Digital technologies, children and young people's relationships and self-care

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Children's and young people's access to and use of digital technologies have received increasing attention in recent years. While influential UK media commentators have often focused on associated risks, researchers have taken a less exclusively problem-focused approach. Children and young people's use of, for example, social media and computer games to extend the spaces available to them in which to maintain relationships, to experiment with social identities, and to engage in an 'economy of dignity', however fragile, have all been highlighted. This paper builds on this work to further consider the role of such resources, accessed primarily through computers and mobile phones, as means of caring for oneself or 'self-care'. It draws on a qualitative study which employed visual and audial methods to explore the sense of belonging (or not) of young people who have been 'looked after' by others than their biological parents, often in less affluent circumstances.

Keywords: children and young people; self-care; relationships; looked after children; digital technologies; internet

Media commentary on children and young people's possession and use of computers and mobile phones has often criticised children's consumption as a reflection of the alleged superficiality of contemporary culture, while also highlighting risks relating to the use of associated technologies (Buckingham 2011). Sociological research into these matters has taken a less exclusively problem-focused approach, identifying some risks but also pointing to the potential benefits of these technologies in terms of belonging within an 'economy of dignity' (Pugh 2009), maintaining pre-existing relationships, and extending the spaces available to young people to experiment with (or 'essay') identities in relative safety (Moore 2011; Ruckenstein 2013).

This paper focuses on a two-year project exploring belonging among 'looked after' children[1] in Scotland that drew inspiration from influential work on the importance of material objects (Miller 2010), domestic practices (Morgan 1996) and sensory experience (Mason and Davies 2010) to relationships and feelings of belonging. Illustrating what Miller (2010, 94) calls the 'social good of communication', this research also highlighted the use children and young people may make of mobile phones, computers and of technologies accessed through these items (such as youtube™, facebook™ and games consoles[2]) to make and maintain meaningful relationships and to essay identities, as highlighted in the literature. Indeed, it may be that the significance of these technologies is heightened for such young people who had often experienced

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multiple placements sometimes far from significant others, or who were living alone having left 'care'. In this paper, it is further argued that the use of such items may also constitute resources for taking care of oneself, or for what might tentatively be called 'technologies of self-care', in dealing with difficult legacies in sometimes adverse material and emotional circumstances.

The first section will consider existing theory and research relating to children and young people's possession and use of such items, and the functions and technologies accessed through them, before further introducing the study on which this paper is based. After presenting data from this project, the discussion section will focus on how these data relate to and build upon the current literature, pointing to the importance, but also to the limitations, of the self-care revealed and suggesting avenues for future research.

Theoretical background

Buckingham emphasises that British children's consumption in general, and of computers, and internet and digital technologies in particular, has often been presented as 'harmful or morally undesirable' (2011, 23). He highlights how in her little evidenced, but highly influential, book 'Toxic Childhoods' (2006), Palmer associates consumption with the 'disappearance' of childhood and with the 'crisis' of the modern (and particularly working class) family, arguing that as a result, children can no longer defer gratification. Similar arguments have been made in the USA (Linn 2004). As Miller (2010) identifies, such accounts draw on a long history of associating 'consumer societies' with the development of superficial, non-social selves. Recent influential examples include Bauman (1997) who argues that consumerism (alongside deregulation) is destroying any sense of responsibility for others and, therefore, the possibility of truly intimate relationships.

In contrast, Miller (2010, 4) argues that such perspectives reflect 'an attempt to retain a rather simplistic and false view of pure unsullied humanity'. He criticises any such universal notions of humanity, as well as the predominant focus on function, in exploring relationships between humans and objects. Drawing on Hegel and Simmel, he calls for a more dialectical approach between people (whether adults or children) and their material reality, allowing for the possibility that 'the whole system of things, with their internal order, makes us the people we are', and that selfhood may, but also may not be, oppressed by 'stuff' (2010, 53).

Other work on children's material cultures takes a similar approach. Whilst critical of the way that the commercialisation of childhood is 'shaping what it means to care and what it means to belong' (2009, 5), Pugh has no doubt as to its importance to US parents and their children. Like Buckingham, therefore, she does not draw a clear boundary line between parents' and children's consumption, nor assume that either may be easily separated from the broader communities in which they live. Her ethnographic work (2009) explains the significance of consumer items, in both affluent and less affluent US households, in relation to participation in an 'economy of dignity'. By 'dignity' (2009, 51), she means the ability to join in with, speak to and be heard by others, and, in particular, by peers. She interprets the importance of particular items, including games consoles for boys, as a form of 'scrip', allowing their owners to participate as 'citizens within their public spheres' (2009, 54) and, importantly, providing evidence to themselves and to others of being cared for (2009, 64). Furthermore, she found that those children who were excluded from such participation needed to engage in 'facework' to manage salient differences.

Since this paper focuses on the experience of less affluent young people, her identification of the emotional significance of possessions in poorer communities (2009, 73) and the sacrifices made by parents in such communities to buy the goods with the greatest 'symbolic power' for their children is particularly interesting. Other ethnographers have made similar points even in contexts of extreme poverty. Carman (2006), for example, explains the importance of visible, somewhat 'flashy' consumption to inner city Buenos Aires squatters,[3] who were forced to

perform conventionally private family practices in the view of others. In her view, the display of such items reflected a claim to some form of aspirational citizenship or worth, to counter the stigma associated with squatting. Discussing the importance placed on dressing well in Trinidad, Miller suggests that such outward display may be similarly interpreted as a strategy to maintain 'the freedom to construct oneself and not to be categorised by circumstances' while living in poverty (2010, 13–17).

In addition to debates around the meanings of having and displaying flashy, often electronic goods, the uses and misuses of the digital technologies to which they provide access have also attracted considerable concern from media commentators. The association of internet use (and assumed consequent exposure to sex and violence through websites including youtube™ and computer games, or to undesirable contacts through social networking sites) with a collapse in the boundary between childhood and adulthood is widespread. Palmer (2006, 3) warns particularly of the dangers of a 'technology-driven culture', and associates children's internet use with the risk of paedophilia, a conflation that, as Meyer (2007) observes, has become morally difficult to contest. Notably, as Buckingham (2011) points out, psycho-social research has often focused exclusively on the negative 'effects' of advertising and media violence on children. Similarly, many policy and most media reports focus primarily on the 'risks' associated with internet use.

Sociological and childhood studies research into children's use of digital technologies has taken a less exclusively risk-focused approach. Notably, the EU KidsOnline Project has identified content (pornography, violence), contact (cyberbullying, grooming), privacy and commercial risks (Livingstone and Haddon 2008). Others have called attention to the potential dangers of making new contacts online (Vandonick et al. 2012), in particular for young people with mental health problems or those lacking good relationships with their peers and parents (Osvaldsson 2011). However, this work has also emphasised that measuring such harms is very difficult and that: 'protection must be balanced against enabling children's rights, pleasures and opportunities, including the opportunities for risk-taking' (Livingstone, Haddon, and Görzig 2012, 3). These authors further emphasise the need for a 'child-centred' approach exploring children's understandings and experiences of harm.

For Buckingham, research should highlight how children and young people employ these items and technologies in their everyday lives, arguing (2011, 37) that these uses are not essentially individualistic, but 'embedded within everyday life and interpersonal relationships, and in wider social and cultural processes'. Similar approaches are reflected in growing research into computer cultures as creating opportunities for sociality and valued self-representation (Crowe and Bradford 2006; Aarsand and Aronsson 2009; Livingstone and Brake 2010). Such possibilities have started to be recognised for 'looked after' children specifically. Notably, Hammond and Cooper (2013) advocate the use of such technologies by social workers with adolescent clients, as an extension of the life story work primarily associated with younger children. For example, they have identified how such technologies may be used in the context of trusting social care relationships as means to foster non-verbal communication and to 'create coherent life stories' (2013, 5). Similarly, the therapeutic use of music is well known (DeNora 2000).

Other researchers have focused on young people's use of technologies unmediated by relationships with professionals or other carers, as was primarily the case in the study discussed in this article. For example, and drawing on DeNora (2000), Bull (2007) explores the use of music (accessed through mobile phones and other such technologies) to 'warm up' potentially inhospitable (public) environments. Furthermore, Downing (2013) argues that the internet provides a space, for example, through networking sites, in which young people can negotiate non-heterosexual identities and perform these safely, while Asbjørnslett, Engelsrud, and Helseth (2012) have made similar points in relation to disabled youth. Holt, Bowlby, and Lea (2013) have further argued that young people with 'socio-emotional difficulties' may counter less supportive

experiences elsewhere, and notably in schools, by seeking out other emotionally inter-dependent relationships, often through their use of online reources such as video games. In their view, such relationships are important as they underpin young people's development of social and cultural capital. Indeed, for Ruckenstein (2013), online communities now provide an essential part of children and young people's sociality, precisely because these resources allow them to bypass the social and spatial boundaries imposed by parents and educators. Similarly, Moore (2011, 8) emphasises that information technologies 'allow users – individuals and groups – to create and develop live-able spaces and opportunities for emergent forms of sociality'. She argues therefore (2011, 2, 109–110) that, rather than dismissing computer games and the internet in general as 'cyphers' for ideas about the 'loss of culture and connectedness', they should be approached as sources of ideas, hopes, images and satsfactions, offering a sense of belonging. Jamieson (2013) also recognises how digital technologies, accessed through computers and mobile phones, can play a role in deepening intimacy, blurring the boundaries between presence and absence. As such, she contends that sociological theories of intimacy must uncouple explanations of the formation of self from exclusive emphasis on face-to-face interactions.

All of this work on the significance and use of such technologies to engage in an economy of dignity, to develop and maintain sociality, and to safely explore identities, therefore suggests that these resources, through providing access to music, games and social networking, may potentially play a role in caring for oneself or 'self-care'. At the same time, as Jamieson points out, there may also be particular disadvantages of such technologies in terms of intimacy, given the absence of co-presence and potential consequent confirmation of loneliness. As such, and drawing on terms employed in literature on the geographies of care, some of the 'therapeutic landscapes' (Gesler 1992), if they can be so called, in which these technologies are used might be seen as particularly solitary or privatised. Furthermore, as Holt, Bowlby, and Lea (2013) suggest, the use of such technologies may not be associated with the development of highly valued social or cultural capital.

The next section will introduce the study and sample on which this paper is based, before relating these ideas to the data produced.

Background to the sample and study methodology

This paper draws, then, on a two-year (2011–2013) qualitative study of the sensory, material and spatial construction of (not) belonging, whether positive, negative or ambivalent, with young people who have had the experience of not living with their biological parents. Twenty-two first interview participants (13 men and 9 women aged 10–23) were recruited. The broad target age group of 10–18 was intended to cover different experiences of, and relationships with, the care system. The eventual sample included two participants aged 20 or above, the idea being that they could reflect back on previous experience. However, it became clear that their circumstances were still very much affected by their experiences in care. The participants were recruited from urban, rural and remote island communities across Scotland through voluntary sector organisations providing services including advocacy and accommodation. Ethical advice and clearance for the project were given by these agencies and a University ethics committee. Pseudonyms chosen by the respondents themselves are used throughout this paper.

Many respondents had experienced a range of often successive official care arrangements, including foster, kinship, secure and residential care, and the living arrangements of some were more complex than indicated officially. Their circumstances differed notably then from most of Pugh's respondents, and from the assumptions of cultural commentators such as Palmer, in that their biological parents were not often there to buy consumer items for them. In addition, while many respondents were intensely aware of living in better circumstances than previously, few were living affluent lives. The circumstances of some older respondents who had officially

left care were particularly difficult both materially and emotionally, as will be highlighted in this paper. Often, these 'careleavers' were living alone in small, sparsely furnished council flats (public housing) in disrepair, with little material or emotional support available to them. As such, these young people's experiences may be situated among the less explored, less affluent minority world childhoods that Tisdall and Punch (2012) argue require more research attention.

The interviews employed participatory sensory methods focusing on respondents' sense of belonging. Of the 22 participants who gave a first interview, 14 completed a second interview, while 6 were also involved in creating films and music to disseminate project themes.[4] The 'running script' (Rose 2007) for the first interviews asked participants to take photos of, among others, their favourite and least favourite spaces, three significant objects or 'things', and to record the sounds they liked, including one music track. This 'script', or instructions for participants, did not therefore limit them to conventional (physical) domestic spaces or to 'tangible' objects. This approach reflected Miller's insistence on the significance of digital spaces, and the input of a young woman on our advisory group with experience of multiple, living arrangements in adolescence and of being a kinship carer herself.

In the second interview, participants' first interview responses were revisited, and they were asked to identify music tracks with messages for others, and to draw their ideal and current living places. As Pink emphasises, the use of such methods is 'multi-sensorial' in that the use of a visual method, for example, does not imply that the data produced will primarily reflect a visual experience, or, indeed, that sensory experience can be divided up in such a way. As Rose (2007, 238–239) argues, photos 'carry flesh and blood', encouraging talk that would not have been possible in their absence. Furthermore, the participatory nature of these methods reflected a concern to 'understand and engage with other people's worlds through sharing activities' (Pink 2009, 9). Indeed, the participants' responses to the instructions extended the methods employed in certain ways. Notably, some used the video function available on the cameras lent to them, and most respondents translated our request for musical tracks into their own cultures, by identifying videos available through youtube™, thus contributing to the researchers' developing sense of the relevance to and importance of such technologies in their lives.

The interviews were very loosely structured, largely participant-led, and often long (1–4 hours). While we did not 'do' the activities identified alongside the young people in quite the manner advocated by Pink (2009), the process of downloading and looking at the data produced by the participants lent a sense of non-threatening proximity and collective, creative endeavour to the interviews. Participants seemed genuinely to have fun, and all wanted to complete the second interviews, even if this was not possible particularly in some of the more remote island locations for reasons of distance, cost, severe weather and, in others, for reasons including social welfare agencies' attendance requirements.[5] All transcripts were entered into NVIVO™ for analysis which also drew on team discussion of data. This paper will draw primarily on participants' contextualised discussions of photographs of significant items, particularly of computers and mobile phones in both interviews, and on second interview discussions of drawings of 'ideal' homes.

Digital technologies, 'dignity' and complex relationships

It should be noted that the respondents did not focus exclusively on electronic items providing access to digital technologies in their discussions of favourite objects. Many eclectic mementoes of important relationships were discussed including teddies, photos, pieces of wallpaper and (broken) clocks, many of which seemed to provide a sense of 'haptic' or sensory belonging (May 2013) through their visibility, texture and smells. It is also important to point out that some respondents were avid readers, while others played musical instruments, and that related items were well represented among their most important things. Furthermore, unlike many of

the circumstances assumed in media commentary on young people's consumption, but similar to those from poorer backgrounds interviewed by Ridge (2002), several of the participants were acutely aware of the cost of consumer items and recounted having to save up to pay for them themselves. As Leah related: '[it] took me two, three year just to save up the money [for a plays-tation™]' (20, adopted by foster carer).

A fascination with particular items, including mobile phones and computers, and with the contemporary cultural referents of luxury more generally, was certainly present in many inter-views, however. Most respondents prized electronic goods highly among their possessions, and only five participants did not identify such items as among those most important to them. As Jodie explained:

> EJM: If I was to take away everything in the world with my super power and then I'd start feeling a
>   bit guilty and I say 'OK Jodie, you can have three things back' …
> JODIE: Computer … my TV … blackberry™ … slash i-Pod™ touch (15, children's unit)

In particular, Dylan, who benefited from a wealthy former foster carer, adored the multi-function-ality of his mobile phone and emphasised the importance of having and displaying the latest version of such items and technologies:

> DYLAN: It's got everything: apps, facebook™, internet … and it's just, you know, 'look at me, I
>   have an iPhone 4™'.
> EJM: So it's also about how you're seen?
> DYLAN: Yes, I mean, cause I wear all designer clothes. … (18, living independently)

It would be possible to dismiss such comments, as might Palmer, as illustrative of a vacuous, con-sumerist culture. However, while not every participant was so concerned to fit in with, or to surpass his or her peers in this way, it seems that the importance of such items to Dylan might also be interpreted in terms of Pugh's notion of an 'economy of dignity'. Their possession seemed to reflect a concern to be 'audible' amongst his peers, and to not appear outwardly needy, in spite of having to return to a 'vile' council flat by which he felt stigmatised and depressed. As he put it, he wanted to live in a 'proper house':

> Because … you wouldn't say 'oh man I'm dying to live in one of they flats' … Look at them! You
> know they're like a decaying row of condemned council houses … Built in the 60s just to like house
> people … I see horrible flats every morning … I don't want to get up every morning and just look at
> flats.

Furthermore, the more intimately relational context of these items was important. Dylan repeat-edly emphasised that the source of these items was his wealthy former foster mother, someone who, in his account, had held very important public positions. To some degree, his concurrent emphasis on the origin of these gifts seemed therefore to try to reinforce, rhetorically at least, a relationship that other comments he made suggested had run into problems, while also presenting himself as worthy of such parent-like support and 'the time, care and attention of others' (Pugh 2009, 64).

Items associated with such technologies also appeared consistently, alongside other cultural referents of luxury, in participants' second interview drawings and discussions of 'ideal homes'. On the one hand, these drawings suggested the influence of celebrity (magazine) culture in forming these aspirations. Computers, games consoles and large plasma-screen televi-sions were included in drawings of living rooms (smelling of lavender) and containing leather

couches, luxurious rugs and glass-topped coffee tables, 'master bedrooms' with 'double' or 'king size' beds, and games rooms with bars and jacuzzis.

However, examining the social and relational context of this data, as urged by Buckingham (2011), again provided a different perspective, since many participants' accounts of their ideal homes highlighted a wish to be sociable and to share these resources, digital or otherwise, with others. Marissa's drawing (10, children's unit) included tables and chairs for 16 people. In the residential unit in which she lived, she was rarely allowed visitors and seemed concerned to rectify this in her drawing of her ideal space. Leah was concerned to create comfortable spaces 'for when I've got family coming up', and there was similarly an element of wishful thinking here, given the fact she was not allowed to see several family members. However, both Marissa and Leah also included digital resources such as computers, and Leah, a games console, in their drawings as part of this desire to provide an enjoyable environment for sharing with others.

It is argued that such accounts again reflect Pugh's notion of the 'economy of dignity', in that they suggest a keenly felt understanding of the (absent) privilege of having the necessary resources to engage in such 'sharing' and in reciprocally generous relationships. The significance of the items in themselves could best be understood relationally, therefore. Thomas' account (14, secure unit) of his 'ideal home' made this point particularly poignantly. His drawing also contained a computer, a plasma screen television, a glass-topped coffee table, leather couches and a sheepskin rug. Most important to him, however, was that this house should be located next to his mother's. Indeed, an imagined ideal home was of no real interest to him. As he put it, 'see to be honest man, I'd rather stay in ma maw's [mother's] house' (rather than the secure unit.)

The importance of communication

In contrast to the risk-focused approach of many studies to goods such as computers and mobile phones, this project's focus on belonging further highlighted the importance of such items to the social 'good' of communication (Miller 2010) and, as identified in the literature discussed previously, of maintaining pre-existing relationships with others.

Mobile phones and the internet have been associated with risky contacts, and their use by looked after children may sometimes be restricted as a result of legal orders or residential home and carers' rules. However, as Ruckenstein puts it (2013, 476), 'mobile phones, games consoles, and computers are an essential part of the sociality between children in increasingly diverse ways'. In particular, for these young people, the portability and multi-functionality of mobile phones helped them to cope with frequent moves between different residences either as a result of court orders, or as part of their own strategies to carve out secure niches in new places. Toni (16, part-time foster care), for example, commuted each part week between a foster carer's and her mother's house as a result of a court order. In these circumstances, her phone served not only to keep in touch with people associated with each of these places when elsewhere, but also as a portable photo album and address book that she did not feel she could live without.

Several respondents spoke at length about the importance of internet-based social networking sites which they accessed through their phones and computers. These accounts indicated an awareness of media discussions of associated risks. However, they suggested that, as Moore and others argue, a focus on risk should be balanced with an understanding of the particular importance of such means of communication to young people in difficult relational, and often material, circumstances such as those living in 'care' (also see Hammond and Cooper 2013). Drab (12, children's unit)'s account of his use of a social networking site to keep in touch with members of his biological family illustrates some of these complexities. He had had little

contact with either his mother, or with his sisters, who lived in different care arrangements. Although theoretically too young to use it, he related 'finding' his mum on facebook™, but had then had to choose between maintaining his mother or his sister, 'Jane', as a facebook™ 'friend': 'I had her (Jane) first so I decided to keep her instead of my mum. Cause that's why Jane's not talking to Alice cause she's talked to our mum'. This choice was a difficult one which would not have arisen without his use of this programme. Without it, however, he would have missed out on the little, but greatly valued, contact he did have with his sister.

Other respondents emphasised the role of internet technologies in relation to maintaining friendships. Reggie (23, living independently) described his computer as 'everything good to me', 'a very, very, very, very big part of my life'. He was well aware of the prevalent risk discourses around internet use and that this form of communication is not universally valued, and insisted that he would prefer to see friends in person. However, as he pointed out, he could not afford to go to London to see his friends there, nor could he afford to phone them. As such, skype™ and the facebook™ chat function on his computer were very important to his efforts to maintain these relationships.

Participants also spoke of socialising with acquaintances over the internet, often through computer games. Once again, the predominant media discourses in relation to such contacts have focused on risks, including that of internet grooming. Dylan, however, emphasised how social networking had increased his circle of friends; a facebook™ friend had become a very close friend he saw frequently. For Reggie, gaming breached his isolation and allowed him to socialise safely and inexpensively. Again, he felt he needed to display his awareness of risk discourses around making new contacts in such a way, while also emphasising the benefits he perceived from their use: 'it's a weird way to socialise and a weird way to make links with people, but everyone on there's so friendly, you know, so it's good … It's genuinely like a little community, it's cool'. The importance to him of this precarious online 'community' was illustrated particularly clearly by the way he kept his computer at his mother's house, despite his difficult relationship with her, as he could not afford internet access in his own flat, and crossed the city where he lived at night to use it when his mother and brothers were asleep. Vincent (16, supervision order) also incorporated recognition of the risk discourses around internet use into his discussion of the gaming he would like to engage in if he had internet access: 'you don't know the said person's actually telling you the truth of who they are … [but] you can take on anyone round the world … '. Similarly, and also recalling Moore's discussion of 'emergent forms of sociality', Penfold emphasised 'I play people from China, people from America' and, through playing his Xbox™ had got back into contact with a friend from a previous school who was now living in the USA.

The social context of these young people's internet use was somewhat different from that of the middle-class children in their bedrooms discussed by Ruckenstein (2013) therefore. Like Dylan, Reggie, a careleaver, hated the flat where he lived, alone and isolated. On one occasion, he recounted having had a 'wee freak out' during which he had thrown several items of his meagre stock of furniture out of the window: 'I've only got a mattress now [laughs]! ..but I just hated everything in the house'. As noted, he also had to make a long bus ride to his mother's house to be able to use his computer. Penfold had fairly recently arrived in (another) foster care placement, and so was not withdrawing from face-to-face socialising with good friends when he went online; he just did not have any such friends where he now lived. This circumstance was recognised by his new foster parents who had helped him create a niche in the conservatory of his new home in which he could engage in such activities in comfort and undisturbed. In these difficult circumstances, therefore, such technologies would seem to offer an expansion of the often somewhat limited spaces available to the respondents in which to maintain supportive relationships and create new ones inexpensively and, in their view, safely.

Technologies of self-care

The importance of such items to building and maintaining relationships with others, whether family, friends or acquaintances was therefore clear. At the same time, they may also be considered to be technologies of self-care: helping participants deal with anxiety, as discussed below, and also in constructing a liveable niche in which 'to be' in difficult circumstances. In an important contrast with much media commentary on internet use, these technologies were sometimes seen as providing refuge, places that were perceived to be safer than the environments immediately surrounding them.

Computer games or listening to sounds and music on youtube™ were often used to 'de-stress'. As observed by the Research Fellow, Leah, for example, employed different pieces of music (accessible through her mobile phone) to cope with different stressful situations including verbal bullying from other young people at a support agency:

> EJM: … you weren't having so a good a night and you were using music and moving around and listening to music to make you feel better..
> LEAH: Yeah..

Having her phone with her, feeling it in her pocket, gave her a sense of security and confidence. She also liked to listen to recordings of bird song and to the sound of cars passing in the rain through her phone. Similarly, Channel (17, foster care) spoke at length about how she loved the sound of running baths and listened to particular pieces of music associated with particular people to calm down. She also employed music and bathroom smells to overcome her fear of being 'trapped' in a room with the door shut, and recounted that not being able to play music in her own room was an important element in her unhappiness when living with a previous foster carer. Reggie also used computers to avoid 'snapping' at others ('it keeps me out of my own head'), listening to particular music and sounds, such as rain, on youtube™ to calm down.

Some of the resources employed, notably computer games and loud music, were not necessarily 'tranquil' in and of themselves but had the effect of calming the participants and diverting them from problems. Reggie emphasised that he had long used such strategies to help him to switch off from family conflict:

> REGGIE: They'd argue a lot so I used to just sit and play computer.
> SW: Right, so you developed techniques …
> REGGIE: I think you have to or you'd just freak … you'd go completely insane if you don't.

Similarly, Penfold spoke of his playing online games as an important tool to calm down after moving to a new placement where he had no friends:

> PENFOLD: You don't need to think of anything that's worrying you, just get on Xbox™ and it'll calm you down …
> SW: Oh that's interesting, cause a lot of people say it makes you feel more pumped up … playing those games?
> PENFOLD: Nah. If you asked 100% of my friends … every last one of them would tell you that it's a good stress reliever … it's my time, no disruption, just leave me to it.

It may also be significant that among the participants who placed most emphasis on the importance of music were 'careleavers', Reggie and Dylan, who were both living alone in flats they hated, and used music to fill the surrounding emptiness.

At other times, however, the participants' use of these resources to explore difficult and complex personal issues resembled the experiments with (non-heterosexual) identities discussed

by Downing or the life story work advocated by Hammond and Cooper, although it should again be emphasised that these practices took place outside of relationships with social workers. For example, the computer games that he played and the video excerpts from musicals that Reggie enjoyed, often related to difficult family situations resolved peacefully or through violence. Many respondents also identified music tracks and associated videos accessed through youtube™ that they employed to reflect on difficult personal experiences and complex related feelings. Drab, for example, recorded himself watching a music video in which a young boy is shown looking in on his father's new family and later vandalising the bedroom of one of his 'new' children. In a process which might reflect elements of what psychoanalysts Fonagy and Target (1997) call the ability to 'mentalise' or organise the representation of onself, he used this video to reflect on his relationship with his father and anger at past events. He seemed to like it as, for him, it emphasised that he had also moved on from this anger, although he felt that others had not recognised this development. At the same time, he seemed to claim a right to be angry, and for this anger to be validated or given space in some way.

A similar point might be made about Leah's identification and discussion of a song reflecting a New York child's treasured memories and loss in the wake of 9/11, a seemingly more socially validated experience of grief than her own for her absent father. In some senses, therefore, this music, and associated videos, might be seen as providing these respondents with some kind of (vicarious) public social recognition, a means of claiming a more glamorous, and certainly less pathologised, niche than the ones offered by the often very negative contemporary media and political discussion of difficult family circumstances. Similarly, Dylan's intense relationship with various television series, particularly '24' and 'Star Trek', and his conflation of his wealthy, property-owning foster mother with Star Trek's Captain Janeway seemed to reinforce a sense of being valued by a powerful person and of imagining possibilities beyond his reduced circumstances.

Discussion

Media commentaries on the use of digital technologies by children and young people have often taken a risk-focused approach, ignoring other activities in which they might engage and presenting such technologies as illustrations of a moral decline in contemporary society. Viewed from such starting points, some of the experiences recounted in this paper, especially those related to the desire for the latest branded goods and to cultivating online rather than face-to-face relationships, might seem to confirm media diagnoses of a superficial, individualised, age. However, recent research (Pugh 2009; Buckingham 2011; Moore 2011; Ruckenstein 2013) has pointed to the broader significance of these technologies as means of engaging in an 'economy of dignity', of making and maintaining friendships over space and of extending the spaces available to young people to essay identities safely.

The findings presented in this paper reflect more difficult minority world social circumstances to those on which much of this research work has been based, but confirm their interest. Dylan's pride in his new phone might be seen as misplaced. However, it is important to recognise that he felt such possessions allowed him to belong to a broader community, as well as illustrating that he was worthy of the care, love and esteem of the person who bought them for him, a former foster mother, who in his account was definitely 'someone'. The multi-functionality and sometimes portability of many technologies also often served other relational purposes, including storing photographs and providing affordable means of communication. They were, as for Reggie who had very little money, and for Penfold who had experienced multiple moves, a means to build and maintain significant relationships and to be part of some form of (online) community, however precarious. Moore argues (2011, 2, 22) that these 'emergent forms of sociality', may be very important in general. This paper suggests their particular salience in more difficult

emotional and material contexts, and the need for further sympathetic explorations of the significance of affordable means of communication to less affluent young people. Such work might also avoid the assumption criticised by Wells (2011) that such young people's contacts are, or should be, exclusively local. Notably, Reggie was keen to maintain contact with friends elsewhere in the UK, while Penfold was excited by the idea of playing online games with contacts in China.

Rather than considering only the potential risks of such new online contacts, and thus reproducing conventional assumptions that such interactions are necessarily more risky than those encountered in the (family) home, such research might also consider digital technologies as providing technologies of self-care. As suggested by the work of DeNora (2000) and Bull (2007), sources of music and other sounds were important for many respondents. Leah, for example, used her i-Phone™ to negotiate difficult, even hostile encounters in public space, while Channel emphasised her discomfort in home spaces where she could not play music. Online computer games and music videos had also been used to blank out sources of stress, including volatile home circumstances (Reggie) or a new foster placement (Penfold). They also provided some, like Drab, with resources with which to think through difficult relationships and events, and to develop more positive interpretations of these. Here, it is important to note that, as Hammond and Cooper (2013, 8) point out, 'everyday technology represents a familiar, non-threatening, non-judgemental and non-invasive communication tool already used by many adolescents'. As such, their use does not separate these young people from mainstream culture. Furthermore, for looked after young people, the flexible self-identifications provided by music videos, for example, may provide an important counterpart to the more formal (and much less glamorous) processes and surroundings of school, care home or children's hearings. In this way, they may provide a non-stigmatising alternative to relentless processes of institutional categorisation as 'in care' or 'under supervision'.

As emphasised, this paper has focused on young people's own use of such technologies to care for themselves in difficult social and spatial circumstances, rather than on their specific therapeutic use within social work and other care relationships as explored by Hammond and Cooper (2013). However, it does suggest how future research might explore ways in which such technologies of self-care might be recognised and supported in general terms within care relationships. Notably, Penfold's foster parents had created a comfortable zone in his new house where he could play computer games undisturbed, while Toni received some help with mobile phone bills as she negotiated travelling between different living places. In contrast, Reggie's experience of having to travel across his city to spend time at his mother's at night, and the absence of a room where Channel could play her music at a former foster carer's house, reflected a lack of such supports and the difficulties each had encountered in creating liveable spaces for themselves.

At the same time, as Moore emphasises, such desires for online sociality and their effects may not always be entirely positive. These participants' accounts, for example, Drab's use of facebook™, and Dylan's intense engagement with fictional characters, highlight complexities with which some young people, particularly those outside of the supportive relationships advocated by Hammond and Cooper, might struggle. Moreover, as Carman (2006) argues in relation to Buenos Aires squatters' visible consumption, and Holt, Bowlby, and Lea (2013) point out in relation to young people in difficult circumstances' use of video games, the social and cultural capital generated through these resources is not generally valued. Reggie seemed to be aware of this and his 'freakout' further illustrated that the use of such resources could not entirely mitigate his feeling of loneliness in an environment he hated.

Finally then, it is not argued that the technologies of self-care identified in this paper present a panacea for the difficult circumstances in which the participants sometimes found themselves. However, it is contended that such tools and strategies may help to get through difficult periods characterised by the absence of other supportive or established care relationships and resources. The importance of the sense of worth, security and of belonging to broader

communities, however fragile or imagined in some cases, that respondents derived from the use of such items, both when living in care and as careleavers, was clear and deserves careful consideration. At the same time, it also highlights the need for further research into and practical support for these young people while living in care relationships and beyond.

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Notes

1. 'Looked after children' designates those living in the care of the state, often in kinship, foster, residential or secure care. In Scotland, the term also includes those living with their biological parents under social work supervision.
2. A range of digital technologies accessed through computers and through smartphones is referred to in this paper. They include youtube™, a free video-sharing website often used to distribute music videos; facebook™, a free social networking service through which 'friends' can exchange messages and share photos and videos. It includes a real-time text 'chat' function; skype™ , a software that provides free video and voice calls and instant messaging and games consoles such as playstation™ and Xbox™.
3. The English word 'squatters' is used to denote people living in unoccupied housing in the city centre as opposed to people living in 'villas' (urban shanty towns) or 'asentamientos' (informal settlements on the edge of cities).
4. More on the project and examples of the data produced by the participants may be found at: http://www.researchunbound.org.uk/young-people-creating-belonging.
5. The potential variation in the sample characteristics between the first and the second interviews was somewhat mitigated by the conduct of two hybrid interviews with island participants, adding elements of the second interviews to the first interview.

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