Under the Influence

Understanding teenagers' media literacy and piloting PSHE lessons for KS3 and KS4 pupils

REVEALING REALITY   PSHE | ASSOCIATION

About Revealing Reality

Revealing Reality is an independent, social research and insight agency. We enjoy working on challenging projects with social purpose to inform policy, design, and behaviour change. This includes working with regulators, government, and charities to provide rigorous insight into young people's online behaviours and experiences.

Studying how the digital world is shaping people's lives is something we do every day. This includes exploring how digital services and platforms are shaping people's behaviour – across relationships, gambling, financial products, the health service, and more.

We frequently conduct detailed qualitative and quantitative research to build in-depth understandings of digital behaviours and observe how people really experience technology and the online world.

Visit www.revealingreality.co.uk to find out more about our work or to get in touch.

Contents page

Introduction
Why this research and intervention were needed

Social media content creators aren't called 'influencers' for nothing.

On average, UK children spend between 1-2 hours a day on social media.[1] Although the most widely used platforms have a lower age limit of 13, a majority of children under 13 have at least one social media app: from Ofcom's Media use and attitudes report in 2022, 33% of parents of children aged five to seven said their child had a social media profile, and 60% of parents of children aged eight to 11 said they had one.[2] By the time they are 13, most children are already using social media, sometimes registered with their real age, but very often not.

For many children, their social media feed is now where they access the vast majority of the media and information they consume. From buying KSI and Logan Paul's Prime to the latest TikTok challenge, from seeking support or exploring their identity, to "searching up" the answers for their homework, the feed is often their first port of call. Their social media feeds serve children an undifferentiated stream of content that includes adverts, news, entertainment and opinion. Increasingly, these come in the form of ever-shorter videos, in which context can be lacking.

Previous research has found that social media influencers are producing increasingly professionalised content, and that children often believe the appearance of professionalism, plus displays of wealth, lend legitimacy and trustworthiness to the content – whether this is presented as fact, fiction or opinion.[3]

But the influencers aren't operating in a vacuum. The big tech companies make billions of pounds in profit, and these profits only continue to grow as social media grows, so does the number of content creators sharing their opinions, advice and information. There is an increasing risk that children are being presented with content that is not verified, not trustworthy, and potentially completely untruthful.

While children have some ability to assess trustworthiness, previous research has shown that they rarely apply it to their own social media feeds. Children generally lack motivation to think critically about the trustworthiness of the sources and content they consume on social media feeds.[4]

And yet, the more time children spend using social media, the greater proportion of their world view is informed by its content, the more essential it is that they are able to detect misinformation and disinformation.

But there's too much content – and not enough hours in the day – for them to critically appraise all of it. What children need is to be helped to evaluate the content that will make the biggest difference to their experience of the world and their preparedness to navigate it successfully.

Schools are in a prime position to be at the forefront of teaching children how to assess the value and veracity of what they see online, and to help motivate them to use this knowledge. PSHE lessons provide one opportunity to support children to develop their media literacy – which here we are defining as the ability and motivation to think critically about the content, sources and information they're seeing on social media.

---

[1] Ofcom, 2023, Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes

[2] Ofcom, 2022, Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2022

[3] Ofcom, 2023, Children's Media Lives 2023

[4] ibid

Refining measures of children's attitudes to the content they see online

Understanding the content children encounter online and how they assess its trustworthiness or apply critical thinking is only part of the challenge. While developing and improving children's ability to critically evaluate what they see online is important, an equally critical question is determining whether these efforts are effective.

Measuring the attitudes and behaviours of children and young people regarding their online activities presents significant challenges. It is particularly difficult to assess critical thinking in real time as they engage with content online, given the complexity and immediacy of such interactions.

Existing efforts to ascertain media literacy attitudes, behaviours, and capabilities include surveys like Ofcom's Children's Online Knowledge and Understanding Survey[5], which includes asking children about how 'genuine' examples of content are and the EU Kids Online[6] research network, which asks children how 'true' a series of statements are including checking if information is true.

While these methods can go some way to understanding children's media literacy capabilities and their self-reported behaviours, there is a need for a greater understanding on how to capture changes in attitudes. Instead, there is an argument to explore and develop measurement tools to the practical application of media literacy skills. By focusing on capturing evidence of critical thinking in action, this project aimed to contribute to our understanding of what works in terms of the evaluation of media literacy interventions.

Exploring and evaluation children's motivation to apply media literacy skills to their social media feeds

This work was designed to enable and encourage children to develop and apply media literacy when looking at their social media feeds. Through interviews with children and teachers, Revealing Reality gathered primary evidence of children's use and perceptions of media in order to design tailored lessons to improve their media literacy and their motivation to use it. Revealing Reality then evaluated the efficacy of those lessons through a pilot program which measured how much children had learned from the lessons, compared against two control groups – one who received no equivalent lessons, and one who received similar lessons designed by a major online platform. Finally, we considered the results of the evaluation and what we and others could learn from them – both those that appeared to show the newly designed lessons had been 'successful' and those results that highlighted there is still further work to be done to fully achieve the media literacy that children need.

This research gathered the thoughts of 20 young people aged 11-18 about their media usage, and how they view what they see on their social media feeds. These thoughts were captured through in-person, depth interviews and diary tasks that children completed independently themselves, and further follow-up interviews over Zoom to capture reflections and probe around the content children submitted in their diary tasks.

Having spoken to 20 young people about their media usage, lessons were then designed to explain the importance of verifying information online, and designed around the misconceptions children often had, with the overall aim to equip them with skills to critically assess what they consume online. The lesson plans and resources were refined and improved through co-design with five schools.

These lessons were evaluated using a survey that was conducted before and after these lessons took place.

This research aims to fill that gap, exploring how children's motivation to apply media literacy skills can be increased, with the overall goal to deliver and evaluate an evidence-based set of educational lessons that addresses these barriers and builds children's motivation to apply media literacy in their everyday lives.

The overarching objectives of the project include:

- Enable understanding of how and why information might be inaccurate on social media feeds

---

[5] Ofcom, Children and parents: media use and attitudes report 2023

[6] The London School of Economics and Political Science, EU Kids Online Research toolkit

- Help children avoid potential harm caused by mis and disinformation online, and use the online world effectively to their own benefit

Revealing Reality piloted these lessons with schools, and has carried out an impact and process evaluation, understanding how well these lessons increased understanding and motivation to think critically online.

About this report

This report summarises the key findings from an initial explore phase of qualitative research with children and young people. It then describes how these findings were used to develop the first iteration of brand new lesson plans for KS3 and KS4 by the PSHE Association. The final sections outline findings from the piloting of these lesson plans and summarises key learnings for educators and other professionals working with children and young people to take forwards and develop in the future.

Methodology
The approach to creating the lesson plans

This project was designed to deepen understanding of children's media literacy and how to increase their ability and motivation to think critically about their social media feeds. The project explored children's current online lives to understand the barriers to this to inform the design of a pilot intervention that could begin to overcome these barriers, as well as developing the means to measure its effect.

To do this, the project was split into three phases, to implement the learnings from speaking to children and teachers into lessons that were designed to develop children's abilities and motivations to assess what they see online.

The research had four consecutive phases:

1. Explore: Understand the range and degree of children's media literacy. This qualitative research phase would then inform the design of media literacy lessons.
2. Development: Work with the PSHE Association and in collaboration with schools, to design lesson plans to increase media literacy.
3. Pilot: Deliver the lessons in schools and evaluate both the process and their impact.
4. Extension: Build on pilot learnings to refine intervention and measurements

Explore phase:

In-depth interviews in children's homes:

Revealing Reality conducted in-home ethnographic interviews with 20 young people aged 11-18, lasting approximately three hours. The sample was created to cover a diverse range of backgrounds and viewpoints: amongst other things, the sample included a mix of gender, family makeup, social grade, location, ethnicity, and types of and attitudes around online activity.

In-depth interviews were conducted to delve into how children used social media feeds within the broader context of their media consumption habits and offline activities. Researchers prompted children to demonstrate their use of devices and platforms, detailing their usage patterns, the types of content they typically saw, and how they felt about specific types of content. These interviews also aimed to investigate which types of content children trusted, which they approached with scepticism, and the reasons behind their attitudes. Furthermore, researchers explored how the content they encountered online might have influenced their offline behaviours.

Additionally, researchers engaged in conversations with the children's parents to gain insight into their understanding of their children's media literacy and online conduct. This allowed researchers to grasp the primary concerns parents had regarding their children's use of digital devices.

Through in-depth, ethnographic style interviews with children and their families, researchers obtained a comprehensive understanding of the children's device usage, their perspectives on online content, and the integration of various media forms into their everyday routines.

Diary tasks and remote follow-up interviews:

After this initial interview, all participants were asked to complete a week-long diary task. This included documenting the devices and platforms they used in a day, as well as recording short video clips of their social media feeds.

Participants then reflected on the diary task responses with a researcher in follow-up, remote interviews. These interviews included asking participants to reflect on content examples from the recordings, exploring the participants' understanding, motives, and reflections on the content from their own personalised feeds.

Researchers also used media literacy 'scenarios' to prompt further reflections across a number of areas of media, such as advertising, media company motivations, and the effect of the social media algorithm on the types of content that different people see.

Detailed analysis of the findings from the explore phase led to the development of a behavioural framework outlining the key motivational barriers and misconceptions that children experienced regarding the content they see online, the potential motives of different social media 'actors' and the commercial element of social media.

Development phase:

Lesson creation

This phase involved collaborative efforts between Revealing Reality and the PSHE Association, including a workshop to discuss the key themes and ideas from the Explore phase. Using the insights from initial desk research and the Explore phase, the PSHE Association then developed a set of lessons for key stages 3-4 with the aim to address the common misconceptions children might have about social media and algorithmically driven feeds.

The resources created included lesson plans, lesson PowerPoints, and guidance for teachers to use as part of the Pilot Phase. These lessons covered different topics relating to media literacy, such as the different values and motivations of content creators and social media companies, the influence of the business model on the children's experience of social media, the impact of the algorithm on what they see online, and the reliability and trustworthiness of the social media content that they are seeing.

During this development phase, 20 schools were consulted to improve the design of the resources and evaluation approach and tool.

With 15 of these schools, interviews were conducted by Revealing Reality with the PSHE teachers, to understand how PSHE lessons on media literacy related topics are rolled out, what sort of topics they usually cover, to inform the approach taken in the resources for the Pilot phase.

The remaining five schools were part of co-designing the lessons. Researchers visited the five schools who trialled the lessons, this provided researchers with observational data of how the lessons were delivered and the children's reaction to them, as well as self-reported data from teachers, allowing for further refinement of the materials.

Pilot phase:

Having tested and refined the materials, the lessons were rolled out across key stages 3 and 4 in nine schools across England.

Pupils were taught three lessons, giving them a grounding in general media literacy, and the impact of different parties' motivations and influence on what they were seeing on their social media feeds. This involved thinking about the motivations and agendas of other users, content creators, and the platforms themselves.

Process evaluation

To record learnings about the implementation of the PSHE Association lessons, a process evaluation was carried out. This included a survey to all teachers who taught the intervention lessons plans or were part of the two control groups. Detailed interviews were also conducted with PSHE leads in schools. Teachers were asked to reflect on the preparation required to teach the lessons, the experience of using the lesson plans with a class, the engagement from pupils, and broader reflections on the process of the pilot.

Impact evaluation

To gauge the effectiveness of the lesson plans, pupils completed a survey before the first lesson was taught and again, two weeks after the final lesson. This survey was designed based on the barriers and theory of change designed in the earlier phases on the project, and testing for clarity, complexity, and ease of understanding with 1,309 participants.

The pre- and post-responses were compared to assess if and how their perceptions and attitude towards social media content had changed.

To ensure robust analysis and inference of the data, two control groups also completed the survey before and after the lessons were taught. This meant in each school, there were three groups of pupils being taught:

- Media literacy lessons designed by the PSHE association[7]
- A comparison group using an existing set of media literacy-focused lesson plans designed by another organisation[8]
- A control group who did not complete any lessons[9]

Revealing Reality engaged 15 schools, 15 PSHE leads, and over 2000 students during pilot across the three groups.

The sample size of the impact survey was N=1400. This was lower than expected, due to surveys being completed incorrectly, errors in survey management, and schools unable to complete the pilot due to timetable constraints.

Extension phase:

Piloting lesson plans and the evaluation survey in schools offered a series of learnings and hypotheses about how each could be further improved. The 'Extension' phase was an opportunity to test and trial a number of amends across both the lessons and the measurement of their effectiveness.

Further feedback from teachers was collected again, to understand how effectively and easily the intervention and the evaluation materials were to implement in classrooms.

This phase focused on

- Using teacher feedback and research observations to condense the plans into one lesson, making it easier to schedule into a PSHE curriculum, and refining the focus of the lessons to a priority objective;
- Exploring hypotheses around measurement and evaluation approach based on pilot survey data and teachers' reflections on guiding their class to complete the survey.

The edited lesson plans and survey were trialled in 12 classes in 6 schools in September to October 2024. The resulting sample size was N=512.

---

[7] An average of 451 students took part in the piloting of PSHE lessons

[8] An average of 437 students were in the control group class who trialled the existing media literacy lessons.

[9] An average of 421 students were in the control group who did not trial any lessons.

Understanding the barriers to children's media literacy

Explore phase

During the Explore phase, researchers conducted three-hour ethnographic interviews with children and their parents in their homes. Researchers gained a detailed understanding of the devices they used, the types of content they were viewing, and how media fit into their lives. The observation of real-life media usage during the diary task stage allowed researchers to compare self-report data from the interviews with the children's actual behaviours.

In most cases, the children were not always aware of what was influencing their behaviour on social media.

One example of this was 'Prime', a carbonated drink by KSI and Logan Paul, two popular influencers, that went viral on TikTok. Many children spoke about bottles of the drink going for £50 or more because of its popularity and exclusivity. Whilst some children reflected on the fact that it did not live up to the hype, many children wanted to acquire the drink regardless, owing to the manic online promotion and the desire to show off to their peers.

The following sections illustrate the key findings from these in-depth interviews with children, and summarise the four primary misconceptions children have about their social media feeds. These include the metrics being used to judge whether something online is trustworthy or not, and how social media works.

Children believe content is more likely to be true if it's popular

The children in this research often believed something was true based on public popularity, more than logical reason, or evidence. This is one of the largest factors shaping children's perception of truth. The young people who took part in the research were more likely to believe something if it was popular. Online, popularity is clearly quantified in likes, comments, and shares, making it easy and quick for children to apply their assumption that something with more engagement is true.

How does this play out across different elements of social media feeds?

Having 'popular' status represented another indicator of truth

Children were more likely to believe what popular influencers said, without requiring those influencers to have any expertise on the relevant topic.

- For example, Mason said that people with lots of followers are more trustworthy, because if someone has a platform, they would be more concerned about what they are saying (compared with people who don't have a following).

This extended to supporting causes children previously had very little knowledge of, if a popular account signalled to them that it was important.

- Lauren started engaging with content about 'The Willow Project' pipeline in Alaska after she saw an account she followed sharing information about it. She now engages heavily with content about the Willow Project from other influencers and has signed a petition to stop the development. Since then, she has also engaged with content about the project via the BBC News TikTok account.

When the children wanted to verify a piece of news or information about the world, they typically looked to what other users were posting

Children found the comment section to be a useful tool to verify content.

- For example, Levi said that if a piece of content states something is true, and he checks the comments and there are multiple people stating that it isn't true, then he knows not to trust it.

- He applied the same logic to likes and dislikes – if a piece of content he looks at has a lot of likes, Levi was more inclined to believe it, whereas if it has a lot of dislikes (e.g. on YouTube or Reddit), then he would be less likely to.

When scrolling on TikTok or Instagram, many children checked comments to see what was being said by the top posts as one way of determining the 'truth'.

- Amber reads the comments under posts to gauge its legitimacy based on what 'most' people are saying. If she sees that a lot of people disagree with something, she feels confident that it's not true.
- Jayden said that he checks the comments to confirm whether or not something is true because he can see if people are in agreement/disagreement.
- While Ravi tried to compare what was being presented on the news with his own experience of a situation, he often turned to the comment section when he wasn't sure whether something was true or not: "I check the comments… If I can't tell (if something is real) then I check the comments to see if it's real. If I say loads of people saying it's 'fake fake fake'… I'll go on comments to see if I think it's right or not"

Children also appeared more likely to believe a piece of news if people were talking about the issue offline, as well as online.

- Kaleb said: "If I see a lot of people saying the exact same thing, then I'll know it is probably true." For example, he would not necessarily believe it if someone with no followers said the world was going to end tomorrow, but if lots of people with no followers told him that the world was going to end tomorrow then he probably would.
- Lauren had seen a lot of people sharing information about the world ending, which she believed until speaking to her mum about it. She said: "People are sharing fake news which makes me really worry about the world. People always put stuff on about the world coming to an end – I see it a lot. And then I ask my mum about it and she says, 'No, it's not true,' but I say, 'Well, it's coming up a lot.'"

Children also looked at how many users liked a product to determine whether it was worth buying.

There were examples of children buying 'trending' products that they felt many other children and accounts were posting about.

- Jayden and Kaleb had both bought Prime bottles despite not being fans of the influencers who created them, or fans of the flavours. They were motivated by the number of people talking about it online, they wanted to feel part of that trend.
- Similarly, Molly wanted to buy an AirUp bottle because she saw lots of people talking about it on her social media feed.

Children looked at comments under content to see whether the product was 'good'.

- India looked to the comments under skincare routine videos showcasing different products to determine quality. She sometimes asked questions in the comments herself: "I'll be like, in the comments, 'Is this a good product to use?' and people will reply like 'Yeah, it's good,' or 'No, it makes you breakout.'"
- Leah liked looking at the comments under posts that featured a product to see what people said about it – if the comments were mainly positive, she would be more likely to buy it.
- Akin to online reviews, the comment section under adverts displayed different opinions and children typically found other users' comments trustworthy.

Children think content is more likely to be true if effort has been put into its production

Compared to the early days of social media, the production value of content has increased. Improved technology and capabilities mean higher production value and more 'slick' content. This can be seen in more advanced capturing or editing of footage, as well as higher quality audio and visuals. The level of financial

investment put into content can also be seen in the exotic locations in which content is shot, or symbols of luxury or wealth. Children used these markers to determine the credibility of content.

Like the first misconception of popularity, judging whether something is trustworthy based on how 'slick' it looks is not inherently a misjudgement. For example, scam webpages often look less professional than legitimate ones. However, the application of this logic on social media has risks.

For children, high production content was not only a signal for how trustworthy the piece of content was but also a reflection of the *content creator's trustworthiness*. Children thought that people's wealth or status came from them likely doing 'well' online in the past, posting popular (and therefore truthful) content.

How does this play out across different elements of social media feeds?

Children were more trusting of creators who produced 'slicker' content

Influencers who share content with a high production value are perceived as more successful, and children tended to associate this success with them being more reliable or trustworthy.

Some children also thought higher production value and slick editing implied a certain level of care or investment in their content, signalling reliability.

- Mason said he was more inclined to believe content if it was presented in a more professional way, even though he acknowledged that people who format content well can also be capable of misleading or lying.

The formatting of content was often *more* important in determining the accuracy of information than the information itself

For many children, the layout of a piece of news content was the biggest determinant of its credibility.

- Levi said, "if I'm going to consider something [as true], it needs to be done properly". He also said that the profile picture of the account posting "has to be something professional, it can't be something like a picture of SpongeBob".
- Content which emulated formatting styles young people had seen in legitimate mainstream media sources, made it more familiar and therefore reliable.

Children did not always consider the validity of the information itself when trying to ascertain whether something was true.

- Jayden had seen a lot of content related to mythical/fantastic creatures, like mermaids and bears. He said that all the content looks so real and genuine that he did not know whether to believe it or not.

Children assumed products featured in high-production-value content were equally high quality

When looking at clearly labelled adverts (often featuring #Ad, Paid Partnership tags, etc.), children were more likely to trust content with high-value production.

However, this was often less important than a recognisable brand name.

- Levi said that he could trust a sponsored advert from an influencer for Ben and Jerry's ice cream because of the overall quality of the production value: the ad incorporated both in person and online footage, which made it seem more realistic.
- Similarly, Sam was wary of buying products on social media. He said he could tell the product would be low quality because "of the quality of the adverts. They just pay some small influencer to promote this product and then the influencer will get a share so anyone will say they'll do it, but the product will not be very good".

Children think they can recognise commercial agendas

Many children were aware of some of the financial incentives of social media and referenced popular influencers, like Molly Mae and KSI, who have built their careers based on their social media presence. Overall,

the children were aware that influencers profited from sharing content, particularly when it was sponsored by large brands.

In some cases, the children were cognisant and critical of paid partnerships, reflecting that sponsored content was less trustworthy as it may not reflect someone's real opinion of a product. However, they were also selective on who and what type of content they applied this logic to.

Many of the children rarely questioned the motives of content creators, especially those they liked. Profit was largely understood as an *outcome* of influencers' social media activity, rather than the *motivation* for it. This meant children were more likely to take content creators at face value and typically did not consider that they were posting for their own benefit.

How does this play out across different elements of social media feeds?

Children rarely reflected on the performative nature of social media and took content creators at face value

Some of the children believed that content was created for purely altruistic reasons, for the benefit of the audience. Without a comprehensive frame of reference on certain topics, they were unable to critically analyse what they had seen to test if it was true or not.

- For example, India enjoyed content from an influencer who regularly gives money and presents away to people. When asked about why the influencer made these videos, India felt that the content creator was "just a really sweet person".
- Both Mason and Kaleb also reflected that the sports and gym content they watched was made to share exercise information and did not consider the potential benefits received by the content creator.

Sometimes this meant children were more likely to buy into trends if endorsed by content creators they particularly admired.

- Molly said that a post about an AirUp bottle made by one of her favourite influencers made her want a bottle more: "she doesn't lie about things and she's very trustworthy. When she makes POVs (point of view videos) she makes it very believable… she just seems like a trustworthy person"

This meant that the children were less likely to recognise more 'covert' advertisements

- For example, Rosie thought Jake Paul wearing 'Prime' (his brother's product) merchandise during his boxing match was not at all an advert – she thought an advert would have a more serious tone.
- Lauren did not consider that content featuring 'normal people' reviewing a product could be an advert. She classed them simply as 'people talking about a product'; she did not consider other motivations, such as gifting, or sponsorship.

Beyond influencer content, the children were rarely critical of agendas behind news content and wider information about the world

The children indiscriminately engaged with topics from a wide range of sources and actors within social media.

- Nour enjoyed seeing mental health and wellbeing content. Some of these videos were created by young users like herself and featured 'diagnosis' content. Nour found these videos "educational" but did not consider the reliability of the sources she was learning from. For Nour, experience focussed content on mental health was equally trustworthy to content from professionals.

The flat structure of social media feeds, where children interact with the same type of content from verified organisations to influencers and their peers, meant that, for the children, the source (and motivation) was not as relevant as the content itself.

- For some, this blurred the boundaries between fact and opinion. Ravi had seen a piece of news-style content on TikTok that spoke about the connection between the cost-of-living crisis, Harry and Meghan and food shortages. He felt that unlike other types of content, the content creator made this

video to 'raise awareness' and tell the truth. He did not consider how the creator may have profited from this type of dramatized news content.

However, in some cases, the children did not care whether the source was reliable or not

Despite highlighting all the areas in their life social media played a role, most of the children saw social media predominantly for entertainment and were not critical of the content they viewed.

- For example, James said that TikTok was something he would use when he was bored, he regarded it as entertainment. It did not really matter if the content he was watching was real or not, as long as it was entertaining.
- The children often did not reflect on the possibility that creators might be posting content or framing content in a certain way for their own commercial benefit. They watched their content for entertainment; their reliability, or underlying motivations, did not matter to them.

Children underestimate the downsides of personalised content feeds

When it came to the content on their social media feeds, most children understood it was based on their interests. Many had heard of 'algorithms' on social media and a few were aware of how they shaped what their social media feeds looked like. Some even said they had 'trained' their algorithm to improve the quality of their feeds. However, most couldn't articulate the scale of content they did not see – what algorithms filtered out. In other words, the children did not know what they did not know.

Since children primarily used social media for entertainment, they underestimated the impact social media could have on the real, offline world - in other aspects of their life like friendships, hobbies, and how they felt about their local community or the wider world. Consequently, the children struggled to reflect on how engaging only with certain types of content might have negative consequences.

How does this play out across different elements of social media feeds?

Children rarely saw different perspectives or topics when engaging with content related to the world around them.

- Nour, for example, felt that many online users, including herself, only saw certain topics. Nour saw a lot of mental health content on TikTok and considered herself quite knowledgeable on the topic. Seeing a lot of this type of content came at the expense of other content, and she was aware that she was "only educated on one thing [mental health] but not the other".

The 'For You' page was a space for some young people to keep up to date on interests.

- Lauren's screen recording, for example, showed that she saw several videos of girls slightly older than her promoting various beauty products. She found that seeing content like this kept her updated with the latest beauty trends among her friends and other people at her school.

Children saw the tailoring of content on their feeds as something positive.

Several children thought it would be overwhelming and less engaging to see content which was not tailored to their interests.

- For example, Jaden said that having to engage with content which was not tailored to his needs would make him feel angry and frustrated.
- Kaleb added that limiting his engagement to content which only served his interests was useful. "Not everybody needs to know everything," he said.
- Sam felt strongly that he could learn about other topics if he wanted to, but that he chose not to because he used social media for entertainment.
- James and Levi 'trained' their algorithm to keep the content on their feed consistent. They liked content about certain themes to encourage TikTok to promote more content *like that*, even if they didn't like that specific piece of content.

None of the children felt there may be negative ramifications of engaging only with content that had been served to them via their feed's algorithm.

- For example, Nour reflected that she was seeing more news on Israel and Palestine than other topics, such as, "the Trump thing" (multiple alleged cases of sexual assault against Donald Trump) because "people take [Israel / Palestine] more seriously" and it was a more important topic. She did not reflect on how content algorithmically generated for her may de-prioritise other content.

The children who recognised that adverts were targeted based on their activity felt this was mostly useful.

Some of the younger children believed that they saw certain adverts because the products were the most popular. Others recognised that adverts were aligned with content they enjoyed. The children did not link this specifically to algorithms.

- Lauren said she sees a lot of adverts for makeup: "TikTok knows what I would probably buy."

Several children commented on personalised adverts being helpful for them.

- Rosie, Nour, Leah and Ellie had all purchased makeup and beauty products from social media after seeing adverts for them.
- India felt she was someone who likes buying things. She didn't mind about adverts being targeted – she preferred this than being shown things she wouldn't buy.

Developing an intervention and evaluation

Development phase

Building on the insights gained from the explore phase, Revealing Reality identified the main challenges children faced in applying media literacy. These challenges mainly revolved around:

- Misunderstandings regarding the motives of different people on social media
- The commercial aspects of social media
- The impact of social media on people's decisions

In response, the 'development' phase focused on crafting an intervention that directly addressed these challenges, aiming to equip children with the essential skills and knowledge to navigate social media feeds and developing the measures that would highlight the effect of the intervention.

Revealing Reality and the PSHE Association worked together to create a set of lessons and resources for key stage 3, and a set of lessons and resources for key stage 4 to improve children's ability to think critically about their social media feeds.

This process of developing media literacy lessons involved multiple stages of collaboration and refinement, making adjustments based on feedback to ensure effectiveness and relevance.

Designing the intervention: Designing interventions to increase media literacy capabilities and motivation to apply them

Designing lesson plans to counter barriers to media literacy application

To counter misconceptions around social media, the lesson plans were designed to cover topics like the motivations of different actors on platforms, commercial agendas, and the potential positive and negative impacts of social media on young people.

The aim of the 'development' phase was to develop lessons that built the foundations and introduced students to media literacy on their social media feeds; familiarising students with important concepts such as the motives of other users, the financial structures of social media and the potential influences of content on online and offline behaviours.

The table below outlines common misconceptions and how the lessons were designed to address them.

Misconception	How the intervention aimed to address the misconceptions
Children believe content is more likely to be true if it is popular	Lesson emphasis: Highlighting that social media is not always a reliable information source; truth is not always the motivation behind content creators' online behaviours.
	It is important to shift children's motivation towards using other cues, besides popularity, to determine truth, instead of relying solely on the likes, views, or shares a piece of content has received.
Children think content is more likely to be true if effort has been put into its production	Lesson emphasis: Content on social media isn't always a reliable information source.
	To develop their media literacy skills and motivation to apply them, children and young people should understand that high production value doesn't necessarily equal authenticity and truthfulness. They should consider other factors that may also incentivise and drive high production

value in content creation. Young people should also be aware that creating content with high production values can be a deliberate attempt to emulate legitimate/official content from mainstream sources.

Children think they can recognise commercial agendas	Lesson emphasis: Helping children grasp how social media companies function as businesses, making money through users' engagement.

To improve media literacy among children, there needs to be greater critical reflection of who is creating or sharing the content and applying this critical appraisal to all types of content and sources. It's also important they're aware of the different agendas that can be at play, from the micro-scale (e.g. other users' agendas, accounts' agendas) to the macro (e.g. the agendas of the platforms and the brands advertising on it) and have some recognition of the fact that as social media users, they are not always able to discern other users' agendas and motives for posting. |
| Children underestimate the downsides of personalised feeds | Lesson emphasis: Helping children understand the drawbacks of personalised content; the importance of engaging with diverse viewpoints.

Children need to be able to recognise that the content they engage with on their feeds has been selected based on their activity and demographics. They need to be able to understand that content will likely only represent one fraction of a wider topic, argument, or conversation, and appreciate that there may be information they are unaware of because of this. Children need to understand the benefits of engaging with a wider variety of content representing a diverse array of viewpoints. |

Co-design to refine lesson plans

To ensure these lessons were appropriate for the students and communicated the key messages clearly, Revealing Reality conducted co-design workshops with five schools.

Co-design included remote interviews with PSHE leads from the participating schools, during which teachers provided initial feedback on the lessons and lesson plans. Subsequently, researchers visited these schools to observe teachers delivering the lessons to key stages 3 and 4.

During lesson observations, researchers noted several areas for improvement:

- Teachers were not always clear on what the key takeaway was for each lesson.
- Some activities and sections of the lessons were observed to be less engaging for students.
- Both students and teachers struggled to think about the different motivations influencers and users on social media might have.
- Understanding and articulation of the commercial motives and structures of social media companies proved challenging for some students.
- Some lesson activities did not align closely with the key messages the lessons aimed to convey.
- Some activities assumed a level of prior knowledge about commercial structures that students did not necessarily have.
- Some teachers felt less prepared to talk through topics they have less pre-existing knowledge about. For example, the more technical areas of social media was intimidating for some teachers who felt they were not "tech savvy".
- One teacher reflected that teachers feeling comfortable with social media and being frequent users also had its own challenges, as they were immersed in the platforms and had a less objective view of social media and its effects.

Following each lesson, researchers conducted short interviews with the teachers trialling the lessons to understand their experience of teaching the lessons, and how they felt the class responded to it. While

teachers generally reported good levels of attentiveness and student discussion, some expressed concerns about the lessons being somewhat dry and lacking in tangible examples.

Additionally, small focus groups were conducted with a subset of students from each class to ascertain which topics they found most engaging and which they found less so. Feedback included observations that some slides were overly text-heavy, certain concepts were difficult to grasp, and some activities were less engaging.

Insights gleaned from these observations, interviews, and mini focus groups informed improvements to the lessons before the official pilot phase.

The PSHE Association and Revealing Reality further refined the lessons:

- Streamlining the lessons to be more concise.
- Incorporating more visual and video assets to provide relatable examples and enhance engagement.
- Breaking down difficult concepts into step-by-step explanations.
- Removing activities that did not directly align with the key aims of the lessons.
- Providing summary slides after discussion activities to ensure alignment with the key aims of the lessons for both the class and the teachers.

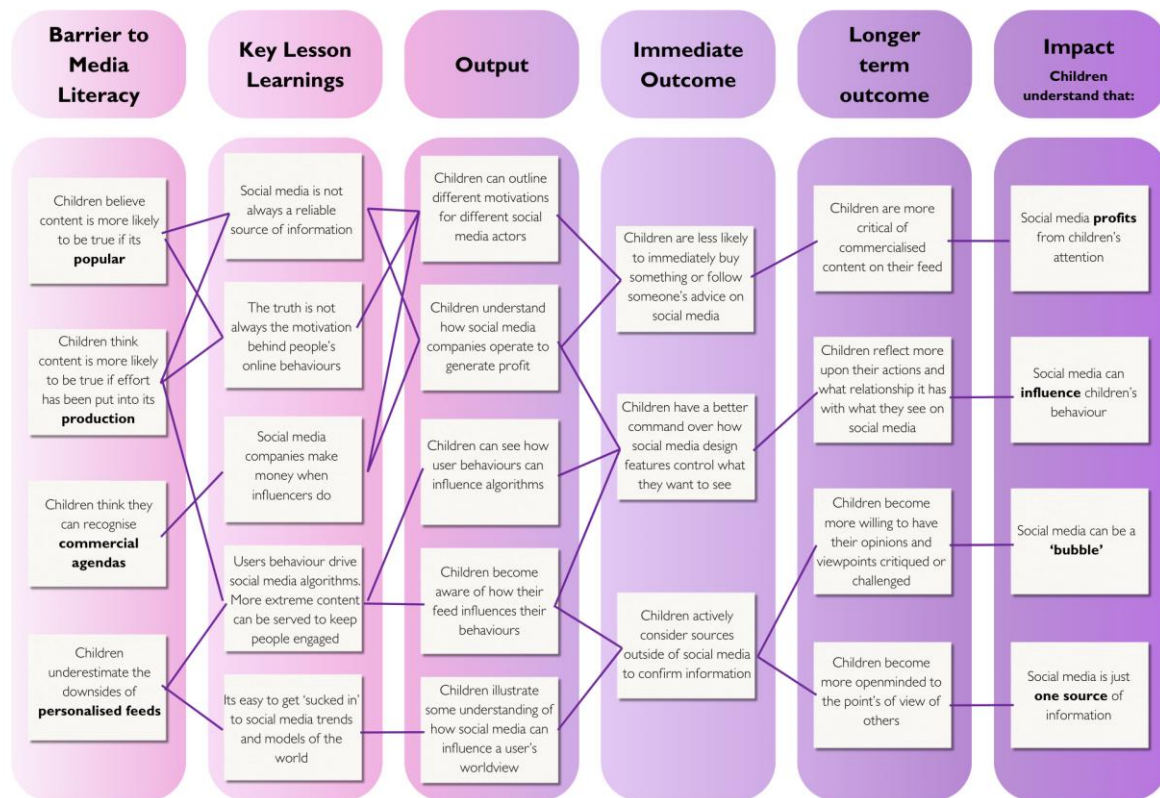# Designing the evaluation: Developing measures to assess the effects of media literacy interventions in schools

The Theory of Change served as a framework for the evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the lessons in achieving the intended outcomes. Measures were developed for each outcome, with questions designed for each to capture survey data with the aim of demonstrating the impact of the intervention on pupils.

Underpinning evaluation activities with a Theory of Change

Revealing Reality and the PSHE Association developed a Theory of Change, outlining a set of skills and learnings that could support children and young people to think critically about their social media feeds, and overcome the misconceptions highlighted during the explore phase of the research.

The drafted 'impact areas' outlined the long-term, intended goals of the lesson plans, with the 'outputs' and 'outcomes' highlighting the short-term changes to children's perceptions of social media which could indicate movements towards the longer-term goals.

Working draft of Theory of Change for media literacy lesson plans and evaluation design

Barrier to Media Literacy	Key Lesson Learnings	Output	Immediate Outcome	Longer term outcome	Impact Children understand that:
Children believe content is more likely to be true if its **popular**	Social media is not always a reliable source of information	Children can outline different motivations for different social media actors	Children are less likely to immediately buy something or follow someone's advice on social media	Children are more critical of commercialised content on their feed	Social media **profits** from children's attention
Children think content is more likely to be true if effort has been put into its **production**	The truth is not always the motivation behind people's online behaviours	Children understand how social media companies operate to generate profit	Children have a better command over how social media design features control what they want to see	Children reflect more upon their actions and what relationship it has with what they see on social media	Social media can **influence** children's behaviour
Children think they can recognise **commercial agendas**	Social media companies make money when influencers do	Children can see how user behaviours can influence algorithms		Children become more willing to have their opinions and viewpoints critiqued or challenged	Social media can be a **'bubble'**
Children underestimate the downsides of **personalised feeds**	Users behaviour drive social media algorithms. More extreme content can be served to keep people engaged	Children become aware of how their feed influences their behaviours	Children actively consider sources outside of social media to confirm information	Children become more openminded to the point's of view of others	Social media is just **one source** of information
	Its easy to get 'sucked in' to social media trends and models of the world	Children illustrate some understanding of how social media can influence a user's worldview			

Developing evaluation tools to capture change in the attitudes of pupils

Alongside teacher feedback, pupils completed a survey before and after the lessons to understand how their attitudes and understanding of their social media feeds had changed. The survey was completed by pupils at the start of the first lesson and then again, two weeks after the third and final lesson. Pupils' responses to a pre- and post-survey were analysed to measure change following the lessons.

The survey was completed by pupils who were taught the PSHE Association lessons, the existing comparison lessons, and a control group who received no lessons on media literacy. This three-group comparison was intended to isolate the impact of the new media literacy lessons.

The survey was designed to try and ensure maximum engagement with pupils and encourage reflection. They were designed to be visually-appealing and questions were framed around scenarios to make the surveys feel interesting to do.

The survey questions were also designed to avoid making the correct or intended answers obvious. Rather than solely relying on multiple-choice questions with answers pupils might be able to work out what the 'right' or 'desired' answer was, pupils were presented with scenarios that encouraged them to consider and express nuanced opinions.
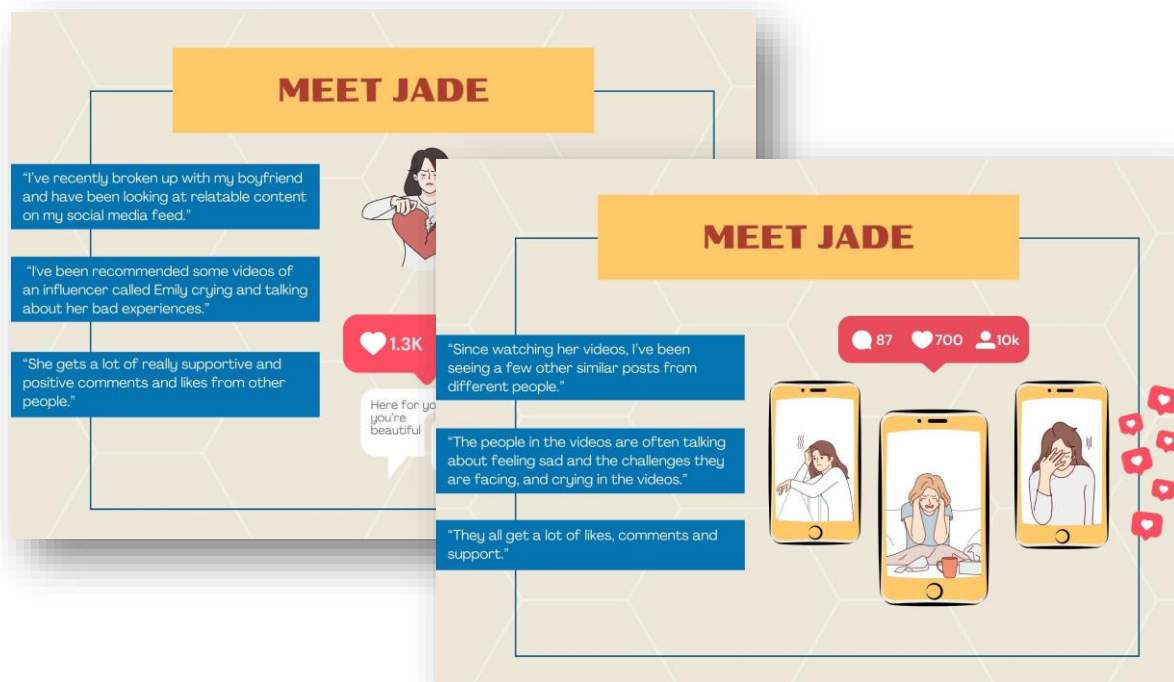
This aimed to capture an accurate baseline of understanding in the 'pre' survey, making it easier to detect any changes in perspective that may occur following the program.

During the development phase, the survey questions and scenarios were refined through cognitive testing interviews with a number of children in key stage 3 and 4. Cognitive testing with students informed the refinement of evaluation methods.

Implementing lesson plans and surveys in schools
Pilot phase

The pilot phase offered the opportunity to trial lesson plans developed to counter the barriers highlighted by children and young people themselves in classrooms with Key Stage 3 and 4 pupils.

Nine schools took part and completed, the pilot. Teachers delivered the lessons in schools and pupils completed paper surveys designed to assess how they applied their media literacy when thinking about social media before and after the lessons. The teachers provided feedback on the process of teaching the lessons via remote interviews and an online feedback form.

There were three groups, including an 'intervention group who were taught the PSHE Association lessons, a 'comparison' group who were taught an existing set of media literacy-focused lesson plans designed by another organisation, and a 'control' group, who received no media literacy-related intervention.

There was too much 'noise' in evaluation data to discern what had worked

Unfortunately, the differences between the 'pre' and 'post' survey responses did not provide clear findings on the effect of the lessons. Initial analysis of the data revealed a similar level of variation within the responses of the 'no intervention' control group to the PSHE Association and existing lesson plans control group – despite that group having received no media literacy lessons. This variation suggests that the survey itself may not be a reliable measure of actual changes in understanding.

Below is an example of this analysis for one question, showing the difference between the average pre and post answers from participants.

Question: What do social media companies want?

*Participants ranked answers from what social media companies **most** want (giving the answer a score of 1) to what they **least** want (giving the answer a score of 6).*

*This means an **increase** in pre to post scores means on average pupils ranked the answer as **less** important. The inverse is also true. A **decrease** in pre to post scores means on average, that answer was seen as more important.*

An asterisk (*) signifies where the change between pre and post was statistically significant at the 95% percentile.

A green cell highlights a move in the direction intended by the lesson plans, and a red cell signals a move in the opposite direction.

Statement	PSHE Assoc.	Control	No int.
To create an online community	+0.4*	0	0
To encourage people to create content other users will find engaging	+0.2	0	+0.1
To keep users on the platform for as long as possible	-0.2	-0.2	+0.1
To share information and spread awareness about important issues	+0.1	+0.3*	+0.1
To allow users to make their own money	-0.1	-0.1	-0.3*
To help businesses advertise their products and services	-0.4*	0	0

The responses for the PSHE Association lessons show slightly more variation than the control and comparison groups, however the differences appear to be random and don't relate to one 'type' of answer more than others.

The 'No intervention' column, representing the average difference in responses for pupils who weren't taught either of the lesson plans, show the same average difference as the comparison group. In one case ('To allow users to make their own money'), the control group who were taught neither of the lesson plan saw a statistically significant change, beyond the effect on either of the lesson plans.

Across all questions, there were similar levels of difference between average pre and post responses, with no discernible trend across themes or outcome areas. The same was true when the data was analysed across sub-groups, including gender, age, year group, and the proportion of students receiving free school meals at a participant's school.

The average change from pre to post survey across all questions for pupils who were taught the PSHE Association lessons was 0.134, whether the numeric value of an answer was increasing or decreasing. This degree of change was slightly higher than the two control groups. Pupils taught the comparison, existing media literacy lessons showed 0.099 and those taught no lessons on media literacy saw 0.092.

The seemingly random pattern of change from pre to post across the three intervention types, along with answers where pupils who weren't taught media literacy lessons saw significant levels of change, beyond either of the two lesson plans, signify a high degree of 'noise' in survey responses[10].

There was a lack of clear trends across all questions and significant 'noise' in responses, particularly within the 'no intervention' group.

Challenges with the survey distribution and completion, and challenges teaching the lessons in classroom settings provide potential hypotheses for the 'noise' or variation in the data. The length, complexity, and subtly of the survey could also have contributed to the quality of the data.

Teachers reported accessibility issues with survey questions, particularly for younger students

As part of the pilot and evaluation, students were made to complete the same survey before and after the lessons, to create a baseline of their knowledge prior to the pilot, and to measure the impacts of the lesson two weeks after they were completed.

Teachers reported that students struggled to understand the specific questions asked in the survey and also found that the survey was not accessible to a range of capabilities across key stages 3–4. A couple of teachers also said that it might have been beneficial to amend the survey to make it more accessible to KS3 students.

> *"Could there be a separate [survey] for key stage three or key stage four? … We've got some SEN students who could not access it at all"*
> PSHE lead

Initially, teachers had anticipated and planned for the surveys to take 5-10 minutes. However, some teachers reported that surveys took at least half an hour to complete as a class.

> *"One year 8 class took a whole lesson to fill in the survey, it was only meant to take 10 minutes. A lot of them didn't understand the questions and the teacher had to go through question by question"*
> Teacher

The evaluation required students to repeat the same survey two weeks after the final lesson. Some teachers noted that students were less engaged in filling out the survey the second time round, which potentially impacted the quality of their responses.

---

[10] For detailed tables breaking down this analysis, please see the appendix.

Teachers found the lessons engaging but highlighted challenges

Many had taught lessons on the potential negative impacts of being online before but had not taught lessons that introduced pupils to the financial agendas that motivated content creators, users, and social media platforms themselves.

Teachers reported that the PSHE Association's lessons were novel and informative, providing a new angle from which to understand social media. Some felt that most of their pupils had little understanding of how social media companies run as businesses, meaning lessons prompted useful discussions and learnings.

> *"We don't tend to focus on social media this way…the company side of it. It was clear they [the pupils] had never thought about it as a business and whose aim it is to make money. It's an interesting thing to do"* –
> PSHE lead

However, some teachers reflected that the PSHE Association slides provided for the lessons had more text on them that comparison group's and the resources used in the wider curriculum. They reflected this may have made it more difficult for some pupils to follow the lesson.

> *"Some of the slides are a little bit text heavy for some of our pupils … if there's too much information on the slide, then it will stop the discussion and it ends up with the teacher reading off the slides, which is not ideal for PSHE which needs to be more discursive."*
> PSHE lead

> *"The lessons were way too long. We barely went past the introduction of the lesson as that alone took the entire lesson."*
> Teacher

Some teachers reflected that the range of literacy and attainment levels within key stages 3-4 meant that some classes struggled to engage and understand the lessons. In these classes, teachers reported that breaking down information further into more simple concepts might help these students engage in the lessons better.

> *"Could there be a key terms page that connects it all for the students? It makes it easier to connect the dots."*
> PSHE lead

Most teachers reflected that the PSHE Association's lessons generally required less preparation than existing, comparison lesson plans about media literacy. Teachers reported that the resources they were provided by the PSHE Association were clear, and generally, that they understood the objectives of each lesson based on the information provided.

This was echoed in the co-design phase of the research in which teachers trialling the lessons reported that the comprehensive nature of the lesson slides meant they felt confident teaching the lessons after briefly skimming through the slide pack.

By contrast, teachers reported that the comparison lesson resources were less user friendly and required greater teacher engagement.

> *"[The PSHE Association's lessons] flowed much better [compared with the comparison group lessons] … there were nice and clear outcomes in terms of what you want from the pupils; the graphics were much better."*
> PSHE lead

Of the teachers who took part in the post-pilot survey, all those who had taught the PSHE Association lessons reported spending less than 30 minutes preparing for their lessons. By contrast, half of those who taught the control group lessons spent between 1-2 hours, with at least two teachers spending more than two hours.

> *"I think it's quite noticeable the different between the PSHE prep and the [comparison group lesson] prep … with the [control group] ones there was a lot of detailed planning advice, but it took me quite a while to then integrate that into the lesson before I could deliver it in the classroom … in terms of a busy teaching schedule, I might have spent two hours looking for examples of disinformation … the PSHE prep you could get your head around in fairly good time, and it was nicely structured."*
> Teacher

Most teachers reported that preparing for the PSHE Associations lessons was easier and faster than for the comparison group lessons, which required teachers to search for sources and examples themselves.

However, while teachers reported spending longer preparing for the control group lessons, they found having contemporary real-life examples helpful in engaging pupils in discussion.

> *"The PSHE ones were a little more generic in terms of their take … the [comparison group lessons] in some ways feel more current, more relevant … The [other] ones have got a really good deep fake of Mark Zukerburg … when they've got a celebrity or something like that, they can kind of make that connection."*
> Teacher

At the development stage of the lessons, Revealing Reality and the PSHE Association made the decision to omit any contemporary and real-life examples for the purposes of making preparation easier for teachers, and to avoid signposting and introducing the children to potentially contentious content they may not have seen.

However, it is important to acknowledge a tension between having contemporary, relatable examples for the lessons, and the practical need for lessons that are 'ready to teach' and require minimal preparation from teachers.

Testing hypotheses to develop future media literacy interventions and measurement

Extension phase

Piloting the lesson plans and the means for evaluating them highlighted useful learnings and potential hypotheses for how to improve the materials. How could the survey design make the questions and topics more tangible for students? How could the lesson plans be developed to help students take away the key messages?

The extension phase was the opportunity to test these hypotheses, and ensure the resulting lesson plans and the evaluation insights that sit alongside them could take advantage of the pilot learnings.

Revealing Reality and the PSHE Association collaborated on developing both the lesson plans and the evaluation tools to trial amended versions, with the final phase of the project being an opportunity to 'test' some of these working hypotheses.

12 classes across 6 schools took part in the final phase, with teachers using the amended evaluation materials and lesson plans before providing feedback in an interview.

Streamlining the focus and formatting of the lesson plans

Overall, teachers who had taken part in the piloting of the PSHE Association lesson plans were positive about the lessons, with many noting the novelty and importance of the topics covered. Some teachers reflected that classes with different capabilities and literacy levels struggled to complete the materials in the time expected, with some struggling with the formatting and quantity of text on the slides.

Streamlining the intervention with clearer alignment between activities and lesson objectives

Some teachers reflected that breaking the lessons down into smaller, component parts would potentially go some way to supporting students to better understand and retain key messages. In the extension phase, each lesson was focused on one barrier and lesson objectives clearly aligned with activities.

The clearer alignment between activities and objectives aimed to make the content easier to follow and teach effectively. The refined focus aimed to improve understanding of key messages for both teaches and pupils, and helped teachers clearly see the connection between activities and objectives for them to convey to pupils. There was also the added benefit of making it easier to integrate the lesson plans into busy PSHE curriculums.

Simplifying language and reducing text on slides

In the pilot, teachers noted that pupils with different capabilities and literacy levels struggled to complete the materials in the expected time, and some found the formatting and quantity of text overwhelming.

In the extension phase, the text on slides was reduced, and language was simplified further to break down information into more straightforward concepts.

The simplified language and reduced text aimed to make the content more accessible and easier to understand for pupils across varying literacy levels, ensuring they could engage with the materials effectively within the allocated time.

Simplifying the evaluation approach to be more accessible for pupils and teachers

Feedback from teachers following the pilot phase highlighted challenges when running the evaluation in classrooms. Some were practical – how could the evaluation survey and supporting materials better work in classrooms and enable teachers to guide a class of pupils to complete the survey at the same time. Other challenges stemmed from the style and complexity of questions, which meant students struggled to

Simplification of the survey questions

Teachers highlighted that some pupils struggled with the complexity of the survey questions during the pilot, which in some cases led to the survey taking longer than expected during lessons. The 'Extension' phase offered the chance to streamline and reduce the length of the survey, with simplified questions.

This involved reducing the number of questions and transitioning from paper-based to digital formats. The changes aimed to streamline the process, making it easier for teachers to administer and for students to complete. By reducing the cognitive load and time required, the revised surveys aimed to improve participant engagement and the quality of responses.

Integration of video clips and benchmarking

The written scenarios used in the pilot were replaced with embedded video clips integrated into the lesson slide pack. This allowed teachers to guide students collectively through questions that were based on real social media content, making the activity more interactive and engaging.

There are existing examples of screenshots used in surveys to probe around children's reflections on specific content or assets, but the survey in the extension phase went further by using video. These video clips are examples of real social media content, more accurately reflecting the digital environment children spend time in.

Avoidance of stimulus repetition and randomisation of materials

To enable meaningful analysis across the different groups of pupils, videos were used strategically across groups for their 'pre' and 'post' survey. Classes were randomly assigned to view either set A or set B during the pre-lesson survey, with post-lesson assessments featuring the alternative set.

Materials were randomised and rotated across classes to mitigate potential order effects. These adjustments ensured that responses were not influenced by familiarity or sequence, leading to a more accurate and reliable evaluation of students' trust levels and critical engagement with unfamiliar content.

The PSHE Association lessons seemed to contribute to decreased trust in social media content

Results from the pre and post survey in the extension phase revealed a clearer pattern compared to the pilot phase, which smaller variance among the control group.

Students who had been taught the PSHE Association lesson plans were statistically significantly less trusting of the content and the content creator following the lesson. This suggests a greater application of critical thinking and increased scepticism in the example content. The longer term goal of these lesson plans would be that this increased scepticism was seen long term and be applied to their own social media feed by extension.

Overall trust across the videos
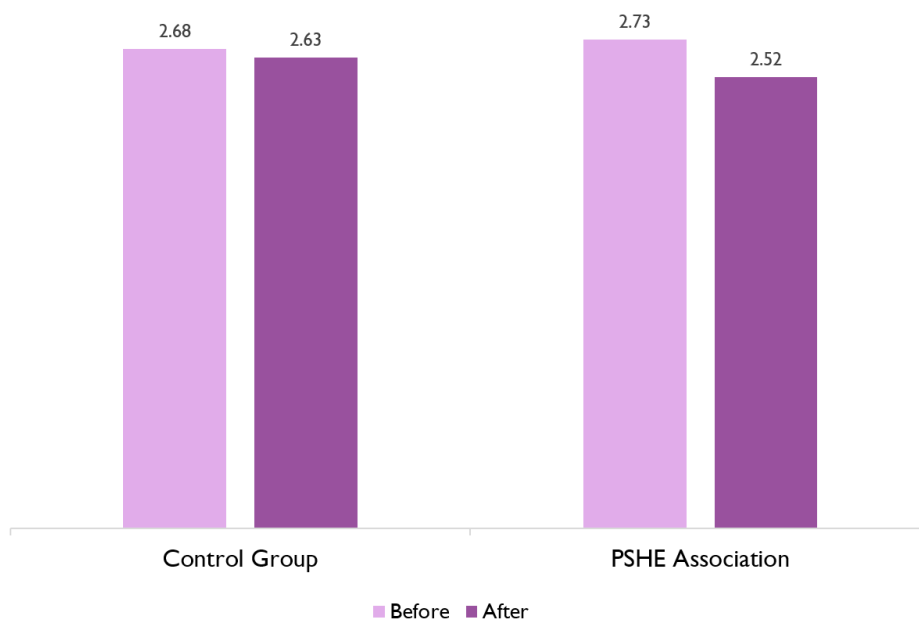
Pupils were asked to evaluate the extent to which they trusted the videos they viewed, considering both the content itself and the account that posted it. Those who participated in the amended extension lesson plans showed statistically significant declines in trust.

Further analysis revealed that these changes were more pronounced among girls, who experienced a significant decline in trust, while boys did not. Additionally, key stage three (KS3) pupils demonstrated statistically significant declines in trust, unlike their key stage four (KS4) counterparts.

Overall trust across the videos, by key stage and gender
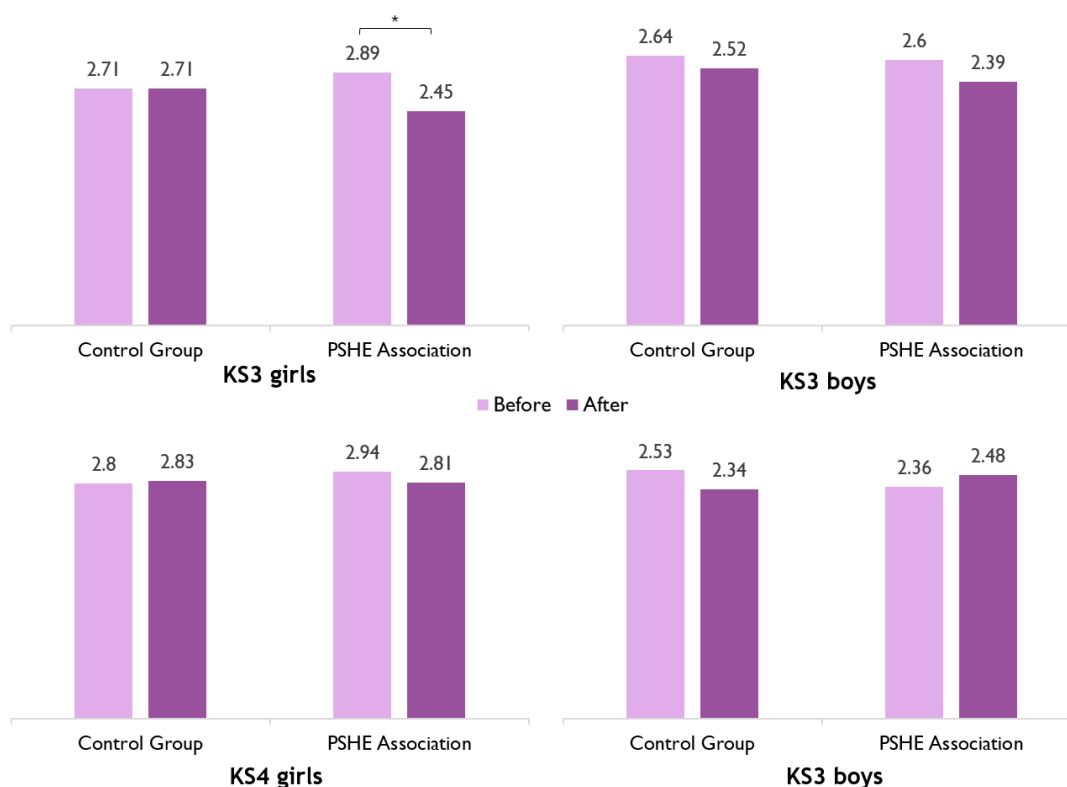
When examining the data by key stage and gender, the most notable changes were observed among KS3 female pupils, who were the only group to show a statistically significant decline in trust. This suggests that a combination of age and gender influenced the effectiveness of the lesson plans in altering perceptions of trust.

While it cannot be claimed that the lesson plans were therefore more effective, the following interpretations could be made

- Impact of survey design: the change in survey design may have corrected biases or clarified ambiguous questions, leading to more reliable or interpretable data.
- Improved respondent understanding: the change may have helped respondents better understand the questions, resulting in more consistent or meaningful answers.

Conclusion

Children are growing up in an increasingly digital world. Algorithmically driven social media feeds have become central to their entertainment, shaping how they interact with friends, discover new trends, and explore their interests. These platforms not only influence their preferences and values but also play a crucial role in shaping their relationships and identities.

Beyond entertainment, the online world is where children receive much of their information, shaping their understanding of current events, exposing them to advertising, and influencing their decisions about what to buy and engage with. With so much of their worldview being constructed through social media feeds, their ability to critically evaluate what they see—distinguishing fact from fiction and recognising the agendas behind different messages—is essential.

The challenge lies in how best to equip children with these media literacy skills. How should these concepts be taught? More crucially, how can critical thinking be made a priority for children, particularly when so much of the content they consume is designed to be engaging, entertaining, and seamlessly embedded into their everyday online experience? Finding ways to make critical evaluation an essential part of how they navigate digital spaces is key to ensuring they are informed, resilient, and capable of making independent, well-reasoned judgements about the content they encounter.

This project aimed to tackle this challenge in a different way, focusing on children's *motivation* to be sceptical of what they see online. The aim was to recognise and incorporate the wider context, what motivates them online and what are the challenges to being critical of what they see, rather than aiming to increase their media literacy capabilities alone.

Making critical engagement meaningful to children and equipping them with the right tools

This project explored these challenges in depth, identifying the barriers that prevent children from critically engaging with online content. Through interviews and diary tasks with 20 children aged 11-16, the research highlighted key obstacles to media literacy and the motivation to apply it effectively.

Findings revealed four primary misconceptions shaping children's online behaviours:

- They are more likely to believe content is true if it is **popular**

- They assume content is more credible if effort has been put into its **production**

- They believe they can recognise **commercial agendas** but miss them when faced with examples on their feeds

- They underestimate the **downsides** of personalised feeds and the influence of algorithms

While media literacy interventions have been developed before, this project took a different approach by starting from the reality of how children interact with social media. Rather than focusing solely on teaching critical thinking skills, the intervention also sought to understand what motivates children to actively apply these skills in their everyday lives.

The project also contributed to the challenge of measuring media literacy interventions. A key question remains: how can we reliably assess whether interventions are working? Like many aspects of digital behaviour, relying on self-reported data is insufficient. This research sought to explore more robust and meaningful ways to evaluate changes in children's ability to critically engage with online content.

The PSHE Association lesson plans encouraged some children to reflect more critically on what they see online

Teachers and students responded positively to the topics and approach of the lesson plans. Students were particularly interested in learning about the business and commercial agendas driving social media platforms and therefore shaping their feeds, and teachers observed that discussions about these topics led to meaningful reflections on the ways in which influencers and platforms operate as businesses.

Following adaptations based on learnings from the pilot, the extension survey data showed that children became more sceptical of the content they saw on their social media feeds. This suggests that the lessons were effective in encouraging students to critically assess online information and recognise the influence of different actors in shaping their digital environment.

However, the improvements in critical engagement were not uniform across all students. Findings from the extension phase suggest that KS4 boys did not demonstrate the same level of increased scepticism as other groups. This highlights the need for further exploration into how media literacy education can be adapted to better engage and resonate with them.

Future work could consider how interventions could be adapted and tailored to this group, taking into account their specific online behaviours, interests, and motivations. Understanding the ways in which they interact with content – and the factors that shape their trust in social media – will be crucial in designing effective strategies to strengthen their critical thinking skills.

Key learnings and principles when teaching media literacy to children, and evaluating its effectiveness

Teacher preparedness: Some teachers found themselves unfamiliar with teaching media literacy as a topic. Those who used social media less, or not at all, tended to struggle more when faced with questions from students. Many felt overwhelmed by the background knowledge required, particularly in technical aspects of social media. This raises the point that enabling and upskilling teachers to teach media literacy can be as important as teaching children media literacy skills.

Accompanying teacher guidance documents and key learning notes should provide structured guidance and teacher training to help educators feel confident in navigating this subject. This is to ensure that teachers are well-versed in key concepts and confident in navigating media literacy landscapes. The aim should be to position the teacher 'one step ahead' of the students in terms of understanding and proficiency.

Reflective and critical thinking: Lessons were designed to encourage students to think critically about their own social media feeds. However, some teachers noted that this approach differed from how they tended to teach lessons.

Scenarios and discussion-based activities were important for helping students reflect on their own media habits. Rather than focusing on 'right' or 'wrong' answers, media literacy education should foster critical thinking and open discussion, allowing students to explore different perspectives and reflect and apply learnings to their own lives.

Focused lessons: In the pilot phase, some teachers found the lesson slides too text-heavy, making the lessons harder to deliver effectively and reducing engagement from students. Media literacy is a complex topic to teach, and therefore it's important that lessons prioritise clear, engaging content that effectively communicates core principles without overwhelming students or teachers. In the extension, the slides were developed and refined, to offer more clear and streamlined messaging to students.

Refining measurement approaches: Measuring the impact of media literacy interventions remains a challenge. Feedback from teachers and variability in survey data highlighted the difficulty of capturing meaningful changes in students' understanding and attitudes. During the pilot phase in particular, the impact evaluation survey was more time-consuming for both teachers and students than anticipated, with some students struggling with the wording and complexity of questions.

To address this, the evaluation approach and materials were edited to be more direct and accessible during the extension phase. Data from this phase suggests that shorter, more focused surveys can reduce variability and improve the clarity of results.

Publication of the lesson plans

These learnings have been incorporated into the latest iteration of the lesson plans, launched in April 2025 alongside this report. The goal is to apply these insights to future lessons with teenagers and inform further work aimed at increasing children's motivation to critically assess content on their social media feeds.