



**Life on the small screen:  
What children are watching and why**  
A report for Ofcom

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# Introduction

What children watch now and what their parents watched when they were children is so different that it can be hard for one generation to understand or imagine the other's experience.

People who are adults now grew up with a narrow choice of TV channels and a fixed schedule of programmes. When they were children, they watched largely the same things as each other, at the same times each week. If they didn't want to watch what was on, they had to do something else altogether.

As parents know, describing this to young people, especially children in homes with multiple screens and devices, children who have never known anything but on demand viewing, is challenging. What is a channel? Why were things only available at fixed times? To young people, these are descriptions of 'the olden days'.

It can be equally hard for adults to understand the kinds of video content children are watching now – let alone how they're finding it, or why they're choosing it.

Alongside these vast structural changes, children's consumption of, and exposure to public service broadcasting<sup>1</sup>, is on a downward trend.

PSB has been described as "the foundation stone" of UK television<sup>2</sup>. For decades it has delivered trusted and impartial news, UK-originated content and distinctive programmes. It has helped ensure certain types of programmes get made, including original children's TV.

PSB's ability to produce "high quality television that is able to reflect the UK back to itself, bring the nation together at key moments, and inform and educate society"<sup>2</sup> is seen as important for social cohesion. For children, PSB is expected to offer a variety of content that is not only engaging but informs their understanding of the world, stimulates knowledge and learning, and reflects UK cultural identity, diversity and alternative viewpoints<sup>3</sup>.

However, recent upheavals in the media sector have raised significant challenges. The time children spend watching scheduled TV is in decline year on year, and this has widely been accepted to be a permanent and structural trend<sup>2</sup>.

Online video watching platforms are now established as children and young people's preferred ways of watching content. Brand awareness of Netflix and YouTube among 12-15-year olds is now higher than that for the BBC<sup>4</sup>. The amount of time that children spend consuming video content on a device other than the TV set continues to rise<sup>6</sup>.

## Exploring why children prefer online video

Ofcom commissioned this research to explore **what** video content children are watching, **how** they reach it, **why** they choose it.

It is always difficult for people – even adults – to articulate why they like what they like. For children, it can be even harder, so research that relies on asking them this question won't reveal the full picture.

Instead, this research has gathered an objective dataset of what children watched across all platforms, before exploring with them the context, journey and decision-making process that led them to specific examples.

It also sought to understand what their interests are more generally and how they spend their free time, to be able to place their viewing behaviours in the context of their day-to-day lives. In this way, the research reveals what children watch, why they choose to watch it and how they find or discover it.

The evidence gives a sense of what attracts them to online video rather than traditional TV – and just how much has changed in the course of a generation.

<sup>1</sup> Following the Communications Act of 2003, PSB (Public Service Broadcasting) has been understood as the main terrestrial TV channels. These include the BBC, Channel 4, ITV1, S4C and Five. These channels, as part of their PSB status, have an obligation to secure programmes with a wide range of subject matters and high standard regarding their content and quality. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/21/part/3/chapter/4>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/111896/Public-service-broadcasting-in-the-digital-age.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/111896/Public-service-broadcasting-in-the-digital-age.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0032/37949/execsummary.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0032/37949/execsummary.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-parents-2017>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/116260/parents-children-5-15-data-tables.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/116260/parents-children-5-15-data-tables.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/108182/children-parents-media-use-attitudes-2017.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/108182/children-parents-media-use-attitudes-2017.pdf)



## About the research

This research was designed to gather data on two key objectives – first, what videos children watch and why they value them, and second, how they navigate to content and what drives decisions about platform choices. The research covered two phases seeking to meet these objectives.

**Forty children and young people aged between 4 and 16** took part in the research, which was carried out from October to December 2018. Respondents were from a range of locations across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and were selected to represent a broad range of demographic backgrounds. To understand children’s content preferences and habits, each child completed a seven-day media diary, in which they wrote what they watched on smartphones, tablets, computers and TVs over the course of a week. Respondents included programmes and films that they had watched live, recorded, viewed on-demand and via streaming services, as well as online videos accessed on YouTube and social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. Children also recorded contextual information including who they were with, what else they were doing at the time, or why they had chosen the content.

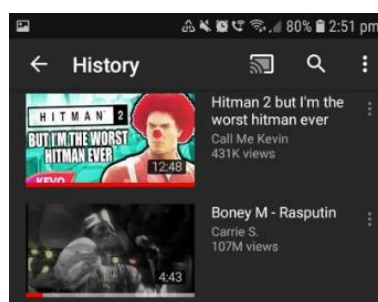
Over the same period, objective data was collected from respondents about their video consumption, including ‘watch histories’ from YouTube, Netflix and other video platforms, app usage statistics from their smartphones, and mobile device screen recordings showing video app navigation and content discovery routes.

Combining self-reported data and objective evidence of videos they had watched; the researchers were able to build a near-comprehensive picture of children’s video watching behaviours over the course of a week.

Researchers explored the data collected in this phase in detail during the subsequent depth interviews.

Researchers spent approximately three hours in each household, building a holistic understanding of why children had watched the video content that had been evidenced in the first phase.

Getting to know children personally, building a rapport with them, and triangulating data from multiple sources were crucial to understand the children’s decision making processes, their current video watching behaviours, and the reasons behind them.



# How does watching videos fit into children's day-to-day lives?

In seeking to understand why children engage with the video content that they watch, specifically why they are spending less and less time watching scheduled TV and more time watching online video, this research sought to explore **how children make choices about the ways they spend their time**. The research examined their decision-making processes, what influenced these choices, and how they felt about the way they spent their time.

This was done by examining data from the children's media diaries alongside objective evidence of the videos they had watched (such as app usage statistics, YouTube watch histories etc.) as an indication of how much time they were spending doing different sorts of screen-based activities. During the depth interviews, researchers then probed further into children's daily and weekly routines and how media fitted into these.

## Key findings

- While some children took part in organised after school clubs at least about one a week, not many of them did other or more spontaneous activities (e.g. physically meeting friends or cultivating hobbies) on a regular basis
- Many children used social media and other messaging platforms (e.g. chat functions in games) to continually keep in touch with their friends while at home
- Often children described going out to meet friends face-to-face as 'too much effort' and preferred to spend their free time on their own at home
- While some children managed to fit screen time around other offline interests and passions, for many, watching videos was one of the main activities taking up their spare time
- YouTube was the most popular platform for children to consume video content, followed by Netflix. Although still present in many children's lives, PSB VOD platforms and live TV were used more rarely and seen as less relevant to children like them
- Many parents had attempted to enforce rules about online video watching, especially with younger children. They worried that they could not effectively monitor it, as opposed to live or on-demand TV, which was usually watched on the main TV. Some were frustrated by the amount of time children were spending on personal screens.

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## How do children spend their time?

### Most children spent the majority of their free time at home

Most of the children had a regular and structured routine, largely centred around school. Many did engage in some form of organised after-school activity during the week, with several playing in sports teams or attending scouts or art/drama clubs. These activities were often instigated by parents, rather than the children.

The majority of the children participated in some sort of organised activity outside the home once a week or less frequently. Their free time in the evenings and at weekends was largely spent at home, either on social media, watching videos (typically short videos or clips), or gaming.

A typical example was **Craig, aged 8**, who was "football-mad", however, during the winter when he didn't play outside as often, his Xbox use shot up and he spent the majority of his time after school playing Fortnite in his bedroom. When he wasn't gaming, he watched football videos on the YouTube channel F2Freestylers, which gave him some football skills tips. He also loved Netflix, one which he had a Kids profile on his parent's account, with Boss Baby and Sam and Cat being his favourite shows. While his mum did mention that they watched soaps and quiz shows together downstairs in the lounge, Craig said he preferred to watch I'm A Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here! (ITV) on his TV in his bedroom alone because it was "easier and more comfortable" than going downstairs.

Not many children in the sample did spontaneous or unstructured activities that they kept up on a regular basis (e.g. a self-driven hobby, like drawing, reading or playing an instrument), and few consistently made plans to do activities at the weekend. Meeting up with friends was also infrequently mentioned and, when probed, most children gave the impression that social events, like sleepovers and play dates, were rare occurrences. For those who did see friends outside of school regularly, it often seemed driven by parents organising activities for their children, rather than by the children themselves.

For example, **Minty, aged 12**, described herself as “very lazy” and “a bit antisocial” at home. She wished she committed more time to her homework and her music (she played the guitar and the piano), but instead found herself spending a lot of time in her room watching YouTube or Netflix on her phone. Her favourite shows were RuPaul’s Drag Race and Skin Wars on Netflix, and these were her go-to forms of entertainment whenever she had free time, including before she went to school in the morning.

Minty’s mum, who listened in on some of her interview, was surprised by the variety and sheer quantity of shows Minty watched. She reflected that as a household they were very reliant on media: “That’s our entertainment.”

“*At the weekend I really just lounge around all day*” Minty, aged 12

It should be noted that, while the period when fieldwork was conducted (October to December) may have had an influence on children’s activities and their likelihood to play outside, these the findings are broadly consistent with longitudinal trends seen in Ofcom’s Children Media Lives<sup>7</sup> research, for which fieldwork is carried out in the late spring/summer.

### **For other children, there was a trade-off between time spent behind a screen and time available for other activities**

**Oscar, aged 14**, had given up his afterschool clubs and found that he was socialising less at the weekends than he used to. This was partly because his family had moved further away from school and from his friends. However, Oscar admitted that another reason was that he was less motivated to play football nowadays because he was more tempted to stay at home and watch videos on his phone, which he found required less effort compared to leaving the house.

“*There’s probably not enough variation in what I do now*” Oscar, aged 14

**Fred, aged 15**, had a passion for scootering and learning scooter tricks, which he had practiced for years with his friends, before he felt he no longer had the time. Fred had started following YouTubers posting sports car videos on their channels who were also professional scooter riders and had become so engrossed in following these videos that he felt there was no longer time for going out and practicing scootering.

“*Sometimes I watch YouTube and because I’m watching YouTube I get too carried away and miss the opportunity to go riding*” Fred, aged 15

### **Outside of school, a lot of children kept in touch with their friends via social media and instant messaging, and described going out to see them face to face as “too much effort”**

Broadly speaking, it seemed that many children saw their friends face to face outside of school relatively infrequently. The most common reason given for this was that it was “easier” to connect with friends online than arrange to see them face to face.

When discussing how they chose to spend their time, many children described activities outside of the home, such as meeting up with friends or pursuing sports and hobbies, as more “effort” than they often felt like expending.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/childrens-media-lives>

**Adrian, aged 14**, rarely saw his friends outside of school and spent most of his free time playing FIFA on his Xbox. He kept in touch with his friends by using Instagram to message them about what was going on in *I'm a Celebrity* (ITV) or a FIFA game, while they watched or played it.

**Ronald, aged 15**, mentioned that, besides being quite active during the week attending Cadets and Explorers, he didn't go out with his friends much at all. Instead, he spent most of his weekends and evenings at home, playing on his Xbox and watching content on Netflix or YouTube. While he did stay in touch with his friends virtually by playing multiplayer games, they rarely met up in person.

*"I might get a bit bored, my friends don't really come out. They say they can't be bothered"* Ronald, aged 15

### **Among the boys, gaming seemed to be one of the main ways they connected with their friends outside of school**

Ronald and several of the other children played multiplayer games with their friends online or chatted via gaming platforms while they were playing.

**Henry, aged 13**, went to football practice twice a week and then spent the rest of his free time playing Fortnite on his X-box, mostly with his friends. He often became so engrossed in the game that his mum said she needed to be really careful that her son, a type 1 diabetic, checked his blood sugar levels. She said: "Sometimes it becomes a bit of a battle of insulin versus Xbox". She had enforced a rule of no Xbox after 9pm, which Henry felt was unfair since some of his friends were allowed to play later.

**Adrian's** mum had signed him up to the local gym out of concern that he wasn't doing any afterschool clubs with his friends, instead choosing to spend time alone in his room playing FIFA. To **14-year-old** Adrian, however, this behaviour was not antisocial; FIFA was simply the medium through which he and his friends interacted. This was true for most respondents who enjoyed gaming, as the multi-player function enabled them to connect with their friends remotely.

*"If I couldn't play, I'd be completely isolated"* Adrian, aged 14

### **Children preferred to consume media privately, being fully in control of choice**

These examples also reflect the finding that media consumption was, for most of the children and most of the time, something they did alone. The majority of children in the sample preferred to use their personal devices (e.g. smartphones, tablets, and TVs) in their bedrooms, rather than use communal TVs and computers. In many households, children chose to consume media privately in their own rooms for the majority of time they were at home. This was a source of concern for some parents, several of whom had consequently tried to create more occasions for 'family time'.

**Samantha, aged 14**, rarely saw any of her friends outside of school. Most of her free time was spent alone in her room watching YouTube and Netflix, though occasionally she watched a film with her brother in his room. After school she would usually go straight to her room, where the "TV would then always be on in the background" whilst she did her homework and went on Instagram on her phone. At the weekends she described her usual activities as "binge watching" series and film franchises on Netflix.

*"I don't really do much, I don't go out a lot"* Samantha, aged 14

### **Some children made more time for offline interests and passions, while still fitting in screen time at home**

For many children, screen time was fitted in and around activities they needed or wanted to do, such as homework or dance classes. Screen time was seen as "chill out time" for these children, around their otherwise busy schedule. For younger children in the sample this screen time was often monitored or scheduled by their parents, however many of the older children managed their own screen time around these activities.

**Cody, aged 15**, represented his home region in athletics and attended regular training sessions that took up much of his free time. Compared with many of the children interviewed, he set himself a very strict routine and controlled his media habits, never watching anything until he had completed his homework in the evening.

Similarly, **Felicity, aged 6**, had weekly swimming lessons, dance classes and attended Rainbows. Her mum monitored her tablet use, ensuring the content she was accessing was suitable and that she didn't spend too long on it.

**Natasha, aged 9**, was also very active. She was part of several sports teams which sometimes practiced after school, and she attended dance and gymnastics classes a couple of afternoons a week. Her mum also tried to keep Natasha and her sister active at the weekends, encouraging them to go out and to do crafts. While she did enjoy YouTube, Netflix and watching CBBC to wind down, her content consumption seemed quite limited compared to others in the sample.

*“If I watched more I wouldn't have time for sports, but if I watched less I wouldn't watch at all”* Natasha, aged 9

## What do they watch?

Children in this study were watching a huge range of types of content via a variety of platforms. There was a clear trend across the sample with few exceptions: YouTube was where most children preferred to access content and did so most frequently, followed by Netflix. Live TV was the next most frequently viewed, followed by video on demand (VOD) platforms such as iPlayer and All4<sup>8</sup>.

	Child	Age	Troy	Gina	Felicity	Harry	Paul	Rhodi	Eva	Freddie	Stacey	Jerry	Jade	Adam	Rae	Lily	Natasha	Craig	James	Miranda	John	Charlie	Lauren	Gus	George	Emma	Lana	Minny	Lee	Jacob	Ellie	Henry	Issac	Oscar	Adrian	Samantha	Georgia	Ralph	Ronald	Fred	Cody	Meredith					
YouTube		4	D	W	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	W	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D			
SVOD (e.g. Netflix, NowTV)		6	W	W	D	W	W	N	D	W	N	W	D	D	D	D	W	D	D	D	D	N	W	W	W	D	D	D	W	N	W	N	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	
PSB VOD (e.g. iPlayer, All4)		6	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	N	D	D	D	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	D	W	D	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Live TV		7	D	D	W	N	O	W	D	O	W	O	W	D	O	D	W	D	W	W	O	D	W	N	W	O	O	D	O	W	W	W	W	W	W	O	O	D	W	O	W	D	D	D	D		

Daily	D
Weekly	W
On occasion	O
Never	N

Table 1: Breakdown of platforms children watch and how often based on the qualitative data collected

There were patterns in the ways children used different platforms. YouTube was a near permanent feature of many children's lives, used throughout the day (although sometimes for only very short amounts of time), and often as a 'time-filler' between other activities. For some of the older children, YouTube and Netflix were watched during the school day, at break or lunchtime on their mobile phones. This was different from their use of live TV and PSB VOD platforms, which was more limited to home and the communal TV.

### The majority of children watched less live TV or PSB VOD services compared to YouTube or SVOD services like Netflix

Children usually tended to watch programmes on PSB VOD platforms (e.g. iPlayer, All4) or live TV while at home. Their viewing behaviour here was generally more directed, in the sense that children knew what it was that they wanted to watch. This was sometimes different to the way children accessed content on YouTube or Netflix, where they were more likely to browse or followed recommendations from the platform.

<sup>8</sup> The majority of children in the sample tended to access the PSB VOD platforms mentioned through the family's account, rather than having their own.



**John, aged 11**, rarely watched live TV, and when he did he usually had a specific programme in mind. He liked to watch Dance Moms (Channel 5) because there is “lots of drama and arguments” in it and found it “funny and ridiculous.” The show even got him to develop an interest in becoming a dancer – “it got me interested, everyone is doing it.” However, John also mentioned that at the time of the interview he had started watching clips of Dance Moms on YouTube, rather than watching TV, as he thought that newer content was available on there.

**Freddie, aged 8**, only occasionally watched programmes on the TV when his dad organised a “boys’ night”, however it would never be on live TV. Instead he and his dad would usually download a comedy, such as House of Anubis (Nickelodeon). His mum mentioned that Freddie often struggled to keep up with what was happening on the programme when they did watch TV and tended to ask a lot of questions. She thought it could be because he spent most of his time watching content on his tablet, where he would be closer to the screen and have headphones on, so he might take in the information better. Freddie tended to spend a lot of time either playing on his Wii console or watching YouTube or Netflix on his tablet in his bedroom. Before school he would often fit in a short episode of Power Rangers or Big Momma’s House on Netflix. He was also a huge fan of Will Smith and loved to watch episodes of The Fresh Prince of Bel Air on YouTube, or videos of his favourite gamer Zak Scott, who voiced over games as he played them.

**Jacob, aged 13**, was an example of a rare case of someone who watched the majority of their media content on live TV in their communal living room, in the company of other family members. In between his busy schedule of basketball, ‘life saver’ swimming classes and scouts, he watched programmes such as Doctor Who (BBC), Dynasties (BBC), and occasionally films with his family. He very rarely used YouTube to watch videos and did not have a Netflix account.

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## Parents’ views on what their children watch

Most parents of children in the sample were aware that their children mainly watched their own content on their own devices. Some parents were concerned about the content their children were watching on PSB channels, but many more worried about the things their children watched individually on YouTube or Netflix on their personal devices.

Live TV, including PSB content, was mostly watched on the communal TV, which parents felt they could ‘keep an eye’ on to some extent, while other forms of content on subscription video on-demand (SVOD) platforms like Netflix and NowTV, and YouTube, tended to be watched on the children’s phones or tablets, which parents felt was harder to monitor.

Many parents knew that YouTube was their child’s ‘go-to’ platform, however they were often unaware of the specific channels or videos their children were watching on the platform.

A lot of parents also expressed concern or frustration that their children sometimes seemed ‘hooked’ on their screens, and worried about the effects of this.

As a consequence of these worries, most parents in the sample had set some rules limiting the amount of time their children could spend on their devices, although these were not always followed consistently by children.

### Concerns over content were not limited to online video platforms

There were some concerns among parents over certain programmes on PSB channels watched by children in the sample. For example, a few parents commented on the fact that they preferred their children not to watch programmes such as Horrid Henry as they felt it negatively affected their children’s behaviour.

**Gina’s mum** did not allow soaps to be watched in the house anymore. When Gina’s sister was younger her mum found her watching Hollyoaks which had come on the TV after another programme. Her mum felt that her daughter had seen what she felt to be a lot of inappropriate content – which she felt shouldn’t be allowed on TV at pre-watershed. Gina’s mum felt safer with letting her kids explore freely on SVOD and VOD services as they just searched for exactly what they wanted and didn’t ‘stumble’ across content by accident.

However, many parents, throughout the interview, were shocked at the range and volume of content that they learnt their children were watching away from live TV and communal spaces of their home. For example, **Minty’s mum** was surprised by the variety of shows Minty, aged 12, was watching. Some programmes had with quite adult themes and **Minty’s mum** had just “assumed it was just Tracey Beaker” she had been

watching. Similarly, **Oscar's dad** had no idea what he was watching on YouTube, he thought that Oscar watched only drawing videos.

### **Some felt they were losing control over their children's media-related activities**

Some parents expressed concern about their lack of awareness or control over of the content their children were watching on their own devices.

**Jessica's mum** worried that her three girls spent too much time in their rooms watching content independently, and that she did not always know what they were watching. She was particularly concerned about her eldest daughter, who watched a lot of reality TV, such as *Made in Chelsea*, and was "very susceptible" to the pressures of popular culture.

|"The kids don't really interact with each other" Mum of Jessica aged 11

**Adrian's mum's** main concerns were about the vast amount of time he spent in his room alone playing FIFA, which made him agitated and angry. She was also worried about Adrian's younger sister viewing YouTube content. She did not like the fact that the content was unregulated, and she was uncomfortable about her watching certain channels such as the Ingham Family, following allegations about one of the family in the news. She did have parental controls on their YouTube and Netflix accounts, as did most of the parents in the sample, however she knew that her children easily got around them by, for example, just logging into her profile on Netflix.

**Adam's mum** was slightly concerned about the type of content her children could access if they followed YouTube's recommendations. Recently Adam's sister had been watching YouTube challenge videos created by SisVsBro, and was suggested a video about a horror makeup challenge which contained scary images. This distressed her and they ended up reporting the video.

**Paul's parents** were concerned after they found their seven-year-old son had been searching "kissing programmes" on YouTube. However, they monitored what Paul watched individually by going through his watch and search history at night as his mobile charged in their room. They also have parental controls on his account.

### **Sometimes parents and children shared similar habits**

Some parents didn't consider their child's viewing of content on YouTube or SVOD as an issue, often because they consumed content in this way themselves, or they liked the fact they could set parental controls on these platforms.

Despite **Harry's mum** setting a time limit on his tablet, she did not mind the children watching content on Netflix Kids because she felt that Harry and his sister wouldn't be watching content she felt was inappropriate, or made for adults because of the Kids feature on the platform. She and her husband also watched a lot of their own content on Netflix once the children were in bed, recently getting into the horror series, *Haunting of Hill House*.

**Adam's mum** felt reassured that "on YouTube once you report something the video goes off the site automatically straight away while they review it". She does not like watching content on the TV herself, often using her phone or laptop to browse the internet or watch shows on Netflix.

|"This generation, all they seem to do is go online. Everything is online." Mum of Adam aged 9

**Rae's mum** admitted she and Rae's dad don't watch much live TV. They like Netflix and Amazon Prime and have recently been watching *In Power*. They enjoy binge-watching shows and Rae's mum loves asking people on Facebook what they recommend for her to watch next on Netflix. Rae's mum said she didn't have a problem with Rae watching Netflix, she was more concerned about Rae being on her phone, and not knowing what she was up to on there.

## Some were trying to set limits on online video watching, turning children's attention from tablets to TV

Parents concerns seemed to be primarily over children watching content on their own devices which they couldn't easily monitor, rather than having a problem with the platforms their children were watching content on. Some parents set rules around the amount of time children could spend on their own devices, or encouraging their children to watch things with them on the family TV.

**Rhodri's mum** explained how she encouraged Rhodri to watch films with her and his dad and they had watched Wall-E together recently. She thought that her son was too easily drawn to his tablet and tried to distract him with 'family time'. She felt that because "the [tablet]screen is instantly gratifying for him", he often chose it over other activities. They had eventually decided to limit the time he could spend on his tablet and banned its use in in the kitchen. **Harry's mum** also had set a one-hour limit on his tablet because she felt he had become too obsessed with it, specifically playing games such as Fishdom, and this was stopping him being able to get to sleep at night.

*"He was addicted to [his tablet]. I didn't want him getting too focused in his own world, so I limited it" Mum of Harry aged 6*

**Rae's mum** had also limited the family's phone time during the midweek as she was concerned they were spending too much time on their own devices and wanted to cultivate more family time. She instead encouraged the children to watch content on the TV and had begun putting the channel E4 on for them after school.

# What role does live TV play in children’s lives?

While this research suggests that children are consuming significant proportions of their content through online platforms such as Netflix and YouTube, some live TV was watched by most children in the sample. For many, it was watched more frequently than programmes via PSB VOD services (iPlayer, All4, etc.). Most children in the sample reported watching live TV weekly, with some watching live TV daily on the ‘family TV’.

To understand the reasons behind live TV viewing, we mapped who children were with when they were watching live TV, at what times of the day they tended to watch it, and what, if anything, they might be doing at the same time. Evidence was pulled from the tracking data and from children’s own media diaries, and then explored in more detail in the in-depth interviews.

### Key findings

- Most children viewed live TV as a family ritual, often watching programmes routinely every year (e.g. Strictly Come Dancing, I’m a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!)
- Parents welcomed live TV as an opportunity for “family time”, and were often actively encouraging their children to join them for communal TV watching
- Children were often using live TV as ‘background noise’ while doing another task or to fill time while they were waiting for something
- Most live TV viewing was on a communal screen or device and therefore usually it was a compromised choice between those watching (e.g. parents and siblings)

## What programmes do children watch?

Child	Age	Troy	Gina	Felicity	Harry	Paul	Rhodri	Eva	Freddie	Stacey	Jerry	Jade	Adam	Rae	Lily	Natasha	Craig	James	Miranda	John	Charlie	Lauren	Gus	George	Emma	Larua	Minty	Lee	Jacob	Ellie	Henry	Issac	Oscar	Adrian	Samanth	Georgia	Ralph	Ronald	Fred	Cody	Meredith							
Drama (e.g. Doctor Who)	4	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	A	N	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N			
Talent shows (e.g. X Factor)	6	N	P	P	N	N	A	N	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	N	P	P	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	N	N	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
Reality shows (e.g. I'm a Celebrity)	6	N	P	N	N	P	A	P	N	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	N	A	N	N	N	N	A	P	P	P	N	N	N	A	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	P	N	N		
Soaps (e.g. EastEnders)	7	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	N	P	N	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	N	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	N	N	
Documentary (e.g. Dynasties)	7	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	N	N	N	N	P	P	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
Cartoons (e.g. Horrid Henry)	8	P	N	N	N	A	N	N	N	A	N	N	N	N	N	F	N	P	N	N	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	N	N	N	
Crime / murder mystery (e.g. Death in Paradise)	9	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	A	N	N	N	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
Sport	9	N	N	N	N	P	N	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	N	N	P	N	N	A	N	N	N	P	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
Other	9	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	A	P	N	N	N	N	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	P	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N

Watched alone	A
Watched with family	P
Not watched	N

Table 2: Breakdown of the types of programme children watched on live TV and whether they did it alone or with family, based on the qualitative data collected

Across the sample, the most popular types of programmes watched on live TV were talent and reality shows, followed by soap operas, cartoons, animation and drama, all of which were watched on a weekly basis. Popular children’s shows included Horrid Henry, watched by five of the children under 10 and Boss Baby; Back in Business, watched by three of the sample.

Among the most popular reality shows among children at the time of fieldwork were I'm a Celebrity (ITV), watched by seven of the sample, Strictly Come Dancing (BBC), watched by nine of the sample, and The X Factor (ITV), watched by eight.

Hollyoaks (Channel 4) and EastEnders (BBC) proved to be the most popular soaps with the children that were interviewed. For example, **Miranda, aged 9**, chose to watch Hollyoaks (Channel 4) live with her mum most days. It was her favourite part of the week, as she valued this quality time spent with her mum alone without her 2-year-old cousin who lived with them. She also watched I'm a Celebrity (ITV) each evening with her mum and elder sister, aged 16. This had been a tradition as long as Miranda could remember and was one of the few programmes they would normally all watch together.

| *"We've always watched it since I can remember"* Miranda, aged 9

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## Live TV as family time

Often watching TV was enjoyed as a "family tradition", and watching programmes live was driven primarily by parents. Many parents commented that they valued TV watching as "family time", and as a result, most of the programmes children watched on live TV were usually only watched with other family members, rather than alone.

**Cody, aged 15**, said he watched I'm a Celebrity (ITV) with his parents simply because they "always had". It was common that children watched live TV shows with their family and continued to do so because it was what they had always done, rather than because they actively decided to do so.

| *"[I watch] I'm a Celeb, but very much out of a tradition"* Cody, aged 15

**Henry's** mum was nostalgic about her own childhood, when her family had gathered to watch TV together. Every Saturday night she would get her two boys - **Henry, aged 13**, and his 18-year-old brother - to come downstairs to watch TV together. They watched programmes like David Attenborough documentaries - recently they had been watching Dynasties (BBC) - and Doctor Who (BBC), which Henry's mum described as a strategy for ensuring they spent time together as a family. Other times, the boys would go to the living room to watch what their mum was watching on live TV, despite not being bothered by the programme itself.

**Lee, aged 12**, watched shows like The X Factor, Britain's Got Talent, I'm a Celebrity (ITV) and football matches together with his family, especially on "takeaway Saturdays." However, "takeaway Saturdays" were extended to Tuesdays and Wednesdays to get the family together as much as possible. Lee's mum was keen to create occasions to spend time with her children, and she used the TV as a tool for making that happen. Lee also became engrossed in EastEnders (BBC) after watching it with his mum. However, while they had started watching it together, as she fell behind on episodes he decided to watch it in his room by himself.

**Samantha, aged 14**, preferred watching content alone than with her family, however her mum attempted to bring Samantha and her two younger brothers together for Saturday night TV even though she knew "they don't want to, really".

| *"On a Saturday or Sunday night I make them come down for family time for I'm a Celebrity or X Factor"* Mum of Samantha aged 14

Similarly, **Jacob, aged 13**, watched Strictly Come Dancing (BBC) every Saturday evening with his family. He was not the biggest fan of the show, but his sister and mum really enjoyed it.

| *"I prefer to watch programmes like that [Strictly Come Dancing] with other people"* Jacob, aged 13

In some cases, watching TV was encouraged by parents to try to prevent what they saw as excessive "individual viewing", where children watched content alone on their personal devices. This encouragement often resulted in live TV watching.

**Rae, aged 9**, was not allowed “phone time” during the week as her mum felt she and her siblings were spending too much time alone on them. This rule included using their phones for social media as well as for watching content as Rae’s mum was concerned that they were not spending enough time as a family because of their constant phone use, Rae’s mum preferred them watching on the main TV because that way they were all together. She would put on E4 for the children and herself after school, because she described it as “easy watching”. As a result, Rae and her six-year-old brother watched *The Big Bang Theory* on E4 most days after school. However, when probed, Rae said she wouldn’t choose to watch the show, and would often be drawing rather than watching what her mum put on for them.

Jessica’s mum had noticed that **Jessica, aged 11**, and her two sisters spent little time together when they were all at home. To combat this, she made proactive efforts to make TV more of a social activity for the family, including trying to find live programmes and films that they all would enjoy. Generally, she could get everyone to agree on some sort of reality TV, such as *I’m a Celebrity* (ITV), or *Celebrity Hunted* (Channel 4). Jessica’s mum did, however, often find herself trying to discourage the girls from also using their own devices during family television time, and Jessica admitted that she didn’t really like these shows, as she rarely knew who any of the celebrities were. Jessica felt that she didn’t have that much in common with her sisters, and therefore they would rather watch different things on their own devices instead of finding a compromise on the communal television.

*“They spend so much time in their rooms... they don’t really interact with each other!”* Mum of Jessica aged 11

### Communal devices, compromised choice

As TV was usually being used as something for multiple family members to do together, the choice of content had to be a shared one, and therefore was often a compromise. In the cases of both Jessica and Rae, this meant that children were less likely to be engaged in what they were watching, which often led them to focus their attention elsewhere (e.g. on other devices or activities such as drawing or playing with construction blocks) whilst the TV was on.

Similarly, **Adam, aged 9**, lived with his mum, dad and five other siblings aged 2 to 13. As a result, he often had little choice over what was put on the main TV and watched programmes that he didn’t particularly like and thought were for younger children. Adam’s favourite device was his tablet which he took upstairs to his own room to play Roblox. Often, he had the TV to himself in the morning during breakfast and would choose to watch Roblox YouTubers on the TV, rather than live TV content.

**Troy, aged 4**, also liked going on his tablet or Nintendo DS to play games, or watch *Angry Birds* on Netflix. His mum said that she didn’t know what he was getting from the tablet and was worried about him being on his own too much. Her strategy was to ban tablet use in the morning, and instead turn the TV on for him and his siblings, aged 4 and 11, to watch. On the TV, they would watch programmes such as *Tom and Jerry* and *Scooby Doo* on Boomerang. However, despite his mum’s efforts, Troy often ended up watching *Angry Birds* on silent on his tablet whilst the TV was on.

*“I don’t know what he gets from the tablet... I don’t want him to be too much ‘in his own world’”* Mum of Troy aged 4

In some cases, children watched the same TV programmes that their parents would watch live, but in their own room on their own devices, and often on catch-up VOD services. They seemed to prefer watching alone, without having to interact with or adjust to other family members. For example, **Craig, aged 10**, had a close relationship with his mum, and they often watched soaps together on the main TV.

However, after he had been gaming in his bedroom, he tended to prefer to stay in his bed to watch *I’m a Celebrity* (ITV) at 9pm on a week night, while his mum would watch the same episode next door in her own room. Similarly, **Adrian, aged 14**, and his family watched *I’m a Celebrity* (ITV) every evening as a “tradition in the lead up to Christmas”. However, it was common that they would watch it separately, on different devices in separate rooms.

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## Live TV as ‘background noise’

Live TV was also used by some children in the sample as a ‘background noise’, often watched whilst they were doing something else

**Laura, aged 12**, watched content on the TV with her family, usually whilst eating dinner. She said she liked eating in front of the television, otherwise “it would be awkward”. Programmes watched by the family during dinner included *The Simpsons* (Channel 4) and *Gordon Ramsay’s Kitchen Nightmares* (Channel 4). Laura explained that she would watch *The Simpsons* because it was easy to watch whilst eating.

Similarly, **Cody, aged 15**, had said on day two of his media diary that he had watched both *Hollyoaks* and *Coronation Street* (ITV) live on the TV. These programmes were the only ones in his diary that he had watched on the TV that week. When interviewed, he explained that he had watched these soaps with his mum on the TV in the kitchen, as it was always “just on” in the background as he ate dinner.

**Felicity, aged 6**, would watch content on live TV for short periods of time before she had to do an activity. For instance, she watched *Unikitty* (Cartoon Network) on the family TV before school, and, when she got home from school, before completing her homework she would watch 10 minutes of *Bunnicula*, an animated TV series, on Boomerang.

**Ellie, aged 13**, watched part of the film *Enchanted* with her sister live on the TV whilst she waited for her friend to come over to play. She would also watch live TV with her grandparents between running and piano lessons on a Wednesday. When she had a bit more time, after finishing her activities, she often watched YouTube videos of people manipulating slime or of hacks for the game *Animal Crossing* on her tablet.

“I watched a bit of the film *Enchanted* [on the TV] before my friend arrived. After completing my daily tasks, I watched some more YouTube videos about random stuff” Ellie, aged 13 (taken from her media diary)

# What role does video on demand play in children’s lives?

Lots of the children were using SVOD services, such as Now TV, Amazon Prime and, most commonly, Netflix. However, few respondents were often watching PSB VOD services, such as iPlayer and All4. In the depth interviews the researchers explored the children’s associations with these brands and platforms, mapping their motivations for using certain services more than others.

## Key findings

- Children felt Netflix offered them instant availability and maximum choice, enabling them to find interesting and relevant content easily through the platform’s recommendations.
- Netflix was also popular with children’s friends and family, so they were familiar with the platform and were often recommended content by people they knew.
- Children tended to think of PSB VOD platforms as catch-up services for their live TV counterparts, rather than platforms through which they could browse a range of content.
- They felt there was less choice on PSB VOD than SVOD, and believed the content didn’t remain available for long.
- Children did watch some PSB content via SVOD, they often didn’t attribute it to or weren’t aware of the channel it had first aired on. They were largely uninterested in the content’s origin, further reducing the appeal of PBS VOD services compared with SVOD.

## What programmes do children watch on SVOD platforms?

Child	Age	Troy	Gina	Felicity	Harry	Paul	Rhodri	Eva	Freddie	Stacey	Jerry	Jade	Adam	Rae	Lily	Natasha	Craig	James	Miranda	John	Charlie	Lauren	Gus	George	Emma	Emma	Larua	Minty	Lee	Jacob	Ellie	Henry	Issac	Oscar	Adrian	Samanth	Georgia	Ralph	Ronald	Fred	Cody	Meredith							
Reality/ competition (e.g. Sugar Rush)	4	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	A	N	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N				
Drama/Action series (e.g. Riverdale)	6	N	N	N	N	N	N	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	A	N	N	F	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	F	N	N	N	A	N	A	N	A	A	N	N	N	A	N	N	N	N	A	N	A		
Kids cartoons/shows (e.g. Boss Baby)	6	A	N	A	N	N	N	A	A	N	N	N	A	A	A	F	A	F	A	A	N	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	A	N	N	N	N	N	N			
Family Films (e.g. Nativity)	7	A	A	F	A	A	N	N	N	N	F	N	N	A	F	F	A	F	F	N	N	N	N	N	N	F	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N		
Horror (e.g. American Horror Story)	7	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
Documentary (e.g. Brainchild)	8	N	N	A	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
Sci Fi/Anime (e.g. Lost Song)	9	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Comedy (e.g. Big Bang Theory)	9	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	F	N	N	N	N	N	N	A	A	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	A
Other	9	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	F	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N

Watched alone	A
Watched with family	F
Not watched	N

Table 3: Breakdown of the types of programmes children watched on Netflix, and whether they did it alone or with family, based on the qualitative data collected

Across the sample, children were watching a broad range of programmes on SVOD platforms, ranging from reality TV to children’s cartoons. Programmes varied not only in specific genre and content, but also in origin, with children watching shows from all over the world, though UK, US and Australian content was most popular.



Most of the children tended to watch these programmes on their own but some were able to connect the account they used to the TV and watch movies with other members of their family.

Netflix was by far the most accessed SVOD platform, used by a large majority of children in the sample. Most children used a communal account they shared with their family. Some had their own account, but even among these very few used Netflix Kids. The most common programmes watched on Netflix included *Riverdale* and *Pretty Little Liars* by the older children (over 12 years old), and *Boss Baby* and *Horrid Henry* for the younger ones. However, although these programmes were popular, there was a lot of variation between each child in what they were watching on Netflix.



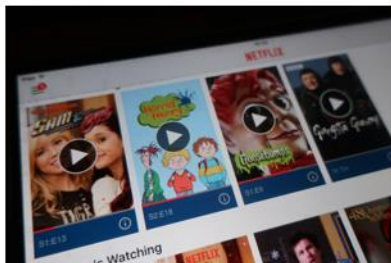
Troy, 5



Eva, 7



Rae, 9



Craig, 10



Emma, 12



Ralph, 14

## Why is Netflix appealing?

Netflix was overwhelmingly the most popular SVOD platform, with most children having their own profile on a family account. Many of those whose family did not have a Netflix account were regularly accessing it via friends' accounts.

### Netflix is seen as a must-have platform among friends

Netflix was the go-to service for on-demand video, especially for older children in the sample, and was seen as an essential platform to have access to. For example, **Georgia, aged 14**, whose family subscribed to Now TV, was desperate to get Netflix because she thought there was much more variety on there. However, she was not allowed Netflix because her mum thought it was too expensive. Georgia had heard lots about shows on the platform such as *Riverdale*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *13 Reasons Why* from one of her friends, and she thought these were the sorts of programmes that most people her age would be watching. As a result, Georgia felt like she was missing out.

Several other children also watched Netflix content that had been recommended to them by friends, family or others at school.

**Rae, aged 9**, watched episodes of *Boss Baby* on Netflix on her TV before bed. She had seen that her younger brother, aged 6, had been watching the show on the Netflix app on his tablet, after seeing the film at the cinema. When she saw the series pop up on her own Netflix account she started watching it on the TV in her room and found it very entertaining.

**Samantha, aged 14**, had recently started re-watching the series *Pretty Little Liars*. She had begun watching the series on Netflix because her friend said it was good, and Samantha caught up on all the episodes. Similarly, **Laura, aged 12**, heard about *Riverdale* at school, and after watching one episode with her friends she was desperate to keep watching it. Laura did not have access to her own Netflix account, so she went to her

friend's to watch it every Thursday. She was keen for her mum to subscribe to Netflix so she could watch at home.

“*I really want to see [Riverdale]. It sounds really good*” Georgia, aged 14

### Choice and flexibility on Netflix

It appeared that for many of the children in the sample one of the main motivations for using Netflix was the instantaneous availability of engaging content and the huge amount of choice.

An example of this was **Ronald, aged 15**, who watched a variety of films and TV shows through Netflix. He said that he preferred Netflix to Now TV because he could search for whatever he wanted, and because he felt Netflix had both TV programmes and movies. He said he liked Netflix because he could watch things whenever he wanted, and could carry on watching programmes when he didn't have time to watch the whole thing in one go. For example, he had started watching the series *Big Mouth* with his friend on his phone at school, and had then carried on watching the episode by himself when he got home. In one of the screen recordings, he also explained that he started watching the *Star Wars* movie *Rogue One* after school on his phone in the kitchen, after doing his chores. He then continued watching it the next day while he was getting dressed for school, and later during a break at school.

“*I kept watching [Rogue One on Netflix] whenever I could*” Ronald, aged 15

**Adam, aged 9**, and his siblings used to regularly watch the programme *The Thundermans* on Nickelodeon, however they seemed to have stopped watching it since they got their Netflix account linked to their TV. They mainly watched Netflix now, as they said there was more varied content on there that catered for the whole family. Adam liked to watch the reality show *Ultimate Beastmaster* on Netflix when on his own. He watched the series *Sugar Rush* or *The Next Step* with his older siblings and would watch *Blaze*, also available on Nick Jr., with the younger ones.

### It's “easy” to find something on Netflix

Respondents across the sample said it was “easier” to find programmes that they wanted to watch on Netflix than on other platforms.

Nearly all respondents who used Netflix made use of the recommendations<sup>9</sup> feature to discover new programmes. Most of the children in the sample had their own profile on the platform, so the recommendations related to their own viewing history (as opposed to someone else in their family who also used the account). Many children referred to this “useful” feature - which appears near the top of the home screen - when deciding what to watch.

Those who had a specific programme in mind when they went on the platform tended to use the search function, or to rely on the ‘continue watching’ bar to carry on watching a series they had already begun.

**Harry, aged 6**, and his twin sister came across new content through the ‘new releases’ section on their shared Netflix Kids profile. Their favourite thing to watch was *Brainchild*, which they had found through this feature. They enjoyed its educational aspect, as “you get to find out loads of facts”. Their mum approved of them using Netflix if it was through their Kids profile.

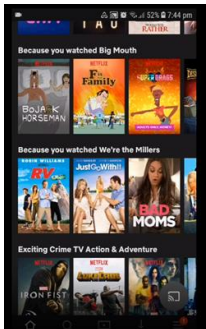
**Adam, aged 9**, also found out about *Brainchild* after seeing it pop up on his Netflix homepage when it first became available on the platform.

<sup>9</sup> Netflix streamlines the process of choosing media content through detailed [recommendations and personalisation](#) for the user. Their streaming software detects not only how people search for movies, but also how long they watch them for and how often a user watches, re-watches or skips past specific scenes. This, combined with their specific watch history, allows Netflix's algorithms to create an intricate behaviour profile for each user. For example, it figures out which actors may most appeal to which viewers or groups of viewers and shows them different cover pictures for the programmes' accordingly. All of this creates specific and very personalised experiences.

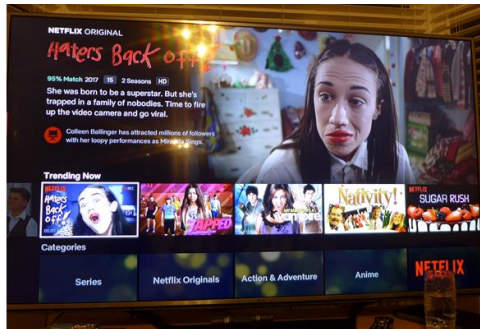
*“I quite like them watching Netflix because it’s got the children’s content filter on there already”* Mum of Harry aged 6

**Samantha, aged 14,** used the recommendation bars on the Netflix app to find new content. She was aware that after she once watched a film with Melissa McCarthy in it, she started seeing recommendations for similar films that she starred in. This was how she had ended up watching the film Identity Thief on her phone in her room. She liked this aspect of Netflix, as it made it easier to find something she wanted to watch.

**Craig, aged 10,** also watched quite a lot of content through Netflix. His favourite programme was Boss Baby, and he also loved watching Sam and Cat. In his Netflix app tour screen record and throughout the depth interview, he explained that he usually navigated to the ‘continue watching’ section, where he carried on watching something he had viewed before, or to the ‘popular’ or ‘everyone’s watching’ sections to find something new.



Ronald, 15



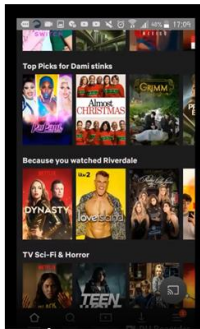
Lily, 9



Samantha, 14



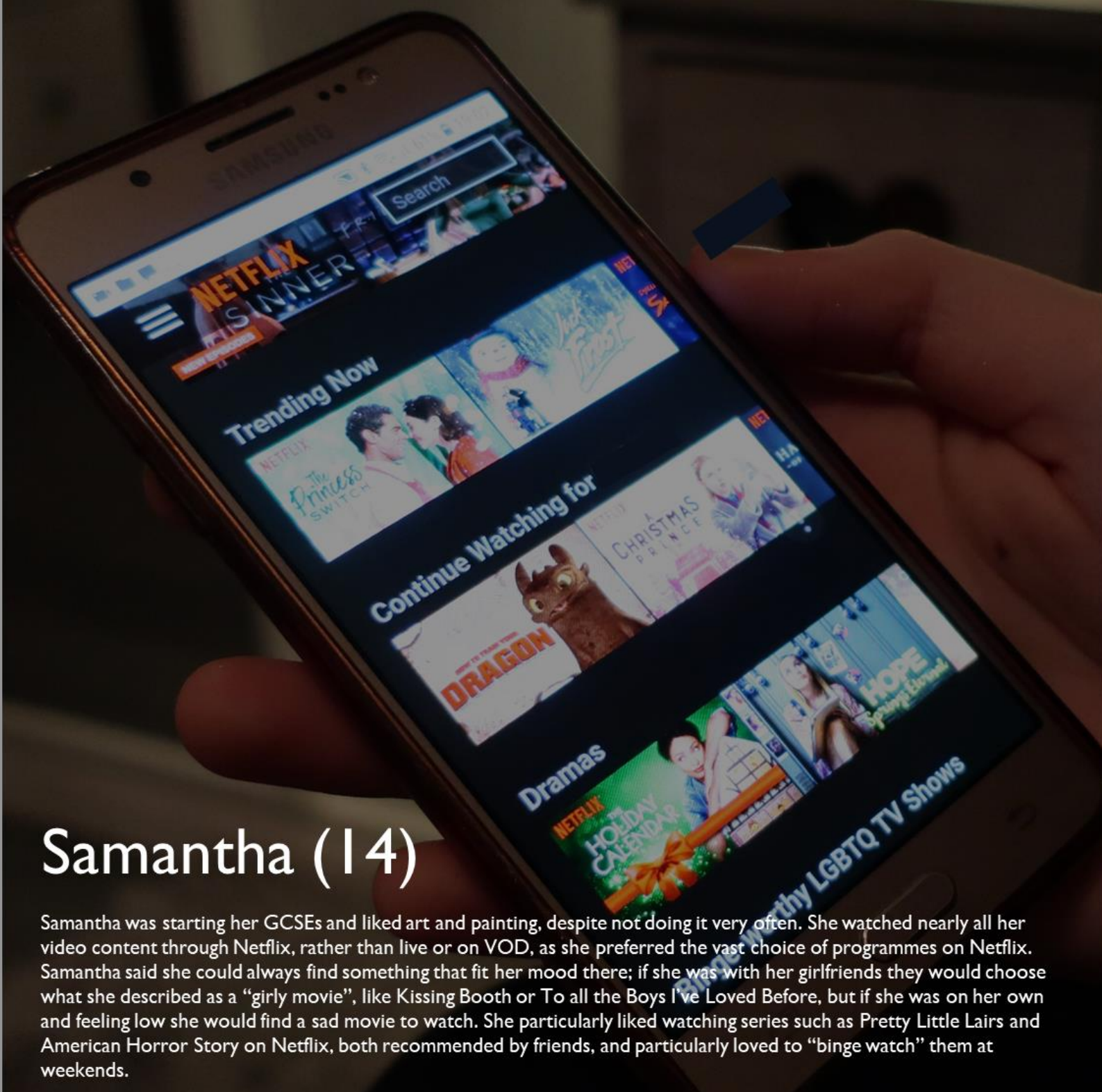
Jerry, 9



Oscar, 13



Adrian, 14



## Samantha (14)

Samantha was starting her GCSEs and liked art and painting, despite not doing it very often. She watched nearly all her video content through Netflix, rather than live or on VOD, as she preferred the vast choice of programmes on Netflix. Samantha said she could always find something that fit her mood there; if she was with her girlfriends they would choose what she described as a “girly movie”, like *Kissing Booth* or *To all the Boys I’ve Loved Before*, but if she was on her own and feeling low she would find a sad movie to watch. She particularly liked watching series such as *Pretty Little Liars* and *American Horror Story* on Netflix, both recommended by friends, and particularly loved to “binge watch” them at weekends.

She also liked the flexibility of Netflix, as she felt “you can change your mind” about what to watch on it easily. She also regularly switched devices during a film or episode. For instance, after school one day, Samantha had started watching *How to Train Your Dragon* in her room on the TV. Later in the evening, she was able to switch to her tablet’s Netflix app, and continue watching the film while she ate her dinner downstairs.

She had watched content on All4 before, using it to watch programmes like *Don’t Tell the Bride* and *Derry Girls*. However she said that often there was “nothing on there I’m interested in”, and that the content on the platform was “mostly reality TV”, which she said bored her.

Samantha liked to watch a range of content on YouTube. Her favorite thing to watch was conspiracy theory videos, her channels of choice being Kendall Rae and BuzzFeed Unsolved. She also enjoyed watching music and DIY craft videos.



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## Why does PSB VOD appeal less?

One of the key objectives for this research was to understand the choices children make around the use of SVOD and PSB VOD services. Through the course of the research it became apparent that children were watching less PSB VOD content than SVOD content. There was some indication of differing perceptions and brand associations corresponding to these two types of platform, as well as variations in content choice and ways of discovering content.

### Perceived limited choice and availability

The appeal of Netflix seemed to be rooted in the perception of immediate accessibility and maximum choice of content. In contrast, most children described their perceptions that platforms such as iPlayer and All4 offered more limited content, or simply in that these platforms were not “for me”.

When exploring children’s perceptions of VOD platforms, it became clear that children tended to associate iPlayer very closely with live BBC TV channels, and All4 with live Channel 4 channels. These platforms were primarily seen as catch-up services for scheduled TV, rather than as on-demand services akin to Netflix. As a result, PSB VOD services were most often used to catch up on specific programmes that children had missed or had not wanted to see live, as opposed to being used to discover new on-demand content.

**Jade, aged 9**, first came across *Extreme Cake Makers* when it was broadcast live on Channel 4 and really enjoyed it. She then started to seek out more episodes of the show specifically by going onto All4 on the family’s smart TV. She also did this with *The Secret Life of the Zoo* after her sister introduced her to it, going to All4 to watch more episodes.

**Isaac, aged 13**, watched the TV series *Informer* on BBC iPlayer after his dad recommended the show. He would go on iPlayer, through the living room TV, to watch the series with his dad. He didn’t watch anything else except this show through the platform. For new content to watch he would go to Netflix, where he had watched *Prison Break* and *Teen Wolf*.

When children were asked more generally about what they thought other people were watching, they categorised most BBC channels (excluding CBBC and CBeebies) as “for adults”. Associating PSB VOD platforms with their live TV counterparts may therefore have contributed more broadly to children’s preference for SVOD platforms which did not have this association.

### Consumption of PSB through SVOD services and online

There were many instances of children watching programmes originally broadcast on live TV through YouTube, Netflix or another SVOD, such as Big Bang Theory, Extreme Cake Makers and Paw Patrol. In these cases, children rarely made the association between the programme and the original channel or broadcaster.

An example of this was **Gina, aged 6**, who really enjoyed watching Horrid Henry. Originally shown live via CITV, Gina preferred to watch episodes of it on YouTube rather than on TV. She most often watched Horrid Henry on her dad's phone, and it had never occurred to her to watch it on another device.

Similarly, **Harry, aged 6**, had not heard much of many of the channels brought up during the interview, such as BBC, Channel 4 or ITV. His mum said that this was because as a family they watched most content on Amazon Prime or Netflix. Because of this the children were not familiar with channels, instead they only knew the specific programmes that they liked to watch.

### On demand PSB content via TV interface

As discussed, in instances where children watched content originally broadcast by a PSB channel, they rarely attributed it to the original channel or broadcaster. In some cases, this appeared to be because they were watching the programme via catch-up services or recording functions built into their TV package interface (e.g. Sky or Virgin box).

For example, **Miranda, aged 9**, liked watching Rich House, Poor House and Rich Kids Go Skint, after her mum recommended them to her. However, as her mum recorded the episodes for her on their Virgin Box, Miranda was unaware that it was a Channel 5 programme. Similarly, **Laura, aged 12**, watched programmes such as Hollyoaks and Simpsons with her family, however, she had very little awareness of the original source of these programmes, as she watched them via the catch-up feature on their Virgin Box.

# Why can't children get enough of YouTube?

A key objective of this research was to understand *why* YouTube has become so popular among children and teenagers, with greater brand recognition and perceived relevance to children their age than live TV channels such as the BBC<sup>10</sup>.

The factors that made YouTube so appealing were explored during the depth interviews, where children explained their habits and preferences on YouTube, and researchers examined their app histories.

## Key findings

- Some of the videos children watched on YouTube were similar to TV programmes in format and content but the majority of them were markedly different. These included vlogs, gaming videos, tutorials, slime and craft videos, and compilations of content.
- The sheer range of content available was part of YouTube's appeal to children.
- They were also attracted by the fact that YouTube is continually refreshed and tailored to their preferences, based on what they've watched or searched for previously.
- Children were, in theory, able to access whatever they wanted to watch, whenever they liked. They did so in three main ways:
  - Searching for the specific content they were after through the platform's search bar
  - Subscribing to channels and getting a notification when new content was available
  - Following recommended videos coming up after the one they had just watched.
- The appeal of YouTube also appeared rooted in the characteristics of specific genres of content.
  - Some children who watched YouTubers and vloggers seemed to feel a sense of connection with them, especially when they believed that they had something in common
  - Many children liked "satisfying" videos which simulated sensory experiences
  - Many consumed videos that allowed them to expand on their interests; sometimes in conjunction to doing activities themselves, but sometimes only pursuing them by watching YouTube videos
  - These historically 'offline' experiences were part of YouTube's attraction, potentially in contrast to the needs fulfilled by traditional TV.

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## How is YouTube a unique world of media?

From observing children's YouTube watching habits and preferred types of content, it is apparent that YouTube offers children something very different from conventional TV.

Several children in the sample were viewing videos that were 'TV-like' in form and style (e.g. episodes, storylines). A few children were also viewing *actual* TV content, including episodes of TV programmes, clips from films or shows, behind the scenes videos, music videos, cartoons and anime.

However, most of the videos children were watching were unlike conventional TV content. Vloggers, gaming videos, tutorials, slime and sensory stimulation videos, crafts and remixed compilations (see pages 20-22 for examples) are all popular genres across children of different ages and genders, some of which are unique to the YouTube platform. Also, children tended to watch much shorter videos on YouTube of between 5 and 20 minutes.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-parents-2017>

Below is a non-exhaustive selection of the many genres of content children were watching on YouTube, distributed across the sample:

	Child	Age	Troy	Gina	Felicity	Harry	Paul	Rhodri	Eva	Freddie	Sacey	Jerry	Jade	Adam	Rae	Lily	Natasha	Craig	James	Miranda	John	Charlie	Lauren	Gus	George	Emma	Luna	Minty	Lee	Jacob	Ellie	Henry	Issac	Oscar	Adrian	Samantha	Georgia	Ralph	Ronald	Fred	Cody	Meredith		
Gaming videos		4	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	W	N	W	N	W	N	N	N	W	W	W	W	W	N	N	W	N	N	W	N	N	W	N	W	W	W	N	N	W	W	W	N	N		
Slime videos		6	N	N	W	W	N	N	W	N	W	N	W	W	W	W	W	N	N	W	N	W	N	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
Make-up tutorials		6	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	W
Craft or hack videos		7	N	N	W	N	N	N	W	W	W	N	N	N	N	W	N	W	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Tutorial videos (e.g. music)		7	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	W	N	W	N	W	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	N
YouTube families		7	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	N	N	N	W	W	W	W	N	N	W	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
Vloggers		8	N	N	W	N	N	N	W	N	N	W	N	W	W	W	W	W	N	W	W	N	W	W	N	N	W	W	N	W	N	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	W	N
TV content		8	W	W	N	N	W	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	N	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	W	W	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N
Music videos		9	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	W	W	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	W	W	N	W	W	W	N	N	N
Other		9	N	W	N	N	W	W	N	N	W	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	W	N	W	W	W	N	W	W	N	N	N	N	N	W	W	N	W	N	W	W	W	W	N	N	N	

Watched	W
Not watched	N

Table 4: Breakdown of the types of content children watched on YouTube, based on the qualitative data collected

There are some other obvious differences in the way YouTube content is distributed and consumed. It is designed first and foremost for consumption on digital and mobile devices, and video links can easily be shared and embedded in social media messages. Content available on YouTube is also unique as users can both create and upload their own content. In this way, the content is generated in a fundamentally different way to TV.

The way content is presented on YouTube also makes for a very different platform experience. For example, videos on YouTube are recommended to individual users with one of the most personalised experiences on the internet.<sup>11</sup> The content available on YouTube is also refreshed second by second by millions of users worldwide, dynamically responding to what is popular. Organisations and individuals alike create and upload content with the sole aim of maximising views, and therefore advertising revenues, making use of YouTube analytics to see exactly what is appealing to users and generating more content of that type.

As a result, the videos available on YouTube adapt rapidly in response to what users watch, making it easier and easier for people to find and discover content that appeals to them. In this research, we found that children could easily access exactly what they wanted to watch and were being served with an endless stream of recommendations tailored exactly to their taste.

<sup>11</sup> YouTube’s content sorting algorithm is one of the most complex and sophisticated recommendation systems in the world. Its key metric for prioritising videos is **time spent** (previously this was click throughs), used in order to maximise the appeal of the videos it recommends to users and avoid ‘click bait’. On top of recommending videos that are thematically related the ones the user has watched and how many other people have viewed them, this system accounts for contextual factors, e.g. recommending shorter videos for users who are accessing YouTube via the smartphone app, and longer videos for those accessing via the TV app. More than 70 per cent of the time people spend watching videos on the site is now driven by YouTube’s algorithmic recommendations. Videos aimed at children are among the most frequently recommended by this system.



## Examples of videos children were watching on YouTube (age 4-9)



PJ Masks Full Episodes | Catboy Scares Catboy and Owlette! | PJ Masks Official  
115,233 views

Troy, aged 4, watched full episodes of PJ masks on his mum's phone when she was out of the house.



How to Make Play Doh Pizza Toy Velcro Cutting with Microwave Oven Baby Toy Appliance for Kids  
11,282,477 views

Paul, aged 7, liked to watch videos of people 'cooking' in toy kitchens on his phone.



ALL GUMMY vs REAL IN ONE VIDEO!!!!  
21,218,333 views

Adam, aged 9, watched Sis vs Bro with his older siblings. This channel involves a brother and sister going head to head on different challenges. Adam liked the competition element to the videos.



Cast\_Angie Part V8  
158,030 views

Jade, aged 9, watched videos of people in full body casts, often of them attempting to do everyday tasks.



WE DO THE IMPOSSIBLE!  
5,448,032 views

Rae, aged 9, liked to watch the Dobre Brothers, who upload vlogs, challenges and pranks. Rae particularly liked a video in which the brothers wore heels for 24hrs.



TRYING FOODS TOFF HAS NEVER LIKED  
45,842 views

Jerry, aged 9, liked to watch Oli White videos. He particularly enjoyed challenge videos starring other YouTubers or famous people, like this video with reality TV personality Toff joining Oli to try foods that she has never liked.

## Examples of videos children were watching on YouTube (age 9-12)



ESCAPING INSANE EVIL SCIENCE LAB IN MINECRAFT!  
146,540 views

Miranda, aged 9, watched Unspeakable Gamer, who posts videos of himself playing Minecraft, a game where you place blocks and create your own worlds.



Crunchy Slime - Satisfying Slime ASMR Video #367  
11,952,342 views

Natasha, aged 10, watched slime videos. In these videos people would play with and manipulate different types of slime.



22 CRAZY HACKS FOR YOUR HOME  
1,012,239 views

Stacey, aged 10, watched 5 minute crafts on YouTube. These videos give ideas on 'hacks' that could 'make your life easier'.



I WON !! (Fortnite Battle Royale)  
824,295 views

Charlie, aged 11, liked to watch all of gaming YouTuber DanTDM's videos. He especially liked his videos on the games Fortnite and Minecraft.



Bongo-Cat - BLACKPINK 'DDU-DU DDU-DU' (K-POP)  
8,325,481 views

Emma, aged 12, liked to watch Bongo Cat videos which portrayed animated cats dancing in time to songs that she liked .



TESTING NEW MAKEUP! CHRISTMAS GLOW UP GRWM | sophdoesnails  
133,999 views

Laura, aged 12, loved watching SophDoesNails videos. She liked watching her chatty makeup tutorials and challenges with fellow youtubers.

## Examples of videos children were watching on YouTube (age 13-16)



MI Channel Theme - EASY Piano Tutorial by PLUKK  
675,681 views

Jacob, 13, liked watching piano tutorials on YouTube to help him when practicing.



SLURPRISE HOLIDAY DESTINATION REVEAL AT THE AIRPORT!  
18,527 views

Georgia, aged 14, watched The Ingham Family, who vlog their daily lives and often go on trips to different destinations.



Return To The Horrifying Worcester Manson  
1,188,322 views

Samantha, aged 14, liked to watch videos on BuzzFeed Unsolved which focused on conspiracy theories.



BEST AND WORST Surprising Songs On The X Factor UK and USA | X Factor Global  
911,250 views

Minty, aged 13, watched clips of the X Factor. She liked watching videos of the best and worst auditions from the programme.



OPENING MY GOLD 1 FUT CHAMPIONS REWARDS! PLEASE HAZARD! - FIFA 19 ULTIMATE TEAN PACK OPENING  
18,289 views

Adrian, aged 14, watched TwoSync's videos everyday. He is a YouTuber with videos focused on the game FIFA, with content including things like opening a FIFA reward packages.



UNFILTERED SEX Q&A: ASK US ANYTHING feat. Chlo  
802,993 views

Meredith, aged 16, loved to watch Grace Fit videos, specifically her 'girlie chat' videos which touch upon topics from skincare to relationships.

## How do children find what they want to watch?

Children's approach to YouTube was distinctly different to their VOD and live TV behaviours. They usually watched multiple videos consecutively, and some were flicking between different types of content or accessed new videos through their suggested 'up next' and auto play.

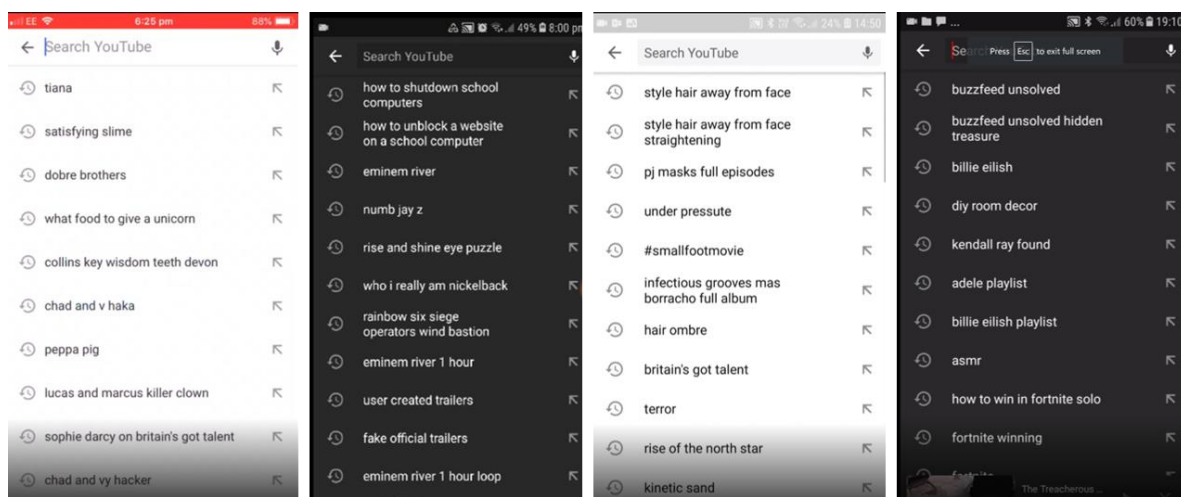
Children's viewing was also less focused than it was on PSB VOD players and live TV; they were not necessarily entering the platform with a clear idea of what they wanted to watch, but were relying on their recommendations or subscriptions to find something tailored to them. For many children, the sheer variety and volume of content available meant that YouTube was their first port of call when they were bored or seeking video content. It also gave them access to a wide range of types of videos, from tutorials to slime videos.

For example, **Georgia, aged 14**, found that her days felt quite unstructured now that she had left school to be home-educated. While she accessed content in a range of ways, including via on demand players (mainly Now TV), and by watching live television, YouTube seemed to be her platform of choice. She described time she spent "panning through YouTube", and that she never failed to find something she wanted to watch. This was her go-to activity whenever she found herself bored of watching films or crime dramas with her mum on TV.

Indeed, YouTube has several routes for users to find content that they want to watch, and the main ones used by children in this research were searching, subscribing and following recommendations.

### Searching

Some had a clear idea of what they were looking for, and simply entered key words into the search bar. For example, **Rae, aged 9**, and her younger brother searched directly for things they liked (e.g. Peppa Pig) using the YouTube search bar on the YouTube app. In general, this gave them instant access to exactly what they were looking for. However, her brother had accidentally stumbled across a rude 'Peppa Pig Big Shaq' video, in which somebody had dubbed over an episode of Peppa Pig with the voice of rapper Big Shaq. He had come across a few of these videos by searching 'Peppa Pig funny', using the search bar at the top of the homepage. He had initially wanted to find funny clips of original episodes of Peppa Pig, which was one of his favourite programmes, but had found these videos of Peppa with voiceover very funny too and so had begun to search directly for these using the designated bar.



Rae, 9

Ronald, 15

Troy, 4

Samantha, 14

*“If I watch it [a video] quite a lot then it would already be up there [on her searches], but if not then you would type in what you want to watch, and it will come up there”* Rae, aged 9

Similarly, **Paul, aged 7**, who particularly liked Supa Strikas, an animation based on a football-themed comic, used the search bar even when he did not know how to spell his initial search term. He used Google’s voice recognition to work out the correct spelling so that he could browse for what he wanted without assistance from his mum.

*“I ask Google how to spell a word then I copy it into YouTube”* Paul, aged 7

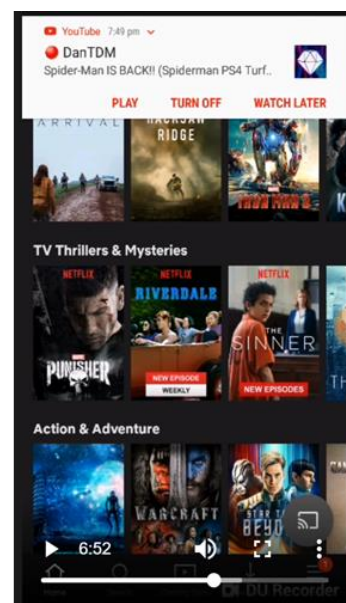
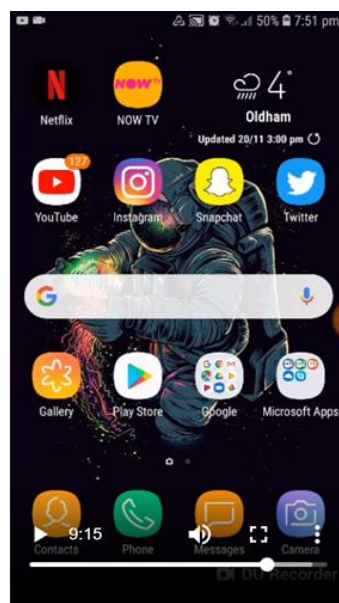
Common search terms used by some children to find the videos they wanted were “funny”, “satisfying” and “challenge”.

### Subscribing

Rather than searching, some children subscribed to the specific YouTube channels that they liked. Around a quarter of the sample subscribed to YouTube channels, with each child subscribing to around 20 to 40 channels. This allowed them to simply refer to their personalised list of channels and immediately see what was new for them to watch.

All of those that subscribed also received **notifications** when a new video had been uploaded to one of their channels, prompting them to engage at that moment or at a later point.

**Fred, aged 15**, received regular notifications throughout the day from YouTube when his favourite YouTubers uploaded new videos (see below). He would usually watch them straight away, or if he was busy, return to them later. Fred would also keep track of his favourite YouTubers via their social media profiles, for example on Instagram, where it would show a short preview of the latest video and a link to the full video on YouTube.



## Following recommendations

The majority of children in the sample also watched content that YouTube ‘recommended’<sup>12</sup> to them based on their past viewing. **Charlie, aged 11**, spent a lot of his time when he wasn’t playing Fortnite or Minecraft watching gaming videos. He really enjoyed seeing other people playing the games to a high level, and often followed recommended videos to find more of this type of content. As a result, he felt he could “never run out” of things to watch on YouTube.

“*On YouTube you never run out of things to watch*” Charlie, aged 11

**Oscar, aged 13**, subscribed to dozens of YouTube channels. He was a particularly avid follower of illustration YouTubers such as Draw with Jazza, and YouTube channels showing science experiments. Oscar also spent hours watching recommended content, and described how this gave him the freedom to discover new things that he didn’t realise he was interested in. He did, however, sometimes find the amount of choice a bit overwhelming.

“*Some days I just keep browsing and don’t watch anything*” Oscar, aged 13

**Emma, aged 12**, had also discovered new interests by watching recommended videos. For example, she had been recommended K-pop (Korean pop) videos because she watched lots of anime. As a result, she had become a big fan of K-pop, and was grateful to have been introduced to it in this way.

“*I started noticing YouTube suggesting videos of K-pop, so I started watching them to find out what they were*” Emma, aged 12

## What drives children’s content choices on YouTube?

To explore why YouTube is so popular, this research probed the motivations driving content choices, and the specific needs that different sorts of YouTube content appeared to be meeting for the children.

Some children described relating to and feeling a sense of personal connection with YouTube personalities. For others, YouTube content seemed to simulate ‘real life’ physical or sensory experiences.

In this context, it is interesting to consider whether what was attracting children to some YouTube content was the online fulfilment of needs or experiences that previously would have been solely offline through hobbies, interests and spending time with other people. If so, children’s motivations for watching this kind of content on YouTube might be quite different from the reasons why previous generations watched TV.

This question will be explored in the following sections of this chapter.

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<sup>12</sup> YouTube’s content sorting algorithm is one of the most complex and sophisticated recommendation systems in the world. Its key metric for prioritising videos is **time spent** (previously this was click throughs), used in order to maximise the appeal of the videos it recommends to users and avoid ‘click bait’. On top of recommending videos that are thematically related to the ones the user has watched and how many other people have viewed them, this system accounts for contextual factors, e.g. recommending shorter videos for users who are accessing YouTube via the smartphone app, and longer videos for those accessing via the TV app. More than 70 per cent of the time people spend watching videos on the site is now driven by YouTube’s algorithmic recommendations. Videos aimed at children are among the most frequently recommended by this system.



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## Connecting with YouTubers

### Children had curiosity for other people's lifestyles

For some children, watching certain vloggers seemed to satisfy an interest and curiosity in how other people live. For example, some children followed family vloggers who posted videos about family life, their adventures and travels. This was particularly appealing for **Georgia, aged 14**, who followed several vlogger families who record their day to day lives. Her favourite was The Ingham Family, a British family with young children, who posted new videos that Georgia watched every day at 5pm. For Georgia, part of the appeal of these families was their 'realness'; she was intrigued by their everyday routines and noted that they were not so different to those of her own family. She also described how one YouTube family, The FizzFam, lived quite near to her dad's house in Brighton.

“*They are just normal people*” Georgia, aged 14

Georgia also liked these families because they had experiences that were different to her own; she described how she and her brother had never been abroad, so they especially enjoyed seeing the places that their vlogger families travelled to.

**Natasha, aged 9**, also loved vlogger families. She eagerly followed The Ingham Family and enjoyed the funny stories they told together. She was also a fan of Norris Nuts, another YouTube family from Australia; she particularly enjoyed them because she was interested in how the life of children in Australia compared to hers. She mentioned that she liked that the children were good skaters and found them entertaining to watch. In general, it seemed that Natasha particularly liked to see whole families from different places doing fun activities together, perhaps because of the differences from her own family life.

“*I love to see what children from other places do*” Natasha, aged 9

**Miranda, aged 9**, liked watching the YouTuber Azzyland, a Canadian gamer and cosplayer (performance art where participants wear costumes to represent a character) who makes a variety of different YouTube videos, including makeup tutorials, challenge videos and vlogs. Miranda liked watching her vlogs because she thought she did “lots of cool things” and she liked that she learned loads of “weird, random stuff from her.” Azzyland also made Minecraft gaming videos, something Miranda liked watching because she played Minecraft too and it was fun to watch someone else doing it. She watched YouTube on her tablet because the TV was often being used by her young cousin.

**Jade, aged 9**, occasionally watched videos of people who had been put into full body casts. She initially found them on the YouTube homepage and was curious, but now searched for the specific channel Castgips or Braced Life. She did not appear to realise that the cast videos could be categorised as 'adult' content. Instead she found them unusual and funny as she knew participants were not actually hurt. She preferred watching content of situations and people who were different to her and her life, doing things she could not do.

For these reasons she did not like most vloggers and found their videos “too much about them.” Overall, many respondents had a sense of intrigue into other people’s lives whether they were similar or different.

### **Many children followed YouTubers who they felt they could relate to personally in some way**

This perceived feeling of intimacy with YouTubers was often described in terms of the ‘realness’ of vloggers. It appeared that their ordinariness appealed to the children, who enjoyed the more personal feeling that they were able to generate. While their content varied a lot, from make-up tutorials to sketch comedy, vloggers were all consistent in their ability to be able to create a connection with their audience.

For example, **Charlie, aged 11**, subscribed to the gamer Dan TDM’s channel, and routinely watched every video uploaded by the account after receiving a notification, irrespective of its specific content. He seemed to feel that every video posted by Dan TDM was worth watching. Charlie saw the YouTuber as a role model, and admired him because of his success, marvelling at the fact that, after starting his channel in 2011, he had now over 20 million subscribers. Furthermore, Charlie felt Dan TDM shared many of his interests when it came to gaming, saying: “e plays a lot of games that I like.” While Dan TDM seemed to be his favourite, Charlie also watched a number of other professional gamers on YouTube. He enjoyed learning about their personal lives and watching them exhibiting their skills in the games.

“*I like to see what they’re doing and showing off*” Charlie, aged 11

Similarly, **Felicity, aged 6**, followed the YouTuber JoJo Siwa, a 15-year-old American dancer, actress and singer, who uploads a varied selection of content. Both Felicity and her sister collected JoJo Siwa’s hair bows, and Felicity had even written JoJo a letter telling her how much she loved her. They had also recently been inspired to make their own YouTube video, filming themselves playing the piano. Felicity also loved to dance, and so really looked up to JoJo as a role model.

### **In some cases, the YouTuber’s personality seemed to be the main motivation to watch a video, as opposed to the content itself**

Several children who followed specific YouTubers, like Charlie, did so very committedly and would try to watch all their favourite YouTuber’s videos as they came out. This loyalty sometimes seemed to be irrespective of the subject that the YouTuber was talking about. Children often seemed more interested in the individuals they were watching - their lives and personalities - than in the specific content of the videos themselves.

**Rae, aged 9**, liked watching vloggers the Dobre Brothers, after coming across them on her YouTube home screen two years ago. They post prank and challenge videos as well as vlogs of their day to day life. She thought the pair were very funny to watch and she watched all the videos they made, which they uploaded every Friday and Saturday. If she missed Friday’s episode she made sure to catch up, watching it on her phone on Saturday morning.

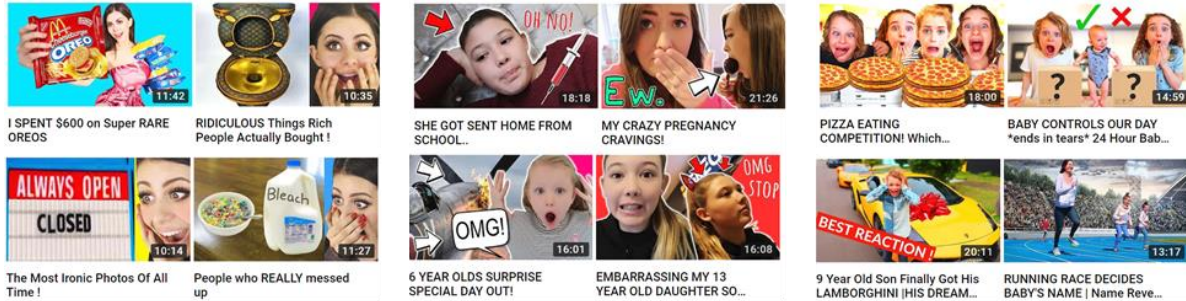
### **Some children saw YouTubers as a source of advice or guidance**

Some YouTubers provided more personal content, talking about their own private experiences in order to offer real-life advice to their followers. For example, **Laura, aged 12**, initially followed the beauty and lifestyle vlogger SophDoesNails for her make-up tips, however, more recently she had found her videos to be relatable and helpful in guiding her through certain challenges that she was facing with her friends at school.

“*[SophDoesNails] has been through school already, so she knows what it’s like*” Laura, aged 12



SophDoesNails was popular with several other children, including **Lily, aged 9**. Lily’s mum said that she could easily spend up to three hours at a time watching her make up tutorials and that when she did she became “mesmerised”. Lily referred to SophDoesNails as “inspirational” and her “role model”. She had recently posted a video talking about bullying and Lily had found this particularly inspiring. **Meredith, aged 16**, initially began to follow GraceFit for her fitness tips, however, more recently she has enjoyed the videos which offered more real-life advice, on a variety of topics from careers to relationships.



Miranda (9) likes Azzyland

Georgia (14) likes the Ingham Family of Five

Natasha (9) likes the Norris Nuts family

# Meredith (16)

Meredith and her younger brother (12) swapped between living at their mother's and father's homes on a weekly basis, as their parents had divorced a couple of years previously. Meredith very much looked up to her mum, whom she saw as a role model because of the dedication she showed to her work, which had led her to run her own estate agency business.

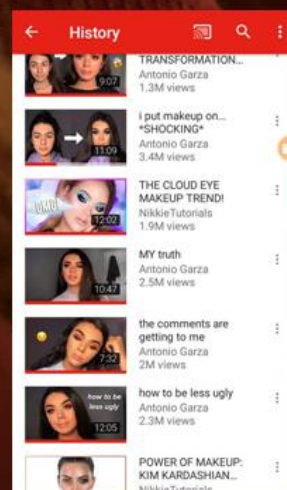
Shortly before her interview, Meredith had decided to quit Sixth Form to begin an apprenticeship at her mum's estate agency, partly because of social issues at school. It seemed that while she did have a small group of friends at school, whom she would go shopping with at the weekend, Meredith was also very aware of not quite fitting in.

*"Girls can be quite funny and 'switchy'. You're either in a group or you're not"*

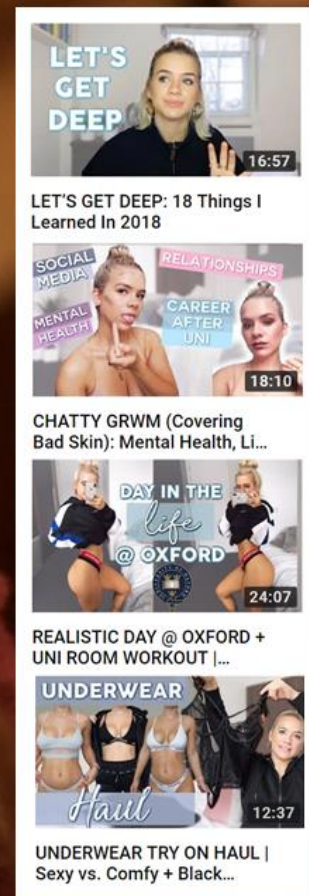
Meredith subscribed to fitness and lifestyle YouTuber GraceFit's channel. To Meredith, GraceFit represented a more "real" alternative to other media figures, such as reality TV stars from *The Only Way is Essex* (ITV2), whom she followed on Instagram. She thought they seemed to be "fake" and their lifestyle more unachievable, as they always appeared very polished, often posing in high-end homes. In contrast, Meredith described how Grace presented herself online without any makeup on, and how she talked to her viewers as though they were her closest friends.

*"I watch GraceFit because I like her, even though I don't know her. She is a source of advice about 'girly chat' type things"*

While predominantly posting fitness videos, GraceFit also shared content that Meredith felt were relevant to her life, including videos like 'Boyfriends, gossip sites & insecurities: personal Q & A', and 'Mental health, Life After Uni, Relationships and Career Goals'. In particular, Meredith felt that the 'girly chat' videos that GraceFit posted were a great source of advice.



Meredith's most recently watched YouTube videos



GraceFit videos in Meredith's YouTube history



## Engaging the senses

Throughout the sample, many children of different ages were watching videos whose appeal seemed to be related to their sensory or tactile nature, beyond the normal audio and visual features of video content. These often fell under key search words such as “satisfying” and “oddly satisfying”<sup>13</sup>. Videos typically involved compilations of different tactile or textural materials being manipulated by the video maker’s hands in different ‘satisfying’ ways.

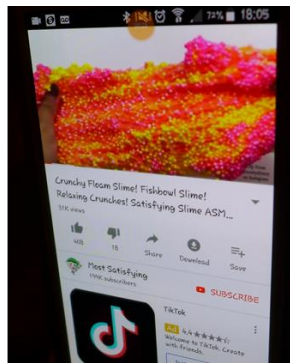
A great number of these videos, particularly popular among children under 10 in the sample, involve so-called ‘slime’, a malleable and sticky substance made by mixing sodium borate and water. Slime videos are made and uploaded to YouTube by both adults and children, often without the need for speech, and many have gained over one million views. This is thought to be because of their ‘oddly satisfying’ quality.



Lily, age 9 – “oddly satisfying” videos on Instagram



Rae, age 9 – “satisfying soap hacks” on YouTube



Natasha, age 9 – “crunchy foam slime” on YouTube



Eva, age 7 – “Giant stress relievers DIY” on YouTube

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/778844cf-4e3c-4b1c-ba76-24fb0a9cd8d9>

Popular with the children in this sample were videos of people squashing slime, making different shapes with it and using different colours to produce visually striking slime. Channels watched included Satisfying Slime ASMR<sup>14</sup> and Will it Slime?

Other videos watched by children involved manipulating, cutting up or melting soap, candles, modelling clay and kinetic sand.

**Rae, aged 9**, loved watching slime videos on YouTube. These videos would involve people squashing different types of slime so that it made noises. Rae commented that she loved the popping sound the slime made. She also liked the variety of slime that people had created and put on YouTube, such as magnetic or rainbow coloured one. She would often watch these videos when she got bored of watching Netflix. She had also followed the techniques shown in the slime videos while making her own slime, and particularly liked making the 'Instagram slime' shape, which is a swirl shape created by rolling out and then twisting the slime.

*"I like watching it because it's so satisfying... I like the sound the slime makes, that popping sound"* Rae, aged 9

**Natasha, aged 9**, also particularly loved slime, and enjoyed both making it and watching YouTube videos about it. One of her favourite activities was buying ingredients on Amazon to make it with her sister, although her mum was not too keen on it because of the mess they made. Slime was very popular among Natasha's schoolmates, and so were the videos which they often watched together. Natasha seemed to like them because of their hypnotising and relaxing nature.

*"They're satisfying, and I love crafts"* Natasha, aged 9

Although **Ellie, aged 13**, didn't play with slime herself and hardly watched any slime videos, she did have a slime simulator app on her tablet that she occasionally went on when she was bored. The slime app enabled her to create her own slime and to interact with it on the screen just like she would with real slime. Even if this was just an app on her device, she found playing with her slime creations very satisfying.

A further subtype and keyword frequent in the genre of 'oddly satisfying videos' was 'ASMR'<sup>15</sup>. A small number of children sought out satisfying videos created specifically to elicit ASMR (Autonomous sensory meridian response) – referring to a variety of soothing sensations (e.g. tingles, relaxation and sleepiness). This response can be triggered for some people by certain auditory stimuli, such as tapping, scratching, whispering and blowing sounds, as well as visual stimuli, such as hand movements. **Adrian, aged 14**, watched ASMR videos before he went to bed in order to relax. Similarly, **Samantha, aged 14**, liked the new phase of ASMR videos, specifically the ones of people whispering into a microphone.

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<sup>14</sup> ASMR (Autonomous sensory meridian response) is the term used to describe the static-like tingling sensation that can be experienced across the scalp and neck when a person is exposed to particular types of visual or auditory stimuli. The four components of the term define the character of the phenomenon as follows: Autonomous – spontaneous, self-governing, with or without control; Sensory – pertaining to the senses or sensation; Meridian – signifying a peak, climax, or point of highest development; Response – referring to an experience triggered by something external or internal. The best known auditory trigger of ASMR is light whispering, however the sensation has also been reported in relation to crisp sounds or slow movements. The tingling sensation is also often described as coinciding with a feeling of intense relaxation, and the use of the ASMR mechanism to treat stress-relief and depression has been widely speculated. However, to date there has been no rigorous, scientific exploration of the phenomenon or its therapeutic application. Nonetheless, a growing body of video media produced with the specific intent of eliciting ASMR has now been amassed both on YouTube and other video sharing platforms.  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4380153/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK453209/> / Giulia Poerio, 'The Restless Compendium: Interdisciplinary Investigations of Rest and its Opposites' Chapter 15

## Felicity (6)

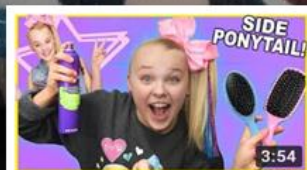
Felicity lived with her older sister (aged 8) and her parents just outside of Glasgow. She was an example of a child who used YouTube alongside offline play, primarily as a source of inspiration for activities she did at home. For example, she had recently received a prankster game which led her to look up prank videos on YouTube. She had come across a video titled 'Halloween Pranks', and after watching it she filled Oreos with toothpaste and gave them to her dad to eat.

Felicity shared a playroom with her sister which her mum didn't mind getting messy, so they used it to make slime and various other arts and crafts activities. Felicity often went on YouTube to find out how to make different sorts of slime.

Felicity also watched Jojo Siwa videos on YouTube (an American singer, actress and YouTube star). This inspired her to produce her own videos on a tablet with her sister, who often played the piano in them, although they had not uploaded these to YouTube. Felicity had a huge collection of Jojo Siwa merchandise 'bows' and had recently sent her fan mail, demonstrating how much she liked the YouTuber.

Other toys such as Barbies and LOL dolls also inspired the content she consumed, as she often watched YouTube videos of those dolls over breakfast before school.

Apart from her older sister, Felicity's neighbour was another key influence in her media life. She introduced Felicity to "flying bottoms" videos, which the sisters loved to watch together in their bedrooms so that their mum didn't see. Felicity's mum often checked their YouTube history and usually intervened if she could hear them laughing too much, suspicious that they were watching something inappropriate.



HOW I DO MY HAIR EVERYDAY!!! (Side ponytail...



THE BEST DAY OF MY LIFE!! \*\*HUGE SURPRISE\*\*

Felicity watched Jojo Siwa on YouTube and collected "Jojo bows" (Jojo Siwa's merchandise)



Felicity played with Barbies with her sister, and also played on the dress-up app on her iPad



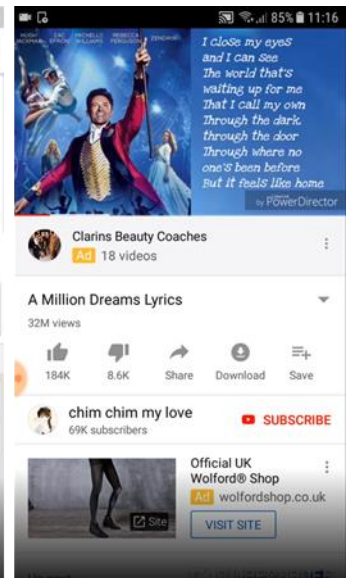
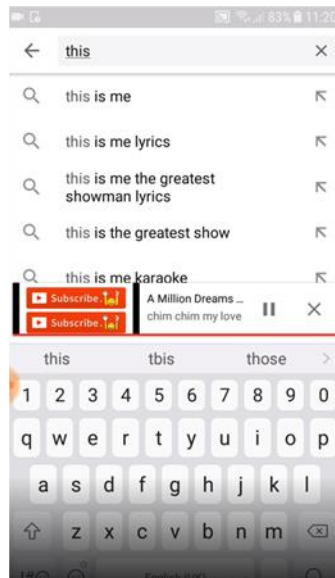
Felicity collected LOL dolls, and also watched videos about them on YouTube



## Feeding interests

The appeal of YouTube for many of the children in the sample seemed to be that they were able to feed and advance their interests and hobbies through it. Due to the variety of content available on the platform, children were able to find videos that corresponded with interests they had spoken about enjoying offline; these included crafts, sports, drawing, music, make-up and science. Notably, in some cases, children were watching people on YouTube pursuing hobbies that they did not do themselves or had recently given up offline.

### Many children used YouTube to advance offline interests



Many children watched videos that related to their offline interests or hobbies, and YouTube was often able to offer content which gave them tips or inspiration to further these interests.

For example, **Minty, aged 12**, had taught herself the guitar with the help of tutorial videos on YouTube. Her grandad had been a guitarist in a jazz band, and Minty hoped one day to go into the music industry herself. She also loved to watch music videos of her favourite artists on YouTube, current favourites being Adele and Little

Mix. Minty described how YouTube had allowed her to expand her music tastes beyond pop, and she had recently realised her love of rock music via YouTube too.

“*I listen to stuff that I didn’t think I would like*” Minty, aged 12

Similarly, **Stacey, aged 10**, loved crafts and had been making bracelets to sell at her local Christmas fair. She often watched craft and hack videos on YouTube, saving the ones she liked on her ‘watch later’ page so that she could try them out for herself. She had recently been inspired to try a hack in which she used a straw to separate her jewellery out. Stacey wanted to make more of what she had seen on the hack videos but did not always have the materials to do so.

“*I like it because you can find loads of useful hacks... most need a glue gun which we don’t have... they are still fun to watch.*” Stacey, aged 10

**Laura, aged 12**, was passionate about makeup, painting and photography. She hoped to become a wedding photographer or a makeup artist, and this was reflected in her YouTube viewing history which consisted mostly of makeup tutorials and photography ‘tips’ videos.

**Gina, aged 6**, really enjoyed singing in the school choir and dancing. These hobbies were extended by using YouTube as an interactive platform. For example, one of her favourite things to do was to sing along to videos of song lyrics, most recently of the Greatest Showman soundtrack. She also liked to watch screen records from people playing Just Dance videos and would dance along in time (see below).

### **There were also cases of children watching people doing activities that they had lapsed in doing themselves, or in some cases had never done themselves**

For example, **Oscar, aged 13**, had become an enthusiastic sketcher when his class had started doing life-drawing in art at school. As a result, he had begun following the illustration YouTuber ‘Draw with Jazza’ to get tips. While at first Jazza had been a source of inspiration for Oscar’s own drawing, more recently he had found himself doing less sketching of his own. Oscar described how sometimes it was just as gratifying just to watch Jazza, and it involved less effort.

“*I haven’t drawn that much recently for some reason... it’s kind of easier just to watch Jazza*” Oscar, aged 13

**Samantha, aged 14**, despite describing herself as “very arty”. However, other than recently entering a Halloween costume design competition, she rarely had actually tried any crafts, drawing or painting. Instead, she watched DIY craft videos on YouTube. She watched videos such as ‘DIY room décor’ and ‘DIY clothes hacks and fashion tricks’.

“*I don’t actually do the stuff in the [DIY] videos but I just like watching them*” Samantha, aged 14

Similarly, **Fred, aged 15**, used to be passionate about riding his scooter. However, he has stopped pursuing this hobby himself and replaced it with staying in and watching pro scooter riders on YouTube. He also spent a lot of time on Amazon Prime and playing games such as Fornite, Forza and Call of Duty. While he kept in touch with his friends through messaging features on his games, he hardly saw them outside of school and spent very little time with his family. Fred explained that sometimes he got so carried away watching YouTube that he would “miss the opportunity to go riding”

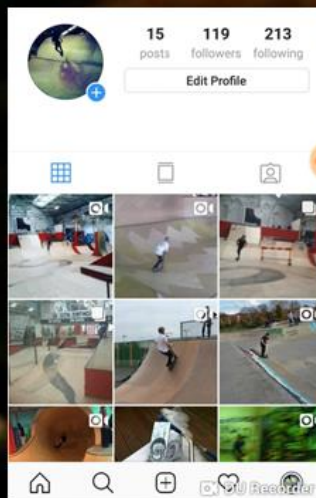
# Fred (15)

Fred was the oldest of five siblings (aged 10, 4, 2 and 2) and lived with both of his parents in Leeds. He used to enjoy going to the skate park and riding his scooter with his friends all the time. He said he was known to be the best in the school on a scooter among his friends, and posted videos of his tricks on his Instagram profile.

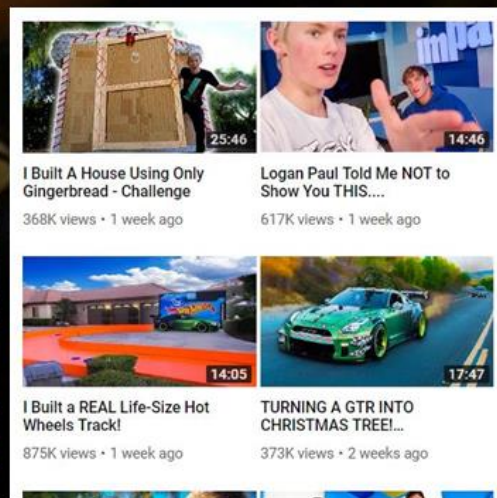
In the last year, Fred had completely stopped riding his scooter. This was partly because he felt it had led him to get into the “wrong crowd”. However, he also felt that the time he spent “scootering” had been replaced by media activities such as playing games or watching YouTube and programmes on Amazon Prime. His life outside school revolved around these activities and he admitted that he spent at least 5 hours everyday after school on them. In recent months he had also spent significantly less time with his family and friends.

While he had stopped riding his scooter in real life, Fred watched a lot of video content relating to it. He followed professional scooter riders and YouTubers Tanner Fox and Roman Atwood on both YouTube and Instagram. Fred got notifications from both platforms every time they posted something new and viewed it as soon as he could.

Fred also loved playing car racing games, and had developed an interest in cars. He said that he attributed his passion for them to his games and that he would like to be a mechanic when he grows up.



Fred's own Instagram posts of his scooter tricks



Fred's favourite pro scooter rider was Tanner Fox – Fred watched all his YouTube videos about skating, cars and his lifestyle



The car games Fred played and the videos he watched about cars ignited his interest in them





## Conclusions

This research explored what children are watching and why. It investigated the devices and platforms on which they are viewing content, how they discover the content they watch, and how this relates to their wider lives and interests.

YouTube was the most popular platform. It was where children most liked to find and watch content, and the place they did so most frequently – many of them every day.

Much of the content they watched on YouTube appeared driven by a wish to:

- feel a connection with people similar to – or different from – them, for example vloggers
- experience sensory exploration and stimulation, such as watching slime videos
- explore their own hobbies and interests, including 'how to' videos for crafts or activities.

At the same time, the children weren't spending a lot of time meeting their friends face to face, playing outdoors or physically pursuing hobbies or interests. This was also seen in our previous work for Ofcom, Children Media Lives Year 5, when at the time of fieldwork in May-August 2018, apart from organised activities, children were spending an increasingly more time alone in their rooms after school.

The children loved being able to find whatever they wanted, whenever they liked. As YouTube responds to demand, it can offer a seemingly limitless choice of content. YouTube offers everything they could possibly want, and then allows them to easily access more of what they like the most.

Children like Netflix for similar reasons. They see it as offering instant availability of content and vast choice. They say Netflix's recommendations make it easy to find content they want to watch, and content which is most relevant to them.

Content on Netflix is often recommended by friends and family, reinforcing the platform's familiarity and favourability.

In contrast, children think of PSB VOD platforms as catch-up services for their live TV counterparts, as opposed to platforms through which they can find a wide range of new and relevant content. They perceive them as offering less choice of content, and believe – rightly or wrongly – that content is not available over the longer term.

Some children watch PSB-originated content on services such as Netflix and Amazon. However, they don't realise or notice that it's from a particular channel, and so don't consider using that channel's video on demand platform as a destination to find further content.

Live TV is explicitly thought of by the children and their parents as an opportunity for "family time", when they all sit down to watch something together. However, the children tended to feel that they weren't choosing the

content themselves, or it was a compromised choice. At other times children put live TV on for a few minutes as a 'time filler' while they were waiting for something or had a few minutes to spare.

Overall, children seem most attracted to content that they can view on their **own device**, over which they can exercise **maximum choice**, and which directly feeds the things that **interest them**.

# Appendix I: Research methodology

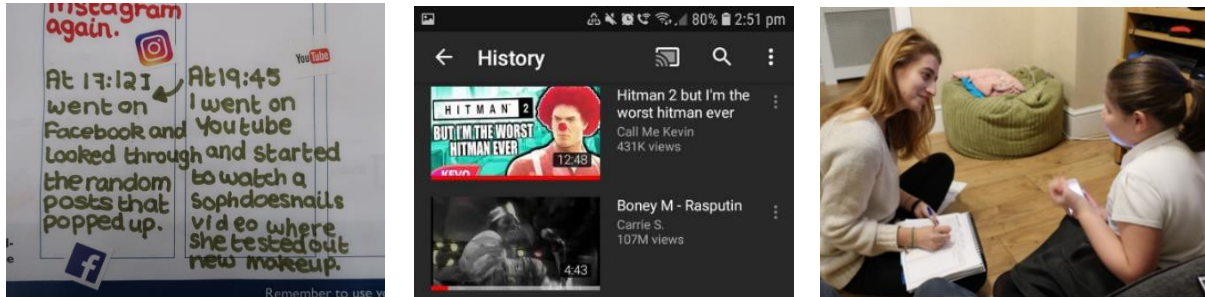
Our sample of 40 respondents were selected to be representative of a cross-section of the UK, with a broad spread of socio-economic segmentation. The sample consisted of an age range between 4-16 with a variation of only children as well as children with older and younger siblings, living in a mixture of suburban, urban and rural areas, and in a range of social backgrounds.



Below is the distribution of ages in the sample according to geographical region:

	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
England (South)	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
England (North)	0	0	2	1	0	0	3	0	2	2	0	3	0
England (Midlands)	1	0	0	1	0	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
Wales	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Scotland	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0
Northern Ireland	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	0	1	0	0

The respondents each completed a media diary over the course of a week, in which they filled out what they were watching, on which device and platform, and who they were watching with. Over the same period, they uploaded 'screen record' videos of how they were using their video apps, browser histories and app usage. This provided extensive detail about the content they engaged with during this time.



Researchers compiled a list of programmes watched by the children over the course of the week, to be expanded upon in the in-depth interviews. This data capture was followed by in-depth interviews, each lasting 2-3 hours, which explored specific content respondents watched and the motivations behind their watching. This also allowed researchers to explore who the children were watching the content with, and whether this might have an impact on what types of content they had been watching. In this way, researchers were able to use both types of data to capture respondent's self-reported attitudes and behaviours and compare this with evidence of their actual behaviour from their screen recordings and browser histories.