital media to compromise their children’s ‘growing brains’, their propensity for distraction, and the potential stunting of their children’s critical thinking skills in terms of a disruption to their children’s ‘normal’ learning and development from digital media technologies. And while concerns about the ‘dumbing down’ effects of media are hardly new, contemporary concerns are exacerbated by the increasing reliance on digital media for children’s learning and education, making parental regulation to minimise the purported risks more difficult.

‘Ed-techtopian’ discourses of opportunity and parental scepticism
Parental accounts outlined above indicate a broader concern expressed by many parents about the impact of increasing reliance on devices for the completion of schoolwork on their children’s development. The adoption and apparent valorisation of technologies by most school systems across all jurisdictions exacerbated concern amongst parents who felt that their children lacked the developmental skills and maturity to manage some of the potentially problematic aspects of digital technologies. In recent years digital media technologies appear to be permeating almost every aspect of education in Australia. ‘Virtual learning environments’ have been adopted to manage and monitor student workloads, assignments, and grades, and a multitude of other apps and technologies are increasingly utilised in the day-to-day operational management of schools (Selwyn, Nemorin, & Johnson, 2017). Parents revealed that their children’s schools had implemented a range of policies which were
positioning digital media as a central pillar of their children’s education, from the provision of Chromebooks for every student, to Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policies, to increasing focus on digital technologies in the curriculum. Discourses of technological progress and innovation typically focus on the opportunities and advantages afforded by digital media for children’s education and schooling. Providing a computer and other digital devices to children has come to be seen as a sign of ‘good’ parenting (Buckingham, 2007; Mascheroni, 2014). However, for parents, these changes have reconfigured what might be considered ‘appropriate’ uses of digital media.

Since the advent of computers, a persuasive rhetoric and ‘visionary utopianism’ or ‘ed-technopian’ discourse (Buckingham, 2007) has accompanied discussions about digital media and education. The educational benefits of technology have largely been taken as axiomatic, with multiple government departments enacting policies to provide children with the technologies deemed necessary for their future success in the global marketplace. In Australia, numerous policies enacted by politicians on both sides of government have sought to operationalise this discourse, which in the territory of the research includes the provision of laptops for all secondary school children (ACT Government, 2019). Numerous participants in my study reported that their children’s schools were eager to adopt technologies as part of their curriculum, introducing programs such as Bring Your Own Device (BYOD), which many parents reported started as early as Year Three. Parents described information sessions and communications from school executives which enthusiastically advocated the benefits of ICTs, declaring that they ‘can’t be left behind’, and that they need to embrace ICTs to remain competitive. Additionally, generational rhetoric also frames ‘digital natives’ as fundamentally different to older generations. Their alleged reliance on communications technologies suggest that we must change our educational practices to accommodate their skills and unique ways of learning (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008).

Parents were sceptical of these claims, but their objections were reportedly met with dumbfounded enthusiasm on the part of principals and schools. For example, Diane, in response to the announcement from her children’s school that they would be introducing BYOD for students as young as eight, had said that she ‘registered her shock’ with the school principal:

I often get responses back to me from the principal and other teachers saying ‘but this is the way of the future, all of our neighbours are all growing up on iPads, we have to be ahead of the curve on this. The Principal had said, ‘I'm very excited to announce
that from next year, we're going to introduce a BYOD program for years three, four, five and six where we're going to encourage children to come to school with their own device, and all the parents are excited.’ And I suddenly went, ‘Can I just ask, what’s wrong with the Chromebooks that are within the school that they get out for various lessons? Why do they need to have their own device on them all the time?’ Everyone recoiled in horror. And the principal responded saying, ‘But Diane, we’re all heading this way. And I’m proud that our school is one of the leading primary schools in the ACT to be doing this. This is a great step forward in the future for all our children who are digital natives who need to be ahead of the game.’ And that was her response about arming our children to be more digitally native than the school next door.

(Diane)

Diane’s scepticism about the school’s technology policy and her questioning of the principal was met with enthusiastic agreement by other focus group participants who were also critical of their children’s school’s adoption of digital media technologies and were similarly struggling with negotiating device use in the home. Samantha, for example, was also highly sceptical of schools’ apparently eager endorsement of digital media. In choosing a high school for her daughter, she attended a number of school open nights and quizzed them on their approach to managing digital media such as social networking:

My question at every school we went to last year was, ‘How do you handle social media or the rest of it?’ And I wasn’t happy with any of the schools, public or private. I totally feel that they do not know how to handle it. And they talk about trusting our daughters or they’ve signed a policy. So that is just pathetic. (Samantha)

While it’s probably reasonable to assume that many of the older students bringing their own devices to school were already in possession of a device and well acquainted with its use in other settings, the decreasing age for which schools were introducing BYOD policies meant that in many cases parents were required or felt pressured to purchase devices for their children’s school use much earlier than they otherwise would have:

He didn’t have a device until we had to get one for school and now he’s got this Chromebook that I’ve got to then try to control … I had no intention of him having a device at this stage. I mean because he has to do all his homework on it, then I’ve got to try and work out or creep into his room and say, ‘Oh, that doesn’t look like homework, it looks like another bloody YouTube video.’ It’s just another nightmare to manage. (Florence)

I think about high school. You need to bring your own device. Everything is online there … The reason we got … well it wasn’t the reason we got my daughter a phone, but we were going to, then she came home and talked about being in English and the teacher said, ‘What’s the definition of an aquifer?’ Everyone pulled out their phone, except for her. She was the only one who had to go to the dictionary and look it up. That was a bit of a bummer. (Karyn)
These intense expressions of negativity and concern existed alongside acknowledgement of the educational benefits of digital media, reflecting an apparently widespread ambivalence about their children’s use of digital media for education. Most parents rearticulated the ‘educational motifs’ (Holloway & Valentine, 2003) that I have outlined above when discussing their children’s use of digital media for their schooling, acknowledging that technology was an essential ingredient of contemporary education and that ‘opting out’ was no longer an option. Even Samantha, who labelled the schools’ responses to digital media and social networking as ‘pathetic’, acknowledged that the answer wasn’t to simply reject digital media altogether. She conceded:

I don’t know what the alternative is, other than the equivalent number of hours they do English or Maths or whatever, dedicated to a subject educating them about this sort of stuff. And even then, I don’t think half the staff would have a clue what to say.

(Samantha)

Diane, who had challenged the school principal about their BYOD policy beginning in year three, similarly conceded that there were positive elements to digital media:

My daughter’s at high school. They have had BYOD in place for about three years and the positive thing I see about it is when my daughter's doing her homework, and her teacher’s set the homework all via the email system, I feel like she's doing an online degree. I feel like she's learning her skills for university study down the line. It's very progressive to watch and I think maybe this school thinks that they're setting up their high school students well for a future academic experience. And I view it quite positively but the negatives are that, like you I say to her, ‘Put that away now.’ ‘I’m doing my homework, I’m doing my homework!’ There’s always that excuse.

(Diane)

Other parents expressed a sense of resignation in the face of the ‘inevitability’ of technology. Rebecca, for example, said, ‘I’m pretty pragmatic. I figure we’re in the 21st century now and that’s where life is, so learn to live with it, learn to manage it, learn to manage it sensibly.’ However, managing it ‘sensibly’ was evidently difficult for parents, as parents indicated the difficulty of distinguishing ‘appropriate’ uses of technology which included the completion of school work, from the ‘inappropriate’ uses which parents indicated were encroaching upon their children’s study.

Many parents appeared angry and frustrated that while schools were apparently so eager to embrace the opportunities and positive dimensions of technology, they as parents were ultimately responsible for managing the risks and negotiating the completion of school tasks. Parents indicated that their capacity to disallow or delay the introduction of digital media
until they deemed their children to be developmentally ready to negotiate the risks and
effectively manage its appropriate use had been effectively removed by schools. While
schools espoused the benefits and sustained the hype around digital technologies and the
purported opportunities and benefits they afforded, parents felt that the schools had not
sufficiently planned or prepared for not only the risks, but also the more practical aspects of
digital media use for managing school tasks and assessments, as the following accounts
demonstrate:

At the schools that our sons are at, they use a program called Canvas and [that’s] how
they communicate with the students and how all their assessment items and resources
and things like that [are done]. But all the parents get their own account and log in to
it as well so that you can see your child’s profile and you can see the work they’re
doing. You can set notifications on there so you can get a notification once a week or
once a day for when the information has changed. But they’ve let us down because
they haven’t actually taught us how to use it. (Naomi).

We have Google Drive and we’ve never been taught how to use it. So as a parent, to
navigate … I had to work it out. I can see all my daughter’s classes and I can click on
the folder for maths and can go in and see homework. But the school never took
parents through that. (Diane).

In addition to the more practical challenges of managing their children’s technology use in
terms of their school work, parents were also concerned that school attempts to address and
manage the risks were insufficient. While it was evident that many schools had guidelines in
place, or certain rules around use, parents suggested that these were tokenistic and
instrumental in the sense that it ‘ticked a box’ so that schools could be seen to be addressing
the risks. Yet, for parents the reality was that they felt that the primary burden for managing
the risks (many of which they felt had been forced upon them by schools) fell unfairly to
them.

The incorporation of technology into children’s schooling compromised parents’ ability to
assess the appropriateness or not of their children’s activities. The use of technologies outside
the domestic sphere of the home and in school meant that parents were unable to monitor
their children’s digital media use in particular contexts. While parents indicated that there
were various technical tools that enabled them to do this, as indicated by Naomi and Diane
above, the schools had not told parents how to use them. Parents were put in a position,
therefore, where they had to trust the school’s approach to managing digital media use. Yet as
many of the above accounts suggest, parents did not trust that schools were managing the
risks appropriately.
Mediated sociality and social development

Childhood play and socialisation are accepted as normal and necessary features of contemporary childhood, however many parents implied that the increasing mediation of play and sociality between children and their peers may not be appropriate for their ‘normal’ development. Kora, who was particularly anxious about the role that digital media was playing in her children’s lives, was concerned that mediated play had ‘numbed’ her children and stifled their creativity.

Basically, when I think about the fact that it [digital media] takes up so much of their time, it numbs them. It just makes them completely uninterested in doing all those amazing things that they used to do before. So, it dims their creativity. They don’t even get out their paints and their drawing where they’re making things, sculpting things. They don’t go, ‘Hey, let’s build this thing! Let’s go for a walk to here and go and meet up with so and so.’ It dims their socialising skills where they would be going, ‘OK we could make a plan and do this’, instead they might just say, ‘Hi how are you going?’ on social media, and then feel like they don’t actually need to see them. Also, it also damages the way that they interact with us as well, because they… like they get addicted to it. (Kora)

Karyn observed that her daughter and her friends ‘face-time each other in the group, even when they’re all in the same room.’ Louise recalled her daughter’s 12th birthday party where she had several girlfriends over for a sleep-over. She recalls her daughter and her friends sitting together in a tent in the garden on their devices rather than interacting with each other:

It ended up like ten kids in the tent in the garden. I ended up going in, you know I guess I was pretty tired, and at two in the morning going, ‘Give me all your bloody devices, I can't believe you. It's two in the fucking morning. Go to sleep or chat or jump or dance! But get off now!’ They were sitting side by side, at two in the morning, Instagramming. I remember staying up late with friends and being noisy and ridiculous, but it just seems so sad to me that all these good friends weren't doing anything. (Louise)

These accounts from parents suggest a particular ideal of traditional friendship based on children and young people developing and cultivating friendship in person and engaging in shared play and activities which are co-located. However, the affordances of social networking and networked gaming have seen the emergence of a different kind of ‘friendship’, where the very act of ‘friending’ someone bears little resemblance to traditional notions of friendship (danah boyd & Heer, 2006). Kora, a psychologist, expressed concern about the ways in which mediated sociality was compromising a more ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ way of socialising, and the potential developmental effects of this:
I do think that the way that a person socialises online is very different from the way that you socialise in person, and developmental stages that you go through in socialising with friends, they’re being hindered by thinking that texting and online talking is actually as real. The way that monitors and alters their speech pattern, that sort of self-filtering, ‘I’d better say this, or I’d better not say that’, or to write something and then to write something and delete it and try again… editing it. All of these are things that you should be able to manage in your speech and talking to people face to face, but people aren’t … I think it’s altering people’s cognitive and emotional development. (Kora)

Parental concern about the increased mediation of friendships and other social and familial relations and concerns about isolation are consistent with earlier studies (Delen et al., 2015; Dias et al., 2016; Rosen et al., 2008; Sergi et al., 2017). Yet my findings suggest that such concerns appear to have multiple dimensions, including the potential erosion of young people’s social skills, and that digital media displaces face-to-face sociality, disrupts family relationships and is less authentic than relationships cultivated offline.

Some participants expressed concern that their children may not be mature enough to deal with the potentially negative mediated interpersonal interaction afforded by social networking platforms. Florence, for example, was concerned about her younger son being exposed to potential bullying online, as he had experienced traditional bullying in the past. Florence was therefore trying to delay introducing new technologies as long as possible due to these (and other) concerns, although she admitted that this was difficult due to school technology policies.

Parental concerns about the potential effects of negative online sociality, including bullying or aggression, on their children are understandable. According to Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) bullying or aggression from peers can disrupt adolescents’ emotional and social development. Yet while some parents like Florence were concerned about cyberbullying implicitly compromising their child’s wellbeing and normal development, many more participants suggested that interpersonal conflict (although not necessarily cyberbullying) was an inevitable part of adolescence, and by extension, an intrinsic part of normal child development. Without excusing or justifying bullying or exclusionary types of behaviours that children were engaging in, parents implicitly delineated between the common covert behaviours of drama and exclusion, considered to be part of ‘natural’ adolescent development, and more overt, targeted, ‘serious’ cyberbullying intended to cause harm. This was seen implicitly as a transgression of ‘normal’, ‘acceptable’ and ‘appropriate’ peer interaction, although in reality the distinction is often far less clear. In drawing this
distinction, parents implied that the types of exclusion, drama and relational aggression were (and had long been) a normal and inevitable feature of adolescent life. I explore this point in more detail in Chapter Seven.

Mediated self-representation and identity development

The tension between technological development and child development was also framed in terms of parental concerns about their children’s implicit lack of maturity, judgement and common sense in expressing themselves online, and concerns that ‘inappropriate’ practices of self-representation might be compromising their future opportunities. Many parents expressed concern that their children did not yet have the capacity or maturity to fully appreciate the possible consequences of constructing and expressing their identities online, or in relation to what some parents considered to be ‘oversharing’. Parents were evidently aware of the unique affordances of digital media, such as the persistence, visibility and spreadability of content (danah boyd, 2014) and the implications of this. This awareness, coupled with the common concern that their children privileged the valorisation that they received via ‘likes’ and comments in response to content shared, over reticence and restraint, concerned many parents.

Kathryn, for example, cited concerns about reputation as one of the main reasons why she hadn’t allowed Facebook for her two daughters. Kathryn, along with other participants, noted that ‘angsty rants’ were typical of teenagers, yet was concerned about the reputational effects of documenting them:

That [the permanence of content posted, and the potential reputational effects] hugely concerns me which is one of the reasons why we haven’t allowed Facebook, because it can be so damaging, not only for your private relationships but more publicly. You read stories about employers trawling social media to get a picture of potential employees, and I’m sure there’s heaps of things that people have put on there that they’d never want an employer to see. And I don’t think at 13 to 20 you have the emotional maturity to understand that. So, permanence is a huge concern that I have for all of this, because you can mean it when you say it but five minutes later the angst is gone and you’ve moved on. (Kathryn)

In this account, Kathryn implies that ‘angsty rants’ are a ‘normal’ phase of teenage development, however expressing them via social media is implicitly not deemed ‘appropriate’ due to the affordances of social media which mean that the ‘rant’ remains long after the teen has moved on developmentally as a permanent record of the ‘storm and stress’ (Hall, 1904) of adolescence.
Robert also expressed concerns about the potential reputational effects of certain online representations, describing with some disapproval the online ‘shenanigans’ of his niece which he contrasted with the much more ‘sensible’ and ‘appropriate’ online representations of his own daughter:

R: To this day she [his niece] still puts stuff on Facebook that I wouldn’t allow.

CPJ: Like what?

R: Just the usual 20 year-old shenanigan type stuff at parties and alcohol and that kind of stuff. So when Ellie does that, who’s my eldest daughter, it’s just generally a group photo and smiling, not so much the ‘Aagggghhh!’ [gestures silly face and fingers in V] type of stuff that goes on. It’s just not a good look.

CPJ: So, the potential reputation impacts?

R: The potential reputation impacts. She wants to be a doctor and I said, ‘Look, the employers will Google’. There was a potential head of Telstra who was dropped off the shortlist because of his Facebook page.

CPJ: Oh, what was he doing?

R: A bit too alcoholic, wrong imagery.

Most participants were similarly concerned about constructions and expressions of identity online, as well as representations or information disclosure by their children or third parties that may have repercussions for their children’s reputations. These anxieties expressed by participants were disproportionately concerned with representations that could be considered to be sexualised, and other representations considered to connote a precociousness deemed ‘inappropriate’, like drinking or partying. Underlying these concerns, was an assumption on the part of parents that their children lacked the maturity, judgement and common sense to consider the potential long-term consequences of such behaviours. Indeed, according to Gabriel (2014, p. 105) many of the fears associated with young people’s online behaviours are premised on:

dominant assumptions informed by developmental psychology and developmental neuroscience … that children and young people have limited capacity to critically reflect on their own development, and that to expect this of them is to harm their ‘natural’ cognitive and emotional growth.

Indeed, cyber safety education programs and other materials are developed to help remedy this alleged deficit. Gabriel, however, disputes these assumptions, claiming that the construction and representation of identity online, especially via social media, requires young people to ‘actively and deliberately think about and negotiate their own visibility – the image
they project, the identity they want to have’ (Gabriel, 2014, p. 105). The accounts shared by participants in my study, however, do not support Gabriel’s assertions. Parents shared many experiences where their children had shared information or images via social media which had the potential to harm their reputations. In one particularly extreme example, Florence shared a story about a recording of her son engaging in sexual activity with a girl being uploaded to social media, and the ongoing legal and social implications which had ‘dragged on for months’ and had involved both the Australian Federal Police and the FBI. Yet Florence was still doubtful that her son had learned from the experience at all:

It was the girl who took the image of herself involved in an act with a body part of my son, and she shared it on Snapchat with her four closest friends, while still in the act… 14 year old girl… They don’t care, they will take images of themselves, and each other, and share them, and two seconds later, it’s gone from your Snapchat to someone’s Facebook to the Internet, to the FBI, and he still, I think, doesn’t really get it … I’m pretty sure that since then he has still shared images and asked for images, and got images. They have no clue what they’re doing. That is the incredible danger of it. (Florence)

Errors of judgement: ‘making mistakes’

Parents acknowledged that their teenage children were going through a particularly vulnerable period of social and physical development in which they were not only experimenting with different identities, but also with new and different experiences. Part of this process, parents acknowledged, involved making questionable decisions and inevitable mistakes. This is a clear example of the tension between access to technology that mediates social relationships and the relative socio-biological development that (allegedly) bestows ‘common sense’ or ‘maturity’ to use such technology wisely.

Most parents accepted that making mistakes was a necessary part of growing up, and hence their child’s development. Indeed, learning from past mistakes is one of the ways that we learn to become productive adult citizens, and many participants implied that making mistakes in their youth was important in shaping who they were as adults. Parents recalled their own experiences as teenagers when discussing their concerns in relation to their own children, noting that they didn’t possess the maturity to always think through the consequences of their actions. Yet, the consequences of the mistakes their children were making and the ones that they had made were different, they suggested, because the unique affordances of social media were jeopardising their children’s ability to ‘make mistakes safely’, as the following exchanges between participants revealed:
Mark: I feel really sorry for them in that respect in that it’s still going to be around. We all did things when we were kids that were embarrassing, that were stupid, that would embarrass us now. It wasn’t getting recorded on everyone’s phone as well.

Christine: You need to be able to make mistakes.

Abigail: You do!

Karyn: Everyone screws up at this point. Everyone does stupid stuff. You need to make mistakes safely.

Abigail: My high school years were private …

Karyn: When I think about uni! And now with smart phones ….

Christine: The terrible things we wore, the people we hung out with, the terrible boyfriends, girlfriends, I mean all that stuff. I mean you need to just get drunk and not think that someone’s going to bring that up again. Yeah, or have a photo of you vomiting over your friend’s veranda on someone’s Facebook page.

Thus, parents were implicitly concerned about the ways in which the internet and social media in particular, may be disrupting ‘normal’ child development. Making mistakes and learning from them was necessary and beneficial, but the persistence, visibility and spreadability (danah boyd, 2014) of online content meant that the mistakes that children made were no longer confined to that particular moment in time. Rather than mistakes helping to shape their future adult selves then, the documentation and sharing of mistakes may be jeopardising their future adult selves.

The limited control that both parents and children felt that they had over some aspects of their online identity and reputation elicited particular concern. While parents were evidently worried about the potential consequences of the information that their children had, or may, willingly share via networked technologies, they suggested that they had some control, at least, in helping their children navigate their online identities, through talking with their children and encouraging them to ‘think twice’ before posting information. Many parents discussed conversations that they had had with their children, whereby they encouraged their children to apply the ‘grandma test’ (a message also promulgated, according to participants, via the various cyber safety presentations that some parents had attended) — to stop and consider if the content they were sharing would be suitable for their grandmother to see. In this way, parents could, to some extent, help their children to understand the reputational implications of their online activities, because implicitly they were not yet developmentally able to do so. Yet parents had little control over information or images that others shared about their children online, which was a particular cause of concern.
‘Appropriateness’ as performance of parental mediation

The notion of ‘appropriateness’, a vague and subjective term that was not explained or defined, was used repeatedly by participants. As intimated earlier, parents invoked the notion primarily when discussing depictions of girls’ bodies and sexual self-representations, a practice which can be seen to transgress what is considered ‘normal’ and acceptable for children and young people as ‘not-yet-adults’. Yet as described throughout this chapter, parents also implicitly invoked the notion of ‘appropriateness’ when discussing a broader set of concerns about their children’s use of digital media. Implicitly inappropriate activities were those that were not perceived as being consistent with ‘normal’ childhood development. With respect to children’s learning, these include intellectual shortcuts, superficial engagements or online ‘multi-tasking’ which have the potential to erode young people’s capacity to think critically and engage deeply with intellectual endeavours. They also include ‘inappropriate’ practices of self-representation or depictions that have the capacity to jeopardise young people’s future employment and educational opportunities, such as drinking, partying, or general ‘silliness’. Predominantly online play, according to participants, was implicitly displacing more ‘appropriate’ forms of unmediated, tactile play and creativity. ‘Inappropriate’ social interactions were those deemed by parents to transgress the boundaries between ‘normal’ peer conflict, and aggressive, targeted, bullying practices. And the practice of making mistakes, itself a ‘normal’ part of child development, became ‘inappropriate’ once it was recorded and made public.

Online representations and depictions that suggested precociousness were typically referred to explicitly by participants as ‘inappropriate’. The recurrence of the term ‘(in)appropriate’ in relation to sexualised representations of girls reveals that the parameters of ‘acceptable’ and ‘normal’ teenage behaviour are especially narrow for girls, and highlight the double standards around the portrayal of bodies, where exposed female bodies are conflated with pornography, unlike masculine bodies that can have various meanings ascribed to them (Salter, 2016). These gendered ‘double standards’ were reproduced by participants, and while many acknowledged their existence, their acknowledgement of the additional constraints placed upon representations of girls did little to change the dominant attitude. Therese, for example, acknowledged the ‘double standards’ regarding female sexualised self-representation, yet still thought that her daughter should dress more ‘appropriately’.

You want girls to feel comfortable in expressing themselves in however they want to. Our older daughter is particularly passionate about girls being able to do whatever
they want with their sexuality. She’s held that view for a couple of years and she
doesn’t dress in a way that I find, I guess the classic word is slutty, but she certainty
wears clothes that I think are not as appropriate for school…. So I don’t want to
curtail their freedom of expression but I need to balance that against, ‘What are these
pictures communicating about you to people that might not have the same nuanced
view of females’ rights to expression that you have?’ (Therese)

Many participants expressed the view that girls who transgressed the boundaries of
‘appropriate’ representation lacked ‘self-respect’ and agency, implying that agentic sexual
self-expression does not accord with ‘normal’ or acceptable perceptions of girl development,
and thus pathologised female sexual subjects (Egan, 2013). Many parents proudly exclaimed
that their daughters did not engage in such practices and thought that their friends who did so
were foolish. Robert proudly claimed that his daughter didn’t ‘do duckface’. Other
participants talked about this notion of appropriateness explicitly in relation to sexualised
female behaviours:

We’ve [my children and I] had those conversations for years and they’ll say, ‘Well,
we don’t think that’s appropriate.’ Then what message is that sending? Does she or he
have some self-respect? Just discussion about who you are as a person and having
some self-respect and just that the images, they go on the internet, they’re there
forever. You’re not going to get rid of them. That’s the reality. When you’re a
grandma, do you want your grandchildren to look at you with your boobs hanging
out? (Jennifer)

She’s got friends who post, I think inappropriate pictures of themselves. Like girls
wearing underwear or low plunging necklines on dresses or what-have-you, and lots
of those fairly provocative poses and that sort of thing. She’s got a couple of friends
who do that a lot and she doesn’t like that, she thinks that’s really foolish. (Therese)

One of the things we confronted my 13-year-old son about was just – some of his
friends on Facebook, some of the girls that he was friends with from his high school,
and the photos that they post of them wearing not very much and that sort of thing.
And we were just saying that we didn’t think that was appropriate for them to be
doing that. To discourage him from commenting on it too much or encouraging the
girls he knows to do that sort of thing. (Peter)

The general discomfort that participants demonstrated in relation to teenage girls’ practices of
sexualised self-representation reflect a broader cultural discomfort with childhood and
teenage expressions of sexuality more generally. Anxieties about childhood precociousness
commonly manifest in relation to childhood sexualisation (Holloway & Valentine, 2003),
implying that there is a ‘correct’ developmental stage, usually outside the realms of childhood
entirely (Faulkner, 2010) at which sexual self-expression is permissible and ‘appropriate’.
Participants did not deny young people’s right to sexualised self-expression and
experimentation entirely. Both Simone and Richard acknowledged that their teenage
daughters were approaching ‘that age of sexual interest’. However, parental accounts suggest that while sexual development is a ‘normal’ part of child development, public expressions of sexuality (especially amongst girls) transgress what is normal and ‘appropriate’. Both Simone and Richard expressed concern that their daughters might engage in practices of sexualised self-representation including ‘sexting’. Such concerns, while apparently fuelled by the developmental stage of their daughters as well as media panics about the issue, need to be considered within the context of broader concerns expressed by participants about the purported sexualisation or ‘pornification’ of culture more generally. Parental concerns were also articulated in relation to the increasing sexual agency (McRobbie, 2011), or what Gill (2008) refers to as the ‘compulsory sexual agency’ of girls, which have become defining features of the ‘postfeminist’ era, with some participants recounting stories in which public displays of sexuality or sexual activity had afforded them a kind of credibility and cultural capital. This will be explored further in Chapter Six in the context of sexting.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the process of child development cuts across two processes: The socio-biological development of children into adults, and socio-technological discourses of progress, and in particular ‘innovation’ in an educational context. Parents framed their concerns about their children’s engagement with digital media technologies in terms of the tension between these two processes. As documented in Chapter One, the ‘developmental paradigm’ is central to modern constructions of childhood (Holloway & Valentine, 2003) and children are expected to progress through a discursively constructed linear developmental trajectory characterised by a set of ‘norms’ for each stage (Jackson & Scott, 1999). At the same time, socio-technological discourses of progress and innovation espousing the various benefits of digital media technologies, typically frame computers as ‘transformative’, ‘empowering’ and ‘emancipating’ (Buckingham, 2007), suggesting that children cannot afford to be left behind. However, parents in my study were demonstrably sceptical of these claims, and apparently resentful about the additional burdens placed on them by schools’ increasing dependence on digital media technologies.

I demonstrated in this chapter that parents navigate the tension between these two processes by determining whether or not their children’s mediated activities are ‘appropriate’. Those activities deemed to enhance or contribute to children’s ‘normal’ development were
implicitly deemed ‘appropriate’, and those that may compromise ‘normal’ development were not. The boundaries, however, were not always clear, nor was there universal agreement. Navigating competing contexts and activities on a device may be inappropriate because it leads to distraction and erodes deep engagement and thinking, thereby compromising normal childhood learning. Yet, some parents conceded that this may be developing essential multi-tasking skills that will equip their children for their future education and careers. Other activities or behaviours implicitly existed on a continuum, only transgressing the boundaries of ‘normal’ and ‘appropriate’ once a particular (subjective and fluid) threshold had been crossed: for example, crossing the threshold from ‘normal’ peer conflict that is a part and parcel of child development, into ‘inappropriate’ cyberbullying which may disrupt childhood development. Public displays or expressions of female sexuality were always explicitly deemed ‘inappropriate’ by participants due to firmly ingrained beliefs and norms that agentic sexual behaviours are outside the realms of childhood entirely, and thus a threat to ‘normal’ child development.
CHAPTER FOUR: Hierarchy of value and parental models

This chapter explores how parents in this study make judgements about activities based on ‘hierarchies of value’ to make sense of the mediation between socio-biological development and access to various media technologies. ‘Hierarchies of value’ in this study are not necessarily organised around limited access to a device (family computer) or a fixed location in domestic space (family home as social space), but exist as a far more mobile set of relations both in terms of location and social space. The chapter introduces and then explores the criteria by which the parents in this study assessed the ‘appropriateness’ of children’s various activities. Some of these criteria are familiar to researchers of family media technology and children’s use of media technology, including binaries of active/passive participation or engagement and offline/online activities. The final part of the first half of this chapter also includes a discussion of how parents were aware of their own contingent incorporation in their children’s use of media technology, both practically and socially. The second half of this chapter then presents two models of parenting that group together the different ways parents mediated the risks and opportunities of their children’s use of media technology. Both models draw on a hierarchy of value with regards to assessing their respective children’s use of technology, but do so in different ways and by drawing on different technical and social resources.

Earlier studies discussed how parents developed and performed certain ‘hierarchies of use’ regarding family computer use (Green et al., 2004; Lally, 2002). The family computer existed in a definite physical location and a definite social space, which meant that parents in these studies made judgements that articulated a clear set of social concerns. For example, online activities were routinely dichotomised as either work/study or entertainment/pleasure, with the former perceived to be of greater value than the latter, and thus prioritised within the home. Elaine Lally (2002, p. 123) talks about the way some computer activities are valued more than others (as per my findings), which suggests certain ‘hierarchies of usage’:

As the computer finds its place within the pattern of activity of home life, some kinds of activity are privileged: some uses of the computer are ‘proper’ uses (both of the computer and of time), while others are not worthwhile or may even be time-wasting. This process of valorisation is, however, complex and multi-faceted: game playing might be seen as time-wasting when there are other tasks that need to be done, but can also be a ‘rational’ recreational activity when used to unwind after a long day at work.
The ‘hierarchies of use’ served an important function in resolving conflicts that resulted from competing demands for access to the shared home computer, whereby work and study were given priority, meaning that use of the home computer for entertainment and pleasure purposes was only legitimate when the work and study tasks were completed (Facer et al., 2003; Green et al., 2004; Lally, 2002).

Like Lally’s research subjects, the parents in this study used ‘time’ as one currency of value. The hierarchy of value and use implied by parents follows a logic whereby young people have a certain amount of time in which they are expected to sleep, eat, bathe, go to school, study, socialise with family and friends, and complete other expected tasks such as household chores and physical exercise. An extension of this logic involves children’s leisure time being increasingly ‘curricularised’ to include activities such as music lessons, sport, and dance, resulting in what Walkerdine (2000) calls ‘full-diary syndrome’, and what Lareau (2011) terms the ‘concerted cultivation’ of children. Young people, especially those from middle-class families, are expected to both use their time appropriately (i.e. not ‘waste’ time) so as to balance their ‘time budgets’ and also engage in tasks that are deemed to constitute ‘quality time’.

Framing children’s media use in ways which encourage certain ‘legitimate’ activities over others predates the internet and digital media and introduces other values besides ‘time’. As prefaced in the introductory chapter, Willett (2015) documents that certain ‘educational’ television programs (such as Sesame Street) were encouraged over ‘commercial’ ones. With respect to digital media, discourses which frame the range of opportunities and benefits for children downplay the social and entertainment aspects of technologies in favour of the educational affordances. Certain kinds of activities, specifically ones that promote learning and ‘creativity’ (Selwyn, 2003) should be encouraged by ‘good’ parents (Willett, 2015). Such constructs are firmly embedded within middle-class discourse. Indeed, middle-class practices of ‘intensive’ parenting (Hays, 1998) are often characterised by investment in and encouragement of educational and extra-curricular activities that are seen as necessary for the future success of their children.

The hierarchies of value and use also resonate with the distinctions drawn by parents that adhere to what Clark (2013) calls an ‘ethic of expressive empowerment’ — those typically middle-class parents who encouraged media use for educational achievement and empowerment, and discourage activities that were perceived to be distractive or wasteful.
Many participants in this study made similar distinctions, privilging educational, creative, active and social use over leisure, passive and non-social use. Such priorities, which are often at odds with the priorities and preferences of children within the family, suggest that parents consider there to be certain ‘appropriate’ uses for the home computer, and it is the role of parents to manage their children’s time to ensure ‘proper use’. As Murdock (1989, p. 233) observed:

[the computer is] a site of struggle between contending discourses, notably those emanating from government and the education system on the one hand and from the entertainment industry on the other. This struggle is regularly played out in conflicts between parents and children as to the proper use of the machine.

Yet while many parents in my study drew distinctions between different activities, usually privileging educational uses of technology over entertainment or social uses, in practice these distinctions are not so neatly applied in a contemporary context characterised by individual devices rather than the shared home computer, which in turn compromised parents’ ability to manage their children’s ‘proper’ and ‘appropriate’ use of digital media.

One way to make sense of the mobile set of social relations that now underpin parental judgement about the appropriateness of activities and their apparent value is in terms of the personalisation of media technology. The personal computer (PC) has now truly become personalised by smart devices that reside in one’s hand or pocket. There was an assumed normative dimension to the ‘family computer’ examined within domestication research that personal media technologies no longer have. In effect, the individualised privacy of the children’s bedroom, and complex ways this ‘bedroom space’ is used by young people, can now be performed through various practices and activities. Livingstone (2007a) has problematised the shift from family television to bedroom culture, largely prior to the emergence of social media and an intensification of this process, to grapple with the shifting demands on parenting. What Livingstone (2007a, p. 1) refers to as ‘domestic media’ changes in their status and use in the home, so that ‘as they become cheaper and more portable, they are reconceived as personal media, particularly by children and young people’. She describes a media rich bedroom that has in part emerged as an effect of the privatisation of public space, but also in part the compartmentalisation of the family home.

[In adolescence,] [t]he significance of the bedroom is now primarily centred on identity, as young people take a growing interest in how their bedrooms are furnished, arranged and equipped. By the early teens, these psychological reasons are easily as important as the practical ones as children and young people seek to identify, protect
and embellish their own spaces distinct from adult scrutiny and intervention. The bedroom provides a flexible social space in which young people can experience their growing independence from family life (Livingstone, 2007a, p. 7).

As Lincoln (2012) has argued, young people’s bedrooms are media rich spaces that blur normative boundaries between domestic and public space. The argument being made here is slightly different, rather than focusing on the actual space of the bedroom, I am suggesting the complex relationships that teenagers and young people have negotiated with their parents about bedrooms can be used to think about the social space performed when using personalised media. Parents in this study have developed a series of criteria for judging whether or not a given activity is of value for their children. Some of these activities are relatively ‘fixed’ in the same way Lally’s subjects would talk about the ‘family computer’, such as with gaming consoles and the family television, but in many other situations there is a performative social isolation or withdrawal of children away from parental oversight of ‘family space’, which is closer to the activity of adolescents and their bedrooms. Parents therefore had to develop a different set of criteria than that associated with the normative assumptions of ‘use’ used to judge family computer use.

Criteria for differentiating activities in a hierarchy of value

Until recently, young people almost exclusively ‘consumed’ media (such as television), and visual media, particularly television, was ‘doubly marked’ as a consumptive and passive form of media. New forms of media necessitate new ways of understanding children’s engagement with media that do not rely on the passive/active or production/consumption binary (Ito, 2008), and media scholars have developed more nuanced ways of understanding this engagement. Jenkins (2006, p. 3) for example, contrasts participatory media culture with older notions of media spectatorship: ‘Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands’. Jenkins does, however, note that not all participation is equal, with corporations still exerting greater power over individual consumers. Nonetheless, by framing all media use in terms of ‘participation’, Jenkins suggests that all engagement with media is active and social.

My findings suggest that while parents were not overly concerned about their children’s ‘passive’ television consumption — likely due to indications that time previously spent watching television was now largely spent engaging with digital media — parents adopted the active/passive framework when delineating time ‘wasted’ on digital media and ‘quality
time’ and ‘proper’ and ‘appropriate’ use of digital media. While parents explicitly deployed the terms ‘passive’ and ‘active’ when describing their children’s media use, parents additionally framed the distinction between ‘passive/derivative’ time wasted and ‘active/creative’ ‘quality time’, in terms of the perceived intellectual effort required for an activity, as well as the inter-personal relations or social context that underpins online activity. Online or device-based activities undertaken with other people or cooperatively were seen as being more worthwhile than some activities undertaken in isolation.

Olivia, for example, talked about there being a difference between the ‘passive consumption’ of something, compared to dancing together to old music videos on YouTube.

I see a difference between the passive consumption of something … like just a pop video or whatever, and our family dancing to ‘Blame it on the Boogie’, which is very different. (Olivia)

Kendall, who was in the same focus group as Olivia, agreed. She talked about viewing YouTube videos with her children together as a family.

Like a YouTube music video or something, particularly old ones from back when my husband and I were young. I like showing those to the kids and they get a lot of joy - we have like Friday rock ‘n’ roll night or something and play stupid songs. But I like doing that because I think it's a family activity. (Kendall)

Both Kendall and Olivia ascribed value to the activities that they describe above, as even though they are not ‘educational’, they both describe activities that are fun, social and are considered to strengthen family bonds.

Anna applied the active vs passive dichotomy to her son’s gaming practices, noting that her husband ascribed less value to her son passively watching ‘walkthroughs’ compared to him actively playing a game:

There’s a guy called Stampy who does walkthroughs of computer games on YouTube, and Richard just loves Stampy. It drives my husband insane… Richard will sit and watch him go through these walkthroughs of games, or just him playing games. I’m not ever sure exactly what he does but it drives my husband insane because he’s not actually doing anything except watching. (Anna)

The activity of gaming and its determination as active or passive, social or anti-social aroused mixed emotions from parents. Most did not reject the activity of gaming outright, but instead

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22 Gaming walkthroughs are typically videos of an individual playing an online game which are watched by consumers with the aim of improving their own skill. ‘Stampy’ for example, has a popular YouTube channel which consists of videos about the online game Minecraft.
applied the distinctions between active vs passive and social vs isolated to the practice of game playing. Therefore, gaming could be seen to be active, creative and social, utilising various skills such as problem solving, and ascribed value by parents as a worthwhile and appropriate use of their children’s time. By contrast, gaming could be considered passive and isolating, and therefore more likely deemed a ‘waste of time’ by parents. Abigail noted this distinction, implying that gaming could be passive, or it could be social.

YouTube is more passive. Games seemed a bit better because they’re creating things. Some games you’re not really creating things. You’re being a bit more passive… If they’re playing games with their friends, so they’re all over and they’re all on their devices and playing together and they’re having a great time and talking, that seems like a different category of use as well because they’re not just passively blobbing around doing it. (Abigail)

These accounts are illustrative of the fact that many parents associated passivity with isolation, which further devalued the activity. Interactivity and online sociality through gaming was often positively viewed (although not always, as I discuss further in Chapter Six). As such, gaming was not routinely seen as a waste of time amongst parents, however excessive time spent gaming did arouse parental concerns about ‘life balance’, the displacement of other activities, and perceptions of ‘addiction’ or ‘obsession’. That many parents perceived benefits to gaming, but also acknowledged that it often became all-consuming for their children, created a tension for parents who sought to harness the benefits of gaming while achieving balance in their children’s lives. For example, in response to a question about whether she thought some online activities were more valuable than others, Kerry responded:

I do, and I have a whole lot of conflicted thoughts on it. That was my perspective when I first got into the online gaming particularly, that it’s a social engagement thing, and I still think that there are useful employability skills that they’re gaining out of that, and learning how to work with people and learning to negotiate with people they don’t really know, and negotiate strategy and all sorts of useful skills. But on the other hand, in the mean time they need to be healthy people. So, they need to also work out how to keep that in balance. (Kerry)

Kerry’s account suggests that parents are framing their perspectives in terms of active vs passive engagement, whereby active engagement is privileged over passive, as a way of resolving two apparently contradictory mainstream discourses: mass media panics about the dangers of excessive digital technology use, and positive discourses which espouse the educational and other numerous benefits of technology.
Online vs offline activities – unmediated vs mediated sociality and play

The distinction that parents made between active, creative and social activities, that were implicitly deemed to be a more appropriate use of time, and passive, isolating tasks, however, were not applied consistently by parents to all tasks and activities that their children undertook, and instead appear to apply predominantly to online or screen-based tasks. Parents implied altogether differing attitudes between online or screen-based activities and offline or unmediated ones, in many cases implicitly ascribing greater value to the latter. The activity of reading, for example, an arguably passive, consumptive and anti-social activity, does not attract the same critique as other ‘passive’ and ‘anti-social’ online activities such as watching YouTube videos or television, with many parents lamenting that their children didn’t read more. (Reading, does of course, accord with ‘high culture’ and ‘active’ intellectual work). Similarly, ‘social’ online activities, like instant messaging and use of social networking, do not appear to have been afforded the same value as other social interaction between friends, such as socialising in person, or even talking on the phone.

Such views indicate that parents implicitly ascribed greater value to unmediated tasks. Parents did not, however, dismiss mediated and online activities entirely as an inappropriate use of time and of little value, with most acknowledging the benefits of digital media, including for maintaining friendships as I discuss in more detail in Chapter Six. However, their views indicate some concern about the increasing mediation of ‘play’ and social interaction amongst young people.

Many parents stopped short of explicitly asserting the superiority of unmediated activities such as outdoor play, sport, and other extra-curricular activities over mediated ones, acknowledging that online gaming, socialising online and watching YouTube were legitimate leisure activities. However, parents routinely framed their concern about the increasing mediation of play and socialisation, and the perceived excessiveness of their children’s time spent using devices, in terms of the ‘balance’ in their children’s lives. Parents therefore acknowledged that digital media have a legitimate and necessary role in their children’s ‘time budgets’, yet it must be adequately balanced with unmediated activities, suggesting a clear dichotomy between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ activities – or the ‘real world’ and the ‘virtual world’. It is a distinction which likely does not exist in the same way for their children, who incorporate digital media into their lives in many complex and varied ways. Indeed, it is now
generally understood that young people experience online and offline social worlds as ‘mutually constituted’ (Valentine & Holloway, 2002). Diane and Louise said:

Well I know I feel really, really happy when my daughter's friends come and knock on the door and she goes off with them. I know I always go ‘Oh my God, my child is socialising face to face. She's out in the real world’. So there is no question that, I think all of us would agree, we feel that joy when our children have those lovely, outdoor, face to face activities, but the world has changed hasn't it? (Diane)

I feel like the more they have a real life in the real world, that does involve sport, music, theatre, whatever floats your boat, the less lure this [digital media technologies] will have, but by the same token this stuff is so addictive and seductive and appealing that it's very hard to drag them back into the real world from the very things that I think they need to be protected against. I mean I'm sure anyone being trolled would be distressed, but I imagine the more steeped in that world you are the harder it will be to go, ‘Oh screw it! I don’t care what that person online thinks. I’m running late for my horse training session,’ or whatever it might be. So it's that tension of keeping their two feet in the real world. I believe it's going to be beneficial in many respects, and yet I find it increasingly hard to do. (Louise)

Many parents expressed relief that the numerous extra-curricular activities that their children engaged in ‘balanced out’ their children’s mediated activities to achieve the appropriate and desired ratio of ‘online’ and ‘offline’ activities. Indeed, many suggested that if it weren’t for those activities, they would be concerned. As Richard said in relation to his 14-year-old daughter, who he also noted was doing well at school:

Her school life is not, nothing seems to be out of balance, out of whack with what it is she's doing. If she was not also physically active I'd be a bit more concerned, but she does ballet three times a week, netball, so I think I'm in a really fortunate position.

These concerns need to be considered in the context of the increasing trend towards middle-class parents’ scheduling of various extra-curricular activities for their children. Rather than assuming that the middle-class participants in my study are primarily driven by a desire to ensure that their children are not excluded from any opportunity that might eventually contribute to their advancement (Lareau, 2011), we should consider the possibility that parents’ encouragement and scheduling of extra-curricular activities may be equally, if not more, motivated by a desire to ensure balance in their children’s lives by scheduling time away from the screen. The extra-curricular activities parents talked about ensured that their children engaged in the active (in the case of sport), creative (in the case of music, dance, art etc) or outdoor activities that they had expressed concern that digital media may be displacing. Indeed, many parents noted that when certain activities finished, technology use
increased. Justine, for example, noted that ‘the sport has reduced in the last three months and I think that’s picked up the phone use.’

For most parents, extra-curricular activities were something of a ‘blessing’ in terms of achieving overall balance in their children’s time budgets:

I’ve actually found one of the best things is that they just don’t have enough time on their hands because there is so many other things. That is probably a blessing in a lot of ways with sports and music and things. (Kathryn)

I think they have a very balanced life in terms of other outdoor activities and other extra-curricular activities that they’re involved in that don’t involve being online and on screen. (Mark).

As I documented in Chapter One, concerns about ‘excessive’ screen time are hardly new. However, recent public discussions and panic discourses about excessive screen-time and ‘internet addiction’ have come to ascribe greater cultural value to unmediated activities. I suggest that unmediated ‘play’ and leisure activities such as climbing a tree, riding a bike playing with friends, and reading a book, have become fetishised in a media rich society in which digital media have in many respects become the subject of intense critique. Such discourses are frequently imbued with a nostalgia for an unmediated childhood characterised by grazed knees and grass stains acquired through carefree outdoor play that is framed as somehow being simpler and more authentic. It is unclear the extent to which broader public discourse and media panics about screen-time may have amplified parental concerns about the amount of time their children spend on devices. However, it was evident that in many cases unmediated activities were valorised and deemed a more appropriate use of time, and thus privileged over mediated activities. As the above accounts demonstrate, many parents lamented that their children weren’t engaging in as much physical exercise as they once did or engaging in ‘play’ in the traditional sense.

**Parenting models: immersive and methodised**

In this part of the chapter, I outline two models of parenting to describe the different ways parents in my study mediated the risk and opportunities of their children’s use of media technologies. These two models draw on the different criteria that parents applied to their children’s activities to determine the ‘hierarchy of value’ but do so in different ways and, as explored in the rest of the dissertation, by drawing on different technical and social resources. The categories that I have identified — immersive and methodised — in some ways resemble the broad parenting ethics and styles identified by Clark (2013) and Nelson (2010), however
they depart from the existing literature in a few significant ways. First, I suggest that the parental approaches to mediation that I have identified may be equally driven by practical considerations as well parental ideologies or ethics. While Clark is careful to assert that her two broad categories of parenting are ethics rather than parenting styles, I suggest that within my study, parental approaches to acquiring knowledge about their children’s media related activities and mediation are driven not only by parenting ideologies (shaped by discourse), but also in part by what is practical and achievable for parents in a media rich environment characterised by privacy, opacity, and teenage ‘bedroom culture’ (Livingstone, 2007a). As documented below, parents found that their best intentions with regard to managing digital media in the home were not so easily achieved in practice. Parents changed and adapted their mediation to suit their own family situations and their children, and it became clear that parental strategies for managing and mediating digital media in the home represented a bricolage (de Certeau, 2011) of diverse tactics and approaches that parents utilised in their everyday domestic practices.

Second, I have made a conscious attempt to avoid any kind of value judgement with respect to the methods of parenting and mediation enacted by my participants. While Nelson (2010) and Clark (2013) are careful not to judge or criticise parents themselves for their approaches to parenting and mediation of digital media, their arguments present an (arguably much needed) critique of contemporary hegemonic parenting discourses. No doubt such a critique may be welcomed by anxious parents who feel morally obliged to engage in intensive parenting practices and ‘concerted cultivation’ due to the prevalence of this discourse, and as such may feel as though they are ‘let off the hook’ somewhat. However the critique offered by Nelson (2010) — whose label for more intensive forms of parenting of ‘parenting out of control’ is itself value laden — may also be read as an indictment of parents who are investing a great deal of time and money into parenting in the genuine belief that it is what is best for their child. In setting out my arguments below, I do not suggest that fully one approach, whether it be immersive or methodised, is superior to or more successful than the other.

Generally speaking, parents who subscribed to an immersive method of mediation appeared to favour discursive and participatory mediation techniques (often referred to in the literature as ‘active’ or ‘enabling’ mediation), as well as trust, for acquiring knowledge about and mediating their children’s use of digital media, with a view to empowering their children so that they can manage risks themselves. While many parents who engaged in a more
immersive method of mediation did still have some rules and regulations around digital media use in the home, these rules were generally less consistent, not rigidly enforced and more ad-hoc compared with the more methodised parental approaches. By contrast, parents who engage in a more ‘methodised’ mediation style were those who may be described as being more ‘strict’. Their mediation style appeared to be characterised by rules, regulations, and consistent methods for acquiring knowledge and managing risks. Methodised parents favoured the imposition of rules and regulations for mediating their children’s digital media use, methods typically referred to in the literature as ‘restrictive mediation’.

As discussed in Chapter One, parental mediation theory attempts to categorise what parents do in relation to their children’s media use. Specifically, it focuses on the practices of parents primarily in response to risk, and perhaps to a lesser extent, in response to pressures to maximise opportunity, in some cases taking into account the technical knowledges and skills of parents in relation to digital media (Livingstone et al., 2017a; Livingstone et al., 2017b). I have developed these two models as a way of taking into account parental knowledges, concerns and practices related to their children’s digital media use. The categories are not absolute, with the majority of parents occupying varying positions across a continuum rather than belonging firmly in one category or the other. However, viewing parental practices through these two lenses enables us to better understand the complexities of how parents appreciate their children’s activities and appropriateness of these activities in critical ways.

The majority of parents in my study engaged in techniques that resemble what I have described as an ‘immersive’ parenting style. As the name suggests, immersive parents immersed themselves in their children’s lives, experiences and activities, and embraced discourses of trust, dialogue and communication as essential ‘good parenting’ ingredients. Immersive parents talked about creating an environment in which children willingly disclose their activities to their parents, and come to them with problems and for advice. Parents within this category gained substantial knowledge about their children primarily through discursive strategies and overt digital monitoring techniques, and expected their children to internalise disciplinary practices. Their preferred style of mediation more closely resembled ‘active’ or ‘enabling mediation’. Of key importance to this study was that their concerns and practices were primarily informed by knowledge about their own children’s online practices and behaviours, rather than external risk discourses.
Immersive parenting resembles what Clark (2013) calls ‘parenting with an ethic of expressive empowerment’. For Clark, parents that subscribe to an ethic of expressive empowerment typically associate ‘good parenting’ with ‘raising children who are self-confident, caring, self-reliant, honest and capable of expressing their views and emotions while exercising self-control’ (Clark, 2013, pp. 128-129). Within these families, which are typically more privileged and educated, digital media use is encouraged for educational achievement and self-development, however children are discouraged from use which may distract them from their goals of achievement. Thus, this ethic essentially seeks to enact the dominant narratives of ‘good parenting’, which typically favour empowerment, self-development and enrichment.

At the more extreme end of the immersive spectrum, this style of parenting might also resemble what Nelson (2010) describes as ‘parenting out of control’, ‘intensive’ parenting (Hays, 1998) ‘concerted cultivation’ (Lareau, 2011), or to use more popular terminology, ‘helicopter parenting’. Discursive strategies (conversation, dialogue, education, negotiation) are key features of both parenting with an ethic of expressive empowerment, and parenting out of control. It is important to note, as Clark (2013), Nelson (2010) and Lareau (2011) do, that these forms of parenting are firmly grounded within middle class sensibilities.

These immersive styles of knowledge acquisition can be contrasted with methodised parents. The concerns and practices of these parents were more heavily influenced by external discourses about technological risk, as parents adopted a set of rules or ‘methods’ in response to the perceived risks in an attempt to ameliorate those risks in relation to their own children. This approach, adopted by far fewer participants, primarily sought to structure their children’s use of technology, by imposing strict rules and firm parameters in relation to content accessed, platforms and apps used, and frequency of use. Their preferred style of mediation thus more closely resembled ‘restrictive’ mediation. Predictably, this approach appeared to yield fewer insights about children’s online activities because this knowledge was defined more by what parents knew their children weren’t doing, rather than what they were doing. Such an approach may accord with at least two broader models of parenting (beyond considerations of digital media): what Nelson (2010) describes as ‘parenting with limits’, characterised by tighter rules and surveillance of children, or what Baumrind (1991) might term an ‘authoritarian’ (as opposed to ‘authoritative’) parenting style.

The ‘hierarchies of value’ used by parents to assess the appropriateness of their children’s online activities differed according to whether parents adopted a more immersive or methodised approach to understanding and mediating their children’s use of digital media.
technologies. While parents across the board drew on the active/passive, creative/derivative, social/isolated and online/offline binaries, the key difference between the two types of parent appeared to be the rigidity with which activities were assessed as appropriate or not according to the hierarchy of value. Immersive parents appeared less hasty to dismiss as ‘inappropriate’ or a ‘waste’, time spent engaged in online tasks that were not considered ‘creative’, or ‘educational’. Immersive parents were instead more concerned about their children achieving overall ‘balance’ in their activities. For immersive parents, the criteria upon which activities were deemed appropriate or not were more fluid and depended on the circumstances. Immersive parents were more knowledgeable about their children’s online activities, and also demonstrated greater ‘trust’ in their children to make the right decisions about what were ‘appropriate’ or not digital media-related activities.

Parents that subscribed to a more methodised approach to knowing about and mediating their children’s use of digital media appeared less knowledgeable about their children’s online activities, demonstrated less trust, and appeared firmer in their assessments about what constitutes ‘appropriate’ use of digital media. The hierarchy of value amongst these parents appeared more rigid, as parents more definitively designated some activities, such as any kind of sexual content, or interaction with strangers online, as clearly ‘inappropriate’.

These two styles or parenting ethics are by no means mutually exclusive or absolute, nor do they constitute firm binaries whereby all participants can be neatly categorised as wholly one or the other. These categories do, however, provide a lens through which the complexities of parents’ anxieties, practice and knowledges can be better understood. While a handful of parents were more clearly situated in one category, many more parents utilised techniques and practices from both. For example, almost all participants had some rules or regulations in relation to their children’s use of digital media. ‘No devices at the dinner table’ was an almost universal rule amongst all participants, and rules restricting devices in bedrooms or after 9:30pm were also common (although frequently abandoned or not enforced by immersive parents). Similarly, most (but not all) parents reported discussing issues with their children, and the importance of keeping an open dialogue at home. However, while most parents used a combination of rules and discursive strategies, it was apparent that parents’ primary approach could be understood as either methodised or immersive, characterised primarily by either rules and regulations, or trust and dialogue.
Examples of the two parenting models

A methodised approach to parental ways of knowing and mediation was the minority amongst participants, however at least three participants reported an approach to mediation that was methodised. Lara was a mother to four children aged from eight to 15 who had prohibited all her children from using social media, and utilised various technical tools such as filtering and monitoring software to firmly structure her children’s digital media activities. Lara’s restrictive approach to mediation meant that her children’s use was restricted to the point where it appeared as though digital media was only used for the completion of homework. Lara’s hierarchy of values therefore suggest that homework and other legitimate school tasks are the only ‘appropriate’ use of digital media. She described her mediation approach, and some of the concerns underpinning her approach, as follows:

I’ve tried really hard to limit our children’s access, and some might think that it’s beyond what’s reasonable, but I just want to completely limit what children have access to and that’s not because I necessarily want to be an over-controlling parent. It’s more to do with the way it affects them, not just now as teenagers, but later on in their sexually active lives, hopefully with a life-long partner. I don’t really want my child’s brain to be wired for pornography that they can’t get from a normal sexual relationship, and that’s what we’re basically facing, in today’s times.

We also have [devices / computers] in a high-traffic area. My daughter, who is 15, she used to go to do her homework in her bedroom, but then a while after her doing that, she had a few issues. She came to us, she was repentant and remorseful, having done the wrong thing with her iPad. So, then we said, ‘Ok, you need to be in a high-traffic area as well’ … We say no photographs whatsoever of our children because you don’t know what paedophiles are going to do with the photograph even when they’re fully clothed. We say none. (Lara)

While it is not entirely clear what Lara’s daughter had done (and she was reticent to discuss it further), Lara appears to be primarily concerned about the potential for ‘inappropriate’ activities, content, or contact to disrupt the ‘normal’ sexual development of her children, and so went to various lengths to try to limit this exposure. In addition to strict rules and regulations, Lara highlighted the importance of dialogue and discussion, yet these conversations appeared to focus solely on risk, and indeed, on extreme, statistically unlikely events, rather than discussions about what her children liked to do online and what kinds of activities they were engaging in. This implies that Lara’s methodised mediation had the primary objective of minimising ‘sexual’ risks, such as pornography and predators, that were frequently the subject of media panics:
We talk about the court cases that come up. Someone who groomed another male, I think it was, to have sex with a girl, but he had to have sex with the guy before he had sex with the girl, or something like that. Not that we give them explicit details of what goes on but we do talk about how a simple decision to connect with someone else who you don’t know can lead to all sorts of things you don’t know where it’s going to lead to. So, we do have lots of those conversations about engaging photographic evidence or videoing and sending it out there, that you put yourself at risk of having a criminal record. (Lara)

Other participants who also engaged in a more methodised style of mediation and thus demonstrated a more rigid hierarchy of values regarding the ‘appropriateness’ of activities, appeared to be similarly influenced and guided by media risk discourses and panics about digital media. But in addition to media influence, it was evident that these parents also acquired knowledge about risks from third parties, which also informed their approach to mediation. Timothy, for example, who had expressed mild concerns about cyberbullying, pornography and grooming, noted the media stories had been ‘filtering through’. However, he also recounted numerous anecdotes from friends and family involving sexting, bullying or potential grooming that had caused him some concern in relation to his own children. These risk discourses and anecdotes from third parties appeared to highlight the extent and range of ‘inappropriate’ activities, behaviours and activities that can play out online, and shaped Timothy’s restrictive and prohibitive mediation. His children, a 15-year-old daughter and 13-year-old son, weren’t allowed their own devices or social media accounts. His children’s permitted internet and computer use was highly structured through the enforcement of a one-hour daily time limit for each child, during which they were allowed to use his laptop computer, a rule that was enforced through software that shut the laptop off after one hour of use (although if extra time was needed to complete homework then they could ‘get an extension on request’). Timothy’s hierarchy of values primarily privileged the use of digital media for educational purposes. The remainder of his children’s one-hour time limit could be used by his children for approved leisure activities such as gaming and participating in online fan fiction.

Timothy’s accounts suggested that his methodised mediation methods were generally accepted by his children. Timothy did not admit to engaging in any discursive strategies with his children in relation to risks. While noting that he may need to address some issues in future, he appeared somewhat reluctant to discuss sensitive issues with his children, suggesting that it would likely be ineffective in any case, and he apparently relied instead on his children’s compliance with the rules. Asked if he was worried about his daughter sending
sexualised images, Timothy shared a relevant (yet apparently quite innocuous) anecdote involving his niece, but said that he wasn’t particularly worried about that at the moment, as he didn’t think his daughter was ‘at that stage yet’. Asked if he would pre-emptively address the issue if/when his daughter got a boyfriend, he said, ‘I’d have to. I’m not sure it would have any effect. It’s advice from parents. All I’d be able to say in future would be, “Well I told you”’.

By contrast, parents who engaged in a more immersive style of mediation generally eschewed rigid rules and regulations, favouring instead dialogue and communication with their children as a way of understanding their children’s media habits and interests, and also as a way of educating their children about the risks of digital media with a view to empowering them to effectively manage risk themselves. Their less rigid approach to mediating their children’s digital media use meant that the children of more immersive parents, compared to the children of Lara and Timothy, had more freedom and time to engage in media-related activities. As such, more immersive parents drew more heavily on their respective hierarchies of value to assess the appropriateness or not of their children’s various online activities, and attempted to impart these views onto their children through dialogue in the hope that they might enact them independently.

Parents who engaged in this kind of mediation claimed to favour ‘trust and dialogue’ over monitoring and regulation. Yet it was clear that despite many parents citing the importance of trust and dialogue, parents still engaged in monitoring and surveillance as part of their immersive mediation, as a way of knowing and understanding what their children were doing with digital media. I explore this in further detail in the next chapter. Participants who engaged in this kind of mediation appeared far more common than those who embraced a more methodised approach to mitigating risk, likely reflecting the middle-class subjectivities of participants, and the dominance of ‘good parenting’ discourses which exalt more egalitarian approaches to parenting.

James clearly demonstrated an immersive approach that he and his wife adopted within their home. Describing himself and his wife as ‘helicopter parents’, who were ‘very involved in their children’s lives’ and always around their kids, James talked about utilising both overt monitoring as well as having conversations with their children about media related issues that arose.
We don’t have specific rules. We have lots of discussions and these things are talked about quite endlessly…. My wife has got the Facebook account that’s linked to their [the kids’] accounts. So, Leanne is sort of monitoring. … And part of our philosophy has been to have the computers in public spaces; so we’re walking past and all that sort of stuff. And we have very open conversations about the sorts of things that are going on there … We’re probably, you might describe us as the helicopter parent. We’re always around our kids. They don’t spend very much time away from us. We’ve had the approach of we want their friends to come to our house rather than them to go to other people’s houses so that we know what they’re doing, and we know where they are… We just want to be around. We just want to know what’s going on. And so, because we think that it’s the idle hands do the devil’s work, you know. If we don’t know where they are and what they’re doing, then they can get up to mischief or fall into unfortunate habits …. So that’s the approach we’ve both taken. And that seems to have worked quite well as far as we’re concerned. And so, we have very open conversations around pornography and sex and boyfriends and friendship networks and girlfriends and all that sort of stuff. (James)

The kind of immersion and involvement in children’s lives described by James is not easy, and requires a substantial amount of time and effort, not to mention ‘emotion work’ (Hochschild, 1979) on the part of parents, in particular mothers. James, for example, said that he and his wife had deliberately structured their work lives so that his wife could spend more time at home with their children. It is a luxury that many parents cannot afford. Yet even if this kind of monitoring was an option for all families, this kind of parenting was not desired by all parents, particularly those who thought their adolescent children deserved some privacy and independence.

James and his wife appear quite extreme in their immersion in their children’s lives. And while the immersive approach to knowledge acquisition and mediation was favoured by most of the parents that I spoke to, few took it quite this far. James’ immersive approach, however, did little to alleviate his concern about the amount of time that his children spent online, with him lamenting (with good humour) his children’s perceived ‘excessive’ use of digital media, the more ‘worthwhile’ activities that were displaced as a result, and his children’s ‘addiction’ to technology, thus reflecting the common hierarchies of value shared by many participants regarding time spent using technology. Yet James, who was a psychologist, took a pragmatic approach to managing this concern, explicitly rejecting more structured and prohibitive approaches, implicitly acknowledging that these sorts of approaches do little to equip children with the skills and knowledge that they will need to effectively manage these issues themselves:

Within the addiction literature you’ve got the two camps. You’ve got the prohibition camp, and you’ve got the harm minimisation camp. We’re in the harm minimisation
camp for addiction. So, we’re sort of saying, ‘OK, we want to educate you, because when you turn 18 you will have unlimited exposure to this, and we want you to understand how this works.’ So I will talk to the kids about serotonin and dopamine, and all this sort of stuff, and the brain chemicals. These games, these platforms are designed to help you to feel good. And this is how it’s done.’… So, we’re not the parents who say, ‘Hand your device over,’ - and we have done that at times, but I think that prohibition approach doesn’t work because they get annoyed at you and it’s like you’re taking away their drug of choice, and they do get the glass eyes, their dopamine levels have dropped, they’re completely almost catatonic and unable to function away from their machines. Give them their machines and they come back to life again, and I don’t want that, I want them to be able to make choices for themselves. (James)

James’ hierarchy of value, like many immersive parents, indicate the privileging of ‘quality time’ and ‘balance’ in his children’s lives, although James’ pragmatic approach to managing this issue demonstrates a fluidity between the various activities, rather than rigidly determining ‘excessive’ time online as outright ‘inappropriate’. It is also evident that James’ approach to mediation privileges knowledge (often acquired through monitoring and surveillance), involvement, dialogue and education. James eschews prohibition and strict regulations in favour of a more egalitarian and empowering approach, hoping that his children will understand the risks and the broader issues around technologies, so that they can make their own informed decisions in time. For James, immersive mediation is about understanding his children, what they do, what they like, what their faults are and the risks that they face, and engaging in dialogue with them so that they are equipped with the knowledge and tools to regulate their use and minimise the risks to themselves on their own.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the various criteria by which parents assess the ‘appropriateness’ of their children’s activities, resulting in certain hierarchies of value. Parents invoked various binaries when determining the value of their children’s media use, including active/passive, derivative/creative, social/isolated and offline/online. While some of these criteria are familiar in the sense that older forms of media such as television have also been assessed according to them, I have argued that mobile digital technologies have generated a more mobile set of relations both in terms of location and social space. I argued that mobile media in many ways extends the concept of ‘bedroom culture’ as a space within which young people develop and express their identities, and experience growing independence from family life (Livingstone, 2007a), thus requiring a more nuanced set of assessment criteria compared to ‘fixed’ media such as the television or PC, to assess their value. This chapter has also demonstrated that, like in earlier studies documented in Chapter One, parents remain
concerned about the amount of time that their children spend using digital media technologies.

In the second half of this chapter I presented two models of parenting to describe the various ways that parents mediated the risks and opportunities of their children’s use of digital media technology. Both models draw on a hierarchy of value with regards to assessing their respective children’s use of technology, but do so in different ways by drawing on different technical and social resources. Immersive parents, who demonstrated values of trust, knowledge and empowerment, appeared to rely more on the various criteria to determine the ‘appropriateness’ or otherwise of their children’s activities. It was clear, however, that the boundaries between the various activities within the immersive parents’ hierarchies of value were fluid, and in many cases the appropriateness or not of an activity depended on the circumstances and other factors. Immersive parents primarily used their knowledges about their children’s activities to inform their assessments about the value of various activities.

The hierarchies of value of methodised parents, on the other hand, were much more rigid, with methodised parents more definitively assessing certain activities and behaviours as ‘inappropriate’. These assessments appeared to be based primarily on external risk discourses, including panic discourses and anecdotes from third parties, rather than in response to their own children’s activities. Methodised parents placed various rules and restrictions on their children’s digital media use as a way of minimising risks and ‘inappropriate’ uses of technology.

My findings suggest, however, that with a few exceptions most parents resisted a wholly immersive or methodised approach to mediation, instead relying on a ‘bricolage’ of both immersive and methodised tactics to minimise risk while maximising opportunity. In the next chapter, I explore the various technologies of surveillance used by parents to acquire knowledge about their children’s digital media use, and the various ways that parents from across the continuum attempted to minimise the risks of digital media while maximising the opportunities.
CHAPTER FIVE: Technologies of surveillance: knowledge, trust and time in parental mediation

This chapter explores the way parents discussed their children’s use of digital media technologies in terms of techniques of surveillance and knowledge or awareness about what their children are doing with digital media technologies more generally. ‘Good’ parenting is normatively framed in terms of parents having knowledge of their children’s activities, and has typically been framed in terms of parental monitoring of their children’s activities more generally (Furedi, 2002; Kerr & Stattin, 2000). ‘Good’ parenting in the digital age, however, is significantly more onerous as it requires that parents, in addition to knowledges about their children’s whereabouts and ‘offline’ activities, engage in ‘investigative parenting’ or ‘transcendent parenting’ (Lim, 2018) to acquire knowledge about the digital media technologies that their children are engaging with, and the nature of that engagement. Still, parents in this study implicitly responded to the discursively constructed norms regarding the ‘good parent’ in the digital age as ‘one who understands, assesses, guides, monitors, and regulates their children’s online activities’ (Willett, 2015, p. 1072).

Within the context of digital media, the acquisition of parental knowledge is often framed in terms of monitoring, supervision, and ‘research’ about various apps and platforms that children are using. ‘Good’ parents are thus expected to possess multiple knowledges: those pertaining to digital media devices, platforms, apps, and software; the risks and opportunities afforded by digital media, and also their own child’s digital media activities. Determining the ‘appropriateness’ or otherwise of certain activities and behaviours according to parents’ hierarchy of values, requires parental knowledge about those behaviours. The second part of the chapter explores the five ways that parents monitored their children’s activities to acquire these knowledges. Some of these were explicitly surveillance-based and used technology to facilitate, but others were primarily social and relied on discursive practices of control. The last section in this chapter explores how most parents in this study discussed this dimension of parenting in terms of the overwhelming difficulty they faced and how they often felt as if their parenting techniques were not working.

This chapter addresses the issue of parental surveillance and monitoring activities in terms of both parents’ perceived lack of knowledge (or, the ‘knowledge gap’), and in terms of parents’
actual knowledges. In the first part of this chapter I draw on my findings to engage with the discourse of ‘media generations’ to argue that contrary to earlier studies documented in Chapter One, parents are no longer anxious due to a perceived lack of knowledge about digital media itself. While the perceived ‘knowledge gap’ between parents and their children about digital media appears to have narrowed (or even closed all together), parents did feel anxious about their perceived lack of knowledge about the different apps, platforms and software that their children are using. In short, many parents — even those that strive to be more immersive in their approach — are largely ignorant about exactly what their children are doing online and on devices, thus compromising parents’ ability to determine the ‘appropriateness’ and ‘value’ of those activities.

Participants’ actual knowledges, their attitudes towards knowledge acquisition, as well as their ways of knowing, varied considerably amongst the parents in my study. Some appeared to place greater importance on some forms of knowledge than others. Many of the more immersive parents thought it important to be knowledgeable about the different software and apps that their children were using. Other parents either didn’t want to spend time doing research, or saw little point in acquiring knowledge that may soon be obsolete. Despite the varying attitudes towards parental knowledge and knowledge generation practices, all parents had some knowledge of their children’s online activities as well as the various risks posed by digital media.

Parents’ surveillance and monitoring activities are the main example of how different ways of parenting helped parents approach the challenges of continually judging their children’s activities in terms of the appropriateness of them. As explored in the previous chapter, immersive parents primarily acquired knowledge about their children’s activities through immersing themselves in their children’s lives, talking to their children about their activities, and situated knowledges, observation and surveillance. Methodised parents, on the other hand, more typically acquired knowledge through technical surveillance techniques, and through knowledge of what their children were not doing.

Technological change and the shifting hierarchy of expertise

The first challenge for parents is that they must possess enough technical expertise to not only ask the right questions of their children, but also to guide and mediate their children’s media use. Early parental concerns about the internet documented in Chapter One arose in part not only because of a lack of knowledge about what their children were doing with this
new networked media technology, but also due to a perceived lack of knowledge about the internet and home computer themselves. Not only were parents concerned about the risks posed by contemporary technologies, they were also anxious about whether or not they possessed the requisite skills and knowledge to manage them, often leading to a ‘fundamental anxiety’ that their natural power base would be diminished (Green et al., 2004, p. 90), and a perceived reconfiguration of power relations within the home (Savic et al., 2016). Thus, parents have long been concerned that they lack the required technical knowledge to manage digital media use in the home which has in turn undermined their sense of authority and control and contributed to parental anxiety. Additionally, discursively constructed generational rhetoric which contrasts ‘digital native’ children with their ‘digital immigrant’ parents may serve to sustain parental concerns about a generational knowledge gap, whether or not it continues to exist.

There is evidence to suggest, however, that parents are no longer digital immigrants (Blum-Ross, 2015; Livingstone, 2017). Indeed, participant accounts indicate that far from the anxious parents of 15 years ago who felt that they lacked the requisite knowledge and skills about the internet, for the most part parents in this study demonstrated considerable competence related to digital media. The internet and other digital media technologies are no longer ‘new’ and ‘unfamiliar’. Parents are no longer ‘terrified’ (Lally, 2002) of computers, or view them as ‘potentially dangerous technology that is out of their control’ (Holloway & Valentine, 2003). Indeed, computers and other digital media now occupy a familiar presence, and as most participants agreed an absolutely necessary, place within family homes. With a few notable exceptions²³, most participants enthusiastically shared the various ways in which they used their devices, social media platforms, and apps and programs for work as well as pleasure. Some participants possessed specific IT expertise and knowledges from working in related fields, and others who did not possess such expertise and knowledge often had spouses who did. Thus, in many cases the household technology expert was a parent. Many parents admitted that they themselves probably used their devices too much and were wary of the behaviours that they were modelling to their children, particularly within the context of their significant concerns about the amount of time that their children spent engaging with

²³ Justine for example, described herself as a ‘bit of a luddite’ and Kathryn had only recently acquired a smart phone after being pressured by her family. Samantha, who admitted that she was ‘glued to her phone’ mainly for work purposes, was less interested in social media, admitting that she had been led ‘kicking and screaming’ to join Facebook.
devices. As Naomi pointed out, implicitly critiquing the ‘digital native / immigrant’ construct:

We are to a certain extent, setting an example. We talk about our kids now being digital natives, but when I reflect back now, from the time my son was small I either had a computer or laptop. Then when I was working, I had the Blackberry, I’d be checking emails and things like that for work and stuff. They’ve watched us do it. (Naomi)

It was evident that many participant families had become reliant on digital media tools not just for entertainment, socialising, and for educational and professional purposes, but also as a tool for managing the business of contemporary family life which is increasingly characterised by two working parents and children juggling multiple extra-curricular activities. For example, participants reported using private family Facebook groups and WhatsApp as a way of communicating with other family members and making logistical and practical arrangements. Digital family calendars were created to ensure family members knew where they needed to be and when. Parents used Facebook pages to follow their children’s extra-curricular activities. Digital media was used to maintain relationships between children and their grandparents who were often located interstate or overseas. Mobile phones were seen as important tools for ensuring (largely through parental monitoring) the safety of their children.

Many parents implied that the process of knowledge acquisition was an ongoing process both for them and their children. Cassandra said, ‘We’re still learning, as they are. And as the parents, we’re the first parents to go through this. We’re feeling our way too’. Other parents agreed, and the question of how knowledge was acquired to manage the challenges of their children’s digital media was enthusiastically debated by participants, who pointed out that their own parents, implicitly a source of other kinds of parenting knowledge, weren’t much use to them in this instance.

Naomi: Who do I talk to? I can’t ring my mother, apart from the fact that she has Alzheimer’s — it’s completely out of her scope, how to deal with a pre-teen. There doesn’t seem to be any … I mean there’s government websites and cyber safety —

Louise: But we’re the first generation to go through this.

Naomi: We are. As parents we’re having to bounce off each other a bit and go, well what the hell do we do and how much of the discipline do you do and how can you actually restrict them from everything when that is part of how they communicate and think nowadays.
For some parents, the relationship of authority or expertise with their child or children was inverted; however, not due to generation-wide exposure, but specific educational talks, programs and cyber-safety activities that their children had been subjected to at school. This meant that their children’s knowledge about digital media apps, platforms and programs extended to comprehensive knowledge about the risks, dangers, and acceptable etiquette, which according to some parents, surpassed their own knowledges in this area. (Many parents said that they had been invited to the ‘parent’ cyber safety seminars, but only a few had attended). Christine highlighted the amount of education her daughters received in this area, (she also pointed out that she hadn’t gone to the parents’ seminar):

There’s a lot of education though. I find that my daughter, even in primary school, they’ve had two sessions this year. Compulsory attendance about how to use social media and about bullying. There’s a lot of education for them around it. They’re very supported in it… In Year 6 by the time they actually had their formal [cyber safety education] session, I think they even had police come and all of that to talk to them, she said, ‘They didn’t tell us anything I didn’t know Mum.’ And also they Google everything. So they’re very self-educated actually. (Christine)

Mark made a similar point, highlighting that when he raised an issue with his children, he discovered that they already knew about it. In relation to an incident involving unsolicited photographs of young women that had been published without consent on a website — an incident that had received significant media attention throughout Canberra — Mark said:

We said, we really should talk to our son about this to see whether he’s aware of it. When we actually came to have a conversation with him about it, he knew more than we did. They’d already talked about it in school. They’d already had discussions about it. Apparently, it was an issue that had involved some people in their school as well. It’s just another example of where we are behind the curve when it comes to your kids being aware of it. (Mark)

Mark similarly acknowledged the positive dimensions of shifting hierarchies of expertise, suggesting that the knowledge acquired by their children through their everyday use and experiences with digital media afforded them a degree of protection. However, in some ways these assertions contradict parental assumptions documented in Chapter Three about the relative immaturity of their children, thus demonstrating the tension between parental desires to trust their children’s knowledge, and concerns that they lack judgement and experience:

Yeah, I think it’s our fear of the unknown because we know less about it than they do in many ways. I think they probably find it much easier to judge the credibility of somebody who says they’re the same age as them than we would because of the kinds of things that they talk about and the kind of engagement they have. (Mark)
The second major consideration for parents after having a baseline of technical knowledge and confidence in that knowledge is in part based on the social relationship they have with their respective children. Many parents acknowledged the rapid rate of technological change and appeared almost resigned to the fact that they would never be fully knowledgeable about what their children were doing online and that they would likely always be ‘one step behind’. For many of these parents, they saw little point in learning about the apps and programs that their children were using, because in their minds the process of knowledge acquisition would never be complete and knowledges acquired would quickly become obsolete. For some parents, the rapid rate of technological change was a source of anxiety in itself, and confirms existing research that indicates that technological change undermines parental confidence (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). Samantha, whose parenting approach was more immersive, implied that it was difficult as a parent to keep up and stay across the issues:

I think the thing that worries me the most is the pace in change. It’s just so exponential. And we can all be sitting here now, talking about the things that are around here, and in 12 months’ time, perhaps the amount of change that’s happened in the last three or four years will have happened again. And that it you’re not actively engaged with your kids’ stuff it can sort of slip away really quickly in the current climate. (Samantha)

The key point about the rate of technological change is that it challenges not only parental knowledge about the hardware and software of digital media technology, but also the ability to manage digital media use and establish social norms and acceptable practices in relation to appropriate use. Rebecca argued that the rate of technological change was problematic from a knowledge perspective, suggesting that a profound social shift had occurred, yet a set of knowledges and etiquette to manage that shift was lagging:

I think it’s a social shift. I think what’s happened is that the devices have developed, and the whole thing, the internet and everything has developed, before we have developed a cultural etiquette around using it and how to use it. So it’s there. Boom! And everybody knows, we don’t know, you don’t know what to teach your kids because you didn’t live in that age, and that wasn’t there. That wasn’t a thing. (Rebecca)

Techniques of parental monitoring

A level of technical knowledge and a degree of trust in the social relationship they had with their children therefore largely shaped the different ways parents would judge the activities of their children as appropriate or not and the measures they would entertain to monitor these activities. The key difference between the two models of parenting was that immersive
parents monitored their children’s activities to ensure that their children were deserving of the ongoing trust that parents had in them. Methodised parents, on the other hand, monitored their children’s online activities as a way of detecting and promptly responding to ‘inappropriate’ behaviours and activities. Not all monitoring techniques involve surveillance, in the sense that some parents would discuss their children’s activities with them and ‘monitor’ them this way without any direct surveillance. In this section I explore the five ways in which parents sought to monitor their children’s activities:

1. Physical observation.
2. Digital surveillance and ‘snooping’.
3. Trust-based strategies.
4. Restriction and control through social or technical means.
5. Other parents.

While the perceived knowledge about their children’s activities was highly variable amongst participants, all parents (including those who claimed to have ‘no clue’ about their children’s online activities) demonstrated basic knowledge about the devices their children were using (or not using), how frequently they were using them, some of their favourite apps, and what they believed were their favoured and most common online activities.

1. Physical observation

The basic knowledge demonstrated by all parents in my study was acquired largely through physical observation of their children as they engaged in their practices of daily life within the home, and was not necessarily the result of concerted monitoring efforts on the part of the parent. It was difficult for parents to ignore, for example, their daughters ‘glued to their phones’ or posing for selfies, their sons sitting on the couch gaming, the constant ‘ping’ of text or instant messages being received, or the sliver of blue light under their child’s bedroom door at midnight. Some parental observations about their children’s digital media use were expressed in the following ways:

Since the devices have come along, they’re kind of glued to it all the time. (Kora)

When she’s sitting having her breakfast she’s got phone in one hand, spoon in the other, just constantly looking at this screen hunched over. And I say ‘sit up straight! Put it away from your face! You’re killing your eyes!’ It does my head in, it really does. (Therese)
On Saturday night his friend … and her older sister were over and I noticed by the end of the night they were all just sitting in the spare room playing games together. (Naomi)

Most parents also engaged in more deliberate, conscious forms of surveillance to actively observe what their children were doing online or on their devices. This included placing the home computer in a ‘high-traffic’ area of the home, looking over their children’s shoulders while they were on devices, or ‘randomly’ walking into their bedrooms to check what they were doing. James, whose immersive approach was documented in the previous chapter, said:

[My wife is] actively monitoring it. And we also, part of our philosophy has been to have the computers in public spaces, they’re meant to be using their devices in the public areas of the house rather than in their bedrooms. It hasn’t always worked. Our son has got his laptop in his bedroom at the moment, but we will say ‘OK come out here, do your homework out here, use these devices out here’. So we can … we’re walking past and all that sort of stuff. (James)

2. Digital surveillance and ‘snooping’

Almost all participants also engaged in some kind of digital surveillance — both overt and covert — of their children, even if they didn’t define their behaviour in these terms. In some cases, these practices were the result of practical arrangements rather than deliberate surveillance strategies (even though parents admitted that they also served a useful purpose for monitoring their children’s activities). For example, parents of younger children who had not yet acquired smart phones frequently used their parents’ devices to use social media and text friends, rendering their activities highly visible to their parents. Likewise, all devices in the home were often linked to parent accounts or devices, requiring parental approval of certain activities. For Kathryn, who engaged in a number of more methodised techniques of mediation, these practical arrangements enabled covert surveillance, or ‘snooping’:

Our youngest daughter doesn’t have a phone, so she uses mine and so she asked if she could put [Instagram] on mine. And I said sure, and that means that I can look at it… They don’t even know that I look at their Instagram accounts and their friends’ Instagram accounts. (Kathryn)

More common amongst these practices was the use of ‘third parties’ such as siblings or extended family members to follow or ‘friend’ the child on social media, and report back in the event of any inappropriate behaviour — a practice that was implicitly deemed more acceptable by parents than covert surveillance. In a couple of problematic scenarios involving ‘inappropriate’ practices of ‘sexting’ and cyber bullying, parents in my study acquired knowledge about their child’s activities through the child’s school, or in the sexting incident,
the police. Parents acknowledged that these scenarios were far from ideal, as by this point the harm had already been done, and the opportunity for parents to act on knowledge to mitigate risk had been substantially diminished or missed. The acquisition of knowledge under such circumstances can be interpreted as a failure of parental monitoring and mediation due to lack of prior knowledge.

In the majority of cases however, parents engaged in overt digital surveillance techniques to purposefully acquire knowledge about their children’s technology activities, and some participants (but not all) implied that that’s what (‘good’) parents do. Naomi, for example, drew an implicit distinction between those ‘good’ parents who monitor their children’s activities, and those (‘bad’) parents who don’t. She said, ‘We’re up against a lot of parents out there that don’t care, they’re not monitoring, they’re not looking at [internet] histories’.

There is a normative dimension to this belief, which is also evident in the cyber-safety discourse. For example, ‘Cybercop’ Susan McLean, in her popular book aimed at parents wanting to keep ‘their children safe in the digital space’ (McLean, 2014) says that ‘parental monitoring is vital’. She implores parents to be ‘well informed’ and research the games, devices, apps, or social media platforms that their children are interested in (McLean, 2014). One popular child psychologist calls for ‘constant monitoring and supervision’ of children on the internet (Carr-Gregg, 2007). And the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, which provides various cyber safety resources and advice for parents and young people, reiterated recently that ‘active parental engagement and oversight of a child’s online activities is critical’ (Judd, 2019).

Overt digital surveillance techniques that were most common amongst participants included requiring their children’s passwords, following or friending their child on social media, regularly checking their child’s text messages and internet browsing history, and using browsers or software that emailed reports about the child’s internet activities to parents — and informing their children that they would do so. Lara, whose methodised approach was described in the previous chapter, utilised a whole suite of technical surveillance tools:

We have our modem set so it filters out a certain level of content. Then we have family sharing, so we’ve set up another device. Then all the children's devices are linked in under my device. Then we have, within that, they can't delete their internet browsing content. I'm the only one who can actually delete it, so it's screened on a daily basis if need be. I'll only do that if I’ve had an issue come up, and then I will go back to policing things more heavily. (Lara)
Parents disclosed their intent to randomly check their children’s online activity to their children as a disciplinary technique. As discussed above, most parents acknowledged their knowledge deficits, and openly discussed the difficulty of actively monitoring their children’s online activity. As Florence noted:

You can’t always be watching. I mean the idea that you have [the device] in a public space, that’s fine. But in any normal house you can’t actually be over the shoulder looking at the screen. (Florence)

The practical difficulties of monitoring children’s digital media use were compounded by the presence of one or more siblings within the household, as actively monitoring multiple children’s online activity was a particularly arduous and time consuming (not to mention tedious) task. Thus it was apparent that most parents, in particular immersive ones, utilised governmental techniques with the expectation that their children would self-govern. As discussed above, while many parents explicitly acknowledged that they relied on children to self-regulate and manage their own behaviours, the majority of parents framed this — without a hint of irony — in terms of trust, explaining their lack of constant surveillance (and thus lack of comprehensive knowledge) in terms of ‘trusting that their children would do the right thing’.

Covert digital surveillance techniques were less common amongst parents, and included secretly monitoring their child’s social media accounts, reading text messages, and checking their child’s browser history. The majority of parents, most of whom subscribed to an immersive style of parenting and thus favoured trust and dialogue with their children (despite engaging in overt digital surveillance techniques), indicated disagreement with such practices, and typically framed their approach as one based on ‘trust’ and ‘open communication’. The minority of parents that did ‘snoop’ or ‘sneak’, as they described it, had done so out of considerable concern about their children’s online activities and their general wellbeing.

3. Trust-based strategies

As discussed above, the majority of participants highlighted trust, communication and dialogue as essential ingredients of ‘good’ parenting, as well as a way of acquiring knowledge and mitigating risk. One possible reason for the popularity of this approach is the difficulty that parents expressed in relation to managing their children’s use of technologies, and the perceived lack of transparency around their children’s activities online and on
devices. Additionally, as documented earlier, egalitarian and ‘child-empowered’ approaches to parenting, as opposed to a ‘command and control’ style of parenting, reflect broader shifts in parenting. Many parents expressed anxiety and frustration in relation to the practical and ethical challenges of minimising technological risks. As such, most felt that they had no choice but to trust their children. Discourses of trust and dialogue co-existed with the practices of surveillance outlined above, producing a tension and apparent anxiety amongst parents.

As a form of knowledge, however, discursive strategies, especially child-initiated disclosure of information, did not appear to be a comprehensive source of knowledge for parents, especially in relation to parents acquiring knowledge about inappropriate material or behaviours. In a small number of cases, parents reported that their children had discussed feeling excluded online or had encountered unpleasant or confronting material. More often, parents discovered concerning incidents involving their children through other means. Parents did note, however, that their children were more than happy to discuss recent things that they had watched on YouTube, or their recent gaming conquests.

Almost all parents across both styles of parenting had initiated discussions with their children about online risks, and frequently used real events reported in the media as ‘teachable moments’ to initiate discussion about inappropriate behaviours and conduct. These discussions served an important knowledge generation tool for parents, who used them to gauge their children’s attitudes towards these events, and hence how they might act in a similar situation. For example, a recent event, mentioned above and widely reported in the Australian media about exploitative images of adolescent girls being circulated and published online without their consent, was used by several parents of boys and girls alike as a way of broaching a difficult issue with their children. Parents of boys discussed the issue with their sons to acquire knowledge about their sons’ attitudes towards girls, and how they might behave in a similar situation. Parents of girls, on the other hand, discussed the issue to understand whether or not their daughters understood the purported risks of taking ‘inappropriate’ (sexualised) images.

Active parental participation in their children’s online activities was also undertaken by some immersive parents, and as a ‘way of knowing’ can be seen as both a technique of surveillance as well as a discursive strategy, as parents used these co-participation opportunities to talk about their children’s activities. This kind of parent engagement could be considered to
constitute ‘active’ or ‘enabling mediation’ (Livingstone et al., 2017a), ‘evaluative guidance’ (Livingstone et al., 2015) or ‘participatory learning’ (Clark, 2011). Such engagement took the form of playing games together, watching YouTube videos together or as a family, and looking at social media with their children. While the knowledge that these practices generated for parents was somewhat limited, it served other important functions for parents, including parent/child bonding, and provided a practical foundation for discussions about appropriate online behaviours.

4. Restriction and control through social or technical means

The methodised parents in my study adopted a highly ‘restrictive’ approach to parental mediation (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Livingstone et al., 2017a; Nathanson, 2001b). These practices also served as a form of knowledge, albeit a somewhat limited one. Such practices were typically defined by strict limitations and prohibitions in relation to devices: not being allowed a mobile phone or tablet device until a certain age; content: not being allowed social media accounts; context: not being allowed to use devices in certain situations (for example at the dinner table), or at certain times (for example after 9pm); and time: imposing strict daily time limits on technology use.

Most parents engaged in some of these restrictive practices in their mediation of their children’s device use (not allowing devices at the dinner table or in bedrooms after a certain hour were common rules imposed by many participants including immersive parents). The restrictive methods adopted by methodised parents, however, which typically also involved the use of technical monitoring tools, were characterised by the tight controlling of their children’s use of technologies. As such, we can view these restrictive practices as a form of knowledge generation for parents, as it defined the remit of activities and behaviours that children could engage in. As such, these restrictions also served as a way of knowing what their children were doing, in part through determining what parents thought their children were not doing.

5. Other parents

Knowledge gleaned from other parents, often acquired incidentally through discussions at the school gate or social gatherings among friends, was revealed by participants to be of particular value. Indeed, it quickly became evident that the majority of participants had volunteered (in the absence of any monetary incentives) to participate in focus groups precisely so that they could tap into other parental knowledges. Many parents, armed with a
pen and paper, diligently jotted down concerns, risks and tips from other parents that they themselves had not thought of. Larissa, who was observed taking notes throughout the focus group, said, ‘I really think that the knocking of heads among parents is really valuable, and the combining of resources’. And while some parents admitted to attending cyber safety information sessions run by the school or the AFP, it appears as though it was the discussions or insights from other parents attending these events that parents found particularly useful. Larissa, who admitted to seizing all opportunities to learn about parenting in the digital age, and managing inappropriate activities and behaviours, made the following comments:

I went to one session about parenting in the age of pornography and the challenges of social media. I found it so valuable hearing what these parents are saying who were way ahead in terms of the problems they were having. So it’s these kinds of forums and those opportunities to interact with other parents, which is as useful as some expert advice as well. (Larissa)

Diane, during one of the focus groups, similarly highlighted the value of other parental knowledges and experiences:

It was interesting telling a lot of my friends about coming here tonight, so many said, ‘Tell me, tell me all about what other people talk about!’ Because everybody wants to know what other people are doing. I love being involved in your focus group, but I wanted to hear from all of you what you’re doing. My mother … can’t give me any guidance on this. All she can tell me is how much easier parenting was in her day, because the digital revolution had not yet happened. So it’s really difficult, we’ve only got each other to talk to. (Diane)

Participants appeared to invoke a sense of ‘solidarity’ with other parents when discussing the challenges of digital media regulation. It was clear that many participants felt somewhat alone in addressing the challenges of parenting in the digital age, unable, as Naomi and Diane have both suggested, to talk about these challenges with their own parents. Cassandra confirmed the value of other parents in terms of knowledge acquisition and assessments of appropriateness:

Something that’s helped is talking to other parents with kids the same age, and we’re all checking what we allow. Because I’ve got an eight year-old watching the screens when my son’s on X-box, so my boys aren’t allowed to play MA24 or higher games like GTA25. We check with the other parents what the kids are playing with, that we’re all on the same page in games and content.

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24 MA15+ is an Australian classification category which restricts content to ‘Mature Adults’ aged 15 and over.
25 GTA stands for Grand Theft Auto, a video game series known for strong violence and sexual content, and which was given an R18+ rating in Australia, restricting it to adults 18 and over (Pitcher, 2013)
Cassandra implied that there was a solidarity amongst parents of children of a similar age, suggesting that talking to other parents to gauge what behaviours, activities, and time limits they considered appropriate helped them assess their own children’s activities, and thus determine their hierarchy of value. Cassandra also suggested that presenting a ‘united front’ amongst parents in their regulation of digital media was important.

Perhaps surprisingly, cyber safety materials and resources were not a significant source of information and knowledge for the majority of parents. The majority of participants indicated that they made little use of cyber safety resources and literature, with many demonstrating no interest in accessing these materials (for various reasons, some of which are cited in the quotes above), and others indicating that they found them ‘a bit’ useful. I had taken a wide range of cyber safety information and resources to focus groups and interviews, as I wanted to offer something to parents in exchange for their time. Yet, only a small handful of participants had shown any interest in them. A much more important source of knowledge for parents was in fact talking to other parents.

Lack of parental (and child) knowledges

Despite the various techniques of knowledge acquisition and monitoring outlined above, some parents still expressed concern about their perceived lack of knowledge about their children’s specific activities, as well as specific knowledges about the different apps, platforms and programs that were being used by them. For example, many parents reported the popularity of Instagram and Snapchat amongst their children, but beyond a general knowledge about what the apps actually do (for example ‘I know Instagram is about photos, and with Snapchat they disappear’), many parents had little knowledge about the specific affordances of the apps, and many reported having ‘no clue’ about what their children were looking at or doing on their devices. Abigail, for example, noted that ‘there isn’t much crossover between what they’re interested in using and what I’m interested in using. I think it’s almost deliberate’. When asked about the kinds of things that their children were doing on their devices, many participants responded with something like, ‘I thought you might ask me this, and I really should have checked before coming along!’ (One or two had actually checked prior to the interview or focus group). Florence for example said:

I thought about checking before I came because I thought this would be a question you’d want to know. The honest answer is I don’t know. So I guess that is part of what we are talking about and that I would have to ask to find out. Except YouTube, I
know a lot of YouTube. And that’s my 12-year-old. The 17, almost 18-year-old, I wouldn’t have a clue because he’s in his room with the door shut.

One likely reason for the deficit in parental knowledge is the lack of visibility around individualised media use, as well as respect for their children’s privacy. For example, Mark adopted a more immersive style, but at the same time respected the privacy of his children. He said that he didn’t really know what his children were doing on their devices because he ‘doesn’t look over their shoulders’. Some parents appeared comfortable not knowing the details and expressed little desire to ‘bridge’ the knowledge gap (discussed further below), preferring instead to immerse themselves in other aspects of their children’s lives or rely primarily on more restrictive methods to manage risk, while for others it appeared to be a significant cause of concern. Kora, for example, appeared especially anxious in relation to her perceived knowledge deficit, despite her best attempts to monitor her children’s activities:

To tell you the truth I have no idea what they have joined and what they haven’t, and I focus my work hours around being able to be there when they get home from school. So it’s not like I’m not there in their face, and trying to know what they’re doing. But if someone’s on the device I can’t see what they’re doing all the time. And I certainly can’t see it with four kids, and there’s all that stuff around when they see that I’m coming over to their screen to have a peek, they put it onto a different thing. (Kora)

Some parents, particularly those that subscribed to a more immersive approach, expressed that they felt obligated to address their knowledge deficit, while others were either comfortable ‘not knowing’, didn’t have the time, or didn’t want to know. Abigail indicated that she felt a particular burden to acquire knowledge about the programs and apps that her son was using:

I feel like I have to learn about them all. I probably should look at the apps and understand them a bit better if they’re using apps that I don’t use… There’s Common Sense Media, there’s a few different parenting and internet sites that I go and check out. I just Google different apps and see what other people are scared about… Yeah, I do feel like I have to learn about them. (Abigail)

Many other parents, however, confessed to having neither the time, interest or inclination to acquire knowledge about the sorts of apps and platforms that their children were engaging with, and, as indicated above, many saw little point in doing so considering the rate of technological change in any case. Christine said, ‘Because I’m so time poor, I actually don’t want to Google all that stuff in my own time’. Naomi confessed that the digital media apps and platforms that her son took such an interest in ‘bored [her] shitless most of the time’. Rebecca, when asked if she looked at her daughter’s Instagram replied, ‘Occasionally, I’m
just a bit lazy. It’s just another thing to look at’. Jennifer said that she preferred to rely on ‘common sense’ or ‘gut feel’. Yet, far from being permissive or laissez-faire in their parenting styles, these parents instead appeared to rely on a broader set of guidelines and advice that they expected their children to adhere to; what Green et al. (2004) refer to as a child-empowering ‘autonomous’ approach to parental regulation. Karyn, for example, said:

I wouldn’t read [for example cyber safety materials] or anything. I don’t read anything. I don’t want to. So I just tell them generally, ‘This is how you should be using social media’. New apps come out all the time, and I don’t want to spend the time researching the app. And I’m not going to and they are going to know better than me anyways. (Karyn)

Time, or lack thereof, therefore, was an important determinant of parents’ approach to knowledge acquisition and mediation. Even those parents who aspired to be immersed in their children’s lives acknowledged the significant time investment in doing so, and as such admitted that they didn’t want to invest the time in learning about the details of their children’s digital media habits.

Other participants, such as Anette, thought that they shouldn’t have full knowledge of their children’s activities and that their children should be afforded some privacy and autonomy separate from their parents:

I’m pretty sure that they do and watch things that I don’t know about. I would be surprised if they didn’t, just like I would do things that my parents would never know about. I just think, I know, that when it comes to the bigger things, they would actually come and talk to us. (Anette)

These parents were apparently less immersed in the details of their children’s media related activities due to time or other constraints, but also out of respect for their children’s privacy. These parents nonetheless privileged guidance, dialogue and trust over the restrictive methods of the methodised parents.

Parents expressed concern about a distinct lack of knowledge on the part of their child as a result of their lack of development, and thus judgement, experience and common sense. Parents acknowledged that children possessed various knowledges about digital media, the apps, platforms and programs they were using, as well as the risks and opportunities they presented. However, as I discussed in Chapter Three, they simultaneously expressed concern about a distinct lack of knowledge on the part of their children regarding the potential consequences of their online activities, or managing the potential negative effects of social media. As explored in Chapter Three, parents were concerned not that their children lacked
the requisite information about digital media and the possible risks, but rather lacked the tacit knowledges — or judgement — that enabled them to navigate some of the more problematic aspects of digital media. Such knowledges, which we might also refer to as ‘life skills’, ‘experience’, or ‘common sense’ are typically seen as attributes that develop over time and are acquired with age and experience. Parents implied that the acquisition of these knowledges and skills is developmental, and as such, something that in most cases cannot be taught. Negatively expressed, many parents referred to this as naivety or ignorance on the part of their children. Positively expressed, it was referred to as ‘innocence.’ Kendall said:

It concerned me so much that he, in his naivety I think, he thought that anyone who posts a football comment or a football picture, they must be genuinely interested in football, and that’s for sure the reason that they’re there. So why shouldn’t he follow them, or they him, on social media? It just showed me how he just had no idea. It’s not just him but some of his friends I’ve spoken to. There’s just a real innocence there not understanding what these things can lead to. That is my big concern. (Kendall)

Naomi, recalling the incident involving her son whereby a stranger was ‘topping up’ his phone credits, similarly did not trust her son’s judgement:

We had lots of discussions with him about the fact that you don’t actually know who it is, and he’s like, ‘I’m not being groomed because I know the language around it’, and all that sort of thing. And it’s like ‘Yeah, you think you know, but you don’t actually know what you don’t know, and I don’t like it, and I don’t like the fact that you’re talking to this person and not wanting to share it with us’. (Naomi)

Failures of monitoring: ‘A gradual process of letting go of all your principles’

James and Timothy, who enacted immersed and methodised approaches to mediation and knowledge acquisition respectively, were two of only a few participants who appeared reasonably satisfied with their approaches to mediation within the home, suggesting that, in their minds at least, these approaches were mostly working. Neither reported significant problems or issues that they knew of involving their children, and their children, according to James and Timothy at least, seemed compliant and accepting. Of course, we cannot actually determine the effectiveness of their mediation without talking to their children. In any case, determining the most effective style of parental mediation is not within the scope of my thesis. However, that’s not to say that James and Timothy found it easy, nor should we wholly attribute their perceived success to the fact that their approaches were more firmly rooted in the respective methodised and immersive styles. Timothy’s accounts suggested that his children were surprisingly compliant, and he and his wife’s success in delaying
purchasing devices for their children evidently made surveillance and enforcement of the rules much easier. For James and his wife, it was clear that they (and especially James’ wife) had invested a substantial amount of time and effort into mediating digital media, as well as parenting more generally. This is a luxury that many parents implicitly did not have.

One of the possible reasons for James’ and Timothy’s relative satisfaction with their mediation, and their subsequent relative lack of anxiety (noting that they still harboured concerns) might be attributed to their status as fathers rather than mothers. It sadly remains the case that fathers are generally less involved in the day-to-day parenting work than mothers (Pew Research Centre, 2015; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018), and by extension, possess less knowledge about their children’s activities. Indeed, within my study, several male participants acknowledged the more ‘hands-on’ role of their wives in the day-to-day parenting tasks. James and Peter, for example, explicitly stated that their wives took more responsibility for parenting, including monitoring and managing digital media. It is unfortunate that mothers still bear the brunt of not only the practical day-to-day parenting tasks such as cooking for, transporting and clothing their children, they also undertake more of the ‘emotion work’ (Hochschild, 1979) that is part and parcel of parenting. According to Hochschild, emotion work involves the managing and shaping of one’s emotions so that they fit with the ‘feeling rules’ of particular situations. Within family life, the emotion work performed by mothers may entail ‘work’ to feel excited, proud or happy for children within a domestic context often characterised by monotony, drudgery and frustration. Within this context, it is perhaps not surprising that mothers exhibited greater concern than fathers about parenting in the digital age.

Most of the other parents who occupied varying positions on the continuum from methodised to immersive but who could generally be characterised as more immersive, reported significantly more difficulty in managing digital media use in the home. As such, they demonstrated much more flexibility, and sometimes inconsistency in their mediation, as they frequently adopted new strategies for addressing new issues that arose (including their children’s increasingly creative tactics for circumventing rules and restrictions) or to avoid constant conflict within the home. Kora, for example, described initial mediation attempts that accord with a more methodised style of parenting. She reported strict prohibitions around screen-time during the week (including television) and banned social media amongst her children. She admitted, however, that she struggled to enforce these rules, noting that she
thinks her children had Facebook accounts, but that she ‘had no way of stopping them’.
Despite structuring her work commitments so that she would be at home when her children
returned from school, she expressed her frustration at the difficulty of mediating the device
use of four children, especially when their use was shrouded in secrecy.

Kora was far from alone in her frustration. The accounts shared by the majority of
participants illustrate just how fraught parental mediation of teenagers’ use of digital
technologies is. With only a few exceptions, parents shared their initial intentions and rules
for mediating internet and technology use in the home, noting that most of them had since
been abandoned due to the difficulties of enforcement and the conflict that ensued. The
following account from Therese documents the initial rules she and her husband had
implemented, the difficulties experienced enforcing them, her children’s (usually successful)
attempts to circumvent them, the family conflict that ensued as a result, and their eventual
abandonment. Her anecdote was broadly representative of many parental accounts, hence it
is reproduced here in full:

Therese: We had that no phones at the dinner table rule. We did try initially to say at
9pm devices go off and they go onto the family charging station which we had in the
office at home. But neither of them would do it, so every single night we would have
this back and forth, the ‘Come on, time to power down, go and plug your device in,’
or if we didn’t remind them they would just hang on to it until we came in and said,
‘It’s ten o’clock what the hell are you doing?’ So it became a point of friction. My
husband would get very frustrated when they were staying online. We did things like
cut off their internet access at a particular time.

CPJ: Did that work?

Therese: No, because then they would just use the download allowance on their
phones. They’ve got prepaid phones so they would run out of data allowance and then
they’d be without a phone for two weeks, and then we’d need to top up their phones
because we need them to have their phones, so we’d take that out of their pocket
money, and then they both starting getting jobs, and they’d run out of credit by the
end of the month, so they’d top it up with five dollars and five dollars and five dollars,
so they weren’t managing at all… They were just like, ‘Oh well the internet’s off but
I’ve got a workaround solution even if it costs me, you know, all my money every
week.’ So that was really frustrating because they clearly really, really, really wanted
to still be able to be online 24 hours a day, so in the end we gave up. We said, ‘Fine,
you’ve worn us down. It’s pretty fucked frankly that you guys can’t control your
addiction to your things, but we’ve tried.’ We did, we tried lots of variations.

Digital media use within the home appeared to become, in many cases, a key site of (often
creative) resistance amongst teenagers, as many parents reported that their children utilised
various tactics for circumventing their attempts at restriction and mediation. For example,
Olivia’s attempts to restrict access to the home wifi were scuppered by her son connecting instead to the neighbour’s wifi. Kerry’s tactic of taking the modem to bed every night was circumvented by her children ‘supergluing the modem to the router’. Many parents knew or suspected that their children had created separate private social media accounts in response to parental conditions that they become friends on social media. Parents suspected that their children cleared the browser history after surfing the internet in response to parental surveillance. Some parents suspected that their children lied about their online activities in response to parental mediation attempts and admitted that it was unlikely that they knew the full extent of their children’s online activities. Thus, many parents described abandoning media-related rules due to the difficulties of enforcement, the resulting conflict, and their children’s successful circumvention tactics. As Kerry explained after admitting to eventually abandoning her tactic of taking the modem to bed with her every night, parenting was ‘a gradual process of letting go of all of your principles’. Here, as I have discussed elsewhere, the inevitable gap between expectations associated with ‘good’ parenting in the digital age, and the practical reality expressed by parents above, as well as the conflict that resulted from mediation attempts, appeared to contribute to parental anxiety and an apparent resignation on the part of parents who were tired, overwhelmed and didn’t want to argue with their children every day. These views were echoed by most participants:

The problem is we try and instigate things and then we get a bad night and it all goes to pot…. I just can’t have this fight. (Karyn)

We started off with rules about time and stuff like that but it’s just completely unsustainable. (Mark)

We started off with screen-time limits before we had all the devices, of half an hour a day. They’d watch each other so it ended up being an hour. It’s really gone out the window. (Abigail)

I’ve got daughters who are 12 and 10, we have a lot of battles around this. I don't feel I enforce the rules very well. We’ve tried no devices in the bedroom and they sneak around or have various arguments as to why this is necessary…. So, we tried and limit time, not always successfully, we try and limit the rooms, but also not successfully. (Larissa)

Parental accounts highlight the challenges of mediation of digital media, compared to earlier forms of media such as television. As Clark (2011) points out, there are limitations to the application of parental mediation theory as it was developed for television, to digital media.

26 Teens have been known to create ‘finstas’ for example, fake Instagram accounts that often act as a decoy for parents, and various other ‘decoy’ apps exist for the purposes of deceiving parents (Tierney, 2018).
Other scholars, including Sonia Livingstone, in developing parental mediation theory for the
digital age, have accounted for the benefits and opportunities afforded by digital media. Yet
the ‘holy grail’ of parental mediation – that of maximising opportunities whilst minimising
risks – appears to elude the majority of parents. Livingstone et al. (2017a); Livingstone et al.
(2017b), referencing work by O’Neill et al., (2013) point out the complex choice that parents
face: as more enabling mediation increases children’s online opportunities, but also increases
risks, and restrictive mediation reduces risks but also opportunities. They highlight that:

This makes problematic the tendency of policy makers concerned with risk to urge
parents to restrict children's Internet use without recognising the costs to their online
opportunities, as well as the tendency of educators to urge parents to enable children's
Internet use without recognising that this may bring more risk (O’Neill et al., 2013)

However, as my findings suggest, parental choice is only one part of the issue. The practical
realities of enacting and enforcing parents’ choices with respect to mediation is a wholly
different matter.

As the accounts from parents above illustrate, and as discussed in previous chapters, in
addition to the ‘collapsing contexts’ afforded by digital media, the multifunctionality of
devices creates particular challenges for parental mediation. Many parents reported that their
children wanted to listen to music on their device before sleep at night and/or use the device
as an alarm. Additionally, a number of parents whose children suffered from anxiety and
depression reported that their children used mindfulness and meditation apps such as the
Smiling Mind. While parents acknowledged the benefits of music and meditation for their
children, they were frustrated that their accessibility via smart phones meant that they were
bundled up with social media and the ‘constant connectivity’ that they partly blamed for their
children’s anxiety in the first place. The following parental accounts demonstrate this concern
and difficulty:

We tried the no devices in their room but found that difficult because they both listen
to music on them… And one of the strategies that was suggested for my daughter to
help her with her sleep and anxieties was the Smiling Mind meditation, which is great.
It also relies on the internet. (Kathryn)

Because the device has the capacity to do so many different things they want to use it
for all the things that are available to them, whereas I’m ok with them to do certain
things, but setting the limit on the other things then becomes a point of contention.
(Kora)

Further complicating an already difficult endeavour, the task of governing teenagers and
adolescents is fraught with its own particular set of challenges, as parents attempt to negotiate
the balance between fostering their teenager’s desire for autonomy whilst continuing to protect them from harm. Additionally, the increasing dependence on digital media for the completion of school work created significant mediation challenges for parents, who felt that their mediation efforts were compromised and undermined as a result of the reliance on devices for completing schoolwork. Kora was particularly angry as she felt that her children’s school and its governing department of education was, ‘actively destroying my family relationships … This whole, them having to have a device, takes away all of my ability to set limits’. Of course, the highly individualised nature of children’s technology and general lack of transparency around their activities also produced challenges. These issues were raised repeatedly by many participants:

We started out with rules, and I have to say that we haven’t really been very good at sticking with it. And one of them was asking if you’re going on the internet and that’s just laughable now. And the second one was internet use in the public space. But once again, with the school work and the access to the internet for research and school work and the fact that she wants to be in the quiet place in her bedroom, that does make it quite difficult to achieve, to enforce that one I suppose. (Larissa)

Until about a year ago I think we had some pretty strict, like, we would literally physically confiscate the devices after nine o’clock, just, ‘Give us your devices’, but it’s more difficult when you have a person who’s almost an adult, who is older, you know … because it’s harder to just impose your will on people who are 16 or 17 than when they’re 14 or even 15. And even my daughter, she’ll just refuse. You can have a massive confrontation, or you can just say, ‘OK, whatever’. Yeah, it’s hard. (Marcus)

It was also evident that parental mediation, both with respect to its methods as well as frequency, fluctuated. For example, as indicated above, many parents reported that they mediated their children’s technology use much more intensively in the beginning, before they ‘gradually let go of their principles’ and mediated their children’s use much less. Parents also reported ‘upping’ the mediation after a school cyber safety information session, whereby their ‘eyes had been opened’ to the myriad of dangers threatening their children. Similarly, a number of parents said that when all was going well (to their knowledge), mediation was relaxed, and when there was a problem, or evidence of inappropriate use, mediation was intensified. Peter explicitly talked about the ‘fluctuating’ mediation that went on in their family home amongst their three boys:

I guess we go in fits and spurts as well you know. You’ll go to an information evening and then you’ll suddenly be more concerned about things and you’ll try to put rules in place, and it will slowly get eroded and relaxed over time, and then you’ll discover that maybe they’ve done something that’s not quite appropriate so you’ll put rules in,
so it kind of fluctuates, and it would be great to be more consistent, but I guess it’s new for us. (Peter)

Maintaining a consistent approach to mediation also raised some challenges for families as it became clear that parents were not always on the same page with their mediation of digital media technologies. Peter talked about his own style of parenting, which appeared to align more with an immersive and enabling style which favoured discursive strategies, however, he noted that his wife’s approach was more methodised and restrictive:

So that’s broadly my approach, to try and stay on top of it, to talk to them quite a bit about what they’re doing, and what they’ve seen, and how they feel about it, to let them know they can ask me and to try to find out myself a little bit about what they’re doing and then confront them if we’re concerned about any of it, generally keep an open dialogue. My wife’s approach would be much more about trying to apply mandatory filters on our internet which we dabbled with in the past but haven’t been that successful, or just restricting their internet usage altogether. (Peter)

Inconsistent approaches and methods of parenting from different parents were also a potential problem within families where child access and care was shared, and children split their time between their mothers’ and fathers’ houses.

‘We do rely on trust a lot’. The role of trust and dialogue in parental mediation

In light of the perceived ineffectiveness of many of the mediation strategies attempted by most parents above, almost all parents fell back on trust, dialogue and ‘communication’ as a primary strategy for mediating their children’s use of digital technology. Indeed, many parents named trust and dialogue as their sole strategy for minimising digital media related risks, as other techniques had been gradually abandoned due to their perceived ineffectiveness. In discussing their particular approaches to knowledge acquisition and mediation, immersive parents in particular talked about providing their children with the fundamental skills to ‘distinguish right from wrong’ (or ‘appropriate’ from ‘inappropriate’) in the hope that their children acquired the skills to manage risks and consider consequences independently in the future. A critical ingredient of this strategy was establishing a trusting, warm relationship with their children so that their children would come to them for help and advice if needed. It is an approach which implies the relinquishing of some parental control as responsibility shifts primarily from parents onto the teenagers themselves. Most parents

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27 Peter was married to Felicity, another participant, who is cited on page 60.
had discovered that attempting to control their children’s behaviours to manage risks (typically the approach of methodised parents) was not the answer in any case.

It’s about establishing that relationship. They’re going to see things we’d rather they didn’t and we just have to be able to talk to them at the end of the day. Hopefully they’re comfortable enough to raise it and bring it up and want to talk about it with us. (Mark)

We just work on that trusting system. So, I think I have all the worries that everyone has but I try to keep the dialogue flowing at the dining table in the hope that they will just continue to find good things and not bad things, and when they find the bad things we can talk about it. (Diane)

Discursive strategies were the favoured primary approach of parents who engaged in more immersive styles of parental mediation. Vanessa, for example, talked about engaging in dialogue, acquiring knowledge and building trust as mutually constitutive of her general approach, which was more immersive:

We have this similar sort of trusting relationship, we can talk about things and we talk a lot and I ask her what she’s looking at and if there’s ever anything nasty or upsetting she will tell me about it, and if there are nasty comments she will leave the conversation, or say, ‘That’s not nice, don’t say things like that’. (Vanessa)

The imposition of strict rules and regulations favoured by more methodised parents may be interpreted as signalling a lack of trust in children. Mark, who did engage in various overt digital surveillance tactics but over time had generally abandoned most rules and regulations around digital media, pointed out what he perceived to be the incompatibility of trusting and dialogic approaches with the imposition of structured rules and regulations:

I want my kids to come and talk to me and ask for my advice when they are going through difficult decisions that they are going to have to make and that they’re going to have to face growing up. Stuff like that. I think in a way, trying to police what they’re doing risks damaging that kind of credibility and trust you’re trying to build up. (Mark)

However parental claims regarding the importance of trust and dialogue to empower their children to independently manage risks exist in tension with parental perceptions about their children’s inability to manage risks due to their lack of maturity, judgement and common sense, as discussed in Chapter Three. As Naomi and Diane pointed out:

Naomi: We end up asking them to self-manage quite a lot.

Diane: Yes, we do.
Naomi: They are not actually emotionally or mentally equipped to be able to do that. Yeah, it’s really hard.

Thus, parents’ accounts represent something of a contradiction. As explored in Chapter Three, parents acknowledged the tension between child development and technological development, noting that their children had not yet developed the critical capacities to make their own judgements about appropriate and inappropriate uses of digital media. Perhaps for this reason, despite parental assertions that trust and dialogue and keeping the ‘communication channels open’ were essential, not all parents appeared entirely convinced by the adequacy of this approach. As Kathryn acknowledged:

We do rely on trust a lot. I feel pretty comfortable with that because of the relationships we have with both the kids. I do still see a better way. I haven’t worked out what that is yet. (Kathryn)

Even Anette, who was generally unconcerned about her children’s use of digital media, hinted that she was not entirely convinced that such discursive strategies were the panacea that parents were so desperately seeking:

I feel like I trust them in the sense that, as long as I’ve done what I can to teach them what’s right and wrong, if they’re exposed to what is wrong, they will recognise it as wrong and … I don’t know … [trails off]. (Anette)

Parents’ accounts however suggest that they remain hopeful that they can address at least some of the deficits inherent in their children by virtue of their age, lack of development and relative inexperience through dialogue, love and trust.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that most parents made some attempts to address the perceived deficit in their knowledge about their children’s digital media use. Parents appeared to be motivated by various factors in their quest for knowledge: as a response to discursive constructions of the ‘good’ parent as one who has knowledge of and monitors their child’s media-related activities to minimise risk; out of desire to be more involved, interested and ‘immersed’ in their children’s lives; and perhaps also as an attempt to retain some semblance of control, authority and expertise in a digital era in which these are seen to be under threat. Parents adopted various techniques of surveillance to achieve these objectives.

Parental knowledge about their children’s digital media activities was highly variable amongst participants. Some parents, particularly those that adopted a more immersive approach to knowledge acquisition and mediation, felt obliged to address the perceived gap in
their knowledge about their children’s activities, although they highlighted the difficulty in doing so. Many other parents, however, indicated that they saw little point in acquiring knowledge that within the context of rapid technological change would quickly become obsolete. Almost all parents did, however, engage in various strategies for attempting to reduce the risk of digital media to their children, with varying levels of success. With only a couple of exceptions, the vast majority of parents reported difficulty in acquiring knowledge about and mediating their children’s digital media use. Many parents indicated that they had ‘gradually let go of their principles’ as initial rules and guidelines governing digital media use amongst their children had been abandoned due to the difficulties of enforcement, their children’s successful tactics of circumvention, and the ongoing conflict that usually ensued.

Despite the varied and noble attempts that parents made to monitor their children’s digital media use, a few of which parents found quite effective, many parents were visibly anxious and upset about their failed attempts at effective mediation. In many cases, although evidently not all, parents felt as though their attempts were futile, ineffective, and achieved nothing other than creating conflict within the home. Evidently, the limited success of many of the techniques and strategies outlined by parents above served to contribute to parental anxiety, which became doubly articulated as parents were anxious not only about the risks posed by digital media, but also their own subsequent inability to eradicate or effectively manage them.

To address these perceived failures and alleviate their anxiety, most parents appeared to default instead to discursive strategies, ‘trust’ and ‘dialogue’ as their primary mediation strategy. Many parents implied that purely discursive strategies were not the answer, as they highlighted the potential contradiction between their concerns about their children’s lack of development, maturity and common sense discussed in Chapter Three, and trusting that their children could distinguish appropriate from inappropriate behaviours and activities. Yet many parents evidently ‘failed to see a better way’, and remained hopeful that their trust, dialogue and support would help address the deficit in their children’s knowledge and judgement to empower them to make the right decisions. Contemporary discourses of ‘good parenting’ which prioritise trust and negotiation (Livingstone & Bober, 2006) likely serve to legitimise this approach.
Parents’ hierarchies of value for making sense of their children’s activities were challenged by participatory practices of social support, friendship, and other forms of sociality (often amongst young women) which are occurring online. While parental knowledges about their children’s online activities were varied and incomplete, parents indicated that much of the time that their children, especially their daughters, spent on devices was occupied by social interactions via social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and WhatsApp, as well as text messaging, ‘face time’ and online gaming. In Chapter Four, I explored the ways in which parents assessed their children’s social relations, and while many parents placed greater value on face-to-face sociality over mediated sociality, most parents acknowledged the various affordances of social media which helped their children maintain their friendships, and in many cases provided their children with support, connection and a sense of belonging. These shared spaces of intimacy were especially valued by parents whose children were suffering from mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

The shared intimacy of friendship, however, creates new challenges and possible risks when it is remediated from the private space of the bedroom to the quasi-public space of social media and other online platforms. In this chapter, I explore the various tensions experienced by parents in mediating their children’s remediated intimate relations amongst friends. Many parents suggested that these shared spaces of intimacy became inappropriate when they: compromised their children’s privacy or were too public (or what parents considered to be ‘oversharing’); constant — raising concerns about or the mental stress of ‘always being on’ or ‘on-call’; and, sexualised or overly concerned with the (female) body, which included practices of sexting and sexual self-representation. I explore each of these concerns in this chapter.

Virtual bedroom culture – hanging out online

In Chapter Four I argued that digital media technologies were extending the concept of ‘bedroom culture’ as a space in which young people develop and express their identities and experience growing independence from family life. Young people’s bedrooms are also intimate spaces within which they ‘hang out’ with friends. I suggest therefore that the analogy of bedroom culture can also be extended to digital mobile devices not only in terms of identity work and experiencing independence from their families, but also in terms of their
intimate social relations. This creates shared online spaces of intimacy, accessed via personal media devices, that are remediating these relationships of intimacy.

Scholars have previously drawn parallels between bedroom culture and social networking sites, especially in terms of adolescents’ ‘identity work’ and ‘identity displays (Downs, 2011; Hodkinson, 2017; Lincoln, 2012; Lincoln & Robards, 2016). Scholars have also noted the importance for young people of a private space, separate from adults, such as the bedroom, which may be used as a coping mechanism as young people work through the issues of adolescence (Matthews, Limb, & Percy-Smith, 1998; Valentine, Skelton, & Chambers, 1998). Hodkinson (2017) however, notes the limitations of the analogy with respect to the social aspects of social networking sites. As danah boyd (2014) points out, social networking sites are primarily public spaces of interaction, resembling less the space of the bedroom and instead more public spaces such as parks, malls, parking lots and cafes. Teens’ motivations to spend time on social networking sites is therefore understood to reflect their desire to ‘gather en masse with friends, acquaintances, classmates and other teens’ (danah boyd, 2014, p. 21; Hodkinson, 2017). Boyd’s conceptualisation of social networking sites therefore largely rejects the notion that they serve as spaces through which intimate, personal and private communication occurs.

Participants in my study indicated, however, that their children maintained intimate friendships online in numerous ways. While most of their children maintained social media profiles, participants suggested that their children were using more private groups with restricted membership through which to communicate with close friends. This included Snapchat, which provides a private, secure channel of communication between limited groups of friends (Velez, 2014), and other platforms which also have the capacity to limit communication between select members such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook groups. According to parents, text messaging also remains one of the most popular means of communication between friends. This suggests that children are indeed aware of the privacy implications of online communication between intimate friends, and take steps to protect it.

**Mediated friendship and support**

Shared online spaces of intimacy, like the bedroom, provide an environment sufficiently personal and secure so that young people can choose what they share and whom they share it with (Hodkinson, 2017). These spaces of intimacy operate as a shared personal space within which young people spend time with trusted others on their own terms, work through their
issues and make sense of the world (Downs, 2011; Hodkinson, 2017). Mediated intimacy is not the same as ‘intimate publics’. According to Lauren Berlant, an intimate public operates when a market opens up to a block of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people’s particular core interests and desires’ (2008, p. 5). They are a ‘space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general’ (Berlant, 2008, p. viii), and a space which facilitates identification, consolation and belonging amongst strangers. Mediated friendships, especially those amongst girls, while involving identification and belonging, involve practices of trust and sharing private details of one’s life with close friends.

Parents shared numerous stories of friendships being mediated through technology. The nature of these mediated friendships appeared to be very different for boys and girls, as girls were said to socialise directly through social media platforms, messenger apps, and shared activities such as Musical.ly\(^\text{28}\), while for boys their friendships were said to be mediated through gaming platforms and YouTube. This is consistent with previous research which indicates that girls are more likely to use the internet for social networking and communication (Downs, 2011). Kendall described her observations about the different ways in which girls and boys engaged with each other through digital media as follows:

Girls spend a lot of time making these cute little videos. Nothing inappropriate. And they’re just having fun with their friends, making these videos, and that’s a really interactive thing to be doing. I don’t think my son, or any of his friends, would have ever engaged in that sort of thing. The girls were engaging with each other, they were planning, they were critiquing so they would do the next one better. And that’s very different from the boys sitting there gaming, you know ‘Bang bang!’(Kendall)

In addition to girls’ friendships being mediated via singing apps such as Musical.ly, many parents acknowledged the various ways in which girls’ friendships were maintained and enacted through social media and other networked technologies. Many parents reported that these interactions provided important emotional support and connection for their children (almost always daughters), especially for those experiencing difficulties or mental illness. These observations are consistent with earlier research which suggests that for girls social aspects of identity development are closely related to ideas of intimacy, connectedness and caring (Gilligen et al. 1988 cited in Downs, 2011). Parents viewed this kind of support and

\(^{28}\) Musical.ly (now known as Tik Tok) was a social media service on which users create and share short videos [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical.ly](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical.ly)
mediated intimacy amongst friends as appropriate and beneficial. Alice, for example, whose teenage daughter suffered from an eating disorder, had taken her daughter’s phone away when she discovered that she’d been visiting ‘pro-ana’ sites, but realised that her daughter needed the support and connectivity with her friends that was afforded by her phone:

I took her phone for a while, but then I saw that she needed to communicate with friends as she couldn't really lean on my husband or her siblings so she needed that social interaction because she would be completely closed off from school. (Alice)

Robert and Kathryn also described the importance of mobile devices for their daughters who were suffering from anxiety. While both had raised concerns with their daughters’ psychologists about their daughters’ apparent reliance on their devices, they were advised that the connection and emotional support afforded by their intimate friendships via their digital devices were necessary for their daughters’ wellbeing. Robert’s family had just moved back to Australia from overseas, and he acknowledged the ways in which digital media assisted with the difficult transition for his daughter.

She still Snapchats and emails with her friends overseas. As with all friendships, that will taper off in time. But for that important period where she was reassimilating back into the community back here, it was enabled through technology through Skype, Snapchat and chat with friends, and that helped with the transition, there’s no doubt about that. (Robert)

Accounts of boys’ mediated sociality were quite different and were said to be primarily mediated through video games, leading to a kind of sociality that parents did not consider to be ‘intimate’ or very ‘social’ at all. Naomi and Cassandra talked about their sons socialising with ‘friends’ via online gaming, and expressed their concerns as follows:

This is what my son says to me all the time, ‘but they’re my friends.’ … but I have no idea if they are or not. Obviously, you share a common interest in the gaming world, and my son is obsessed with games, so that is his world. But that’s how he socialises. (Naomi)

My concern is that in that gaming space they don’t need to be in the same room playing Xbox anymore. In fact, they can’t. They have to be on their own device on the internet to play each other so it’s really starting to isolate them from being with their mates. They don’t want to be with their mates. They just want to be online at the same time… I also think we live in a world where parents aren’t prepared to let their kids play outside in the street. We’re bad parents because we let our kids out of sight to the park. I think overall their social networks have changed. Their friends are the ones

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29 ‘Pro-ana’ websites controversially support the virtues of anorexia nervosa, and many promote the eating disorder as a lifestyle choice (Norris, Boydell, Pinhas, & Katzman, 2006)
that they play online games with and I don’t think that’s a healthy circle of friends to have. (Cassandra)

Despite these concerns, parents of boys also acknowledged the benefits of these mediated friendships, including the team work and shared problem-solving that was required through such collaborative gaming practices.

**Mediated intimacy, privacy and ‘over-sharing’**

The extension of the intimate space of the bedroom into semi-public online spaces raises questions about privacy. Despite participant accounts which suggest that young people enact intimate friendships via largely secure and private online channels of communications, parents (and young people themselves) were aware of the permanence, persistence, potential visibility and spreadability (danah boyd, 2014) of communications. The increased participatory ‘sharing’ practices of young people (Madden et al., 2013) have led to popular claims typically circulated through the mass media and commonly regurgitated by ‘older’ generations, that young people today are narcissistic and have ‘no sense of shame’ (Livingstone, 2008). We are led to believe that the self (or indeed ‘selfie’) obsessed young people today don’t care about their privacy, sharing the minutiae of their daily lives at the drop of a hat via social media with anyone who cares to listen. These claims, however, are largely unfounded. Research suggests that young people in fact care deeply about their privacy, taking steps to protect it, and making conscious decisions about the information that they choose to disclose and to whom, thus deliberately managing their privacy and reputations (danah boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Livingstone, 2008; Madden et al., 2013; Marwick, Murgia-Diaz, & Palfrey, 2010). Jurgensen and Rey (2013) convincingly argue that privacy and publicity, far from being polar opposites in which one must come at the expense of the other, in fact exist in a complex dialectical relationship with each other, deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Young people, they argue, engage in a carefully choreographed ‘fan dance’ of concealment and revealment about their personal lives. Despite these findings, however, common assumptions about young people’s laissez-faire approach to their own privacy prevail, driven in part by the perception that young people lack the foresight and maturity to carefully consider the potential consequences of ‘over-sharing’ amongst their peers.

The ‘cult of narcissism’ arguments that circulate via media panics do not address the key problematic for parents about allowing children a private space within which they can sustain intimate relationships with friends, provide and receive emotional support via these
connections, while managing and contextualising the risks inherent within these semi-public spaces. Earlier survey data indicate very different parental concerns about their children’s online privacy, including how much information advertisers could learn about their child, and how their child interacts online with strangers (Madden et al., 2012). Long-standing parental concerns about the reputational effects of digital media do appear to have persisted, however. It seems that parents have, for several years, been aware of the potential for children’s online activities to jeopardise their future employment or educational prospects, although these concerns appear more common amongst more advantaged families (Clark, 2013; Madden et al., 2012; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011).

‘Over-sharing’ by young people in semi-public and public online spaces was thus not considered ‘appropriate’ amongst participants in my study. As foreshadowed in Chapter Three, parents in my study were acutely aware of the potential reputational consequences of social media use in particular. While young people have long sought out creative ways to construct and express their identities, the affordances of contemporary digital media have raised particular concerns about young people’s privacy and the potential reputational effects of ‘over-sharing’ private information amongst online friends and networks. Reputational damage and the persistence, visibility and permanence of their children’s ‘digital footprint’ were thus significant issues of concern amongst participants.

Parents expressed concern not just about their children willingly sharing information with little regard for the possible consequences, but also, and perhaps more so, about the sharing of information and images by friends and third parties without the consent and often knowledge of their child. These concerns also likely reflect middle-class parenting practices foreshadowed in earlier chapters, in which parents are concerned with ensuring their children are afforded the opportunities to succeed in the future global marketplace, and that their children don’t do anything which might compromise those opportunities.

Concerns about young people’s futures, and the interventions which may threaten them, are premised upon the status of adolescents as neither child nor adult, suggesting that adolescents are in a state of ‘becoming’. Such conceptualisations necessarily invoke ideals of a desirable

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30 danah boyd (2014) identifies four particular characteristics of mediated environments which have significant implications for young people’s personal information, privacy and hence their reputations: They are: persistence: the durability of online expressions and content; visibility: the potential audience who can bear witness; spreadability: the ease with which content can be shared; and searchability: the ability to find content.
future which young people are perceived to be at risk of jeopardising. As Kelly (2006, p. 30) states:

Youth is principally about becoming: becoming an adult, becoming a citizen, becoming independent, becoming autonomous, becoming mature, becoming responsible. There is some sense in which all constructions of youth defer to this narrative of becoming, of transition. Moreover, there is a sense in which becoming automatically invokes the future. Youth, as it is constructed in risk discourses, is at risk of jeopardising, through present behaviours and dispositions, desired futures. The discourse of youth at-risk mobilises a form of probabilistic thinking, about certain preferred or ideal adult futures and the present behaviours and dispositions of youth.

The tension between technological development and child development explored in Chapter Three was framed in relation to privacy by participants in two distinct ways. First, that children lacked the maturity, foresight and common sense to consider the consequences of personal information that they (over-) shared online, and second, that their children’s ability to make mistakes safely, which parents implied was a necessary part of growing up and ‘becoming’, was being compromised by these ‘mistakes’ increasingly being made public. Ashok, for example, said, ‘I feel, at the age of 14 you’re not mature enough, you don’t know what information you want to put out there in the public domain about yourself’.

Shared intimacies

Research has shown that digital media, particularly social networking sites, provide ‘full-time access’ to peers (danah boyd, 2014; Livingstone, 2008; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014) and a desire for ‘constant connection’ (Clark, 2005). The constant, always-on affordances of digital media and online spaces, coupled with the heightened desire for connectedness with peers which is a feature of adolescence (Barry, Sidoti, Briggs, Reiter, & Lindsey, 2017), means that intimate mediated sociality becomes a constant feature of young people’s everyday lives (Downs, 2011; Hodkinson, 2017). This has likely reconfigured what it means to be a ‘good’ friend and changed expectations in relation to peer availability and support.

However, the mediated intimacies afforded by digital technologies that were so important for many of the participants’ children (see accounts from Alice, Robert and Kathryn above), became a cause of concern for parents when they were perceived to become constant or all-encompassing for their children. The provision of ‘on-call’, ‘just-in-time’ peer support, while beneficial to the friend ‘in need’ caused anxiety for parents due to their children (almost always daughters) being constantly ‘on-call’ to friends seeking emotional support. In this respect, the hierarchy of value of this mediated intimate sociality shifted, as parents expressed
worry that the additional expectations placed on ‘friends’ were particularly onerous and might place unreasonable practical and emotional demands upon their children. Justine for example, indicated that it was simply too much for her young daughter to try to work through the problems of her friends, and it was not reasonable to expect her to do so:

So many messages that my kids will get, where I say, ‘These kids need counsellors’. Children are trying to provide mental health treatment and support – children! And I think that’s very unsafe and it does worry me. I try to have this discussion with my daughter, ‘No, you need to give them the number for Lifeline, Headspace, get the teacher, that’s the role you need to play here because you’re 14, they’re 14, you’re not equipped to do this…’ And often teenagers are carrying extra baggage because of that, again those late-night messages, they feel that they have to do something. (Justine)

Therese recalled a particularly shocking incident where her daughter’s friend sent her daughter a ‘cry for help’ late at night:

This girl one night at 11 o’clock sent my daughter a photograph of what she claimed to be her wrists, which were all cut. ‘Look what I’m doing to myself, help me’. I was so shocked, I was so upset that my daughter, safe in her bed in our warm house, was being sent such a shocking photograph… That’s when I want my kids to switch off because I want them to be safe and not be under any pressure from whatever, whether it’s from a friend saying ‘I’m cutting myself’ or another friend saying, ‘Hey look at this cool picture of Harry Stiles,’ or whatever. Your brain, your eyes need a break from this… Because anything in excess is not healthy. (Therese)

Kathryn was particularly concerned about the effects of ‘constant engagement’, as her daughter suffered from anxiety and depression. Indicating that she had raised her concerns with her daughter’s psychologist, she stated:

It’s really hard, we’re really struggling to know what to allow and what not to allow with it [social media], because the depression is helped by her being in close contact with her friends, because that can pick her up a bit. But at the same time part of me thinks that there is this real pressure of this 24/7 communication line being open, where you don’t really have any downtime, and I think that’s really difficult for anyone to deal with, let alone teenagers, because I think even if you, even if she’s not on her phone the whole time, I think it’s always this back presence almost. (Kathryn)

As Kathryn’s story, as well as Robert’s described earlier, demonstrate, the smart phone thus represents both a potential source of stress and anxiety as well as a potential antidote, causing particular problems for parents seeking to manage this tension.

Parental concern about constant connection and the stress of ‘always being on’ to friends was more prevalent amongst parents of girls who were said to use digital media to create shared online spaces of intimacy. Parental concerns about the effects of what they considered to be
excessive social engagement on their children’s sleep compounded the issue. Parents framed their concern about this issue in various ways:

Our older daughter has had a really hard year this year with her social interactions, with her group, not all social media based but we’ve had discussions about well, that adds a real stress when it’s a very different medium where you’re sort of on call 24/7 almost. It adds a stressful level, where you don’t have that brain space where you’re not wondering what people are doing. Even if you’re not on it yourself you might be thinking, ‘Oh, but what if there’s been this conversation I’m not aware of?’ It becomes this underlying tension. (Kathryn)

As Kathryn’s account suggests, parental concerns about constant connectivity were also framed in terms of their children’s apparent fear of missing out (FOMO). FOMO is a relatively recent construct that is defined as a ‘pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent’. It is characterised by the ‘desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing’ (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013, p. 1841). Although FOMO is not specifically associated with the internet and social media, individuals with high FOMO are likely to feel compelled to check their social media more often to keep up to date on their friends’ plans and activities (Oberst, Wegmann, Stodt, Brand, & Chamarro, 2017). As Helen and Abigail observed:

It’s like always needing to be online and knowing what’s going on. All this texting all the time, it’s like you can’t miss anything. (Helen)

There’s this constant fixation on, ‘I’ve got to respond!’ (Abigail)

Self-representation and valorisation

Online semi-private shared spaces of intimacy including social media have become spaces within which young people engage in practices of self-representation which are then valorised and endorsed by their peers. This issue was one that was demonstrably gendered and discussed at length by parents of girls, yet hardly raised at all by parents of boys. Many parents expressed concern that their children had become overly reliant on valorisation in the form of ‘likes’ and comments via social media. While parents acknowledged their daughters’ right to self-expression, such representations are considered inappropriate by parents when they became overly focused on the body, or too dependent on peer valorisation.

Young people construct identities through social media through various strategies and practices of self-representation and content creation (danah boyd, 2007; Livingstone, 2008; Ringrose, 2010, 2011). Girls in particular are using social media for these purposes (Bosch, 2011; Ringrose & Barajas, 2011). Idealised forms of femininity and masculinity are displayed
on social networking sites in various ways, with femininity typically epitomised through emulating the ‘sexually commodified body’ and being sexually desirable (Ringrose, 2011, p. 104). As documented earlier, an obsessive preoccupation with the female body, the increasing sexualisation or ‘pornification’ of culture more generally, and increasing sexual agency (McRobbie, 2011), or what Gill (2008) terms a ‘compulsory sexual agency’ are defining features of the ‘postfeminist’ era. Within this context there is significant pressure on girls to look good but at the same time they are required to ‘conform to the socially shared rules of self-presentation’ (Mascheroni, Vincent, & Jimenez, 2015, p. 2) and navigate the delicate balance between sexy and slutty (Bosch, 2011; Ringrose, 2010).

As documented in Chapter Three, few parents were expressly concerned that their daughters were performing overtly sexualised online self-representations. Of greater concern was the apparent preoccupation with the body and physical attributes over what parents considered to be their daughters’ impressive academic, artistic and sporting achievements. Kathryn said, for example, that she was not that concerned with her daughter’s images being overly sexualised, or the potential risks around predators or sexting. However, she indicated concern about the practices of her daughter and her friends of posting images on Instagram which were designed to emphasise their bodies, which were then ‘liked’ and commented upon by friends. She said:

My concern has been more around the confidence issue. What’s driving them to do that has probably been my main concern. I feel like saying, ‘Oh, for God’s sake! Don’t waste your time with all this stuff!’ (Kathryn)

Many parents were concerned that their daughters placed too much import, not to mention emotional investment, in curating their online identities, and had become overly reliant on external valorisation which was usually granted in the form of reciprocal exchanges of positive comments amongst friends. That this valorisation was achieved through receiving ‘likes’, comments and ‘validation’ from their peers based solely on their physical attributes was of particular concern, especially amongst parents of older teenage girls. Kathryn, for example, claimed that many girls, especially ones with low self-esteem including her daughter, were posting images on Instagram to obtain ‘validation’ from peers:

A lot of the photos on Instagram are very much designed to – I say sexualise – but it’s kind of slightly different in my mind, but it’s designed to make them feel good about their bodies... So, a lot of the tags back on Instagram will be, ‘Oh, you look beautiful, don’t you look great’. I find it a real double-edged sword because it’s designed to be giving them more confidence and stuff, but the whole premise of it I think is just
really concerning... Because all the positive comments I’ve seen on there are related
to body. Rather than validating your positive attributes, like talents. (Kathryn)

Kathryn’s apparent conflict with her daughter’s and her friends’ online practices represents a
broader tension around female practices of self-representation. While the practices of self-
representation which predominantly feature the female body could be seen to be legitimate,
agentic practices of self-expression, they typically reproduced dominant aesthetic models of
femininity (usually ‘sexy’ poses which are simultaneously coy, shy or submissive) which
might be seen as acquiescence with mainstream depictions of ‘correct’ femininity and
sexiness (Bosch, 2011). Indeed, the post-feminist context within which participants’ children
are situated has enabled binary versions of extreme gender norms to thrive (Ringrose &
Barajas, 2011). The reciprocal support and ‘likes’ generally shared amongst female online
peer networks, however, may be seen to constitute an intimate feminist community of support
that expressly rejects the male gaze. Yet, as Kathryn points out, the girls’ purported emphasis
on their physical attributes (albeit on their own terms) at the expense of their achievements,
can be seen to cater to hegemonic gender norms which determine girls’ worth according to
their physical attributes.

Many parents acknowledged that teenage female insecurity about their physical appearance
was hardly new, and that social media had not created this issue. However, they were
concerned that digital media created a much more complex terrain in which online depictions
of ‘perfect’ bodies were the norm and the gap between reality and fantasy exacerbated their
daughter’s insecurities.

I think it’s just making it far too easy for them to jump on it and blow it out of all
proportion. I really believe, even without technology, they’re going to have those
[anxieties about their appearance], but I just think it’s giving extra voice to it and so
what could be possibly a manageable problem becomes an unmanageable problem
because it explodes into this validation into this, ‘I don’t look like a million other
people that they see on Instagram and Facebook that are no doubt photoshopped or
airbrushed or whatever they do’, you know all the filters. And I just think it becomes
then a huge problem what should be a natural probably anxiety and lack of confidence
but it can snowball and become much bigger. (Kathryn)

Likes and comments circulate as a kind of social capital within online social networking
communities. Kathryn and Therese both suggest that their daughters are posting self-portraits
on social media for the purpose of acquiring ‘likes’ and other types of valorisation such as
comments from ‘friends’ and peers which are then commonly reciprocated. On the face of it,
this confirms existing findings from Mascheroni et al. (2015, p. 7) who found that some girls
‘explicitly link their social acceptance with the approval of their online self-representation, thus reconfiguring the number of likes received to the pictures they share online as symbolic tokens of social inclusion’. Therese raised concerns about what happens if there is an *absence* of ‘likes’ or support in the form of comments from friends:

In terms of the younger daughter’s general self-esteem, I think she gets quite a lot from being online, using Instagram. But I think that having that thing that tells her, ‘Yes we like it, we like it, we like it, we like it’, when she’s looking beyond that I wonder what she – how does she cope if she goes a whole day without someone saying, ‘Oh you’re dressed really nicely today’, or ‘Your hair looks good’. They become quite dependent on this external reinforcement and encouragement and all those sorts of things and less coming from themselves. (Therese)

In addition to self-representation practices that parents perceived as seeking peer validation and social legitimation based on physical attributes, some parents, while acknowledging the positive aspects of the support afforded by online spaces of intimacy, also expressed concern about a perceived dependence on peer support and sympathy. A few parents recounted stories of their daughters sharing ambiguous status updates on social media that hinted at personal trauma, which they perceived as ‘attention’ seeking behaviours:

It’s always that constant engagement with other people. Getting the feedback, getting the sympathy, getting the, ‘Are you ok? Are you ok?’ Or not getting that, and thinking, ‘Hang on, hang on, give me some sympathy’. It feeds into that. (Bronwyn)

I suggest that parental concern about their children’s apparent reliance on valorisation, support, attention and sympathy, may in part be rooted in a perceived deficit within their children. That their children relied so heavily upon their peers for their self-esteem, rather than having confidence in themselves and valuing their own unique attributes and achievements (which were obvious to loving parents) concerned and frustrated parents. Additionally, that the criteria upon which peer acceptance and validation were (almost always) granted (for example, their bodies or other physical attributes) were superficial and of ‘little value or consequence’, amplified parental concerns even further. Many parents did, however, acknowledge that teenage (particularly female) feelings of inadequacy and a desire to belong were a necessary phase of adolescence. However, the shift to online practices of self-expression and impression management raised unique challenges that created particular tensions for parents.
Sexting

Body-focused practices of self-representation that seek valorisation through semi-private online spaces of intimacy sometimes constitute what has been referred to in the media and popular literature as ‘sexting’. The advent of camera-enabled smart phones in the late 2000s gave rise to a media panic about the issue, resulting in various campaigns, resources, and cyber safety advice which frames the practice as a serious risk facing young people (almost always girls). Parents in my study did not appear to be as anxious as the media discourse was implying that they should be. Only two participants identified this as a major concern with respect to their 14-year-old daughters, with others indicating that they were only ‘a bit concerned’, that it ‘wasn’t an issue for them yet, but might be in a couple of years’, or that they didn’t think their children would ever do that (despite their children’s friends allegedly doing it). A minority of parents said that they weren’t at all concerned, and Michael went so far as to explicitly dismiss media discourse as a ‘moral panic’. Some parents invoked discourses of development and maturity in framing their concerns, or lack thereof, that their children (usually daughters) might send explicit images.

Two participants, Simone and Richard, identified the issue of sexting as a major concern, and their anxiety was apparently fuelled by the developmental stage of their daughters, and specific knowledges about the purported prevalence of sexting and the broader ‘sexualised culture’ in which sexting was taking place, generated not solely through panic discourse, but through school and other professional networks. Simone and Richard appeared to draw on dominant discourses which circulate not only in relation to sexting, but also pornography, about the broader ‘sexualisation’ or ‘pornification’ of culture creating a ‘new normal’ in which practices of sexting become commonplace and even expected. Simone and Richard’s concerns should be interpreted within the ‘postfeminist’ context of the current era, defined by a ‘compulsory sexual agency’ (Gill, 2008) on the part of girls. Richard framed his concerns as follows:

The thing that I’m most nervous about is the extent to which young women in particular as they get into that age of sexual interest, which is about 13–14 predictably, it comes on slowly, but they get to the point where the temptation to take explicit selfies and send them to someone or post them or whatever, that’s the stage that I think we’re getting close to. That really makes me nervous because that puts them in a whole different place. As we now know, those things never really go away. They’re always going to be there. Not only that, but even if they’re really good about not exposing themselves to those risks, the chances of somebody manipulating an image
Richard added that the issue of sexting was, according to the school, a significant problem (he described it as ‘their number one concern’) which contributed to his concern:

The teacher [at his daughter’s school] said that the biggest thing by far and away that they deal with was the young girls taking photos of themselves in the bathroom at home and then sending it around. Now she didn’t elaborate what sort of photographs but you can imagine that they’re more likely to be intimate photographs, revealing photographs. And the reasons they might do that might be several, but it seemed to be that they’d zeroed in on it because some boy had asked them to do it. (Richard)

Simone similarly expressed her concerns less in terms of sexual agency, but in terms of pressure from peers within a sexualised culture in which explicit images come to be normal and expected. But it was evident that these concerns were influenced by external risk discourses as well as knowledges about her step-daughter’s peers:

I’m worried about them thinking that this is how we conduct relationships. She’s 14, and she’s at school with 15-year-olds because she’s just started the year. Little girls, 15 year-olds sending nude photos in her year. Sent to 17-year-olds in the school. I don’t know if she’s [her step-daughter] doing that. Yeah. 15. I worry about consent. And the pressure of boys … You can get this pressure to share images of herself when I don’t think they’re old enough to know the purpose of it … I’ve read somewhere something saying this is how relationships might occur now… This might be how they conduct relationships, but it’s so young, 14, 15. Yeah, that’s what I worry about. (Simone)

Compulsory sexual agency and gendered double standards

Rebecca, a senior high school teacher, drew on her professional knowledges when discussing her experiences with sexting in the school environment. Rebecca’s direct experiences and knowledges clearly shaped her views about the issue, although she admitted to not ‘having any concerns’ about her own daughters due to it being a ‘topic of discussion in our house for some time’. Rebecca said that sexting was ‘very common’, and often resulted in ‘terrible’ consequences for the girls involved.

Rebecca: I’ve had girls that haven’t even had a boyfriend send full frontal nudes to boys just because they’ve been asked to.

CPJ: Do you know why they’re doing it?

Rebecca: They want validation by the boys. They want the boy to like them. The boys ask them for it, and … Self-esteem. I always see it as the girls that aren’t comfortable with the way they look, they’re not comfortable in themselves, seem to be the ones who do it. Well certainly the ones that we find out about, and maybe others that we don’t find out about. They’re often the girls where it’s all blown up at school.
Conceptions of the motivations for teen sexting amongst participants were varied and at times contradictory. In some accounts, like Rebecca’s, views about those who were most at risk of sexting appeared to reflect mainstream media discourses around sexting, which typically frame girls as victims, and ‘at risk’, corruptible, and lacking self-respect, self-control, or self-esteem, pressured by boys into engaging in the practice. Another view was that engaging in practices of sexualised self-representation demonstrated sexual potency and agency and carried with it a degree of credibility and cultural capital. Olivia recounted the following:

I talked to someone else, who, apparently talked to one of the young girls involved, and she was shocked because, apparently, this particular young girl [who had engaged in practices of sexualised self-representation] was not that embarrassed. Then we laughed and we said, if you’re a true celebrity, you have a sex tape and it’s been ‘leaked’. Then, it adds to your infamy. It makes you even more cool, so that’s interesting, huh? (Olivia)

Florence, who’s son’s ‘sexting’ incident was first described in Chapter Three, explained that the filming and sharing of the incident was initiated by the girl.

Florence: In this situation with my son, it was the girl who took the image of herself involved in an act with a body part of my son, and she shared it on Snapchat with her four closest friends, while still in the act.

Kerry: How bizarre.

Florence: Fourteen-year-old girl. That was her credibility, look at me, wagging school, in the toilet on Valentine’s Day.

Despite most parents reproducing dominant gendered discourses around sexting which typically shame female practices of sexualised self-representation, many parents acknowledged and were critical of the gendered double standards that exist. Evelyn drew on external knowledges to critique the gendered double standards and cultures of victim blaming that exist in relation to the practice, and expressed concern about the implications of this for her daughters.

I was reading an article about young people, and they were going with these young women, the girl, it doesn’t matter if he took it secretly and she didn’t give agreement, she didn’t give him consent to do that. She’s a slut, she’s a whore. She’s bad, and he, well you shouldn’t have done that. He’ll get a slap on the wrist. Doesn’t matter what it is. The girl is always looked down upon… That’s just what happened and that happens quite a lot now and she was really looked down upon. That’s what happens, and I worry about my daughters, and I say, ‘Look, if you can’t talk to me, please talk to somebody. Find someone, a friend, another parent. I said, ‘I don’t mind. I want you to be safe. I want you to be in a comfortable spot where you can go and talk to people about stuff.’ And that’s what’s really important. It’s just out there and it just worries me quite a lot. (Evelyn)
Despite these varied views about the practice, and the general low level of concern, none of the participants (with perhaps the exception of Michael), suggested that sexting was an unproblematic, healthy mode of agentic sexual self-expression. Most parents drew on external risk discourses to indicate that they considered it to be a risky behaviour with potentially serious consequences, although the perceived consequences clearly differed depending on the gender of the child, with girls suffering reputational damage, and boys potentially facing a criminal record.

The complexities of sexting

The complexities of sexting as an intimate practice of self-representation, both in practice and in definition, are typically not captured by the media or cyber safety discourse. The term itself is ambiguous, and the types of behaviour it encompasses are varied, and may range from a semi-clothed, slightly provocative image, to depictions of actual sexual activity being sent or shared. Likewise, the important matter of consent is often buried within, or completely absent, from media discourse about sexting. All of this is further complicated by archaic legislation that still exists in most Australian states and territories that treats circulation of sexual images of people under the age of 18 as criminal, regardless of the circumstances and motivations for taking and sharing them. This lack of nuance in the debate has a collective homogenising effect.

This homogenous approach to discussions of sexting behaviours also appeared evident amongst participants, who, with the possible exceptions of Florence and Michael, did not explicitly refer to the kinds of behaviours that they were referring to in their discussions about sexting. Discussion about the issue implicitly reflected dominant media discourse about sexting, which typically constructs sexting practices as girls and young women sending sexualised images to males. These girls are often pathologised for sexual self-expression, with discourse verging on ‘slut-shaming’ and ‘victim-blaming’. If girls have been pressured to take intimate images, or an image or message is circulated without their consent, girls are conceptualised as victims. On the other hand, girls who have willingly taken and

31 A good example of this is an Australian ad campaign called ‘Megan’s Story’ in 2010 developed by ThinkUKnow Australia, a partnership organisation between the Australian Federal Police, Microsoft Australia, Datacom and the Commonwealth Bank Australia. The campaign consists of a short video that first appeared on YouTube in September 2010, but also had additional resources for teachers. According to the ThinkUKnow website, the video depicts a teenage girl’s experience of taking an inappropriate image of herself and ‘sexting’ it to a boy in her class and the unintended consequences (ThinkUKnow http://www.thinkuknow.org.au/site/megans-story). This campaign attracted scholarly critique for its implicit shaming and victim blaming (Albury & Crawford, 2012).
sent explicit images of themselves are often denounced as ‘cheap’ (Squires, 2012) or lacking in self-respect. This discourse appears to reproduce reductive binaries around girls’ sexuality more generally, which conceptualise girls as either innocent/good and sexualised/bad (Egan, 2013). Rebecca, for example, talked about the ‘inappropriateness’ of certain images taken by her daughter’s friend:

There’s one girl that takes her selfies like that [gestures] with the cleavage, and so she [her daughter] doesn’t take that sort of selfie, so we talked about that, and that that’s not …. So, she says to me that it’s completely inappropriate and she doesn’t think that’s right, and she’s outraged whenever she sees one. Having said that, she hasn’t had a boyfriend yet. And she’s a bit later than the other kids to enter puberty, so I don’t necessarily think she’s found that drive yet, and some kids have. (Rebecca)

Interestingly, parents of teenage boys expressed just as much, if not more, concern about issues related to sexting than parents of girls. Some parents were concerned that their sons might ask for or share sexualised images of girls. As foreshadowed in Chapter Three, parents were worried about the prevalence of pornography, and how this might influence perceptions of girls, even in the absence of any warning signs or evidence that their son might engage in disrespectful behaviour. Parents addressed this issue mostly through discursive strategies: raising and discussing the issue with their sons, often through proposing a scenario and asking their sons how they would feel if it was their sister or female friend that might be the victim.

We’ve had conversations as well. It was more, I think something happened with Dylan’s friends at school, someone was sending photos around. I don’t think Dylan necessarily got them, but they were certainly all aware that there were some inappropriate images going around. We’ve had a big strong talk about ‘You need to treat girls like it was your sister, rather than …’ because it’s a mate’s girlfriend’s ex, it doesn’t matter how far removed you are. You need to treat all girls like that was your sister that they might be talking and sending pictures about. (Cassandra)

Cassandra was also worried that her sons might find themselves in the position of being in possession of sexualised photos of girls.

They don’t understand themselves that if they’re sharing a photo of a girl pulling her top down, they are then responsible for that themselves and be charged … It concerns me greatly that our boys, and I’m not saying my son and his mates are, could find himself in that position. (Cassandra)

For almost all parents, sexualised self-representation in various forms, including sexting, were considered inappropriate, and not valid forms of self-representation or displays of intimacy. Sexting, in their minds, was a real risk with potentially serious consequences for
their children. However, the majority of parents in my study were not concerned about this issue in relation to their own children, as most were confident that their children (usually daughters) had the ‘common sense’ to not engage in ‘risky’ practices of sexualised self-representation.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the ways in which intimate relationships, including friendships amongst girls, have been remediated online. I argued that the teenage bedroom, a space in which young people ‘hang out’ and connect in private and intimate ways with their friends, has been extended to shared online spaces of intimacy via (usually restricted) social networking sites, apps, and text messaging. Parents acknowledged the various benefits of these spaces for their children, including the provision of emotional support, connection, and a sense of belonging. This was especially important for those children who suffered from anxiety and depression. At the same time, however, parents felt responsible for managing some of the risks inherent within these shared intimate spaces which occupied the liminal space between public and private.

For many parents, there were certain instances when these spaces became ‘inappropriate’ and a cause for concern. First, young people’s self-representation practices which were perceived to be compromising their privacy elicited concern amongst parents who were mindful of the potential reputational effects of ‘over-sharing’. This issue, which was first discussed in Chapter Three, was framed primarily in terms of the potential for reputational damage to compromise their children’s future educational and professional opportunities. Second, shared spaces of intimacy became inappropriate when they were considered to be ‘constant’. Parents worried that the ‘always-on’ nature of peer engagements caused their daughters stress and did not afford them the opportunity to disconnect from their peers. Navigating the tension between the emotional support afforded by ‘anytime’ connection to peers, with the potential stress and anxiety from always being connected, was a particular challenge for parents.

Third, while parents acknowledged the benefits of the reciprocal endorsement and valorisation that commonly took place through these shared spaces of intimacy, some parents were concerned with what they considered to be undue focus on valorisation of girls’ physical attributes, at the expense of their ‘more worthy’ talents and achievements. The focus on the female body, even when it was not sexualised, can be seen to cater to hegemonic gender norms which determine girls’ worth according to their physical attributes. Finally,
these spaces of intimacy facilitate practices of self-representation and sexting, which were always deemed ‘inappropriate’ due to the perceived risks, and the pathologisation of girls that participate in such practices.

Despite these concerns, this chapter has highlighted various positive and ‘appropriate’ aspects of intimate sociality amongst peers, as it has focused on some of the ways in which young people navigate the ‘storm and stress’ of adolescence through these shared intimate online spaces. The next chapter, by contrast, explores some of the negative dimensions of mediated sociality, including drama, bullying and relational aggression.
CHAPTER SEVEN: Mediated sociality: bullying, drama and relational aggression

Parents indicated that the maintenance of friendships and sociality between their children and their peers was a healthy and ‘normal’ part of child development. However, the increasingly mediated nature of peer interaction generated a range of responses from parents in terms of the ‘appropriateness’ of these interactions. As explored in Chapter Four, parents’ hierarchies of value implicitly privileged unmediated or face-to-face interaction over mediated interaction. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, not all forms of mediated conflict or relational aggression were deemed ‘inappropriate’. For most young people, electronic communication enables pro-social behaviour that can help friendships and romantic relationships to be developed and sustained (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). However, these technologies also facilitate negative mediated sociality such as conflict, relational aggression, and cyberbullying. For most parents mediated sociality was only ‘inappropriate’ in the sense that it had the potential to disrupt normal child development when it displaced face-to-face sociality, or took the form of more serious, targeted aggression.

In this chapter, I examine parental concerns and perspectives in relation to negative mediated sociality, including drama, relational aggression and cyberbullying. I argue that in the same way that intimate mediated sociality is an extension of the offline private space of the bedroom, cyberbullying and other types of negative interpersonal behaviours are also extensions of offline spaces and unmediated interpersonal relations, rather than a problem caused by the internet and social media. Second, I argue that the ‘indirect’, social and relational aggression that parents discussed were generally downplayed by participants and were not considered to constitute cyberbullying. Instead, participants discussed instances of exclusion or negative online interaction as nastiness, bitchiness, or drama. Negative mediated sociality was only considered ‘inappropriate’ when it was considered to be so serious as to threaten their child’s development.

There are many dimensions to negative online social interaction. However, it is the more extreme targeted behaviours, known as ‘cyberbullying’ that have generated the most media attention and collective anxiety, due to few highly publicised tragic tales of suicide allegedly as a result of online bullying. Indeed, as danah boyd (2014) observes in relation to the US,
cyberbullying in Australia has also become something of a ‘national obsession’. This is despite some research which suggests that media claims about cyberbullying are greatly exaggerated and not supported empirically (Olweus, 2012). There has been a suite of responses to the issue, including new legislation\(^{32}\), the establishment of an eSafety Commissioner to investigate cyberbullying complaints made by young Australians, as well as a growing number of dedicated cyberbullying organisations and awareness and prevention campaigns and programs.

As is typical of moral panics, panics about cyberbullying typically frame the issue as something new, the likes of which we have not previously seen, rather than as an extension of offline conflict and bullying, which have a very long history. The discursive construction of cyberbullying frames its putative prevalence, potentially tragic consequences\(^{33}\), its potential anonymity, the speed at which material can spread to large audiences (Juvonen & Gross, 2008), as well as its constant, 24/7 nature and encroachment into the ‘safe’ space of the home, hence denying victims any kind of reprieve from the abuse. Underlying these claims is the suggestion that cyberbullying is more prevalent and damaging than more traditional forms of bullying, and hence, that social media and the internet are somehow causing the enactment of conflict and aggression between peers.

While parents frequently drew on these dominant discourses about cyberbullying, acknowledging that it was a problem facing many schools and families, their own apparent concern about and experience with the issue was generally not commensurate with the media coverage and political and popular attention dedicated to this issue. This is despite many parents recounting incidents of negative online interaction or exclusion experienced by their children. It quickly became clear from parental accounts that they did not consider their children’s experiences with online conflict as ‘cyberbullying’ as such, as parents evidently tried to delineate the experiences and stories that they shared with what they implied to be the more serious, and ‘inappropriate’ behaviour of bullying.


\(^{33}\) Incidents of cyberbullying which attract the most media attention are typically those with the most tragic outcomes. For example, the tragic death of 14 year old Amy ‘Dolly’ Everett, purportedly due to cyberbullying (O’Brien, 2018; Roe, 2018).
Negative mediated sociality as an extension of unmediated negative sociality

Moral panics about cyberbullying suggest that new media technologies are solely responsible for bringing about a serious new problem which requires action, and consequently social media radically increases bullying (danah boyd, 2014). Yet much of the existing literature suggests that cyberbullying, rather than constituting an entirely new problem that remains independent and separate from more traditional forms of bullying, is an ‘old problem in a new guise’ (Campbell, 2005; Li, 2007), a ‘reconfiguration’ of traditional bullying (Livingstone, Stoilova, & Kelly, 2016), and an ‘extension of the school environment’ (Juvonen & Gross, 2008, p. 497). As Juvonen and Gross (2008, p. 503) make clear: electronic communication devices are not the cause of problem behaviour among youth, but they are literally tools: they can be used to interact with peers in both anti- and pro-social ways. Yet there is little doubt that new digital tools are changing the nature of traditional negative interactions among peers. The affordances of social media make online conflict more visible, persistent, and accessible to a greater number of people (danah boyd, 2014). Thus digital media facilitate new forms of peer aggression that mix traditional and cyberbullying (Livingstone et al., 2016). Therefore, while offline aggression and conflict are in some ways, migrating online, at the same time peer aggression is taking ‘new forms and finding expression in new ways online’. (Livingstone et al., 2016, p. 117). Cyberbullying and other types of online aggression or conflict are therefore a rearticulation of an age-old problem which takes on new characteristics due to the affordances of digital media.

Participants, for the most part, seemed to share this view. James, for example, was of the view that: ‘Some of the things that have been present and part of our human experience for thousands of years, like the behaviour that can be cruel and vindictive and manipulative and exploitative is also online’. However, some participants expressed concern that the affordances of digital media may have shifted the character of negative interpersonal relations in troubling ways. Richard, for example, suggested that technology enables the ‘bullying that young women do to each other’ to ‘be done more continuously’, and was ‘more pervasive and vicious’. Mark and Esther expressed concern that the character of online interaction was more ‘mean’ because one couldn’t gauge the recipient’s reaction online:

> When we were kids growing up without all of this stuff, if you actually said something mean to somebody and upset them and you saw them cry or become upset

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34 There are some apparent exceptions to this, however. Livingstone et al. (2016) found some evidence that in some countries such as Turkey and France, cyberbullying is a distinct problem with its own characteristics.
or whatever it was, that’s part of the learning process of, ‘Oh, it’s not very nice to make somebody feel like that by saying that.’ But with all this just posting comments about people on social media you become divorced from actually seeing the reaction you can cause. I think it’s a difficult kind of thing, a different space for them to navigate as well. (Mark)

I can even see with my ten year-old, when she’s sometimes texting on the Ipad with her friends, she says things that you don’t say face-to-face. It’s almost like those kids are mean and I know they’re not. (Esther)

Notwithstanding the more impersonal nature of some mediated social interaction, a number of parents also drew on dominant discourses which frame the potentially constant nature of online bullying as well as its ability to encroach into the safe space of the home, in describing particularly troubling aspects of online interpersonal conflict:

I think it’s happening outside of school hours as well. It’s not just something that would happen amongst the friends at school. It can happen there and then it continues at home. (Simone)

Yeah, so there’s no break. (Abigail)

In addition to blurring spatial and temporal boundaries, social media and other networked technologies also make bullying or conflict more visible and persistent, meaning that online conflict leaves a trace that may be visible to large audiences, and which may persist long after the initial interaction took place (danah boyd, 2014). Yet these same affordances also create opportunities for others, perhaps parents or teachers, to intervene (danah boyd, 2014). Participants pointed out that the visibility of negative online social interactions meant that they may be able to help their children manage conflict through discussion and support. Abigail talked about some of the benefits of these affordances, while suggesting that online bullying wasn’t necessarily any worse than offline bullying:

In a way having it [bullying] happen on text and having the authority to read it means I can see some of it sometimes. We’ve had conversations that we wouldn’t have been able to have because I wouldn’t have known exactly what was going on. I don’t think it’s any worse because it’s on social media. It’s just it’s there and you can see it. The only thing that makes it worse is that it’s written down and other people can see it and it stays there. (Abigail)

While parents were evidently concerned about their children being hurt and upset as a result of negative online social relations, parents were somewhat pragmatic in their responses. Most acknowledged that while the internet and social media had changed some of the ways in which conflicts and aggression played out, the fundamental issues underpinning peer relationships and conflict remained essentially the same. Learning to negotiate interpersonal
conflict was generally accepted as part and parcel of growing up, and therefore an important phase of child development. In some ways, the affordances of digital media enabled parents to help their children navigate their relationships with their peers.

**Common online negative interactions: ‘Cyberbullying’, or something else?**

Despite parents’ apparent pragmatism in relation to the nature of mediated social interaction, it became clear that the apparent lack of parental anxiety about the issue of cyberbullying was largely the result of parents’ claiming little experience and knowledge about what they considered to be cyberbullying with respect to their own children. Indeed, bullying, either offline and face-to-face, or mediated via the internet and social media, is a disturbing occurrence that would likely cause both parents and children distress and anxiety, and I anticipate that if participants knew that their children had been victimised, their response would have been quite different. It is of course possible, even likely, that parents were unaware of bullying and other inappropriate interpersonal conflict amongst their children and their peers. Nonetheless, participants recounted a number of negative incidents involving their children that they were aware of, usually because their children had told them about them, yet it became clear that most parents were keen to distance these kinds of behaviours from the dominant discursive construction of cyberbullying, and the kinds of behaviours and consequences it typically encompasses.

Without dismissing the issue entirely, some parents rejected outright the sensationalist media claims about cyberbullying, refusing to ‘buy-in’ to the panic. As Richard said:

> There’s a great tendency to overreact because there’s so much out in the media, things like the 11-year old boy committing suicide because he was being bullied. And god, we’re all going to commit suicide, well no we’re not. (Richard)

It became apparent that parents’ claimed lack of experience (or indeed knowledge) about their children experiencing or perpetrating ‘cyberbullying’, made it easier for them to reject panics and occupy a more dispassionate position.

Yet parental accounts indicate that interpersonal conflict amongst their teens was common. Parents shared numerous stories of online conflict and social exclusion involving their children, yet generally eschewed the term ‘cyberbullying’, describing them instead as general ‘nastiness’, ‘bitchiness’, ‘exclusion’, or ‘drama’. Scholars have acknowledged the ambiguity around the label ‘cyberbullying’, noting that there is no universal definition, and no broad consensus about what behaviours are included or excluded by the term (danah boyd, 2014;
Görzig & Frumkin, 2013; Livingstone et al., 2016). Popular texts similarly assert that precise definitions of cyberbullying are contentious (Carr-Gregg, 2014). One commonly used definition of bullying identifies it as aggressive behaviour that is unwanted, repeated over time, intentional and unbalanced in power (Olweus, 1994). The Australian Office of the eSafety Commissioner omits the requirements for cyberbullying to be ‘repeated’ or for there to be an imbalance in power, defining cyberbullying as: ‘the use of technology to bully a person or group with the intent to hurt them socially, psychologically or even physically’ (Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2019a). Kowalski, Limber, Limber, and Agatston (2012) define cyberbullying as aggression that is intentionally and repeatedly carried out in an electronic context.

Much of the research about cyberbullying provides little additional insight into exactly what behaviours are captured by the term, utilising existing definitions (such as that from Olweus above) and briefly outlining common cyberbullying behaviours which are somewhat vague and open to interpretation. Much of the literature primarily focuses on the incidence and frequency of cyberbullying, its relation to traditional bullying, typical characteristics of perpetrators and victims, risk factors, and potential prevention strategies (Campbell, 2005; Görzig, 2011; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Lenhart et al., 2011; Li, 2007; Tanrikulu & Campbell, 2015) without interrogating or examining in detail the types of behaviours it purports to be measuring. Similarly, studies which consider parental concern about the issue typically present cyberbullying as an axiomatic category against which parental concern is measured, often quantitatively (see for example danah boyd & Hargittai, 2013; Delen et al., 2015; Family Online Safety Institute, 2014; Flash Eurobarometer, 2008; Ponte & Simões, 2009; Sorbring, 2014). Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) do, however, outline a number of behaviours that are encompassed by the term, and appear to take a broader view of bullying than other scholars, noting that bullying can take both direct and indirect forms, including rejection and exclusion. There is evidence to suggest that many parents are concerned about their children being cyberbullied, or indeed, being cyberbullies themselves (danah boyd & Hargittai, 2013; Clark, 2013; Davis, 2012; Delen et al., 2015; Ponte & Simões, 2009; Shepherd et al., 2006; Sorbring, 2014), yet the exact nature of potential behaviours that elicit parental concern remain for the most part, unclear.
Drama

Negative interpersonal interactions and aggressive behaviours occupy varying positions on a spectrum from disagreement and mild conflict right through to malicious, repeated verbal abuse. The vast majority of negative or ‘mean’ social interactions that occur amongst peers and which may upset or create hurt or stress to others does not fall within broadly held notions of what cyberbullying encompasses, despite these behaviours often being labelled as such (Marwick & boyd, 2014a). For example, Allen (2015) found that common problematic behaviours amongst peers included ‘conflict and aggression’, which often included disagreements, misunderstandings and differences of opinions which led to young people feeling upset or hurt, as well as competition between peers, and issues around social grouping, power and status. Marwick and boyd (2014a) and Allen (2015) found that students used the term ‘drama’ to describe interpersonal conflict that commonly played out between peers, usually on social media, and performed in front of an active, engaged audience.

In addition to more general ‘drama’, Miller (2016) found that sexualised forms of drama were commonplace amongst girls. Sexualised drama involved gendered practices such as gossiping and spreading rumours of a sexual nature, ‘slut-shaming’ and homophobic labelling, such as calling each other lesbians. Miller (2016) uncovered numerous disturbing behaviours enacted by girls in her study, yet while many of these clearly crossed the boundaries into bullying, she found that her female participants did not consider it as such. Indeed, while the concept of drama generally includes overlapping features with conflict, relational aggression and bullying, youth seemed to view it as distinct from each of these (Allen, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2014a; Miller, 2016). Further, research shows that not all people understand bullying in the same way, and the way that students understand it is often different to the way that teachers understand it, and the way that researchers understand it is often different to student and educator conceptualisations of bullying (Allen, 2015). A major issue for adults is determining whether or not a behaviour constitutes bullying (Allen, 2015). Further, the distinction between ‘cyberbullying’ and other types of aggressive or negative online such as ‘trolling’, stalking, harassment, ‘outing’ and ‘hating’ is similarly unclear amongst them (Livingstone et al., 2016).

Participants in my study demonstrated varying conceptualisations of cyberbullying, although almost all of them eschewed the term when discussing their own children’s experiences. While only one participant explicitly used the term ‘drama’ to describe her daughter’s online
and offline interpersonal relations, a few participants alluded to incidents which seemed to fit the ‘drama’ description. Therese explicitly referred to interpersonal conflict involving her daughter as ‘drama’. Therese’s younger daughter (aged 16), she explained, signed up to Facebook aged 13 but deleted her account one week later because, ‘She just thinks Facebook’s ridiculous and it’s bitchy and all her friends are on it and they talk about crap and she’s just not interested’. When prompted further about the kinds of ‘bitchiness’ her daughter was describing, Therese said:

I think she saw Facebook as an extension of what was happening at school, which wasn’t something that she necessarily wanted to engage in. She had a good bunch of friends, but in her group they all have a love hate relationship with each other. So frequently throughout primary school, one day she would be best friends with somebody and then the next day she wouldn’t be, and so I think she saw Facebook as just replicating all of that drama and angst. (Therese)

Richard also described an incident involving his daughter that could be interpreted as drama, despite not using this term explicitly. He did explain later, however, that the incident had ‘exploded’ and was taken very seriously by his daughter’s school:

There was a bit of a falling out between my daughter and her friend. My daughter was telling me about her friend, saying ‘She’s just not really very nice to people, I just don’t want to be around her’, so she just distanced herself. And I don’t think she was nasty about that, maybe she was, I’m not naïve enough to think that there weren’t some exchanges involved. But then there was a Snapchat exchange where my daughter said something which was a Snapchat broadcast to all of the people following her on Snapchat. This one girl took offence at it and that led to my daughter posting a photograph under the influence of her older brother that was completely unnecessary and unwise and it all just exploded. And it happened in the blink of an eye. (Richard)

Participants evidently had some experience of drama amongst their children and their peers. Many accounts shared by parents, including the one from Richard above, suggest reciprocity in which there are no apparent power imbalances, a performative dimension, and appear to have played out in front on an online audience. While danah boyd (2014) found through her research that young people were keen to delineate drama from cyberbullying, she found that parents were not, and used the term bullying as an umbrella term to describe all manner of conflict and aggression between youth. While we should be careful not to generalise my findings to all parents, as some participants indicated that other parents had been quick to apply the label in relation to peer interactions involving their own children, most participants in my study were reluctant to categorise behaviours as cyberbullying as the young people in
boyd’s study. Most parents also rejected the sensationalism that often accompanied reports of cyberbullying.

Targeted exclusion and relational aggression

Notwithstanding the anecdotes shared by Therese and Richard above, it was apparent that the majority of experiences shared by participants resembled ‘relational aggression’, something slightly different to drama. Relational aggression is defined as ‘harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of their peer relationships’ (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, p. 710). It is a covert form of ‘indirect aggression’ which is ‘a type of behaviour in which the perpetrator attempts to inflict pain in such a manner that he or she makes it seem as though there has been no intention to hurt at all’ (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992, p. 118). Relational aggression seeks to harm a victim via social manipulation and damaging the victim’s social relations and feelings of group belonging through breaking contact with peers, becoming friends with others as revenge, and excluding or rejecting peers from friendship groups (Björkqvist et al., 1992; Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008). These forms of indirect aggression have been contrasted with ‘direct aggression’ which, as the term suggests, involves direct practices such as verbal and physical abuse.

While noting that drama shares many elements with relational aggression, such as gossip, ‘backbiting’, social manipulation, and characterisation as a ‘female’ practice, Marwick and boyd (2014a) distinguish drama from relational aggression, suggesting that the latter implies an unknown perpetrator, and the visible, participatory nature of drama makes this impossible. Participants alluded to numerous incidents where their child (almost always daughters) had been visibly excluded or rejected from groups or events. And while it is unlikely that parents are privy to all the details, these incidents appear to be more straightforward acts of rejection and social exclusion, whereby someone wasn’t invited to a party, wasn’t included in a group chat, or was otherwise excluded by peers. These incidents as described by participants appear to lack the participatory, performative elements of drama, and suggest a power imbalance whereby a weaker party was targeted and excluded, as opposed to the reciprocity of drama. Whether or not such behaviours are considered cyberbullying is unclear and depends upon which definition is applied, however, the general consensus amongst parents suggests it is not.

Relational aggression occurs both offline and online and appears to be a common practice amongst girls, as discussed below. Online relational aggression is often an extension of
offline, face-to-face peer dynamics, as many parents pointed out, while acknowledging that digital media provided additional avenues for excluding individuals within peer groups. For example, Michael described an incident in which his daughter excluded a friend, and while this occurred offline, he acknowledged the ways in which it could be enacted via digital media with potentially less accountability and visibility:

Cassie and her friends excluded a girl that was also Cassie’s friend at the time, from activities, and I spoke quite sternly to Cassie about that, in fact that was probably the first time we spoke about peer group pressure. And this was a friend of Cassie’s and still is a friend of Cassie’s. So, Cassie was being completely swayed by this peer group activity of excluding someone. There was no social media involved. I can see how in social media those dynamics could play out in a way that was less accountable and harder to recognise as happening although it’s still happening. As in face-to-face interactions it’s much easier to see and identify what is happening. As social media is such a destructive space of intermittent engagement, there’s lots of excuses and you can probably disguise that kind of bullying behaviour in that environment much more easily. (Michael)

Facebook groups, apps such as Instagram and WhatsApp, and other social media platforms that facilitate communication between ‘networked publics’ provide ample opportunities to exclude peers from groups, chats, and activities, and can also easily make visible the act of exclusion to the person being excluded. Anna talked about a group of her daughter’s friends setting up a messaging group amongst themselves, where they could arrange to ‘hang out’, or ‘talk about assignments’, but they didn’t add her daughter to it. According to Anna, her daughter ‘found that to be quite painful at the time’. James, while noting that such behaviours were a natural extension of similar offline behaviours, called these exclusionary practices a hurtful ‘game’:

People are like, ‘We don’t like this about you, and people aren’t afraid to tell you so and they’ll do it on social media,’ but there’s also the ‘We’re not going to tell you what we don’t like, but we’re just going to pull back from you, or turn our backs on you.’ And I think that’s something that happens on social media as well, and it’s a game that’s very hurtful. (James).

Therese’s 16 year-old daughter, despite deleting Facebook, was a keen Instagram user, and Therese recounted an incident of exclusion that played out via social media. Like other participants, she highlights the parallels between online and offline exclusion, questioning if online exclusion is in fact any worse:

A couple of years ago a couple of the girls would be having an [online] conversation and she could see that she was being excluded from the conversation, or someone would post a photo of a party that they were having, on Instagram, so she could see
that she was not at the party, wasn’t invited. That happened a couple of times. Is that any worse than when you go to school on Monday and you realise that everyone had a party? You have to deal with that. Maybe it’s the immediacy of it, that right now they’re all over at Bianca’s house having a party and I’m not there, why not?

(Therese)

Parental accounts suggest that relational aggression practices such as targeted exclusion are common and are increasingly enacted online. Yet, there is surprisingly little research examining online relational aggression and targeted exclusion. While these practices do resemble ‘drama’, I suggest that they are subtly different in that they don’t have the same level of visibility, performance or the audience that drama does. Despite the apparent prevalence of these practices of exclusion, they receive little attention in the mass media and cyber safety advice. The lack of attention to this practice is curious when we consider legal definitions of bullying within the workplace, which includes ‘excluding or isolating employees’ (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019). While the school environment is clearly a different context from the work place, characterised by different behaviours and peer dynamics which are often outside the control of adults and educators, practices of targeted exclusion nonetheless need to be considered within the constellation of negative interpersonal behaviours and peer conflict. The disproportionate attention to the serious, yet by some accounts exaggerated problem of cyberbullying (Olweus, 2012), therefore eclipses less serious yet still distressing and potentially damaging — and apparently far more common — online behaviours including relational aggression, social exclusion and rejection. As such, greater consideration needs to be given to other problematic online behaviours that fall outside normative definitions and conceptualisations of bullying, such as relational aggression.

Mean girls

Cyberbullying, drama, exclusion and other forms of online conflict and aggression are highly gendered, and typically conceptualised (and pathologised) as female behaviour, despite evidence which suggests that incidences of cyberbullying and relational aggression occur relatively equally amongst boys and girls (Barlett & Coyne, 2014; Card et al., 2008). The majority of participants who shared stories of relational aggression including exclusion, described behaviours enacted by their daughters and female friends of their daughters. Some research has indicated that boys are more likely to engage in ‘direct aggression’ such as physical and verbal attacks, and girls are more likely to engage in ‘indirect’ relational aggression such as social exclusion, rejection, gossip and spreading rumours (Björkqvist et
al., 1992; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Scholars suggest that girls are more likely to engage in indirect relational aggression such as exclusion, gossip and spreading rumours because these practices are more socially acceptable for girls than enacting physical aggression (Marwick & boyd, 2014a), and thus ‘meanness’ is the product of a repressive patriarchal culture (Brown, 1999, 2003). The conceptualisation of bullying, drama, gossiping and other forms of social manipulation and exclusion as female behaviours was pervasive amongst participants. Richard, for example, referred to them as ‘girl issues’:

CPJ: What makes you say it’s more of a girl issue than a boy issue?
Richard: Simply because the way in which girls do this is quite different to the ways in which boys do it.
CPJ: It’s more exclusionary?
Richard: It’s vicious and it doesn’t stop. It will go on for months and years, whereas mostly with boys they’ll have a punch up and it will be in the past. It’s a flash and it’s gone. There might be some lingering resentment but rarely have I seen it come up again and again and again. With the girls it comes up again and again and again frequently.

Mark similarly suggested that it was a ‘girl problem’:

We’ve had far more problems in terms of, bullying is too strong a word, but in terms of people being excluded from social groups and friendships and stuff like that. We have far, far more problems with that from my daughter and the interactions with girls at school than we had with my son and with boys. (Mark)

Accounts such as those given by Mark and Richard accord with the figure of the ‘universal mean girl’, which, according to Ringrose (2006) has been the subject of increasingly sensationalist media accounts warning of a new kind of pathological, but also ‘normal’ female aggression. Participants’ accounts and assumptions about girls’ behaviours accord with a meanness that Ringrose (2006) has identified as a ‘normal’, essentialising, universalised feminine behaviour that elides context and female difference.

Negative mediated sociality, ‘appropriateness’ and child development

While acknowledging that digital media had shifted the character of peer sociality, it was evident that parents considered that the networked sociality that their children were engaging in was generally replicating and extending ‘offline’ peer group dynamics. Thus, while parents acknowledged that peer conflict, exclusion and drama were distressing and hurtful, they conceded that they provided an important learning and development opportunity for children, who fundamentally need to build resilience, navigate peer relationships and friendships, and
learn how to cope with hurt, betrayal and exclusion, both online and offline. Negotiating the complexities of interpersonal relationships, and the joys and heartache that they invariably bring, was therefore seen to be a necessary part of child development and maturation.

It was clear that parents delineated between the common covert behaviours of drama and exclusion, considered to be part of ‘natural’ adolescent development, and more overt, targeted, ‘serious’ cyberbullying intended to cause harm which conversely threatened child development. This was seen implicitly as a transgression of ‘normal’, ‘acceptable’ and ‘appropriate’ peer interaction, although in reality the distinction is often far less clear. In drawing this distinction, parents implied that the types of exclusion, drama and relational aggression were (and had long been) a normal and inevitable feature of adolescent life.

James suggested that the unique features of online conflict and drama actually afforded children an opportunity to work through interpersonal conflict while supported and aided by their parents. James described the discussions he had with his children about negotiating the complexities of relationships online and offline:

We have lots and lots of conversations at home about how do you manage this social experience, whether it’s online or whether it’s in person … We talk about all that stuff with the kids. We talk about it endlessly. And as psychologists I suppose we perhaps overanalyse it, but we’re also wanting to equip our kids with the skills they need to be able to make their way in the world. Because unless you understand the social rules that society works by, it can be really tough. So, I guess we’re trying to teach our kids all of those social complexities whether it’s in the real sphere or whether it’s in the social media sphere, the digital sphere, or wherever it happens. (James)

The differing attitudes towards different types of interpersonal conflict demonstrated by parents – whereby ‘less serious’ forms of conflict are seen as opportunities for learning and development, and more serious incidents of cyberbullying are potentially damaging and may disrupt normal development — demonstrate that a much more nuanced and detailed understanding of the different types of behaviours that play out online is needed. Nuance gets lost in media panics about cyberbullying, which tend to eclipse and downplay other problematic, yet apparently far more common practices of relational aggression and exclusion which appear to have remained relatively invisible within discussions about cyberbullying.

Conclusion
This chapter has examined parents’ assessment of and concerns about their children’s various negative mediated social relations. Parents raised a number of concerns about the increasing mediation of their children’s social relationships, as well as the various negative social
dimensions of digital media, including drama, relational aggression and cyberbullying. And while most parents indicated that online drama and conflict were extensions of offline conflict, parents acknowledged that the affordances of digital media created additional pressures for their children in negotiating peer conflict.

There was a clear gendered dimension to the ways in which parents articulated their concerns about peer conflict. Parents’ explicit characterisation of relational aggression, drama and exclusion as female behaviours is just one of the many ways in which many participants essentialised and pathologised certain female behaviours. This characterisation also served to normalise these behaviours to some extent. Many parents drew parallels with their own (unmediated) experiences growing up, implying that negotiating and dealing with the inevitable hurt that, according to parents, girls routinely inflict on each other, may build resilience, and therefore aid their daughters’ development.

Participants’ apparent reluctance to label the various negative interactions experienced by their children as cyberbullying was perhaps a little surprising. Parents shared numerous stories of conflict, exclusion and relational aggression. For parents however, negotiating conflict was implicitly a ‘normal’ part of development, and part and parcel of growing up. Only when this conflict ventured into more repeated and targeted aggression (i.e. cyberbullying), was it considered ‘inappropriate’ and a threat to their child’s ‘normal’ development.
CHAPTER EIGHT: Conclusion

This thesis has explored the various tensions, challenges and anxieties experienced by parents in relation to their children’s use of digital media technologies. Discursively constructed norms about ‘good’ parenting in the digital age responsibilise parents for minimising the risks of digital media technologies while maximising the opportunities through correct governance and mediation of their children’s digital media use. A comprehensive body of cyber safety resources and advice as well as popular parenting literature exists to remedy the perceived parental knowledge deficit to ensure that parents are provided with the ‘correct’ information to achieve these seemingly contradictory objectives.

Children and young people’s use of media has long been framed primarily in terms of risk. Recurrent moral and media panics, from concerns about television violence and screen time, to more recent concerns about cyberbullying, device ‘addiction’, and online pornography, warn that the risks posed to young people from contemporary media are many and varied. In recent decades, however, a discourse framing the purported opportunities and benefits of computers and other digital media has emerged. Primarily framed in relation to children and young people’s education, these ‘ed-techtopian’ discourses frame the ‘revolutionary’ potential of computers and digital media (Buckingham, 2007; Selwyn, 2016). Parents, they are led to believe, cannot afford to let their children be ‘left behind’. Such discourses appear to strike an affective resonance with (middle-class) contemporary parents said to be increasingly ‘anxious’ and concerned about maximising their children’s future educational and professional opportunities in an era of rapid change and uncertainty (Barr et al., 2012; Nelson, 2010).

My study explored the complex and at times contradictory ways in which parents negotiated these tensions. Parents were critical of and resistant to panic discourses about young people and digital media, yet at the same time many invoked familiar media panic motifs when sharing their anxieties and concerns. Parents demonstrated a similar resistance to the inflated claims inherent within much of the ‘ed-techtopian’ discourses of innovation and opportunity, but also acknowledged the numerous educational benefits afforded by digital media technology. Parents in my study were concerned, and in some respects anxious, but these anxieties appeared to stem less from concerns about maximising their children’s future
educational and professional opportunities, and more from negotiating the tension between the competing objectives of the ‘good’ parent.

Parents were thus ambivalent about their children’s use of digital media technologies. Parental anxieties, hopes and fears were in large part discussed by parents outside of the frames of the two polarised discourses maximising opportunities while minimising risks as they drew upon and described their own lived experiences. Participants expressed the greatest enthusiasm, and often frustration, when sharing their own personal anecdotes and experiences involving their children’s use of digital media, and the challenges of negotiating and mediating digital media use in the home. The accounts and experiences, so generously and honestly shared by participants, thus come to represent the nuanced perspectives and meanings that fall in between these two hegemonic discourses, providing much needed insight into the various knowledges, practices and resources that parents draw on in making sense of and negotiating digital media use in the home.

The parental concerns explored throughout this thesis were shaped by the developmental paradigm which is central to modern constructions of childhood (Holloway & Valentine, 2003). Everyday child development cuts across two processes: The socio-biological development of children into adults, and socio-technological discourses of progress, and in particular ‘innovation’ in an educational context. Parents framed their concern about their children’s engagement with digital media technologies in terms of the tension between these two processes, and the capacity for digital media to disrupt their child’s ‘normal’ and ‘proper’ development. In articulating their concerns, parents indicated that they did not think that their children had the capacity, maturity, judgement and common sense to manage the myriad risks that digital media is said to pose by virtue of their immaturity and relative inexperience.

The regulatory norm of ‘appropriateness’ was evident in the ways that parents articulated their concerns about their children’s digital media related activities. Activities or uses that assist their child’s normal development, were determined to be ‘appropriate’ uses of technology by parents. Those activities and uses that were perceived as posing a threat to their child’s normal development’, were deemed (both explicitly and implicitly) to be ‘inappropriate.’ (That’s not to say, however, that all activities deemed ‘inappropriate’ by parents were necessarily perceived as posing a threat to their children’s development). The goal of the ‘good’ parent is to facilitate their children’s ‘appropriate’ activities involving digital media technology, while mediating, restricting or prohibiting ‘inappropriate’ activities.
Throughout this dissertation I have critically explored the different ways parents negotiated the tension between inappropriate activities that threatened their child’s development, and appropriate activities that could be seen to enhance it. Far from absolute, these categories of activity exist on a continuum, and what may be considered appropriate or not shifts depending on the particular context and parents’ interpretation of it according to their particular approach to parenting (whether immersive or methodised). The use of digital media to create shared spaces of intimacy within which friendships could be maintained and emotional support could be provided was appropriate and considered to be of particular value amongst parents whose children suffered from anxiety and depression. In particular, many parents of girls in this study highlighted the emotional support afforded by digital media for their daughters (this issue appeared less prevalent amongst parents of boys). However, these spaces became inappropriate when they became all-encompassing or relentless, were at risk of displacing face-to-face sociality, or when their children appeared to rely too much on valorisation from their peers. Even some negative forms of mediated sociality such as relational aggression, conflict, drama and exclusion that were enacted online were considered ‘appropriate’ amongst parents who acknowledged that navigating peer conflict and exclusion was an inevitable feature of life. Thus, parents viewed these instances as an opportunity for development as their children were required to negotiate conflict and navigate the inevitable hurt and heartache of adolescent peer relationships. Consistent with earlier findings that indicated parental concern about cyberbullying, negative mediated sociality that involved overt aggression or targeted bullying (danah boyd & Hargittai, 2013; Clark, 2013; Ponte & Simões, 2009; Sorbring, 2014) were not, however, considered appropriate, as these posed a threat to ‘normal’ child development. ‘Oversharing’ and practices of self-representation became inappropriate when they were considered to pose a reputational threat to their children which might jeopardise their future educational and employment prospects, an issue which has long been a concern for parents, particularly those from middle-class backgrounds (Clark, 2013; Madden et al., 2013; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011). Making mistakes, parents acknowledged, was a ‘normal’ part of development. However, the documentation, permanence and visibility of those mistakes afforded by digital media, and the potential reputational impact, posed a threat to their child’s development. Any sort of sexualised representation of girls or undue focus on the female body were always considered ‘inappropriate’ and parents explicitly referred to them as such.
Participants assessed the value of their children’s digital media activities, and therefore its ‘appropriateness’ according to a ‘hierarchy of value’. In assessing various activities participants invoked a familiar set of dichotomous criteria, including active/passive, creative/derivative, social/isolated and online/offline, as well as considerations of ‘time’, in determining the relative value of given activities. However, the portable and private affordances of digital media highlight the limitations of these reductive binaries, as digital media extend the concept of ‘bedroom culture’ both spatially and temporally. Beyond parents’ explicit articulation of their concerns and practices drawing on these criteria, parents’ own accounts highlighted the apparent inconsistency with which these criteria were applied.

Parental concern about ‘time’, which has been explored throughout this thesis in various ways, are consistent with earlier studies which documented parental concerns about what they considered to be their children’s ‘excessive’ time online (Clark, 2013; Green et al., 2004; Haddon & Vincent, 2015; Sorbring, 2014). Similarly, participants’ assessment of online pornography as ‘inappropriate’ is also consistent with earlier findings (Flash Eurobarometer, 2008; NetRatingsAustralia, 2005), although my study indicates that it is the broader shift in the nature of online pornography towards ‘more extreme’ depictions which were of particular concern to parents, rather the availability of sexual content per se. These two examples — concerns about ‘excessive’ time online and pornography — demonstrate the ways in which participants’ various, and sometimes shifting, assessments about the ‘value’ or ‘appropriateness’ of their children’s digital media related activities according to different criteria provide a more complex and nuanced insight into parental perceptions and concerns about various risk issues than many earlier studies.

In this thesis, I developed two distinct models of parenting based on my findings to describe the various ways that parents mediated the risks and opportunities of their children’s use of digital media technology: immersive parenting and methodised parenting. These two models build on earlier studies which identified different parental approaches to mediation of children’s digital media use, including Clark’s (2013) two parenting ethics which were strongly correlated with the class and background of participant families, as well as the parental mediation literature which determines two broad styles of mediation — enabling and restrictive (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Livingstone et al., 2017a). My two models of immersive and methodised parenting aim to complement earlier research by incorporating not just what parents do with respect to their children’s digital media use, but also how they
acquire knowledge about their children’s use (i.e. their surveillance techniques), and also the various knowledges which inform their mediation. Both models reflect parents’ hierarchies of value to assess their respective children’s use of technology, but do so in different ways, drawing on different knowledges, technical and social resources. While a few parents clearly adopted methodised and immersive styles respectively, most of them occupied varying positions on a continuum between the two styles. Participants tended to be more immersive in their parenting, acquiring knowledge about their children and their practices from the children themselves (rather than from external sources such as the media) to inform their assessments of the given value of an activity. It was clear, however, that for immersive parents their hierarchies of value were more fluid and shifted according to various circumstances and changing knowledges. Immersive parents adopted a style of parenting that privileged trust and dialogue. Methodised parents, on the other hand, appeared to rely more on external knowledges, and their hierarchies of value appeared much more rigid, particularly with respect to ‘inappropriate’ use.

Many parents in my study demonstrated substantial knowledge and expertise about digital media technologies, suggesting that unlike parents of 15 years ago, parents are no longer terrified of new technologies, and the ways in which it disrupts hierarchies of power in the home (Green et al., 2004; Lally, 2002). This finding lends further weight to scholarly critiques of the digital native / digital immigrant construct (Livingstone, 2017). However, there was evidence of a parental knowledge deficit in relation to children’s use of digital media technologies, with many parents admitting that they did not know exactly what their children were doing with digital media. Participants demonstrated varying levels of knowledge in this respect, however the majority of parents made some attempt to address their perceived knowledge deficit, likely in response to discursive constructions of the ‘good’ parent as one who knows what their child is doing and monitors their children’s activities (Furedi, 2002; Kerr & Stattin, 2000). Participants engaged in various ‘techniques of surveillance’ which shaped concerns as well as enabling the practical steps that they took to address them. Monitoring and surveillance techniques were used by all parents in this study, however the methods and objectives varied according to their parenting style. A key difference between immersive and methodised parents was that immersive parents monitored their children’s activities to ensure that they were worthy of the ongoing trust that their parents had in them, rather than monitoring to know exactly what they are doing. Methodised parents, on the other hand, monitored their children’s activities to see what their children
were doing, and to determine if they were following the rules that they had made in relation to digital media use.

Acquiring detailed knowledge about their children’s activities was difficult for participants. The growing autonomy of adolescents, the opacity surrounding their digital media use, as well as the time and investment required to not only monitor their children’s activities, but also research the various platforms and apps that their children were using, presented significant challenges. Methodised parents responded to these challenges with methods and rules. Many immersive parents were comfortable not knowing the details of their children’s digital media use, as this knowledge was not necessarily required to ensure that their children were behaving in a trustworthy manner. However, immersive parents evidently struggled to navigate the tension between fulfilling the obligations of the ‘good’ parent as one who monitors their child’s activities and conducts research, with that of affording their children the privacy, autonomy and trust that they thought that they deserved.

The challenges and difficulties of monitoring and mediating young people’s digital media use was a key finding of this study. Almost all parents reported that they had established some rules and regulations governing their children’s digital media use. However, with the exception of the few methodised parents who continued to enforce clear rules around digital media use, the majority of parents had changed, relaxed or even abandoned many of their rules due to the practical difficulties of enforcing them, their children’s creative tactics for circumventing them, and the family conflict that usually ensued as a result. Evidently, the limited success of many of these techniques and strategies exacerbated parental anxiety, as parents indicated concern not only about the risks posed by digital media, but also their own subsequent inability to eradicate or effectively manage them. Thus, a collective sense of frustration at the sheer difficulty of mediating teenagers’ use of digital media was clearly evident amongst many participants. Parents’ experiences documented throughout this thesis highlighted the challenges of mediating digital media compared to earlier media such as television, supporting Clark’s (2011) critique regarding the limitations of applying parental mediation theories for television to digital media technologies. Challenges for participants included the multifunctionality of devices (including the ‘collapsing contexts’ of school, socialising and entertainment), as well as the lack of transparency around their children’s media use which was individualised and often shrouded in secrecy. Governing adolescents and attempting to negotiate the delicate balance between fostering autonomy and protecting their children further complicated matters.
A defining feature of immersive parenting was trust, dialogue and communication with their children to discuss risks, gauge their children’s responses to particular issues, and also as a strategy of monitoring. Trust and dialogue were used by immersive parents as part of a suite of mediation strategies, which also included rules (for example, no devices at the dinner table, or no internet after 10pm). However, it became evident that these parents, in response to the challenges documented above, had gradually abandoned many of their more restrictive mediation attempts, and had come to rely primarily on trust and dialogue as their main mediation strategy. While acknowledging the importance of trust and dialogue in minimising the risks of digital media to their children, immersive parents nonetheless did not seem wholly convinced by its effectiveness as the primary mediation strategy. Many participants, for example, indicated that they were still searching for a ‘better way’ of mediating their children’s activities. Many of the parents who attended my focus groups evidently hoped to find it amongst the other participants. Despite their dissatisfaction, however, such an approach is likely legitimised by hegemonic parenting discourses which construct the ‘good’ parent as one who is egalitarian, child-centred, and who empowers their children (Clark, 2013; Nelson, 2010).

Finding points of resonance: parental attempts to connect with their children’s digital experiences

Despite the significant changes brought about by digital media, parents attempted to find various ‘points of resonance’ between their children’s digitally mediated experiences, and their own unmediated or differently mediated experiences growing up. In doing so, parents implied that digital media are not necessarily producing entirely new behaviours, but instead are changing the character of behaviours and practices. I suggest that parents attempted to find these points of resonance as a way of making sense of their children’s experiences, bridging the perceived knowledge gap, and boosting their confidence in helping their children navigate some of the difficulties of digital media. Parents acknowledged the various ways in which digital media had indeed changed the nature of a range of developmental experiences and milestones in a way which was highly problematic. However, underneath, they suggested, some of these experiences remained fundamentally the same.

There were a number of examples of this. For example, parents suggested that sexual curiosity is a ‘normal’ feature of growing up. In some cases, however, attempts to draw these
parallels ignited fierce discussion amongst participants, with many suggesting that internet pornography had far exceeded ‘normal’ adolescent sexual inquiry due to its ‘extreme’ nature and accessibility.

Parents did, however, draw other parallels in relation to their children’s digitally mediated experiences and their own which were met with far less resistance, even agreement. As documented in Chapter Seven, many parents drew parallels between the peer conflict experienced by their children which took the form of relational aggression or ‘drama’ and their own understandings and experiences. In these instances, most parents explicitly rejected the panics around cyberbullying, pointing out that peer conflict was a normal part of growing up. And while parents did highlight the ways in which digital media had changed the nature and conduct of peer conflict in problematic ways (for example, it ‘followed you home’, ‘it was more immediate’ and ‘offered no escape’), parents also pointed out that the affordances of digital media lent more visibility to conflict, and as such provided an opportunity for relationship work between parents and their children to resolve the conflict together. Likewise, in discussing concerns about the potential reputational effects of digital media, parents discussed their own mistakes growing up, again suggesting that making mistakes is inevitable in adolescence. Parents’ main concern was not the mistakes themselves, but that digital media meant that mistakes could no longer be made safely. Parents also noted that teens had long found ways of expressing their identity, and securing peer acceptance, but that the ways in which this had migrated online had some worrying implications, especially in terms of girls’ reputations and ‘appropriate’ behaviours.

Contribution

This thesis has provided detailed insight into the ways in which parents negotiate the tension between minimising the risks of digital media, while maximising the opportunities. With the exception of the growing body of parental mediation literature which explores what parents do in terms of managing their children’s digital media use, parents have generally been under-represented in research about children and media. Children’s use of digital media technologies has predominantly been discussed in the literature in terms of the ways in which children and young people use them. Such research is often drawn on to inform contemporary debates as well as policy initiatives, advice and ‘toolkits’ to help young people navigate the risks and opportunities afforded by digital media. As such, it is important to
understand and incorporate the many and varied ways that young people engage with digital media if these policies and resources are to be effective.

However, there are different ways of understanding children’s use of digital media technologies. One key perspective is that of the parents. In this thesis, I have argued that parents bear primary responsibility for mediating their children’s media use. Being a ‘good’ parent means performing parenting in such a manner as to demonstrate sufficient responsibilisation by minimising the risks posed by digital media, while maximising the opportunities. Yet, the anxieties, challenges, and practical realities experienced by parents as they strive to be a ‘good’ parent, are notably absent from the literature. If the substantial body of parent-centred cyber safety advice and parenting literature that exists to help parents negotiate the tensions of parenting in the digital age does not accord with parents’ actual experiences, knowledges and anxieties, it is unlikely that parents will make use of them. Indeed, most participants in this study indicated that they did not access, read, or otherwise make use of cyber safety materials and resources that are designed to help them.

Limitations and directions for future research
As foreshadowed in Chapter Two, highly educated, white women from privileged socio-economic backgrounds were well-represented in my sample, which limits the generalisability of my findings. This is a significant limitation, as many scholars have demonstrated the various ways in which class and cultural background shape attitudes towards digital media, mediation practices and parenting more generally (danah boyd & Hargittai, 2013; Clark, 2013; Livingstone et al., 2015). The challenges and concerns shared by participants in my study appear consistent with the concerns of middle-class parents. For example, concerns about the amount of time that their children spent online and engaged with a device, as well as concerns about the potential reputational impacts of self-representation, have been found to be more marked amongst middle class families who have greater educational and career aspirations for their children (Clark 2013). I acknowledge that had my participants been more diverse in their backgrounds and ethnicity, the key findings may indeed have been different.

Additionally, my call for participants did specifically foreground parental anxieties and concerns, meaning the likelihood is that it attracted parents who already harboured particular concerns about their children’s digital media use, rather than representing the concerns and attitudes of the general population. There are many issues, challenges and concerns that were raised by participants that were not comprehensively explored within the context of my
overall argument. For example, participants in my study expressed serious concern about the accessibility and character of online pornography; in particular, the ways in which it may be ‘skewing’ and ‘distorting’ sexual norms. To a lesser extent, participants also indicated concern about online predators, despite parental accounts that their children seemed to be relatively knowledgeable about such dangers. Future research could explore these concerns further, and how they have shifted over the years within the context of technological change.

Further, my study revealed some interesting gender differences – both on the part of the children as well as the parents. Parents’ perspectives about the online practices of their children revealed that the normative parameters for girls’ ‘correct’ behaviours remain rigid and policed. Parental accounts confirm existing feminist scholarship that argues that the acceptable behaviours for girls using digital media are significantly curtailed compared to their male counterparts, and that transgressions threaten girls’ comparatively fragile reputations. Further research documenting parental perspectives and interventions in relation to the gendered practices of their children online would help shed further light on this important issue. Similarly, my findings also suggested differences in the concerns, perspectives and practices between mothers and fathers, with mothers generally expressing greater concern and knowledge about their children’s digital media habits. I have speculated that this is likely a product of mothers still bearing the brunt of child care and parenting responsibilities. Further analysis of this observation was beyond the scope of this thesis and would necessitate engaging with the gendered dimensions of parenting more generally. Nonetheless, further research that examines the differences between mothers and fathers in their approaches to their children’s use of digital media, beyond parental mediation, is needed.

Policy implications
In this thesis I have interrogated many of the dominant discourses around young people and digital media technologies. This is important because the hegemonic discourses typically bring about a response in the form of policy or regulatory reform. Significant funds are directed towards cyber safety programs and advice, and guidelines and resources for parents. In 2018, the Australian Government announced a proposed $17 million online safety package to be rolled out in 2019, designed to protect children and ‘defend them from dangers in the online environment’ (Prime Minister of Australia, 2018). The package, part of more than $100 million over the next four years, is said to include resources for parents and carers, although at the time of writing the details of the package had not yet been revealed.
Most of the cyber safety materials and resources are directed towards minimising risk and are concerned with ‘safety’. There is little doubt that developing resources and programs to help children and their parents navigate online risks is important in an age where digital media have become an integral part of children’s lives. This thesis has argued that parents, while aware of high profile risks, actually harbour concerns and experiences which are much more nuanced, complex, and encompass more than just these risks. Indeed, parents’ actual concerns do not neatly map on to panic and cyber safety discourses. As such, focusing solely on the risks and dangers without addressing the advantages and opportunities — and the daily challenges parents face in trying to balance these apparently competing objectives — means that we are only addressing part of the problem.

Further, the findings of this dissertation lend further weight to existing critiques of ‘screen-time’ rules (see for example Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016, 2018). In Australia, some government and parenting resources still cite the AAP screen-time rules which impose recommended limits on young children’s screen time (see, for example Australian Parents Council Inc, 2016; Department of Health, 2019). Parents demonstrated the various ways in which their children used digital media technologies, including increasingly for the completion of school work, as well as numerous other ‘appropriate’ activities, thus rendering the suggested time limits unrealistic. The Office of the eSafety Commissioner and the Raising Children Network (Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2019b; raisingchildren.net.au, 2016), however, eschew concrete time limits and acknowledge the various benefits of screens, including educational uses. These sources provide a number of helpful suggestions to assist parents and their children manage ‘balance’ in their screen time. However, they do not explicitly address the difficulties evidently experienced by parents in negotiating the boundaries between ‘legitimate’ and ‘appropriate’ educational uses of digital media technologies, and the various other activities that young people were said to simultaneously engage in, and ways that parents might help their children manage this.

In terms of practical recommendations, the development of cyber safety materials aimed at parents should seek to involve them in the process to ensure that their knowledges, experiences and concerns are taken into account. This could be accommodated in various ways, but a living lab involving policy makers, scholars, young people and parents would be an ideal way of achieving these objectives. A living lab would foster dialogue amongst various participants from different backgrounds, enabling them to share experiences, knowledges and views, bridge any knowledge gaps, and would enable various perspectives to
be taken into account without defaulting to the assumptions that circulate throughout popular media and cyber safety materials.

Finally, it would appear as though schools could be doing more with parents to address their concerns about the increasing use of digital media technologies for the completion of school work. Parents should be consulted in relation to decisions about digital technologies and their children’s education, and parents’ experiences should be taken into account in the development of technology related policies in schools. Schools also need to ensure that parents are taught about the various platforms and apps that schools are increasingly adopting, so that the parents themselves can become involved, and monitor if need be, their children’s online school work.

* * * * *

My research identified and examine parents’ anxieties, practices and knowledges in relation to their teenage children’s use of digital media technology, and the ways in which they negotiated the tension between minimising risk while maximising opportunity. Parents were concerned and some were even quite anxious about their children’s digital media engagement. They expressed frustration, annoyance and resentment regarding their children’s relationships with digital media technology, from their inability to get their children off their screens, to their obsession with acquiring ‘likes’ on social media. Yet, it was clear that underlying these concerns was a fundamental parental desire to care for and protect their children. And while many parents appeared to relish the opportunity to vent their concerns and frustrations in the focus groups and interviews, it was evident that many were there in the hope of working through the issues and acquiring help, tips or guidance about how they might be able to be a better parent.

Almost all parents spoke about their children with a demonstrable sense of pride and love. Cassandra proudly talked about her children’s mastery of Minecraft. Naomi’s son’s gaming prowess was so good, she said, that people tuned in around the world to watch him play. Karyn’s daughter produced a ‘brilliant’ video of herself singing along to musical.ly which was copied by her friends and spread further because it was so ‘fabulous’. Peter and Robert’s sons had built furniture themselves with nothing other than an instructional YouTube video. Kathryn’s daughter’s Instagram feed was beautifully curated with ‘amazing’ photos.
Finally, despite parents’ concerns and frustrations, digital media technology obviously provided additional opportunities to bring parents and their children together. Most participants described a domestic environment characterised by two working parents, various extra-curricular activities, and busy social lives in which family members were increasingly apart as they went about their own activities and social commitments. The existence of digital media technologies such as messaging apps, family Facebook groups, and mobile phones meant that parents could call their children while they were apart to say, ‘Hi’, and have a chat, text their children after school to ask them how their day was, or simply send a smiley or heart emoji to tell their children that they love them and are thinking about them.
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Appendix A: Call for Participants

Are you the parent of a teenager aged 12 - 16?

Does your child use the internet, social networking and/or a mobile phone?

We want you to take part in a university research project!

We are looking for participants who are willing to share and discuss any worries they have about their children’s use of internet, mobile phone and other new technologies, as well as any strategies they use to manage, monitor or negotiate how they are used.

The research project will consist of focus groups of between 5 – 10 participants. The format of the study means that you will hear from other parents about this issue. Some participants may be asked to take part in interviews with the researcher to further discuss some of the points they made during the focus groups.

What is this research about?

This research aims to identify and explore some of the concerns and anxieties that parents may have in relation to their teenage children’s use of mobile technologies and social networking, as well as the ways that parents manage their children’s technology use.

Information gathered from the focus groups and interviews will provide valuable insight into the perspectives of parents regarding children’s technology use, something that is largely missing from existing studies. This may be used to inform future policy, or toolkits and strategies that parents can use to help manage their children’s internet, mobile phone and technology use.

When? Focus groups will run from August to October at a time that suits you.

Where? The University of Canberra, Bruce. However, I may be able to arrange a focus group closer to you if travelling is difficult.

How long? Focus groups will run for approximately 90 minutes. If you agree to participate in an interview after the focus group, this may take an extra 30 – 45 minutes.

Can I bring anyone? Yes! Please let me know if you’ll be bringing your spouse, a friend or anyone else.

What’s in it for me? You’ll get to meet some other parents dealing with the same issue, and hear about how they manage their children’s internet and mobile phone use. All information will be confidential. Light refreshments will be also be provided, and I’ll have some relevant resources on hand that you can take home with you.
I’d like more information: Please contact Catherine Page Jeffery on the contact details below.

If you are interested please contact Ms Catherine Page Jeffery on Catherine.PageJeffery@canberra.edu.au or 0431944295.

This project has been approved by the University of Canberra’s Human Research Ethics Committee Project 16-110 – Media Technologies of Parenting: Children and Digital Culture. HumanEthicsCommittee@Canberra.edu.au
Appendix B: Participant Information Statement

Media Technologies of Parenting: Children and Digital Culture

Researcher

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Supervisor

Name: Dr Glen Fuller
News and Media Research Centre
Phone: +61 2 6201 2749
Email: Glen.Fuller@canberra.edu.au

What is this study about?

This research aims to identify and explore some of the worries and concerns that parents may have in relation to their teenage or pre-teenage children’s use of mobile technologies and social networking, as well as some of the strategies that parents use to manage their child/ren’s technology use.

You have been invited to participate in this study because you have been suggested by another contact or responded to a call for participants. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the research. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don’t understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary, so it’s your decision whether you wish to take part or not.

By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

✔ Understand what you have read
✔ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below
✔ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.

What will the study involve for me?

You will be asked to share your views and participate in discussions with other study participants via small focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups is for participants to talk about their teenage or pre-teenage children’s internet, mobile phone or other technology habits, and any worries that you have in relation to your child’s use of technology. You will also be asked to talk about how, or if, you manage, monitor or negotiate your child’s internet or mobile phone usage. Focus groups will run for 60-90 minutes.
After the focus groups, you may be asked to participate in an interview to elaborate on some of the information that you have given in the focus groups. Additionally, if you would like to share a particular piece of information or experience but do not feel comfortable doing so in the focus group, please let us know. Follow-up interviews will be scheduled for another date, and will be no longer than one hour in duration. You may decline to participate in interviews.

We anticipate that focus groups and interviews will be held in August/September 2016.

Benefits of the study

Information gathered from the focus groups and interviews will provide valuable insight into the perspectives of parents regarding the technology use of young people, something that appears to be largely missing from existing studies. This may be used to inform future policy, or toolkits and strategies that parents can use in managing the children’s internet, mobile phone and technology use.

Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I’ve started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of Canberra. If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw at any time. You are free to stop the interviews at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results.

Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

There’s a possibility that participants may hear stories and experiences from other participants that may cause them concern or worry. We will have some resources and information on hand that may help parents address any concerns they have about their own child’s use of technology.

What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

✔ Information that you give during focus groups will be recorded, transcribed and used in the study. Statements that you make may be quoted in the study. Basic demographic information will also be collected about you and your child/ren (e.g age and gender).
✔ A research assistant may be hired to carry out transcription of interviews.
✔ Personal information will be kept confidential.
✔ We envisage the data will be used in journal publications and conference presentations.
✔ The data shall be retained at the university for three years, during which time research publications shall be prepared.
✔ The data collected in this project may be used for use in future research projects relating to this topic.
By providing your consent, you are agreeing to us collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. This information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise.

Your information will be stored securely and your identity/information will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study and/or the results.

**Can I tell other people about the study?**

Yes, you are welcome to tell other people about the study.

**What if I would like further information about the study?**

When you have read this information, Catherine Page Jeffery will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact Catherine at Catherine.PageJeffery@canberra.edu.au and 0431 944 295.

**Will I be told the results of the study?**

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form. This feedback will be in the form of a one page lay summary after the study is finished.

**What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?**

Research involving humans in Australia is reviewed by an independent group of people called a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the HREC of the University of Canberra [project 16-110]. As part of this process, we have agreed to carry out the study according to the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)*. This statement has been developed to protect people who agree to take part in research studies.

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the university using the details outlined below. Please quote the study title and protocol number.

The Manager, Ethics Administration, University of Canberra:

   **Email:** HumanEthicscommittee@canberra.edu.au

This information sheet is for you to keep.
Appendix C: Consent Form

Media Technologies of Parenting: Children and Digital Culture

Consent Statement

I have read and understood the information about the research. I am not aware of any condition that would prevent my participation, and I agree to participate in this project. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my participation in the research. All questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

Please indicate whether you agree to participate in each of the following parts of the research (please indicate which parts you agree to by putting a cross in the relevant box):

☐ Participate in a focus group with other participants.
☐ Provide basic demographic information.
☐ Participate in an interview with the researcher.
☐ Allow information given to be quoted in the study.
☐ Allow focus groups to be audio and/or video recorded.

Name ............................................................................................................................................

Signature ........................................................................................................................................

Date ........................................................................

A summary of the research report can be forwarded to you when published. If you would like to receive a copy of the report, please include your mailing (or email) address below.

Name ............................................................................................................................................

Address .........................................................................................................................................

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Appendix D: Participant Demographic Information Sheet

Media Technologies of Parenting: Children and Digital Culture

Please provide some basic information about yourself and your family. Please note that all information will be kept strictly confidential, however if there is any information that you would prefer not to disclose, please discuss with Catherine Page Jeffery.

Contact information

Name: ____________________________________________________________

Email address: ____________________________________________________

Phone number: ____________________________________________________

Personal details

Age: _________________________

Sex: _________________________

Including yourself, how many persons are in your household? Please list them according to their relation to you? (E.g Six: Myself, 3 x children, husband, mother).

__________________________________________________________________

Number, age and sex of children:

__________________________________________________________________

Marital Status (check one)

☐ Married

☐ Not Married
☐ De-facto

☐ Separated / divorced / widowed

**Occupation (check one):**

☐ Unemployed

☐ Stay at home parent

☐ Manager

☐ Professional

☐ Technician / Trades Worker

☐ Clerical / Administration

☐ Sales

☐ Labourer / Machinery Operator / Driver

☐ Other ________________________________

**What is your current work status?**

☐ Full-time

☐ Part-time

☐ Casual

**Please indicate your approximate yearly *household* income before tax.**

☐ Under $25,000

☐ $25,001 - $49,999
☐ $50,000 – $74,999
☐ $75,000 - $99,999
☐ $100,000 - $149,999
☐ $150,000 - $199,999
☐ More than $200,000

What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

☐ Did not complete High School
☐ High School
☐ College (years 11 and 12)
☐ Bachelor’s Degree
☐ Postgraduate Degree
# Appendix E: Participant Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant age (at time of interview or focus group) and sex</th>
<th>Children age (at time of interview or focus group) and sex</th>
<th>Focus Group / Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>48f</td>
<td>12m &amp; 18m</td>
<td>Both (FG #1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>47f</td>
<td>12m</td>
<td>FG #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>46f</td>
<td>12m, 15m &amp; 17m</td>
<td>Both (FG #1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara</td>
<td>39f</td>
<td>8m, 10m, 12m, 15f</td>
<td>FG #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendall</td>
<td>47f</td>
<td>6f &amp; 15m</td>
<td>FG #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anette</td>
<td>45f</td>
<td>14m &amp; 17m</td>
<td>FG #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larissa</td>
<td>43f</td>
<td>10m &amp; 12f</td>
<td>FG #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>40f</td>
<td>7f, 10f, 13f</td>
<td>FG #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>46f</td>
<td>14f</td>
<td>FG #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>47m</td>
<td>11f &amp; 13m</td>
<td>FG #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>44f</td>
<td>9m &amp; 12f</td>
<td>FG #3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karyn</td>
<td>42f</td>
<td>10f, 12F &amp; 13f</td>
<td>FG #3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>48f</td>
<td>10F &amp; 13f</td>
<td>FG #3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td>35f (stepmother to two older children)</td>
<td>2f, 4m, 14f &amp; 17m</td>
<td>FG #3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justine</td>
<td>46f</td>
<td>11f, 14f, 16m</td>
<td>FG #4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>63f (Grandparent)</td>
<td>15m &amp; 17m</td>
<td>Both (FG #4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathryn</td>
<td>46f</td>
<td>12f &amp; 15f</td>
<td>Both (FG #4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>48f</td>
<td>10m &amp; 12f</td>
<td>FG #4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>61m</td>
<td>14f, 21m, 25f &amp; 27m</td>
<td>Both (FG #4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>48f</td>
<td>14f</td>
<td>FG #4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>46f</td>
<td>15f, 17f, 18f &amp; 20m</td>
<td>FG #5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
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<td>-------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cassandra</td>
<td>45f</td>
<td>6f, 8m, 10m &amp; 13m</td>
<td>Both (FG #5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>47f</td>
<td>11f &amp; 13f</td>
<td>FG #5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>46f</td>
<td>11m &amp; 14f</td>
<td>FG #5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>42f</td>
<td>12m</td>
<td>Both (FG #5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>40f</td>
<td>10f &amp; 12f</td>
<td>FG #5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicity</td>
<td>43f</td>
<td>3m, 11m &amp; 13m</td>
<td>FG #5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>54m</td>
<td>14f, 15m, 20m &amp; 22f</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arun</td>
<td>41m</td>
<td>14f</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kora</td>
<td>45f</td>
<td>12f, 16f, 16m &amp; 22f</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>43m</td>
<td>3m, 11m &amp; 13m</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>55m</td>
<td>15f, 17m &amp; 20m</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>M (age not specified)</td>
<td>15f &amp; 16m</td>
<td>Interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>47f</td>
<td>13m &amp; 17f</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>45f</td>
<td>14f &amp; 20f</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronwyn</td>
<td>53f</td>
<td>16f, 18m &amp; 24m</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>44m</td>
<td>13m &amp; 15f</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>45f</td>
<td>16f &amp; 18f</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>47m</td>
<td>15m</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>44m</td>
<td>12f</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants and their children.*