Sussex Research Online

'Befriend them but not be their friend': negotiations of youth practice in a digital age

Article (Accepted Version)

'Befriend them but not *be* their friend' – Negotiations of youth practice in a digital age.

Abstract:

'You've gotta befriend them but not *be* their friend' is how one youth worker thoughtfully described the secret to successful youth practice. This paper draws on experiences of youth workers in the United Kingdom to consider how the growth of digital technologies comes to be negotiated and articulated in professional practice. Situating these experiences alongside young people's accounts, this article highlights a distinction between young people's relationship with the digital and adult perceptions of youth and technology. The aim of this paper is to consider what factors contribute towards this divide and where adult perceptions come from, if not from the experiences of young people themselves. The article then goes on to discuss the potential consequences of the presence of technology and discourses surrounding the digital for youth worker's engagements with young people in professional practice. Overall, this article argues for the enduring relevance of youth workers and physical youth centre's in a 'digital age' (Baym, 2015) and joins several scholars in critiquing the chronic under-investment in youth workers and provision in the UK and beyond (see Bradford and Cullen, 2014; de St Croix, 2018; Nolas, 2014)

Keywords: Youth work; young people; digital technology; boundaries; relationships; austerity

Introduction:

In response to a recent spate of fatal knife crime in London, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Cressida Dick, blamed the rise in violence on young people's use of social media. It was suggested that social media presents unique challenges which have, thus far, evaded the police (Telegraph Reporters, 2018). Reflecting on the findings presented in

this article, the Commissioner's comments are striking for two reasons. Firstly, these comments echo previous moral panics related to technologies (see Cohen, 2002; Livingstone, 2009), providing evidence of the persistence of negative narratives surrounding youth and technology. Secondly, the emphasis placed on social media in these remarks works to undermine the role of social inequalities and the disenfranchisement of young people and their youth services which are important contributory factors to violent crime and gang culture (Clement, 2010).

Placing accountability with technology and young people themselves is deeply problematic as it fails to acknowledge the burden of austerity within the United Kingdom (UK) and, indeed, internationally in other contexts affected by political or economic turmoil. This article draws attention to the value of youth centres and face to face interaction between young people, their peers and workers, at a time when investment in youth services has been stifled. Most importantly, this article reflects on the experiences of youth workers in two youth centres in the United Kingdom to highlight the fears surrounding the digital felt in practice and the consequences of these anxieties being felt as intimately tied to the persistence of the austerity agenda. Dedicated physical spaces provide opportunities for young people to congregate, informally learn from peers, workers and reflect on their everyday experiences in a digital age.

The title of this paper is taken from a longer excerpt in which a youth worker explained what successful youth intervention looks like in practice;

> 'You've gotta befriend them but not *be* their friend […] they've
>
> got to see you as an authority figure but not really'.

This encapsulates the complex boundary work that occurs in successful relationships between young person and youth worker. To explore the anxieties surrounding digital technologies and the ways these potentially intervene in this boundary work this paper considers three

central aspects of the youth workers experiences of practice. Namely, these are, relationships, economic pressures and adult perceptions of technology. Taking these in turn, I consider how digital technologies were negotiated and imagined in practice, how the digital is discursively framed in youth workers accounts and finally the consequences of the digital for contemporary youth practice.

The article begins by engaging with the uniqueness of the relationship between young person and practitioner within a youth work context (see Hart, 2016; Sercombe, 2010). As the notion of 'befriend them but not be their friend' eloquently captures, successful relationships rely on a careful balancing act between professionalism and friendship, fluidity and rigidity, formality and informality. Understanding the nuances of the young person/youth worker relationship is important for interrogating the tensions related to the role of technologies in practice. In the latter part of this article I draw on a concept perhaps less familiar to readers of this journal, which theorises digital technologies as enhancing the potential for 'context collapse' (Marwick and boyd, 2011). This term describes encountering multiple audiences, for example work colleagues, family members and friends, in one online environment.

From here, this article unpacks the many parallels between youth workers thoughts about digital technology and the persistent framing of children and young people in popular debates as 'digital natives' (Buckingham et al., 2014 p.10). To situate youth workers and broader discourses surrounding youth and technology (see Thornham and McFarlane, 2011), this article moves on to consider fears around maintaining participation and attendance whilst adhering to targets and producing outcomes. I join several scholars (Bradford and Cullen, 2014; Nolas, 2014; de St Croix, 2018) in critiquing the enduring austerity agenda. Further still, this paper positions the context of austerity as significant for understanding how digital technologies are articulated among youth workers as representing a threat to youth practice. The assumptions surrounding young people and technology and the pressures facing youth

workers has the potential to create barriers between young people and their youth workers. The barriers outlined in this paper generate from and reinforced a growing sense of 'us' and 'them'. Such a divide resulted in a limited recognition of the nuanced ways (both positive and negative) that young people experience digital technologies in their everyday lives, and a lack of confidence among workers due to fears that digital technology will render youth work and dedicated physical spaces where this takes place irrelevant or ineffective.

Overall this article highlights the many ways that workers *are* engaging with experiences of the digital, regardless of whether technologies are physically present in these encounters. This is achieved by considering where the anxieties of youth workers come from and including a comparison with the experiences of young people attending the youth centres'. Despite fears of becoming redundant in a digital age, youth workers are in fact *best* placed to engage with the everyday lives of young people.

Researching experiences of the digital

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork that took place across two youth centres run by a charity organisation, receiving county council and charity funding in the UK. Over an eight-month period during 2016, I attended weekly meetings at both youth centres, a total of forty sessions. The empirical data relating to youth workers' experiences in this article formed part of a broader project which explored how young people experienced the digital in their everyday lives and how these experiences are gendered.

The research involved twenty-seven participants, including twenty-four young people aged between fifteen and eighteen and three of their youth workers. Young people were voluntarily recruited from regular attendees at the youth centre and senior youth workers who provided written consent were interviewed as part of the project. Originally, these interviews were devised to provide context for the experiences of the young people whom were part of the ethnographic research combining participant observation, audio-recorded semi-structured

individual interviews and focus group conversations. However, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with youth workers led to pertinent insights surrounding their own experiences of technology in practice and their perceptions of young people's negotiations of digital media.

In addition to my position as 'researcher', I volunteered as part of the youth work team throughout the project. The decision to volunteer was mutual between myself and the youth organisation, and was informed by my intention to observe the sessions as they would normally unfold, as far as this is ever possible with a researcher present. Volunteering also felt ethically appropriate as I would be undertaking a DBS check in any case and reporting back information participants shared with me that implied harm to themselves or others. The role of volunteer/researcher was also a response to chronic staff shortages affecting many of the sessions I would be attending and enabled a greater sense of collaboration, enabling me to 'give back' during the project. Hodkinson's (2005) definition of '*insider researcher*' (p.136), is useful for understanding how positionality as both researcher and volunteer shaped the findings discussed in this article. For example, though I shared many aspects of my own upbringing with the young people who attended the youth centres, having grown up nearby, there were aspects of my adult identity, as PhD researcher and volunteer, which meant that I only held 'a degree of insider status' (Hodkinson, 2005, p.136). I was both *insider* and *outsider* during the fieldwork process. It is however important to acknowledge that this role did place me in a position of authority and required me to be sensitive to situations that occurred frequently between myself and staff which were 'off the record'. Recognising and respecting this trust is a fundamental principle of ethical practice as an ethnographer.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of X and in advance of attending the youth centres, information packs and consent forms were provided and signed by senior youth workers. Upon arrival, young people provided their own informed consent, and the same information packs were provided to workers and young people. The insights of youth

workers presented throughout this article were shared in recorded individual interviews, the transcripts from which were anonymised, referring to workers only as '1' '2' or '3'. In depth interviews with youth workers lasted for between forty-five minutes and an hour. During interviews with youth workers, care was taken to reiterate the aims of the research and to ensure that I did not ask questions about specific young people that might prompt the confidentiality between youth worker and young person to be compromised. Instead, interviews with youth workers focused on *their* professional experiences of the digital and the various ways these intersected with the negotiation of their role.

The remainder of this article explores the experiences of three senior youth workers practicing in the UK in 2016. Though this is by no means a representative sample, the experiences presented here are indicative of youth practice in the age of austerity and broader perceptions towards youth and technology, pointing to pertinent issues facing youth workers in a digital age both in the UK and more globally.

The importance of relationships in youth work

In their accounts of practice, all youth workers made the distinction between the relationships fostered in youth work and other adult/young person relationships for example parent/child and teacher/pupil. Further still, Youth Worker 1 explained that it was the unique nature of these relationships that were fundamental to ensuring attendance and successful intervention.

Researcher: What keeps young people coming back to youth club?

Youth worker 1: Relationships. Yeah with each other and the youth worker they feel comfortable, they feel confident there, you know they can say how they feel, they can express everything and we don't judge them - do you know what I mean? That's one of the main things, and that's why

they are always coming back - and that's why we can't get rid of them! [Laughter] But yeah, that is it down to a tee, […] it's not about activities or anything, it's just about being that person there for them. Being that support and that's what they liked as soon as that club would open - it would be like "guess what happened to me over the weekend" and that's how it went. It might not have been a youth club, it might have been more of a counselling session, but it worked - that's what made them come back every week.

Achieving this safe environment which fostered acceptance, expression and peer support relied on the skills of youth workers to 'befriend' young people, whilst also being able to reassert boundaries when necessary. This involved a constant complex negotiation of hierarchies of power between being a peer and authority figure. Such a negotiation involved a balancing act between professionalism and friendship and, on occasion strategic rule breaking and humour (see Hart, 2016). Humour was a vehicle through which the relationships between young person and youth worker came to be reinforced, however, as the following vignette from field notes observes, the youth clubs were not without rules surrounding behaviour and conduct.

Field note, 5th April 2016:

As Jessica (sixteen) was getting her shoe out of the bin, she found a lot of sealed bandages. Youth worker 2 explained that these had been thrown out in a recent clear out of the first aid kit. At this point, Claire (fifteen) started to wrap Jessica in the bandages. Ben (eighteen) got involved as well and within a few minutes, Jessica was completely mummified in the bandages. Music was playing and she was dancing. Youth worker 2 took some pictures but did not get involved. Another youth worker and I had picked bandages up but (following the other workers lead) we gave them back to

carry on. The situation then escalated and Jessica went into the kitchen to get a whisk to (in jest) attack Sophie (fifteen) who responded by getting the fire extinguisher. Youth worker 2 intervened at this point as did the other youth worker present. Jessica continued dancing while getting wrapped in the bandages and she then saw people arrive at the door and panicked trying to get out of the bandages. She was trying to roll a cigarette which she is not allowed to do inside while saying she wanted to go outside but couldn't walk out there looking 'like a complete bell-end'.

The subtext to this vignette is that the young people attending this session had just found out their favourite member of staff was leaving and that this would be her last shift[1]. These initial reactions, becoming more animated, throwing objects and bodies around the room, can therefore be interpreted as emotional responses to the loss of this staff member. This provides a live example of how negotiations of informality/formality and authority/agency occurred fluidly in practice and expectations among workers were intuitively adjusted depending on the scenario. The actions of youth workers for example, taking pictures on the work phone or picking up the bandages after being thrown around and returning these to the young people – shifted the usual boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Indeed, what these physical encounters of practice further demonstrate is how youth worker's ability to read body language was central to successfully distinguishing between aggression and, for example, when shoes were thrown on the ground in a purposefully exaggerated sarcastic gesture of dissatisfaction for comic effect, rather than aggression.

All of the adults present shared in the humour of watching Jessica being wrapped in the bandages. The mood was relaxed, jovial and excitable, and the interventions by staff only

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[1] High staff turnover was discussed in interviews as being attributed to low pay, anti-social working hours and lack of job security.

occur when excitement in these light-hearted moments bubbled over into over-reaction. In the final part of the field note, Jessica gets interrupted rolling a cigarette which is a direct contravention of one of the rules of the youth club. When taking the fluid negotiation of boundaries into consideration, and the embodied experiences of those present at that time, Jessica's actions here can be read as an appeal for sympathy and as a continuation of the joke previously shared. Due to the presence of humour and a change of power dynamics within this moment, this young person attempts to subvert the standard norms of behaviour by framing this as relatable and circumstantial. In other words, if only she were not dressed as an Egyptian mummy she *would* obey the rules and go outside to roll her cigarette!

Understanding the progressive nature of scenarios such as this are important for situating youth workers concerns around digital technologies. This is due to the ways in which the lines between formality/informality and authority/agency are shifted in accordance with intuitive embodied experiences of the current mood within the youth club, enabling certain behaviours to become acceptable in certain moments and not others. Workers explained that the fluidity between the boundary of peer and authority figure and the ability to redraw boundaries quickly or anticipate through body language, when necessary, was at stake with the introduction of digital technologies into practice. The fact that youth workers knew that intervention was possible whenever it was *felt* necessary, led to the illusion that rules and norms of behaviour were absent at youth club, however temporarily and that, importantly, these could be consensually subjectively renegotiated between young person and youth worker. Comradery was a key aspect of maintaining youth club as a space that was distinct from home and school and for developing rapport, trust and respect between young people and their workers.

Sercombe (2010, p. 79) argues that the relationship between young person and youth worker is by necessity *unlike* other settings such as teacher/pupil and parent/child. Similarly, Nicholls (2012, pp.30-31) reminds us that;

> Youth work is a unique intervention which seeks to respect the current condition of the young people it engages with and to assist them voluntarily in moving from this condition to an improved one in which greater understanding, skill, awareness, knowledge, fun, emotional pleasure or intellectual, physical or experiential attainment are developed.

Respecting young people's agency and creating spaces for voluntary participation (see Nolas, 2014) is the cornerstone of successful youth work practice. Understanding youth intervention as continually dancing between peer connection and authority, strategic rule breaking and enforcement (Hart, 2016) is important for our consideration of the role of digital technologies in the physical space of the youth centre, such as smartphones and computers.

Negotiating and imagining digital technologies in practice

It was striking that across interviews with youth workers, all felt that they were increasingly being called upon to engage with young people 'online' in their professional practice and that this was increasingly a point of contention. There was a tangible sense of unease towards digital technologies, particularly in relation to professional practice. Concerns could be roughly divided into three categories, *personal, professional and practical*.

On a *personal* level, youth workers were concerned about sharing information about their lives outside of work with the young people they worked with. Marwick and boyd (2010, p.122) observe that 'social network sites […] flatte[n] multiple audiences into one – a phenomenon known as 'context collapse'.' I suggest that many of the concerns about sharing

personal information with young people is best understood as material moments where 'context collapse' was anticipated, imagined and articulated. Davis and Jurgenson (2014, p.478) importantly note that context collapse, as a phenomenon, is not unique to the digital era, we have long navigated multiple selves, for example at work, home or when socialising with different groups of friends (see also Goffman, 1959). Youth clubs or centres are in themselves unique social spaces where young people are encouraged to share their experiences from disparate parts of their lives – or where we might say for the purposes of our discussion that 'context collapse' is encouraged.

However, practitioner's accounts suggest that this, or at least the sense of potential context collapse facilitated by digital media *is* presenting new challenges for youth workers, particularly when the relationships forming the basis of youth work rely on this exchange of private/public spheres. All of the youth workers told me that the testing and negotiation of boundaries between young person and youth worker has always been, for them, fundamental to the experience of youth work. Asking personal questions of the adults, and giving part of yourself at the youth club has always been a feature of the job, but that now these subjective moments and boundaries were potentially becoming more challenging to negotiate due to digitally mediated communication. Anticipations of context collapse among youth workers led to the digital being framed as being dangerous and as a threat to youth work practice, both in terms of making youth centres appear obsolete with young people being able to access friends outside of youth club and as being fundamentally inappropriate and inadequate for negotiating the complex boundary between young person and youth worker.

Relatedly, on a *professional* level, below in an extended interview extract Youth Worker 1 expressed concerns around the discussions at her organisation regarding using social media to further connect young people and youth workers. Concerns around the

increased popularity of visual based platforms among young people and what this means for practice were emphasised.

> **Youth worker 1:** Yeah we [the organisation] have discussed maybe trying to get through to them on a different social media site. But we feel like Twitter and Facebook are our main ones where we can get through to young people that way, but, Facebook is, you know, it's old now - not to us, but to them it's completely different. You have got things like Snapchat and Instagram, but then it's just a photo which I don't like. I don't like the fact that you can just see this photo and then it's gone completely. So, I'm all for Facebook and getting my message across to them that way but I don't think I would get into any other social media.

> **Researcher:** Is that because it would rely on you sending a picture as well?

> **Youth worker 1:** Yeah, it's just professionally… I don't think it is right.

> […]

> It is the pictures, I mean you've got to write a little sentence to them that's completely different to sending a picture. Pictures are more personal and I do not agree that a youth worker should be sending pictures to young person because I think that's very unprofessional.

Researcher: So, it's about boundaries?

Youth worker 1: Yeah and you need to keep them boundaries. I mean you've already got Facebook which is sort of a little touch going into personal, like they get to see your date of birth on there and little bits of information already and I think that is as far as it goes with being in a professional way, youth worker to young person. But no, I don't really agree with images to be honest and I don't think that should be a way of communicating with young people.

The popularity of image-based platforms among young people were pinpointed as deeply problematic for youth workers using social media, as communication via these platforms was seen to be an irreversible and inappropriate breech of the divide between the young person and youth worker boundary. Though youth workers were used to boundaries being tested and re-established, as previously mentioned, it was felt that the reliance on images on social media platforms restricted their own ability to maintain a personal/professional distinction.

Youth workers also articulated the potential *practical* consequences of digital technologies for professional practice. The following statement from Youth Worker 1 was a typical response;

Youth Worker 1:

You know we had a computer room which I was very dubious about, which I didn't really want them to go on because I feel like they do a lot of that in school already and to just sort of get on the internet and start going on social media, it just defeats

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the point of coming to youth club do you know what I mean?

They could do that sitting at home.

Corroborating this, another youth worker with over thirty years' experience told me that for him, youth work *used* to be about giving young people tools or an outlet to tell their stories. They explained that the state of play had now changed which he articulated through a rhetorical exchange during our interview:

Youth Worker 3:

How do we engage with young people today? When these tools

are more accessible, arguably young people do not need a

youth centre?

These practical concerns exacerbated fears that youth workers and, in particular, youth centres would be rendered obsolete due to digital technology. As one worker told me, he felt the profession needed to 'respond or die' if youth clubs were to remain relevant to young people. At the heart of this was the concern that the communication young people were participating in through technology might somehow replace the relationships that 'kept them coming back' to youth club. Further still, this article suggests that this anxiety was fuelled by external factors which shaped how the digital came to be negotiated and articulated in practice. Such factors include the existence of a broader moral panic, captured in the comments by Commissioner Cressida Dick relating to young people and technology. I argue that such rhetoric distorted the ways that young people's experiences of digital media came to be engaged with and understood among youth workers. In addition, but by no means secondary, a long-standing under investment in youth provision in the UK and a shift towards the quantification of practice in the new 'youth impact agenda' (st Croix, 2018 p.415) has led to increased targets, evaluation and a building pressure to keep up healthy attendance figures.

Must youth workers 'respond or die'? Contextualising fears of the digital in practice.

Though youth workers endeavoured to maintain the informal structure of youth sessions, there was often a tension between providing a space to simply 'hang out' and documenting youth engagement and evaluation. Youth Worker 2 captured this particularly clearly, as she reflected on her career transition from 'formal' education to youth work.

> **Youth worker 2:** It [youth work] allows young people to have that space, that freedom from somewhere that is not just school and teachers and somewhere that is not home and parents and you have a different relationship with young people in youth work than you do in education and I've seen that and I've kind of lived that. [...] They learn to do so many different things even though they don't think they are learning or developing, but [...] they come and they cook on their own or they cook in a team and they do different activities so they are definitely learning and developing and it is a place they can develop their skills.

Workers emphasised the importance of dedicated spaces, for example youth centres, for generating a sense of 'freedom' and for this kind of 'informal' learning to take place. Further in our interview, this youth worker directly compared her experiences as a teacher and as a youth worker. She noted how, given the opportunity to reflect in our interview, these professions are in fact 'quite similar'. As our discussion moved on to details of how the youth centres are funded and the 'targets' and 'outcomes' of sessions, a contradiction emerged between the potential for flexibility and the realities of youth practice.

> **Researcher:** In terms of targets involved in youth work how does that work?
>
> **Youth worker 2:** It depends on the project. Like in a youth club it is very much down to the young people and what they enjoy and then we try to

arrange that around; we've got seven set targets which we have to try and meet with the young people, so it's kind of like positive outcomes for them. That could be increasing their communication, increasing their confidence, allowing them to be in an environment where they can be open, manage their emotions and make positive choices. So, having all that in mind and then thinking about what the young people enjoy and what they like doing, we have to kind of come up with a programme plan that is gunna suit them but also allow us to hit the learning outcomes that we need to go back to the council really.

Youth worker 2 explained how the seven set targets that guide the activities run during sessions are 'fed back down' from the council to the youth workers for them to 'embed' into programmes. I am not suggesting that youth work is not distinct from mainstream or formal education, however the contradiction of the funding targets with the desire to adapt to the needs of young people is important for establishing youth practice as a mode of informal education with targets and outcomes as opposed to being an entirely flexible space.

Economic pressures including the imposition of targets and outcomes to legitimise funding resulted in the inclusion of structured aspects to youth work sessions, despite frequent resistance to organised activities among youth workers who frame these as *necessary* rather than effective. For many of the young people that attended the youth centre, mainstream education was challenging and so the distinction between the formal and informal to which the youth worker refers, though contradictory in terms of implementation, certainly *does* exist for the young people and their workers. A careful balance was struck between ensuring the provision of services through encouraging participation and engagement among young people to secure funding, and the desire to maintain informality to foster the kinds of 'authentic' relationships between young people and youth workers that 'keep them coming back' as described earlier.

Rather than the imposition of targets, digital technologies were framed as being, in part, to blame for dwindling numbers. This was due to the desire to maintain meaningful relationships and ensure adequate levels of attendance during a time when workers were increasingly aware of the presence of digital technologies in the youth centre. The perceived inadequacy of such technology for negotiating fluid boundaries and for, in the words of youth worker 3, telling the stories they once helped young people to tell. The presence whether literal as in the case of computer rooms or imaginary in the assumptions of young people's relationships with technology posed new difficulties for workers. Most notably, this was associated with navigating the boundaries between informal/formal and personal/professional due to the permanency of online content. When asked what, if any, are the issues around engaging with young people and social media, youth worker 1 told me:

> **Youth worker 1:** Whatever it is, whether it is on Facebook and it's just a post about someone or if it's a picture, it's out there at the end of the day. You might be able to delete it but it's still out there, so yeah it is an issue and we do need to work on it and there needs to be I don't know some sort of like training around it I think. Do you know what I mean? It needs to be really tackled.

The notion that 'once it is gone, it's gone' and that even when deleted, 'it's still out there', is clearly problematic given the fluidity inherent in the relationship between youth worker and young person in effective practice (Hart, 2016). Sercombe (2010, p.89) reiterates the importance of the relationship and 'unlimited, unconditional' and 'open-ended […] giving if transformation is to occur' (Sercombe, 2010 p.89). This led to the digital being framed as a threat to practice whilst, as this article now takes up, reinforcing many popular stereotypes surrounding young people and technology.

Young people's experiences of the digital

The accounts of youth practitioners presented here need to be understood within a contemporary moment in which the mention of young people and their digital lives too often conjures up hyperbolic scenes of dangerous encounters, between young people and technology (see Hasinoff, 2015; Renold and Ringrose, 2013). Cases of cyberbullying, sexting or harassment, of course, do exist. However, much like other research into young people's experiences of the digital (Livingstone and Sefton-Green, 2016; Wang and Edwards, 2016; Thomson et al., 2018) this study found experiences to be overwhelmingly mundane. Despite this, extreme and negative anecdotes prevailed in youth worker's reflections on the experiences of those they work with.

Central to this was the increased presence of 'pictures' on the platforms popular with young people, and the specific features of these platforms such as the disappearance of images on Snapchat (Handyside and Ringrose, 2017). In particular, Snapchat was seen as being *more* risky than, for example, Facebook, Twitter or even the predominantly visual platform of Instagram. Youth worker 2 reflected on a recent team meeting where a detailed discussion about the use of social media in professional practice had taken place.

> **Youth worker 2:** We were saying that you know, obviously the young people here were saying, 'oh get Snapchat' or 'oh, get Instagram' and we was asking [at meetings] whether that is something we could do, and yeah we are gunna have to keep up with the trend we can't be using, what was the old ones? High Five and Facebook cos it's not gunna work, so we are gunna have to definitely chase the trend.

Researcher: What was the position of the organisation in the meeting?

Youth worker 2: Snapchat no, and that's fair, Snapchat is a no no. Instagram is a maybe. We could potentially use that but it depends on how we wanted to do it because [pause] there was talks about them [the young people] managing it and that was kind of a no no, because we don't know what's gunna go up! I think the same way we use our Facebook page is the same way we should use the Instagram.

Researcher: And do you think with Snapchat […] is difficult to manage?

Youth worker 2: Yeah because we could potentially have, for example, if we had Snapchat on our work phone and we had *all* the young people on it, they could potentially send us risqué pictures and images and yeah, that we should *not* be seeing so that's a no. […] Some things are just not appropriate, so yeah Snapchat wouldn't be, I don't know what other things are out there these days!

Before going on to explore the extent to which there is even a *need* for youth intervention via social media, or to 'chase the trend' in the ways articulated throughout interviews, it is useful to unpack the assumptions surrounding young people's representational practices that lead to Snapchat being a 'no no'. Both the presumed content of the images shared amongst young people and the modes of sharing, for example on Snapchat or Instagram led to the assumption

that this cohort shared potentially 'inappropriate' images with each other and thus would be tempted to do the same with their youth workers.

On the contrary, interviews with young people about their everyday digitally mediated representational practices contradicted the narratives of youth workers in two ways. Firstly, in terms of image content, young people described taking great care over the images they created, shared and encountered, with an awareness of how this would be read by the anticipated viewer of the image. Much of this content was overwhelmingly banal – images of ones pet for example. However, when sharing images of themselves or others there was a complex visual language with personal and broader social connotations developed in and between friendship groups. Indeed, such a visual language may well be challenging for members outside of the peer group to understand. Taking seriously young people's often banal representational practices here (see also Miller, 2015; Dobson, 2015; Tiidenberg and Cruz, 2015; Senft and Baym, 2015) as careful curations and expressions of identity undermines the assumption that online communication between teens was inherently *more* 'risqué' in content.

Secondly, the use of spaces such as Snapchat were framed among participants as a refuge from parents and other authority figures (see also Miller, 2015, p.12). Though youth workers were more privy to participants' social lives, for example they witnessed smoking when this was hidden from parents, during sessions young people prioritised the youth centre space and the interactions that took place here above their devices. Beyond youth club many participants said that they prioritised face-to-face contact with friends and family with Sean, a sixteen year old male, described his frustration at his brother's use of his phone during dinner for example. Some young people elaborated on this to suggest that the youth centre (which had no wifi and poor signal) provided them with welcome time away from their devices.

Nadine, aged fifteen, who described herself as someone who uses several social media platforms frequently and has a daily routine surrounding social media, interrupted my questioning to tell me why she is rarely on her phone at the youth centre:

> **Nadine:** Yeah, cos the only people I really talk to on there [phone/social media] is them [points through window] cos they are my friends.
>
> **Researcher:** So would you say it is different when you're here?
>
> **Nadine:** Yeah, like even when we're out in a group we don't really use our phones, unless someone like rings us or texts us important.
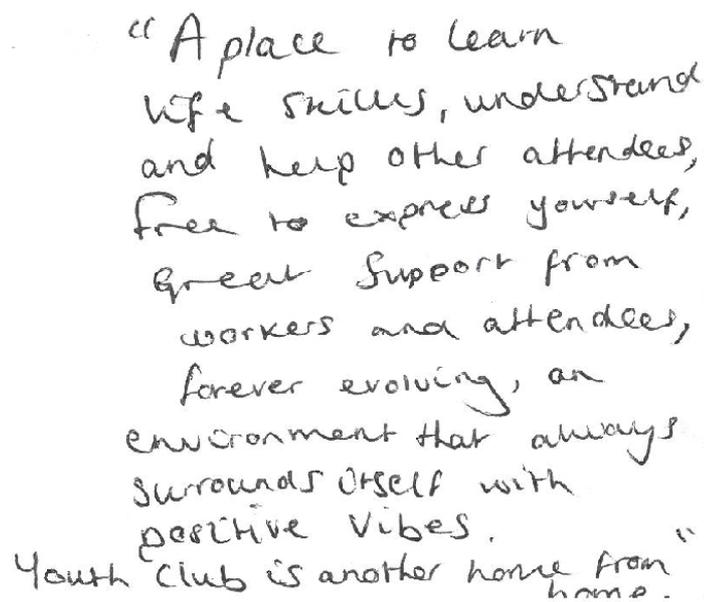>
> **Researcher:** What do you prefer?
>
> **Nadine:** I'd rather have a conversation with someone than text them.

This sentiment was shared among all twenty-four participants and was something they felt was obvious. As other scholars have argued (see boyd, 2014; Livingstone and Sefton- Green, 2016), this sentiment starkly contradicts the frequent media reports of teens being 'addicted' (Woods, 2016) to their screens or social media. Sixteen-year-old female Lucy explained how she mainly uses her device to stay in contact with her friends, all of whom regularly attended the youth centre. As she put it:

> **Lucy:** If we are all on our phones, it's always to the people here, so when we are here we just don't need 'em. Like, our phones will constantly be on us, but we just won't go on 'em cos we don't *need* to contact anyone.

As captured in the following handwritten statement Chris, a male aged sixteen, described the youth centre as a 'home from home' and noting the 'great support from workers and attendees' as one of the main things he valued about the youth centre.

Figure 1: Handwritten statement by research participant. Researchers own image.

Insightfully, Chris' statement comments on the youth centre being an 'always evolving environment'. As observed in the earlier vignette in which Jessica was mummified in bandages, such an environment depended on the ebb and flow of the interactions that take place between workers and young people.

Despite the fears surrounding social media for fostering these kinds of relationships, the desire to find new ways to connect with young people and enhance the youth project was always evident in the accounts of youth workers. This desire was not necessarily driven by the young people attending the youth centre themselves, who often enjoyed a break from technology during sessions.

Conclusion

This article has explored the experience of youth workers working across two youth centres in the United Kingdom in 2016. In these accounts, the increasing prevalence of digital technology in the youth center space and as imagined in the lives of young people emerged as a source of tension for youth workers. The aim of this paper has been to draw out their concerns whilst situating these within the contemporary context of austerity and popular misconceptions surrounding youth and technology. To this end, this paper focuses on three main aspects of youth workers experiences of practice. Namely, these are; negotiating relationships between young person and practitioner; the economic pressures which culminate in the increased planning and documentation of youth club sessions; and adult concerns surrounding youth and technology. Drawing on empirical data from a relatively small cohort, I point to potentially new barriers facing workers that demand further exploration. I posit that the time, energy and resource amassing from anxieties surrounding digital technology ultimately distracts from the ongoing demand for more investment in traditional modes of intervention in the form of youth workers and physical spaces for this work to take place. Larger scale and potentially longitudinal research is needed to determine the prevalence and success of online youth interventions and the preference of young people more broadly.

Whilst highlighting and contextualising the fears of youth workers, this article has engaged with the experiences of young people who deeply valued their workers and their youth club. Importantly, young people's accounts of their relationship with technology, focusing predominantly here on their experiences within the youth centre, point to a contradiction between adult's assumptions and young people's experiences of the digital in everyday life. In drawing attention to this contradiction I have not sought to challenge youth workers accounts. The fear felt in practice towards digital technologies was real and I argue

here that the economic pressures facing services exacerbated the sense of demand to 'respond or die'. Rather, critically engaging with youth workers fears of context collapse, both in terms of enabling communication beyond the youth centre between peers, and the blurring of personal and professional boundaries for workers, enables the issues facing workers to be potentially reframed. In the final section of this paper, I argue that worries surrounding heightened potential for context collapse was less to do with technology but more to do with what we *think* young people do, and the assumption that young people *prefer* to communicate 'online'.

Herein lies a contradiction between what the youth centre is supposed to engender and a growing demand *felt* by youth workers to engage with young people online. On the one hand, youth clubs or centres are in themselves unique social spaces where young people are encouraged to share their experiences from difference parts of their lives – or where we could say that contexts are invited to collapse. In this sense, context collapse serves as a productive tool for workers as the ethos of the youth centres encouraged young people to reflect on experiences from beyond this space. However as this article crucially highlights, technology and in particularly social media, particularly when framed as a space exclusively for young people, does not allow for this fluidity.

The popularity of image based platforms, for example Snapchat and Instagram, among the young people attending the youth centre was of particular concern for workers. There was a sense that in order to engage with young people's experiences of these spaces, youth workers would need to be present on these platforms. This led to concerns around maintaining personal and professional boundaries. Underlying this discomfort was the view that images are fundamentally different to written communication with one youth worker explaining that 'pictures are more personal'. Fears surrounding context collapse led to not

only anxiety about the relevance of youth provision, but a barrier to understanding the many ways young people experienced the digital.

Participants described valuing the youth centre as a welcome refuge from digital technologies but this was also a place which was tied to friendship groups, popularity and discussing issues from school, home or for some older attendees work. Digital technologies have become increasingly 'embedded' (Hine, 2015) in our everyday lives. I suggest thinking about experiences of the digital as both when a young person shared anecdotes about the weekend by showing a youth worker pictures on their phone *and* when computers and phones were no-where to be seen but a recent fallout which had taken place across school and social media was being described in animating detail. These scenarios were common. In moments such as these, the digital was frequently (re)negotiated and articulated but were physically absent. Positioning technology as a dangerous other as in the comments made by Commissioner Dick, offers a convenient decoy away from the value of physical spaces for youth intervention, and the skills to befriend but not *be* their friend, which endure but are underfunded in austerity Britain (see also Yates, 2012). Doing so does the work that youth workers do, the challenges that young people face, and the economic and institutional barriers encountered by both parties a disservice. This relationship needs to be prioritised as vital for engaging with young people's everyday experiences in a contemporary digital age.

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