

**Blurred boundaries: An exploration of university students'
digital intimacies in hybrid ecologies.**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the critical intersection of digital technologies and intimate relationships amongst university students. By providing a nuanced investigation of how students navigate intimacy, trust, and abuse in the digital age, this study contributes valuable empirical insights which are of relevance during a sector-wide policy shift in England, as universities move toward regulatory requirements to address harassment and sexual misconduct (OfS, 2024a). Although universities are nationally recognised as agents of social change, with students moving beyond traditional learners to citizens and future leaders (Humphreys & Towl, 2022), research exploring UK university students' experiences and perceptions of healthy and harmful online relational practices is limited.

Grounded in voices of twenty students, collected via focus groups, and supplemented by follow-up interviews, the findings of this thesis highlight the need to recognise the changing space and time dimensions of students' university experience afforded by technologies. The use of online platforms during the transition to and throughout university is pivotal to student experience, providing opportunities to connect with near and distant others, although accompanied by risks and extended university boundaries. For the students, such risks are a necessary component of digital intimacies, and foundational to trust. However, online platforms serve dual and often contradictory functions in students' digital intimacies, with blurred boundaries between practices constructed as intimacy or abuse. Together, the findings highlight the necessity of reconceptualising students as existing within hybrid ecologies, moving toward risk mitigation and harm reduction approaches to online safeguarding in universities as opposed to risk elimination, and recognising wider forms of online abuse across the university sector. The thesis concludes by emphasising the need to move toward supportive multi-stakeholder responses to online abuse (Phippen & Bond, 2022a), which recognise the complexities of digital interactions and their profound impact on the intimate lives of university students.

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1. Chapter 1: Introduction

This research explored university students' everyday experiences of 'digital intimacies', defined as the variety of ways in which individuals develop and express intimacy online (Scott et al., 2020; Setty & Dobson, 2023a). My choice to explore this topic arose during a sector-wide shift in recognising the digital welfare of students as being crucial to their university experience (UUK, 2016), and my subsequent realisation that in the English Higher Education context, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the digital lives of students, particularly their experiences of intimacy. This becomes pertinent when we consider the widespread discourse of risk and harm associated with digital intimacy practices, such as non-consensual intimate image sharing, that dominates policy, guidance, and research with young people. Furthermore, in light of recent regulatory changes addressing harassment and sexual misconduct in higher education (HE) (OfS, 2021; 2024a) and findings that 24.5% of surveyed students have experienced sexual harassment ($n = 12,720$) (OfS, 2025), I argue it is increasingly necessary to understand how students experience and conceptualise digital intimacies, to inform preventative and responsive interventions grounded in their meanings of healthy and harmful practices.

Aligning with the underpinning role of 'hybrids' in Actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005; Blok & Jensen, 2011), and expanding the concept of 'hybrid ecologies', defined as "a new class of digital ecology that merges multiple environments, physical and digital, together" (Crabtree & Rodden, 2008, p. 481) to students' intimate lives, I argue for the necessary movement away from rhetoric which reinforces a digital and non-digital binary. Instead, my findings highlight how students' experiences of space, time, trust, insecurity, intimacy, and abuse in the context of university are shaped by socio-technical networks of students' social connections, their associated norms, and online platforms. Although context-specific, these findings have direct implications for the ways in which students' experiences of digital intimacies and technology-facilitated abuse are conceptualised and understood, providing, for example, empirical insights into the continuum from 'normative' digital intimacies to harmful practices (Doerfler et al., 2024).

While regulatory conditions suggest that "harassment and sexual misconduct that is conducted online should be included in a provider's policies" (OfS, 2024a, p. 9), this is the extent of the reference to and/or frameworks for preventing or responding to online harassment and sexual misconduct provided. Additionally, despite further guidance to tackle online misconduct being recommended as a part of the statement of expectation evaluation (Baird et al., 2022), research continues to highlight how guidance for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on safeguarding students online remains inconsistent, and current policies are often fragmented (Tyrrell et al., 2024; Bond & Phippen, 2022a; Phippen & Bond, 2020a).

Consequently, I argue throughout this thesis that there is a need for HE policy and practice to reflect the increasingly networked lives of students, moving away from approaches reinforcing 'digital dualism' (Gosse, 2021), to recognising and responding to students' experiences of online harms utilising a multi-stakeholder approach.

Accordingly, this study set out to explore students' perceptions and experiences of digital intimacies. Specifically, it aimed to examine how university students', aged 18-25 years, experience, and perceive, the use of online platforms within their intimate relationships, and whether this has implications for HE policy and practice. Utilising a qualitative approach, speaking to students from the East of England, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are university students' experiences of digital intimacies?
2. How do students construct opportunities and risks associated with online platforms in the context of intimate relationships?
3. What is the perceived impact of digital intimacies upon students' university experiences?

This thesis offers an original contribution to knowledge in that it addresses the critical intersection of digital technologies and intimate relationships among university students. By providing a nuanced, interdisciplinary exploration of how students navigate intimacy, trust, risk and harm in the digital age, the study contributes valuable insights to academia, policy, and practice. By illuminating students' experiences and perspectives, the study advocates for informed, empathetic approaches to supporting healthy relationships and addressing online abuse within university communities and beyond via hybrid systems approaches. The remainder of this chapter introduces some of the key concepts addressed in this thesis, from technology to intimacy, relationships, and HE, before summarising the thesis structure.

1.1 Defining technology

Scholarly definitions of technology have varied over time, however a common definition is technology as "the application of scientific or other knowledge to practical tasks by ordered systems that involve people and organizations, productive skills, living things and machines" (Dusek, 2006, p. 35). Changing meanings and semantics surrounding technology have influenced the ways in which we perceive this concept, associating its form with deterministic discourse, making the presumption that technology reflects progress and scientific discovery, the ends to a means, otherwise known as the technological bluff (Ellul, 1990). The difficulties in defining technology have been argued amongst many, including Braudel (1985) and Leo Marx (1997), due to its presence in all aspects of everyday life. Indeed, contemporary definitions would be limited if they referred solely to tangible objects, "technology is everything,

it is also everywhere, present in all our endeavours, be they exceptional or everyday” (Matthewman, 2011, p. 8).

Broadly speaking, technology is the application of scientific knowledge to everyday life. Matthewman (2011) identified technology as comprising several different concepts and their interactions with one another, including objects, activities, knowledge, modes of organisation and sociotechnical systems. For example, the development of the stethoscope, born from the need for “moral and socially ethical” screening, changed patterns of interpersonal relations via enabling doctors to create distance, while enabling “unprecedented intimacy” and the previously unidentifiable detectable (Matthewman, 2011, p. 59). A similar observation could be made for digital technologies and online platforms, where the private self is made public via user generated content, with the expectation of participatory interpersonal relationships with others online (Bond, 2014). These examples indicate how the social, societal norms or invention influence technological development, but also how technological developments influence the social.

Social media, as forms of interactive technologies utilising the internet, are also difficult to define. Replacing older terms such as Web 2.0 and social networking sites, social media can constitute a multitude of different platforms in which ‘social’ may not even be the primary aim (Dyer, 2020a). Modern social media platforms typically feature the individual at the centre of their community, moving away from chat-based sites structured by topics of interest (boyd & Ellison, 2008), further reflecting the concept of ‘network individualism’ (Wellman et al., 2003). Previous research focuses on the use of single social media platforms, particularly Facebook (Ellison et al., 2007; Muise et al., 2009), a platform originally developed to support US college students (Cassidy, 2006). However, since the introduction of Facebook in 2004, social media has developed exponentially. Most young people also frequently access image and video-sharing platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok as a means of social communication and connection (Piwek & Joinson, 2016). Furthermore, instead of using one single platform, individuals move between multiple platforms (Madianou & Miller, 2012), yet there is a dearth of research to date investigating the interplay between different platforms, particularly whilst studying intimate relationships (Whitty & Young, 2017).

Throughout this thesis, I highlight how students utilise a multitude of platforms to connect with others intimately, subsequently, the term ‘online platforms’ is adopted to reflect the shift between various platforms, including for example, social media, dating applications and gaming platforms. According to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report, an online platform is defined as “a digital service that facilitates interactions between two or more distinct but interdependent sets of users (whether firms or individuals)

who interact through the service via the internet” (OECD, 2019, p. 2). Online platforms subsequently encompass websites, apps, gaming platforms and search engines. Although it is recognised that ‘user-to-user services’ (Online Safety Act 2023) in which content can be generated and shared, are primary platforms in which students may form and maintain intimate relationships, the whole digital ecosystem embedded within student’s hybrid ecologies is of interest in this thesis. Crabtree and Rodden (2008, p. 481) consider the “emergence of hybrid ecologies, which marry mixed reality environments and ubiquitous computing environments together to bridge the physical-digital divide”. This thesis draws on their proposition and elements of ANT, recognising both the role of human and non-human actors, as central to student’s hybrid ecologies.

Bridging the sociology of science and pioneered by Callon (1986) and Latour (1987), ANT is:

“concerned with investigating the social and the technical taken together or, putting it another way, with the creation and maintenance of coextensive networks of human and nonhuman elements, which in the case of information technology, include people, organisations, software, computer, and communications hardware, and infrastructure standards” (Walsham, 1997, p. 467).

This thesis is informed by aspects of ANT, in which technology has a mediating role in social, cognitive, and behavioural action and therefore has agency within the chain of actors (Latour, 1990; Matthewman, 2011). This bottom-up descriptive approach of following networks to studying potential relations facilitated by ANT (Law, 2007) provides an inductive approach to investigation and analysis of socio-technical relations, which is central to this thesis. Alongside ANT, which has been described by Walsham (1997, p. 466) as a “development of one strand of the wider school of thought on the social construction of technology”, this thesis also draws upon theory of affordances. Originally an ecological psychology approach proposed by Gibson (1979), affordances, like ANT, gives equal attention to both the material as well as the social in studying the “sociomaterial nexus” (Faraj & Azad, 2012, p. 238). According to Hutchby (2001) technologies have the ability to enable and constrain actions (Fussey & Roth, 2020), therefore the concept of affordances acknowledges the materiality of technology, their ability to invite certain actions and subsequently influence human action. Schrock (2015, p. 1231) also describes affordances as “the interaction between an individual’s subjective perception of utility and the objective qualities of a technology”, leading to a dynamic interplay between people and platforms. Livingstone (2008) suggests that it is the affordances of online platforms that influence intimacy practices within relationships. Subsequently, throughout this thesis I recognise the relational role of technological affordances and the social in shaping student experiences.

1.2 Risk, trust, and intimacy

The taken for grantedness (Ling, 2012) and embeddedness of the internet and digital devices in everyday life is well documented. A recent Ofcom (2024) report highlights how 94% of adults have access to the internet, with 16-24-year-olds using an average of 8.7 different online communication platforms. Children's use of, and attitudes towards, digital technologies is widely researched, with reports highlighting that 65% of 8–12-year-olds use social media platforms, and 91% of 13–18-year-olds do so ($n = 2,005$) (Children's Commissioner, 2022). Ofcom (2024) highlight how children perceive online spaces as positive for their relationships, with 65% suggesting that online platforms were beneficial in building and maintaining friendships, however they also identify challenges of being online, presenting the possible 'risks and rewards' posed by online platforms, likened to the 'double edge sword of modernity' (Giddens, 1990 in Bond, 2010).

In an increasingly reflexive society, digital technology could be conceptualised as a new form of "manufactured uncertainty" with online harms forming "high-consequence risks" (Rasborg, 2020, p. 28). With the changing spatial and temporal boundaries associated with virtuality, affording anonymity, perpetual contact (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) and globalised connections, is it perhaps unsurprising that risk features heavily in technology discourse. Risk has been inherently intertwined with digital technologies and childhood, providing a modern example of the risk society thesis (Beck, 1992), particularly with regards to sexual risk, such as sending intimate images (Bond, 2014; Dobson, 2017). In these instances, the social construction of risks associated with digital technologies has been dominated by a harms narrative, as children and young people are considered vulnerable and in need of adult protection from the 'dangers' or 'risks' associated with online platforms. These "protectionist ideals derived from adultist perspectives have defined public space and adult space where children's participation is controlled and limited through formal and often legal restrictions." (Phippen & Bond, 2020c, p. 123). As such, the dominant narrative of protection from online harm lends itself to responses which focus upon eradicating risk.

However, the existence of risk does not always equate to harm. Risk is an important part of relationships, and online platforms provide opportunities to engage in 'risky' practices to express trust and intimacy (Setty, 2018b; 2019; Amundsen, 2019; 2022; 2023). Furthermore, central to, and inherently interlinked with risk, is trust. As Luhmann (2002) outlines, trust should be understood via its relationship to risk, with trust being a response to uncertainty in situations. Uttenthal (2024) highlights how a multidisciplinary approach to conceptualising trust is necessary, that, trust is not inherently psychological or rational only, but is a combination depending on the context, a social mechanism responsive to uncertainty or risk. Trust, at the institutional or interpersonal level (Misztal, 2020), "is a bet about the future contingent actions

of others” (Sztompka, 1999, p. 25), specifically, the positive expectation of future action, and is central to social relationships (Misztal, 1996). In a modern society which is underpinned by increasing uncertainty and risk (Beck, 1992; Giddens 1990), trust is significant, and central to ontological security, that is, our perceived continuity of our personal identity and environmental constancy (Giddens, 1991).

At an interpersonal level, trust is increasingly required and being shaped by online contexts. For example, online platforms enable anonymity and asynchrony, which can facilitate disinhibition (Suler, 2004), leading to potential fabrication or inauthenticity of identities (Paat & Markham, 2020). These changing boundaries of space and time facilitated by online platforms means signalling of trust utilising technologies becomes increasingly important. Establishment of trust via “a mutual process of self-disclosure” (Giddens, 1992, p. 121) is considered pivotal to intimate relationships. Intimacy practices such as sharing intimate images and sharing passwords to online platforms (Van Ouystel et al., 2016) are frequently regarded as mutual tokens of trust. Although accompanied by risks, such as non-consensual sharing (Phippen, 2012), or relationship conflict (Van Ouystel et al., 2019), disclosure in online spaces is considered crucial for the development of trust within young people’s intimate relationships (Bryce & Fraser, 2014).

Intimacy is characteristic of multiple different relational forms, “from familial through friendship to romantic and sexual” (Scott et al., 2020, p. 677), however the latter is of predominant focus in this thesis. Digital intimacies, as the focus of this thesis, encompass both connections between individuals as well as individuals’ connections with digital technologies, within an “infrastructure of intimacy” (Paasonen, 2018, p.2). Subsequently, digital intimacies are the variety of ways in which individuals develop and express intimacy online, including through sexually explicit image sharing, flirting, and meeting partners and creating, accessing, and circulating sexual content online (Scott et al., 2020; Setty & Dobson, 2023a).

Research investigating digital intimacies, particularly intimate image production and sharing, has focused predominantly on children, and is becoming increasingly saturated, with less attention paid to other stages of the lifespan (Henry & Powell, 2018; Amundsen, 2019). This is because policy and practice interventions have focused heavily on the risks and detrimental outcomes associated with digital intimacies, including the sometimes-unnecessary criminalisation of children (Phippen & Bond, 2023). Throughout this thesis, I move beyond the hegemonic discourse surrounding childhood and online harms, to explore the multifaceted notions of risk and its relation to trust and intimacy in the context of technology-mediated emerging adulthood relationships. The relationship between these concepts is considered particularly pertinent as emerging adulthood, the extended period of development between

adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 2000; 2004; 2006; 2015) is frequently associated with 'risk' behaviours linked to identity development and sexual exploration.

With around a third of emerging adults entering HE in the UK (Bolton, 2025; HESA, 2024), universities provide a unique context, presenting students with new opportunities for relationships and social connections, along with challenges like financial uncertainty and emotional instability, particularly during the first year (Hughes & Smail, 2015). The importance of building supportive social networks is recognised by university guidance, which often includes advice on intimate and healthy romantic and sexual relationships to promote well-being (for example, University of Portsmouth, 2025; University of Exeter, 2025; UWE, 2025). Digital technologies, particularly mobile phones, have become central to these connections, acting as a "technologies of social mediation" (Ling, 2012, p. 9). As aforementioned, these pose opportunities but also risks, from identity exploration, pleasure, choice and additional "resources for intimacy" (Amundsen, 2022, p. 123), to instability, insecurity, violations of privacy and abuse (Finn, 2004; Tokunaga, 2011; McGeeney & Hanson, 2017). As a result of the potential risks, universities have regulatory, legal, and moral duties to respond to and work toward the prevention of harm students experience in hybrid ecologies. Despite this, less sector-wide consideration is paid toward students' experiences of online harms, irrespective of the unique affordances of technologies and their embeddedness in everyday life. Instead, the online safeguarding landscape has predominantly focused on children, leaving adults, including vulnerable populations, with limited guidance and protection (Bond & Phippen, 2022b; Powell et al., 2020).

The purpose of this research was therefore to address the gap in existing evidence, as well as exploring sector opportunities to intervene, by investigating emerging adults' digital intimacies in the context of an English university. By highlighting how, and in what contexts, student utilise online platforms for intimacy, including mundane, normalised everyday activities, practices, and norms, I argue that we may be better able to understand the spectrum of healthy to harmful practices (Burkett, 2015; Roberts & Ravn, 2019).

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis begins, in chapter two, by outlining and discussing the theoretical and conceptual literature pertaining to intimacy and technology within young peoples' everyday lives. I highlight how, despite the substantive literature surrounding young people's use of digital technologies for intimacy practices, there is less research exploring emerging adults' digital intimacies. This chapter subsequently examines the changing nature of relationships in emerging adulthood, and how this may intersect with digital technologies, particularly within educational contexts such as universities. In this chapter, I argue how important it is to

consider student eco-systems as hybrid ecologies, environments which are shifting socio-technical networks, as this informs how we perceive and respond to student safeguarding and harm reduction. The literature reviewed is also additionally woven throughout my findings chapters for contextualisation. Chapter three discusses the methodology and outlines the methods, sampling and analytical techniques used. This chapter reflects upon the suitability of a qualitative approach, as well as the challenges encountered throughout the data collection process, describing how the project developed to meet the research aims.

Chapters four, five and six are dedicated to the presentation of findings and discussion. They explore the perceptions and experiences of students using digital technologies for the purpose of building or maintaining intimacy whilst at university. These chapters highlight the nuanced and complicated relationships between technological affordances of digital platforms and how these influence, or are influenced by, students social norms surrounding intimacy. The chapters present how digital technologies have influenced the ways in which students experience and perceive intimacy whilst at university, by altering the space and time boundaries, providing opportunities and risks to identity, trust and privacy, and blurring boundaries of abuse and institutional responsibility.

Chapter four begins by exploring the contexts in which students may be using digital technologies, highlighting how pivotal technology is to transitions, between spaces and identities. Chapter five discusses how the interplay between technological affordances and social norms impacts how students conceptualise and navigate trust, risk, and privacy in intimate relationships. Students highlight how risk is a necessary pre-requisite for trust and subsequently intimacy. Chapter six reflects how students conceptualise some digital practices on a continuum from normative to abusive, particularly in the context of intimate partner relationships. The chapter is closed via a discussion of the increasingly blurred boundaries of responsibilities for tackling and preventing forms of technology-mediated domestic and sexual abuse.

Finally, chapter seven concludes the thesis by reflecting on the findings and discussing what has been revealed, illustrating the ways in which the thesis advances knowledge surrounding university students' use of online platforms, for romantic and sexual intimacy, as well as avenues for future research and potential implications for HE policy and practice. Throughout, I emphasise how student voice is central to the understanding and discussion of digital intimacies.

2. Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, a contextual overview is provided of the shifting nature of intimacy and romantic relationships in the context of an increasingly 'networked society' (Castells, 2000). Inspired by the interdisciplinarity underpinning ANT (Latour, 2005; Blok & Jensen, 2011) and science and technology studies, I draw upon an array of social science literature, including sociological and psychological research. Student voice was central to my thesis, and as such, this chapter is structured around literature which gave relevant theoretical and empirical emphasis to their perspectives and experiences. Subsequently, in line with my methodological approach to this project outlined in Chapter 3, whilst I began writing this narrative literature review at the start of my doctoral journey, engaging with existing literature and writing this chapter was an iterative, reflective process throughout my period of study. This approach enabled me to provide a contextualised and situated overview of what is currently understood which is directly shaped by my analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The literature presented is therefore structured to provide a macro-level overview of the changing nature of intimate relationships and socio-technical influences, before finally focusing on the specific context of higher education.

The literature review starts by highlighting the increasing pertinence of romantic relationships based on choice, and subsequently the rising relevance of risk and trust in individualised intimacy projects. In the following subsections, I emphasise the importance of individuals operating within wider ecologies, recognising the significance of systems, both social and technological, in influencing constructions and experiences of identity and intimacy. Due to the scarcity of existing studies explicitly exploring emerging adults' digital intimacies, and more specifically university students, the succeeding literature reviewed incorporates research exploring young peoples' use and experiences of digital technologies for intimacy and identity projects more broadly, and the associated risks and opportunities.

Following this, I focus the review on the intimate lives of students, as the population of interest in this thesis. I highlight how, across substantive US research in particular, university cultures have been associated with casual sexual encounters, relating to wider discourse surrounding online platforms and relationship fluidity. Finally, I focus specifically on contextualising the role of technologies in university students' everyday lives, from digital learning environments to technologies to support transition and mediate peer, intimate and sexual connections. Whilst literature exploring the utilisation of online platforms for building platonic connections and transition experiences of university students highlight the possible opportunities technologies afford, there are limited studies which explore these opportunities in the context of intimate relationships. Furthermore, research tends to focus on associated harms and risks of students'

sexual and intimate connections, such as victimisation, violence, and non-consensual behaviours (see for example, Bull, 2022; 2024), with less focus however, on the intersection with digital technologies.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of existing research exploring university students' experiences of sexual and domestic violence, and the current policy and practice context across the UK Higher Education sector. Emphasis is placed upon recognising students as existing within hybrid ecologies, and thus the need for further research exploring students' everyday digital intimacies, as well as experiences of technology-facilitated domestic and sexual violence, to enhance support provision. The chapter thus emphasises the aim of the study, as a prelude for the following chapter which outlines the appropriate methodological approach for an in-depth explorative study investigating university students' digital intimacies.

2.2 The changing landscapes of identity and intimacy

Intimate relationships are a critical part of human existence, being highly predictive of both physical and mental health (Meltzer & McNulty, 2019), and desired universally, independent of culture, gender, and sexual orientation (Meuwly & Randall, 2019; Jankowiak & Paladiono, 2008). Relationships and love, whether it is within friendship, familial or romantic intimate relationships have been the topic of substantive psychological and sociological research (Simpson & Campbell, 2013; Montagna, 2023). There are several theories of different types of love and relationships in existence including Sternberg's (1988) triangle of love and attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), however the focus here will be placed broadly on intimate interpersonal relationships, in the context of romantic or companionate love between individuals. Evolutionary theories frequently dominate the study of intimate relationships, focusing on the laws of attraction, physiological responses, attachment to social groups and preferred partner characteristics (Hogg & Vaughan, 2014). While evolutionary theory contributes to the understanding of relationships, the biological basis cannot be considered alone. Psychological and social factors must also be considered, in particular the individual, communicative, cultural and contextual factors that influence our perceptions and the ways in which relationships exist and are constructed in everyday life:

“So even if relationships are based on biology, it is clear that immediate individual psychological and social communicative processes combine with distant societal and sociological forces to influence our ways of looking at them in a living society...” (Duck, 2007, p.2)

The ways in which we understand individual and social motivations for initiating and maintaining intimate relationships has been shaped by the social construction of love and cultural shifts in sexuality, sexual practices, relationships, and the self over time. Love, sex,

and intimacy in the nineteenth century, for example, was restricted to the purposes of procreation only, with love and sex becoming highly dissociated, particularly for women (Beall & Sternberg, 1995). The subsequent introduction of contraception, including the contraceptive pill and intrauterine devices from the 1960s onwards (Quarini, 2005), increased women's sexual autonomy and removed sex from its previous predominant role of reproduction. Furthermore, changes in post-war economic development and the labour market enabled further opportunities for women. Increased access to HE and subsequent professional roles in the service sector changed the nature of the modern western economies as well as women's identities, no longer defined by household roles and economic dependency (McDowell, 2009). However, this may not be entirely the case for women facing current economic, class and educational inequalities and research indicates that women still engage in most household work, despite social acceptance of gender equality (Jamieson, 2011). The change in western economies has also impacted young males, particularly those with low education capital, who may find difficulties in finding suitable employment in addition to competing with an increase in female workers (McDowell, 2009). Changes such as this have been described as a crisis for young masculinities (Holland, 2009) or alternatively, a post-feminist movement toward "celebratory, neoliberal discourse of girls' new-found equality", however some argue such gender-focused explanations for changes in social mobility fail to recognise intersectionality (Ringrose, 2007 p. 474). Changes in the economy, contraception and subsequent perceptions of sex and intimacy alongside the feminist movement and the more recent #MeToo and Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Intersex (LGBTQI+) movements, imply a projection toward a more liberal culture (Fileborn & Loney – Howes, 2019). A culture in which women and individuals identifying with different sexualities and genders experience more rights, freedom of speech and sexual autonomy than in previous years of repression.

The historical economic and social changes highlighted reflect how identities have been shaped by cultural contexts, particularly how individuals identify with social constructs, such as gender and sexuality, over time. Identity and social identity theories emphasise how the individual is influenced and constructed by society, but also how the individual exists within society (Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg, et al., 1995). Both theories focus on how identities are internalised and used to define the self, however while social identity theories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) reflect upon self-categorisation as a mechanism for placing the self within societal structures and group membership, identity theorists emphasise role identities in which individual adopt to form part of a social category (Stets & Burke, 2000; Hogg, et al., 1995). Sociological and social psychological theories of the self therefore could be argued as holding a social constructionist approach, implying that "there is no thinking, or indeed any sense of being a self, that is independent of social processes" (Gergen, 2011, p. 12). Gergen (2009)

argues that relationships define the complexity of an individual and how self-identity is constructed. This idea resonates with developmental perspectives, such as that of Vygotsky (1978), Bowlby and Ainsworth (Bretherton, 1992) regarding social development and attachment theory, where intimate interpersonal relationships are the foundation for social, emotional, and cognitive development.

In many ways, Gergen's (1991) ideas of the social construction of the self and technologies of social saturation, align with that of Giddens' (1991) view of the self in modernity, suggesting that a multitude of social connections in modernity causes competing potentials for being which require constant self-reflection (Papacharissi, 2012). Therefore, although identity is shaped to an extent by social connections, according to Giddens (1991) the construction of the self is 'reflexive', a continuous and all-consuming task, requiring constant internal monologue, restructuring and validation, increasingly re-vised and explored, due to the reduction of pre-existing institutional structures in late modernity. Our relationships are key to this norm of self-identification and individualisation within society. With the changing economic and social landscape, increasing opportunities for choice alongside competing needs and desires, it is inferred that idiosyncratic constructions and expressions of the self, particularly via individually based communication technologies, will also shape the foundation and dynamic of intimate relationships.

2.2.1 The 'transformation of intimacy'

According to Giddens (1992) the shift in perceptions of love has changed over time, moving from romantic love to confluent love. Individuals identify a partner based upon choice, an active and contingent relationship, free from constraint and moving away from previous societal norms. Subsequently individuals appear to be pursuing a "pure relationship" form, remaining together because that is their choice, albeit considered less durable in nature:

"It refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within" (Giddens, 1992, p. 58)

Giddens, in his somewhat utopian perspective of love and modernisation, suggests the transformation of relationships had led to greater autonomy amongst women and increasing influence over intimacy (Smart, 2007). The pure relationship is maintained via a journey of mutual self-disclosure amongst partners, with increasing focus on the self and the partners unique qualities (Giddens, 1992). The movement toward a more individualised society facilitated changing perceptions on sexuality, sex, and intimacy in late modernity, particularly regarding women's sexuality, reflecting a transition toward what Giddens (1992, p. 27) referred

to as “plastic sexuality”. The proposed increased focus on the self, meant women are no longer wholly restricted economically and socially, and therefore changes in marital, family structures and contraception enabled increasing freedom, exploration and emerging diverse constructs of intimacy and sexuality.

The idea of the pure relationship, sometimes defined as a transient, fleeting view of romantic relationships also raises questions around practices of intimacy. Such theories imply that there is no guarantee of lasting relationships, and therefore continually signalling commitment and trust is of high importance (Boiger, 2019). Giddens (1992) reflects upon the process of mutual self-disclosure in his description of the transformation of intimacy as an important element of the pure relationship, which is underpinned by mutual partner benefit. Others on the other hand have suggested that focusing specifically on intimacy as a form of self-disclosure and privileged knowledge of another fails to consider more practical forms of intimacy such as love, care, and divisions of labour (Jamieson, 2011). Nonetheless, the emerging society in the age of reflexive modernity encourages new types of interpersonal connections, those built on mutual knowledge and shared intimacy, as opposed to being constrained predominantly by institutional structures and gendered roles.

Beck (1992) argues that such shifts in identity, relationships and social life represent the dissolution of ties to traditional institutions and structures and a movement toward individualised agents in late modernity. The increasing knowledge and introduction of new technologies mean individuals move away from a ‘shared meaning’ to a reflexive sense of self in which the construction of their own biographies is priority. Furthermore, the notion and management of risk was embedded to cope with the movement toward modernisation, destabilisation, and uncertainty, enabling the rise of the ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992). From Beck’s perspective, and other sociologists such as Giddens (1992) and Bauman (2003), this focus on the self, subsequent individualisation and reflexivity of society influenced the ways in which relationships are experienced and this is evident in the students’ accounts presented throughout this thesis.

Theories of individualisation also reiterate that the present age is one filled with multiple interests and choices, enabling the pursuit of individual goals but also constant uncertainty (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Individualisation reflects the shift in relationships between individuals and society and includes the movement away from prior traditions and their associated securities, toward new social commitments (Beck, 1992). Individualism, as a predominantly westernised concept, suggests that instead of the pursuit of communal goals, individuals focus on themselves and their interests, including ideals of love and romance (Dion & Dion, 1993). Theories of independent and interdependent self-construal also reflect similar

ideas to individualisation, in which those within more westernised cultures tend to operate within a more independent mode of relating (Boiger, 2019). In these cultures, discovering internal attributes and engaging in a process of self-disclosure is desired (Kitayama et al., 2009). Regardless of changing social values, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) suggest that people still idolise love, despite a fear of investment present in a risk society, leading to multiple and endless pursuits of intimacy (Hobbs et al., 2017).

Bauman (2003, p. 21) describes the impact of an individualisation upon relationships as paramount, with increasing conflicting desires, the development of loose relational bonds leading to quantity over quality, and “top pocket relationships” which can be quickly utilised and disregarded. Psychological theories also reflect upon independent modes of relating creating tensions within relationships across the lifespan due to changing needs and desires, particularly amongst romantic partners (Boiger, 2019). Women are considered to be less economically dependent, more likely to seek a career and face less inequality, something described by Beck and Beck Gernsheim (1995, p. 11) as a trigger for the ‘battle of the sexes’, an ever-increasing antagonism between men and women. Nonetheless, there is still a desire and need for love, which has become increasingly important in an overwhelming world. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) suggest it is this desire for love which appears to override values arising from individualisation, contributing to cognitive dissonance and continued engagement in marital and familial traditions for some (Giddens & Sutton, 2017). Therefore, as opposed to freedom from institutional ties and constraints, the process of individualisation may be linked to increased internalised responsibility, heightening the significance of relationships with romantic partners, friends, and family (Wyn et al., 2011). Despite being of increasing individualised importance, love and intimacy as changing constructs over time still receive negative connotations of being linked to brief, intimate encounters, idealistic romanticism, and liquid love (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bauman, 2003).

The fluid and changing nature of social ties is suggested to be exacerbated by developments in technology, including online dating, in which romance, and courtship become entertainment, as opposed to embedded in security and solidity (Bauman, 2003). Bauman (2003) frequently links transient relationships to technology mediated communication, suggesting online platforms enable recreational intimacy contributing toward networked individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Hobbs et al., 2017). On the other hand, recent research suggests that as opposed to the concept of fragile bonds, exacerbated by technological advances, individuals use the internet as an “intermediary in the search for companionship, love, sex and intimacy” (Hobbs et al., 2017; p. 281). In addition, the use of technology has been utilised to build social capital to subsequently combat feelings of anxiety and insecurities resulting from individualisation (Turkle, 2011). Therefore, instead of increasing the likelihood of frail bonds,

technological advances enhance plastic sexuality, providing a network of potential intimate partners, enabling freedom, exploration, and pleasure (Giddens, 1992; Hobbs et al., 2017).

Alongside Bauman (2003) and his concept of liquid modernity and fluid, unconfined relational bonds, exacerbated by new technologies, other more dystopian theories of intimacy and love argue that these concepts have been shaped predominantly by economic and political models (Illouz, 2007). Despite suggesting that the internet provides new additional possibility to connect with others, Illouz (2007, p.111) implies that it “empties them of the emotional and bodily resources which have until now helped them carry on”, further emphasising the modern frailty of romantic, intimate relationships experienced online (Pugh, 2008). Illouz (2007) also describes the notion of emotional capitalism, and the idea that emotions and perceptions of love and intimacy have been altered significantly by increased rationalisation, consumerism and marketisation. Not only this, but similarly to other sociological theories of love and intimacy, contemporary experiences of intimate relationships are suggested to involve unavoidable suffering, particularly amongst women, due to increased uncertainty, self-scrutiny, subjectivity, and the individualistic pursuit of love (Illouz, 2012). Thus, although individual choice in a technological environment can foster exploration and empowerment, it can also bring anxiety and persistent yearning for deep connection. The overall picture is of a socio-technical late-modern society caught between the promise of personal freedom in love and the pressures of heightened self-responsibility, risk, and uncertainty.

2.2.2 From the psychological to the socio-ecological

In line with the concept of individualisation in relation to intimacy, social psychologists also propose that the maintenance of intimate relationships relies upon some form of weighing up relational pros and cons based on individual beliefs and desires. Social exchange theory implies that individuals seek relationships if the benefits outweigh the costs (Crisp & Turner, 2014), and will compare their relationship with other possible alternatives when considering relationship dissolution. Equity theory, based primarily on social exchange, also suggests that equity is important to intimacy and unlike presumptions made within familial relationships of ‘unconditional love’, if unbalanced will cause dissatisfaction within the relationship (Hatfield & Traupmann, 1981; Walster et al., 1978). For example, if one partner shows less commitment in a relationship and is considered a ‘weak link’ this may result in relationship breakdown (Schoebi et al., 2012). Foucault (1978) implies that such inequity will depend upon the era and social context in which the relationship exists and what relational characteristics are considered important. Subsequently inequity within a relationship may cause increased conflict in late modernity, if we consider Giddens (1992), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (1995) ideas of individualisation, plastic sexuality and confluent love embedded across competing desires and needs.

Conversely, the idea that relationships are purely based on a social exchange, biological responses or evolutionary drives may be considered limiting. Some proclaim that such psychological theories are reductionist in their approach because they appear to explain a reciprocal social event in the context of reinforcement and conditioning without consideration of other features of the relationship which may be overlooked or unexamined (Emerson, 1976). Furthermore, the research discussed primarily refers to individualistic and subjective experiences of relationships, referring to dyadic or individual psychological perceptions, instead of exploring the impact of wider social networks upon relationships. Investigation of network influence upon relationships is of particular importance, as relationships are inevitably shaped by context:

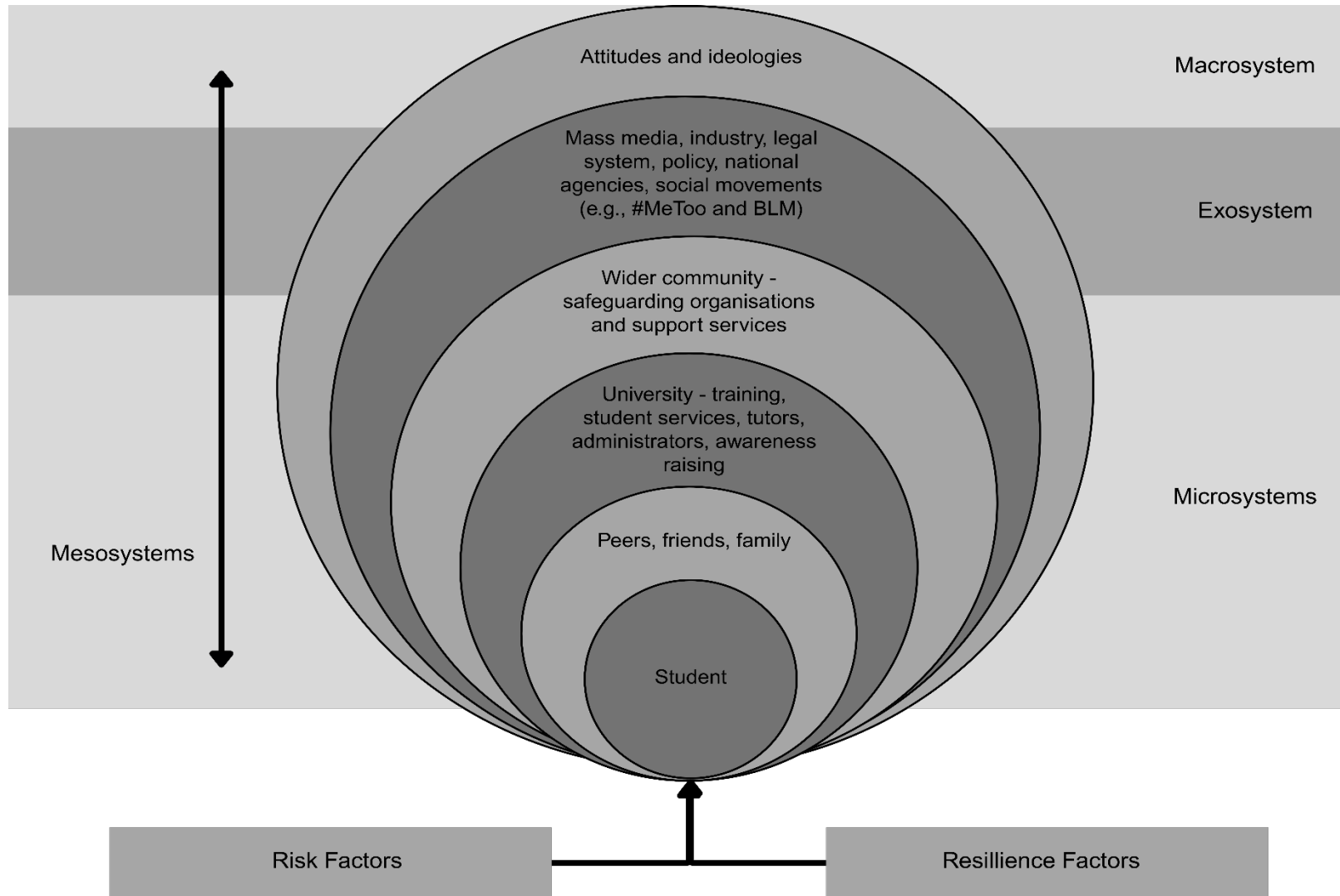
“Attempts to focus explanations for relationship processes only on the inside of the relationship or individual partners choices and emotions are incomplete and limiting because they overlook important social, sociological, and cultural contexts that ‘prefer’ certain sorts of relationships and regard other forms negatively.” (Duck, 2007; p.11)

As well as being described as pessimistic about the changing nature of intimate relationships, theories of individualisation have also been criticised for the lack of empirical evidence, for example requiring further investigation and identification of specific constructs of risk (Cebulla, 2007). Social constructionists also reflect upon the negative influence of the construction of the self and western individualism, suggesting that this individualised language featured generates a society of distrust, self-gain, and separation (Gergen, 2011). Similarly to psychological theories of social exchange, individualisation as a concept has been criticised for failing to recognise more inclusively the impact of structural constraints and wider social impact upon relationships (Giddens & Sutton, 2017; Smart, 2007; Jamieson, 2011). Smart (2007) suggests that theories of individualisation not only omit the emotions associated with love, but marginalise children and childhood, focusing solely on the dyadic relationship without further consideration of life projects in the wider context of family and social networks (Giddens & Sutton, 2017; Wyn et al., 2011). Furthermore, theories of individualisation fail to recognise our connection to the past and generational social constructs (Kehily, 2007). Instead, it is widely accepted that individuals interact, act, and develop within various social systems, such as those outlined in ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1992).

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1992) describes the importance of different systems, such as the immediate environment (microsystem) to the wider social and cultural influences (mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem), and their interactions, upon child development. The model emphasises that an individual is influenced by a multi-layer system, which can ultimately affect thoughts, values and behaviour in various contexts and social

settings. For example, in the case of gender identity, self-narratives reflect perceptions of previous generations within the microsystem, such as parents, who may have traditional views of femininity and masculinity as opposed to more current modern individualised perceptions of gender identity (Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg, 1994), creating conflict and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1954). However, despite the possibility for exploration and linkage across systems, the levels are typically examined in isolation (Prout, 2005), for example the child's microsystem is examined without understanding the links to the meso and macro (and chrono) systems. With recognised applicability to any person, relationship, or environment (Shelton, 2018), Phippen & Bond (2022a) adapted Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory model in the context of higher education. The adapted model provides a helpful framework to explore both the risk and resilience factors impacting students' experiences of online harms, but also how potential stakeholders surrounding the student interact (Figure 1). For example, peers within the microsystem influence students' experiences of university, but also regulatory bodies within the exosystem, such as UUK or OfS, influence the policy that directly impacts students' experiences at university, despite students not necessarily having an active role in developing that policy (Neal & Neal, 2013).

Figure 1: Phippen & Bond (2022a) stakeholder model for student development (included with permission).



What these systems approaches highlight is that relationships are not insular and are subject to other relationships, people, and norms due to our need for recognition by others but also our predisposition to adhere to social and cultural guidelines to manage our own expectations and those of others (Duck, 2007). Peer networks, for example, play a key role in decisions regarding dating preference during adolescence and cohabitation throughout emerging adulthood (Manning et al., 2011). Research frequently indicates the all-consuming impact of platonic relationships, such as peer networks and close friendships upon adolescent romantic relationships and sexual behaviour (Setty, 2019; Bond, 2014). Nevertheless, a social structure based around individualism has also undoubtedly influenced relationships, opening increased choices and focus on the self, which has significantly shaped identities as well as perceptions of the future (France, 2007).

“In the individualized society the individual must therefore learn, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive of himself or herself as the centre of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own biography, abilities, orientations, relationships and so on.” (Beck, 1992, p.135)

Increasing internal narratives and self-reflection are shaped by our interactions and intimate relationships with others, development of identity therefore cannot be detached from social processes (Jamieson, 2011). The conflicting influence of placing more emphasis upon individualistic agency within society, generates uncertainty within the self and relationships, leading to increasing commitment to love and intimacy as a means of seeking stability (Beck & Beck-Gernshein, 1995). However, despite the re-defined expectations of intimate relationships, “intimacy and inequality continue to coexist in many personal lives” (Jamieson, 1999, p. 491) requiring further empirical investigation. Nonetheless, intimate relationships in modernity provide an opportunity for personal growth (Gross & Simmons, 2002), enabling self-development and exploration of individual freedoms (Giddens, 1992). Recognising and exploring how individuals, within socio-ecological systems, navigate intimate relationships in the context of a shifting cultural and technological frame is therefore of considerable importance.

2.3 Trajectories and technologies in emerging adulthood relationships

Implicit in this shift to an individualistic society, is the changing nature and shape of relationships in youth. Definitions of youth in western societies usually refer to the life stage between childhood and adulthood, the transitional period between being dependent and becoming independent, typically from the age of 13-25 years old. Youth is considered a more flexible concept, a sociological category or social construction, as opposed to ‘adolescence’ or ‘teenager’ which are grounded in biological and psychological theory (Kehily, 2007).

Nonetheless, understanding developmental stages across the life course enables positioning of young people in 'critical periods' of which intervention, education and support are useful (Kehily, 2007).

Arnett (2000; 2004; 2006) introduced the theory of emerging adulthood to describe the extended period of development between adolescence and young adulthood, typically extending from ages 18-29 years. This period is thought to be associated with a dominant romantic discourse, a time of finding 'true love' and exploration prior to 'settling down' (Kehily, 2007; Arnett, 2000). Furthermore, this developmental stage is suggested to be associated with rapid changes in identity development, frequently accompanied by an exploration of sexuality, risk-taking behaviours, cognitive changes, brain maturation and alterations in neural plasticity. Studies of developmental neuroscience suggest that emerging adulthood is a key phase for the formation of schemata relevant to safety behaviours (Luciana & Collins, 2012), but that this period is also associated with increased cognitively driven reward-related drives and risk behaviour (Victor & Hariri, 2016).

Arnett (2000) argues that this developmental stage emerged as a result of changing social roles, increased independence and self-exploration. However, there are some contentions surround the concept of the emerging adult with some scholars proposing that it is a period of life predominantly experienced by the middle class (Bynner, 2005). Certainly, Arnett (2000) actively suggests that emerging adulthood is a phase of development typically experienced in cultures in which young people can experience a prolonged period of independence to explore their role and position within society. Conceptualising the social changes in the lives of emerging adulthood is important in contextualising the positioning of university students in modern society. Adulthood has been traditionally described as encompassing major life events such as school completion, leaving home, employment, marriage, and parenthood (Settersten, 2012). Many have argued for an elongated trajectory to adulthood underpinned by, for example, an advancing economy, globalisation, and a shift to a culture of individualism (Tillman et al., 2019). The shift to individualism for emerging adults reflects a deviation from prior traditions, such as marriage at an earlier age for economic stability and subsequent family formation for increased liberalised views around sex and relationships and enrolment into tertiary education in search of financial independency (Tillman et al., 2019).

Emerging adults are thus constructing their own choice biographies (Beck, 1992), pursuing individual goals as well as life courses that are more varied and less scripted, yet increasingly uncertain and fluid. In an unpredictable late modern society, characterised by detraditionalisation, the "lifting out of social relations from local context of interaction" (Giddens, 1990, p. 21) and increased risk management, emerging adults subsequently rely

upon “individualised and reflexive approaches to management of their life projects – in their search for trust and ontological security” (Cieslik & Pollock, 2002, p. 4). Bound up within trust, which is the confidence in the reliability of a person or systems, is ontological security, the confidence in continuity of self-identity (Giddens, 1991). Trust is pivotal in maintaining the social order of things and is fundamental to the development of ontological security and interpersonal relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Rotter, 1971). Subsequently, for emerging adults, engaging in individualised life pursuits in an uncertain risk society (Beck, 1992), has the potential to challenge ontological security. With increasing temporal expansion and diversity of transitions amongst emerging adults to adulthood, alongside societal economic changes such as reduced and increasingly precarious youth labour market (Furlong et al., 2017; Chesters et al., 2019), it is perhaps unsurprising that many emerging adults may seek opportunities within higher education to reduce the risk of financial uncertainty. Interestingly, Lolich and Lynch (2016) highlight that while attending higher education can be perceived by students as a form of insurance for future employment prospects, they secondarily perceive university attendance as enhancing the likelihood of a positive relational future, indicating the importance of interpersonal relationships. Irrespective of reasoning behind university enrolment, students are deliberating the risks and opportunities associated with dedicating years of their life to study, with “the responsibilities – and risks – of negotiating pathways through the university system rest[ing] with young people themselves” (Christie, 2009, p. 124). Engaging in intimacy projects may subsequently provide opportunities for the development of trust, as well as mutual reflexive discovery (Giddens, 1991), in an increasingly fluid and uncertain time during the transition to, and throughout, university.

Furthermore, a key, and crucial, aspect of this thesis is the recognition that emerging adults are embedded within layered “hybrid ecologies”, interacting with human and non-human actors in both the physical and digital (Crabtree & Rodden, 2008, p. 481; Licoppe, 2019). According to Giddens (1991) technological advances, including more specifically, media technologies, increases individual awareness of diverse ways of living, and subsequently facilitate the active construction of the contemporary self via reflection of our position in society. Over time, digital technologies have become ubiquitous and firmly embedded in everyday life (Ling, 2012; Fussey & Roth, 2020), with Matthewman (2011, p. 8) highlighting that, “just as technology is everything, it is also everywhere, present in all our endeavours, be they exceptional or everyday”. Subsequently, a dichotomous approach to understanding online and offline experiences is unhelpful, as it omits complex intertwined practices (Livingstone, 2008). As a result, it is important for research to describe and investigate the technology of interest, as well as the socio-technical context (Ellison & boyd, 2013). Throughout the remainder of this section, I will emphasise the sociomateriality of students’

lives, focusing first upon how young people more broadly, and subsequently emerging adulthood more specifically, utilise online platforms for the purposes of identity development and intimacy projects. Literature relating to children and young peoples' digital intimacies provides invaluable insights to understanding the use and conceptualisation of digital technologies in intimate relationships across the lifespan (Amundsen, 2022).

2.3.1 Intimacy and identity work

Both sociologists and social psychologists highlight the importance of social processes in the development of self-identity. Subsequently, it is through social relationships with others, including intimate partners, friends, and family, as well as wider communities, that self-identity is developed (Jamieson, 2011; Bond, 2014). Identity is therefore interactional by nature, involving performance and management in social contexts, as a process of 'identity work' (Best, 2011). Erikson (1968) argues that a fundamental task for young people's identity development involves learning how to build and maintain supportive social relationships, a task which according to Arnett (2015) has extended into emerging adulthood, and arguably, beyond. Subsequently, identity is not fixed, and is instead fluid and continuously evolving or negotiated through our interactions with others (Buckingham, 2008) as well as through self-reflexivity (Giddens, 1991).

Digital technologies, and more specifically, online platforms, provide a major modality in which young people can explore identities, seeking answers to questions about the self. As highlighted by Weber and Mitchell (2008), the affordances of online platforms contribute significantly to self-awareness, via feedback from peers, visual representations, content construction and engagement with wider socio-cultural media. Digital technologies therefore provide opportunities for us to "construct, perform and mobilise identity [and] make it possible to try out different lifestyles and subjectivities" (Marwick, 2013, p. 362). However, as Marwick (2013) outlines, identity exploration is limited by social norms and structural oppression, as well as the affordances of platforms themselves, such as requirements for 'verifiable' identities alongside the possibilities of 'context collapse', the combining of social networks into one online audience, influencing communication management. Linking this with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective of human interaction, Marwick and boyd (2011) suggest that this collapse of multiple social contexts online makes impression management and 'saving face' more complex.

Goffman (1959) constructs identity as performative, that is, certain elements of self are expressed depending on the audience, leading to 'frontstage' and 'backstage' social actions. Failure to project a particular image to an audience will subsequently lead to an individual 'losing face', of which Marwick & boyd (2011) suggest is more likely on online platforms with

a diverse audience from multiple social contexts. As social media has developed and expanded, it is becoming increasingly apparent that performance of identity online is likely on a continuum (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013), fluid by nature, whilst also being explored, managed, and constructed across multiple platforms (Dyer, 2015), perhaps limiting, in some cases, the implications of 'context collapse'. Nonetheless, the ubiquity and affordances of social media lend themselves to collision and collapse in both the spatial and the temporal, having implications for privacy, but also stability of the perceived self. Subsequently, not only are presentations of self potentially more complicated to manage across spaces (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2013), boundaries of time may also be distorted, with users having "little control over the resurfacing of old (and outdated) versions of the self" (Brandtzaeg & Luders, 2018, p. 4).

Nevertheless, research indicates that individuals continue utilising online spaces as an extension of offline identities, to present authentic versions of themselves (Ellison et al., 2006), or as an opportunity to explore, construct and mediate varying versions of the self (Dyer, 2015; Wangqvist & Frisen, 2016; Hällgren & Björk, 2023). For example, Thomas et al. (2017) identified how emerging adults utilised social media platforms in a multitude of ways during the transition to university to shape and (re)construct their identities. In their study, students utilised social media platforms to manage the maintenance of old identities associated with home and to formulate new student identities. The "identity work" associated with managing diverse presentations of self across contexts had implications for the perceived emergence of their "authentic self" (Thomas et al., 2017, p. 552). Online platforms, for students, therefore, may provide opportunities to construct or validate the self in online environment, via interactions with others, (Ellison et al., 2007) which contributes to ontological security (Giddens, 1991). However, context collapse, alongside divergence in presentations during transitions may challenge ontological security, particularly when there is dissonance between the actual self, and the ideal, or ought, self (Higgins, 1989).

Navigating impression management across networked contexts is subsequently relational by nature. As boyd (2014) highlights, the ways in which young people manage identities is a social process, dependent on self-presentation, peers' profile interactions and subsequent feedback, constructed as "identity through connection" (Livingstone, 2008, p.9). Intimate relationships are subsequently salient to both expression and construction of identity, however, the majority of research exploring digital intimacies and identity focuses on intimate peer relationships amongst children and young people. As aforementioned, the development of romantic intimate relationships are key to the identity development of emerging adults (Erikson, 1968). As described in section 2.2.1, engaging in intimacy projects subsequently becomes an opportunity for reflexivity, seeking a pure relationship (Giddens, 1992) for the

purposes of developing self-actualisation, fulfilling individual needs. Not only do intimate relationships of this nature provide opportunities to develop a sense of self, but they also facilitate the exploration of sexual identities amongst young people (Bond, 2014), after all “people tell sexual stories to assemble a sense of self and self-identity” (Plummer, 1994, p. 72). Digital technologies provide a unique space for forming and maintaining romantic and sexual relationships, due to the immediacy of communication and affordances of online platforms which facilitate disclosure with less emotional risk (Smith et al., 2019). Nonetheless, as opposed to being a distinctive space to engage in intimacy practices, online platforms need be conceptualised as a component of young people’s wider socio-technical ecosystems, in which their experiences of intimacy with others are embedded (McGeeney & Hanson, 2017).

2.3.2 Digital intimacies

If intimacy is “any form of close association in which people acquire familiarity, that is shared detailed knowledge about each other” (Jamieson, 1999, p. 8), then it is unsurprising that exploring how digital technologies afford new methods of forming and maintaining intimate relationships across time, distance, and relationship type is of significant interest (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Vitak & Ellison, 2018). Intimacy is characteristic of multiple different relational forms, “from familial through friendship to romantic and sexual” (Scott et al., 2020, p. 677), however in this thesis the latter is of primary interest. For young people and emerging adults more specifically, access to online platforms enables flirting via messaging, video chat and commenting on profiles with less emotional risk and without the scrutiny of peers (McGeeney & Hanson, 2017). The affordances of online platforms are therefore linked to sociality and intimacy in young people’s relationships (Bond, 2010; 2014; boyd, 2014), facilitating digital intimacies, conceptualised as the variety of ways in which individuals develop and express intimacy online, including through sexually explicit image sharing, flirting, meeting partners and creating, accessing, and circulating sexual content online (Scott et al., 2020; Setty & Dobson, 2023a).

Subsequently, digital intimacies encompass both connections between individuals, but also individuals’ connections with “devices, apps and platforms” within an “infrastructure of intimacy” (Paasonen, 2018, p.2). For example, the affordances of mobile communication technologies mean that online platforms, such as Tinder or Grindr, enable searchability as well as geo-spatial location services to identify and connect potential nearby romantic or sexual interests (Vitak & Ellison, 2018). Online dating platforms also enable access to a larger pool of potential partners and the ability to make pre-judgements upon compatibility (Finkel et al., 2012). Not only do online platforms provide a medium which may enable relationship formation, they also provide a context which can facilitate ‘mutual self-disclosure’ (Giddens, 1992) due to the accessibility, perceived anonymity, and disinhibition (Suler, 2004), as well as

enabling indirect relational information sharing (e.g., via social media profiles) (Fox et al., 2013). In a large qualitative study in the UK with 9–19-year-olds, Bryce and Fraser (2014) identified that the ability to disclose personal information online is crucial. The findings of this study highlighted the importance of disclosing personal information for establishing trust and maintaining relationships, as well as the strategies young people utilise to manage their evaluations of trust and subsequent risk online. In accordance with previous research, young people are therefore aware of the risks as well as the opportunities posed by digital technologies (Livingstone, 2008), likened to the ‘double edge sword of modernity’ (Giddens, 1990 in Bond, 2010). Constructing young people as “risky and at-risk” with the need of adult intervention to protect may have implications for autonomy, agency, and opportunities to develop resilience in online spaces (Bond, 2010, p. 588), subsequently a more nuanced understanding and approach is required.

The complex interplay between trust and risk in young people’s use of digital technologies in their relationships is demonstrated in various practices of intimacy. For example, Van Ouytsel et al. (2016), in their qualitative study of 15–18-year-olds, identified that sharing passwords to social media accounts with their romantic partner was regarded “as a mutual token of love and trust, but also as a kind of insurance policy against unfaithfulness” (Van Ouytsel et al., 2016, p. 83). In this instance, sharing a password was utilised as a means to manage a partner’s feelings of jealousy, or perhaps as “resource for intimacy” (Amundsen, 2022, p. 123), to indicate love, trust and transparency. Similarly, Doerfler et al. (2024) highlight how providing smartphone access was a signifier of trust in relationships. Of course, sharing passwords with others is not without risks, with some research indicating increased experience of cyberbullying after password sharing (Walrave & Heirman, 2011), as well as relationship conflict (Van Ouytsel et al., 2019). Nonetheless, what is apparent, is despite the associated risk, sharing passwords or access to accounts was important, symbolically, of trust with an intimate other.

Similarly, sexting, as a cultural phenomenon, has been an intimacy practice that young people have engaged with over the past two decades (Phippen & Bond, 2023), to develop and sustain sexual and/or romantic relationships (Bond, 2014; Phippen, 2012). Broadly, sexting is the production and sending of private images and texts via digital technologies (Bond, 2016), however sexting is typically conceptualised and researched as the production and receipt of sexual images (Amundsen, 2022). Sexting can facilitate positive, healthy, and shared closeness between two individuals in an intimate relationship, as well as providing opportunities to explore self-identity and sexuality (Cooper et al., 2016; Setty, 2019). Similar motivations are also present amongst adults who engage in sharing private sexual images in the context of a relationship to signal intimacy and trust (Amundsen, 2022). Sending intimate

images could therefore be considered as an act of mutual self-disclosure, a means of 'gifting' (Mauss, 2002; Berking, 1999), or as a "resource for intimacy" for both men and women (Amundsen, 2022, p. 123; Waling et al., 2020). Nonetheless, societal responses to the sharing of intimate images typically focus on the potential harms, and subsequently how to avoid risk, as opposed to the motivations behind consensual sharing of intimate images and multifaceted understandings of risk, particularly amongst adults (Smith et al., 2019; Amundsen, 2022).

To manage risks inherent in digital intimacies, trust is a crucial pre-requisite (Giddens, 1991). As highlighted by Amundsen (2023), in the context of sharing intimate images, trust, both implicit or explicit, may also be a means of risk management, building both trust in an individual and negotiating trust within a broader socio-technical network to manage potential non-consensual image distribution. Thus, the acts themselves, of, for example, sharing passwords or intimate images are conceptualised as acts of trust, as well as necessarily risky acts to build intimacy. However, as aforementioned, digital intimacies can also be experienced alongside abuse and violations of privacy. Research investigating young peoples' experiences of risk and harm online is vast, as is the public discourse and rhetoric, focusing on children's access to and experiences of bullying, pornography, sexting, and harmful content (Bond, 2014). With regards to young people's digital intimacies, the risks of sharing practices include non-consensual sharing of sexual images amongst peers (Phippen, 2016), or increased surveillance, monitoring and controlling behaviours, which can also translate into offline contexts (Stonard, 2020). Whilst understanding the 'harms' is necessary, movement away from focusing predominantly on risk to further understand how young people construct digital intimacies, and their subsequent management of risks, may provide a more nuanced approach to supporting young people within their socio-cultural contexts (Smith et al., 2019).

2.3.3 Hookup culture and 'liquid love'?

As aforementioned, the utilisation of digital technologies within intimate relationships has enabled differing means of signalling trust, "resources for intimacy" (Amundsen, 2022, p. 123) and self-disclosure, all of which are salient to relationships in modernity, characterised by individualisation, uncertainty, and risk (Giddens, 1992; Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). While Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) highlight that despite the shift toward individualisation, individuals still value and strive for love and intimacy, others, such as Bauman (2003) and Turkle (2011) suggest that the movement toward individualisation has facilitated frail and insecure relationships, 'liquefying' love ideals. The notion of 'fragile bonds' and 'liquid love' is also considered as a direct consequence of technological development (Bauman, 2003). The idea of loose ties resulting from technological advancements is further emphasised by Turkle (2011) who suggests that we are nourishing digital relationships whilst consequentially neglecting 'in-person' relationships.

The idea that traditional ideals of love, romance and intimacy are being eroded via developments in technology may be considered deterministic. Rainie and Wellman (2014, p. 8) highlight that although in an individualised networked society we may experience “looser, more fragmented relationships” as we are able to connect more easily to weaker ties, there is limited research to suggest our relationships are being destroyed, merely transformed. Furthermore, Ling (2008) suggests that while digital technologies may facilitate individualism, we might be experiencing a new form of social cohesion, particularly to close bonds, via mobile communication. For example, Hobbs et al. (2017, p. 282) identified that unlike arguments emphasising the fragility of intimacy in a digital age, participants in their study utilised dating apps as a part of their “ongoing search for love and fulfilment”. Furthermore, in a Belgian study of 1,038 emerging adults, Timmermans and Courtois (2018) highlighted that while use of the dating app Tinder generated casual sexual encounters, these ‘offline’ Tinder encounters were also highly associated with the formation of committed relationships. However, according to Licoppe (2019), the ‘liquification’ of relationships via digital technology may relate to heteronormative ideals of romantic relationships or dating subcultures. Participants in their sample who used Grinder as a dating platform utilised its affordances for sexual relationships without intimate knowledge of one another, in comparison with Tinder users who were more likely to utilise the app for sexual connections based upon intimate conversational exchanges. Thus, the former could represent a ‘liquifying’ of dating to casual hookups via online platforms, nonetheless, “this is no way a straightforward process, nor does it herald an impending ‘dating apocalypse’ as moral panic brokers would have it” (Licoppe, 2019, p. 88). As Timmermans & Courtois (2018) suggest, instead perhaps what we are seeing increasingly is intimate romantic relationships moving away from traditional dating to ‘hooking up’ as the basis for formation, with online platforms enabling a medium to meet potential intimate others.

Certainly, one way for students to identify potential intimate partners could be via online platforms, as after all “traditional sites and locales for meeting singles, including schools, universities, pubs, clubs, and workplaces, have been partially displaced...” (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 272), however few studies have investigated this population more specifically. On the other hand, the literature pertaining to ‘hookup culture’ at university, and amongst emerging adults more broadly, is further established. In a decade review of sex and relationships in young adulthood, Olmstead (2020) defines hooking up as “physically intimate encounters between two individuals who are not in a defined, committed romantic relationships” (Olmstead, 2020, p. 780), although definitions, particularly amongst certain groups, such as students, can vary (Olmstead et al., 2018). The concept of hooking up has been explored substantially amongst emerging adults, and those within a university environment, particularly in the USA, due to the associated “unique contextual experience” of college campuses

(Olmstead, 2020, p. 781). Researchers have subsequently identified a 'hookup culture', as "a combination of social structures which privilege brief sexual interactions on college campuses" (Hanson, 2020, p. 80), as well as a subculture within the broader 'party culture' associated with universities (Aubrey & Smith, 2011).

According to Padgett and Wade (2019) hookup culture on college campuses has become institutionalised and normalised, a phenomenon embedded in students' lives that even those who do not wish to engage still contend with its existence. Bogle (2007) argues that on US college campuses, hookup scripts were occurring much earlier than identified by researchers, overtaking the traditional dating scripts. While there are some contradictions across studies, with some highlighting that although casual sex increases from adolescence to emerging adulthood, those who enrolled at college had fewer casual partners than those who did not (Lyons et al., 2014), or did not expect to engage in hooking up at college (Olmstead et al., 2018), there is a consensus that hooking up is a gateway to intimacy, whether fleeting or longer lasting.

Research has also frequently highlighted positive implications of hooking up. For example, in a sample of 520 lesbian and bisexual women aged 18-25, hooking up was associated with increased long-term connectedness with the LGBTQ+ community (Jaffe et al., 2021). Furthermore, for undergraduate men and women, hooking up has been linked to positive emotions and romantic relationships (Anders et al., 2020) and for women more specifically, sexual pleasure and confidence (Shepardson et al., 2016). Nonetheless, hookup culture has also been identified as potentially reproducing inequalities, particularly gender inequalities (Padgett & Wade, 2019). Research has highlighted that hookup culture could lead to sexual double standards (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013), and may predict greater rape myth acceptance, although only for those who believe that hookups elevate status (Reling et al., 2018). Furthermore, some research highlights how hookup culture has been linked to sexual assault, with negative outcomes disproportionately impacting women, particularly those with intersecting identities (Martino et al., 2024). Again, what becomes apparent is that the implications of a hookup culture is complex, research is somewhat contradictory, with a significant proportion, if not all, of research investigating students' experiences of hooking up taking place in the US. Understanding of hookup culture, or more broadly students' sexual lives, in the UK may therefore be less established, particularly when we consider the integration of online platforms in students' intimate relationships.

Just as we have seen young people's movement away from the bike shed to the mobile phone in their everyday intimacy practices (Bond, 2010), are we seeing students "hookup scripts out of localised cultures into wider ones" (Padgett & Wade, 2019, p. 171) via online platforms?

Firstly, I argue that we need to understand the entanglement of the technological and the social in students' everyday lives, how this interacts with their university contexts with regards to learning, social, sexual, and romantic experiences. To do so requires a movement away from technological determinism and the idea that transient love is a direct consequence of technologies, to a nuanced approach that considers "the mutual implication and complication of bodies and objects" (Holloway & Valentine, 2003, p.13).

2.4 Higher Education and student experience in 'hybrid ecologies'

Digital technologies, including specifically smartphones and online applications, have become ubiquitous and taken for granted in society (Ling, 2012). As boyd (2014, p.26) highlights "along with planes, running water, electricity and motorized transportation, the internet is now a fundamental fact of modern life". Communication technologies have shifted the ways in which we interact with others, from the telegraph in the nineteenth century, to smartphones in the early stages of the twenty first century, technologies have facilitated information exchange without the constraints of time and/or space (Gotham, 2020). Technological developments have been suggested to shape the ways in which we experience time and space, for example, Giddens (1991) highlights how in late modernity, a restructuring has occurred via the process of time-space distancing. Subsequently, 'expert systems', which are "systems of technological accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of material and social environments" (Giddens, 1991, p. 27), act as disembedding mechanisms, enabling the abstraction of local activities from spatial and temporal contexts fostering "both trust and ontological insecurity" (Gotham, 2020, p. 211). Signalling and establishing trust is important when actions and thoughts are not continually visible, however distancing is also associated with new risks in an increasingly visible globalised society (Giddens, 1991).

In addition to time-space distancing, Massey (1994) suggests that time-space has compressed, facilitating easier transference of information in an increasingly interconnected world. Irrespective of the stretching or compression of time-space, conceptualisations and organisation of space and time are considered to be changing as a result of technological advancements. Massey (2005) emphasises the relationality of space, continuously under construction via social processes. Furthermore, physical boundaries no longer constrain places and spaces (Massey, 1994). In Castells (2000, p. 969) networked society while "space of places", the localised contexts, are still important for the everyday functioning of many, "the space of flows", information systems, circuits and intermediate places embedded within networks enable new forms of social organisation. The combination of environments both distributed geographically across physical and digital space has been conceptualised as hybrid ecologies (Crabtree & Rodden, 2008). Contextualising this idea, boyd (2007, p. 21)

describes how “what is unique about the Internet is that it allows teens to participate in unregulated publics while located in adult-regulated physical spaces such as homes and schools”, thus young people are embedded in networked spaces, hybrid ecologies that encompass assemblages of virtual and in-person, human and non-human.

As Castells (2000) delineates, within these hybrid or networked ecologies, it is important to consider the assemblages of human and non-human actors, due to the inability to divide the world into ‘things’ and ‘the social’ (Bingham, 1996). Aligning with Latour’s (2005) ANT, the idea of hybrid ecologies functioning in assemblages, provides a helpful “approach to understanding the individual’s relationship to and use of digital technologies that emphasises that each actor, whether human or non-human, shapes the other in a mutually constitutive relationship.” (Lupton, 2015, p. 24). Therefore, if considering the higher education student more specifically, it is necessary to understand their environments as sociotechnical assemblages, integrating both the online and offline across the “social, physical and academic” spaces (Dyer, 2020b, p. 98). Thus, like Massey (2005) suggests, the shaping of spaces is relational, however, as opposed to viewing the transformation of space dichotomously as either technological or social, space is equally shaped by human and non-human assemblages.

Just as technologies are shaping spaces within a ‘networked society’, many also hypothesise a significant influence upon temporality (Castells, 2000). For example, Castells (2010) discusses timeless time, in which the rise of digital technologies is dissolving time, replacing clock-time with space of flows characterised by instant communication. The possibilities of instantaneous and constant communication afforded by mobile technologies irrespective of time is reflected via the utilisation of terms such as perpetual contact (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). Others argue that there is a movement away from clock-time to other time (Adam, 1995), which are perhaps more abstract conceptualisations of time based on social norms. Thus, similarly to space, as opposed to dichotomous temporal influences, “the relationships between time practices and technology is one of ongoing mutual shaping: that the contours and rhythms of our lives are calibrated by and with machines” (Wajcman, 2022, p. 15).

Understanding how digital temporalities are experienced in everyday life is important (Adam, 1990), and while some perceive the ‘acceleration society’, characterised by perpetual connectivity, as being universal, it is likely the relationships between individuals, time and technology is more complex (Wajcman, 2022). For example, Stirling (2014) highlights how HE students experiences are dominated by temporal references, from timetables to time allocated for social events such as ‘freshers’ week’, to university as a liminal time-period to explore identities. Stirling (2015) identified that in addition to the social constructions of time

associated with university, Facebook timescales were utilised to organise clock-time whilst also facilitating instantaneous organisation and time management both socially and academically. Nonetheless, Stirling (2015, p. 115) emphasises that not all students utilised Facebook in the same way, some actively disconnecting, whilst others engaging in practices of connection. However, all appear to ebb and flow between the “digital and physical spheres” across time.

Societal discourse increasingly emphasises the potential benefits and flexibility of the digital in contemporary HE (Selwyn, 2016), particularly for students managing diverse timescales across varying spaces and places (Sheail, 2017; Holton & Riley, 2013). Research highlights the possibilities of more formalised virtual learning environments in providing both synchronous and asynchronous immersive learning opportunities, as well as the use of online platforms beyond curricular boundaries to shaping collaborative and applied learning experiences (Castro, 2019; Manca, 2020; Araos Moya & Damşa, 2023). The centrality of technologies in the delivery of HE became particularly pertinent during the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling rapid continued and flexible access to learning resources during a time in which physical access to universities was not possible (Gurukkal, 2021). Despite emergence from the COVID-19 restrictions, the use of technologies in HE learning and teaching continues to be pivotal to a universities core function, however movement to more blended or virtual learning opportunities can have implications for the welfare of students (Bovill, 2023; Bond & Phippen, 2021). Recognising the shifting temporal and spatial boundaries of students’ hybrid ecologies subsequently requires universities to reconsider their code of conduct guidance and acceptable use policies (Sladdin, 2020) to reflect the increasingly digital university environment.

Subsequently, as Selwyn (2016, p. 1019) highlights, the use of technologies within the context of HE is complicated and ‘messy’, and as such, the exploration of the sociotechnical assemblages in which students experience university is important. In doing so, as Holloway and Valentine (2003, p. 15), I aim to “emphasise the mutual constitution, not only of the social and technical but also of the spatial and temporal, by showing how each is transformed and transformative of the other” by exploring one important aspect of university students’ everyday lives, their experiences of intimacy. Firstly, however, is it necessary to understand the embeddedness of digital technologies within varying student identities, from students as social to sexual beings, alongside the opportunities and risks associated with online platforms across different spatial and temporal boundaries.

2.4.1 Technologies to enable the social

Although understanding students' experiences of digital technologies for learning is important contextually, like Selwyn and Grant (2009) suggest, it is also important to consider how students utilise online platforms beyond academic purposes. While technologies can be utilised for academic purposes, many have highlighted students' use of online platforms, in building social networks and connections, particularly during times of transition. Building connections with others, particularly when entering a new environment, can be important to securing a position in a wider network and building social capital (Coleman, 1988), enabling access to "actual or potential resources" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Access to social networks can provide, in some instances, social and economic support, information and knowledge. These social networks may encompass close ties, such as with family and friends, for social support, as well as 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973), which facilitate 'bridging social capital' (Putnam, 2000) for information sharing across diverse contexts. For university students, social networks enable varying forms of social capital, such as information to support transition to university, as well as emotional and social support from peers (Mishra, 2020).

Digital technologies have been constructed by some as having positive implications for building social networks, for example Katz & Rice (2002, p. 337) highlight:

"Rather than a technology of isolation and loneliness, the Internet is a technology through which social capital can be created. Its capability may be entirely potential and not used. But in many cases, it draws people into contact to create shared resources and communal concerns."

Indeed, one way in which students can develop and maintain social networks is via social media platforms, particularly where there is an existing structure (e.g., existing bonds and/or the university community) (Ling, 2004). For example, Mazzoni and Iannone (2014), in a quantitative study of 927 Italian young adults, identified the importance of social media in facilitating information acquisition, relational and contextual bridging social capital, particularly for students during a period of transition. Online platforms subsequently provide students with opportunities to connect with new and established others during a transitional period which is inherently social by nature (Talbot et al., 2020; Dyer, 2020b).

Several conceptualisations of transition exist. O'Donnell et al. (2016), in their review of transition literature, highlight that transition tends to be theorised with specific reference to the institution, for example movement from one educational setting to another, transition as identity transformation via socio-contextual change, transition as a process of being and becoming and transition as a permanent human state. Gale and Parker (2014) suggest that conceptualisations of transition as induction and development, assume that transition is a

problem that must be solved, either at the institutional or individual level. The third conceptualisation presents transition as an experience of change (Crafter & Maunder, 2012), one that is not easily categorised by stages or life phases and is subjectively experienced by the individual. Subsequently, O'Donnell et al. (2016, p. 8) advocate for alternative conceptualisations of transition, utilising a socio-ecological theoretical framework, understanding transition as a:

“...process of individual development, but development that is fundamentally situated within social contexts, and which therefore cannot be understood solely at the level of the individual. Transition to higher education is a process of shifting identities through engagement in the practices of the higher education community, where those practices are constructed and reconstructed through individual meaning-making within the context of microsystems and broader social macrosystems, all of which impact upon individual action, participation in the higher education community and identity.”

Internationally, research tends to highlight the challenges experienced by students navigating the first few days, weeks, months, and year of university life, in which there is considerable change (Coertjens et al., 2017). In the UK, this has led to the explicit inclusion of transition in sector-wide policy (UUK, 2020b). Research also suggests that difficulties in navigating the sociocultural changes associated with attending university are disproportionately more likely to impact some student groups, with neurodivergent, disabled, minority ethnic and low socio-economic status students facing additional barriers and increased requirement for identity work (Gillies & Pedlar, 2003; Crozier & Reay, 2011; Nuske et al., 2019).

Several studies have implied that connection with and attachment to peers is a significant predictor of adjustment to university life and subsequent retention (Maunder, 2018). In a study of current university students and students who withdrew from their studies, Wilcox et al. (2005) highlighted that the most significant factor for retention was positive social connections. Furthermore, Hughes and Smal (2015) highlighted that transition support may be more effective in engaging students if efforts are focused first initially on facilitating social integration, with institutions proactively intervening to prevent social isolation. Social media, such as private course specific Facebook groups, have been utilised by staff to engage with students prior to their arrival at university and during their time at university as part of their extracurricular activities to enhance a sense of belonging (Meehan & Howells, 2018). Others, such as Nehls and Livengood (2018) and Gray et al., (2013) have also explored the utilisation of online platforms, and more specifically Facebook, in supporting the transition HE, identifying that in addition to supporting engagement and academic success, social media platforms have an important role in expanding social networks by building connections with peers, staff and

the institution. Research exploring experiences of social adjustment and the implications of multiple social media platforms also imply that students experience better social adjustment when utilising platforms, particularly Instagram, to interact with family and university friends (Yang & Lee, 2018). These studies highlight the embeddedness of online platforms in students' transitions to university, as mediums to seek information to support social adjustment (Ellison et al., 2007), connect with others prior to arrival on campus (Barnes, 2017), formulate connections whilst on campus, as well as maintain contact with friends and family at home (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012).

The utilisation of online platforms during university transition to build social networks does not always have positive implications, for example, online platforms enable “revitalization of the past potentially making ‘orientation to the present more difficult” (Miller, 2011, p. 191). Thus although “maintained social capital” (Ellison et al., 2007, p. 1146) via digital technologies has been associated with reduced loneliness during transition to university (Thomas et al., 2017), negotiation and expectations surrounding desires for reinvention and conformity can lead to tension between identities and social comparison (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012; Thomas et al., 2017). Nonetheless, there is no denying the interconnectedness of students' digital presence with their relational experiences during the transition to university. Thus, as opposed to academic, transition in the context of university can be considered as primarily social, with students developing and learning about themselves and others within wider student cultures and beyond (Talbot et al., 2020; Dyer, 2020b). While digital technologies can facilitate and maintain social capital via enabling temporal and spatial flexibility for students to engage with others, our smartphones and associated platforms are still very much embedded within individualism, acting as a “self-reflexive symbol” with a focus on developing a sense of self alongside personalised “remote presence” to intimate others (Ling, 2004, pp. 187, 192).

2.4.2 Technologies to enable romantic and sexual intimacies

The prior subsections demonstrate how students are embedded within hybrid ecologies, navigating digital technologies for learning as well as managing transition and relationships with family and friends from the ‘past’ and the ‘present’ (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012). Yet, fewer studies attempt to explore the implications of transition into and throughout UK HE as a “liminal period” (Stirling, 2015, p. 3) upon maintaining pre-established intimacy, building new intimate relationships and the intersection with digital technologies, despite the unique contexts of universities (Olmstead, 2020).

Nonetheless, there are some studies which investigate the use of digital technologies within university students' romantic intimate relationships, particularly within the US. For example, Standlee (2023) highlighted, in their qualitative study of undergraduate college students, the

utilisation of social media and digital communication more broadly were useful for students in creating efficient communication channels for selecting potential partners and enabling disclosure. Furthermore, online platforms were utilised for what Ling (2004) discusses as the micro-coordination of everyday life, an individualised way of managing relationships, or as Standlee (2023) suggests, a more effective way of controlling life plans in a rapidly changing and complex area of personal life for students. Standlee (2024) also suggests that digital technologies are mediums which transform the ways in which intimacy and privacy are conceptualised in student cultures. Technological forms of communication are embedded within students' contexts as tools to achieve intimacy and privacy, particularly when more traditional forms of communication changes, for example, proximity for face-to-face interaction (Standlee, 2024). Similarly, Yang et al. (2014) also highlight how college students use different platforms or communication technologies for differing purposes in relationship formation, intimacy building and maintenance. Their findings suggest students use digital technologies to maintain long-distance connections whilst at university, use platforms with instant messaging during early stages of romantic relationship formation and subsequently move to other forms of mediated communication, such as calls, as intimacy developed. As a result, digital technologies become an increasingly important aspect of initiating, but also maintaining intimate relationships.

As opposed to broader investigations into university students' use of digital technologies in intimate relationships, most research has focused on specific practices of intimacy. For example, scholars have investigated the engagement with and experiences of sexting amongst university students. In a US study of 744 college students, Drouin and Landgraff (2012) identified that of the students who were in current or recent committed relationships, 67% had sent sexually explicit messages and 54% had sent sexually explicit images or videos to an intimate partner. Renfrow and Rollo (2014) highlight how US students outlined the normalisation of sexting in committed relationships, perceived as a facilitator for relationship maintenance and enhancing intimacy. Similarly, Roberts and Ravn's (2019) findings emphasise the sexual expression linked to sexting behaviour, with Australian undergraduate men engaging in sexting as a social practice for intimacy as opposed to being conceptualised as deviant. Nonetheless, students are also aware of the potential risks of digital intimacies, engaging in behaviours to minimise or mitigate potential risk, as well as highlighting complexities and ambiguities, particularly regarding consent (Roberts & Ravn, 2019; Wignall et al., 2020).

Indeed, a substantial proportion of studies investigating students' technology-facilitated relationships focus on the role of technologies in victimisation, violence, 'risky' and non-consensual behaviours. Several studies focus on students' experiences of technology-

facilitated sexual violence (TFSV), which “refers to a range of criminal, civil, or otherwise harmful sexually aggressive and harassing behaviours that are perpetrated with the aid of communication technologies” (Henry & Powell, 2018, p. 195). Henry and Powell (2018) include online sexual harassment, gender- and sexuality- based harassment, cyberstalking, image-based sexual abuse, and sexual assault or coercion via digital technologies within their definition of TFSV, noting that few studies explore adult experiences of technology-facilitated abuse, particularly qualitatively. In the context of intimate personal relationships, all of the above would also be encompassed within the statutory definition of domestic abuse within the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, with research highlighting increasing use of technologies in domestic abuse cases (Refuge, 2021), including use of platforms for surveillance, stalking and coercive control (Woodlock, 2017; Woodlock et al., 2019).

In the context of universities, many studies highlight high reporting rates of perpetration and/or victimisation of intimate partner abuse utilising technologies within student samples (Henry et al., 2020). For example, Burke et al. (2011), researching in the US, identified that around 50% of both male and female students had been perpetrators or victims of controlling monitoring behaviours. Other studies investigating surveillance also identified that younger university students were more likely to monitor their partner using social media platforms (Tokunaga, 2011). Moreover, Spitzberg and Hoobler (2002) findings indicate that among 235 US students, a third had experienced some form of online stalking, and similarly, Maran and Begotti (2019) found that of 229 college students in Italy, 46.7% had been victims of cyberstalking, of which the perpetrators were likely to be a friend or acquaintance. In a survey of 365 US college students, Reed, Tolman and Ward (2016) identified that around 10% of their sample had experienced pressure to take sexually explicit images by an intimate partner. In the UK, Walker et al. (2021), in a survey of 391 university students, identified that a significantly high proportion of students are engaging in the practice of sharing intimate images, with around 16% of students reporting that they had non-consensually shared intimate images with others. Similarly, in a recent Office for Students (OfS, 2024b) pilot sexual misconduct prevalence survey in the UK, 10% of students had received unwanted sexualised messages, and 3% had either had an intimate image taken without permission, or shared non-consensually ($n = 5,435$). Within the same survey, of the students who reported that the unwanted sexual behaviour took place elsewhere other than on campus (78%, $n = 870$), 33% suggested that the behaviour took place online.

The literature highlights both the ubiquity and embeddedness of digital technologies in students’ everyday lives, and more specifically their initiation, management, coordination, and maintenance of intimacy. Not only this, but research also highlights the potential risks of online harms in the context of intimate sexual and romantic relationships for student populations.

Irrespective of where these online harms occur (e.g., VLE or social media platforms), the impact of technology-facilitated abuse means that the “student victim-survivor may not be able to access their education safety” (Disantis & Towl, 2025, p. 37). Considering the above, in the context of this thesis, the broader term technology-facilitated domestic and sexual violence (TFDSV) will be utilised to encompass experiences in which human (students) and non-human (technologies) are embedded in complex socio-technical systems, both influencing and facilitating forms of online harm (Henry et al., 2020). As students are increasingly embedded within hybrid ecologies, utilising technologies for learning, identity formation, exploration, and maintenance of intimacy, universities must consider the complex intertwining of risks and opportunities presented by digital technologies whilst developing policy and practice to support positive student experiences.

2.5 Safeguarding in Higher Education: What are we missing?

The previous sections have highlighted the changing trajectories of intimacy, identity, and technology use amongst emerging adults, particularly in the context of HE. As opposed to traditional forms of romantic relationship formation, research has identified a shift to more casual forms of dating and sexual relationships as a precursor to more committed relationships. In many cases, utilising and being influenced by, digital technologies, and their associated affordances, to form and maintain intimacy with others across boundaries of space and time. Unfortunately, as outlined, symbolic acts of trust, such as sharing passwords, or intimate images, may also be accompanied by breaches of trust, some of which can lead to criminal unlawful acts. Subsequently understanding the context in which universities are supporting students is significant, however, to understand how to address TFDSV in a HE setting first requires exploration of sector policy and practice.

The general notion of care and support provision for students to facilitate a positive experience whilst studying at HEIs is well established. Although recently petitioned for, Universities in the UK do not have a statutory legal duty of care for students, however they do have a general duty of care to act in the best interests of their student population as outlined by the Department for Education (2023):

“Higher Education providers do have a general duty of care to deliver educational and pastoral services to the standard of an ordinarily competent institution and, in carrying out these services, they are expected to act reasonably to protect the health, safety and welfare of their students. This can be summed up as providers owing a duty of care to not cause harm to their students through the university’s own actions.”

In addition, HE providers in England, Wales and Scotland have duties under the Equality Act 2010, which “protects students from discrimination and harassment based on ‘protected characteristics” (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2014, p. 7). Similarly, under the Public Sector Equality Duty, universities are also required to “eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation... advance equality of opportunity... and foster good relations between people who share and people who do not share a relevant protected characteristic” (Government Equalities Office, 2023). Subsequently, as well as a general duty of care, universities also have a statutory requirement to facilitate a safe environment for their students, both on and off campus.

As a result of some high-profile cases of student suicides at UK universities (Rodway et al., 2025), a welcome discussion regarding student mental health has been central across the sector, leading to guidance and whole-provider approaches to ensuring universities are implementing preventative and responsive measures, such as Suicide Safer Universities (Clarke et al., 2018) and the University Mental Health Charter (Hughes & Spanner, 2019). However, as Towl and Walker (2019, p. 9) highlight, “if we are to more effectively prevent and address mental health issues in HE, tackling sexual violence needs to be a part of that.”

Sexual violence affects graduate as well as undergraduate students (McMahon & Seabrook, 2021) with profound negative impacts on both educational and mental health related outcomes (Kammer-Kerwisk et al., 2021). Furthermore, based on the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) year ending 2020, full-time students were most likely to experience domestic abuse (7.7%) compared to any other occupational group (e.g., routine and manual occupations, 6%) (Khan, 2021; ONS, 2020), with inevitable negative implications for both academic study and student mental health (Wood et al., 2020; Brewer & Thomas, 2019). The issue of sexual violence in UK universities is not something new, in fact, prior to the coalition government publishing a call to end violence against women and girls in 2010, the National Union of Students (NUS) had conducted a study, later published in 2011 called the ‘Hidden Marks’ report, in which 2,059 women students were surveyed about their experiences of harassment, stalking, violence and sexual assault. The findings highlighted low reporting rates, with one in seven reporting physical or sexual assault during their time at university (NUS, 2011).

Since then, Universities UK, a membership organisation for Vice-Chancellors across the UK, published the Changing the Culture report (UUK, 2016), which highlighted the prevalence, nature, and current activity to address violence, harassment and hate crime against multiple student groups. Although universities were identified as having made some progress in their efforts to safeguard students, in follow-up evaluations, it was identified that further work was

required to ensure student safety and support was embedded across institutions (UUK, 2018;2019c). Consequently, sexual and domestic violence continue to be prevalent across UK institutions, as highlighted by the more recent OfS sexual misconduct prevalence survey. While such violence is prevalent across the whole of society, with 2,904,420 student enrolments in 2023/24, and 1,844,500 students aged under 24 (HESA, 2024), of which the CSEW highlights as the most likely age group to experience domestic violence, universities are in a unique position to tackle domestic and sexual violence perpetrated across hybrid environments.

“Regardless of the legal framework expecting us to do this work, the financial, reputational, and legal risks for not doing work, when we think about the ability to influence society on a macro-level, it begs the question, why wouldn’t we address sexual violence in higher education?” (Humphreys & Towl, 2020, p. 38)

In February 2023, the OfS proposed a new condition of registration, in which universities would need to address harassment and sexual misconduct. In 2024, the OfS announced that the regulation would come into force in August 2025, after which universities will be required to ensure they have comprehensive policies and information relating to incidents of harassment and sexual misconduct; ban or discourage relationships between staff and students, allocate appropriate resources to facilitate compliance; comply with freedom of speech principles and prohibit non-disclosure agreements (OfS, 2024a). Whilst this is a welcome step, there are still associated challenges (Bull, 2024), as well as a dearth of understanding and evidence pertaining to students’ experiences of TFDSV across UK universities to assist effective prevention and responses. Furthermore, there is still a considerable journey ahead in tackling sexual violence and domestic abuse across universities more broadly, to ensure universities are safe on campus and beyond (Humphreys & Towl, 2022).

2.5.1 Tackling domestic and sexual violence in Higher Education

As aforementioned, sexual violence in HEIs has received considerable academic attention globally, but also nationally across the UK. Despite significant activism in this area, including the global #MeToo movement, to the UK based ‘Everyone’s Invited’ charity, in which victim-survivors share their stories of sexual violence, a significant number referencing experiences within educational institutions, universities are yet to take ‘robust actions’ (Humphreys & Towl, 2022). Despite this, scholars nationally have researched the prevalence, contributing factors and potential preventative institutional responses to sexual violence.

The impact of sexual violence upon student victim-survivors is significant, as well as reducing retention rates and academic achievement, experiences of mental ill-health, including depression, anxiety, and trauma are also more likely (Molstad et al., 2023; Phipps & Smith,

2012). Sexual violence disproportionately impacts young women, with perpetrators being predominantly young males, subsequently universities encompass both the “high risk victim and perpetrators” (Towl, 2016, p. 434). Not only this, but research increasingly highlights that various student groups, and students with intersecting identities, are more likely to experience sexual violence, including students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ and global majority students (Richter et al., 2021; Coulter et al., 2017). Subsequently, with increasing focus upon equity of opportunity in UK universities, tackling sexual violence is imperative.

A multitude of factors have been linked to prevalence and experience of sexual violence amongst university students. For example, analysis of data from 309,171 students in the US, highlights that campus-level factors, such as higher rates of binge drinking and campus diversity were associated with more frequent experiences of sexual assault (Moyle et al., 2024). In the UK, the culture of institutions in facilitating sexual violence is also researched widely, with scholars highlighting the impact of ‘lad culture’ specifically, upon reproducing hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal values (Phipps & Young, 2013; Phipps, 2018a). Phipps (2018b) also argues that the values and hierarchical structures associated with neoliberal universities also facilitates a culture of sexual violence, which may align with the hesitation toward the suggestion that universities should encourage increased reporting (Towl, 2016; Page, 2022).

Despite the extensive research exploring sexual violence in UK HE, fewer studies explore experiences of students in current or recent intimate relationships, and more specifically, students’ experiences of domestic abuse. Domestic abuse can be inclusive of sexual violence but is characterised by a personal connection between individuals, and also encompasses physical abuse, violent or threatening behaviour, coercion and control, economic and psychological abuse under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Internationally, research has investigated experiences of intimate partner violence, for example Wood et al. (2018) identified that in a sample of 6,818 female students in the US, 31% had experienced intimate partner violence. Furthermore, DeKeseredy et al. (2019) report that one in five female students in their sample ($n = 551$, 18%) experienced intimate partner violence. Very few studies exist in the UK which explore students’ experiences of domestic abuse (Jones et al., 2024). One UK study investigating student experiences of domestic abuse, conducted by Bull & Bradley (2023), identified that 26% of their sample ($n = 725$) had been subject to ‘dating violence’. However, as the authors note, the survey utilised is US based, and subsequently omits various forms of domestic abuse under UK legislative definitions, including coercive control and technology-mediated abuse. The omission of technology-mediated abuse becomes particularly pertinent when we consider the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, in which perceived frequency and experiences of online harms, such as cyberstalking and online harassment,

increased (Short et al., 2022; Horeck et al., 2023), as well as the required shift in higher education responses to gender-based violence (Franklin-Corben & Towl, 2023)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, UUK (2020a) released briefings related to domestic violence, providing key recommendations, whilst also further highlighting limited data on experiences of domestic and technology-facilitated abuse experienced by both staff and students. More recently, Hall et al. (2021) conducted a rapid review to identify the current UK universities policies and guidance surrounding domestic abuse, highlighting that of 133 institutions, 9 had a specific domestic abuse policy, 18 had policies covering domestic abuse alongside sexual violence, and 27 referred to domestic abuse briefly in safeguarding policies. Considering the prevalence of domestic abuse, calculated by Khan (2021) as approximately 185,000 UK university staff and students experiencing domestic abuse annually, universities still have some progress to make in ensuring training, guidance and policy is in place. Khan et al. (2023) however note that since the introduction of the domestic abuse policy guidance for UK universities (Khan, 2021), 58% were now aware of the policy, 37% created new or updated policy and 29% created new training as a result of the guidance.

Policies provide important frameworks for facilitating consistent approaches and ensuring accountability in how a HEI operates. Despite this, additional responsive and preventative measures are required to embed holistic and comprehensive approaches to tackling sexual and domestic violence across a university, including training, reporting and investigative mechanisms, partnerships with wider communities, campaigns, and specialist support provision (Paske, 2022; Humphreys & Towl, 2022; Short & Barnes, 2023). As an example of a preventative intervention, several universities have adopted bystander interventions across campuses to tackle sexual violence, the nature of which is to alter attitudes, beliefs, social and cultural norms and hopefully lead to behavioural change (Fenton et al., 2016; Gainsbury et al., 2020; Chadwick & Paske, 2021). Such approaches are important as they aim to directly challenge the cultural factors aforementioned, such as 'lad culture' and 'negative peer support', which have been highlighted as predictors of both offline and online victimisation (Phipps, 2018; DeKeseredy et al., 2019). Reviews and meta-analyses of international bystander interventions implemented for addressing sexual violence on campus reveal positive outcomes related to pro-social attitudes and beliefs and intention to intervene, although long-term outcomes are less clear (Jouriles et al., 2018). Labhardt et al. (2017) also argue that the context of US colleges differs to UK campuses, and subsequently, some bystander initiatives developed internationally may need to be tailored for the UK context. Within the UK context, awareness of what constitutes sexual and domestic abuse, as well as confidence to intervene are identified as mediating factors in positive action, highlighting the

importance of raising awareness and confidence to intervene early in the student lifecycle or prior to arrival on campus (Bovill & White, 2022).

In summary, universities are operating within a diverse mosaic of practice and policy implementation to addressing sexual and domestic violence, shaped by varying approaches, resources and interpretations within local contexts. Moreover, while there are some strides being made with regards to developing institutional practices to tackle sexual and domestic violence within university settings, there is still limited guidance with regards to addressing forms of violence occurring online. As noted by UUK (2019c, p.6) “universities were also encouraged to afford greater priority to addressing incidents of hate crime and online harassment, which tended to have a lower profile and status”. However, whilst some university policies may mention TFDSV, the very nature of the hybrid ecosystems in which universities operate, may hinder coordinated responses. Furthermore, there is still limited research, guidance, training, and perceived severity associated with student experiences of online risks (Phippen & Bond, 2020a; Messinger et al., 2021).

2.5.2 Contextualising online safeguarding

As Bond and Phippen (2022a, p. 10) eloquently outline, “while the concept of online safeguarding for children and young people is well explored from both research and policy perspectives, and there are many statutory requirements on stakeholders to ensure effective training and education in this area, the same cannot be said for adults”. This thesis hopes to in some way address this, in the context of higher education students. Thus making an important contribution, as those adults of greater vulnerability in society, and those who support them, are without effective guidance and provision. Nonetheless, understanding the current online safeguarding landscape, which is predominantly centred around children and young people, provides important context for understanding its applicability to organisations with a duty of care to safeguard the welfare of the populations they support, such as universities.

Since the publication of the Byron Review (2008), resulting from government concerns surrounding children’s risks online, there have been significant shifts in policies and initiatives to ‘protect’ children in an increasingly digital world. With practical recommendations, including the establishment of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS), Byron (2008) encouraged a nuanced approach to developing online safety for children, including recognition of digital literacy, building resilience as well as a whole eco-system approach. The review also made recommendations related to platforms regulation as well as the delivery and assessment of online safety education as a part of school curriculum. While the NSPCC (2018) notes that of the 38 recommendations of the Byron Review (2008), only 13 were wholly fulfilled 10 years

later, the progress within the education sector has been more promising, with schools embedding policies and parental engagement within a whole school approach (Phippen & Bond, 2020d).

Following the Ofsted (2010) report, *'the safe use of new technologies'*, online safety became a part of schools' regulator statutory framework in 2012. As a result, schools are expected to "protect and educate pupils and staff in their use of technology and have the appropriate mechanisms to intervene and support any incident where appropriate" (Ofsted, 2013, p. 4), with a focus on addressing risks categorised into the 3Cs, namely content, conduct and contact, an approach widely utilised within child safeguarding (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). In addition, from 2015, the Department for Education (2024) published and regularly updated the *'Keeping children safe in education'* statutory guidance for schools and colleges, including child-centred approaches to safeguarding with significant reference to online safety. Of pertinence to this thesis is the welcome acknowledgement that "abuse that occurs online or outside of school or college should not be downplayed and should be treated equally seriously" with all staff being advised to maintain an attitude of "it could happen here" (DfE, 2024, pp. 112-118, emphasis in original). However, while strides have been made in ensuring schools have policies and procedures in place to embed online safeguarding as a whole school approach, there are still limitations, for example limited reference or guidance surrounding staff training related to 'online safety' and continuing examples of 'safeguarding dystopia' still prevail (Phippen & Brennan, 2019; Phippen 2021).

Of equivocal importance is the rhetoric surrounding online safety, as Phippen & Bond (2022a) highlight, the idea of one being 'safe' online is increasingly unlikely, risks are inevitable in a modern society, and placing the onus on an individual to keep themselves 'safe' online can risk further re-victimisation. Instead, we need to raise awareness of online abuse, in all its forms, as well as identify "how we can help them mitigate that risk and support them in the event of abuse occurring" (Phippen & Bond, 2022a, p. 393). As discussed previously in this chapter, technologies are ubiquitous in young peoples' everyday lives, including importantly, their relationships with others (Ling, 2012). Subsequently, the experience of TFDSV is increasingly likely, as indicated by the evidence presented throughout this chapter so far. Within secondary and further education, this was highlighted at a national scale with the release of anonymous testimonials via the Everyone's Invited website (Everyone's Invited, 2024) and the subsequent Ofsted (2021) review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges. The Ofsted (2021) findings, for example, highlighted that 90% of girls and 50% of boys, suggested that being sent unsolicited explicit images or videos were commonplace, happening to either themselves or peers. Of course, amongst scholars this was not surprising, given that over two decades of research has highlighted the prevalence and experiences of sharing explicit

images consensually and non-consensually amongst young people (Ringrose et al., 2012; Bond, 2010, Henry & Powell, 2014). Nonetheless, the recommendations for schools and colleges to the Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum, made compulsory from 2020, was welcome, suggesting the inclusion of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online, alongside training for all staff.

Despite this, delivery of RSHE within education settings is not without challenges, for example institutional culture and contextual factors, such as educator autonomy, staff-student and community partnerships and resourcing influence the ability to enact a whole-school approach alongside curriculum delivery (Bragg et al., 2021; 2022). Additionally, the RSHE curriculum has been criticised for being too risk-averse and legalistic, as opposed to being centred around rights, criticality, ethics, and confidence in young people's digital sexual cultures (Setty & Dobson, 2023b). Furthermore, within the RSHE guidance, as highlighted by Phippen and Bond (2022a), reference to intimacy practices, such as youth-produced sexual imagery, is included under Section 82 'The Law' (DfE, 2019, p. 30), which may further exacerbate the "criminal justice drift" rhetoric that is also unfolding across HEIs (Cowan & Munro, 2021, p. 208).

In addition to the changes across the education sector, we have seen a shift nationally with the introduction of the Online Safety Act 2023 (OSA), which also outlines a new legislative framework that 'protects children and adults online' (Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, 2024). The act introduced long-awaited changes to legislation with regards to cyberflashing and image-based sexual abuse, removing the requirement for intent to cause distress and inclusion of deepfakes, alongside a greater focus on violence against women and girls. In addition, the act places a predominant focus upon regulating online user-to-user services and search services, such as global social media platforms. The uncertainties and gaps associated with OSA 2023 however are emerging, for example Nash & Felton (2024) highlight how a focus on larger platforms could detract from smaller, high-risk platforms in which intimate images are shared non-consensually. In addition, Huber and Ward (2024, p. 13) suggest that while there appears to be a slight shift towards more of a systems approach, the OSA 2023 appears to prioritise identification and prevention of harmful content as opposed to placing more emphasis on platforms "safety by design" and managing the "balance between protection and participation". Thus, while the OSA 2023 has brought about some necessary legislative changes, the focus predominantly on platform regulation as a solution is perhaps technologically deterministic. Although service providers are one important element of the ecosystem, a multi-stakeholder risk mitigation approach focusing on harm reduction and victim-survivor support across the whole system may be more appropriate (Phippen & Bond, 2024; 2022b).

2.5.3 Avoiding ‘digital dualism’: Online safeguarding in Higher Education

The previous section has highlighted the contextual and structural challenges of delivering effective online safety and RSHE curriculum within secondary and further education institutions, as well as the potential limitations of current legislative frameworks. Subsequently, universities cannot assume that “students would arrive at university knowledgeable and confident about the risks they face and how they might best tackle them” (Phippen & Bond, 2022a, p. 398). Aligning with critiques of the ‘digital natives’ debate, in which young people have been previously conceptualised as ‘native speakers’ of the digital (Prensky, 2001), this movement away from assumptions and myths about the ways in which young people, and emerging adults more specifically, have experienced the ubiquity of digital technologies is a helpful first step in embedding online safeguarding in HE.

Furthermore, our understanding of university students’ experiences of utilising digital technologies and implications for online safeguarding is in its infancy, particularly in the UK. UUK (2019b, p. 6) published a literature review to accompany their ‘tackling online harassment and promoting online welfare’ report (UUK, 2019a), acknowledging that:

“Literature on online harassment among university students, including UK-based research, is limited. As a result, it is not possible to determine the incidence rate and impact of online harassment and to identify ‘what works’ in a robust way in universities.”

The UUK (2019b) guidance was pivotal in shaping awareness of online harassment more broadly within HEIs, encouraging universities to establish clear policies, raise awareness of online harassment across institutions and adopt whole-university approaches to embed a culture of digital civility. Nonetheless, as Bull et al. (2022) highlights, within this broader focus there is less consideration of technology-facilitated sexual violence. This is also reflected in the newly introduced condition E6 of registration by the OfS (2024a, p. 9), in which the only mention of technology-facilitated sexual violence is “harassment and sexual misconduct that is conducted online should be included in a provider’s policies”.

Research has previously highlighted the ad-hoc nature of university policy related to online abuse, with Phippen & Bond (2020a) in a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to 135 institutions, revealing that of 130 institutions, 21 different policies were suggested to include how the institution tackles online abuse. The main policy highlighted was student discipline or code of conduct policies, furthermore of the 266 policies reviewed, very few made specific reference to online abuse. Similarly, Bull et al. (2022) identified that across 23 institutions reviewed, definitions of online sexual harassment are not sufficient to allow recognition of experiences or facilitate knowledge of support options. Furthermore, Phippen & Bond (2020a) highlight that of 106 institutions, only 54% reported some level of staff training around online

abuse. Furthermore, when accounting for policy and practice tackling technology-facilitated domestic abuse within universities, the picture is even less clear, especially as this form of abuse is an under recognised safeguarding issue more broadly (Brookfield et al., 2024).

Lack of consideration of TFDSV in universities lends itself to the exacerbation of 'digital dualism' (Jurgenson, 2011a; 2011b). Jurgenson (2011a) suggests that those who adopt a digital dualist perspective believe that the physical world is real and subsequently the digital world is less real, however the reality is that both are increasingly intertwined. Gosse (2021) utilises the concept of digital dualism in a qualitative study investigating women's experiences of online abuse. The findings highlight how discursive practices of placing online and offline in binary opposition leads to perceptions of victim-survivors as less vulnerable resulting in increasing ontological labour to legitimise experiences (Gosse, 2021). Indeed, cases such as the Warwick University group chat (Lee & Kennelly, 2019) potentially reflect a digital dualist approach, requiring female students to engage in ontological labour as a response to unsafe "spaces of sociality" (Gosse, 2021, p. 62), particularly when university responses to abuse are unsatisfactory (Phippen & Bond, 2020b).

As well as lack of policy, training, and inadequate responses to online abuse potentially corroborating 'digital dualism', research highlights bystanders to online abuse at university may show less sensitivity to peer distress when compared to bystanders within primary, secondary and college education settings (Myers & Cowie, 2019). Furthermore, a study of 738 students in the US identified that unless accompanied by physical violence, participants were unlikely to perceive intimate partner monitoring as a form of privacy violation and abuse, and less likely to suggest seeking support from others (Messinger et al., 2021). Davidovic et al. (2023) suggest that ambiguity related to online abuse, but also a perception of platform responsibility may negatively impact the likelihood of bystander intervention. As a result, embedding the barriers and facilitators afforded by online environments in shaping bystander behaviour within educational training was recommended (Davidovic et al., 2023).

The research reviewed thus far presents the importance of understanding students' everyday lives as existing within hybrid ecologies, that is, placing students in shifting socio-technical assemblages or networks which are composed of human and non-human actors (Latour 1996; 2005). Such an approach has the potential to negate digital dualism, by acknowledging the explicit and implicit role of technologies, alongside multiple actants, in shaping student experiences of sexual and domestic violence. Not only this but adopting a 'whole-university' or a broader systems approach to online safeguarding is necessary, as outlined by research highlighting the role of legislators, regulators, HEIs and more immediate relational networks in supporting positive responses to address technology-facilitated abuse experienced by

students. As highlighted in section 2.2.2, Phippen & Bond's (2022a) adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model provides a helpful conceptual framework in understanding the layers in the system that influence and interact with one another to influence student development. In addition to the different system layers, Phippen & Bond (2022) propose that students have various risk and resilience factors that are shaped by experiences prior to entering university. In this sense, just as the idea that "learners are "empty vessels" to be filled by the educators' deposits" (Freire, 1985, p. 100) is contested (Symonds, 2021), the idea of students arriving at university in a vacuum without prior experiences which shape their development is also challenged. Subsequently, if universities can firstly understand, but also "influence the resilience factors and inform risk factors" utilising a holistic approach working with various actors in the networked system, this could have positive implications for student experience, as well as fostering a safe environment that encourages participation, inclusion, and support (Bond & Phippen, 2022a, p. 404; Bond & Phippen, 2022b).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter explores the empirical and theoretical research underpinning the key themes that are pertinent to this thesis, relevant and appropriate literature is also interwoven throughout Chapter 4, 5, and 6 as a part of the discussion of findings. Firstly, literature exploring the changing socio-economic context positioned via broader theories of the risk society and reflexive modernisation was outlined, providing a contextual backdrop for understanding how intimate relationships are shaped by the increasing focus on the 'self', aligning with theories of emerging adulthood, as well as the rise in individualised technologies. The limitations of such theories in negating structural, systems or networked influences upon intimate relationships is subsequently discussed, highlighting how a nuanced approach recognising both the central role of the reflexive individual, but also the role of socio-technical actors in a wider hybrid ecology is important in understanding emerging adults' digital intimacies, something which this thesis aims to build upon.

Furthermore, existing research predominantly centres around children and young people's experiences of identity and intimacy in digital spaces. This research highlights the dual role of digital technologies and intimate relationships in shaping identity construction and expression, but also the unique role of technological affordances in shaping relational behaviours related to trust and risk management. Substantial research focuses upon the harms and risks implicated by technology use, particularly related to digital intimacy practices amongst children and young people, such as sexting. Yet, fewer studies explicitly explore digital intimacy practices amongst adults, despite the recognition that digital technologies afford risks and opportunities universally, irrespective of age. This thesis subsequently contributes toward the evidence-base by exploring emerging adults' experiences of technology-mediated

relationships, and in particular university students, as a population experiencing a unique socio-cultural context.

Exploring university students' digital intimacies is particularly pertinent due to the shifting Higher Education sector in England, in which policy, practice and regulation has recently focused on addressing sexual violence, sexual misconduct and increasingly, domestic abuse, yet, with limited discussion of technology-facilitated abuse. While the international body of evidence, particularly quantitative studies investigating the prevalence of technology-facilitated intimacy and abuse within student populations is growing, there is still a dearth of research in the context of UK universities. This thesis thus aims to contribute to existing literature by conducting an in-depth qualitative exploration of students' digital intimacies, including mundane, normalised everyday activities, practices, and norms, of which, I argue could further understanding of the spectrum, and persistence, of technology-facilitated abuse.

3. Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the overall research approach and justifications for the methodological choices made for answering the research aims based on my understanding of the philosophical assumptions underpinning social science research, and the methods most appropriate for addressing the research objectives. The chapter begins by discussing the overarching research paradigm and design. It then outlines and explains the relevance of a qualitative approach, to explore students' experiences, perceptions and meanings related to digital intimacies, and the importance of a reflexive approach to research. My choice of research methods is subsequently outlined, demonstrating the appropriateness of focus groups and individual interviews in facilitating data collection, gathering qualitative data to provide a rich and meaningful description and interpretation of students' experiences of technology-facilitated intimacy. Finally, I focus on my approach to data analysis, utilising reflexive thematic analysis, engaging in an iterative process of familiarisation, coding, and theme generation. The chapter then concludes with the overall ethical considerations required whilst developing and conducting this research, such as informed consent, rights, fairness, sensitivity, confidentiality, and safeguarding.

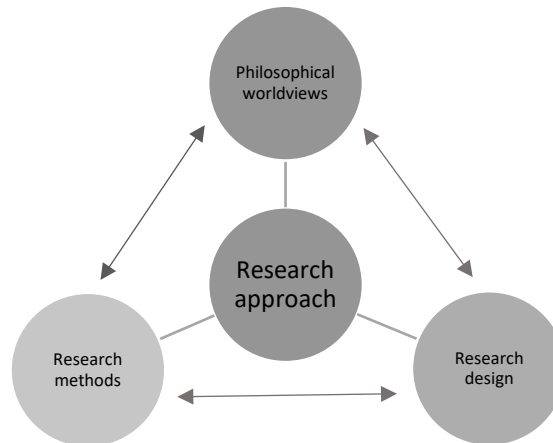
3.2 Research Approach

3.2.1 Research paradigm

Philosophy, epistemology, and ontology

Paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), worldviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), ontologies and epistemologies (Crotty, 1998) or models (Silverman, 2022), as interchangeably referred to, represent a set of assumptions that influence action (Guba, 1990). Such paradigms or worldviews “tell us what reality is like, the basic elements it contains ('ontology'), the nature and status of knowledge ('epistemology')”, and subsequently how we might obtain that knowledge (Silverman, 2022, p. 190). Such philosophical assumptions of ontology and epistemology, alongside an approach to how we can gain knowledge of the world (methodology), combine to form a research paradigm (Guba, 1990). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), understanding and acknowledging philosophical world views is central to establishing a research approach, in interconnection with, an appropriate research design and methods (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *The interconnectedness of philosophical assumptions/worldviews, research design and research methods (Adapted from Creswell & Creswell, 2018).*



At a broad level, epistemological beliefs tend to converge around either positivism or interpretivism (Clark et al., 2021). Positivist views centring around the belief that stable, law-based ‘nomothetic knowledge’ (Punch, 2014) can be developed objectively from the world, whilst interpretative epistemological beliefs centre around subjectivity of participants understanding and meanings that are created to make sense of the world (O’Donoghue, 2007; Silverman, 2022). Interchangeable with these broad epistemological beliefs are objectivist and constructionist ontologies, which depict beliefs about the nature of reality, that is whether social phenomena have an existence independent of, or are produced and revised through, social actors (Clark et al., 2021). Depicted in a very rudimentary way, positivist epistemologies and objectivist ontologies broadly map onto quantitative research methodology, whilst interpretative epistemologies and constructionist ontologies broadly map onto qualitative methodology.

However, paradigms can be diversely defined and applied by researchers. Furthermore, research paradigms are not necessarily mutually exclusive and the network of philosophical positions from which to choose is substantial (Cohen et al., 2018). For example, Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 109) identify four main inquiry paradigms underlying research (positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructionism), while Creswell and Creswell (2018) combine philosophical assumptions into the four worldviews outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: *Main types of research paradigms (adapted from Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 6).*

Post-positivism	Constructivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determination • Reductionism • Empirical observation and measurement • Theory verification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding • Multiple participant meaning • Social and historical construction • Theory generation
Transformative	Pragmatism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political • Power and justice orientated • Collaborative • Change-orientated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consequences of actions • Problem-centred • Pluralistic • Real-world practice orientated

In my own research, outside of this thesis, I have embraced multiple worldviews, making sense of the role of philosophy in a way that is appropriate to the research, adopting a ‘question-driven’ approach, to first identify what the key questions are and the best mechanisms to address them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Punch, 2014). For example, utilising Creswell and Creswell’s (2018) outline of research paradigms (Table 1), I have utilised a transformative paradigm when researching with young people regarding agency and voice in shaping places (Tyrrell, 2023) and priorities for student mental health research (Sampson et al., 2022).

I have also adopted a positivist/post-positivist worldview in my earlier research in cognitive neuroscience (Bell et al., 2017), using an experimental design to gain further insights into human action selection performance. Post-positivist worldviews challenge the traditional notion of the truth of knowledge (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) but are shaped predominantly via an aim to identify objective knowledge about fundamental causal laws utilising top-down theory driven approaches (Neuman, 2011). In the study of online behaviours post-positivist worldviews are often adopted, particularly within research into predictors of harm in relation to young people’s social media use (Kelly et al., 2018), or for identifying undergraduate student use of digital technologies (Henderson et al., 2015). Recognising diverse paradigmatic views is important when researching digital technologies, particularly when adopting theories such as ANT (Latour, 1987) that bridges technological determinism and social constructivism (Cordella & Shaikh, 2006). Latour’s theory argues for a “realistic realism” (Stadler, 2000; p. 245), bridging realism and relativism, by highlighting that ontologically, individuals and technologies are hybrid in that they belong to the world, and subsequently, object, as well as conceptual, influenced by language and subjectivity through a process of interaction (Stadler, 2000). Subsequently, I can see the value in multiple worldviews and consider that to focus on one paradigm at the expense of others would be misjudged, and in an area of research

connecting both human actors (students) and non-human actors (technologies), would be negligent. Thus, I recognise the importance of the characteristics of technologies in understanding their use (see Law, 1992) by referring frequently to their affordances in shaping human behaviour, however I also emphasise that to understand how students make meaning of technology use in their intimate relationships, a (social) constructivist approach, through the lens of ANT is required.

Constructivist ontologies recognise that realities are constructed. They are based on the active creation of meaning and interpretation via individuals or groups in social contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Constructivism “invites the researcher to consider the ways in which social reality is an ongoing creation of social actors rather than something external to actors and that totally constrains them” (Clark et al., 2021, p. 29). Moreover, interpretivist epistemologies acknowledge that the nature of knowledge is based on individual meanings, which influence perceptions of the world (O’Donoghue, 2007). An interpretivist, social constructivist paradigm recognises that although technologies have an operational, physical component, they are designed and utilised in a complex social world (Cordella & Shaikh, 2006; Doolin 1998).

“Events, persons, objects are indeed tangible entities. The meanings and wholeness derived from or ascribed to these tangible phenomena in order to make sense of them, organize them, or reorganize a belief system, however, are constructed realities.” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 84)

For example, Walsham (1995) utilises an interpretivist framework to study information systems within organisations, focusing on human sense making and the context that influences and is influenced by the information system (Walsham, 1995; 1993). Theories with a grounding in interpretivism and social constructivism are also adopted in the study of online intimacy practices such as sexting, recognising that norms and understanding are continuously constructed within a social context (Roberts & Ravn, 2019). I consider that the affordances of technologies (Hutchby, 2001) may be (re)negotiated for different purposes, and subsequently technologies as an emergent reality are in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction. As a result, to study how students construct, understand, and make meaning of technology use in their intimate relationships requires a paradigm embedded in an interpretative and (social) constructivist framework, underpinned by a qualitative methodological approach (Raddon, 2020), that also recognises the role of technology, objects, and non-human networks in shaping these constructions.

3.2.2 Aims and approach: Qualitative research

A predominantly inductive approach was utilised within this study, as opposed to a deductive approach which formulates a top-down method from theory to testing hypotheses (Creswell &

Clark, 2007). Instead, the focus of this study was to explore new phenomena, by beginning with more granular observations to detecting patterns in the dataset (Soiferman, 2010). Thus, participants views, in all their interrelatedness, subjectivity and variation are considered as central to building broader themes, and subsequently this study did not set out to prove or disprove hypotheses or to test theory; rather it sought to generate qualitative data to develop further understanding into the complex world of students' digital intimacies (Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Accordingly, this study set out to explore students' perceptions and experiences of digital intimacies. Specifically, it aimed to examine how university students', aged 18-25 years, experience, and perceive, the use of online platforms within their intimate relationships, and whether this has implications for HE policy and practice. Utilising a qualitative approach, speaking to students from the East of England, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are university students' experiences of digital intimacies?
2. How do students construct opportunities and risks associated with online platforms in the context of intimate relationships?
3. What is the perceived impact of digital intimacies upon students' university experiences?

Corresponding with the philosophical worldview of an interpretivist, (social) constructivist paradigm, a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate in addressing the research aims. As Fox and Moreland (2015, p. 169) suggest, "qualitative methods are necessary to elaborate on quantitative studies about technology and gain more insight into the breadth and depth of users' changing experiences". While at one end of the continuum quantitative approaches to studying online behaviours provide useful insight into the breadth of technology use and experiences, producing greater generalisability, qualitative approaches allow for greater exploration and understanding of the meanings ascribed to human experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research methods have been utilised to study the experiences of children's' digital intimacies in educational contexts (see Setty, 2019; Ringrose et al, 2012) yet adopted less so when investigating adult experiences (Amundsen, 2022), and, more specifically, emerging adults' digital intimacy practices in the context of higher education contexts. Yet, a qualitative approach is considered of particular value in exploring sensitive topics (Lee, 1993; Frith, 2000), as well as being a vehicle for enhancing higher education policy and practice by empirically centring student voice.

Qualitative research is "rich, exciting, and challenging in lots of ways; it captures the complexity, mess and contradiction that characterises the real world, yet allows us to make

sense of patterns of meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 10). Underpinned by an interest in understanding participant interpretations and actions within a particular context, qualitative research aims to provide deep exploration and explanation of individuals everyday lived experiences. Merriam (2002, pp. 4-6) highlights several key characteristics of qualitative research:

1. Qualitative researchers strive to understand how people make sense of their experiences, exploring the meanings constructed about the world around them.
2. The researcher is central to data collection and analysis, being the primary instrument in the research process, and subsequently subjectivities should be recognised and embraced.
3. Qualitative research is typically inductive, gathering data to develop concepts, hypotheses or theories as opposed to deductively testing hypotheses.
4. The product of a qualitative research study is richly descriptive, with words and/or media used to convey findings.

Qualitative inquiry and methodologies have evolved over time, with Denzin and Lincoln (2011) proposing eight key moments in the development of qualitative research. Prior to the ‘paradigm wars’ between researchers adopting postpositivist-constructivist and positivist paradigms during the 1970s (Denzin & Lincoln 2011), positivism remained the overarching preferred paradigmatic approach within the social sciences, particularly in disciplines such as psychology which have been dominated by (post)positivist experimental paradigms (Madill & Gough, 2008; Coolican, 2018). However, from the 1980s onwards, qualitative approaches regained their position, as approaches such as feminism, social constructivism and postmodernism continued to develop, questioning observable, independent reality to recognise the situatedness of individuals in “subjective, interpreted worlds” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 7). Nonetheless, Brinkmann, Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2014) argue that throughout history, qualitative philosophies and an interest in human experience has been embedded, for example with early sociologists rooted in positivist paradigms, utilising qualitative analyses to study social phenomena, and subsequently “qualitative researchers have no reason to feel inferior or marginalised in relation to their peers, who employ methods normally associated with the natural sciences” (Brinkmann et al., 2014, p. 32).

Despite a resurgence in recognition, qualitative methodologies are often critiqued for having limited generalisability, validity, and objectivity, due to perceived lack of control over variables and researcher influence (Flick, 2023). However, it is considered important to be cautious of using quantitative labels when assessing the methodological rigour of qualitative inquiry (Morse, 1994). Furthermore, the “ideals of objectivity formulated by methodologists can only

be met in part” (Flick, 2023, p. 5), due to the interpretative and contextual nature of social science research. As highlighted by Merriam (2002) and Braun and Clarke (2013), the subjectivity of the researcher can be embraced and seen as a resource to understand and make sense of participant meaning via reflection on their own values and experiences. Subsequently, later in this chapter, I examine and deliberate my own positionality as a researcher in this process, interpreting my own insider and outsider positions, and engaging in reflexive practice.

Contrasting qualitative and quantitative methodologies alongside philosophical worldviews highlights how a qualitative approach is appropriate for this study, exchanging testing of hypotheses for naturalistic inquiry to establish meaning based upon participants views and my interpretations of them (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The purpose of this research was to capture the perspectives of students engaging with digital technologies within their intimate relationships, allowing opportunities for my participants to share their inner experiences. A qualitative methodological approach allows flexibility in understanding how meanings are formed, provides effective tools to acquire insights into how my participants construct their realities (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and facilitates in-depth exploration of the “rich tapestry” of students’ lives in their own words (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 24).

3.2.3 Methodological rigour

Due to the nature of this research, following criteria for assessing the methodological rigour typically reflective of quantitative research, such as measures of reliability and validity, were not considered appropriate. Rooted in a realist perspective of a single external reality, the notion of reliability, alongside the idea that something can be measured and validated, omitting the recognition of multiple realities, does not align with the philosophical underpinnings of a qualitative approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Nonetheless, consensus around the framing and understanding of methodological rigour in qualitative inquiry is limited, and still in continuous development (Morse, 2018). Guba and Lincoln (1994) proposed two main criteria for assessing qualitative research; ‘trustworthiness’, comprised of ‘credibility’, ‘transferability’, ‘dependability’ and ‘confirmability’; and ‘authenticity’. By involving multiple students in discussions, analysing findings across different focus groups and subsequent follow-up interviews to revisit previous thoughts, ideas, and perceptions (Seale, 1999), the results could be described as ‘credible’ based on participant accounts. Not only this, but thick descriptions were utilised to describe the participants contexts, the setting, and circumstances to ensure some level of transferability of findings to alternative settings (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Blaikie, 2010). To address dependability and confirmability, a constant process of creating records of processes, thoughts, and findings, alongside recognition of personal values and theoretical inclinations that could influence the research, were reflected upon throughout the duration of

the project (Clark et al., 2021). To achieve authenticity, I included perspectives from a range of students from different backgrounds and studied these perspectives in-depth. Ontological and educative authenticity are also aspects of Guba and Lincoln's (1994) criteria for authenticity, the emergence of shared understandings and reflection on individual and shared experiences was evident throughout the focus group interviews, empowering some students to think differently about online relational behaviours (Shannon & Hambacher, 2014).

3.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves explaining the position of the researcher in relation to the position of the researched (Falconer Al-Hindi & Kawabata, 2002). More broadly, Mills and Birks (2014, p. 26) define reflexivity as “an active process of systematically developing insight into your work as a researcher to guide your future actions”. Subsequently, awareness of positionality; ideologically and philosophically, as well as recognition of the researchers social and cultural background, is inherently important in research design and data interpretation (Clark et al., 2021). Recognising, reviewing, and reflecting on our own positionality and subjectivities as interpreters and authors of research should enhance the “trustworthiness of findings and outcomes” (Etherington, 2004, p. 32).

Analysis of qualitative data is ultimately subjective (Schmidt, 2004), where the researcher is involved in a “sustained and intensive experience” with the interview participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 183). From a constructionist perspective, reflexivity is recognised as central to qualitative inquiry, as the ‘researcher-researched relationship’ is fundamental to understanding the co-constitutive nature of qualitative data (Finlay, 2002b). Such subjectivities are considered a strength of qualitative research, a resource to be utilised to strengthen the quality of analysis (Finlay & Gough, 2003).

“As qualitative researchers engaged in contemporary practice, we accept that the researcher is a central figure who influences, if not actively constructs, the collection, selection, and interpretation of data. We recognize that research is co-constituted, a joint product of the participants, researcher, and their relationship. We understand that meanings are negotiated within particular social contexts so that another researcher will unfold a different story. We no longer seek to eradicate the researcher’s presence – instead subjectivity in research is transformed from a problem to an opportunity” (Finlay, 2002a, p. 212)

As a post-graduate research (PGR) student but also a member of staff at the institution in which the study took place, I was aware of my dual identities, both as an insider and an outsider.

“Insiders” were those who shared positionalities or social locations with their participants, and therefore were believed to hold insider knowledge to the experiences of those they studied. “Outsiders,” on the other hand, were categorized as those who did not share the positionalities or social locations of interest with their participants, and therefore were unable to utilize their own lived experiences to understand and translate the experiences of their participants.” (Thurairajah, 2019, p. 135)

Hellawell (2006) encourages researchers to think of this positionality as a continuum, and subsequently I considered how my position as a staff member influenced my ability to approach gatekeepers, have an in-depth understanding of the university context, as well as relate to the student population I was studying. My identity, as a postgraduate student, of a similar age to some of my participants, and having an experience of being an undergraduate student, although at a different time, may have facilitated a sense of ‘sameness’ or ‘group-identity’ with my participants (Le Gallais, 2008). I noticed making a conscious effort to remove my staff badge prior to interviews with students, as I was aware that small things, such as wearing a different coloured lanyard may have influenced relatability. Furthermore, I found myself being sympathetic to students’ experiences of using technologies with intimate partners and navigating identity development during a period of transition, as something that I also experienced as an undergraduate student. As Le Gallais (2008) highlights, I was aware that this relatability may have reduced the requirement of a ‘mutual familiarisation’ phase, and with partial insiderness (Robson, 2002), I was able to build rapport with my participants quickly, with ease. I felt an indicator of this positive rapport was reflected in the students’ asking questions, seeking clarity from me and other participants and steering the discussion. Counteracting the “mythology of the ‘hygienic’ research with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data collection” (Oakley, 1981, p. 58), I perceived this rapport, relatability and empathy toward students experiences a facilitator to a non-hierarchical relationship that enabled free-flowing and dynamic conversation. My perceptions of participants positive experiences of engaging in the interviews was further clarified by some students engaging in follow-up interviews, as well as contacting me at later stages of their university journey, including applying to work on projects alongside me and asking for advice regarding further study. It would be naïve however, to assume this was the experience of all participants, and to disregard the ‘complex conditions that shape familiarity’ (Oakley, 2016, p. 209), including potential power dynamics or desire for social support during a time of transition. For example, despite my emphasis on participants agency in discussions and confidentiality, in some instances I sensed that some participants withheld information to protect their peers or may have desired the ability to retrospectively edit accounts, likely due to uncertainty about authority and my role in addressing potential

harmful practices. Subsequently, the embedding of Weber's (1964) *verstehen*, which is "the attempt to understand social action through a kind of empathetic identification" (O'Connell Davidson & Layder, 1994 p. 31), was considered necessary in this research adopting an interpretative framework in exploring students' meaning making surrounding digital intimacies.

All the group interviews constituted mixed-sex groups, which facilitated interesting discussions, particularly due to the gendered nature of some of the intimacy practices and online harms, as outlined in section 2.5.1. I originally considered single-sex groups; however, I did not want to prevent participation of naturally formed peer groups and/or existing romantic and/or sexual relationships and as such I was flexible in my approach based on when participants volunteered to take part. As such, I was able to observe co-constructed meanings in mixed-sex groups, which comprised of friends, romantic others and acquaintances, which is more reflective of students' ecologies. However, as a female researcher, I was also subsequently reflexive about my own gender, and potential role in shaping discussions with participants, as well as analysis. Whilst I recognised gender as an important underlying factor to consider, my approach was to instead focus upon the students' lived realities and co-constructed meaning, and subsequently, similarly to Setty (2018a), my aim was to avoid any censorship of experience, instead facilitating a non-judgemental environment conducive to open discussion across groups of students with varying intersecting identities.

Nevertheless, I am aware that reflexivity goes beyond a list of identifying characteristics to reflections on how as a researcher I engaged with and influenced the research and analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This idea of being a partial insider may have had positive influences upon my ability to build trust with participants (Robson, 2002), however I was also aware of the impact that this may have had on my 'taken for grantedness' of certain concepts (for example the frequent reference to hookups, discussed in section 2.3.3 and 4.3) which might have been important to unpack further. In addition, my own awareness of the negative rhetoric typically surrounds digital technology use amongst young people led to an active effort on my behalf to include questions addressing both opportunities and risks of digital technologies. I felt conflicted around students' discussions of breaches of privacy and the normalisation of these behaviours as it directly conflicted with my own perception of rights which may have led to additional probing or questions around their perceptions of this behaviour. Although this conflict felt uncomfortable at the time of interviewing, I felt this enhanced my analysis, as it enabled me to sit with dominant internalised narratives of, for example, tracking apps as 'control', to realise that their usage is a nuanced and complex experience for my participants, often conceptualised as, and symbolic of, 'care'.

Reflexivity is recognised as central to qualitative research. However, reflexivity is “neither an opportunity to wallow in subjectivity nor permission to engage in legitimised emoting” (Finlay, 1998, p. 455). Subsequently, I tried to balance my own subjectivities with the data collected, engaging in explicit reflection to identify how my own experiences, and the wider context of the research, influenced the process of data collection, analysis, and the participants experiences. As such, reflexivity is a key component of this thesis as a whole and is embedded throughout the sections that follow.

3.4 Research Methods

Research methods represent the “procedures and techniques involved in data collection, analysis and interpretation” (Gelo et al., 2008, p. 274). Subsequently, dependent on the research approach, the researcher must distinguish whether qualitative inquiry, with a focus on text and images, or quantitative inquiry, with a focus on numbers and statistical associations (or a combination of both), are most appropriate for the study design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As highlighted earlier in this chapter, qualitative methods were considered most appropriate to addressing the research aims of this study. Qualitative methods are broadly categorised into four groups of data collection: observations, interviews, documents, and audio-visual data (Holden & Lynch, 2004), all of which tend to lead to textual data forms for analysis.

Qualitative data was collected via five semi-structured focus group interviews, lasting between 60-90 minutes with 20 students at a UK university during 2019. After the announcement of the COVID-19 lockdown, students who were still based at the university or continued their studies at the university, were contacted to see if they would be happy to engage in a follow-up interview. These six individual interviews were conducted online via telephone or Zoom, depending on the student’s preferred platform, and lasted between 40-60 minutes. The purpose of these follow-up interviews was to identify whether COVID-19 had any impact on their experience and perceptions of using digital technologies in their intimate relationships, to revisit and reflect upon previous discussions, thoughts, and perceptions.

The selection of focus groups and online individual interviews was both a theoretical and practical decision. The combination of both focus groups and individual interviews has been used in qualitative research investigating digital intimacies amongst young people (see for example, Setty, 2018a). Furthermore, while such methods may not provide naturalistic observations of ‘real life’ scenarios of students’ everyday intimacies, both focus groups and interviews enable a complementary exploration of collective meaning making and socially situated practices, as well as how these are incorporated into personal lives (Silverman, 2024). Subsequently, this dual-method approach can facilitate a more nuanced understanding of

students' intimacy practices by enabling exploration of public and private narratives. Whilst it was not anticipated that individual interviews would be taking place online and would be occurring within a shorter timeframe after the group interviews, the increasing concerns related to COVID-19 led to project modifications which required further ethical approval. At a time in which audio-visual online qualitative methods were subsequently necessary, yet previously utilised sparingly due to concerns about their equivalent quality to in-person interviews (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022), this presented additional practical and ethical considerations (see section 3.3.2). Nonetheless, this approach enabled further investigation into students' intimacy practices during the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as highlighting any temporal relational changes associated with the liminality of university.

3.3.1 Focus Groups

Focus groups, developed by Merton and colleagues in the 1940s (Merton & Kendall, 1946), are a research method in which data is collected from multiple participants at the same time, typically centred around a topic for discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As Wilkinson (1998) highlights, focus groups, as a standalone method, can be used for exploratory inquiry, or to research existing questions or topics from the perspectives of a participant group. Subsequently, the primary aim of the focus group is to understand the meanings, perspectives, and interpretations of participants (Liamputtong, 2011). From a social constructionist perspective, focus groups are a useful and effective method for gaining further insight into collective sense making, as well as observing "how views are constructed, expressed, defended and (sometimes) modified within the context of discussion and debate with others" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 186). Subsequently, focus groups are more likely to reflect participants' perspectives and topics of importance, as opposed to the researchers. Focus groups are suggested to be more 'naturalistic', a means of observing social interaction processes in a more authentic context, in comparison to one-to-one interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

"A small number of such individuals, brought together as a discussion and resource group, is more valuable many times over than any representative sample. Such a group, discussing collectively their sphere of life and probing into it as they meet one another's disagreements, will do more to lift the veils covering the sphere of life than any other device that I know of." (Blumer, 1969, p. 41)

Focus groups have had a long historical application in understanding how people respond to media, for example in emotional reactions, attitude formation and social implication of radio programs and mass communication (Merton, 1987; Morley 1980). Lunt and Livingstone (1996) highlight how research moved away from focusing on determining causal influence of mass communication on individuals to how individuals make sense of media in their everyday lives.

As such, focus groups as a research method have the potential to (re)create subcultures of individuals connected socially in specific contexts, for example spontaneous family discussions of television (Libes & Katz, 1990). Frith (2000, p. 277) suggests that focus groups are a useful for exploring “under-researched topics”, can facilitate the researchers understanding of participants “language and vocabulary” as well as providing “conditions under which people feel comfortable” discussing sensitive topics such as sex. For example, researchers have utilised focus groups to explore how young people construct and experience sexting, highlighting how such approaches facilitate narratives that exemplify lived experience, with young people openly discussing the role of technologies in their sexual lives (Bond, 2010; Setty, 2019; Setty & Dobson, 2023a). As noted by Bond (2010), historically, understanding young people’s sexual experiences was typically explored via retrospective surveys, similarly, research exploring university students online and/or sexual experiences has been dominated by the use of online surveys (Haslop & O’Rourke, 2020; Myers et al., 2023). Surveys, however, may be less likely to reveal the diverse understandings and perspectives within a social network (Liamputtong, 2011). On the other hand, focus groups have the potential to uncover nuances in meanings, experiences, and perceptions of participants and how these reflect wider group and peer norms (Kitzinger, 2005).

Although focus groups were considered as the most appropriate method within this study, this form of qualitative interview is not without potential practical and ethical issues which needed careful consideration. Despite the idea of focus groups being more representative of participant-led ‘naturalistic’ interactions, Acocella & Cataldi (2020, p. 40) suggest that there is still potential for power imbalance, as the researcher has greater “knowledge and command of the research objectives”, as well as understanding of the qualitative method. Subsequently, creation of a safe, permissive environment was of great importance (Silverman, 2022), by creating a relaxed, informal context with my participants, building rapport at the outset of the discussion, establishing ground rules, and emphasising the nature of the conversations as safe and valued contributions to the research, I felt I was able to negate some of the potential power imbalances.

By highlighting my appreciation and value of individual contributions to the research (Stewart et al., 2007), I was also able to diffuse potentially difficult group dynamics, such as the inclusion of over-dominant voices as the expense of others (Wilkinson, 1998). Although the primary aim of the discussions was to facilitate a conversation amongst the students, I was able to moderate effectively by ensuring all members of the group had the opportunity to contribute without undue pressure, in their own time (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Subtle gestures, such as pauses, eye contact and body language were utilised to signal to more quieter members that their contribution is valued. Furthermore, participation was encouraged from the outset, by

engaging in informal dialogue prior to recording and asking all students to introduce themselves at the start of the session, so that everyone has the initial opportunity to speak comfortably.

Alongside the focus group schedule questions (*Appendix I*), open ended prompts were used throughout the discussions to enable participants to continue to steer the conversations (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Prompts, and questions, were iterative in nature, guided by the students' conversations and topics of interest, while still reflecting the aims of the research. As discussions developed, topics that were repeatedly explored in one or more groups were brought into subsequent discussions to facilitate the generation of a comprehensive picture of meanings and experiences that mattered to students. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2013) recommendations, focus groups were of a smaller size, between three to six participants in each, to facilitate the generation of rich discussions. All focus groups were conducted within quiet meeting rooms on the university campus in which the students were studying. Students were invited to participate via a method of their choice, either a focus group with other participants or a one-to-one interview for those who may have felt less comfortable discussing intimate topics amongst others. All participants opted for focus group discussions, potentially highlighting the unique features of a focus group in facilitating a comfortable environment for participants to discuss a topic of interest to their everyday lives (Frith, 2000).

3.3.2 Online one-to-one interviews

In addition to in-person focus groups, after the announcement of the COVID-19 lockdown, online one-to-one interviews were conducted with students who participated in the original focus group discussions. The purpose of these interviews was to identify any impact of the COVID-19 lockdown upon experience and perceptions of using digital technologies in their intimate relationships, as well as to revisit previous discussions, thoughts, and perceptions. While focus groups can highlight individual views, they also focus on collective perceptions, something which can be explored further in one-to-one interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Similarly to focus groups, individual interviews are conversations between the participant and the researcher, with the aim of uncovering experiences and perceptions whilst being responsive to the participants unfolding narrative (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Traditional face-to-face interviews were not possible as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions, subsequently students were given the option of taking part via a telephone interview, or an online interview via Zoom dependent on their preferred platform. Interviews via phone, instant messaging, or voice-over-internet protocol (VoIP) software, such as skype, have been utilised in social science research for many years (Hanna & Mwale, 2017; Howlett, 2022), however the shift to online working and study during the COVID-19 pandemic led to rapid adoption of

online software to conduct research fieldwork (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). Deakin and Wakefield (2014) suggest that online interviews should be treated as a primary research method, as opposed to an alternative when face-to-face interviews are not feasible. Meanwhile, others suggest that the quality of online interviews is questionable as a result of more limited non-verbal cues (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022) or interruptions resulting from technical issues (Howlett, 2022). Nonetheless, research has highlighted that there are limited differences in building rapport with participants, disclosure and sharing of personal experiences between face-to-face and online interviews via audio-visual software (Jenner & Myers, 2019). Audio-visual platforms, such as Skype, Zoom and Microsoft Teams facilitate synchronous exchanges which broadly replicate face-to-face interviews, establishing co-presence and instantaneous feedback (Howlett, 2022).

Despite the option for telephone, all students decided to participate using Zoom. Zoom, a videoconferencing platform, experienced significant growth in usage during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and has been used extensively for conducting research (Lobe et al., 2020). Prior to utilising Zoom, I considered a multitude of technical factors similar to those outlined by Gray et al. (2020) to ensure the interviews were accessible, whilst also ensuring appropriate functionality of the platform, including ensuring participants did not require an account to attend the interview, sending direct links for meetings to participants only and enabling local storage of recordings. Typically described as user-friendly, Zoom has also been suggested to be a preferred platform for many individuals in comparison to other alternatives, including face-to-face interviews, because of its accessibility and convenience (Archibald et al., 2019).

The students engaging in the online interviews had the option of turning their camera on or off during the conversations, this was not pre-specified but led by students during the call, most participants kept their camera off during the conversations and subsequently some of the interviews replicated traditional telephone interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Limited camera use by students may be reflective of wider norms predicating the early stages of synchronous teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). Whilst reduced visual cues have been highlighted as a disadvantage of online interviews (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022), other researchers suggest that there is no evidence to suggest data will be any less rich and may lead to the sharing of personal experience in greater depth (Novick, 2008). In my own interviews, I was not concerned with whether students turned their camera on or off, as I was aware of the potential concerns my participants may have, including potential discomfort in being videorecorded (Howlett, 2022), concerns about appearance, being able to identify physical locations or weak internet connections, all of which have been

highlighted in research investigating students camera use within online classrooms at university (Schwenck & Pryor, 2021; Castelli & Sarvary, 2021).

The students in this study were contacted via email if they had suggested they would like to be notified of further opportunities to participate in the research, 18 out of the 20 participants were contacted for a follow-up interview. Unfortunately, 10 of the students were no longer studying at the university or were uncontactable due to email addresses no longer being in use, and 2 students did not respond, however 6 of the original participants agreed to participate in a follow-up interview. In hindsight, obtaining an alternative email address, as opposed to only student email addresses, may have been helpful in maintaining contact with participants, particularly due to the liminal phase associated with university. Obtaining informed consent has been highlighted as a potential issue in conducting online research, some overcoming this via obtaining verbal consent at the outset of the interview as a separate recording, or signing electronic documents (Howlett, 2022). My participants were sent a copy of the consent form via email and asked to return an electronically signed copy, with an opportunity to ask questions via email and at the start of the call. Utilising online interviews as a method of qualitative inquiry enabled me to engage with the students at a time convenient for them, explore previously discussed topics, including re-visiting sensitive personal experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013) amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

My chosen methods of focus groups and interviews provided opportunities for lively discussion with students. As Ann Oakley (2010, p. 9) outlines, "...good social research which involves collecting data from other people is about listening and it's about focusing on topics of concern to the people who are providing you with the data.". I felt that the success of these methods was evidenced by the free-flowing conversation and engagement of students with the topic of interest (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Subsequently, detailed discussions of how students perceived the use of digital technologies in their everyday lives, with a focus on their intimate relationships, took place. The opportunity for a forum of open discussion, in a familiar context with peers and follow-up conversations with those already acquainted with myself and the aims of the research, I believe, enabled rich responses.

3.3.3 Participant Group

A broad non-probability purposive sampling approach was utilised, with elements of snowball sampling embedded to reach participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The aim of the sampling approach was to reach current students aged 18-25 at a UK university in the East of England, to generate "insight and in-depth understanding" (Patton, 2002, p. 230) of their use of technologies in their intimate relationships.

Participant criteria

The selection of students aged 18-25 as a participant group was purposive to meet the study aims. Students were selected as the study population as research has typically focused upon the risks and opportunities of the internet, mobiles, and the use of social media amongst children and young people under the age of 18 years (Amundsen, 2019; Henry & Powell, 2018). A lack of research has considered the mediating role of mobile technologies and social media in interpersonal relationships amongst emerging adults, despite evidence highlighting that it is those aged 16-24 who are more likely to experience online risks, such as harassment, predominantly on social media platforms (Kantar Media, 2018; Davidson et al., 2019). The study of intimate relationships among university students, 64% of whom are aged 18-24 (HESA, 2024), has the potential to illuminate wider understanding of the use of digital technologies in intimate relationships within this population. Furthermore, the increasing regulatory focus within UK higher education institutions upon addressing and preventing harassment, sexual misconduct, and online harassment (OfS, 2023a, 2024a; UUK, 2016; 2019c) means this population is of increasing interest to policymakers and researchers, in which the evidence-base for UK students' experiences of technology-mediated opportunities and risks is more limited.

The institution in which the students were recruited is a small to medium sized university in the East of England, UK, and is recognised for its high percentage intake of students from low participation neighbourhoods (OfS, 2023b). As a result of the qualitative exploratory nature of this research, comparison of students across other higher education institutions was considered inappropriate. Apart from being a current student at the site of fieldwork and being aged 18-25, no other selection criteria (e.g., sexuality, currently in an intimate relationship) were implemented as I was interested in the broader overall experiences of students. Whilst some students disclosed their sexuality, disability, and relationship status during interviews for example, disclosure of this information was not a requirement of the study. However, I acknowledge that some individuals with intersecting identities are likely to be at greater risk of online harms. For example, students from the LGBTQ+ community are likely to have varying and different experiences to heterosexual and cisgender individuals, such as a higher likelihood of experiencing technology-facilitated violence (Powell et al., 2020). Research also suggests that student samples in social research may also by nature, be unbalanced, for example with a greater number of female participants (Dickinson et al., 2012), however I was fortunate to engage with a range of students with varying experiences and diverse perspectives.

Recruitment, access, and gatekeepers

Advertisement for the study took place across a multitude of mediums and platforms. I used university branded digital and print materials to advertise the study on social media, including the university's Facebook page, via the student union Facebook page, and via my own personal social media accounts on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. I also utilised print materials to advertise on campus, placing posters on information boards and the back of toilet doors, placing flyers in student communal areas, and printing out small business cards with my student contact details for interested participants. In addition to the above, I approached gatekeepers with direct student contact, including academics and student union liberation officers. Gatekeepers are defined by Silverman (2022, p. 601) as "someone who is able to grant or refuse access to the field". I asked academic staff with teaching responsibilities to share my study advertisement materials on the virtual learning environment module areas for their respective courses. Negotiating this access with academics was simplified, as I had a relationship with some members of staff as colleagues and supervisors at the institution (Silverman, 2022), however they were predominantly based within the social science and humanities disciplines. Advertisement via academics teaching students at the institution may have increased the students trust in the research project (Bonisteel et al., 2021), but it is also important to be mindful of potential power dynamics and subsequent ethical implications (as discussed further in section 3.5). Consequently, I made sure that academic staff, if any students highlighted an interest in taking part, would ask the students to contact myself directly and reassure them that there would be no negative implications of declining involvement in the study. In addition to being conscious of the importance of making research participation voluntary and accessible, I was aware that most students were not in lectures on a particular afternoon in the week at the institution in which the study took place. Subsequently, to increase the chance of participant availability, I scheduled focus groups during these times initially, later working around students' availability to enhance recruitment efforts (Bonisteel et al., 2021). Indirect snowball sampling was also utilised via contact with student union liberation officers. Snowball sampling, often combined with purposive sampling, is a helpful technique to recruit via communication through social networks to reach new participants, although not without risk of selection bias (Parker et al., 2019). Student union liberation officers are typically current university students themselves, and some participants were directed to the study via these individuals.

Participant composition

It has previously been suggested that qualitative studies require a minimum sample size of at least 12 to reach data saturation, however qualitative research, instead of focusing on sample size, focuses more so on the quality, depth and meaning of participant narratives and can include anything from 1-2 participants to large studies with 60 participants (Clarke & Braun,

2017). Nonetheless, guidelines produced by Braun and Clarke (2013) have been followed, with 5 focus groups conducted, with a total of 20 students. A total of 20 students engaged in in-person focus group discussions with the researcher in 2019. Students were aged between 18-25, with an average age of 21. Groups were mixed sex, with 9 females and 11 males participating in the discussions. Most students were White British ($n = 12$), with 6 students identifying as White Other and 2 students identifying as Black British. Students were from across all levels of study, with 10 students in their first year, 6 students in their second year, 3 students in their third year and 1 PGR student. Six of the students, who were still at the university, were followed up in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3.4 Data management and storage

Focus groups were conducted on the university campus in a quiet meeting room, with audio voice recordings collected via a Dictaphone. Audio files were stored securely via OneDrive, transcribed verbatim and anonymised. After secure storage, recordings were deleted from the Dictaphone. Individual interviews were conducted via Zoom during lockdown, with students who indicated at the initial focus group that they would be interested in future opportunities to participate in the research. Prior to utilisation, I made sure the online platforms would be compliant with EU GDPR regulation (Lobe et al., 2020). Audio-visual recordings were captured via Zoom and stored locally on my own password protected laptop, audio files only were subsequently retained. I was aware of the University of Suffolk's protocols for primary research data retention and storage and adhered to these guidelines. Research data was stored via OneDrive on the University of Suffolk secure server. A spreadsheet linking student names and demographics to pseudonyms was stored securely in OneDrive and password protected. Data will be stored securely as above for up to 12 months after the completion of the PhD and subsequently deleted.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research involves a process of making sense of the data collected, covering a spectrum from more descriptive to interpretative forms of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Miles and Huberman (1994) describe qualitative analysis of consisting of three parallel processes: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification. These processes broadly reflect the transformation of data, compression or displaying of information succinctly and the refining and verification process of the researchers' iterative conclusions. Transcription is a key part of the data reduction and display process. In this study, ahead of analysis, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim into a word document after each data collection phase. Whilst manual transcription is a time-consuming endeavour, the

transcribed data is much easier to process and provides an opportunity to establish enhanced familiarity with the dataset (Denscombe, 2021). My subsequent analysis relied significantly upon thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022), a method of analysis facilitating epistemological flexibility (Coolican, 2018), for this thesis that is underpinned by an interpretative, social constructionist framework that also recognises the significant role of technology, objects, and non-human networks.

3.4.1 Thematic Analysis

The analysis of data was based on the thematic analysis (TA) method developed, and later expanded on, by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). TA is defined as a “method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 4). It is positioned as a flexible analytic approach that can be applied within a multitude of epistemological, ontological, and theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The key difference between earlier conceptualisations of Braun and Clarke’s TA and their later expanded upon reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), is the emphasis on “researcher subjectivity as a resource for research” (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 2), and subsequently qualitative findings are inherently interpretive, subjective and require researcher reflexivity (as explored in section 3.6). According to Braun and Clarke (2022; 2021a), RTA can also be applied to answer several different research questions within the qualitative paradigm, from understanding experiences, how individuals made sense of phenomena, views, perspectives, behaviours, or social processes that influence norms, rules, and meanings. Subsequently RTA is particularly suited to the current project, enabling an “accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach” (Byrne, 2022, p. 1392), which allowed me to explore HE students’ experiences and perceptions of digital intimacies and their associated meanings linked to my research questions, respecting the subjectivity of participants, whilst also embracing my own interpretations.

Developed as one of several iterations of TA, RTA diverges from other forms of TA which centre around codebook and/or coding reliability approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2021a), such as framework analysis (Smith & Firth, 2011) and template analysis (King and Brooks, 2017) by placing less focus on intercoder reliability, objectivity and pre-defined or anticipated themes (Byrne, 2022), and more emphasis upon the researcher’s creativity and subjectivity as tools to facilitate theme development. Subsequently, RTA gained popularity due to its diversity and flexibility in research applications, however according to Braun and Clarke (2021a), the method has been utilised in ways inconsistent with the conceptual and design assumptions underpinning RTA, for example notions of objectivity and reliability in analysis. Consequently, throughout the process of analysis, I made sure to remind myself of the conceptual assumptions of RTA, and whilst I broadly followed the six phases of analysis outlined in Table

3, I was flexible and fluid in my approach, recognising that analytic approaches need not be ‘followed precisely like baking recipes’ (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 2).

Table 2: *Six-phase process of (reflexive) thematic analysis (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 86-93, 2022, pp. 35-36)*

Phase	Descriptive features of the process
1. Data familiarisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribing data • Reading and re-reading of the data • Making notes/personal memos of analytic insights • Researcher reflexivity
2. Data coding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working through the data set systematically, developing codes for segments of data • Every time there is something of interest in the data, a decision should be made whether to use an existing code or create a new one • Implementing numerous rounds of coding so that ‘coding drift’ is counter-balanced • Prepare for theme development by compiling a list of all codes and the attendant data excerpts
3. Initial theme generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stepping back from the minutiae of the data and think about the broader patterns that capture shared meaning • Collate and cluster together codes that relate to a particular idea or concept • Compile all data extracts associated with all codes relevant to each candidate theme
4. Developing and reviewing themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking for fit between candidate themes and coded data (Level 1) • Checking for fit between the candidate themes and the entire dataset (Level 2) • Generating a thematic ‘map’ of candidate themes and identifying the relationships between them
5. Refining, defining, and naming themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme • Demonstration of the patterned nature of the themes by drawing widely from across the dataset
6. Writing up thematic analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of ‘evidence base’ from the data – using vivid, compelling examples – combined with the analytic narrative that locates and ‘answers’ the research questions. • Production of a research report that explains, locates, and contextualises the analysis in relation to existing theory and research.

3.4.2 Data familiarisation and coding

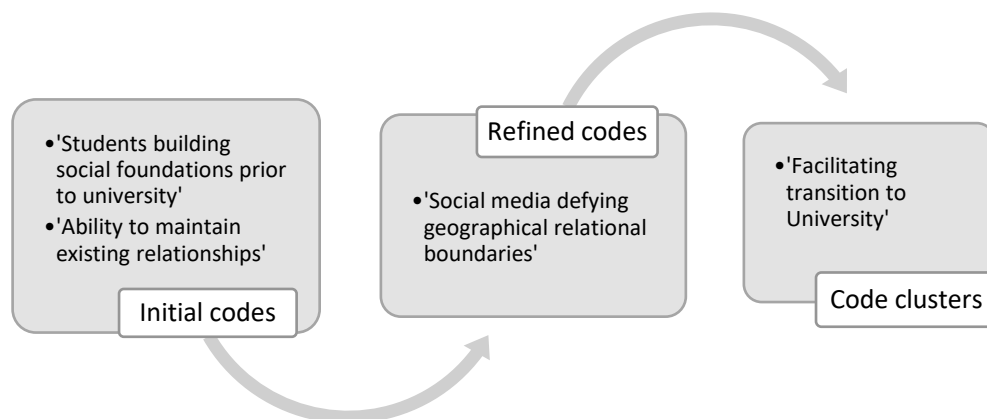
The process of data familiarisation starts during the process of transcription, as you can get “close to the data” (Denscombe, 2017, p. 307), immersed, and familiar with the qualitative dataset. Following transcription, a systematic exploration can commence with re-reading data, critical engagement with the data, note-taking and subsequently coding to highlight segments of meaning relevant to your research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I initially engaged in a process of listening to audio files, reading, and re-reading my transcripts, printing paper copies and highlighting segments of the data I thought were of interest or potentially relevant to my research questions. I created analytic memos for each transcript, starting with focus groups so as to be familiar with these prior to individual interviews, reflecting on participants narratives, as well as my own position as the researcher. For example, whilst engaging with the first focus group transcript I noted how students often referred to shared feelings regarding the implication of platform affordances in enabling feelings of closeness whilst at a distance. I subsequently created overall analytic memos for the dataset, highlighting for example the frequently referred to dual, but contradictory, function of online platforms in students’ intimate relationships. My familiarisation notes at this stage were as such, primarily inductive and descriptive in nature, reflecting on overall patterns and shared meanings across the dataset.

After preliminary familiarisation with the dataset during Phase 1, I began Phase 2, the coding process. Codes are “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). Coding is a process of labelling and categorising in the early stages of analysis (Flick, 2023), “conceptualised as an analytic unit or tool, used by the researcher to develop (initial) themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 340). During the initial coding phase, I developed predominately semantic codes attributed to students’ direct meanings, retaining an experiential orientation to data interpretation. I was conscious of ensuring that within this research around experience of students’ use of digital technologies in intimate relationships, I used an inductive approach, particularly during the early phase of analysis to emphasise meaning ascribed by students. Although coding was primarily semantic, as I was interested in students’ direct constructions and meanings, as the coding evolved during refinement, I was able to attach more latent coding which reflected my own interpretations of meaning underpinning what the students were describing. As a result, the coding process featured exploration of meaning across a spectrum of semantic and latent, moving between identification and interpretation in a reflexive and recursive process (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; 2021b). The codes produced reflected the (social) constructionist approach and ANT lens adopted in this study, highlighting latent participant meanings which are shaped by both social relationships and non-human agents. For example, maintaining trust in intimate relationships which were characterised by long

distance for students was conceptualised as being both socially negotiated as well as materially mobilised and shaped through online platforms, with coded examples such as ‘long-distance relationship trust maintained through frequent communication via online platforms’ and ‘co-presence enabled via online platforms despite physical distance’.

Whilst coding, I moved from the use of paper copies of transcripts with margins for notetaking, to using the comments function on Microsoft Word. The initial coding was conducted for all focus groups and individual interview transcripts, I then moved from initial coding to a second round of coding in which I had a more focused approach – keeping in mind the research question, being more reflexive but also undertaking more critical engagement. During this coding phase, I started from focus group five and worked backward, so as to not be in familiar flow with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). After I had coded the focus groups, I started on the associated individual interviews to ensure I was capturing any similar or different ideas and perceptions from individuals engaging in the focus group discussions. The process of coding was iterative, engaging in the initial coding, which led to more refined codes and eventually code clusters (Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Thematic Analysis: Example of initial and refined coding*



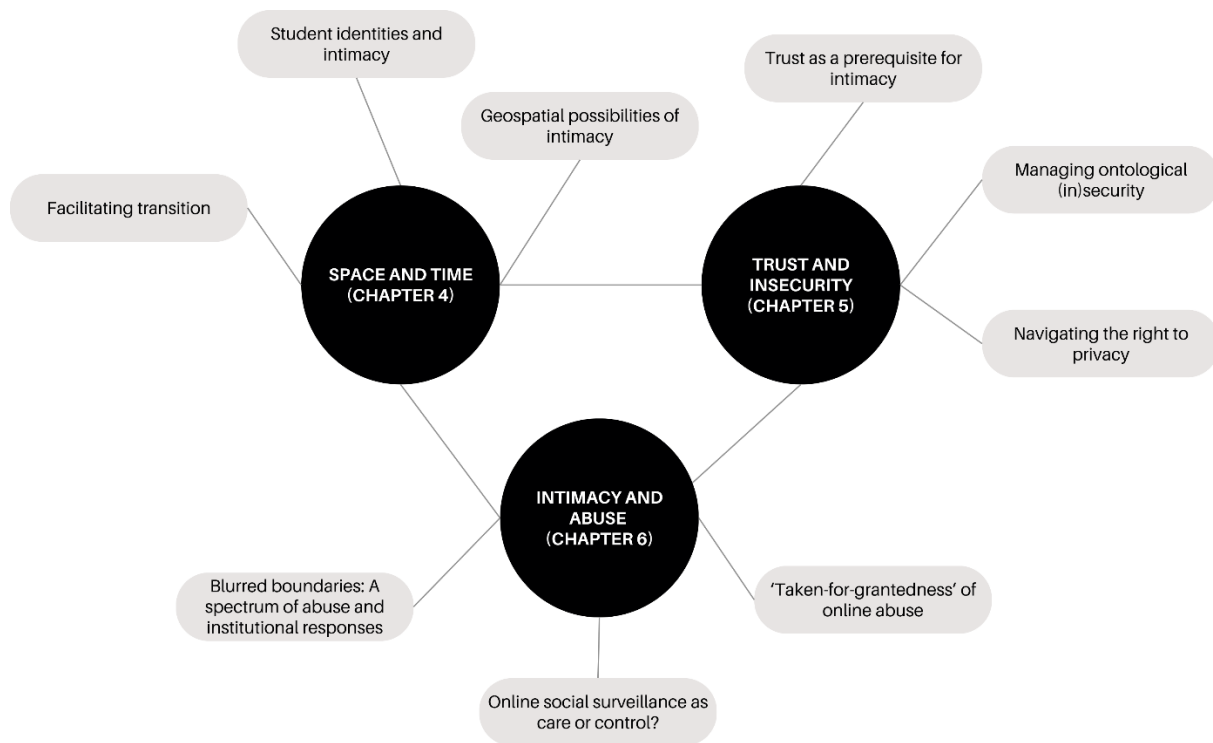
3.4.3 Theme Development

Themes encapsulate codes revolving around a central concept, they must capture data unified by shared meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2022), and subsequently, themes are “an outcome of coding... not something that is, in itself, coded” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 14). During the process of initial theme generation (Phase 3), I exported all codes to an excel spreadsheet, with the associated data extracts, this helped me to identify whether there were any overarching concepts. It was clear from the transcripts for example, that there would be a theme around trust, as this was frequently cited by students in the context of digital technology use in intimate relationships. At this point, it was important to revisit the data and refine the candidate themes

further. Due to the depth of the data collected, initially I struggled to narrow down themes and focus on the most important concepts constructed via my codes and code clusters, leading to thirteen themes, centred around four overarching themes. Subsequently, I entered Phase 4 of analysis, developing, and reviewing themes organising within a thematic map to identify the strongest potential themes and subthemes within them. As a result, Phase 4, and Phase 5, of RTA were largely engaged in recursively, moving back and forth between developing, refining, and naming themes, ensuring all themes were distinctive, with clear focus and boundaries (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I refined initial themes further by reflecting on whether these represented disparate ideas or overlapping organising concepts, for example 'access and monitoring as care and surveillance and 'tracking' were combined to 'online social surveillance as care or control?' to highlight the dual functions of online platforms in students' intimacy projects within one theme.

The final overarching themes and themes arising from my analysis are presented in Figure 4, these themes represent an in-depth narrative, drawing meaning from student voice, both latently and semantically, providing contextual, intrapersonal, and interpersonal themes which provide an overall depiction of how students perceive and experience digital intimacies in the context of higher education. The overarching themes provide structure for the analysis, but also represent dual and interrelated concepts which reflect students' narratives. For example, space and time is a reference to the spatial and temporal boundaries which underpin students' constructions and experiences of digital intimacies in higher education. For example, students referred to the ability to negate spatial boundaries during transition due to connections with prospective and existing students via online platforms, intimacy projects were therefore made possible even prior to arrival on campus. In line with recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2013; 2022), themes are explored within the finding's chapters of this thesis, synthesised, and contextualised alongside existing research, presenting an analytical reporting style combining findings and discussion. Theme summary tables are presented within the introduction of each findings chapter.

Figure 4: Thematic map of themes generated during analysis



3.6 Ethical Considerations

The consideration of ethical issues is pivotal to the conduct of research with integrity, particularly when involving the study of human participants (Silverman, 2022). Researchers have a duty and responsibility to develop ethical awareness, reasoning, and behaviour when engaging in research practice (BPS, 2021). Ethical considerations are paramount to all aspects of the research process, from study design, collection, and analysis of data to dissemination of findings (BERA, 2018).

Throughout this project, the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021), Code of Human Research Ethics (Oates et al., 2021) and Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research (Kaye et al., 2021) were utilised as guidelines, alongside the British Sociological Society Statement of Ethical Practice (2017) and British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2018). Underpinned by key values and principles in the changing landscape of research, the BPS (Oates et al., 2021) outlines the following overarching principles for conducting ethical research:

- Respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals, groups, and communities
- Integrity

- Social Responsibility
- Maximising benefit and minimising harm

Furthermore, central to a multitude of ethical codes of practice in social science research (UKRI, 2023), are the following general principles which will be addressed in the subsequent sections:

- Voluntary participation
- Informed consent
- Rights to withdraw
- Confidentiality and anonymity
- Managing risks
- Protection from harm

A detailed application was submitted to the University ethics committee prior to conducting the research. Data collection for individual interviews required a further application to the committee to notify them of the alterations to data collection methods as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The application broadly outlined the research design, how I as a researcher would mitigate any risks, safeguard the welfare of participants, and ensure processes and procedures were in place which addressed respect, dignity, and the rights of participants (Flick, 2023). The process of applying for ethics facilitated further development of my understanding of the ethics of research, and qualitative research more specifically. Qualitative research often involves complex moral and ethical decisions and considerations, which requires recognition of potential power imbalances, and considerations around how we interact with and represent participants in data collection and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a), which requires understanding of ethical principles, as well as researcher flexibility.

“Ethics must be both a compass as well as a guide. When dealing with human subjects, unanticipated things will happen.” (Granholm & Svedmark, 2018, p. 506).

Development of ethical awareness was integral to this project, I was able to build upon prior experience of researching with young people in different contexts, reflecting upon the ethical complexities of participatory and online research with young people (Tyrrell, 2023; Tyrrell, Snee, 2022). For example, in research I have conducted alongside young people in schools (Tyrrell, 2023), the dilemmas of agency and consent when researching within a context managed by gatekeepers, and the ethics of perceived inaction resulting from research findings, influenced the research presented in this thesis, as well as my general understanding of the complexities and importance of ethical research. Reflexivity, in the context of this thesis

and previous research, was a core component of developing ethical awareness. Being critical about the ways in which I have engaged in research was central to developing my understanding of the importance of integrity and virtuous conduct of ethical research (Carpenter, 2018) and developing an empathetic understanding of participants position (Weber, 1964). I outline below, how approaching the research with sensitivity, fairness, awareness of potential harm and respect for my participants was central and intentional within this project.

3.5.1 Informed consent

As a primary principle in research ethics, informed consent is fundamental to participants decision to partake in a research project. As a precondition, informed consent should be underpinned by ensuring participants have access to all information required to make an informed decision, are aware that participation is voluntary, and aware of the potential benefits and risks of participation (Oakes et al., 2021; Flick, 2023). Prior to conducting the focus groups with students, participants in my study were provided an electronic copy of the participant information sheet via email, after which they could ask questions ahead of the session and at the start of the session if they decided to participate. Provision of information prior to the focus group was considered imperative, to ensure potential participants were aware of the topic of group discussion, as well as highlighting the importance of respecting other participants confidentiality due to the group context (Acocella & Cataldi, 2020). Paper copies of consent forms were provided and collected on the day of the focus group. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, individual interviews took place online. Thunberg and Arnell (2022) suggest that additional considerations may be necessary when seeking consent from participants online, for example, whether to obtain consent on electronic documents, recorded verbal consent or email consent. I opted for asking participants to electronically sign consent forms once they had an opportunity to read and digest the participant information sheet and ask any subsequent follow-up questions. Although obtaining informed consent prior to the interview process is important, I view informed consent as an iterative process. Subsequently, throughout focus groups and interviews I was conscious of ensuring that students felt able to stop the interview at any time or choose not to respond to questions they did not wish to answer.

3.5.2 Right to withdraw

In addition to voluntary participation, I ensured that my participants were aware that they had the right to withdraw or modify their consent at any time up to two weeks after the interviews had taken place. The withdrawal period outlined was put into place to ensure that participants had a period of time to change their mind after participation, but also so that the interviews

could be transcribed and anonymised after this period. Braun and Clarke (2013) highlight how providing participants with the right to withdraw at any point in the research process is difficult for researchers utilising focus group methods, due to the interactive nature of the data. Subsequently, I made sure participants were aware of this period, to uphold their rights, but also to ensure that withdrawal at a later stage did not impact the analysis of focus group data which relies heavily on the conversational nature of discussion, shared meanings, and interpretations (Liamputtong, 2011). None of my participants withdrew from the research.

3.5.3 Fairness and sensitivity

The overarching ethical principle of respect was adhered to throughout the research process, with a particular focus on respecting “the knowledge, insight, experience and expertise of participants and potential participants” (Oates et al., 2021, p. 7). As a result, I was mindful of my sampling approach, being broad and inclusive to capture as many diverse student voices as possible, to respect their potential and actual contribution to my research. Although many research projects investigating intimate relationships focus on identifying sexualities or genders, I deliberately refrained from including demographic variables such as these into my inclusion criteria, with the awareness that excluding some groups could cause further marginalisation (Holden & Lynch, 2004). To further promote fairness in my approach to the research, I was conscious about the impact of engaging in this research might have upon my participants learning experience. Subsequently, I arranged focus group interviews outside of teaching periods, within the university campus, so that the location was familiar and easily accessible. Moreover, aware that the topics of conversation could be sensitive in nature, I was flexible in when online interviews took place, working around the students timetable and availability, as well as when they could identify a space in which they were happy for the interview to take place with minimal interruption.

Sensitive research has been described in a multitude of ways, for example, as research which may pose a threat to the individual (Lee, 1993) or as research topics “which delve into the acutely personal about someone, or that someone experiences” (Silverio et al., 2022, p. 2). I was aware that asking students about their use of digital technologies in their intimate relationships could be identified as sensitive research. Although some researchers highlight the positive experience of participants engaging in research around sensitive topics (Corbin & Morse, 2003), there are nonetheless potential risks to participation that need to be considered. Engaging in interviews around sensitive topics could lead to participant distress or discomfort, due to the disclosure of personal information. According to Corbin and Morse (2003) the utilisation of qualitative methods, such as more unstructured discussions and interviews are one way of ensuring that participants are central to telling their stories and have more control over the interview process. In approaching my research sensitively, I ensured that I adapted

the discussions and interviews according to my participants needs by remaining responsive, building in time to develop rapport, listening empathetically, steering conversation if leading to discomfort or facilitating ways for participants to take a break (Mitchell & Irvine, 2008).

3.5.4 Anonymity, confidentiality, risk, and safeguarding

Ensuring participants have the rights to confidentiality and anonymity is a key component of ethical research (BERA, 2018), with the two closely interlinked, as anonymity is one of the fundamental ways in which confidentiality is implemented (Wiles et al., 2008). Anonymity in qualitative research is generally addressed via pseudonymisation, in which participant names are “substituted by unique identifiers that are not connected to their real-world identity” (Flick, 2023, p.127). However, Wiles et al. (2008) highlight how in qualitative data the process of anonymisation is not straightforward, particularly when researching in specific communities or contexts, or when investigating individuals’ idiosyncratic stories. In this project, all participants were allocated a pseudonym, any additional indirect identifying information, such as a location or name of other individuals discussed, were removed from transcripts. Confidentiality and subsequent anonymity within qualitative research utilising focus group interviews has also been highlighted as a potential risk, due to the group setting, consequently it is possible that other group members could share information about the discussion (Acocella & Cataldi, 2020). All participants in this research were reminded to respect one another’s confidentiality both during and after the focus group interviews (Liamputtong, 2011).

The potential risks regarding participant confidentiality and anonymity were part of the risk identification and management process. One potential identified risk which needed to be addressed sensitively and carefully was the possibility of disclosures or distress during data collection. To manage the risk of participant discomfort or distress as a result of discussing their experiences within intimate relationships, I endeavoured to create a safe, relaxed and comfortable environment (Silverman, 2022), in which participants were aware of their right to withdraw, ability to stop the interview at any time, facilitating breaks if needed and approaching the research in a sensitive way as previously outlined. After each focus group or interview, I provided debrief information, in which participants had access to links to internal and external support should they require it after participation.

Following the principle of a duty of care to students in HE, I was aware of the safeguarding policies and procedures, and how they might be utilised in the context of this research. It was deemed necessary, given the potential discussions held around intimate relationships, and subsequently where these might elicit conversations around abusive behaviours, for example experiences of image based sexual abuse, that the appropriate safeguarding protocols be followed. Exceptions to participant confidentiality centred around the reduction of harm to

participants. If I considered participants to be at harm as a result of what was discussed, or others were in harm, it was considered necessary to contact the designated safeguarding lead at the institution. Participants were made aware of the exceptions to the rule of confidentiality prior to data collection and during the interviews themselves.

During the focus groups, one topic of discussion surfaced in which the students' expressed concerns about the behaviour of another student who was considered to be engaging in harassing and inappropriate behaviours toward multiple students online. The students had highlighted that this had been raised with the Student Union, however they were unsure as to what happened thereafter, and believed that the Student Union was in discussion with the institution. Shannon (2022) highlights the contentions between safeguarding and agency in conducting research on sensitive topics, suggesting that safeguarding procedures are typically at odds with facilitating participants agency within the research process. After the focus group had come to a natural conclusion, I made the students aware that they could report their concerns to the University safeguarding team and expressed that I felt it necessary to inform the safeguarding team of the discussion if they were happy for me to do so. Ensuring the students had some control over whether the discussion was shared was considered necessary, but also important for their agency in the safeguarding process (Shannon, 2022). Consequently, as I was aware the Student Union and possibly the university were aware of the situation, and the students were likely to approach the university again, I contacted the safeguarding team to let them know the discussion had taken place, retaining participants confidentiality, but to make them aware of the concerning behaviours and potential future contact from students.

3.7 Conclusions

The contents of this chapter reflect my methodological decisions which informed the research and the subsequent findings. Utilising a social constructivist paradigm which further recognises the role of technologies and more broadly, non-human actors, is central to understanding how students experience the use of digital technologies in their intimate relationships whilst at university. Subsequently, adopting qualitative methods was necessary in recognising and unpacking the complex socio-technical contexts that students inhabit, developing a deeper understanding of experiences and constructions of meaning via focus groups and interviews. A primarily inductive and experiential qualitative inquiry was deemed necessary, due to the limited research exploring university students' digital intimacies in a UK HE context, as outlined in Chapter 2. Analysing the data using Reflexive Thematic Analysis offers theoretical flexibility, as well as recognising my own role in shaping the research process. Analysis involved an inductive iterative process of semantic and latent coding,

leading to the development of three overarching themes which reflect the apparent distinct yet intertwined concepts of space and time (Chapter 4), trust and insecurity (Chapter 5), intimacy and abuse (Chapter 6) and their intersection with students' use of digital technologies. As such, the following findings chapters are organised by these three overarching themes and their associated themes, interlinked with discussion around relevant theoretical concepts and conceptual literature. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of this research, developing strong ethical awareness was crucial, subsequently, I place significance upon a sensitive and fair approach to the research, respecting participants agency, rights to withdraw and anonymity, whilst being responsive to potential harm. Together, these methodological choices were shaped by the overall objectives of this project, which is to gain an in-depth understanding of higher education students' intimate relationships within hybrid ecologies.

4. Chapter 4: Space and Time

4.1 Introduction

This, the first of three chapters focusing on the qualitative data collected, seeks to set the context of students' described experiences and perceptions of digital intimacies. The overarching theme of space and time reflects the centrality of interlinking spatial and temporal references across students' narratives to describe their experiences of intimacy. As outlined in Table 3, this centres around three themes which highlight how students' experiences of digital intimacies, through hybrid ecologies of human and non-human actors, shape the spatial and temporal boundaries of university. Together, these findings highlight the multiplicity of space associated with students' experiences and practices of intimacy, both physical and digital, and how this is intertwined with the temporal dimensions of liminality associated with university.

Table 3: *Theme summary table for Space and Time findings chapter*

Theme	Characteristic
Facilitating transition	Online platforms create additional layers of space and time associated with university, enabling connection with others, irrespective of place, and subsequently, new, and existing relationships can be created, maintained, and extended. This has nuanced implications for students, creating opportunities for social connections whilst also managing an increasingly intertwined past.
Student identities and intimacy	Students' intimate interactions within a multiplicity of hybrid spaces provide contexts for identity development. These interactions are constructed via temporal references of maturation and university being 'the right time' to explore identity and sexual selves, with online platforms providing opportunities to engage in acts of intimacy and self-presentation, but also pressure and social comparison.
Geospatial possibilities of intimacy	Online platforms which afford geospatial possibilities of connections influence the experience of spatiality for students, moving beyond campus environments. However, despite the global geospatial possibilities afforded by technologies to meet intimate partners, students are likely to engage in intimacy projects with 'local' others, which is however, accompanied by its own perceived risks.

Our lives, and the accompanying spatial and temporal practices, are continuously shaped by, and with, technologies (Wajcman, 2022). As discussed in section 2.4, space and place have inherently been considered as two intertwined concepts, with limited temporal dimensions, as static, bound, and stable in nature (Massey, 1994). Nonetheless, as suggested by Giddens (1990), alternative conceptualisations of space and place are necessary to account for time-space distancing and the disembedding of individuals from their physical contexts. Massey (1994) suggests that this stretching of time-space is leading to compression, in which technological advancements facilitate a shrinking interconnected world in which information can be shared rapidly, connections fostered globally and altered perceptions of time, space and place. Instead, places and spaces are no longer constrained by physical boundaries (Massey, 1994). Furthermore, Massey (2005, p.9), considers spaces to be inherently social and subsequently dynamically constructed:

“Space is always under construction – space a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out as if always in the process of being made. It is never finished, never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as simultaneity of stories-so-far.”

Massey’s definition suggests that spaces have a significant temporal dimension, that two cannot be disconnected, with multiplicity being inherent in the continuous social construction of spaces. In line with this, the students’ narratives themselves suggest an experience of time as succession, as a movement from one stage of identity development to the next, but also as a process of navigating a multiplicity of interchangeable spaces, including their offline, online, local, and distant spaces in the journey to ‘becoming’ a student. Subsequently, the ordering of, and reference to, space and time in HE, both formally, via timetables, academic years, classrooms, virtual learning environments, and informally, via leaving home, transitioning into the new and navigating distant and close relationships across spaces, is important to consider (Stirling, 2014; Adam, 1995).

I also argue that the ordering of space-time, and its intersection with sociomateriality, is also important in understanding student identities and intimacies. In addition to, and closely intertwined with space, students’ lives are dominated by temporal references and narratives, from timetables to transitioning to new beginnings and the perhaps ‘liminal period’ of university life (Stirling, 2014). I also suggest, like Stirling (2014), based on the work of Adam (1995), that temporality of student experiences moves beyond clock and calendar time, and encapsulates norms and values associated with time based on the practices of those involved, for example “a new student should engage in the first week of university “freshers’ week” activities to ensure they meet new people and make friends. This is obviously not the ‘only’ way to behave

but the expectation and the norm nonetheless” (Stirling, 2014, pp. 40-41). In my research, the idea of university as being the ‘right time and space’ to explore social relationships and sexual identities was dominant, with a focus around students’ times of transition. In reflecting on students’ perceptions of transition, relationships, and technology, I take a broad approach, focusing on the students experience across all years of study and their individual narratives, acknowledging “the complexity and multiplicity of students’ lived realities” (Gravett et al., 2020, p. 1171) across changing space-time boundaries. In this chapter, I argue for a reconceptualisation of how we understand students’ everyday social realities, by specifically exploring their experiences of digital intimacies, in which the assemblages of socio-technical networks extend the traditional boundaries of university.

4.2 Facilitating transition

4.2.1 Building new connections

At the time of interviewing, half of the students I spoke with were in their initial year of study, with the remaining students in their second, third or even first year of PhD study, encapsulating a broad range of transitional experiences. All participants described how they had utilised online platforms, reflecting what Hobbs et al. (2017, p. 281) describe as an “intermediary in the search for companionship, love, sex and intimacy” (see Hobbs et al., 2017; p. 281), with other students, prior to their arrival at university, or during the first few weeks and months after arrival. Subsequently, as outlined in section 2.4.1, I focus on transition in the context of HE as primarily social, as opposed to solely academic, with students learning and developing an understanding of themselves within wider student cultures (Talbot et al., 2020; Dyer, 2020b) across hybrid spaces.

For the participants, online platforms facilitated networked connections, strengthening offline relationships (Pempek et al., 2009; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008), as well as enabling the formation of new friendships and romantic relationships (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008) enabled by physical (e.g., smartphone) and social (e.g., establishing peer networks) capital (Coleman, 1988). Subsequently, digital technology, when used “to communicate and coordinate with friends, relatives and organisations – near and far – is a tool for building and maintaining social capital” (Wellman et al., 2001, p. 451). Aligning with previous research, the students’ techniques to manage transition began prior to their arrival at university, seeking out social connections, information, advice and guidance on social media platforms and other digital platforms (Nehls & Livengood, 2018). Connection with peers via social media during the initial transition to university was thus an expected and essential part to their integration into university life. Many students discussed how they connected with others via institution-led

'new starters' pages on Facebook, as well as via peer-led WhatsApp groups created specifically for courses, societies, and events, as suggested by Emily and Rhys:

Emily (22, FG4): *'So, erm as with anything, I started university there was a chat forum, so you could talk to all these people you didn't actually know yet and it gave you an opportunity to meet them...'*

Rhys (21, FG2): *'The thing like for me it was group chats, here in the UK they're a lot more... so as soon as I came to uni, boom had a group chat for that, people on my course, boom, had a group chat for that, everyone had like thousands of group chats...'*

Emily refers to accessing a chat forum to connect with other people she had not yet met but were connected via their shared desire to study at the same university. In addition, Rhys describes the prominence of WhatsApp groups in UK HE culture, suggesting that in the very initial stages of integration into university life, social connection is paramount, and an easy way to connect with multiple others is via online platforms. These examples highlight the role of technology in facilitating the development of socio-technical networks during the early stages of university life, but also reflects the multiplatform reality of students' communication (Dyer, 2020b).

Later in our discussion, Emily described how Facebook was utilised to connect with other students living with disabilities, who were engaging in the early induction, a mechanism developed by the institution to support transition. The importance of opportunities to build social networks to support social capital in the form of information and knowledge of HE alongside social support for 'underrepresented' students has been highlighted previously (Mishra, 2020), with online platforms facilitating peer support for students with disabilities in particular (Eden & Heiman, 2011). Despite geographical distance, Emily was able to connect with these students, and build a social network prior to their first day at university.

Emily (22, FG4): *'The people that I hang around with on my course, I met on the early induction, so that's for people with disabilities and things, so we all had mental health issues so that's how we all met, so we got each other on Facebook, we could stay in contact, message each other before uni started, ask each other questions that were keeping us up at night, and then it was good for us on the first day, it was like I know you people, we're going to go in together, we have no idea what to expect it was like a support system that we already had built because we could build up that support system online. I was from [location], one from [location] and [location], so before that we wouldn't have been able to communicate, so it was good for us, because it relieved our anxieties about university.'*

With the increasing emphasis on widening participation for universities, initiatives to support students, in this case, students who disclose a disability, is of high importance, as it is recognised that these student groups are likely to face additional barriers during transition (Gillies & Pedlar, 2003). Aligning with previous research, Emily's last sentence also highlights the importance of connecting with other students to relieve anxieties related to the transition into university (Bewick et al., 2010). Extending these findings, and as I highlight throughout the analysis, for the participants, online platforms facilitate the development of 'strong ties' to seek both emotional and information support, as opposed to views of online platforms facilitating 'weak ties' for the predominant purpose of seeking information only (Krämer et al., 2021; Granovetter, 1973). In Emily's example, by engaging with the early induction process they were able to build and form peer connections that reaffirm identity, irrespective of geographical distance, reflecting the potential for digital technologies in enhancing transitional experiences for students who are disproportionately likely to experience barriers within educational settings.

Not only were the students interviewed seeking platonic relationships during periods of transition, but they were also seeking intimacy. Although studies reflect the importance of supportive romantic or intimate relationships on young people's identity and wellbeing (Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019), fewer studies investigate the intersection between educational transitional experiences and intimacy. It was clear from the interviews with students that university was considered as a place to seek intimacy, as a means of exploring identity, but also to establish social support networks. Furthermore, the process of seeking potential intimate partners was a socio-technical act in itself, as evidenced by Nathan and Paige below, both using Tinder during the early stages of their university experience to 'put themselves out there'.

Nathan (23, FG3): *'...it's difficult to find people, meet people rather, when you're on placements and just everyday life isn't it, and you can kind of sit on the sofa in the comfort of your own home and just try and match with people, it's kind of fun as well, if you get a few mates doing it you can compare or whatever.'*

Paige (19, FG2): *'I was having a bit of an issue with a re-occurring ex-partner and my friend was like that's it, I have had enough you're going on Tinder, and you're going to go and get yourself out there, because I had never really been around anyone else but him... And so, my friend had set me up a Tinder account and I got a bit addicted like oh I really like this!'*

Participants utilised online dating platforms as an intermediary to meet intimate others whilst at university, particularly during periods of transition. For Nathan, this was increasingly

important as a student studying a health profession and engaging with placement, in which he perceived there to be less opportunities to meet others. Similar findings are reflected in research investigating the wellbeing of students on placement, suggesting that students frequently cite the desire for additional opportunities to connect with their peers (Oates et al., 2020). For Paige, on the other hand, Tinder was used as means to move on from an ex-partner. Whilst both Nathan and Paige recount different reasons for initiating platform use, they both construct dating platform use as a social act. For participants, online dating created opportunities to bond over the practice of creating profiles and comparing 'matches', as well as having 'fun' all of which, according to Hanson (2020), is part of a process of defining and redefining dating apps as a normative part of student cultures. The utilisation of online platforms, and digital intimacies more broadly, are closely intertwined with students' peer networks, highlighting that not only are dating apps increasingly used to facilitate new social connections, but also reaffirm existing connections in hybrid ecologies.

During transitional periods, in addition to dating apps, participants described how social media was utilised as a mechanism to engage intimately with potential partners. The interchangeable use of online platforms for students' digital intimacies reflects ideas presented by Madianou and Miller (2012) in their theory of Polymedia. Madianou and Miller (2012) highlight the importance of moving away from investigating and understanding social use of singular platforms and their affordances, considering the collective use of a multitude of digital technologies. What is significant, and emphasised throughout this thesis, is that there are complex interrelationships across students' use of digital technologies, based on a wide range of platforms and their affordances. For example, Emily describes how, 'right at the beginning' of her university journey another student reached out to her via Facebook to connect intimately.

Emily (24, Interview): *'... there was a girl first year of uni, right at the beginning...we must have only talked twice in person. And then I'm sure she sent me a few messages on Facebook, but like they were very chatty. I don't know if that's again because of the communication barrier. But it never, we never really chatted or anything like that. And then I just got this message from her randomly telling me that she had a crush on me. And ever since that time that we talked in person, and she just wanted to let me know that she thought I was really nice. And that she had this crush on me...'*

Emily describes how the student who had initiated interaction with her in person, was more conversational online where there were reduced conversational barriers. As explored further in Chapter 5, Facebook may have also acted as a 'confessional' platform, enabling the disclosure of information that perhaps in person, may have been more difficult to manage, or

as Camila explained in a group discussion *'I guess some people are more open online, because it's easier than face-to-face'*. Online platforms in these instances subsequently provide students with both the temporal and spatial flexibility to engage with others (Dyer, 2020b) across contexts to facilitate new connections during transition into and throughout university.

4.2.2 Connecting with established others

Online platforms have been utilised by HEIs themselves to attempt to facilitate positive adjustment to university. By utilising platforms, such as Facebook, researchers have suggested that early online interventions successfully support transition by building connections with current staff, as well as enhancing identification with the university prior to formal induction (Meehan & Howells, 2018; Nehls & Livengood, 2018). Ribchester et al. (2013), using Ning, a social media platform, also suggested that via pre-induction social networking, students and staff were able to connect virtually, increasing familiarity despite geographical distance, as well as facilitating the development of new peer relationships prior to arrival.

For Maria, meeting and engaging with Oli online via the university new starters Facebook page was a way to connect with someone who was already a student at the institution, to seek advice, guidance and subsequently facilitate transition. The extract below clearly highlights how building social connections online can lead to intimacy, and for some, how platonic relationships can take on new romantic meanings in an online space.

Oli (21, FG1): *'She was about to come to the university...'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'I was finishing, he was first year, and I posted on the freshers Facebook group, and we started talking.'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'Yeah she started asking me questions, what it is like here, how is it, moving from there to here.'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'Yeah we were just talking about uni and everything and that was all because I was shy and then I realised that I started to like him, and thought I'll try, if it works it works, if it doesn't work... it's uni (laughs).'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'It was pretty risky because we didn't see each other at all so you don't know who you are talking too, even if it's a profile, it could be fake.'*

In addition to establishing relationships with new starters, it is evident here that students due to start at the institution may also be seeking out peers who are already embedded in the university community to support their own transition experience. As exemplified by Maria and

Oli, this appeared to also be of importance due to their shared experience of moving to the UK. Research frequently highlights how, for international students, social media contributes to the acquisition of knowledge, related to, for example, financial, health-related, and sociocultural change during the transition to university (Hofhuis et al., 2023; Hamid et al., 2016). Not only this, but Lin et al. (2012) suggest that Facebook use is strongly correlated with social adjustment for international students transitioning to university in the US, and that connections with other international students was important for enhancing social connectedness.

The discussion between Oli and Maria also highlights how forming relationships in online spaces prior to meeting in-person is constructed as risky, yet for Maria this is counteracted by the fact that university is a place to explore, seek intimacy and perhaps perceived as a culture facilitating additional social opportunities. The idea that university is a place enabling continuous development and social experiences which shape identity, fits appropriately with the notion of transition as prolonged period of time, as opposed to a short phase, for example, university induction week (Gale & Parker, 2014). For some students, building relationships online, moving between public new starters and society pages to more private personal spaces, was key in developing a sense of belonging, but also enabled the collation of information related to a new sociocultural context. The ability to build connections with peers or established students across online platforms extends university space-time (Stirling, 2014), it expands the pre-arrival period, highlighting the importance of student experiences prior to their arrival in the physical campus space.

4.2.3 From the mundane every day to the intimate: Maintaining relationships during transition

Regardless of relationship duration, students who were in a romantic relationship with someone described utilising online platforms to maintain contact with one another, sharing the mundane activities of everyday life, but also engaging in digital intimacy practices. Maintaining online communication was of considerable importance for students in relationships with someone outside of the campus community, or who was geographically distant. McGeeney and Hanson (2017) identified that technologies played an important role in maintaining partner intimacy amongst adolescents, predominantly by enabling the communication of desires via affectionate messages irrespective of time or place. For example, Callum described how WhatsApp was used as the main form of communication between himself and his long-term partner who was no longer studying at university. Callum and his girlfriend use WhatsApp to keep in touch throughout the week, before they see each other at the weekend in-person.

Callum (25, FG1): *'I think in terms of maintaining relationships, like I said me and my girlfriend kind of do our own thing, we still go out with our friends, do our own hobbies and stuff like that so it's not like, I think the use of WhatsApp and stuff is kind of like, it's less kind of stress and strain of having to see them every day or like, just cause we like to do our own thing, but we can still talk to each other, so when I have been with people before they kind of want to see me every day'*

For a couple of the male students across focus groups, the ability to communicate using online platforms relieved the 'pressure' and social expectation of frequent in-person meetings, facilitating distance whilst also maintaining intimacy. Research focused on intimacy practices amongst male undergraduates, asynchronous online communication reduces the awkwardness and 'performativity' associated with face-to-face intimacy (Roberts & Ravn, 2020). For Callum, being able to maintain his relationship by communicating via online platforms also meets his expectations of an interdependent relationship. For other students, digital technologies also offered the opportunity to connect with their long-distance partner, maintaining a sense of closeness despite physical distance, whilst engaging in the mundane activities of everyday life.

Amelia (19, FG5): *'He was away, so I called him pretty much every day and I was still here, and I was at uni until midnight, so it was a case of if I was here and he was away, we would just sit on the phone and go about our business... so it's like we're present.'*

Finley (20, FG5): *'So, whilst both of us had an evening free, it would be like call, you do your bit I'll do my bit, and it's like we're in the same room, it's all cute and fluffy...'*

Both Amelia and Finley describe how the co-presence affordances of digital technologies enabled them to feel present with their partner who is elsewhere geographically. Similarly to Madianou's (2016) concept of 'ambient co-presence', for both students, communicating, or not communicating and just simply being present synchronously, online or on the phone, was a way to enact intimacy and care. In these instances, technology facilitated connection during transitional phases of life, by offering stability, and perhaps less stress, in the form of connection with pre-established intimate partners. Interestingly, Brooks (2002) highlights that despite the common conception that young people tend to cut ties with established relationships when transitioning to HE, they also employ a multitude of techniques to maintain existing friendships. Such techniques included avoiding the topic of HE in conversation and concealing information regarding university choices and experiences during periods in which the equality of the relationship was being threatened by emerging sociocultural differences

(Brooks, 2002). While narratives around young people's relationships in university tend to be constructed as transitional, due to the way in which 'time' is conceptualised in adolescence and emerging adulthood as a period of ongoing development that 'happens' to them (Brooks, 2002), the students accounts in my study highlight that they are not passive recipients, but are active, utilising multifaceted techniques to maintain and manage existing intimate relationships across multiple spaces.

Research emphasises that online platforms facilitate transition by enabling connections with peers, staff, and an institution. However, what the students' narratives suggest here, is that digital technologies are used much more widely, to maintain existing relationships, perhaps changing the very nature of how we understand 'transition' in the context of HE. Therefore, based on the students' narratives, I argue that transition could be accurately conceptualised as a more gradual, multifaced process, elongating what was historically a phase associated with 'cutting ties' and a 'new start' to a space in which the past is much more intertwined with the present through hybrid ecologies. Aligning with Miller (2011, p. 191), online platforms subsequently enable "revitalization of the past potentially making orientation to the present more difficult", which might account for some of the conflicting feelings felt by students in this study who were maintaining long-distance, pre-established, relationships.

4.2.4 Negative first impressions

Despite the aforementioned opportunities associated with online platform use during the transition to university, participants also expressed associated risks. Students across focus groups referred to the expectation to be present on social media, but more specifically, to join peer-led WhatsApp and Facebook group chats during the weeks preceding, and during, induction. Camila and Emily discussed how in some instances, the use of WhatsApp and Facebook to connect with others at the university 'tarnished' their view of peers, or generated discomfort when connecting in-person.

Camila (19, FG4): *'Well, I got added to a Facebook group for people that were starting, but people just posted about what they were going to study, if they wanted to meet people...'*

Emily (22, FG4): *'Like what flats people were living in and stuff, so you can build a relationship before moving in?'*

Camila (19, FG4): *'Yeah, it didn't really work for me, I knew my roommate was there, but we didn't really talk, like we knew we were going to share a flat, but we didn't talk anyway, it was a bit weird...'*

Emily (22, FG4): *'So the new starters group that is on Facebook, they started this group chat, were you in that?'*

Camila (19, FG4): *'No, I didn't get added.'*

Emily (22, FG4): *'I was excited to meet all these people who wanted to do my course and all that happens is before lectures had even started, I was already annoyed at most of them... I don't know how old you lot are, but they were just these annoying like 18-year-old girls like bitching and being rude and laughing at things that were inappropriate and whining before uni had even started that it was hard, and I'm like dude you haven't even had your first lecture yet! So, it wound me up before I had spoken to them, so now I don't talk to them, they're probably perfectly nice people, but I didn't gel with them, otherwise I would have come to uni like oh hi nice to meet you all, whereas now I feel like I have a jaded view of them.'*

In contrast to the positive experiences expressed by Emily earlier in the discussion regarding focused online introductions, inclusion in large group chats negatively influenced her perception of peers prior to meeting them in person. Similarly, Camila describes how knowing her flatmate in advance via social media, and then not communicating with them in person, led to awkwardness and discomfort when moving into student halls. In both instances, first impressions mattered, with Emily and Camila describing experiences incongruent with their expectation of positive peer interactions during the initial transition to university. Furthermore, the conversation also highlights exclusion from online groups, which could contribute to feelings of ostracization during a period of change. Connecting with other via online platforms to support transition appears to be a fine balance between facilitating intimacy and tarnishing possible relationships before their opportunity to form, which contradicts the dominant narrative that technological solutions to facilitating transition are inherently positive upon social connection. Instead, the above narrative implies that, like Stirling (2016) suggests, students' perception, experience of and engagement with online platforms, and in particular, social media, will vary dependent on a variety of sociocultural factors, including their perceptions of how university students should behave and conduct themselves.

In a different focus group, Paige also reflects on her perceptions of a student WhatsApp group, and how the large group discussion was perceived negatively, facilitating peer-on-peer abuse in a public online space.

Paige (19, FG2): *'There was probably about 50 of us on there and it got erm just deleted because of the amount of arguments, we would be sitting in our lectures, and it would be going ping, ping, ping, people are bitching about each other, that person has just said that in a seminar but she's not in the group chat so they're going to bitch about her on the group chat, but then because there are so many people on it, her friends on it so she*

is telling them, it was just like going and going and people were bitching and I'm just like really.. and there were mature students on here, there was literally people from 18 to about 40 and they were all participating.'

In this instance described by Paige, students who are not privy to the group chat are subject to negative comments and abuse. Subsequently, as expressed by some of the students, the fear of ostracization or being 'out of the loop' (Lutz & Büttner, 2025) may contribute toward the perceived pressure to have a presence on social media platforms and be part of online groups. The students' narratives highlight "limitations to the usefulness of social media as a transitional tool" (Dyer, 2020b, p. 105) such as the possible negative implications of utilising group-based communication platforms as a mechanism for building and supporting transition. Understanding students' use and perceptions of online platforms as part of their social integration is important in understanding their broader sociocultural experiences, but also for informing learning and teaching practice, particularly as multiple studies investigate the use of WhatsApp and other messaging platforms for pedagogic purposes (Enakrire & Kehinde, 2022; Jordan, 2023; Manca, 2020).

Technology in the context of transition to and within HE facilitates temporal and spatial flexibility for students, enabling them to connect with prospective peers, new intimate others and maintain pre-established relationships. However, this same technology affording social opportunities, is also experienced, and constructed as being tied to risks of ostracization, insecurity and abuse. The narratives presented highlight the multitude of platforms students navigate when seeking intimate others, including online dating platforms, social media, and online forums, suggesting that a holistic, polymedia approach is necessary when investigating students' hybrid ecologies. Furthermore, in contrast to dominant perceptions that student transitions are brief, the students' collectively highlight an elongated transition to HE, one in which digital technologies are facilitating the intertwining of social new beginnings with pre-established pasts. I argue therefore that these shifting conceptualisations of transitional boundaries in increasingly 'digital universities' requires a reimagination of HE's temporal and spatial boundaries (Sheail, 2017). The conceptualisation of the social transition to university, and students' digital intimacies more specifically, as being shaped temporally and spatially with, and by, online platforms, has been explored so far. Next, I argue that as well as influencing the space and time boundaries of university, students' conceptualisations of identity is shaped by temporal and spatial references, constructed through digital technologies and sexual norms across socio-ecological contexts

4.3 Student identities and intimacy

4.3.1 Identity transitions and changing perceptions of intimacy

Identity, as aforementioned in section 2.2, is a notion studied extensively across disciplines and theoretical perspectives, commonly understood as “an internalized set of role expectations” (Simon, 2004, p. 23), shaped by experience. Self-identity is interwoven with relational processes, and “it is through relationships with others – friends, family and intimate relationships – that self-identity is constructed” (Bond, 2014, p. 119). Many students were reflexive about how their perceptions and experiences had changed over time in relation to their social contexts, from school, to college to university, suggesting a sophisticated awareness of their position in, and expectation of, relationships. Students’ continuous constructions of themselves, reflecting upon experiences in a multitude of different contexts, echoes Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) analysis of individualisation and identity development, with internal monologues to re-shape, restructure and validate the self.

For participants, the development of self-identity is a spatial and temporal reflexive process of social engagement within public structures, such as educational institutions, as well as public and private online platforms. Rhys describes how his perceptions of having an intimate partner has changed over time as he has developed in himself, partly as a result of his experience at university, but also as a result of ‘maturation’ and ‘becoming older’.

Rhys (22, Interview): *‘I’ve changed in my perspectives, and like, with my experiences and things I’ve found out about myself and other people and what makes me happy, I think, yeah, I think I’ve changed and that may partly have to do with the university. And like, the things that I’ve experienced, because of university but also maybe because I’ve just got older, when you’re older, you have a lot more expectation of almost being in relationships, or, you know, have a partner, whereas when you’re younger, it’s almost like, it’s okay to not have a relationship or to have two or three relationships within the space of two months.’*

In this instance, university, similarly to school and college, exists partially as an institutional frame for identity development (Kehily, 2009), but ideas of identity are also shaped by perceptions of age-related social norms. Rhys suggests that the expectation to be in an intimate relationship increases with age, and that the expectation is that these relationships become less transient in nature. It could also be implied that as well as an expectation for more ‘stable’ relationships in emerging adulthood, there is also perhaps a stigma attached to more transient relationships that were considered acceptable in adolescence. Rhys describes how he has found out about himself and what makes him happy, coinciding with ideas of

choice biographies and relationships to fulfil personal needs (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998; Giddens, 1992), however he also implies that he still feels restricted by social norms. This coincides with the idea that 'emerging adulthood' is centred on a dominant romantic discourse, a time of findings 'true love' prior to 'settling down' (Kehily, 2007; Arnett, 2000). While social relationships are evidently important to Rhys, and how he defines himself, it also appears to be the constant reflexivity (see Giddens, 1992) which is shaping and restructuring his idea of himself and subsequently his positioning in the context of intimate relationships.

The idea of changing perceptions during the transition between different educational institutions was also described by Amelia when we discussed digital intimacies. Amelia describes how the perceived stigma attached to sending intimate images has changed as she has moved from being a 'teenager' in school and college, or adult-regulated spaces, to 'a bit older' at university, where sending intimate images is considered as an important part of maintaining intimacy within a relationship, particularly if your partner is 'long-distance'.

Amelia (19, FG5): *'I think the one that jumps out at me is the difference between the stigma between sending pictures and sexting and stuff like that, when you're a teenager it's kind of like 'oh, don't get caught doing this because it's illegal if you're under the age of 16' and so it is always really like oh this person has done this, this person has done that, well actually as you get a bit older you know, if you're partner is away or you're not going to be able to see each other for a while, if you're long distance, then actually that can be quite a healthy part of it in keeping that flame going while you're not there...'*

Miles (25, FG5): *'Would you say that because of the technology or because your relationship has grown? Obviously being in college you could say that your relationships are quite new, it's the first time with somebody and you're a bit scared of the wider public opinion, but as you get older, and maybe in the case like your partner is going away, but maybe even you're a bit more older, wiser and comfortable in yourself you'll just be like oh yeah he's going to be away for 6 hours let's just give him a cheeky little..'*

Amelia (19, FG5): *'Yeah, I mean the first one is it doesn't bother me anymore, I think once you get older, you are so much more secure about it, when you're at high school and college, it's like omg boys are they going to spread it around, are they going to get leaked, whereas when you get older you kind of like grow up a bit and think most guys are pretty sensible so they're not going to do that, so it's just like every now and again a cheeky surprise!'*

Part of the changing stigma attached to sending intimate images, for Amelia, was also linked to the idea of maturing into an adult, an increase in self-confidence, as well as a reduction in harmful, stigmatised narratives around digital intimacy practices. Similarly to findings from Setty and Dobson (2024, p. 482), this could further reflect 'reproduced or reworked' meanings surrounding intimate image sharing as individuals move from adolescence to emerging adulthood. For participants, sending intimate images to potential partners, but also partners in more established relationships was a normalised element of forming and maintaining romantic intimacy, as well as a mechanism to explore their developing identities. The idea of sending intimate images, or sexting, as being a mundane normalised activity is in accordance with existing research (Roberts & Ravn, 2019), and reflects the integration of digital technologies as a fundamental part of student's sexual selves (Bond, 2014). Moreover, as discussed in section 2.3.2, online practices amongst young people and adults, such as consensual sexting, can facilitate positive, healthy, and shared closeness between two individuals in an intimate relationship, as well as an opportunity to explore self-identity and sexuality (Cooper et al., 2016; Setty, 2019; Amundsen, 2019). Subsequently, temporal changes in institutional social norms and conceptualisation of age and maturity have implications for students' constructions of self, as well as their perceptions and attitudes toward digital intimacies.

4.3.2 Developing sexual identities: The role of university

Researchers describe university as a space for ongoing transition and identity development (Tett et al., 2017), a place to build a 'leaner identity' (Christie et al., 2008), but also a context to explore other facets of identity expanding beyond the academy walls. There are several dominant constructions of the university student, including students as learners, consumers, citizens, future workers, and socialites (Brooks & O'Shea, 2021), and the facets of student identity development have been researched extensively. For example, student identity has been understood by Weidman (1989) as a process of socialisation in normative contexts via interpersonal relationships with peers and university staff, intrapersonal learning, and integration into HE. The process of student identity development via socialisation in online environments however is studied less extensively, despite the fact that digital technologies are ubiquitous and embedded in everyday life (Ling, 2012), something this thesis aims to explore further.

The student narratives suggest that intimacy is a mechanism to explore their identities as they enter different transitional periods in time, and it is of subsequent interest in this thesis to explore how 'becoming' a university student intersects with intimacy and identities. Online platforms were considered as a positive mechanism to explore sexual identity during the early

stages of university adjustment, providing intimacy without the confines of geographical proximity, especially for students identifying as LGBTQ+.

Corey (21, Interview): *'Well, I hadn't really had that sort of positive, social, and romantic experience that a lot of young people get during high school and college. And my sort of plan since I discovered I was gay was when I reach University I'm going to be more confident. And I'm just going to put myself out there... internet dating was one way that I could easily facilitate that.'*

For Corey, University was considered a goal for exploration of his sexual self. Later in our conversation, I asked Corey to expand on what he considered the role of technologies to be in this process:

Corey (21, Interview): *'Yeah, I would it sort of enabled me to transition between being that sort of socially anxious teenager that I was into a more outgoing person, it sort of enabled me to put a sort of physical wall of physical distance between the people I was talking to. And then I could use that sort of physical wall to just speak to new people. And then I can slowly sort of, I'm trying to think of the best way to describe it. There is this concept in psychology where you can sort of slowly, slowly, introduce a trigger that causes fear in someone. And you just slowly build yourself up to that big moment where you put yourself out there. In my case, you go on a first date with someone who you never even met. My sort of gradual steps with creating a Tinder profile and putting myself out there and making the first message. I just slowly built myself up to meet my partner and it worked really well for me.'*

The affordances of online platforms, such as Tinder or Grindr, enable searchability as well as geo-spatial location services to identify potential nearby love interests (Vitak & Ellison, 2018). Online dating applications also enable access to a larger pool of potential partners and the ability to make pre-judgements upon compatibility (Finkel et al., 2012). For young people, access to these platforms enables online flirting via messaging, video chat and commenting on profiles with less emotional risk and without the scrutiny of peers (McGeeney & Hanson, 2017).

For Corey, and other participants within the LGBTQ+ community, such as Emily and Camilla, access to online platforms, was an important means of seeking intimacy with others during the first year of university. Corey later described how this was increasingly important in a rural county with smaller LGBTQ+ support networks. Research has identified that changes in exposure to sex and the social acceptance of sex is higher during the period of transition to

university, and that sexual attitudes changed in positive ways throughout university (Lefkowitz, 2016). It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that students with differing sexual identities view university as a temporal period of truly ‘becoming’ oneself. Online spaces enabled participants to co-construct identities, and build intimate connections with others, to subsequently enhance belonging. As highlighted, this is of particular importance for students identifying with groups frequently marginalised by society. As Valentine (2006, p. 379) aptly highlights:

“The internet offers a space for emotional expression and for experimenting with sexual identity, fostering a sense of self-identity that may not be available elsewhere, and making friends and intimate relationships, while providing a refuge from the confines, and in some cases hostile climate, of offline everyday heterosexuality.”

Subsequently, for some students, exploring their sexual selves occurs in a multiplicity of intertwined online and offline spaces. The temporal process of transitioning between ages and educational institutions alters the way in which the self is constructed and explored, as well as how intimacy is perceived, re-defined and desired.

4.3.3 Is becoming a student to become ‘hedonistic’?

Recent discursive constructions of HE students have centred around the notion of students as ‘millennial’, risk-seeking and hedonistic (Finn et al., 2021; Jayadeva et al., 2021). In many instances, the idea of students as ‘pleasure seeking’ is reiterated by dominant narratives of HE campuses as a being a haven for ‘hookup culture’. As discussed in section 2.3.3, the notion of ‘hookup culture’, “a combination of social structures which privilege brief sexual interactions on college campuses” (Hanson, 2002, p. 80) may subsequently contribute to the conceptualisation of students as ‘hedonistic’. For some of the students interviewed it was clear that university, particularly first year, was constructed as a time to seek pleasurable experiences.

Rhys (21, FG2): *‘I was in a relationship for first year, for the entire first year so when second year started it did feel very much like this is my first year again I am going to go out and try and make the most of this uni experience it seems to be a lot of going out and doing all this useless stuff to do with your course but yeah I wanted to get that out of the way and say I’ve done it and experienced it...’*

For Rhys, the re-imagining of his second year as his first was considered important to his experiences as a student, and this appeared to be largely influenced by others’ narratives of university experience. Subsequently, being in a pre-established intimate relationship during the first year of university appears to be misaligned with perceptions about what it is to be a ‘university student’. The pre-anticipation of university as a locality for ‘hookups’ has been

explored by students themselves at other institutions, for example Dazon (2020) reports of Cardiff University students' perceptions of casual sex and relationships on campus to explore and shape their identities, as well as suggesting that 'hookup culture' is the norm, something that was also described by the students interviewed as '*freshers' hookups*'.

Finley (20, FG5): *'I don't think you have much choice, when I first came here I was like oh I need to find someone I need to get with someone sort of thing, and then when that's done and that was seen too, I was like that was less interesting than what I thought it would be, I will play it how I usually play it anyway, but generally in the first 2 weeks, it was everything you heard about...'*

Amelia (19, FG5): *'What fresher's hookups?'*

Finley (20, FG5): *'Yeah and after a while it almost got a bit weird, and going back to my ex, she was on campus, and I was talking to her about the first 2 weeks, she was like I'm doing this and that, and I would chat with her each week, but there were different lifestyles being led, for me it was easier, I wasn't involved in social circles, I would be at my computer studying, whereas she was like oh I've got to go to this now...I suppose that led to strains in the relationship and we couldn't relate on the same topics....'*

Finley's description suggests that he was leading a different university experience to his partner who was a part of multiple social circles, and the difference in experience perhaps intensified insecurities or pressures related to perceptions of what a university experience 'should' be. Such social norms or 'rites of passage' at particular times during university transition relate to what Stirling (2014) attributes to 'other time' as defined by Adam (1995), that is periods of time being associated not primarily with traditional conceptualisation of 'clock time' but related to the norms and social practices of individuals adopting those spaces. Furthermore, the students suggest an awareness of the importance of university as an element of their cultural life scripts, the "series of culturally important transitional events expected to take place in a specific order at specific times in a prototypical life course within a given culture" (Bohn, 2010, p. 1325). Subsequently, the idea of university as a period of identity development within cultural scripts alongside sexual scripts of hookups (Holman & Sillars, 2012) may contribute toward reflexive narratives and wider discourse about what university 'should' be like.

Recounting Finley's' experience, and that of many other students interviewed, it is perhaps unsurprising that if there are significant changes in sociocultural contexts and identities, that relational dissolution occurs. The ability to maintain contact with a pre-established intimate partner via digital technologies may therefore lead to a prolonging of relationships despite

contextual and identity changes. While the positives of online platforms in maintaining relationships, globalizing intimacy via the decoupling of space and time, is frequently discussed (Valentine, 2006), the potential implications for prolonging relationship breakdown may be less frequently discussed. As Allan and Adams (2006) highlight:

“...social differences make it more difficult to develop or sustain friendships as ties between equals. Indeed, the more divergent people's social location, interests, and commitments, the less likely it is that ties of friendship will form between them”

The ability to maintain connection with a pre-established intimate partner in online spaces during the transition to university may also increase the likelihood of social comparison, comparing oneself with others as a mechanism of self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954). Finley described how at his previous university; he was less inclined to socialise which was in contradiction to his partners experience at the time. Finley suggested that the difference in university experience contributed to “strains in the relationship”, which may not have been so conveniently unveiled without access to online platforms.

Furthermore, Finley describes a pressure to “get with someone” during the first few weeks at university, something perceived as an obligatory exercise with limited choice. The dominant discourse of students as ‘hedonistic’ may be having a negative implication upon students’ experiences by increasing pressure to conform to the normalisation of hookup culture in HE. Students often believe that others view them as hedonistic, and therefore the internalisation of this expectation as a part of student identities may be anticipated (Brooks & Abrahams, 2020; Jayadeva et al., 2021). Given that the idea of ‘hookup culture’ and students as hedonistic, extroverted, and social beings is widely discussed in mainstream media and within student cultures themselves, perhaps it is unsurprising that, for some students who feel uncomfortable with casual sexual encounters, there may be negative implications for their sense of identity (Wade, 2016; Freitas, 2013). In this instance, I argue that access to online platforms and subsequent wider discourse about student identities and experiences, may further expand the space-time boundaries of universities, so students begin to conceptualise what it means to be a student even prior to their arrival on campus.

Conflicting student experiences and what it means to be doing it ‘right’ was also discussed by Amelia, who suggested that her and her partner at the time had divergent experiences at university:

Amelia (19, FG5): *‘...I think the perceived idea, how people think university is going to be like oh yeah, dating, hooking up, massive hookup culture, but actually as you say, moving away from relationships and that can be really hard erm but actually when it comes down to it 90% of your time is spent making sure you’ve caught up on your work,*

so it can be really hard to sustain a relationship through that and as I said my first relationship ended at the end of my first year because it was really hard, he has just finished uni, I did everything really different to how he did everything at uni so he was like, oh you're not doing this right, you're not doing that right...'

Amelia suggested that, for her, there was dissonance between how she envisages and experiences university as a student living at home and the perceptions of others, such as her ex-partner, who may have perceived university as a social endeavour. Students understand what it means to be a 'university student' via a multitude of mediums, including the media and institutions themselves. However, I suggest, based on the student narratives, that one of the predominant influences upon the development of their student identities is the social comparison with intimate others, those present in their physical contexts, but also those connected with them in online environments.

4.3.4 Online 'presentation of self'

As highlighted in section 2.3.1, technology facilitates individualisation, enabling the exploration of self, as well as the possibility to construct complex and fluid identities depending on the platform, its affordances, and the intended audience (Bond, 2014). Most young people access online platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok as a means of social communication and connection (Piwek & Joinson, 2016). Not only this, but the narratives from students suggest that in addition to social media, dating platforms are utilised as a means to communicate with intimate others. The use of a multitude of online platforms, with varying affordances and modes of communication has interesting implications for identity performance and subsequently the development of multiple identities (Dyer, 2015; 2020b).

Corey (21, Interview): *'...whether you're just thinking of purely emotional attachment or a sexual one, that's between you and the person you are messaging but places like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram or Tinder or Grindr or Scruff, enable people of varying desires to come together and just share that and that defeats the ideas of politics, location and rurality, deprivation, because as long as you have got an internet connection, you can share who you are with everyone.'*

The affordances of online platforms, such as the increased anonymity, enable exploration and expression of multiple selves, which may not have been as possible in offline contexts (Bargh et al., 2002; Soh et al., 2024). As a result, it is unsurprising that online spaces are a haven for exploration of the sexual self. Sex, intimacy, and relationships are of importance to students and emerging adult identities more broadly, and subsequently, many of the students discussed how online profiles and communication is constructed to attract others. However, this was also

accompanied by dissonance in some instances when the 'actual' self is not in accordance with the 'ideal' or 'ought' self (Higgins, 1989), in online and offline spaces. Many students described presenting their 'best selves' in online environments, and how this was necessary to compensate for feelings of low confidence. The work of Goffman (1959) and Walther (1996) resonates here, with online platforms enabling the curation and self-selective presentation of identity, in which within the 'expressive order' may be difficult to maintain as individuals potentially 'lose face' in offline interactions if the presentation of themselves in online environments diverges too far from their perceived authentic selves and vice versa (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013).

For participants, seeking intimacy online, whilst accompanied by unrestricted spatial and temporal opportunities to explore the self, was also perceived as minimising a person to aesthetics and appearance.

Dylan (21, FG4): *'... online you're going just for qualities kind of, we kind of follow a schema in our head, I want her to be blonde, you know all these kinds of stuff, and we're looking for these kinds of things, we create such things in our mind rather than just going there and doing it and appreciating that person it's so much different, but I guess it's part of the culture and environment...'*

Dylan suggests that romantic pursuits via online platforms have reduced the initiation of intimacy to a pre-conceived checklist of desired physical attributes. The perceived narrowing of self-presentation online to predominantly imagery makes the construction of oneself online increasingly important, and across other discussions, students described profile construction as an 'artform', one which requires significant impression-management (Ellison et al., 2006; Goffman, 1959).

Finley (20, FG5): *'But at the same time, some people are starting to treat it with respect, it's about putting it out to the public, people are starting to tailor it, people on Instagram trying to get cool photographs, changing their description to be a bit more honest, true but positive, there are some desperate people out there who will lie, be vulgar about it, but at the same time, I think they're trying to treat the whole social media thing, getting a partner whatever, getting laid, as a bit more of an artform, and at the same time it's a bit more serious, maybe it's because we're a bit older, it's no longer funny, ha-ha you're on a dating site, it's now...'*

Miles (25, FG5): *'I want to go back to something you said about your online persona being a bit like a performance, an artform, because it is a performance, you see yourself as the lead performer, you make expectations out of your supposed spouse that you wouldn't necessarily make of people in real life, because if you went up to*

somebody in real life you wouldn't go, I'm not going to date you because you're not 6'4 or because your hair is brown, you're going to look like a dickhead...'

Finley describes, similarly to other students, that the stigma attached to online intimacies reduces with age, and that people within his social networks are starting to treat the construction of online profiles as a 'serious' personal endeavour to facilitate romantic and casual intimacy. It could be inferred that with the expectation of "freshers' hookups", and widespread generalisation of students as 'hedonistic' that there is an increasing pressure to portray an attractive "online persona". For participants, online platforms, provide opportunities to make the private public, to present multiple versions of the self, highlighting the constant reflection on perceived opportunities and risks presented by online environments. Miles reflects further on the idea of online identities being a performance, suggesting that the rules associated with developing an online persona and engaging in intimate partner selection are different to those in "real life". The ethics of intimacy practices (which is discussed further in chapter 5), subsequently differ in online and offline spaces, with online platforms providing more anonymity and consequently, in some instances, a perceived reduction in behavioural accountability.

Conflict between the self-presentation of virtual and non-virtual identities in the context of forming intimate relationships was also discussed by Nathan, highlighting the difficulties with maintaining 'face', by living up to performative expectations of the audience (Goffman, 1959).

Nathan (23, FG3): *'When you're online you can kind of present the best form of yourself, when you're online you can think about your responses, you can put the best pictures, it's kind of the highlights, the best things about you I suppose, yeah, when you meet someone in real life just like randomly I suppose they get to know you for who you are in everyday life erm, I did find that like a couple of dates I went on Tinder like talked to them online and then you'd meet up with them, of course they were similar looks and things but the personality is sort of different to the person you were talking with on Tinder, maybe that's just me.... I think I does give that layer of confidence even if you don't realise it. Someone said that to me on a tinder date, I didn't even realise, she said you're a bit quiet in real life...'*

Nathan reflexively discussed how his experience during the date highlighted discrepancies between how he unconsciously presented himself online in comparison to the non-virtual. For Nathan, the identification of intimate others as performing a role online which diverges from their offline persona appeared to be easier to identify, in comparison to an awareness of his own self-presentation in virtual and non-virtual spaces. Theories of love and intimacy taking a

more dystopian stance suggest that contemporary experiences of intimate relationships are shaped through suffering, due to increased uncertainty, self-scrutiny, subjectivity, and the individualistic pursuit of love (Illouz, 2012) (see section 2.2.1). Dylan, Finley, Miles', and Nathan's narratives suggests that in the pursuit of intimacy, there is indeed uncertainty, due to possible discrepancies between online and offline selves, as well as increased self-scrutiny due to the increasing importance placed on self-imagery as a marker for attractiveness.

Some of the female students interviewed also reflected on the idea of self-scrutiny and "social media pressure". They frequently referred to presentation of the sexual self in online spaces, as affording confidence, and self-validation (Timmermans & De Caluwé, 2017), yet constructed as a risky maladaptive process. Camila refers to the presentation of self in online environments as "superficial" due to the dominant narrative that it is a requirement to "look sexy":

Camila (19, FG4): *'Maybe that's why people really want to look sexy in the pictures, because they want to be chosen by others, so it's really superficial...'*

Emily (22, FG4): *'And then it goes back to the social media expectations and what people think you should look like to try and look like that... social media pressure!'*

Furthermore, Paige and Phoebe discuss how, whilst seeking intimacy online, they portrayed themselves in a particular way, 'enhancing' themselves by using filters, staging selfies, and posting pictures centring on bodily expression, to increase self-confidence and align themselves with the profiles and images of their peers:

Paige (19, FG2): *'My self-confidence has always been very low, erm social media so for example all my best friends have thousands of followers on Instagram, I have about 400, and that's always been like a thing... so going on Tinder was a massive thing for me, my self-confidence, all of my photos on my profile just didn't look like me, I've got to say, bit of a catfish, most of my pictures, full face make-up, no glasses, hair down... I think when we met each other he was like, you weren't what I was expecting, not in a bad way but yeah, my accounts don't look like me because of self-confidence reasons yeah.'*

Phoebe (22, FG2): *'That's like the same with my friends, if I post pictures, I've always got a filter on... I think sometimes you put pictures out there, especially on Instagram and stuff to get more attention and on some occasions, I did get the attention but sometimes it didn't feel right, I thought I wanted the attention that my friends were getting, I thought I needed it but...'*

Paige (19, FG2): *'I think it shows as well like what photo you put on, like if I put on a selfie for example I would probably get about 80 likes, when I was on holiday last year, I put on a picture of me in my swimming costume, it was like a nice one a little bit booby, 150 likes in a couple of hours, it was like, you can really see the difference in what kind of photo...'*

The discussion between Paige and Phoebe clearly indicates the complexity of managing the self, how this is presented in online spaces and how closely this subsequently reflects the 'real' self. The generation of online profiles and content was accompanied by a constant self-surveillance of identity and associated behaviours, which is tied up in peer and wider societal perceptions of gender and sexuality. Later in the discussion Corey and Rhys also highlight how this selection of imagery became an important individualised reflexive process, and in some instances liberating to deviate from social norms, instead focusing on posting images that they felt confident and happy about. However, Paige and Phoebe highlight how their lower self-confidence or perceived desirability interlinked with their longing for validation in the form of likes and attention from potential intimate partners and peers, reflecting potential implicit internalised gendered scripts (Setty, 2018a). Posting images on Instagram and selecting images for a dating profile was a careful process of selecting an appropriate filter, identifying which images received the most likes or highlighted physically attractive features. There was also an explicit acknowledgement that what was presented on an online platform, such as Tinder, was not necessarily representative of the 'real' self, as demonstrated by Paige describing herself as 'a bit of a catfish'. Catfishing as a social phenomenon is relatively new and subsequently, definitions and understanding of what it is to be a 'catfish' or to be 'catfished' is still unclear (Simmons & Lee, 2020), however some have referred to the term as "a person's fabricating a profile for the purposes of deceiving someone into developing a romantic relationship" (Patt & Markham, 2021, p. 27).

For many of the students interviewed, reconceptualising identities during the pursuit or maintenance of intimacy projects and subsequently altering their digital presence was an important part of transitioning to university. The affordances of online platforms, enabling connection despite physical distance, aided the exploration of self via communication with others and building subjective confidence across a multiplicity of spaces. Nonetheless, students also acknowledged a discrepancy between the 'real' self and 'ideal' self that was presented on online platforms, and how this could generate conflict or disappointment in the context of intimate relationships. The participants narratives highlight an individualised reflexive process of observing differences between how they present themselves and communicate with others across hybrid ecologies. Students are working with a multitude of norms, scripts and social expectations which are shaping meanings of identity and the sexual

self, both of which appear to be constructed by perceived temporal shifts in age and transition across the multiplicity of spaces they occupy.

4.4 Geospatial possibilities of intimacy

4.4.1 *Permeability of geographical boundaries*

Digital technologies have blurred the meanings of space and place, enabling permeable boundaries and increased connections with multiple others irrespective of geography (Wellman et al., 2001). The rise in digital technologies, has been suggested to be influencing the ways in which societies are structured, moving toward social and organisational networks, in which ties (albeit suggested 'weak ties' [Granovetter, 1973]), no longer reliant on physical proximity, are built between individuals, group and organisations (Giddens & Sutton, 2017). An individual can therefore build a multitude of social networks which are no longer constrained by physical proximity.

“For the networked individual, ‘community’ is not geospecific but is defined as networks of personal communities that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity, managed on and offline...” (McEwen & Wellman, 2013, p. 170).

University is typically associated with broadening networks, and as the previous subthemes have implied, students are seeking intimate connections prior to and during their university journey, as well as maintaining existing social networks. For university students, the use of online instant messaging platforms has been predominantly identified as social (Kindred & Roper, 2004), facilitating new and existing connections before even arriving onto campus (Stirling, 2014). As such, online modes of communication are likely to be engaged with 'locally', or within the student community, as well as to facilitate “a close integration of far-flung ties into university students’ everyday lives” (Quan-Haase, 2007, p. 671).

In this study, the student narratives suggest the use of an abundance of online platforms to engage with 'local' others, particularly during the transition to university, such as Facebook messenger and WhatsApp, alongside more public forums, and Facebook groups. A social media presence was integral to the students interviewed, and while some students, such as Dylan, suggest that this 'requirement' to be connected online is not always considered necessary in a face-to-face context, for other students it is a normal part of how they build and maintain social connections in new environments.

Dylan (21, FG4): *‘Yeah and it starts to be required you know, the people that get to know you, so when you meet someone it’s kind of like after a while, are you online or something, and I mean I have Instagram, Facebook or whatever why would you have*

that when you have me here and you can see me, why would you want to go online, but I guess it's just like I can see the things that he thinks about...'

Emily (22, FG4): *'I suppose it's a way of them feeling like they're connecting with you more, so they talk to you then but then they're like, if I add you online I can keep updated with your life and it's kind of like them saying, it's literally like offering a friend request and saying do you want to be friends with me, so adding them on Facebook or something to try and make that link...'*

Camila (19, FG4): *'And nowadays if you meet someone who doesn't have a social media profile you just think it's weird.'*

Emily describes how synonymous connecting with someone online is to connecting with them in a non-virtual environment. Meeting someone in person is suggested to be further enhanced by connecting online, and how requesting to be friends with someone on Facebook is a symbolic extension of a non-virtual request to be friends (Wellman et al., 2001). Given the suggested link between Facebook use and indicators of social connectedness (Ellison et al., 2007), it is perhaps unsurprising that students look to online platforms to build social networks, but also seek information about the identities of intimate others. Dylan and Camila's comments suggest an inherent personal expectation to occupy online social spaces and have a social network, as well as implying the normalisation of seeking out further information about someone's 'self' through engaging with their online profile as a means of authentication. Similarly, to previous research, students are using social media and online platforms in the context of higher education, for social purposes, to connect and communicate with others who occupy the same 'space' (Kindred & Roper, 2004).

On the other hand, although it was acknowledged by the students that meeting 'close' or 'local' others in the traditional geographical sense was important, they also discussed connecting with others beyond the campus, creating a network of global ties (Quan-Hasse, 2007).

Rhys (21, FG2): *'... I met this girl in Florence... she was Russian so she didn't speak a lot of English, erm and so I was just using google translate for most of the conversation because she couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Russian obviously, and then we stayed together like for most of the trip and then after that she went back to Russia and I came back here and we stayed in contact, and then we organised another trip... staying in contact online and organising another trip online was actually easier than speaking in person because of the language barrier.'*

Aaliyah (19, FG2): *'It's interesting like how online platforms can help you build those relationships like I was on a flight in January, and I met this guy on a flight, it was just me and him sitting together on a row and it was really nice, we were talking and*

everything and we have stayed in contact since erm just on social media... but I wouldn't have been able to do that if there wasn't social media, I would have never heard from him again!

As evident in Rhys and Aaliyah's narratives, students are not bound to one place in space and time, such as a university campus, but, due to technological advances, are able to travel, and build social relationships which defy geographical boundaries. For Rhys, Google Translate enabled the removal of language barriers to connect with another individual, but also the ability to communicate online facilitated the maintenance of a relationship which may have otherwise deteriorated. This point was reiterated by Aaliyah, who suggested that without social media, she would not have been able to stay connected with someone she met on a recent flight. Most research investigating students use of digital technologies in their personal relationships focuses upon their immediate communities, however the student narratives above suggest, that as well as forming and maintaining 'local' ties, students are reaching out beyond their immediate community to make and maintain connections with others at a distance. Students seeking and maintaining relationships outside of the immediate university community is perhaps unsurprising considering the move from more campus-based institutions to civic urban 'post-1992' universities embedded in local regions (Holton & Riley, 2013). Not only this, but the idea of the 'networked individual', facilitated by digital technologies, indicates that boundaries are more permeable and social ties are no longer restricted to geographical proximity (Wellman et al., 2001). Both Rhys and Aaliyah's examples indicate that students' online connections extend beyond the realms of a physical campus, and can be globalised in nature, potentially blurring the importance of place when (re)conceptualising student identities and intimacies. Nonetheless, despite possibilities of maintaining physically distant connections, formation of such relations appears to require co-presence, further highlighting the importance of digital technologies in consolidating existing relationships (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Steinsbekk et al., 2024).

4.4.2 Dating at a distance: Casual ties or lasting love?

Intimacy is typically equated with physical proximity or closeness (Valentine, 2006), however as aforementioned, online platforms can facilitate broadened social networks, and subsequently students are no longer necessarily restricted to their immediate environments and social connections to seek intimacy.

"Traditional sites and locales for meeting singles, including schools, universities, pubs, clubs, and workplaces, have also been partially displaced, with the internet increasingly allowing people to meet and form relationships with people with whom they have no previous social ties" (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 272)

Discussions with students revealed a mixture of perspectives regarding physical distance in intimate relationships and whether this was a determinant of more 'casual' or 'lasting' ties. For Camila, the internet afforded possibilities to make new friends via online gaming and forums, as well as opportunities to explore her sexuality. Camila recounts her long-distance relationship moving between communicating online, to meeting in person, and how voice chatting and viewing each other's social media profiles was important in establishing trust in a relationship formed entirely online.

Camila (19, FG4): *'We voice chatted without camera, but we added each other on Facebook so we could see pictures of each other, there is that doubt, like who are they really... It was a little awkward at first I had to fly to her country, and it was just really awkward because I wasn't sure if she was going to be the person that I thought she was, but we had talked for like a year so I thought I knew her, so I was confident but also scared, but it was great in the end.'*

For Camila, it was clear that the idea of being 'catfished' was a perceived threat to her safety, and that certain steps had to be taken to reduce the risk associated with building intimacy with someone in which there was no pre-established physical connection. When I followed up with Camila a year later, she was still in the same long-distance relationship with her girlfriend, and although opportunities to meet in person were of importance to her, most of their relationship was maintained online whilst she was studying in the UK. The importance of online platforms in maintaining her relationship also became increasingly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Camila (20, Interview): *'...besides discord, we also chat a lot on online games. Yeah, because we play a lot. We both enjoy games. We just do group activities, and we keep in touch with, like, group mates. And then my girlfriend and I, we just do a lot of things together on there, especially during the pandemic, because it's like, oh, we have nowhere to go. Nothing to do. We can just chill in an online world.'*

What Camila's narrative highlights is that not only are students using online platforms, such as Facebook, Discord, WhatsApp, and Tinder, to make intimate connections, but they are also connecting via multiplayer online gaming, utilising a multiplicity of spaces to communicate. Subsequently, understanding the collective use of online platforms, and how individuals and networks utilise a plethora of platforms to manage relationships is important (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Madianou, 2015). For Camila, the affordances of online platforms offer the opportunities to explore the self, connect to physically distant others with similar interests,

manage risks associated with connections formed online and maintain connection with intimate others irrespective of global travel restrictions and her chosen location of study.

Many students also described the use of online dating platforms to seek casual or long-term relationships whilst at university. Global Positioning System (GPS) technologies, such as dating platforms Tinder, Bumble, Scruff and Grindr, offer new social opportunities, in which “physical locations are transformed into data points that position users in space, giving people access to social connections that are local, global, or anywhere in between” (Roth, 2014, p. 2128).

Paige (19, FG2): *‘My boyfriend, I met him on Tinder, I was on tinder for like a month, and I went back home and my radius was like 50 miles, and when I went back home there is like a place that is 20 minutes’ drive from my house and it picked him up there, and we started speaking... we spoke for about 3 weeks, went on a date, dated for a month and now we’re like fully into a relationship... it’s mad!’*

For Paige, the geospatial possibilities offered by online dating platforms meant that whilst on a trip to her hometown, she was able to continue to seek intimacy via Tinder. Similarly, for Amelia and Miles, Tinder was considered an opportunistic tool to build intimate social networks, however because of incorrect radius settings, this led to ‘matches’ at a distance. In addition to user-set parameters, research has highlighted how algorithms on online dating platforms, such as Bumble, Tinder and OkCupid, may introduce potential matches from outside the radius settings (Broeker, 2023). Online platforms therefore influence the conditions in which spatiality is produced and experienced (Kitchin & Dodge, 2011), despite students perceived importance of physical proximity in more ‘serious’ intimate relationships.

Amelia (19, FG5): *‘I came out of a relationship and it was just a joke that I joined it, started swiping, I had erm a one night stand with someone, so I didn’t know how to work them, I’m not a technology person, so this guy I matched with was from [location], so he came all the way down and we hooked up and that was fine ... then I met my current partner on there as well, so it was very short lived, probably a couple of months I was on there but it was successful, but I didn’t go on there with a purpose it was just kind of let’s see what happens. So my radius was huge and he was 26, so I hadn’t got my age thing down either so it was literally just completely like pot luck thing of like well I wouldn’t have found you if I knew how to work it, and the same with my current partner who lives in [location] thank god... so I have been quite lucky with most of my experiences actually, and it wouldn’t have met them if I knew how to work it!’*

Miles (25, FG5): *‘So my comparison, so I am kind of comparing the way I met my ex and then one of the girls I met on Tinder, so my ex was kind of how you call it in the*

'traditional' old school way, as in you would come out and see someone, so we got chatting, I said can I take your number, ended up talking ,went on like 3 dates and got serious from there... I had the same problem with you where I didn't know how to deal with the radius so on the option it just said scan in [location]... that was a big mistake. I ended up linking up with this girl from [location], mans in zone 3, we call it Pluto right because it is in Zone 9.'

Irrespective of the physical distance and explaining that they would prefer to date someone in closer proximity, Amelia and Miles continued to pursue intimacy, albeit described as short-lived, suggesting that less importance is placed upon geographical proximity for the purposes of a 'hookup'. Despite the common conception of, and stigma attached to, dating platforms, as virtual environments primarily utilised for casual sexual encounters, some of the students interviewed continued to explore the use of these apps in the geospatial search for 'serious' relationships, emphasising diverse meanings attached to online platforms when searching for intimacy.

Furthermore, although there was an awareness of the ability to pre-select a desired radius on various dating apps, for some students there was limited understanding of the geo-spatial affordances, which led to unexpected online, and subsequently offline, encounters. The student's narratives here deviate from the misleading idea of all students being 'digital natives', that is, "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). As described in section 2.5.3, the idea of students as 'digital natives' has been criticised for being a highly inappropriate generalised term, and whilst predominantly disregarded in academic literature, is still pertinent in wider discourse. Phippen and Bond (2022a) highlight how policy makers, regulators and university senior leaders frequently still refer to younger generations as 'digital natives'. This has been conceptualised as a form of responsibility deflection back upon the young person to navigate online spaces without mechanisms for support. In this study, the students' narratives indicate, that despite being 'born into the digital world', emerging adults are still making sense of, the different affordances of online platforms. Subsequently, in accordance with Phippen and Bond (2022a), the need to further debunk the myth of students as 'digital natives' is required amongst higher education staff, senior leaders and beyond, to appropriately acknowledge and respond to university students' experiences of online victimisation (Centelles et al., 2021).

4.4.3 Proximity matters: 'Local' intimacies

Despite the use of platforms to build, at times, global connections, the close physical location of potential intimate partners was still of importance to most students interviewed. Research

suggests that although, social networks can be global in nature, they tend to centre around geographical proximity, as this is an important aspect of 'non-virtual' social connections (Westcott & Owen, 2013). The affordances of dating applications, with access to users geolocational information facilitate quick identification of proximity to potential 'local' intimate others (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018), enabling possible online and offline interaction in layered 'hybrid ecologies' (Crabtree & Rodden, 2008; Licoppe, 2019).

Reflecting on Paige's example in section 4.4.2, the fact that she was able to 'pick up' her current partners location via Tinder whilst visiting home meant she was able to create 'local' intimate connections, but also importantly, as suggested at a later stage of the interview, outside of the university campus community. Many students referred to location as a means of categorising and identifying potential intimate partners online. Miles, for example, referred to relationship longevity as a mathematical equation, combining scores for geographical proximity, attractiveness, and frequency of meetings, highlighting the importance of physical closeness for some students.

Miles (25, FG5): *'So it's good because with online you have a much wider radius and you would meet people that you wouldn't even necessarily have the option of approaching, but then it kind of puts a strain, you have that distance, is it still going to be possible, because building a relationship, or even a friendship is how much you like the person x your proximity to them x how often you are able to see them, and if any of those things are a 1 or a 0 then it's not going to work out in the long-term.'*

For most participants, the spatial flexibility afforded by technologies is constructed as positive for initiating intimacy, however whilst 'ambivalent co-presence' is possible, geographical proximity to facilitate face-to-face meetings appears to be a pre-requisite for long-term relationships (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). The narratives here seem to suggest that rather than simply utilising online platforms for 'casual hookups' and attachment-less connections, as implied by some modern perceptions of dating as 'liquid love' (Bauman, 2000), most of the students' use of online platforms to seek intimacy is more complex and multifaceted. Their digital intimacies depend on desires, intentions, and proximity, highlighting a high degree of reflexivity as opposed to the previously discussed popular discourse of students as 'hedonistic' in section 4.3.3.

Considering the affordances of geospatial online dating platforms in enabling the ability to identify and specify desired physical proximity of potential partners, it is perhaps unsurprising that the students utilised these apps to pursue intimacy. Nonetheless, despite many students describing the identification of 'serious' partners via apps such as Tinder, the perceptions of

online dating apps in facilitating a culture of 'casual hookups' was described by many students. Libby (20, FG1) for example, suggests that she doesn't believe dating apps are "worth it" as "you meet someone, you end up having sex and that's it really". Furthermore, Tilly suggests that online dating and nights-out are for seeking casual intimacy, in comparison to meeting someone at university, which was considered to lead to longer lasting ties.

Tilly (18, FG3): *'I think so, I think like we said before, I think Tinder you can kind of look for relationships, but it's based on kind of hooking up whereas if you meet someone, unless you are going out at night-time, if you met someone at uni it's more likely, I think you're more likely to date them and get to know them rather than just hooking up with them sort of thing I think...'*

Tilly implies that, from her perspective, whilst you can search for relationships on Tinder, the app itself is perceived as predominantly centred on more casual intimacy, and therefore is not necessarily suitable for building 'serious' relationships. Instead, she suggests that universities are a more suitable place for students to build social networks within their immediate peer group. How participants make meaning of intimacy typically deviates from popular discourse around students acting as hedonistic individuals seeking out sexual partners within their educational institutions. However, irrespective of their engagement, the idea of contemporary 'hookup' culture is still consistently key in students' constructions of casual intimacies, with both the university and online platforms as perceived spaces for "locating sex and sexual play" (Sunden et al., 2022, p. 425).

4.4.4 Campus dating and awkward encounters

As aforementioned, proximity is of increasing importance for students' constructions of intimate relationships, however, for some, with boundaries related to romantic connections inside the university community. For example, Aaliyah established a relationship with another student at the end of her first year, which unfortunately didn't work out, she described this break-up as awkward, due to shared peer groups and being part of the same university community.

Aaliyah (19, FG2): *'I did get into a relationship during the end of first year and I think the difficult thing is because we're so close together we were always with each other, we were working together, we were doing so much together, when we broke up it was very awkward because we still did stuff together, it does make it more awkward and it made me think is it worth getting into a relationship with someone from uni, so now it's more looking outside of uni...'*

Paige (19, FG2): *'I have never swiped for someone that has said uni of [name] on it, I was like I can't do that, most of the time it's probably because I've already seen them at like freshers, I was like, I know what you're like I've seen you in action ...'*

Aaliyah (19, FG2): *'It's always nice to have a bit of distance as well because if you are in a relationship with people, you're with them constantly... For example, if I go on holiday with my friends or something for a weekend, but the Sunday I actually want to leave, I wouldn't want to be with someone constantly in this fast-paced environment, yeah, I wouldn't want that.'*

Subsequently, dating outside of university was considered as a risk management technique to avoid uncomfortable encounters. Aaliyah's account also reflects the desire to retain independence whilst also maintaining interdependence in relationships, and how the intensity of intimate relationships with peers may inhibit feelings of independence linked to the university experience. Paige also actively describes how she utilises Tinder to date outside of the university community, filtering via radius to ensure she is not matching with anyone in very close proximity. The tensions of shared space here are evident. In comparison to research which suggests consistent exposure and subsequent familiarity enhance attraction (Zajonc, 2001), Aaliyah and Paige suggest that the intensity of intimacy, or awkwardness of encounters within the university environment, may have the opposite effect. The risks and benefits of dating within a campus environment highlighted by the students, in some ways, reflect that of emerging adult's workplace relationships. In contrast to research suggesting young adults hold liberal perspectives of workplace romance, participants perspectives in Chory and Hoke's (2019) study appear to reflect those of older adults. These included perceived benefits of workplace romance, such as increased time together, as well as perceived negatives, such as scrutiny from colleagues, awkwardness, and detrimental implications of relationship breakdown. Subsequently, the students' narratives here may reflect the norms and attitudes of relationships within other formal institutional structures. Chory and Hoke (2019) also suggest that perceptions of workplace romance may influence perceptions of sexual harassment, blurring the boundaries of 'acceptable' and 'consensual' behaviours in the pursuit of intimacy within an institution.

The implications of intimacy with peers were also discussed during other focus groups, in which experiences of being 'ghosted' online by other students were described, and the awkward repercussions of this when both individuals are embedded in a campus community. Ghosting describes "a popular contemporary dating disengagement strategy that abruptly ends communication using technological medium(s)" (LeFebvre et al., 2020, p.395). Miles and Amelia describe the experience of engaging with another student online, with the intention for intimacy, to be subsequently ignored.

Miles (25, FG5): *'... of the people that I do know that live in halls it is kind of like, you hookup at first, but because you have that exposure to each other first it's more likely to branch out, it's either going to be awkward, or branch out into something more. When it is awkward it is very awkward because you don't want to see that person again, but you walk past them at the washing machine like, hey....'*

Amelia (19, FG5): *'I did match with a guy that goes here and he ghosted me... we never met up, he was a student paramedic, like oh do you want to go out for coffee, and he was like yeah sounds good and then he just didn't reply, so if I were to, at that point, if I were to bump into him in the next couple of weeks it would have been like it's not good at all... but it doesn't faze me, I wouldn't be bothered, it doesn't bother me, that might be because I don't live on campus, but it is big enough to avoid.'*

Miles (25, FG5): *'Yeah, I think you have some security if you don't live on campus, like yeah, I'm not going to see you all the time, I have some control of when I will come to uni and apart from that we're probably never going to see each other again. I had a similar situation, I matched up with someone who went to this uni, and we started talking and they were like yo lets go for drinks sometime... but then I saw them again when they came into the bar when I was working like 'ohhh it's you', yeah it's me, hi... and she was like oh yeah free drink, and then I looked at her like I don't know you.... Yeah, I'm going to charge you double!'*

As well as the potential for awkward encounters after casual sexual relationships and breakups, there is also the potential for uncomfortable experiences resulting from the non-mutual dissolution of digital intimacies. LeFebvre et al. (2019) described ghosting as a form of relationship dissolution via online mediums, in their qualitative study of emerging adults, they identified that for non-initiators of ghosting, the cessation of communication was typically unexpected, leading to feelings of uncertainty and social rejection due to ambiguous loss. For Miles, similarly to Aaliyah, dating at a distance, or outside of the university community, was considered as a means to achieving greater control and ability to manage the risks associated with seeking intimacy as a student. Miles and Amelia also highlighted that the context of the institution was important in considering potential risks of initiating intimacy with other students, such as the size of the campus and whether the student was living in campus accommodation.

The students appear to be engaging with a set of complex decisions and considerations when engaging in the search for intimacy, as well as navigating multiple online platforms and 'non-virtual' contexts, in a 'hybrid ecology' (Crabtree & Rodden, 2008). The narratives deviate from mainstream discourse around student intimacies as primarily transitory and based on a 'hookup' culture as outlined in section 2.3.3 and 4.3.3, and instead suggest that students are making a myriad of decisions regarding intimacy with others, based on a multitude of

individualistic and social factors. Technology does afford opportunities to build wider social networks, to connect with 'local' as well as 'distant' others beyond the campus community. Despite these affordances however, most students still value the idea of physical proximity in forming intimacy, however with peer group proximity comes risks, such as awkward encounters, shame, and humiliation. Subsequently, the possibilities of geosocial online platforms enable the management of risks associated with forming relationships within an immediate 'non-virtual' community, such as the possible wider disclosure of personal information, and subsequent potential loss of social connections.

4.5 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the ordering of space-time is key to understanding transitions and social relationships (Stirling, 2014). The ways in which students conceptualise and make meaning of digital intimacies is constructed through spatial and temporal references, shaped by socio-technical networks. Student narratives highlighted how digital technologies provide spatial-temporal flexibility to form new relationships and sustain established ones, experiences common in the first year of university. Online platforms were central to transition, enabling connections before campus arrival, thereby extending the temporal boundaries of university life. Yet, despite technology expanding these boundaries, and despite some students experiencing hostility even before arrival on campus, university policies only apply to enrolled students, leaving applicants without equal protection (Phippen & Bond, 2022a, p. 401).

Online platforms also afford connections with 'past' relationships, prolonging transition through a 'revitalisation of the past' (Miller, 2011), underscoring students as individuals moving through multiple, interchangeable hybrid spaces. Technology was particularly important for maintaining romantic ties, including, what Finley described as 'on campus and off campus' relationships, allowing presence despite distance. However, long-distance relationship maintenance sometimes created tensions and cognitive dissonance, given cultural scripts and constructions of university as a liminal space for exploration of social connection, sex, and intimacy.

Shifts in sexual identities and perceptions of intimacy were tied to periods of transition, maturation, and changing institutional contexts, with norms centred on 'other-time' (Adam, 1995), framing university as a time for sexual exploration and hookups. Contemporary 'hookup culture' was consistently noted, with both university and online platforms used to 'locate sex and sexual play' (Sunden et al., 2022, p. 425). Students balanced desires for physical co-presence with geosocial opportunities for intimacy, using risk management to avoid awkward encounters on campus or engaging within the university space. Ultimately, university,

particularly during transitions, was conceptualised as the 'right time and space' to explore relationships and identities. Online platforms enable this flexibility by fostering connections before arrival, sustaining prior ties, and facilitating identity exploration, thereby extending the temporal and spatial boundaries of HE. The findings presented in this chapter provide a contextual overview of how students are using online platforms, particularly during the transitional and liminal period of university, to facilitate intimacy projects. As well as online platforms shaping the contextual temporality and spatiality of students' intimacies, I will also highlight in the following chapter, how students' conceptualisations and experiences of trust, risk and privacy are shaped by socio-technical networks.

5. Chapter 5: Trust and Insecurity

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter highlights how students' intimacies during periods of transition are shaped by the spatial and temporal flexibility afforded by online platforms. However, absence in space and time can also have implications for trust (Giddens, 1991), with online platforms facilitating connectivity and 'ambient co-presence' (Madianou, 2016), or creating uncertain relational conditions. This, the second of three findings chapters, moves away from the contexts of students' digital intimacies to thinking about the implications of contexts upon constructions of intra and interpersonal experiences of trust and insecurity, via in-depth qualitative discussions with students. The overarching theme of trust and insecurity reflects students' conceptualisations of online platforms as a 'double-edged sword', enabling and hindering trust and security. As outlined in Table 4, this centres around three themes which highlight that students' conceptualisation of intimacy, ontological security and privacy are underpinned by their experiences and perceptions of navigating trust with intimate others in online spaces.

Table 4: *Theme summary table for Trust and Insecurity findings chapter*

Theme	Characteristic
Trust as a pre-requisite for intimacy	Trust is described as central to experiences and perceptions of digital intimacies. Students perceive online platforms as important in enhancing or eroding trust. This theme highlights, through exploration of participants experiences of intimate image sharing, how trust, despite at times being conceptualised as individualised, is networked, via social norms and online platforms.
Managing ontological (in)security	For students, intimacy projects during university transitions and affordances of digital technologies can contribute to feelings of ontological insecurity (e.g., creating perceived conditions for deceit, such as 'do not disturb' settings and ephemeral content sharing). Subsequently, practices which signify trust and intimacy (e.g., by mutual sharing of passwords and device access) are adopted by participants to manage ontological security.
Navigating the right to privacy	The ways in which privacy is understood and enacted is mediated by students' constructions of trust in the context of intimate relationships. For students, social norms (e.g., normalisation of 'perpetual contact') interact with platforms affordances to shape students' experiences of privacy.

	Enhanced trust was equated to fewer violations of privacy; however, trust was also constructed to be achieved by 'forgoing' privacy. Despite students' privacy being networked, preventative risk-management was typically individualised, with participants compensating for platform affordances or changing social norms.
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Trust, as defined by Sztompka (1999, p. 25), "is a bet about the future contingent actions of others", subsequently involving risk or an "intention to accept vulnerability" (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395). In a world increasingly altered by civilisational and technological change, vulnerability in a 'risk society' (Beck, 1992) must be met with increasing levels of trust (Sztompka, 1999). As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, p. 182) highlight, a lack of security in modernity leads to individuals seeking protection from "someone they can trust who shares their world and promises support and understanding". Trust is key to maintaining the social order of things, from our own identity and security to our everyday practices, and wider societal systems.

"The entire fabric of our day-to-day living, of our social order, rests on trust – buying gasoline, paying taxes, going to the dentist, flying to a convention – almost all of our decisions involve trusting someone else. The more complex the society, the greater the dependence on others." (Rotter, 1971, p.443)

Subsequently, as outlined previously in section 1.1 and 2.2.1, trust is fundamental to intrapersonal decision-making (Luhmann, 1979), and as a result, shapes who we may or may not decide to engage with intimately. While trust in an online context can be reflective of face-to-face interaction, the affordances of digital technologies can have implications for trust in interpersonal communications. For example, the removal of meaning from messages via distortion of limited cues (Ellison & boyd, 2013) as well as the ability to share personal information at scale, with implications for privacy (Rotenberg, 2020). Nonetheless, online contexts also provide a medium in which trust can be enhanced, by enabling unique contexts for disclosure due to accessibility, perceived anonymity and disinhibition (Bryce & Fraser, 2014).

As discussed in section 2.2.1, Giddens (1992) reflects upon the process of mutual self-disclosure in his description of the transformation of intimacy as an important element of the pure relationship, which is underpinned by mutual partner benefit. In this chapter, I focus on sending intimate images as an example of a 'resource for intimacy' (Amundsen, 2022, p. 123) amongst university students, and how such acts of self-disclosure facilitate trust and intimacy,

as well as potentially leading to 'betrayals of trust' extending beyond relationship dissolution, influencing social norms and attitudes towards the ethics of intimacy using online platforms.

In the second theme, I highlight students' perceptions of the role of changing ontological security resulting from transition to university and prior relational experiences, and the techniques used to manage partners insecurities utilising digital technologies. Adapted from psychoanalysis (Laing, 1965), ontological security has been described as having confidence in a sense of reality, stability, and certainty about the future, all of which are important for identity development and derived from 'basic trust' during development (Giddens, 1991). This chapter highlights how students manage their own, as well as others, ontological security via online platforms and their affordances, modifying behaviours, seeking reassurance, and engaging in practices conceptualised as intimacy.

Lastly, due to the unequivocal importance of trust in achieving privacy (Setty, 2018b), the final theme focuses on how students conceptualise networked privacy as an extension of trust, building upon social norms and affordances of platforms. The perceived social norm of being 'always on', accessible and accountable to intimate partners, in addition to the affordances of online platforms in enabling visibility of actions, led to some negative implications for students' abilities to manage privacy. The perceptions of breaches to privacy were linked directly to a lack of trust, within their intimate relationships, but also extending to child-parent relationships. In this chapter, I argue that social norms, alongside technological affordances, shape the ways in which students perceive and conceptualise trust and subsequently risk and privacy, producing a need for a networked understanding of trust in intimate relationships (Marwick & boyd, 2014).

5.2 Trust as a prerequisite for intimacy

5.2.1 *'Are they the person they really claim to be?': Trust, imitation, and fabrication in online spaces*

Almost all students in my study referred to trust when discussing the context of intimate relationships. Most students suggested that trust is inevitably a pre-requisite to the success of any intimate relationship, irrespective of how the relationship developed, and in which context. This aligns with ideas of pursuing the 'pure relationship' as outlined by Giddens (1992), a relationship pursued by choice and mutual self-disclosure, subsequently requires a continuous signalling of trust (Boiger, 2019). However, for some students interviewed, the notion of trust, and how much they could trust an intimate partner, was dependent on where and when that relationship was formed. As outlined previously, online platforms provided the students with a space in which they explore their identities, some suggesting that construction of the online

self is synonymous with a performance (Goffman, 1959), involving monitoring and adaptation of role performance to create desired impressions. However, when discussing the formation of intimate relationships, the idea that another could perform an idealistic view of themselves, or present a perceived inauthentic version of themselves, was considered a significant risk in developing mutual trust in an online environment.

Many of the students referred to the fear of being 'catfished' as a primary source of distrust when encountering others in online environments. Catfishing is linked to online impersonation, and Goffman's (1959) principles of impression management also apply to misrepresentation, where deceit, lying and secrecy can be utilised to generate a misleading version of the self, a 'mask', to hide certain facets of identity (Shulman, 2022; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). As highlighted in Chapter 4 (section 4.3), when portraying themselves on social media, some students described themselves as being a 'catfish' because they presented an enhanced version of themselves on their profile. However, catfishing was typically discussed whilst students were describing the potential for intentional deception during relationship initiation, as a barrier to trust.

Camila (19, FG4): *'Usually when talking about relationships online and meeting people online the first thing that comes to mind is are they the person they really claim to be, you know, Tinder and all this stuff it's really hard to know the person that is behind the screen... it broadens your chances, but at the same time it is dangerous.'*

As Camila outlines, online platforms provide a multitude of opportunities to meet other potential romantic others, yet the ability to trust someone is who they say they are can be compromised. Some of the students' perceptions are similar to Sztompka's (1999) observation of the internet 'limiting trust' as a result of anonymity and distance, particularly in the context of romantic intimacy. Participants in Henderson and Guilding's (2004) study also revealed that the scope for deceit and betrayal online was considerable, and subsequently "the consequences of trust might be dangerous" (Henderson & Guilding, 2004, p. 497). Considering the potential risks associated with catfishing and online deception, such as experiences of trauma, loss of social support, discrimination, and harassment (Lauckner et al., 2019; Whitty & Buchanan, 2016), it is unsurprising that students in this study are cautious of identity representation in online contexts. In addition to impersonation, the ability to 'perform' and construct responses online was considered as another form of potential deceit, albeit perhaps a 'lesser deceit', students highlighted that although the individual may be who they say they are, their responses may be fabricated, leading to scepticism and an inability to trust completely.

Emily (22, FG4): *'I think people let their guard down, they're talking to people online so I think they feel more comfortable to share things or give opinions which they may not give in person because I know some people are like keyboard warriors where they have all the talk and lots of things to say but when they meet in person they're really shy and reserved, so I think you have to be careful of what you're looking for and not to take everything people say as gospel because they could just be like mini catfishing...'*

The perceived incongruence between some students online and offline communication with intimate others is perhaps unsurprising given the asynchronous nature of online messaging platforms which facilitate the ability to 'enhance performance' via delayed constructed responses (Henderson & Guildings, 2004). In addition to perceived potential differences in an individual's personality online versus offline as discussed previously by Nathan, the difference in appearance when meeting in person in comparison to an individual's online profile was also discussed as a dilemma of digital intimacies by Roland:

Roland (23, FG3): *'There's also the thing of being catfished that's what they call it... It happened to a couple of my mates, obviously you mentioned the personality thing but the big thing on Tinder is all about the looks, especially like, he met someone he wasn't personally expecting and just walked out of the restaurant, that's really bad I know...'*

Subsequently, despite facilitating identity exploration, the affordances of platforms in enabling constructed profiles and communication were considered as a significant risk, influencing students' perceptions of trust and intimacy. For Paige, the perceived risk of 'catfishing' was enhanced during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the conditions, such as reduced in-person contact, increased internet use and loneliness, including amongst young adults, were associated with increased online romance fraud victimisation (Buil-Gil & Zeng, 2022).

Paige (20, Interview): *'... you can do a lot of lying, over text. If you know what I mean, yeah. And I think, it really is that, like, do I trust what this person is saying? Especially in today's situations, so some people might go and say if they haven't gone on these like little socially distant dates, if people go three, four, weeks chatting to someone every day not being able to see them, you might have a little bit of a higher risk of catfishing maybe people taking advantage of the fact that they can catfish easier.'*

For Paige, the opportunity to lie and deceive when talking to a potential intimate other online is enhanced, part of which can be overcome by being able to see the person, as she described

moving from messaging, to Facetime, to meeting in person as a form of risk management. Subsequently, the medium of communication plays an important role in enhancing or eroding trust (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). Normative behaviours in reducing uncertainty during relationship development in online spaces has been explored by Fox and Anderegg (2014), who suggest that, in their student sample, there are multiple passive, active and interactive methods of reducing uncertainty whilst dating, including looking through profiles, 'friending' the individual and online messaging. However, as opposed to one platform, as in Fox and Anderegg (2014), recognising the multiple platform realities of students is key. For example, Libby (20, FG1) described using Instagram to first check a potential intimate partner's profile, befriending one another on Facebook, to messaging "back and forth", to calling and subsequently "video calling" prior to meeting in person. The development of online platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, alongside the utilisation of Facetime, to facilitate video call, mean students are able to connect 'face-to-face' via an online medium to reduce risk and uncertainty whilst dating at a distance. Despite concerns around deception and potential 'masking' of self via online profiles and communication, almost all students continued to engage in the pursuit of romantic relationships via online platforms, suggesting that the associated risk in being able to trust others in online spaces is overruled by the desire for intimacy. Subsequently regardless of the changing social values outlined in section 2.2, it could be argued that emerging adults still idolise love, despite a fear of investment present in a risk society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), leading to multiple and endless pursuits of intimacy (Hobbs et al., 2017).

5.2.2 Confidence, trust, and disclosure

The idea of the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992), sometimes defined as a transient, fleeting view of romantic relationships also raises questions around practices of intimacy. Such theories imply that there is no guarantee of lasting relationships, and therefore continually signalling commitment and trust is of high importance (Boiger, 2019). Perhaps part of the reason as to why the students interviewed continued to utilise online platforms when forming and maintaining relationships was related to the platform affordances, enabling disclosure of personal thoughts, as well as enhancing self-confidence. As outlined in section 2.3.2, online spaces provide unique opportunities for self-disclosure and risk-taking (Henderson & Guildings, 2004), providing an additional medium in which individuals can decide to reveal more and more details about themselves (Reed, Spiro & Butt, 2016). Risk-taking is an experiment with trust and is key to how we construct our identities in the reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991), taken to "gain a valued identity, to protect one's identity or to be honest to one's identity" (Zinn, 2020, p. 90). For young people in particular, risk-taking and

perceptions of risk, have been highlighted as important for identity development, pleasure-seeking, and connection with peers (Mitchell et al., 2001; Green et al., 2000).

For some of the students interviewed, when exploring potential romantic connections, there was a recognition that online platforms provide a 'safe place' to engage in conversations which may not have taken place offline. Online platforms therefore provided an opportunity for some students to seek intimacy, while also reducing levels of anxiety induced by risk-taking and disclosure. Emily outlines how the affordances of platforms, such as Tinder, reduce negative repercussions, as they remove the awkwardness of potential rejection by removing notifications for those you have swiped for.

Emily (24, Interview): *'I think just the fact that it's online, gives you more of a confidence. Like if me and [name] had walked past in the street, I would not have approached him and spoken to him, he wouldn't recognise me. I may have recognised him. But I wouldn't have approached him or spoken to him, I wouldn't have done it. So, I think when you get put in this situation, you act much differently like you suddenly have it's like keyboard warrior, your online you behind the screen, what's the worst that could happen. Like especially on Tinder because if you swipe on someone to say, you know, you liked them, they don't know. And vice versa, like there is no sort of negative repercussions to putting yourself out there. There's not like an embarrassing situation where they get a notification saying they swiped on you... but you have to have a lot of confidence to walk up to someone and introduce yourself and a little bit of flirting, like the thought of it makes me feel so anxious! Like, I don't know how people did it before, you know.'*

For Emily, the idea of meeting someone outside of online dating platforms appears incomprehensible, due to the amount of perceived confidence required. Instead, the ability to communicate with others in online spaces enables, as Emily refers to it, a 'keyboard warrior' persona, in which she feels comfortable in putting herself out there. It is well recognised that online spaces can provide both opportunities and risks (Livingstone, 2008), with the two being heavily intertwined and reflecting the double-edged sword of modernity characterised by increasing benefits alongside new threats and risks (Giddens, 1991). The narratives of students suggesting that engagement with online platforms to seek intimate others leads to risks of being 'catfished', as well as facilitating enhanced confidence in building new connections, is demonstrative of this dichotomy. The potential for online environments to facilitate personality expression in different ways is a key concept outlined within the theory of online disinhibition (Suler, 2004). Suler (2004) suggests that individuals may be more likely to disclose and explore different facets of their identities online due to the disinhibition

experienced and afforded by online spaces, such as, the opportunities for anonymity, invisibility, and asynchrony. In line with Suler's (2004) idea of 'invisibility' afforded by online platforms, in which an absence of immediate physical feedback, including verbal and facial cues, leads to disinhibition, Maria suggested that a lack of physical presence whilst having intimate conversation reduced her levels of anxiety.

Maria (18, FG1): *'Yeah, but I think online relationships escalate quicker because er, you don't see that person face to face, so you don't have that anxiety like if I tell him now that I feel this way or if I tell him now that I want us to do this or so... I can tell him through a text message, because he is not here and at least I don't have that anxiety if I am face to face and I have to say something important I get shy and I can't speak anymore...'*

Maria, who built a relationship with her partner prior to moving to university, suggested that disclosure of information is easier online, leading to quicker relationship formation. For participants, intimacy in relationships is subsequently enhanced online by the ability to engage in selective, positive self-presentation and the capacity to carefully construct responses (Walther, 1996; Walther & Whitty, 2021). This appears to be the case, in particular, for individuals with social anxiety, in which the affordances of online message-based communication can lead to interpersonal connectedness and increases in perceived shared attitudes (Lundy & Drouin, 2016; High & Caplan, 2009). In comparison to research frequently highlighting correlates between social media and anxiety (Keles et al., 2019; O'Day & Heimberg, 2021), the students examples reflect the nuanced experiences of utilising platforms as mediums to alleviate feelings of anxiety, highlighting the importance of a balanced approach in conceptualising opportunities and risk associated with digital technologies (Livingstone, 2008). Both Maria and Emily suggested that online mediums reduced their feelings of anxiety when engaging in intimate conversations with another person, enabling them to effectively impression manage whilst also experiencing disinhibition afforded by mediated communication. Later in our discussion, Maria also suggested that trust is of higher importance in relationships which are formed and maintained in an online space, due to the lack of physical proximity. The inability to be face-to-face every day, according to Maria, requires additional trust.

Maria (18, FG1): *'So online relationships work just as real relationships, because it is a real relationship, it is just based on more trust because you can't see each other every day and you have to trust the person that you are talking too, and he or she has to trust you. It's just understanding and trust from my point of view, it can work, it cannot work.'*

Maria makes a distinction between 'online relationships' and 'real relationships', despite her clear statement that relationships which exist primarily in online spaces are just as 'true' and 'real' as those that take place offline. However, from her statement, it is clear that she perceives online relationships as requiring additional mutual trust due to physical absence. Maria's perception of online relationships requiring more trust, is subsequently in line with Giddens observations of trust:

'Trust is related to absence in time and in whose space. There would be no need to trust anyone who's activities were continually visible and thought processes were transparent, or to trust any system whose workings were wholly known and understood. It has been said that trust is "a device for coping with the freedom of others", but the prime condition of requirements for trust is not lack of power but lack of full information.'
(Giddens, 1991, p. 33).

For many students interviewed, the use of digital technologies in the search for romantic partners, whilst considered as risky, was almost second nature, a necessary medium for seeking trust and intimacy with others, something of particular importance during the transition to university. This is in accordance with research alongside young people aged 9-19 years, in which the 'risk' associated with disclosure in online environments was considered crucial for the development of trust with others (Bryce & Fraser, 2014). The idea of students engaging in acts of reflexivity and self-disclosure to explore relationships with others is perhaps unsurprising given that theories of independent and interdependent self-construal reflect similar ideas to individualisation, in which those within more westernised cultures tend to operate within a more independent mode of relating (Boiger, 2019). In these cultures, discovering internal attributes and engaging in a process of self-disclosure is desired (Kitayama et al., 2009). For the students, while the online platforms utilised to seek intimacy were considered as risky, due to opportunities for perceived inauthenticity, the potential for a reduction in anxiety induced by forming relationships, alongside the ability to engage in mutual self-disclosure, appear to outweigh such risks.

5.2.3 "It is like 'pooping' at someone's house": Trust and digital intimacies

The quote in the sub-heading above reflects the interchangeability between offline intimate acts and online intimacy practices such as sharing intimate images, a common practice across emerging adulthood (Mori et al., 2020). Despite nuanced constructions of trust in the context of relationships in hybrid ecologies, there was consensus around the importance of trust in intimacy practices. As outlined briefly in Chapter 4 (section 4.3) sharing intimate images with others was a way of forming, but also maintaining intimacy during the transition to university, and throughout university, predominantly when relationships were physically distant. Prior to

engaging in the practice of image sharing and receipt students explored the level of trust in an intimate partner. For example, Maria and Oli, suggest that this was likely to be once the relationship was official and established, but irrespective of time, while Iwan suggests that the length of the relationship prior to becoming romantic partners is important in determining when to send intimate images. In our discussion, I asked the students to describe the conditions required for engaging in intimate image sharing:

Oli (21, FG1): *'Only when I was in a relationship.'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'I was just doing it with people that I was in a relationship with, and I could **trust**'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'We knew each other for like 2 years before our relationship, so it was like day two (laughs)!'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'It was pretty soon'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'I can't remember exactly the time.'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'For some reason I just felt like I could trust him, and I could do this without him leaking it on the internet or something.'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'I don't know how (laughs)'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'That's a lie, you don't know how to put them on the internet?'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'No, I don't know how she trusted me'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'Ohhhh ok.'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'Well, it's a person you don't know!'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'It's not like it was my face in those photos'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'Yeah, but still!'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'So if it was on the internet no one could say it was my body or something, they had no proof'*

Despite suggesting that she could trust Oli, Maria still engaged in additional risk-management behaviours, reducing the likelihood of her identification by removing her face from intimate images, as well as engaging in 'trust work', building a picture of Oli before sending intimate images (Amundsen, 2023). Renfrow and Rollo (2014) in their qualitative study of US college students, identified that students would engage in risk-mitigation by regulating and controlling image contents, for example managing the explicitness of images, or eliminating identifying characteristics, similarly to practices Maria engaged in, in order to maintain privacy should the recipient engage in non-consensual image sharing. However, unlike Renfrow & Rollo's (2014, p. 914) findings in which sending intimate images was based on a "claim of normalcy" due to individuals being in committed romantic relationships, Maria and Oli appear to engage in the practice of image sharing prior to this point in their relationship, as a "resource for intimacy"

(Amundsen, 2022, p. 123) after establishing trust. As discussed in section 2.3.2, intimate image exchanges can be conceptualised as ‘gifting’ (Mauss, 2002; Berking, 1999), as a means for students to “actively invest and sustain their relationships with one another” (Bond, 2014, p. 102). Subsequently, for Maria and Oli, trust appears to be the key risk-mitigating factor when considering the sending of intimate images in contrast to Iwan, in which the status and duration of a relationship appeared to be of greater importance.

Sending intimate images was described by the students as a normalised part of a relationship formation and maintenance. In the quote below, Rhys describes how sending intimate images is a stage, compared to using the toilet when staying over at an intimate partner’s house, both potentially awkward and embarrassing, but a necessary act in the endeavour for intimacy. For some of the students interviewed, sharing their intimate images in this context is an acceptable risk, and is central to sustaining trust, and subsequently, intimacy.

Rhys (21, FG2): *‘Well I’m speaking to someone now, I just kind of as a joke asked them, go on send me a nude and it was meant as a joke... but then you move on and it’s just a case of you know, like I pooped at her house and I think that is a stage, like accepting that the other person poops, at the beginning its like oh my god, but that’s the trust you know it’s an intimate thing that you don’t really want to share with someone because you might clog the toilet which has happened believe it or not, and if you have use soap it goes down like a treat... ‘No all jokes aside I think it’s something intimate that you share with someone and now nudes like you said have become a much easier thing to do where it’s like it just becomes natural, we see it all the time, it’s just easier, but in terms of the human aspect...you’re probably a bit more shy but when you’re speaking on a phone and you don’t necessarily have to deal with that persons reaction at that moment so that probably makes it easier to say things like that...’*

Rhys explains how, for him, engaging in sharing sexual images is something requiring trust. Interestingly, he comments upon how he suggested his partner shares a nude with him as a ‘joke’, however, it is clear from his later comments that the act of sharing intimate images is a normalised social practice of trust and intimacy as opposed to solely an act of playfulness. Rhys’ attempt to keep the sharing of sexual images as light-hearted, by suggesting it was a ‘joke’ could be inferred as a mechanism to explore sexual boundaries with another, particularly as sexting has been suggested as a social practice associated with ‘learning by doing’ (Roberts & Ravn, 2020, p. 268). Nonetheless, dependent on context, this type of behaviour for some individuals may also be considered as setting an expectation for sharing of sexual images, blurring the boundaries of consent (Amundsen, 2019) and used as a means to

highlight status and pressure for reciprocity (Mauss, 2002; Bond, 2014). Nonetheless, sending intimate images could be considered as an act of mutual self-disclosure, in pursuit of a 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992), with the students continuously sharing information about themselves, including their bodies, as well as a means of communicating trust and navigating student social norms around practices of intimacy.

5.2.4 Ethics of digital intimacies

Risk, trust, and intimacy appear to be heavily intertwined, with trust acting as a prerequisite for risk-taking, as well as a mechanism for risk-management. Building upon the narrative in the previous subsection, Rhys later describes how, at the point of relationship dissolution, discussions about deleting intimate imagery are inevitable, highlighting the heightened role of trust and risk in image sharing due to the potential permanence of digital content after a relationship has ended.

Rhys (21, FG2): *'A new relationship can sour and people can be bitches, and be really, really, mean, and that goes back to trust and you build that trust with people over time, erm especially when you are in a long distance relationships... you know let's be honest... that's [sending intimate images] a part of it, and after that, at the end of the relationship, it's happened twice now, where you just kind of become human to each other and just like, will you just be able to delete those, hmm yeah sure fine and then you go back to hating each other, but for 5 seconds, we agree on something finally!'*

Rhys describes the exchange of requesting image deletion as two individuals "becoming human to each other", reflecting the morality surrounding online intimacy practices, and ethics of sharing images that extends beyond the duration of a relationship. When engaging in online intimacy practices, careful consideration, and calculation, of trust in an intimate partner therefore must extend beyond a single practice or behaviour conducted in a particular context, at a particular moment in time (Setty, 2018a). This example highlights how contexts in which content was shared can change, and subsequently the accepted norms associated with that context can collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2014), with, in Rhys case, a requirement to be re-affirmed. Furthermore, although literature tends to suggest that young men's sexting behaviour is low risk in comparison to young women's (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016), Rhys' response suggests that image deletion after relationship dissolution is equally valued, presumably to prevent non-consensual sharing, implying the dominant narratives of gendered risks associated with sexting are nuanced (Burkett, 2015; Waling et al., 2020). These findings

build upon research which is predominantly focused upon heterosexual women's perspectives and experiences of sexting (Amundsen, 2024).

In the group interviews, Finley provided another example of the ethics surrounding image sharing, demonstrating the importance of trust in identifying whether to share an intimate image with another person, and the consequence if this trust is 'misplaced'.

Finley (20, FG5): *'A very similar story, someone who has recently been on this bizarre spree of getting with people has in the same way had gossip about this and that, who the latest person is and if there is a nude she'll show us, or she'll attempt to show us a nude and on occasion she has been rather successful but there is an element there of that is, someone's privates 'quite literally', that's someone's private property, he gave that to you in faith, maybe misplaced faith because it is a one night stand, erm so there's an element there where that's maybe when the university could step in and say no you don't... this type of material should be shared with someone you can trust, for me personally I have only really ever nearly got to that stage once or twice in that 3 year relationship, not because we were scared to do it, but its literally private information... come meet me in person, you don't need a photo do you, but it became long distance and that diminished...'*

Finley describes intimate images as private property, identifying ownership with the sender as opposed to the receiver. He also suggests, like many other students, that sending intimate images is a way to connect with a romantic other, particularly at a distance, yet sharing images with the wrong person without establishing trust is an act of "misplaced faith". Subsequently, similarly to young peoples in Setty's (2018a; 2019) research, students constructed acceptable contexts based on hierarchies of relationships, underpinned by the establishment of trust. In Finley's example, there is an expectation that the individual sharing the image, will have a shared understanding of the appropriate contexts to send intimate images, for example outside the depicted distrust surrounding a 'one night stand' and within an established relationship. Not only this, but the notion of consent with regards to who the image should be shared with was also highlighted by my participants. Consent as a concept has been debated widely, due to its intricacy and complexity, and "the importance of privacy and consent for all authors of ephemeral social media content" (Hasinoff, 2012, p. 454) has been highlighted as crucial for navigating hybrid ecologies. In the context of HE, conceptualising sexual consent has been recognised as multifaceted, making policy creation difficult to enable consensual sex while tackling sexual assault (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Dominant narratives tend to focus on a legislative understanding of consent, and an assumption that all students conceptualise consent in the same way, however research highlights that students do not necessarily

perceive consent via a legal frame or pertain the same level of understanding (Wignall et al., 2022). Similarly, in the context of online spaces, students' perceptions and understanding of sexual consent may also differ, as highlighted in Finley's interaction with another student.

Across some students' narratives, the onus is placed on the individual to share the image with someone that they trust, as opposed to a focus on the recipients understanding of the ethics of sexting, depicting dominant narratives of victim-blaming in non-consensual intimate-image sharing (Bond & Tyrrell, 2019; Law Commission, 2022). Finley's example also highlights the ways in which 'hookup' culture at university, and sharing intimate images with others, may be a means to building peer relationships and status, and while literature suggests that sexting risks and consequences are predominantly gendered in youth culture (Salter et al., 2013), the narratives here further suggest that this relationship is nuanced and complex.

Across other interviews, male students demonstrated an awareness of the potential gendered nature of sexting that can impact young women negatively (Ravn et al., 2019), in which women's bodies may be more vulnerable to being exposed or shared without permission. Both Oli and Iwan acknowledge a difference between the responses to, and risks, associated with non-consensual sharing of images for both men and women, while women can have it 'pretty bad' if an image of them is shared, for men, the response is less severe, presumably because of, what Oli suggests as, lesser value attributed to intimate images of men.

Oli (21, FG1): *'For me, I don't really care, the most that somebody could see of me, I don't think they'd really be interested in that.'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'Yeah, it's also true for us'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'Yeah, I know a guy and his ex-girlfriend, I think it was like 2 years ago she leaked some photos of him after they broke up and like it didn't affect him in any way, and people were like 'oh I saw you naked''*

Oli (21, FG1): *'It depends for girls, some people can have it pretty bad...'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'Yeah, most of the time I think'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'Yeah, well don't put them on the internet!'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'Yeah, well let's not judge people who have leaked photos on the internet...'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'Yeah I know but I just don't think you should leak them in the first place'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'Obviously'*

Interviewer: *'What are your views of consent in that situation, so if someone shared an image with someone else and they put that online, what would you think about that scenario?'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'They're just arseholes'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'Yeah'*

Scott (22, FG1): *'Yeah, it's a betrayal of trust'*

Nonetheless, amongst the students in this focus group, there is a consensus that someone who non-consensually shares intimate images is engaging in a “betrayal of trust”. Thus, further suggesting that trust, for many students, is a pre-requisite to engaging in online intimacy practices. Expanding on Marwick and boyd’s (2014) conceptualisation of ‘networked privacy’, the findings of this study suggest that students’ experiences of trust in digital intimacies could also be constructed as ‘networked’, being shaped by both social norms and technological affordances. For example, how students conceptualise trust in the context of intimate image sharing is shaped by both social norms (whom to share with and in what context), alongside risk-management techniques that recognise the affordances of online platforms, and the implications for continuously changing contexts (private consensual sharing to potential public non-consensual sharing).

Digital technologies thus facilitate connection for students in a multitude of ways, however when engaging in digital intimacies, a myriad of continuous judgements and evaluations of potential risks are taking place based on expectations and perceptions of trust in relationships. Across interviews, students describe how they are engaging in social practices, such as sending intimate images, as a normalised part of their everyday lives, yet non-consensual image sharing is at times conceptualised as an act of “misplaced faith”, with varying understanding of consensual and non-consensual digital intimacies. Subsequently, as outlined in section 2.5.3, Universities therefore have a role to play in firstly, acknowledging that students are engaging in online intimacy practices, and subsequently online harms are possible in their contexts (Phippen & Bond, 2022a), and secondly, shaping the discourse around victim-blaming and consent that extends to online spaces.

5.3 Managing ontological (in)security

5.3.1 *Ontological (in)security during transition*

The transition to university, could be argued as a time of fluctuating ontological security, that is, a disruption to the sense of continuity in one’s life and also one’s self-identity. Students highlighted a change in how they explore their idea of ‘self’ when transitioning to university, with university, for some, acting as an institutional frame for identity development (Kehily, 2009). Nonetheless, research is less likely to consider the implications of transitioning to and within university upon students’ romantic and sexual relationships which, as mentioned in section 2.3.1, form part of how identities are constructed. Whilst interviewing students it

became apparent that for those in relationships, particularly with individuals external to their immediate university community, that the transition to and within university had implications for their partners' sense of security in their relationship. This is outlined below by Corey, who suggested that his partners insecurities were exacerbated when he started university and made connections with peers who his partner was unfamiliar with.

Corey (20, FG2): *'Well my current partner he's got really bad anxiety about me leaving him or me going after someone else and coming back to someone else... he'll just say look I need to ask you, have you been seeing this person and I'll say no I haven't he is just a friend from uni, here are pictures of him with his student card, this is him in class he is a friend from class. I think the fact that he is able to access my phone sort of helps him deal with that but also makes it worse because he can just go onto my phone and check. I have given him my password, and he can go on my phone and check to say oh ok he has a message from this person, this person, this person, oh wait, who is this person and whilst it is helping him in terms of him being able to check who I am messaging and check there are no ex-partners messaging me, any person he doesn't recognise is a bit of a threat...'*

Interviewer: *'How does that make you feel?'*

Corey (20, FG2): *'I don't really mind, I can understand why people would mind because there are times I have thought stop looking at my phone that's not helping you. But then there have been times where he has looked at my phone and it has helped him because I don't have any messages from people he doesn't recognise. But the fact that he is looking and seeing people he doesn't recognise has prompted me to bring him more into my life and introduce him to my friends and family and that has had a positive effect on our relationship and his life as well because he is now familiar with some of those people. So, it has been positive, but I can see it going negatively as well.'*

For Corey, navigating his partner's insecurities has become a part of his experience of building relationships at university. The ability for his partner to monitor and view Corey's connections via online platforms has contributed both to feelings of anxiety, but also a means of managing his ontological security (Giddens 1991), that is, managing the threat to continuity in their relationship and subsequently a stable sense of self. In this example, digital technologies facilitated Corey's ability to reassure his partner, by engaging in social practices such as sharing passwords as a way of reducing levels of anxiety associated with him building new social connections at university. It could be argued that there is a fine line between care and control when negotiating and managing smartphone access (Doerfler et al., 2024), however

Corey constructs this primarily as a means of care and intimacy, a necessary act to reassure his partner that he remains faithful to their relationship. Absence in space, as a result of one partner attending university can subsequently challenge an individual's level of trust in their intimate partner, as trust is required in situations in which actions and thought processes are not continually visible and transparent (Giddens, 1991). Trust, as defined by Rousseau et al (1998, p. 395), reflects an "intention to accept vulnerability", subsequently the students' willingness to share passwords and access to devices reflect trust, risk and vulnerability. Paige also recounted her long-distance partners insecurities related to her activities at university. Despite her partners knowledge of her whereabouts via tracking apps, he continued to suggest a lack of trust in her newly formed friendships, in what Paige perceived as an attempt to 'guilt-trip' her into spending less time with them.

Paige (20, Interview): *'... I remember telling him I was getting a taxi, but it was really warm. And we weren't that drunk. So, we just walked home, and he watched me on tracker walk home, waited till I got back to my flat rang me up and bollocked me for not getting a taxi... he'd always ring me I'd go to like house parties in or flat parties in other flats in [halls of residence]. And he'd be ringing me, texting me kind of almost guilt tripping me to come home kind of thing. He said that he didn't trust my friendship group and all that, but I saw no problem with my friends.'*

Interviewer: *'...Was there anything else that he'd mention?'*

Paige (20, Interview): *'Um, so I do like a drink. So he asked me what I was drinking. How many I've had? Like, do you really think you should be drinking that much around people that won't help you if you need it, that kind of thing. And the biggest one was that how I always put a full-face of makeup on and dress nice to my friends but never for him. So, I'd send him photos of me and my friends at a party and he'd be kicking off about it. And put me in a really crappy mood until I came home.'*

In these examples, monitoring and tracking behaviours exhibited by student's romantic partners in a context of ontological (in)security, as well as limited trust due to physical absence in space and time, was constructed differently by my participants. For Corey, the actions of his partner were considered to be a result of anxiety and insecurity of him meeting romantic others, while Paige described the behaviour of her partner as manipulative. Digital technologies facilitated others with access to these students lives at university, which was perceived in both positive and negative lights, by enabling the embedding of their partners in their journey but also creating distance due to inconsistencies in experience respectively. As explored further in section 6.3, while Paige reflected on her partners behaviour as troubling after the relationship had ended, in an earlier interview, her suggestion about the use of online

tracking apps was constructed as a mechanism to promote care as opposed to control. This example highlights the blurred boundaries and contextual constructions of healthy behaviours within some of the students' intimate relationships from initiation, maintenance and finally to dissolution. Furthermore, whilst navigating their own journey of transition to and within university, those student in relationships are also managing their partners expectations and perceptions of the university experience, engaging in social practices of perceived intimacy, such as sharing locations and passwords, to maintain their partners sense of ontological security.

5.3.2 Retrospective insecurities and romantic jealousy

While students' descriptions implied a change to their partners sense of certainty in their relationship and ontological security during their university journey, many students suggested that insecurities arising during relationship formation and maintenance was related directly to prior experience. As identified by Giddens (1991, p. 114), building on Erikson's (1968) conceptualisation of 'basic trust' as foundational for identity, trust during development is key in developing ontological security:

"In the early development of the human individual, basic trust in stable circumstances of self-identity and the surrounding environment – ontological security – does not in the first instance rest upon a sense of the continuity of things or events. Rather, as we have noted, it derives from personal trust and establishes a need for trust in others which no doubt endures, in some form or another, throughout life."

The students' narratives highlight that their intimate relationships whilst at university are influenced by prior experience, and this extends to theirs, and their partners, experiences of past digital intimacies.

According to the students, certain social media applications had an impact on their partners perceptions of relational certainty, which in turn contributed toward their own perceived need to compensate for a partner's ontological insecurity. In addition to the transitory nature of image and message sharing afforded by Snapchat, Paige and Phoebe described how the 'Do Not Disturb' mode available on Android and Apple devices to prevent notifications, also led to feelings of paranoia and distrust amongst their partners.

Paige (19, FG2): *'That's very similar about my boyfriend now, his ex-girlfriend used to have the do not disturb on constantly and she was messaging her ex and for him that was like a massive thing I think [name] appreciates the fact that, or I think if one of our phone pings we just go oh so and so has messaged you this and we've just kind of got that where we don't care because we know there is nothing...'*

Aaliyah (19, FG2): *'... from my experiences I can understand why you might be a bit paranoid about what your partner is doing at the beginning of the relationship, I think further in if you are still worried there is something wrong with your relationship because there is no trust...'*

Phoebe (20, FG2): *'With my boyfriend... his ex was very shady about her phone so whenever she was with him she would always have do not disturb on so she wouldn't get any messages pop up and she wouldn't let him on her phone... but with me I'm like you can have your fingerprint on my phone you can go on it whenever you want I've got nothing to hide so I let him freely do it and he hasn't felt the need to do that yet because he has the access, we do go on each other's phones but not to look at what we're doing, just because I'm a nosey person and I like reading his group chats...'*

For Phoebe and Paige in particular, open, and honest communication about what they were engaging with on their phone was important in maintaining trust in the context of a romantic relationship. Not only this, but sharing access to personal devices, via fingerprint access and passcodes, was also considered key in managing a partners ontological insecurity induced by negative experiences in previous relationships. Sharing access to personal devices in itself was therefore considered as an act of intimacy, symbolic of trust (Doerfler et al., 2024), and a means to diffuse insecurities. The findings build upon previous research (Doerfler et al., 2024) by highlighting that diverse affordances of online platforms can lead to trust or distrust. From the students' perspectives, not only can password sharing mediate trust, but also the use of apps with ephemeral content sharing and settings to prevent notifications.

Mobile phones, frequently conceptualised as an extension of the self, hold salient personal information about an individual's life, and subsequent access can provide further insight into their private self. The implications of sharing access therefore appear to be twofold, facilitating intimacy but also risking further ontological insecurity if boundaries in consensual and reciprocal sharing are crossed. The practice of sharing passwords and access to devices was further highlighted by Rhys, who suggested that he shared this information freely with his ex-partner.

Rhys (22, Interview): *'... if you're in a relationship and you struggle to trust people or you have issues with, I don't know what it'd be actually cause you to do that. I think preliminarily be trust. So yeah, if you're worried about your partner, or you're worried about a particular person, I certainly wouldn't share any sort of passwords online... I mean, saying that I did do that before. And I did share like all my passwords and my ex-girlfriend. So, I think I would if they if they asked for it, but I'd seriously have a*

conversation with them and be like, look, you know, we're not 12, just trust me, or that's it. That's kind of like a big, big deal breaker for me.'

Interviewer: *'So you mentioned that you shared passwords with your girlfriend... Could you tell me a bit about what the reasoning behind that was, from your perspective?'*

Rhys (22, Interview): *I think she was jealous. I think she, she wanted to know. Or I think, actually, what it was, I think I might have signed into her device with my phone or like through the communal. So, we had like an iPad and stuff. And we both use the iPad. And I just signed in my Facebook and I kind of just left it there. And so, you know, it was kind of transparent. I'm pretty sure she knew my password. I knew her password because she told me one time when we had to sign up for something. She was busy. So, she was just like, Yeah, can you sign in for me? And so, then that was it. But it wasn't me asking her to check up on her things or anything. I think I did, though, at one point, checked her chats, must have done. But just out of curiosity, just to see what kind of conversations she was having? Maybe from a jealousy perspective. I don't know. I don't remember anymore.'*

Rhys initially suggested that he would not share passwords to accounts with intimate partners, yet as the conversation continued, he implied that he did share this information with his ex-partner, presumably due to established trust and subsequently as a practice of intimacy and to facilitate "transparency". It is interesting that perhaps objectively, there is a perception that sharing passwords and subsequently sacrificing an element of self-privacy is something beyond comprehension, yet in the context of an intimate partner relationship, the expectations change. I felt a sense of unease expressed by Rhys, as he reflected upon checking his ex-girlfriend's social media, highlighting some of the nuanced, subtle experiences of morality, ethics and consent amongst students when navigating boundaries. In these examples, trust, or a lack of trust, is highlighted as central to engaging in particular social practices conceptualised as intimacy. The students appear to compensate for their partners ontological insecurity by sharing passcodes, turning off 'do not disturb' functions and using tracking apps to present themselves as being transparent and accountable. These actions could be considered as ways to reduce the requirement for trust, by enhancing visibility of actions (Giddens, 1991). Nonetheless, although enabling reassurance and trust if access is granted consensually, due to the nature and affordances of certain platforms, they may also exacerbate feelings of insecurity by acting as tangible, yet private, accessible gateways into the lives of others.

5.3.3 Online opportunities for deceit: *'...that's what social media does isn't it, it makes you paranoid'.*

Trust, and subsequently, intimacy, requires faith and confidence in another and oneself. Giddens (1990, p.92) describes ontological security and its intersection with trust as:

“... the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action. A sense of the reliability of persons and things, so central to the notion of trust, is basic to feelings of ontological security; hence the two are psychologically closely related.”

Digital technologies are considered as contributing toward ontological security via interpersonal and mass communication with multitude of others enabling the continual flow of information (Cohen & Metzger, 1998; Markham, 2021). However, as highlighted in the previous section, affordances of online platforms could also be considered to contribute to ontological insecurity, in one's relationships and subsequently oneself. For example, Emily describes below how one of her friends saw her partner out with others via social media, which led to a state of anxiety and upset induced by feeling paranoid and insecure about the partners intentions.

Emily (22, FG4): *‘If some people have been cheated on, then that automatically scars them if you like, so for all future relationships there will be that extra paranoia, like I don't know why people cheat but some people do and then for that other person it has a knock on effect for trusting people so they get a bit paranoid with their social media presence and stuff, trying to see, oh are they interacting with anybody else, or is there anything else I should be suspicious of... I remember when one of my friends said to me, oh he did this thing and he was talking to this girl and I was like, I don't care, you shouldn't care, if you trust him... apparently I think he had gone on a night out and she had seen that he was with some other people and she got really upset about it, I was like that's not like a problem, you are just making a problem, but yeah that's what social media does isn't it, it makes you paranoid.’*

For Emily, previous negative experiences with unfaithful intimate others are a core contributing factor toward a lack of ontological security, leading to enhanced surveillance of their social media presence. Furthermore, for most of the students interviewed, the affordances of technology were conceived as a direct influencing factor upon levels of trust and ontological security. Online platforms were perceived as mechanisms facilitating increased opportunities to be unfaithful to an intimate partner, but also providing additional tests or ‘experiments with trust’ (Garfinkel, 1963), challenging an individual's ability to ‘resist’ as described by Nathan below.

Tilly (18, FG3): *'I think it is more opportunity to be unfaithful, cause like you said there are more people, I don't know how to explain it, like with snapchat and things it's easier to hide if you are cheating or being unfaithful to someone, and there are more options as such, more options out there like I think...'*

Nathan (23, FG3): *'Yeah and even if you are faithful but you can have the temptation there as well, before you even have that, but now you've got Instagram and that, random people start messaging you, and I suppose it's just the temptation if you can resist or not and how good your relationship is...'*

For Tilly and Nathan, online platforms increase opportunities to meet others, but that opportunity is also accompanied by the risk of 'temptation' to explore multiple intimacies. Interestingly, the affordances of certain online platforms were considered important in understanding romantic jealousy, 'unfaithful' behaviours, and experiences of intimate partner conflicts. Tilly and Nathan describe how platforms such as Instagram facilitate conversation with multiple others, even people who are not in your immediate social circles, and applications such as Snapchat enable and encourage unfaithful behaviours, due to the transitional and private nature of image sharing and messaging (Setty et al., 2023). Furthermore, students, such as Roland, discussed how the ability for followers to see what images they had liked on Instagram, contributed to relational conflict.

Roland (23, FG3): *'It was a bikini picture, I'm not messaging her or anything I'm just liking it...I didn't even know as well, apparently you can see what people liked if you go on activity or something...'*

Tilly (18, FG3): *'I didn't know that'*

Nathan (23, FG3): *'You can pretty much spy on your other half now can't you indirectly, you don't even need their password, you can just as you say, see what they've liked...'*

Roland's example also reflects the subjective perceptions around behaviours which constitute 'unfaithfulness' toward intimate partners, and how for him, messaging was considered as an act warranting romantic jealousy as opposed to the act of liking a 'bikini picture'. Not only this, but it highlights the level of knowledge and awareness required to access the full functionality of social media applications, whether for their intended purpose or not, and how presuming that young people are 'digital natives' is increasingly unhelpful in exploring and identifying experiences of digital intimacies. Paige also reflects on how platforms differing affordances are conceptualised as encouraging unfaithful behaviours (Setty et al., 2023; Vaterlaus et al., 2016):

Paige (20, Interview): *'He had a massive, massive issue with Snapchat. So if I was on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook next to him, he wouldn't bother. He had an Instagram when I met him. He did delete that. And he has Facebook but it's very locked down. And Snapchat he thought that was just full of like, was just used for sexting or private conversation that it shouldn't be like this secret, like so he mentions like, oh, if you're going to cheat, you'd use Snapchat, I don't like it when you're on Snapchat.'*

Paige's example above highlights further the different observations made about particular platforms and their transitory affordances which are considered conducive to unfaithful behaviours. Another example of romantic jealousy and relational conflict triggered by the ability to see the posts liked by an intimate partner are highlighted by Rhys:

Rhys (21, FG2): *'Instagram for me, because my ex-girlfriend was bisexual, it made me, not uncomfortable, but it made me insecure a bit, erm and so you guys probably think I'm really weird but... I feel like I'm oversharing, but basically it made me feel uncomfortable because I didn't feel threatened, but she wasn't afraid to show that she did like women before, erm and to me it was always like if you like them before, do you like them now, and we would have these conversations, and one time I was on Instagram... I saw her like this picture and I saw this picture and I was infuriated and we'd been speaking and everything was fine and you know, nothing was wrong and it was like what the hell this is like a complete breach of the trust and I was so angry so I screenshotted it and I circled it and sent it to her like what the hell is this...'*

In this example, the insecurity experienced by Rhys is associated with his partners sexuality, and cultural assumptions associated with bisexuality (Hayfield et al., 2014), that was subsequently further enhanced by the ability to see her activity on Instagram. Rhys' narrative also provides insight into the use of online platforms as a means of monitoring and measuring accountability of intimate others, by collecting evidence of actions that demonstrate a 'breach of the trust'. Since the time of interviewing, Instagram has removed the feature to see what others have liked, however the ability to identify '*how to see what someone likes on Instagram*' is only a click away via Google, in which I uncovered blog posts and forums discussing how to monitor others, as well as a multitude of third-party apps which report on the activity of connections.

During the transition to and throughout university, students experience fluctuating ontological security. Not only this, but for those students in relationships, this appears to also influence

their partners sense of ontological security, contributing to challenges of trust as a result of an absence in time and space, as well as increased perceived risk of romantic jealousy. The students describe a multitude of ways to manage a partner's sense of ontological security, including sharing of passcodes, tracking, and increased transparency via removing 'do not disturb' functions. While these practices provide visibility of actions and accountability, constructed as acts of intimacy and promoting care, they could also be monopolised as mechanisms to control or overstep consensual boundaries. Constructions of trust and ontological security, for my participants, are subsequently conceptualised as influencing, as well as being influenced by, contextual norms and online platform affordances.

5.4 Navigating the right to privacy

5.4.1 *'If I didn't respond for hours, I'd be dead': Online and 'always-on'*

As outlined by Setty (2018a) trust is integral in achieving privacy. In the context of intimate relationships amongst young people, establishing trust is considered key to maintaining privacy, however trust is also considered fluid and dynamic (Setty, 2018b; Marwick & boyd, 2014). Marwick & boyd (2014) highlight how social norms, in relation to information sharing, shape conceptualisations of privacy, and subsequently, as opposed to individualistic notions of privacy, understanding privacy and technologies should be re-imagined as networked, shaped by social relationships and the affordances of technologies. Extending the idea of the affordances of technology, the "functional and relational aspects that frame possibilities for action" (Hutchby, 2001, p. 444), in shaping constructions of privacy, my participants discussed how platform affordances, such as the ability to see when someone is online, and the notion of 'perpetual contact', had negative implications for their ability to manage privacy in an intimate relationship.

Scott (22, FG1): *'...I use messenger to speak with my current girlfriend but normally that is do you want to meet up at x time, I just feel old because I don't use my phone much. I got a message the other day, I was sat there for half an hour, and I didn't respond, and I responded and then it was like 'where were you' and I was like (pft)...*

Maria (18, FG1): *'Yes social media can do that to relationships, if you don't respond for hours, you're doing uni work or something'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'If I didn't respond for hours, I'd be dead'*

The above discussion highlights how the expectation of immediacy afforded by digital technologies, led to feelings of confinement, encouraging the use of 'white lies', such as 'I'm doing university work', to account for delayed responses in an attempt to manage the desire for privacy. The absence in space and time in the form of geographical distance and prolonged

responses in the example provided by the students, were considered as key contributing factors in relational conflict, creating unrealistic expectations, and shaping privacy norms. Thus, “the virtue and vice people find in the availability of the mobile telephone and its uses represent concerns about control over the new degree of contact and availability the mobile phone makes possible” (Katz & Aakhus, 2002, p.9). Later in the conversation, Scott continued to suggest that there was a conflict between his perception of himself as an independent student and the expectation of frequent contact with his partner.

Scott (22, FG1): *‘...I feel like there’s less ‘me time’ because there’s an expectation, I’ll always have the phone handy, just in case something comes up and I’m available. Whereas, say I’ve like been at uni all day, I’m just going to go home and eat a pizza and play a video game because I’m a student, and it’s like I’ll be doing that and then I’ll be thinking, oh have I checked my phone, have I got any messages, she might send me a message and it hasn’t been receive and she’ll respond like, are you busy or something.... I don’t know, it’s not like what I was doing was really important, I’m just playing a game I really enjoy.’*

Maria (18, FG1): *‘See you shouldn’t need excuses’*

Oli (21, FG1): *‘Yeah, just tell her you’re playing a game’*

Scott (22, FG1): *‘I just feel bad’*

Maria (18, FG1): *‘You should tell her you need some yourself time, so you can relax and put all your thoughts in place, and I bet she’d understand’*

Scott (22, FG1): *‘We have had that conversation, but I don’t know, I still feel a bit bad about it, because there is still the expectation that I will respond quickly. And I know I’ve been the one to send the message and she doesn’t respond and I’m like is she alright... and she does, and she responds, and I’m like oh she’s fine, of course she is, she is a capable human adult, she didn’t respond for 10 minutes, what if she banged her head in the shower and now, she is dead (laughs).’*

Callum (25, FG1): *‘Do you think that would be different for like how long you have been together with someone? So, for like for instance, if you’ve only been for someone for a month, do you reckon there is more pressure? Do you feel like you have to reply? I’ve been with my girlfriend for 8 years, so if I don’t reply for half a day like she doesn’t care, so it’s like I don’t know...’*

Scott (22, FG1): *‘I think there is an element of time together, maybe not a requirement of time together, but the level of trust... and the expectation, oh you didn’t respond for 12 hours I’m sure you had a valid excuse whereas like when there’s not much trust, you didn’t respond for 12 hours... what happened!?’*

For Scott, the expectation to be available and contactable directly conflicts with his perception of what it means to be a student, to be independent and have time to “go home and eat pizza and play a video game” without the expectation to be immediately responsive to anyone. In this instance, Scott suggests that the maintenance of privacy is linked primarily to trust, that to trust in another means confidence in the morality of other individuals reasoning and actions. Interestingly, Scott suggests that he also expects immediate responses as a means of protecting and managing his own anxieties, subsequently reciprocating the expectations of immediacy despite his own reservations when the same is expected of him. For Scott, and other students interviewed, the expectation of immediacy is built upon a desire for awareness of another’s safety, highlighting the blurred boundaries between whether this expectation is constructed as a means of care or control, which is discussed further in chapter 6. Phoebe and Rhys’s narrative reflect this further, by outlining the potential for online platforms to afford additional ways to prevent forms of privacy in what are conceived as networked publics (Marwick & boyd, 2014). The very nature of social media and communication platforms is to share to a wider networked ecosystem, however from student narratives, it appears that there are social expectations as to how this information is used. In the examples highlighted below, the function of being able to identify when someone was ‘active’ across social media platforms led to a perceived breach of privacy, in which this information was used in an attempt to control or question intentions.

Phoebe (20, FG2): *‘Just the snapchat maps one, before I was with my boyfriend I was talking to a guy, because it tells you how many minutes ago you were active he’d kick off at me all the time if I was on there like just now but I weren’t replying to him like straight away, he was controlling and wanted my attention all the time... if I didn’t tell him I was going out, he would be like why are you out what are you doing, it was very weird, yeah...’*

Rhys (21, FG2): *‘Yes, same thing, with Facebook it tells you when you’re last active, you say goodnight to someone, and you stay on your phone because you’re a human being and you just go on random stuff and they’re like you’re still active, who are you talking too, uhoh...’*

The affordances of online platforms appear to shape the way in which students are enacting and conceptualising privacy. The expectation of being ‘always on’, or the experience of ‘perpetual contact’ (Katz & Aakhus, 2002), appears to be normalised, with many students suggesting that although they may feel conflicted, others checking in on them as a result of their online activity or implying a need for immediate responses is an expectation of utilising online platforms for communication. For the students these expectations for being ‘always on’ and subsequently contactable irrespective of differences in space and time are mediated by

trust, in which high levels of trust within an intimate relationship require less immediacy and visibility. The students in this study conceptualised the achievement of privacy as interlinked with agency (Marwick & boyd, 2014), something which was challenged by intimate partner expectations, changing contextual social norms, as well as the affordances of online platforms.

5.4.2 Managing expectations of immediacy

The expectation to be 'always-on' and immediately responsive to an intimate other appear to be common experiences amongst the students interviewed. What also became apparent was that a multitude of methods to manage expectations of immediacy and prevent breaches of privacy were utilised. Similarly to young people in Marwick & boyd's (2014) study, the students utilised strategies to regulate access to information online, however while the young people in Marwick & boyd's study utilised encrypted messages to hide meaning of posts, the students in this study would moderate when and who would be able to see when they were online to manage the perceived requirement for immediate responses. In addition to the fabrication of their whereabouts or activities, Oli and Iwan discuss how additional measures, such as disabling a status of being online, in applications like WhatsApp, can reduce expectations of immediacy and facilitate greater privacy.

Maria (18, FG1): *'Sometimes you don't answer text messages'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'Yeah like 5 minutes if I'm online, it was like that, she was expecting me to always answer and if I didn't, she would get mad, unless I told her I was doing uni work, so then that kind of being the norm, I would say I'm doing uni work every time I was really busy.'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'You can remove that...'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'But then you won't see when they're online either if you disable it'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'Yeah... so you can just enable it, have a quick look and then disable it'*

As well as utilising university work as a reason for perceived slow response times, Iwan and Oli describe how they could utilise the affordances of WhatsApp, that is the platforms, to have more control over when they display their status as online or offline to prevent partner monitoring. Not only this, but they imply the importance of being able to identify whether someone is online, highlighting the perceived necessity of monitoring platform use. Aaliyah also identifies the potential intrusiveness of other individuals being able to identify online status, and how this contributes toward expectations of an immediate response. For Aaliyah, turning off this function was necessary in order to gain back a sense of control over when she might respond to contacts.

Aaliyah (19, FG2): *'I've had people message me in the middle of the night because they can see that I'm online, and I might have just left messenger open or something and they're like why aren't you replying I really need you I really need you, this is in friendships not in relationships, and I've woken up like I've been asleep it was 2am (laughs), yeah I wouldn't say that, so that's like with a relationships, but you can have other stuff going on, it really annoyed me so I've turned off whether it says I'm online or not.'*

In these instances, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger are facilitators and mediators in the expectation of immediacy within relationships, both via enabling the identification of whether someone is online, but also facilitating an ease of communication (Mitchell et al., 2022). For students like Aaliyah, receipt of multiple messages during a time in which contact was deemed inappropriate was considered as a breach of privacy, to counteract this, turning off platform affordances which highlight online status was utilised. In contrast, for Amelia, sending multiple messages to a partner isn't based around an expectation of an immediate response, but is used as a way to keep a continuous channel of communication, so that her partner is aware of her plans. Instead, she suggests that a more immediate response would be expected if she were to call, as this would indicate something of greater importance.

Amelia (19, FG5): *'I quite often send him 5,6,7 8 messages in the expectations he won't reply, but just keeping him updated with my day, like what time are you getting off, so he does look at them, I do spam him a bit, but when he does look at them it's like oh ok this is what she has done, this is what she is planning to do, he doesn't need, he has that all in one place, it's easier, but it's not that expectation he will reply straight away because he is busy, people are busy, if it is really important then I will call rather than text...'*

Miles (25, FG5): *'I think that's really rare what you said, about the point that you would call someone if it's very important... I've found just thinking about when I left college, so the apps starting up to now there has been an aversion of people willing to call or talk to you via voice, a lot of talking has to be done via text, because via text you can control what is being said, you can kind of pace yourself, so there's like this stupid rule where you have to reply the same amount of time as someone else, so if someone takes 40 minutes, you have to take 41 minutes, if someone replies within 10 seconds you can reply within 10 seconds and everything like that...'*

Miles suggests that communication predominantly takes place via messaging using digital technologies, and alongside that, rules around response times during relationship initiation and maintenance are dominant. Interestingly, Miles highlights the expectation around online

communication, that responses should be paced at similar timings, as opposed to Amelia's method of a continuous flow of information, implying a diversity in how students navigate and manage expectations around communication with intimate others. Perceptions of trust and the affordances of platforms alongside social norms around expectations of communication and accessibility in online spaces, appear to be pivotal in shaping students' understanding and experience of privacy. Immediate responses appear to be normalised, shaped as a mechanism to indicate care and intimacy, despite conflicting with some students' desire for independency at university and their construction of trust in relationships. Similarly to Marwick & boyd's (2014) conceptualisation of how young people construct privacy as networked, the students in the current study suggest that immediate responses, and in some instances, breaches of privacy, are reinforced by affordances of online platforms, highlighting availability, alongside social rules of digital intimacies. Subsequently, despite students' privacy being networked, preventative risk-management was typically individualised, with participants compensating for platform affordances or changing social norms.

5.4.3 Navigating privacy beyond intimate partners

The idea of immediacy and managing expectations of always being available extends beyond intimate relationships to friendships and familial relationships. Phippen and Bond (2022a) suggest, in their adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory model, that students are entering university with an abundance of differing risk and resilience factors based on previous experiences online, such as those outlined in section 5.3.2 and 6.2.2, as well as developmental influence across a wider ecosystem of interconnections. Subsequently, as outlined in section 2.2.2, it is important to consider the individuals functioning within the wider systems that may influence development. At a microsystem level, in addition to the peer and romantic intimate relationships described by the students in this study, it was clear that social norms around online behaviours are shaped by familial use of digital technologies. Similarly, to intimate partner relationships and use of online platforms within these, parental use of online platforms to connect with their children once they have started university, according to the students, appear to be, in some cases breaches of privacy, linked directly to trust.

Phoebe, Rhys, and Aaliyah described how their parents check on their online status, questioning their whereabouts and what they are up to, suggesting this is something that has been ongoing even before they arrived at university. The increasing omnipresence and perpetual contact of parents for the students may reflect the changing nature of parent-child relationships. Children are no longer viewed as economically beneficial, but instead are linked to the pursuit of emotional needs of the self where "the child itself has become the focus of

parental effort” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 129). Subsequently to raise children becomes an invested project, with the child’s success linked heavily to parents’ own sense of self. Accordingly, with increasing levels of investment comes greater parental solicitation, including at times monitoring, surveillance, and tracking which, for their children, can be perceived as invasions of privacy and autonomy (Burnell et al., 2023).

Phoebe (20, FG2): *‘Its more my mum really, my mum looks at that more than [name], like we don’t really care, if he is up, he’s up, but my mum will be like, why are you not in bed...’*

Rhys (21, FG2): *‘My dad does that too! He’s like did you have a long night last night? And I’m like noo and he’s like well because you were active 4 hours ago and I’m like oh yeah, but I probably just opened my phone or something I don’t know, it’s not even relationships, well its relationship with your dad I suppose but he doesn’t really care if I go out, he just wants to know...’*

Aaliyah (19, FG2): *‘I think my parents trust me more now I’m at uni, they know that if I’m going to do something I’m going to do it anyway, I probably won’t tell them, well I’ll tell them maybe in 5 years’ time, but I think my parents are more worried about what my little brother or sister are doing online, so recently my little sister got into a lot of trouble...my mum was like you’ve lost my trust, and she installed her phone on my mums phone, so my mum could see everything, all of her messages, she had everything on her phone, so you might see that as controlling, but the way my mum looked at it and I looked at it, she had lost that trust and she has to now work to get that trust back and yeah if my partner installed something like that on my phone I would probably break up with them straight away, but it’s different when it’s parent-child relationship than partner relationships...’*

Interestingly Aaliyah suggests that her parents are more likely to trust her now she is at university, presumably due to increasing perceived independence with age, whilst Phoebe and Rhys describe how their parents ‘check-in’ with them whilst they are at university, to see why they are online at certain times. Aaliyah continues to suggest that a breakdown of trust between her parents and her siblings led to installation of software to clone and duplicate her sister’s device, implying that this ‘breach of privacy’ was warranted due to a ‘betrayal of trust’. Aaliyah also suggests that this is justified based on the parent-child relationship, as opposed to if it were to be an intimate partner relationship, however research suggests that relationship behaviours between a parent and child can be replicated in future intimacy projects (Rotenberg, 2020). Similarly to Nissenbaum’s (2010, pp. 240-241) example of a parent choosing not to read a child’s journal despite knowing where it is as this would violate privacy

and “undermine the bonds of trust”, installing software on a child’s device can also challenge the “spheres of trust”. Not only this, but the framing of sharing access to a personal device as a mechanism to re-build trust may also have implications for social norms around disclosure and sharing as acts of trust, care, and intimacy. As Marwick and boyd (2014, p. 1061) highlight:

“Some parents make password sharing a rule, while others use the language of “trust” to frame password sharing as a mechanism of protection. From this, many youths have concluded that to trust means to share. And to share means to trust.”

As trust appears to be so pivotal in the students’ endeavour for intimacy and engaging in sharing and acts of disclosure appear to be ‘resources for intimacy’, identifying early experiences of this behaviour may be important in understanding the social norms surrounding online behaviours, such as monitoring and surveillance, and their construction as care or control in different contexts. For example, Leaver (2017, p.1) argues that parental monitoring of infants, and ‘intimate surveillance’ is becoming increasingly normalised, leading to surveillance being “(re)situated as a necessary culture of care”. Research has also highlighted the potential detrimental impacts of parental surveillance upon children, including reduced autonomy, infringements on rights to participation (Livingstone et al., 2018), limiting active risk-management (Wisniewski, 2018), resistance, and tactic development to evade monitoring (Barron, 2014; Stoilova et al., 2019). Similarly to the idea of ‘sharing as protection’ within a child-parent relationship outlined in the discussion between Phoebe, Rhys and Aaliyah, many students highlighted throughout that sharing of passwords and geographical location was symbolic of relational trust and intimacy, a mechanism for ‘protection’ and ‘care’ as opposed to control and breaches of privacy. This distinction is in line with Fuchs (2011) description of monitoring, which is conceptualised as different to surveillance due to the motivations behind the behaviour being driven by ‘care’. However, as outlined by Frampton and Fox (2021), the distinction between different forms of online information seeking such as monitoring and surveillance is blurred, dependent upon the individuals involved, the motivations and intensity of information seeking behaviours. Students’ conceptualisations of privacy appear to be tied to social norms which are shaped by online platforms, such as the normalisation of being ‘always on’, expectations of immediacy and subsequent accountability. To manage this perceived breach of privacy across relationships within the microsystem, students utilise the affordances of platforms to hide their online status. Nonetheless, sharing of online information, such as location and passwords, all appear to be linked back to trust. For the students interviewed, engaging in these behaviours, utilising the affordances of online platforms as gateways into the ‘private’, are used predominantly to continuously signal trust as a pre-requisite for intimacy.

5.5 Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter highlight how online platforms shape students' negotiations of trust, risk, ontological security, and privacy primarily during their transition to university life and within intimate relationships. Extending Marwick and boyd (2014), I argue that social norms, together with digital affordances, influence a networked understanding of not only privacy, but trust. Despite concerns over fabricated identities, most students continued to pursue romantic relationships online, suggesting that the desire for intimacy outweighs the risks of misplaced trust. Online platforms may therefore facilitate the pursuit of the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992), sustained through mutual self-disclosure and partner benefit, by creating opportunities to build trust and manage anxieties associated with new relationships. For example, sending intimate images can function as mutual disclosure, a 'gift' (Mauss, 2002; Berking, 1999), or a 'resource for intimacy' (Amundsen, 2022, p. 123), with students sharing personal information and their bodies to communicate trust. For many, trust, and its associated risk, is a precondition for online intimacy, shaped by social norms and technological affordances.

Students also underscored the contextual and experiential dimensions of trust. As noted in Chapter 4, separation caused by one partner attending university challenged trust, as it was required in situations where thoughts and actions were no longer visible (Giddens, 1991). In response, students engaged in reassurance practices, such as sharing locations or passwords, to sustain their partners', and in some instances their own, ontological security. Trust was further identified as central to achieving privacy (Setty, 2018b). The expectation of being 'always on' and accountable through online platforms undermined students' ability to manage privacy in their intimate relationships. Higher levels of trust, however, reduced demands for visibility and immediacy. Thus, platform affordances directly influenced perceptions of privacy, breaches, and individualised strategies for managing accessibility, extending beyond intimate to familial relationships.

In conclusion, trust, and by implication the associated risk, is a pre-requisite for intimacy, shaped by social norms and digital affordances, subsequently conceptualised as networked. Platform features and relational histories contributed to insecurity, while the transition to university further challenged students' sense of trust and ontological security. Social expectations of communication and accessibility in online spaces were pivotal in shaping experiences of privacy and trust in the pursuit of intimacy. As explored further in Chapter 6, this pursuit, and the associated risks, are also entangled with experiences of online harms, blurring the boundaries of student norms and attitudes toward digital intimacies.

6. Chapter 6: Intimacy and Abuse

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter highlights how students' conceptualisations and experiences of trust, risk and subsequently intimacy, are shaped by social norms and platform affordances. While risk is pertinent and necessary to students' digital intimacies, the students also refer to betrayals of trust, where risk associated with intimacy projects can lead to potential harm. This, the final findings chapter, considers students' constructions and experiences of online harm in the context of forming or maintaining intimate connections, and perceived responsibilities in preventing and responding to harmful behaviours. The overarching theme of intimacy and abuse reflects how the affordances of online platforms enable dual and often contradictory functions in facilitating students acts of intimacy, but also the apparent continuum between students' constructs of normative intimacy practices and abuse (Doerfler et al., 2024). As outlined in Table 5, this centres around three themes which highlight that students' experiences and constructions of risk and harms in the context of digital intimacies are shaped by an embedded assumption of risk of harm afforded by technologies, contextual norms associated with digital intimacy practices, and wider perceptions of the 'lesser' impact of online abuse (Gosse, 2021). Together, the findings highlight that students' experiences of not only intimacies, but also abuse, are shaped by their socio-technical networks.

Table 5: *Theme summary table for Intimacy and Abuse findings chapter*

Theme	Characteristic
"Taken for grantedness" of online abuse	Drawing on Ling's (2012) 'taken for grantedness' of technology, this theme highlights the ubiquity and embeddedness of forms of online abuse in students' everyday lives. Online sexual harassment was considered normalised across online spaces and was generally experienced and conceptualised as gendered. However, victim-blaming and narratives of individualised responsibility for prevention persist.
Online social surveillance as care or control?	Students describe dual constructions of online social surveillance as both a form of care, but also as a mechanism for control in intimate relationships, highlighting simultaneous, multifaceted distinctions. Such conceptualisations are predicated by the affordances of online platforms in enabling perpetual visibility, as well as social norms related to the contextual acceptability of surveillance behaviours.

<p>Blurred boundaries: A spectrum of abuse and institutional responses</p>	<p>This theme reflects the identification of abuse as being entangled across online and offline space. Drawing on the concept of ‘digital dualism’ (Gosse, 2021), the findings highlight the tendency for abuse occurring in digital spaces to be conceptualised as ‘lesser’ than abuse occurring in physical settings could perpetuate the ‘taken for grantedness’ of online abuse, as well as blurred boundaries with regards to rights and responsibilities.</p>
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Research, as discussed in section 2.5, has highlighted the extent of sexual violence on university campuses (Humphreys & Towl, 2020; 2022), suggesting that universities are ‘conducive contexts’ for abuse (Kelly, 2016; McCarry et al., 2022), perpetuating ‘lad culture’ (Phipps, 2018;2020) and reproducing broader gendered power structures (Haslop et al., 2021). Despite this, research exploring adults, and in particular UK students’ perceptions and experiences of digital abuse and harassment, particularly TFDSV is still limited (Haslop & O’Rourke, 2020; Phippen & Bond, 2022b; Powell et al., 2020). Jackson and Scott (2010, cited in Burkett, 2015, p. 842) emphasise the importance of examining the everyday sexual experiences, norms, and practices in order to understand the spectrum and persistence of sexual violence. Subsequently, this third findings chapter considers online abuse in the context of intimate relationships but also amongst the wider student population, with a focus on understanding perceptions, attitudes and norms surrounding the use of technology for practices of intimacy and abuse.

The chapter starts by contextualising students’ experiences, by examining the expectation and embeddedness of online abuse as a part of their everyday navigation of online spaces. Students suggest that the ubiquity and affordances of digital technologies facilitate channels that increase reach, accessibility and facilitate desensitisation of abuse. They highlight how online sexual harassment in particular is a normalised experience of occupying online platforms, with receipt of unsolicited sexual images and messages as gendered, with female students predominantly being victim to sexual invasions of privacy. While many students discuss and appear to recognise online sexual harassment as abuse as opposed to attempted intimacy, the discourse typically places responsibility on victims to manage online risk, as opposed to emphasising perpetrator accountability.

The second theme reflects more specifically on behaviours within the contexts of intimate partner relationships amongst students, in particular the notion of online social surveillance as a practice of intimacy or abuse. While the first theme of the “taken for grantedness” of online abuse highlighted that online sexual harassment as being constructed by students as

predominantly gendered in nature, their experiences of online social surveillance reflect research findings indicating similarity in experiences amongst both males and females (Alexy et al., 2005; Bennett et al., 2011 & Reyns et al., 2012). Students' narratives highlight how blurred the boundaries are between different conceptualisations of online social surveillance as an act of care or control. Lyon (2001; 2003) depicts this dichotomy as the 'Janus Faces' of surveillance, with surveillance technologies enabling both protection as well as repression. As evidenced by the students' narratives, motivations associated with engaging in online social surveillance are multifaceted and cannot be easily divided, conceptualised as forms of intimacy and care, whilst also enabling forms of online abuse, coercion, and control.

The final theme explores the intersection between students' experiences of 'offline' and 'online' sexual harassment, by highlighting the spectrum of sexual violence taking place across both the physical campus space and online spaces during a time of transition. University responses to online harassment are also discussed, with reference specifically to students' perceptions of an institution's 'power', ability, and willingness to respond to cases of online sexual harassment, with students' narratives highlighting the need for universities to intervene, educate on respectful relational behaviours and promote proactive bystander intervention. Together, these findings highlight the importance of acknowledging the hybrid ecologies in which students exist, to avoid 'digital dualism' (Gosse, 2021) in preventing and responding to TFDSV in HE.

6.2 "Taken for grantedness" of online abuse

6.2.1 *Students' perceptions and experiences of 'everyday' online abuse*

The ubiquity of digital technologies across society has fundamentally shaped the ways in which we communicate with one another, and has become, as Ling (2012) conceptualises it, 'taken for granted'. Just as technologies are an "assumed part of social interaction" (Ling, 2012, p. 7), the experiences of online abuse are also a pertinent part of being present in an online space. Furthermore, within the lives of young people violence has also been suggested to be ubiquitous, "pervasive, all-encompassing and normalised" (Skott, 2023, p. 8422). Skott (2023, p. 8443) outlines how young people in their study suggest that violence, particularly in online contexts, was a normalised part of their everyday lives, describing secondary educational institutions as "loopholes for violence". Conceptualising institutions as 'loopholes' was reflective of inadequate sanctions, alongside limited understanding of the pervasiveness of online abuse demonstrated by adult networks, contributing toward the perpetuation of violence. The students in this study reflected on how pervasive and embedded online abuse was to their everyday lives, that it was an expected due to the accessibility of the 'networked publics' they occupy (boyd, 2014), as outlined by Corey:

Corey (20, FG2): *'I think unfortunately these discussions are still going to happen, technology is making it easier, more accessible, more frequent, because you can have those discussions whilst lying in bed, whilst one person is at a party, the other is at a bar and that just allows it to be 24/7, whereas if that technology didn't exist it would only happen if those people were together, maybe under the influence of alcohol but the fact that it is so easily accessible, pull your phone out, bitch about this person, make a little joke and put it back sort of normalises it and then it becomes more severe and more significant and just gets worse and worse and worse...'*

Corey highlights how the accessibility of platforms for online communication has shaped the ways in which we can readily communicate with each other irrespective of place. Driven by the key motivation of “sociation” (Ling, 2012, p. 35), technologies are described by Corey as reciprocal, enabling a constant flow of communication or connected presence (Licoppe, 2004), irrespective of time across social networks as a result of perpetual contact (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). While this was reflected positively by Corey earlier on in our conversation, he also suggests that this enhances accessibility and facilitates disinhibition, comparing the opportunity to “bitch” about people being similar to instances of face-to-face contact when “under the influence of alcohol”. Subsequently, these ‘normal’ and perhaps mundane, expected acts of discussing others in a negative light becomes unnoticed, gradually increasing in severity, and becoming “more significant”. Aaliyah also reflects on how forms of negative or abusive communication about others in online spaces is “something that carries on with technology”, implying that norms surrounding age-appropriate behaviours are blurred in online platforms in which students are communicating.

Aaliyah (19, FG2): *'I've still got that mindset of as people get older, they get more mature... and then you hear all this stuff, especially because we have got all these mature students and it's like this person is 40 and they said that! You're like but I thought you were meant to be grown up, so it does surprise you. I thought it was something that comes with age, but I think it is something that carries on with technology.'*

Aaliyah discusses an example of a WhatsApp group created for all students in a particular course at her institution. Whilst implying that this behaviour is unacceptable, both Aaliyah and Corey suggest that this is an expected part of inhabiting and communicating with others in online spaces. Similarly, as highlighted in the first data chapter (see section 4.1), Emily reflected on how, as opposed to supporting transition to university, a group chat she was added to contained individuals “bitching and being rude and laughing and things that were inappropriate”, which led to a “jaded” view of her peers before she had even arrived on

campus. Although research highlights the potential for messaging platforms, such as WhatsApp, as helpful contexts to establish peer connections (Stone & Logan, 2018) and build social capital (Mishra, 2020; Bano et al., 2019), particularly during periods of transition, less research explores the potential negative implications of the use of group messaging platforms amongst students. The students' narratives in this study highlight how online platforms, particularly group messaging platforms, may also be contexts in which abusive behaviours can become 'taken for granted' in that it is an assumed part of social interaction (Ling, 2012), in which increasing private intimate communication is counteracted by "incivility in the public sphere" (Ling, 2004, p. 191).

6.2.2 Embeddedness of online sexual harassment in students' lives

Experiences of online sexual harassment, including receipt of unsolicited sexual images, also known as cyberflashing, were also very much an embedded and expected part of navigating digital platforms (Gillett, 2018; Phippen & Bond, 2023). Legislative developments mean that online sexual harassment can be addressed legally through the Sexual Offences Act 2003, Communications Act 2003 or via new legislation being introduced as a result of the Online Safety Act, including cyberflashing as a standalone criminal offence. Nonetheless, whilst legal frameworks criminalising online sexual harassment are warranted, the students in this study consider such harms as being as 'taken for granted' as digital technologies themselves. Furthermore, the Online Safety Act fails to wholly recognise implications of online harms across the lifespan, including harms to adult populations (Balfour et al., 2023). Subsequently, whilst raising awareness of legal ramifications of online sexual harassment is positive, tackling social norms and promoting respectful relational behaviours underlying actions utilising online platforms is key for preventative efforts to tackle online sexual harassment in HE.

In line with Phippen and Bond's (2022a) adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory model, many students described experiencing various forms of online abuse throughout their life, highlighting the risk factors of exposure to online harm, and the impact of 'learned helplessness' (Abramson et al., 1978) due the pervasive and repeated nature of online abuse. Students referred to experiencing the receipt of unsolicited sexual imagery as a 'normalised' aspect of engaging with online platforms. Phippen and Bond (2023) emphasise how sexting, as a cultural phenomenon, is a digital intimacy practice young people have engaged in for over the last two decades. Early research by Bond (2010) and Phippen (2012) highlights how young people engage with sexting using virtual space to develop sexual and romantic relationships, and subsequently for students today, such practices are likely to have been dominant throughout their childhood. Furthermore, the non-consensual sharing and sending of intimate images and 'taken for grantedness' (Ling, 2012) of sexual harassment is

also apparent in early research on youth sexting (Ringrose et al., 2012). In the current study, Tilly, discusses how since a young age, she was subjected to cyberflashing:

Tilly (18, FG3): *'As a young girl I used to get loads of dick pics I was like I don't want this go away! Just from random, it's probably my fault for putting my snapchat on Facebook or Instagram I think I had it on, but I just kept like getting messages from random strangers... I think it's quite new that I'm in a relationship on social media, so I don't get them as much, I get people messaging me, like hi... you know the creepy weirdos like hi! I'm like eugh...'*

Tilly describes how despite changing her relationship status on social media platforms in order to appear “off the market” (Fox et al., 2013, p. 783) and manage the risk of unwanted images, she still received unsolicited messages albeit less sexual in nature. Interestingly, changing a relationship status appears to be a way to communicate a commitment to a relationship to wider social networks, but also as an unintended ‘protective’ act to reduce possible online sexual abuse, highlighting perhaps additional ‘hidden labour’ and ‘safety work’ for students to prevent experiencing harassment online (Veletsianos et al., 2018; Vera-Grey 2017; Vera-Grey & Kelly, 2020). Not only this, but the perception that having her account visible across her social media profiles warrants unsolicited sexual images pertains to the common victim-blaming narrative surrounding gender-based violence, and negates from holding the sender accountable (Salter, 2016). The apparent ‘taken for grantedness’ of online abuse was also discussed by Paige, who suggested that receiving unsolicited sexual images was “so normal” that her and her friends were predominantly “unphased” by this intrusion.

Paige (19, FG2): *'... I remember being like 14/15 snapchat being a big thing, people would just randomly add you just randomly and you'd be like who is this person, oh it's a penis, fine let's move on you wouldn't even be shocked that someone has sent you a picture of your penis like that, it just didn't faze us at all because it's so normal, and I think like that have just become so normal it's kind of a given...'*

The normalised experience of receiving unsolicited sexual images has led many of the students in this study to become desensitised to their receipt, viewed as an inevitable consequence of occupying online spaces. This was further emphasised in a conversation with Maria and Libby, who suggested that if in receipt of unsolicited messages “you just get to the point where you just don't care about the messages anymore... it's just like ‘oh there it is” (Maria), suggesting they “would just delete them and that's it” (Libby). These responses from the students are similar to what Gardner (1995) describes as reactions to gendered-public harassment, outlining how women in particular, tend to ‘ignore, block or repress’ experiences

of sexual intrusion and violation. Subsequently, these examples also highlight the importance of understanding experiences and responses to online sexual harassment in conjunction with experiences in 'offline' spaces. Technologies act as tools to perpetrate sexual harassment, enhancing reach and anonymity, further contributing toward its 'taken for grantedness' as an everyday aspect of utilising platforms, reinforcing a culture of violence and abuse. Maria and Oli contribute to this narrative, by highlighting how experiencing unsolicited messages is commonplace for women in particular:

Maria (18, FG1): *'... as a girl on Facebook you get two types of guys... you get the nice guy that's really nice and you can talk with him about everything and anything and then you get the guy who is... hi, hi, hi.. let's have sex, hi, hi, hi... and after that if you don't answer that you are a whore and a bitch and you will never find anyone...'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'I think that happens everywhere because a lot of girls from here have had that same thing... I think it's more of an all around the globe kind of thing...'*

Interviewer: *'So have you had friends here who have said that has happened to them?'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'Yeah, most of the girls just receive weird messages from different guys and I looked at some of them and it's like how can you send this to someone?'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'Yeah, sometimes they don't even say hi they just send you this telling you how they are going to fuck you...And you're like I did nothing to get this.'*

The students' narratives in this section highlight how they have continued to receive unsolicited messages and sexual images throughout their lives, and despite its perceived 'taken for grantedness' of occupying online spaces, this intrusion has detrimental impacts on their rights, agency, and wellbeing. Maria for example suggests experiencing distress as she highlights "I did nothing to get this", as well as Tilly suggesting that despite being able to try and protect herself by ignoring and repressing, the persistence can become intrusive and detrimental to the student's sense of self as they question their perceived responsibility in 'enabling' these behaviours and "managing the risks of online abuse" (Salter, 2016, p. 2724). As Oli highlights, the receipt of unsolicited sexual messages and images is "global", all-encompassing and embedded in student's utilisation of online platforms.

6.2.3 Students' conceptualisation of the gendered nature of online abuse

The previous subsections have highlighted the embeddedness of online abuse, in particular online sexual harassment, in the form of receipt of unsolicited sexual imagery and unwanted sexual contact in particular. According to Henry and Powell (2014), these practices are located within a broader frame of technology-facilitated sexual violence and should be interpreted

within “a social context of gender inequality and hierarchization” (Henry & Powell, 2018, p. 196). Research has highlighted the gendered nature of sexual violence on university campuses (Humphreys & Towl, 2020; 2022), yet limited research explores students’ experiences of gendered forms of TFDSV. During the conversations I had with students it was clear that many perceived online sexual harassment to be gendered by nature, the conceptualisations, particularly of male students stood out, as to what extent and why these forms of harassment exist for women online, and how these might differ from their own experiences. When discussing the sharing of unsolicited sexual images, Oli describes how sending a “random dick pic” is inappropriate, suggesting that receipt of a naked image of a woman, for him, would be similarly inappropriate. However, for other male students this was not the case:

Callum (25, FG1): *‘But then in terms of saying banter between lads, would they say the same thing if females were doing the same thing, is it classed as the same? I don’t know... is it classed as banter, or would it then be seen differently?’*

Oli (21, FG1): *‘I think it depends on what kind of harassment, because from what I have experienced and heard from other people as well, mostly sexual harassment is to females, the majority what I’ve heard and seen are females, but for example other types of harassment can be equal, it just depends on the situation...’*

Oli (21, FG1): *‘One of my friends, she just received a dick pic, like a random dick pic, the first message was a dick pic, like how do you think someone is going to respond to that?’*

Oli (21, FG1): *‘Like you would see a photo of a naked girl and be like what the fuck’.*

Iwan (20, FG1): *‘That wouldn’t be my reaction’.*

Here, Callum suggests that the idea of what is considered ‘banter’ is treated differently dependent on gender. Whilst discussing the Warwick ‘rape chat scandal’ (Lee & Kennelly, 2019), Callum implies that men are treated differently when discussing the objectification and sexualisation of women, classified as ‘banter between lads’, suggesting that women might not experience the same repercussions. As discussed in section 2.5.1, researchers have highlighted the potential, particularly within university communities for banter to be used to legitimise sexual violence and exacerbate ‘lad culture’ (Phipps & Young, 2013). The downplaying of ‘banter between lads’ and receipt of unsolicited sexual images by Callum and Iwan could be interpreted as contributing toward a rhetoric of silencing female students’ experiences of online sexual harassment. Not only this, but the students’ narratives highlight a “digital empathy gap” (Project deShame, 2017, p. 36) in which the conceptualisation of abusive behaviours, such as sending unwanted sexual images, may not necessarily be seen

as problematic. Later in the conversation Iwan continues to highlight the point that he wouldn't mind if he "got a nude from someone on snapchat".

Maria (18, FG1): *'You are out with friends, and then one friend of yours brings someone, and you make friends with that someone, and you add him on snapchat and you're just friendly, only friendly, and then you get home and you get a dick pic or lets have sex like this, and I'm like I don't want to have sex with you I was just being friendly... 'no but you were leading me on... 'no I wasn't I was just friendly!'.... you get those kinds of texts also; you were just leading me on but you're being friendly.'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'Yeah, if he wants to have sex with you, why didn't he just ask you whilst you were at the party or wherever you were...'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'That would have been awkward'.*

Maria (18, FG1): *'Because it's nice to send a dick pic first apparently.'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'I wouldn't mind if I got a nude from someone on snapchat, a girl...'*

Iwan's comment implies a gendered dynamic to this exchange, where unsolicited sexual images are perceived differently for female and male students. In this instance, Maria describes how being 'friendly' to someone on a night out and adding each other on Snapchat led to the receipt of unsolicited sexual images. She explains how this exchange was conceptualised by the other individual as an invitation for sex and, similarly to Salter (2016), as opposed to online sexual harassment, sending an unsolicited image was enacted to elicit sexual interest. On the other hand, Iwan appears to rationalise the receipt of unsolicited sexual images by suggesting he "wouldn't mind" receiving a "nude" further highlighting the moral differences and positionality of males and females in sharing and being in receipt of sexual images (Salter, 2016; Setty, Ringrose & Regehr, 2023). This exchange highlights the gendered hierarchies inherent in the production of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), where in this example, women are sexually dominated in online spaces and "unsolicited dick pics can be recognised as practices that work to reify hegemonic masculinity in digitized spaces" (Haslop & O'Rourke, 2020, p. 1114). Similarly, in another focus group discussion, responses to and reasons for perpetrating online harassment were considered as gendered, with acknowledgement that women may be more likely to experience online harassment, yet paired with rationalisation for male perpetration and an onus on women to "just block them":

Interviewer: *'Has anyone else ever received unwanted messages?'*

Roland (23, FG3): *'I don't see it as a big deal, because you can just block them... but maybe it is because I am a lad so maybe that is a factor.'*

Interviewer: *'In what way?'*

Roland (23, FG3): *'I don't know like, if you're a girl you feel like you are being harassed, as you said the guy, he is a big lad so you feel intimidated and that, but if you're a girl, the majority of the harassment comes from guys I would say, online... I've never done it myself, but its understandable cause people are going through stuff themselves, so just block them.'*

Later in our conversation, Roland recounts his previous suggestion about the gendered nature of online harassment, providing possible reasons:

Roland (23, FG3): *'My point earlier about girls being harassed more than guys, I think in most cases it's a guy messaging a girl telling her I like you, you're beautiful and that and she lets him down, she rejects him and that's where the harassment comes in, oh you're ugly anyways, I think that's why girls get harassed way more than guys.'*

Roland appears to recognise online sexual harassment as gendered yet rationalises this behaviour by suggesting “people are going through stuff themselves” and later as the result of rejection from women. Again, the notion of blocking a perpetrator of online sexual harassment denies individuals experiences as well as shifting responsibility onto individuals to manage online risk, as opposed to holding perpetrators accountable (Salter, 2016). The students' narratives reflect the embeddedness of online abuse as an expected or ‘taken for granted’ element of occupying networked online spaces, suggesting that gendered discourse may have contributed toward the normalisation and perpetration of online abuse (Gillett, 2018; Setty, et al., 2023). Their discussions reflect, perhaps, a recognition of online sexual harassment, yet a continued discourse of individualised, victim responsibility as opposed to perpetrator accountability (Hasinoff, 2017).

6.3 Online social surveillance as care or control?

6.3.1 Social surveillance, trust, accountability, and technological affordances

Online social information seeking has been defined as a “human or informal group of humans purposively looking for personal data about a human target other than themselves via the Internet or Internet-based applications” (Frampton & Fox, 2021, p. 4). In the previous data chapter, information seeking behaviours outlined by the students in the context of newly forming or established intimate relationships included searching for what someone has liked on social media, checking someone's online status, searching through someone's social media profiles and personal messages. These practices were all identified as common, normalised behaviours to indicate care, intimacy, and establishment of trust, while also at

times constructed as breaches of privacy. The affordances of technologies are thought to influence social information seeking behaviours in several ways, including the anonymity of platforms (Fox & McEwan, 2017) and the accessibility of platforms (Tokunaga, 2011) as described by Rhys:

Rhys (21, FG2): *'I think with these tracking apps, where it's like Snapchat, where you can see what other people are doing it just kind of raises that argument... what's going on in somebodies head and you are kind of inclined to do that, you know with Spotify, this girl I'm talking to, on Spotify it tells you what music others are listening too and I.. I'm probably a psychopath, but I was like I wonder why she is listening to that, is she thinking about me, is she thinking about something, what is she thinking about and then I was like you should probably get back to work, so in that sense, it's a bit worrying, it may be me trying to over analyse the situation, but I just thought it might be good to share, these things are out there, you're likely to do it, if you don't know what that persons liking, listening to or where they are then you don't really care, because you just trust them.... Yeah, that's all I have to say...'*

Rhys describes how the accessibility of platforms which facilitate monitoring of intimate others activities lead to internalised questioning about behaviours and intentions. He suggests that the affordances of platforms in enabling increased accessibility of information is contributing toward an internal conflict of trust, highlighting that, counterintuitively, trust may be questioned in situations in which an individual's activities or behaviours are increasingly visible. Contrariwise to the idea of using online platforms to manage the ontological security of partners, what Rhys describes is his own use of Spotify in an attempt manage his own relational certainty by questioning his partners platform activity, highlighting that "trying to over analyse the situation" could have negative implications for a sense of security in the self. In addition to monitoring of online activity, students frequently referred to 'tracking', using platforms that utilise GPS technology to pinpoint an individual's physical location. Fuchs (2011) implies that surveillance, in the broadest sense, has been conceptualised as either neutral or negative, while monitoring as information collection is "oriented on care, benefits, solidarity, aid and co-operation" (Fuchs, 2011 p. 137). However, the ways in which online information seeking behaviours are conceptualised, including monitoring and surveillance, tend to be ad-hoc, platform-based and context specific (Frampton & Fox, 2021). I refer to the students' use of platforms to track others as online social surveillance to capture the monitoring of another's location described by the students, and although closely linked to cyberstalking and online harassment, interestingly, the students' descriptions of engaging in tracking behaviours did not always have negative connotations or motivations to harass or

threaten another. Many of the students, such as Amelia, suggested that sharing location was a means of her partner ensuring she felt a level of security whilst he was away, easing her worry, but she also suggests that it leads to a level of accountability within a relationship.

Amelia (19, FG5): *'Quite often if he is travelling he will send me his location on google maps, so he will say this is where I am, this is how far away I am... so you can turn it off and on... but it's like I'm just letting you know where I am because I can, so you don't worry... he went skiing quite early on in our relationship and I didn't realise even if you don't go on Tinder it still updates your location, so I could see that his location was on so many km away, and I was grumpy that week anyway, but I was like what are you doing on Tinder when you're in France, I thought this was going really well, and he was like calm down, chill, but because I thought you had to actively log on to it rather than just, here is where you're going to tell me that you can... I'm at the point where I trust him, even if he said oh I don't want to come out tonight, I want to sit in the house and do nothing... I think that takes that away you can't really make up some excuse if you don't feel like it, you automatically have to come up with excuses or actively turn your location off when you don't want people to see it...'*

Finley (20, FG5): *'And that in itself is a story as well if you turn your location off like, oh what are you hiding... what are they doing, who are they with...'*

Amelia (19, FG5): *'It does keep you accountable, I think you know if you are in a relationship you have that level of trust it will just be like ok, and even if someone wants to check that it's like oh yeah there he is, but it's something I hadn't really thought about and I don't think it really bothers me... and I am just remembering that I didn't turn my location off when I had that one night stand...'*

Amelia describes how sharing locations encourages a level of accountability, to prevent the possibility of 'making up excuses', urging a level of honesty. Finley agrees by suggesting that turning your location off is an unspoken act of dishonesty, implying a level of secrecy which in turn leads to internal questioning of relational certainty. In these instances, the affordances of technologies in enabling easy access to another individual's location despite being physically distant appears to facilitate a sense of security, in addition to potentially leading to relational conflict. Amelia's example also emphasises how the affordances of online platforms could be used to negate accountability within a relationship. At the time of writing, Tinder's (2023) privacy policy highlighted that "The collection of your geolocation may occur in the background even when you aren't using the services if the permission you gave us expressly permits such collection", subsequently it is possible for different permission levels to be granted, for geolocation to be collected in the background or only when the application is open. Amelia's

example demonstrates how application affordances could be used to reassure or potentially as a form of gaslighting, with gaslighting being “a set of attempts to create a surreal social environment by making the other in an intimate relationship seem or feel crazy.” (Sweet, 2019, p. 84), although recognising that she too must have logged onto the app to identify her partners location. Again, trust appears to be a mediating factor in the use of platforms for online social surveillance, with students suggesting that if an established level of trust is achieved in a relationship, there is less desire to utilise tracking functions. As highlighted in chapter 5, affordances of online platforms were used as means to encourage relational certainty, such as sharing passwords and disabling ‘do not disturb’, similarly location sharing was considered as a mechanism to manage one’s own relational security when establishing trust in another, or after betrayals of trust.

Tilly (18, FG3): *My friend looks at her Snapmaps a lot to find out where everyone is, but I don’t think, actually, I tell a lie I do think she did it with her boyfriend, well the person she was speaking too, but I don’t know I think it is a bit of an invasion of privacy really... You should have trust really shouldn’t you, like trust them.*

Nathan (23, FG3): *‘There was a girl on my course and her boyfriend cheated on her so she has installed a tracker on his phone, so at any given time she can see exactly where he is...’*

Tilly (18, FG3): *‘They’re still together?’*

Nathan (23, FG3): *‘They’re still together the strangest thing is, he works at the shop, and the person he cheated with works at the same shop, and they still work together, but yeah, she looks through his phone all the time, she tells us, we’re thinking this is really strange there is obviously no trust there, like why are you still together...’*

Similarly to Amelia, both Tilly and Nathan suggest that trust is pivotal in determining the use of platforms that afford tracking and monitoring, with limited levels of trust leading to an increased likelihood of online social surveillance. Nonetheless, regardless of levels of trust established, many students constructed the engagement in online social surveillance as an act of care and intimacy in the context of intimate relationships.

6.3.2 Online social surveillance as performance of care

As highlighted previously, affordances of online platforms were used as means to encourage relational certainty, such as sharing passwords and disabling ‘do not disturb’. Similarly, location sharing was considered by some students as a ‘resource for intimacy’ (Amundsen, 2022, p. 123), an act of care, as opposed to a potential invasion of privacy. The act of online social surveillance was discussed at length by students in this study, many suggesting that

mutual surveillance was a normalised and accepted behaviour within relationships. The reasoning behind the desire to track an intimate partners whereabouts was, at times, linked back to care as opposed to control, with students implying that if they are aware of their partners location, if anything were to go wrong, they would be able to intervene. This was described further by Maria:

Maria (18, FG1): *'See I want to know where he is all the time, but not because I want to control him, or something, I want to know in case something bad happens I want to know where to go to find him, to you know...'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'You know where I am most of the time...'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'I know because you tell me, and I don't have to track you but that's...'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'I wouldn't. but...'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'That's a good excuse, you should track him.'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'It's not an excuse!'*

Interviewer: *'So, it's just to know where he is?'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'Knowing where he is in case something bad happens to him so I can take him home or take care of anything...'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'I always tell, if I'm across the street obviously not because it takes longer to text it...'*

Recognising the “diverse motivations and the complex emotional entanglements underlying surveillance practices” (Widmer & Albrechtslund, 2021, p. 82) is important in understanding students' everyday experiences of digital intimacies. Widmer and Albrechtslund (2021) highlight, in their study of familial use of GPS location tracking, how surveillance, when conceptualised as an act of care, negates from the predominant narrative of surveillance as control, when considering the multitude of motivations behind the utilisation of location-based applications. This complex negotiation is further highlighted by Emily and Camila, who suggest that the use of location-based applications for surveillance is appropriate as “a security thing”, however there is always the possibility for use to “step over the line”.

Emily (22, FG4): *'I used it with a guy for about 5 years and we had each other on that and that was more of a security thing, so at one point I lost my phone, and he was with me and he was like oh I can tell you where it is, that's the only time we ever used it for each other. His mum used to use it for him, which is creepy, like 21-year-old at university and his mum was seeing where he was, which is weird! But yeah, I use it with my friends on Snapmaps and stuff.'*

Camila (19, FG4): *'Like she said, for security it is ok, it is easy to just step over the line and get to the creepy side of it you know.'*

Emily's example also indicates how the use of surveillance technologies in location tracking is context and relationships specific. For her, the use of applications with GPS tracking affordances was considered suitable in the context of intimate partner and peer relationships for security and social purposes. However, as also highlighted in the previous chapter, parental use of platforms to track location was considered a breach of privacy, particularly for HE students. Similarly, Paige describes how she utilises 'Find my Friends' to engage in mutual online social surveillance with her partner for the primary purpose of safety.

Paige (19, FG2): *'Me and [name] don't track each other on Snapmaps, but we have the Find My Friends on and usually we will keep it off, but because I'm here and he is like 2 hours away, if I've gone out, I'll normally put mine on and he can just click notify me when she leaves, so if I'm out, otherwise I do find myself like, where is he, he is down the pub again, erm right.... That's kind of, so we only really turn it on when we need too, but we do like it because then he can make sure if I'm ok, and he knows I'm on a night out, whereas if he is out with his friends I can see when he leaves the pub and is walking home, that sort of thing...'*

Paige suggests that use of Find my Friends was linked to her partner being able to make sure she is ok, and so she could check when he was walking home from a night out with friends. However, as discussed in section 5.3, when I spoke with Paige after the dissolution of her relationship, the affordances of technology in being able to engage in surveillance behaviours paired with partner insecurities led to controlling and coercive behaviours. Care and control are frequently cited as two sole motivators for engaging in surveillance practices (Widmer & Albrechtslund, 2021). In Paige's example, the conceptualisation of online social surveillance was initially centred around an accepted form of intimacy, care, and security, however after the relationship had dissolved, reflections on the behaviour highlighted for Paige that the affordances of online platforms were used as mechanism for coercion and control, masked as care. This narrative aligns with findings from Henry & Powell's (2018, p.200) review of TFSV, which highlights:

"...some intrusive and controlling online behaviours (e.g., excessive contact) are relatively indistinguishable from acceptable relational or dating practices, or indeed only become harassing or cause fear when accompanied by other abusive behaviours or when a relationship ends."

For the students interviewed, the construction of what is considered intimacy or abuse is contextual, influenced by fluctuating norms and platform affordances. Subsequently, an ongoing re-establishment of mutual consent and boundaries is of increasing importance across online spaces.

6.3.3 Online social surveillance as control

Digital technologies enable a 'spaceless' element to intimate relationships, enabling abusive behaviours remotely and at a distance (Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Leitão, 2021). Subsequently, technologies can be used to track an individuals' location, harass, and stalk at a distance and monitor online information remotely, leading to feelings of perpetrators being "omnipresent and omnipotent" (Leitão, 2019, p. 205). For example, Dragiewicz et al. (2019) identified, through interviews with domestic abuse survivors, how surveillance technologies were utilised by perpetrators for coercion and control, to track location, control online accounts, monitor app use and video-record partners. The affordances of digital technologies in facilitating coercion and control via online social surveillance was highlighted by students in this study, many of whom suggested that such access can lead to increased paranoia about a partner's activities, increased self-insecurity and subsequently patterns of controlling behaviour.

Aaliyah (19, FG2): *'Yeah all of that tracking has the potential for a really controlling relationships, for your partner to be constantly looking at where you are and then for you to come home and they're like what are you doing there, I don't know anyone there are you cheating on me...'*

Rhys (21, Interview): *'I think the tracking apps is a bit weird. It's like you're almost like a prisoner of some sort where you're, you're a convict, and you're on parole. Yeah, I don't find that pretty. I don't find that interesting or cool at all. I wouldn't recommend it. And I don't I don't think it's a good idea. Because we can almost become obsessive.'*

Aaliyah and Rhys highlight how platforms which afford online social surveillance can lead to controlling relationships and obsessional behaviours. Similarly to Foucault's (1977) conceptualisation of surveillance as a form of disciplinary power, Rhys describes the use of online surveillance technologies in the context of an intimate relationship as replicating a prison experience suggesting "you're almost like a prisoner of some sort". In addition to 'Find my Friends', students frequently referred to 'Snapchats' affordances enabling GPS tracking of contacts. Below, Miles discussed how in the early stages of relationship formation his location was monitored, to him, this was considered as an invasion of privacy, linking directly into the social expectation of perpetual contact discussed in section 5.4.

Miles (25, FG5): *'I have a story about this, it is part of the reason I don't use Snapchat actually, so a while back, Snapchat included the update, if you had someone as a friend, you could see where they are on a map and I never realised this update had been put out... so I was chatting to someone, and she was like 'oh do you want to go and see this play' and I was like hm I don't want to see your stupid play it is raining outside, and I should have just told her no, but instead I said oh no sorry I have to go to the hospital like 30 minutes away and see someone there.... And she was like oh you know we will do it some other time, and I was like yeah thank you for understanding.... 30 minutes later she was like 'yo how is that hospital visit going', I'm like yeah yeah, it's good... and she said, 'I didn't know you had a hospital in your house' and screenshotted every page, so then obviously I had to do the only thing I could do as a mature person.... I said, 'stop stalking me you crazy bitch' and then I blocked her! That comes back to your whole point about tracking... social media, everyone is very accessible, because you are on Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and everybody has a phone now that can use apps, that you are reachable 24/7 and that you should be able to answer 24/7 it's kind of like that thing, you're easily trackable, and if you're not at this place then why not...'*

Miles' example highlights again how the affordances of social media can be utilised as an indirect form of 'accountability' within intimate relationships, how online social surveillance can lead to conflict due to miscommunication or lack of honest communication. With continuously changing affordances and privacy settings attached to online platforms, Miles' example also emphasises further the inaccuracy of conceptualising students as 'digital natives'. While for some students the use of platforms for online social surveillance was considered as "weird", with the potential for "really controlling relationships", for some students, this distinction was blurred. For some students, such as Iwan, this ambiguity was evident through our discussions. As Iwan described his experience of his location being monitored by his partner, he suggests that "this sounds kind of bad now I am saying out loud".

Iwan (20, FG1): *'We were snapchatting a lot, and if you have your location on your phone you can always see someone's location on snapchat where they used it, like it says if you were online, but if you're using it at that moment in time it tells you exactly where you are on the map, and she wasn't tracking me or anything but like I always used to tell her where I'm going... sometimes when I didn't she would look on the map and I was not supposed to be where my home is and then she was asking 'where are you' 'why did you leave'... and this sounds kind of bad now I am saying it out loud!'*

Interviewer: *'No it's fine, I am genuinely interested, how did you feel about that at the time?'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'... I didn't mind it.'*

Interviewer: *'Looking back on it now, what do you think about it now?'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'Erm, I don't know, I don't think I mind it now either... What I did mind was the whole I didn't message back, so she messaged me and got angry like why am I not messaging her back... I didn't mind if she knew where I was...'*

Callum (25, FG1): *'I think that would kind of annoy me if my girlfriend did that, like I don't mind if she knows where I am, but I don't know I just think if she doesn't trust me that much to have to check where I am, it's almost like well if you don't trust me, why are we together...'*

While the first theme of the 'taken for grantedness' of online abuse highlighted that online sexual harassment as being constructed by students as predominantly gendered in nature, their experiences of online social surveillance reflect similar research findings highlighting a similarity in experiences amongst both males and females (Alexy et al., 2005; Bennett et al., 2011; Reyns et al., 2012). Interestingly, the findings may also reflect an increasing use of GPS technologies to track intimate partners compared to US studies which highlighted a lower percentage of students experiencing and initiating online social surveillance in comparison to other online social information seeking behaviours (Burke et al., 2011). The discussion highlights how blurred the boundaries are between different conceptualisations of online social surveillance as an act of care or control, with surveillance technologies enabling both protection, as well as repression (Lyon, 2001; 2003).

6.4 Blurred boundaries: A spectrum of abuse and institutional responses

6.4.1 From 'online' to 'offline' spaces: Student experiences of sexual violence and abuse

Sexual violence and abuse within the context of universities has been of public concern both nationally and internationally, with research highlighting that at least a third to a half of university students have experienced some form of gender-based violence during their time at university (Fedina et al., 2018), contributing to poorer academic outcomes (Molstad et al., 2023) and mental ill-health (Carey et al., 2018). Research across the UK suggests that anywhere between 31% to 84% of students have been subject to sexual violence at university (McCarry & Jones, 2021; AVA & NUS, 2022), with particularly high rates amongst minoritised communities (Kirkner et al., 2022; Coulter et al., 2017). In addition, findings from the CSEW indicate that from 2021-22, full-time students were the occupational group most likely to have

experienced sexual assault (ONS, 2023). Yet, there is a dearth of research highlighting the voices of victim-survivors within UK university settings (Gangoli & Jones, 2022), particularly with regards to experiences of online sexual violence and abuse, and how these also relate to offline incidents (Myers et al., 2023).

A multitude of students I spoke with suggested that they had experienced forms of technology-facilitated sexual violence that extended to offline spaces, both prior to and during their time at university. For the most part, many of those sharing experiences of online abuse were females, suggesting they had experienced forms of unwanted contact, harassment, and abuse via online platforms. For example, Tilly described how she had received aggressive unwanted messages from an individual she knew:

Tilly (18, FG3): *'...I was in a different relationship to what I am in at the moment and erm I can't remember how it came about but he kept spamming me with like 'I'm going to fuck you' and he was being really aggressive and I saw him in the street and he was like I don't know it's really hard to explain, like I'm not being horrible but he was a big lad and he was bullied quite a lot so I don't know if he was taking it out on me, but it was really horrible it really scared me, he was like I'm going to find you and I'm going to get you and stuff.'*

The implications of experiencing online sexual harassment for Tilly are clear, and with the risk of encountering this individual in person, the possibility for online harms extending to offline spaces is progressively more tangible. For students within a university community, this possibility of encountering an individual perpetrating abuse via online platforms could be considered increasingly likely, given the geographical boundaries of many university campuses, as suggested by Scott and Maria.

Scott (22, FG1): *'Especially if it's peers or people they work with in their class, so it's obviously close to them, it's not like a complete stranger on the internet, it's still a source they know.'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'Its someone close, someone who can see you every day and do that, you know they're capable.'*

It is already evident that educational institutions, such as primary and secondary schools, are facing an increasing prevalence of online peer-on-peer abuse (Phippen et al., 2018), as well as being constructed as 'loopholes for violence' (Skott, 2023). Subsequently, it is unsurprising

that university students are also facing online peer-on-peer abuse as outlined by Emily and Camila:

Emily (22, FG4): *'So erm, there's a guy who I met through university, we became friends online because I had seen him around and he was messaging me, like persistently messaging me asking me to be friends asking personal questions..., telling me personal things, and apparently this has happened to other girls as well, to the point where yeah.... So there have been complaints put in about it, for me this wouldn't have happened, apparently he is like turning up at people's houses and stuff, for me if I had just seen him around it would have been fine, but the fact that he has been messaging me as well...'*

Camila (19, FG4): *'I don't know if we are talking about the same person, but er, I'm in [society] and there is a guy who is kind of like that and he can get really touchy with girls, it's very creepy actually, and we're in the society Facebook group, so he started messaging me as well, and he wanted me to go to his flat, and come to mine and I was like dude no, and then he started flirting in a really aggressive way.. it was really awkward.'*

Emily (22, FG4): *'He sent nudes to one girl...'*

Emily and Camila's narratives outline how what could initially be perceived as harmless attempts to build friendships at university, previously emphasised as highly important in supporting student transition, can shift to forms of online abuse. Both Emily and Camila also suggest that while the communication started in online spaces, this soon turned into attempts to move the behaviours to offline spaces. These findings align with national quantitative research which highlights that women under the age of 25 are "more likely to know the people who committed the violence against them and for this to move offline" (Jurasz, 2024, p. 23). When I followed up with Camila at a later stage, she elaborated on her experience:

Camila (20, Interview): *'I just kept shooting my roomie like, help me please. You know, I was getting a bit desperate. Yeah, because he kept, you know, being very close in a bit touchy. And then in the end, my roommate, thank god, he got fed up and was like, okay, you need to leave right now... We were also in, there's a society group. And then this boy was there again. And apparently, he was trying to flirt with another girl and being trying to be touchy again. And I spoke to somebody else. They said something like, oh, yeah, he tries to flirt with every girl he sees. And it was very clear that the girl was uncomfortable as well. So, I think somebody, another student I think it was a, like a second year, because we were first year at the time. I think the second year*

approached her and helped her. But it wasn't a really good experience. And then there was another boy I also met in the [society]. And we got really close. And then, you know, at some point, we're like, oh, yeah, we can have a movie night, you know. So we just spent all night watching movies, like until 8am, or something. So, you know, at some point, we were sleepy. And we cuddled a little bit, but we didn't, you know, we didn't do anything else. We didn't kiss. We didn't get very close. And then, before we agreed on the movie, he said, oh, well, if we finish at 8am or something, I can just go back to my dorm. You know, we're not sleeping together. I'm like, okay, thank God, you know, because I didn't feel comfortable doing that. And then when 8am came by, I tried to stall and be like, hey, can you please go to your room? Like, I would like to sleep now because I'm tired. And then he just stayed. And then he said, Can I stay? But can I sleep on the covers? So, we don't touch? So, I was like, fine. If you don't want to go to your room, then okay. Um, so we did that. And in the end, he did go under the covers... So, the next day he just left... And apparently after that he started telling people that we were dating, which was not true.'

Camila's discusses how these two experiences during her first year at university made her feel "uncomfortable" and "desperate", highlighting how from meeting someone in an online space due to shared interest can lead to in-person encounters which break the boundaries of consent. Although the ethics of consent, for some universities, are considered to be embedded in responses to tackling sexual violence and harassment, via consent training and workshops, Camila's examples indicate that the boundaries of negotiating consent are still blurred for some students. While training and campaigns can be useful in raising awareness, if there is a presumption of a shared understanding of consent amongst students, without tackling heteronormative sexual scripts, idiosyncratic experiences of consent, including obtaining and expressing consent, then efforts might not show lasting impact (Wignall et al., 2022). Interestingly, Wignall et al. (2022) highlighted that technologies are used as mechanisms to negotiate consent more explicitly, constructed by students as a more socially acceptable and 'less awkward' way of communicating sexual consent, nonetheless, as Camila's narrative highlights, in converse, despite explicitly declining 'aggressive flirting' online, offline sexual harassment persists.

6.4.2 "Not every girl can block him": Institutional responses to online abuse.

Research investigating university responses to sexual violence on campus consistently suggests that universities and HE regulators need to do more to support victim-survivors, create adequate sanctions for perpetrators and conduct effective investigations (Humphreys & Towl, 2022; Towl & Walker, 2019; Cowan & Munro, 2021). As discussed in section 2.5.3, while

some progress has been made with the release of the OfS E6 Condition of Registration to regulate harassment and sexual misconduct in English HEIs (OfS, 2023a; 2024a), acknowledgement and understanding of the severity, prevalence, and implications of online abuse within the student population is still lacking, despite high-profile cases (e.g., ‘Warwick Rape Chat Scandal’ (Lee & Kennelly, 2019). Phippen and Bond (2020a) conducted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to investigate UK universities policies, reporting, recording and responsibilities with regards to online abuse. The findings highlight the ad-hoc nature of university responses (or lack of) to online abuse, subsequently, it is unsurprising that many students, include those within the current study, may feel as if universities do not take online abuse seriously.

During a conversation with Emily and Camila, it was clear that the dominant perception was that universities would have limited power to act in instances of online abuse.

Emily (22, FG4): *‘I wonder as a university, they are paying to be here, do they have any say, what are their rules, what can they do how can they enforce it? Can they say you need to stop harassing these girls otherwise you’ll be kicked out? What can they do?’*

Camila (19, FG4): *‘Yeah realistically, what can they do, that’s the question you know...’*

Emily (22, FG4): *‘So like, he has been sending me messages are they going to be like, what do you want me to do about it, just block him.... But not every girl can block him.... Another student, they have put in complaints, but they have said to me that they don’t know how much they can do, because mine is all online, whereas the girls he has been inappropriate with in person or turned up at their house they feel like they have more responsibility about it, erm but they don’t know what they could do about him sending messages, but I’m just ignoring them now...’*

Emily challenges the common discourse surrounding how women and girls should respond to online abuse by suggesting that “not every girl can block him”. The denial of experience by implying that blocking an individual, or in other instances, deleting a platform, is a reasonable resolution to online abuse places further blame on a victim as well as assuming “that people are somehow less vulnerable as humans in online spaces and can thus easily protect themselves from harm and abuse” (Gosse, 2021, p. 57). The university’s response, suggesting there is not much they can do as Emily’s experience of harassment is taking place in an online space, further embeds the notion of ‘digital dualism’, reinforcing the division of online and offline experiences as separate entities, and subsequently potentially denying experiences of online abuse (Gosse, 2021, pp. 57-58):

“Furthermore, this type of advice demonstrates a misunderstanding of a core tenet to our ontological status: that we are profoundly vulnerable. It assumes that people are somehow less vulnerable as humans in online spaces and can thus easily protect themselves from harm and abuse. The consequence of normalizing this type of advice – or, of treating it as common sense (Fairclough, 1989) – is that it implants in individuals, and their support networks, a sense of false control over the repercussions of online abuse. This type of advice also assumes that the abuse, and the harm that it causes, can be turned off as easily as the devices themselves, as if the abuse is localized to the screen before us, rather than something that sits with us – that we carry affectively throughout our day.”

From Emily’s perspective, the suggestion that universities would have no ability to respond to experiences of harassment as these have occurred online was further exacerbated by her perception of ‘public and private’ platforms. Emily considers universities to have less ‘power’ in responding to online abuse if this takes place in a private messaging platform (e.g., Facebook messenger) as opposed to a more public student union or university-owned space (e.g., university-led social media pages).

Emily (22, FG4): *‘I didn’t realise the SU would have any power over it, I didn’t realise it would have been an opportunity for me to complain, I felt like he was harassing me online but I didn’t realise that they would have any say about what happened online, I didn’t think the university would have any control over it so that’s why I never thought to go and complain, I thought like the group chats, there is nothing they can do about it, maybe if they are university pages, like the new starters page, is a university page... I think, I would like to think they have some control about what goes on there, but as it comes in messenger, I didn’t think they would have any responsibility for it...’*

However, we know from previous high-profile cases, such as the Warwick Rape Chat Scandal, that instances of online abuse taking place in ‘private’ online spaces, can, and should, have ramifications for breaches of university policy (University of Warwick, 2019). The Warwick case was also discussed by some students across other focus groups, emphasising that universities have a responsibility to highlight behaviours that are not “acceptable in society”:

Callum (25, FG1): *‘I guess it’s almost like more real, there’s a chance of it happening, whereas if it’s online you’ll probably never see that person so it’s slightly different, still I don’t really agree with them going back to the university I think they need to make an example and show people that it’s not ok, I mean obviously everyone has their own views and perceptions about how they treat other people but as a university I think it’s important to show that’s something that isn’t acceptable in society... I know people*

have different perceptions and different cultures and things like that, say for instance in the UK it is illegal, they just made it seem like it's not really that bad...'

Nonetheless, Callum still suggests that if the abuse is taking place online, to an extent, this is considered 'lesser' as the likelihood of meeting that individual in person is reduced, however it is evident from students' narratives in this study that this is not necessarily the case. Furthermore, evidence suggests that victim-survivors of online abuse, such as cyberstalking, are likely to know the perpetrator (Maran & Begotti, 2019). Subsequently, both student and staff perceptions of the severity of online abuse is inconsistent, typically reflecting the idea of 'digital dualism' (Gosse, 2021), reinforcing the dichotomy of online and offline experiences, which in turn can have negative implications for tackling online abuse as a wider form of violence. Not only this, but the perceived severity of cases such as the 'Warwick Rape Chat Scandal' was constructed by students as highly context dependent, with blurred boundaries regarding responsibility and levels of severity, as expressed by Nathan:

Nathan (23, FG3): *'If they are targeting an individual like obviously that is wrong, and they should be punished for it, if they're saying we're going to do this to this girl, but I think you've got to put things in context, obviously it's not nice things to say, jokes about rape and they are inappropriate but if someone just posted a joke in a chat everything can be taken out of context can't it, it's difficult isn't it, it's kind of like a grey area.'*

Nathan suggests that the affordances of online platforms enable extraction of content from contextual cues or 'context collapse' (Marwick, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011), however his comment also highlights how online abuse can often be dismissed as 'banter' (Phippen & Bond, 2022b), with 'context collapse' being a possible way to legitimise abusive online behaviours. Concerns in responses to online abuse extended beyond universities. Students within the focus groups also referred to police responses to online abuse, such as image-based sexual abuse, as low priority and subsequently unlikely to be responded to.

Iwan (20, FG1): *'It's so hard to track, if you're anonymous on the internet its easy'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'If you see a photo of you naked on the internet you can report that to the police.'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'Yeah but what are they going to do?'*

Oli (21, FG1): *'They can search for the person who posted it'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'Sure, if they use a VPN or something similar, I don't think that's a priority that someone posted a naked picture'*

Maria (18, FG1): *'It should be'*

Iwan (20, FG1): *'Yeah it should be, but I don't think it is'*

Despite students suggesting online abuse should be a priority, to both universities and police, their conceptions of the reality of responses (or in this case, lack of) paints a bleak picture. Research highlights a lack of police knowledge and awareness of legislation relating to, for example, image-based sexual abuse (Bond & Tyrrell, 2019), and subsequently it is unsurprising that responses may be deemed unsatisfactory. Without acknowledgement of the severity and effective responses to online abuse across institutions, students are unlikely to seek support in the first instance or may continue to deny the gravity of experiencing and perpetrating online abuse (Phippen & Bond, 2022b).

6.4.3 What can universities do? Student perspectives of rights, respect, and responsibility

When discussing with students their perceptions of what universities could do in responding to experiences of online abuse, it was clear that the majority believe that universities should take this seriously and respond appropriately. As noted previously, policies relating specifically to online abuse across HEIs are limited (Phippen & Bond, 2020a), many responding to incidents via general misconduct policies “such as acceptable use policies, dignity and respect policies or through a disciplinary code of conduct” (UUK, 2019b, p. 34), most of which do not refer to online behaviour and its intersection with sexual misconduct more broadly. While English schools are required to have anti-bullying policies, alongside compulsory online safety and relationships and sex education (RSE) embedded in their curriculums, the same is not true for HEIs. Furthermore, not all children within schools will have received the same online safety education, and in instances where this is provided, challenges prevail, including limited training for staff (Phippen, 2019). Subsequently, reflecting on students' narratives, in the first instance, a recognition of online abuse as a serious issue occurring in the HE population, with students' idiosyncratic prior experiences of online safety and RSE, alongside policy development, is key.

Camila (19, FG4): *'I think if it concerns students, the university should get involved... to protect other students, that's what I think...'*

From a rights perspective, students suggested that if experiences of online abuse are detrimentally impacting their experience at university, affecting their studies and wellbeing, universities should intervene to support them. Thus, under their general 'duty of care', universities should provide an infrastructure to support students experiencing online abuse

and ensure mechanisms are in place to facilitate risk-mitigation and harm-reduction (Phippen & Bond, 2022b). Student narratives portrayed thus far suggest that, irrespective of universities good intentions, online abuse is not consistently taken seriously by their institution. Rhys suggests that educational interventions to tackle disrespectful behaviours, alongside a zero-tolerance approach, may assist in tackling online abuse.

Rhys (21, FG2): *'That's the issue, if it happens at the university on campus then it's the universities problem, if it doesn't then it's not, but they have to condemn it, they have to say I don't know without any far stretch of the imagination, anything to do with PR, but from the way I see it you have to condemn it, if you want to show a stronger stance on it, you can put together seminars to try and educate students around the importance of respecting other people...'*

Rhys later highlights the importance of moving away from rhetoric to a reality of sanctions, as if this narrative extends across a university community but is not met with appropriate and effective intervention, denial of victim-survivors experience can be exacerbated further (Paske, 2022).

Rhys (21, FG2): *'For example the uni had put quite a hard stance on that and they've made people aware of the issues with that [image-based sexual abuse], that's not necessarily their responsibility to enforce it but they need to let people know if you do this stuff there will be people who will enforce it, so there are things that were put in place and people we kind of looking at this stuff and will call you up on it, so it's not something that will be taken lightly.'*

Rhys also suggests that raising awareness of the potential online harms experienced by students is important for universities to engage with. He also implies that while universities may not necessarily be able to enforce a 'zero-tolerance' approach, others can reinforce sanctions for inappropriate behaviours, particularly when this falls within current legislation, such as image-based sexual abuse. Paske (2022, p. 262) suggests that while a 'zero-tolerance' approach to violence in universities is commonly advocated for (UUK, 2016, p. 34), from a practitioner perspective, enforcing sanctions can at times, lead to university failures on behalf of victim-survivors, and subsequently whole-institution preventative approaches may be the most appropriate form of action to tackle the "primary ('first' or underlying) divers of violence".

As outlined in section 2.5.2, while RSE and online safety education is statutory across UK schools, the same is not true of FE and HE institutions, subsequently there are no current

standardised and/or regulated preventative educational approaches addressing positive relationships, sex, and online behaviours. Currently, some research (albeit typically cross-sectional as opposed to longitudinal) exists to suggest that preventative interventions can have a positive impact on reducing gender-based violence in university settings. For example, Towl (2016, p. 432) suggests that “contributions can be made to prevention, it is argued, through increased reporting and also potentially through bystander intervention initiatives and consent workshops”.

Evidence suggests that bystander interventions are appropriate preventative approaches to tackling sexual misconduct within university settings and have been advocated for by regulatory bodies and UK university groups (OfS, 2023a; UUK, 2019c). According to Fenton and Mott (2018, p. 169), bystander approaches are “predicated upon empowering bystanders to intervene in a positive, pro-social way upon witnessing an event that they recognise to be problematic”. Research has consistently highlighted the potential for bystander interventions to tackle sexual violence and abuse within university settings, as well as wider communities (Gainsbury et al., 2020). A Public Health England report emphasises that across predominantly US based research into bystander intervention, the initiatives have the potential to create positive changes in relation to behaviour, cognition and attitudes centred around violence against women and girls and could have significant value within UK HEIs (Fenton et al., 2016). Camila’s narrative in the previous subsection highlights how help from bystanders can be positive interventions for students to obtain support. Recalling a situation in which a fellow student was experiencing unwanted sexual advances, so a second-year female student intervened to provide support. Nonetheless, the intricacies of factors influencing efficacy of bystander intervention are far from straightforward, despite the increasing emphasis on enhancing bystanders’ confidence in reporting incidents of abuse (UUK, 2019c). Subsequently, embedding and addressing students’ perceptions of bystander behaviours is critical to developing effective intervention (Robinson et al., 2022). For example, Finley describes how engaging in bystander behaviour was a complex negotiation of rights and responsibilities, from encouraging a student to report to discussing responsibilities with immediate networks.

Finley (20, FG5): *‘... there is only one case of it coming outside of social media, and that was when someone was stalked to their place of work, followed, ‘stalked’ kind of gives it a connotation, to their place of work during their work hours... [before] it was mostly like oh he is so naggy, he is so this, and immediately the conversation jumped back into that saying oh he says this, but when it actually changed from that to he followed me to work and that’s actually quite upsetting, and I was like you should*

complain. I think there is an element here of what universities should do, they should be really wide with their net or really focused with their net, no you can't complain on someone's behalf, get them to do it or don't... If anything, I appear to be the only person who wants to do anything about...'

Finley describes resistance in being able to report concerns on behalf of another student, from his description, it appears that despite feeling a moral and responsible obligation to report the behaviours it was suggested that the reports needed to come from the victims themselves. He also describes the complex interplay of instances of harassment conducted in online and offline contexts, with online harassment being the predominant form of abuse experienced yet only being taken seriously once the behaviour extended to an offline space. Finley continues to discuss the process of consulting others regarding his level of responsibility to intervene:

Finley (20, FG5): *'...there is the issue of what is my responsibility, someone who does know... so I had a conversation with a member of staff at the SU who said I think you have grounds to take this further, I talk to my parents and they're like it's not your concern is it, you should inform the university and sit back, it's up to them to decide what they do with that information... but there is now this element of it seems like doing this myself could go wrong, breaking someone's confidence, being a bit weird a guy coming forward expressing the disinterest of girls there is an element of is there jealousy going on whatever, one of the members of staff considered it as a point...'*

Finley's example highlights how within student hybrid ecologies, immediate networks are important in constructing the social norms around prosocial bystander intervention. Finley describes how navigating the social consequences of intervening alongside opposing moral obligations and perceived responsibilities (Robinson et al., 2022) leads to internal conflict. Bystander interventions, and more broadly, preventative mechanisms to tackling abuse, should subsequently consider the complex social negotiations experienced by students, including citizenship approaches which recognise individual and collective rights and responsibilities (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Setty et al., 2024). This is particular importance during a time of transition, in which peer networks are significant to developing connections and belonging within university settings. Incorporating students' perceptions of barriers to engaging in prosocial bystander intervention, particularly with reference to violence and abuse in all contexts (both online and offline) will likely lead to increased effectiveness and positive impact (Robinson et al., 2022).

6.5 Conclusion

Collectively, this chapter highlights the hybrid ecologies students occupy, in which digital platforms both facilitate intimacy and enable abuse. Despite the centrality of digital technologies to students' learning and social interaction, research on UK students' experiences of online abuse remains limited. Previous chapters emphasise how digital technologies, alter experiences of space and time at university, holding dual and often contradictory roles during transition and development stages of students' identities and intimacies, as well as in constructions of trust and security. This chapter presents students' experiences of when the risks necessary for intimacy leads to online harms, the blurred boundaries in norms surrounding digital intimacy practices and constructions of roles and responsibilities of stakeholders across students' ecologies.

Students described the 'taken for grantedness' (Ling, 2012) of online abuse as part of everyday online navigation, where harmful commentary and sexual abuse were normalised through socialisation and platform affordances. Online platforms created opportunities for connection but also enabled harassment. Online sexual abuse was seen as a continuation of earlier experiences (Phippen & Bond, 2023), requiring individual 'safety work' that reinforced cultures of violence without perpetrator accountability. The dual role of online platforms in facilitating intimacy yet enabling abuse was also presented through students' constructions of online social surveillance as both care and control. Location sharing and visibility features were used to build intimacy, security, and accountability, yet some students described these as intrusive, with 'Find my friends' and Snapchat used to question their whereabouts. Narratives highlighted blurred conceptualisations of surveillance as either an act of care or privacy violation.

Students situated sexual harassment and abuse across both physical and online campus spaces and expressed ambivalence about universities' 'power' and willingness to intervene. Their accounts stress the need for institutions to educate on online harms, support mechanisms, respectful relationships and promote proactive bystander intervention. I argue such preventative intervention should move beyond risk elimination toward approaches reflecting student experiences, embedding risk mitigation and harm reduction. Acknowledging students' hybrid ecologies reduces the likelihood of 'digital dualism' (Gosse, 2021) and recognises how digital technologies, alongside norms, attitudes, and practices shape intimacy and abuse during students' transition into and through university.

7. Chapter 7: Conclusions and Implications

7.1 Introduction

I began this study, with one specific aim, and that was to listen to, and explore, students' experiences of digital intimacies whilst studying in UK Higher Education. Through my own anecdotal university experience from 2012-2016, and through conversations with students whilst working in higher education to date, I was aware of the complexity of students' lives, managing multiples relationships and identities, all of which were interwoven with digital technologies. However, it was later that my interest in this topic arose during a sector-wide shift in recognising the digital welfare of students as being crucial to their university experience (UUK, 2016), and my subsequent involvement in an institutional OfS student safeguarding catalyst project in 2017 (Baird et al., 2019), that I realised that across the UK HE context, we have limited empirical evidence regarding the digital lives of our students.

Overall, this study set out to explore students' perceptions and experiences of digital intimacies. Specifically, it aimed to examine how university students', aged 18-25 years, experience, and perceive, the use of online platforms within their intimate relationships, and whether this has implications for HE policy and practice. Utilising a qualitative approach, speaking to students from the East of England, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are university students' experiences of digital intimacies?
2. How do students construct opportunities and risks associated with online platforms in the context of intimate relationships?
3. What is the perceived impact of digital intimacies upon students' university experiences?

By listening to the students' experiences of digital intimacies, the findings of this thesis provide original insights into an under researched topic across UK higher education contexts. This thesis, through the construction of four key conceptual and practical suggestions outlined below, thus provides a novel approach for how the higher education sector firstly conceptualises, but also could support, students who are embedded in hybrid ecologies. Firstly, I argue that if we are to understand and support university students effectively, we need to recognise the changing space and time dimensions of their higher education experience afforded by technologies. Secondly, if we are to fully understand students' conceptualisations and engagement with online risk in the context of digital intimacies, we need to contextualise these in relation to trust and vulnerability, centring our support around these concepts and recognising risk does not always equate to harm. Thirdly, by listening to students' everyday experiences of digital intimacies, we can gain knowledge into the blurred

boundaries between constructions of intimacy and abuse, and how to prevent and respond to online harms accordingly. And lastly, in bringing all of this together, I use Phippen and Bond's (2022a) online safeguarding stakeholder model as a framework to map my findings onto, providing insight into the different layers of the ecosystem, suggestions for stakeholder engagement at each level, but also suggestions for model development. Based on the research presented, the recommendations provided are both conceptual and practical, drawing upon existing evidence, policy, and guidance (UUK, 2019a). By emphasising the centrality of student voice, the findings of this thesis present a constructive way of thinking about university students' digital intimacies, the risks, the opportunities, and everything in-between, to inform policy and practice.

7.2 Re-imagining the Higher Education boundaries

The findings of this study advances understanding of how online platforms influence university students' experience of space and time, and their subsequent conceptualisation of relationships, identity formation, and transitions. Historically, space and place were viewed as static and stable, but technological advancements have challenged this perspective. Giddens' (1990) concept of time-space distanciation and Massey's (2005, p. 9) dynamic view of space as "simultaneity of stories-so-far" suggest that spaces are continually constructed through social and material practices. Similarly, Sheail (2017) highlights how digital universities exemplify 'translocality' and 'transtemporality', where students engage across both physical and virtual boundaries. Embedding this idea of students' hybrid ecologies, the findings, more specifically, reflect how students use online platforms as spaces for navigating transitions and sustaining relationships, how social and digital practices shape the temporal and reflexive evolution of student identities and how the affordances of online platforms enable this to extend beyond campus boundaries.

Students' narratives underscore how digital technologies extend the spatial and temporal dimensions of university life. Formal structures, such as timetables and virtual learning environments, intersect with informal transitions, including leaving home and forming relationships. Similarly to Stirling (2014), who describes university as liminal, a temporal period for exploration and identity formation, facilitated by digital platforms, this study highlights the importance of online platforms in offering students flexible opportunities for connection during a period of transition. Pre-arrival interactions via online platforms enable students to build social ties, gather information, and ease transitions, expanding the temporal boundaries of university life (Stirling, 2016; Dyer, 2020b). However, the findings also highlight that some students also engage in 'risky' intimacy projects and are subject to discomfort when witnessing inappropriate behaviours when added to group-based chats across online platforms prior to

arriving on campus. Subsequently, with the OfS Condition of Registration E6 (2024a) in mind, institutions must reconsider their policy and practice to reflect these expanded spatial and temporal boundaries. For example, policies often focus exclusively on enrolled students, leaving applicants and pre-enrolment activities unaddressed (Phippen & Bond, 2022a). As such, whilst some institutions require students to read and sign a code of conduct at offer acceptance, which outlines unacceptable behaviour, this is not consistent across all UK HEIs, with some only requiring student code of conduct signatories during enrolment. Subsequently, students who experience, or are bystanders to, unacceptable online behaviours prior to enrolment but having received and accepted an offer to study, may be at increased risk of being unaware of what is institutionally considered as unacceptable conduct, but also unable to access detailed advice, guidance, and support until after receipt of student login details. Online harassment and forms of sexual misconduct occurring online should also fall under the OfS Condition of Registration E6, however the condition only refers to 'registered' students, subsequently universities and regulators should make it clear that when students enter "distance contracts" with institutions, such as at offer acceptance (CMA, 2023, p. 35), that policies apply for inappropriate conduct, and access to information, advice and support is available. Arguably, such information should be publicly available prior to this, to ensure prospective students recognise that universities take students safety and wellbeing seriously (Towl & Humphreys, 2022), whilst recognising that universities must demonstrate how they go beyond code of conduct and acceptable use policies to address online abuse (Short et al., 2016).

In accordance with Dyer (2020b), the students' narratives also highlight how the transition to university is conceptualised as being primarily social. Subsequently, for many students interviewed, university represents a critical time and space for exploring social and sexual identities, shaped by both personal maturation and changing sociocultural norms around intimacy. For the students 'becoming a university student' was associated with new expectations and norms surrounding their sexual selves, mediated, and facilitated by, online platforms. Online platforms subsequently enabled the temporal exploration of multiple fluid identities, whilst also mediating identity performance, as the students present profiles which blend curated versions of their past and present selves. The findings also suggest a movement beyond the consideration of online platforms primarily facilitating 'weak ties', particularly during the transition to university, to facilitating the formation and maintenance of 'strong ties' (Krämer et al., 2021). The maintenance of such ties however also introduces complexities, such as pressure in long-distance relationships and tensions related to physical co-presence and the convenience of online communication. The implications of digital technologies in facilitating the maintenance of intimate relationships whilst at university is less frequently discussed and

warrants further research, particularly the potential implication of prolonged relationship dissolution and relational conflict. Such research could also highlight gaps in transition-focused advice and/or support regarding wellbeing and healthy relationships, to enhance national guidance, for example Student Minds (2018) Transitions Guide.

Digital technologies are pivotal in fostering temporal and spatial flexibility, allowing students to connect across geographic and temporal boundaries. However, despite these expanded opportunities, students in this study often preferred physical co-presence for lasting connections, underscoring the continued significance of shared spaces in developing intimacy, irrespective of the described associated risks. Thus, students' may be more likely to engage in digital intimacies with others within the immediate university environment, surrounding wider community or within the geographical region of their permanent home address, despite the global reach afforded by communicative technologies. Nonetheless, some students suggested that geographical proximity was less pivotal in 'casual' relationships, or for the purposes of 'hooking up', with dating at a distance also portrayed as a form of risk management. These findings extend our understanding, by highlighting the complex reflexive decisions and risk negotiations students engage with when initiating digital intimacies, as well as the multi-platform reality of students' relationships (Madianou & Miller, 2012).

Furthermore, these findings have implications for how we think about supporting students who experience online harm, as similarly to students' experience of violence across a multitude of locations (Myers et al., 2023), students' experiences of online harms can occur amongst, or extend beyond, university platforms and peer-to-peer connections. Subsequently, it remains essential that universities support students who experience online harms, regardless of whether the perpetrator is a member of the campus community or whether the abuse occurs on university-managed platforms, due to the negative implications for students' higher education experience.

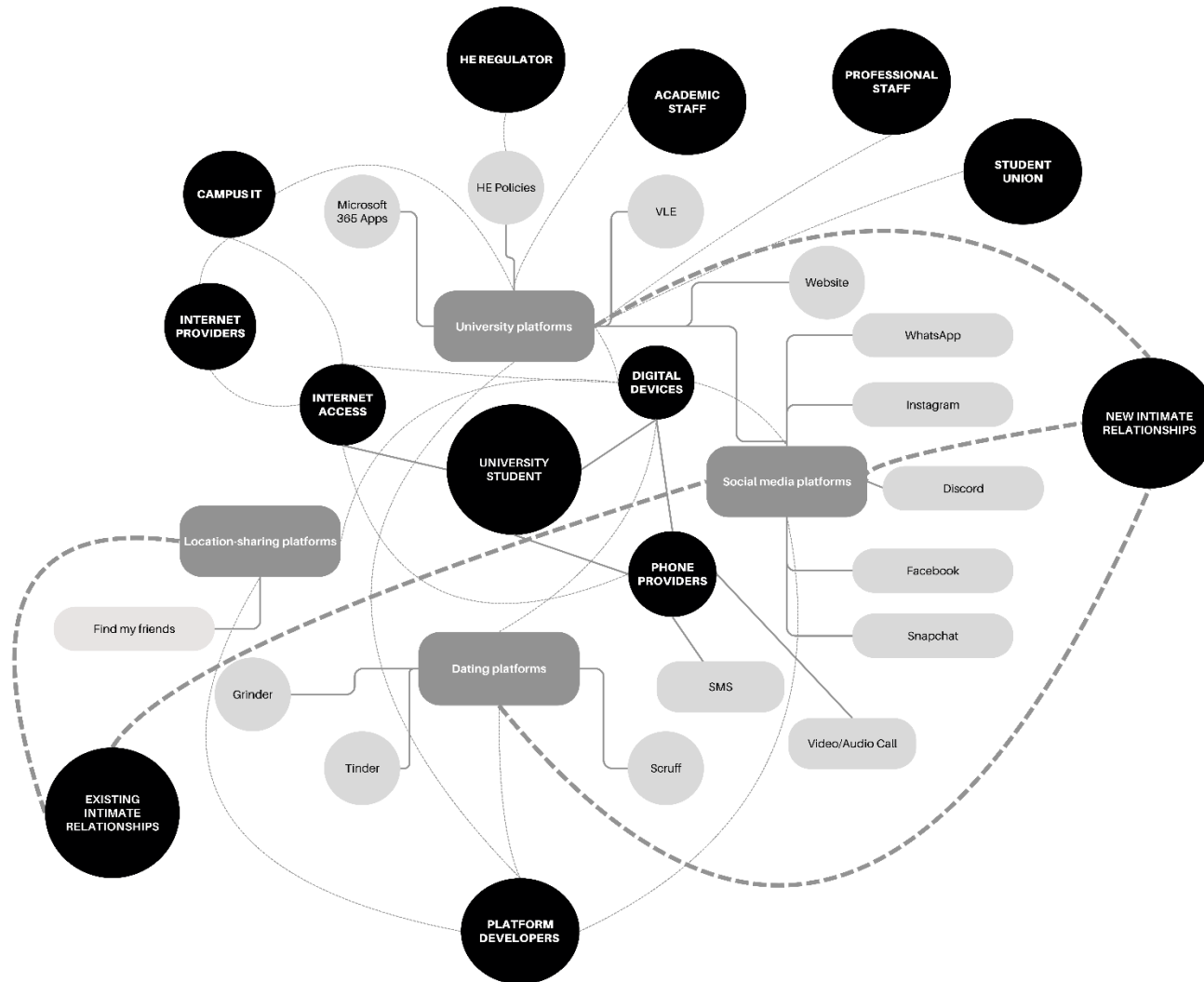
We tend to think of shifting boundaries of higher education in the digital age in relation to learning (Erstad & Silseth, 2023), but the implications of this change for students' social networks is of equal importance. By exploring students' ecologies drawing on Actor-network theory, universities can build a holistic understanding of the different actors within their socio-technical networks. For example, Figure 5 depicts how students interact with new and existing relationships through a network of platforms, all occurring across different spaces during a time of transition to, and throughout, university. The figure depicts a tracing of the 'heterogeneous connections amongst human and non-human actants' (Blok & Jensen, 2011, p. 20) present within students' hybrid ecologies based on their accounts. With the student at the centre, this figure includes a map of all platforms discussed as central to their experience

of digital intimacies as represented by the thick dashed lines, as well as all their associations with other key actants within the socio-technical network as represented by the thin dashed lines. Lines are bidirectional, representing the active role of both human and non-human actors in influencing one another, as well as the wider system.

The mapping provides a visual multi-actor representation of actants influencing students' intimacies. Thus, similarly to systems mapping approaches, based upon 'systems thinking' perspectives (see Arnold & Wade, 2015), I suggest that mapping students' ecologies through the lens of ANT provides not only opportunities to (re)conceptualise students' ecologies as hybrid systems, but identifies key points for intervention and prevention. For example, training for both staff and students may embed references to relevant platforms students are utilising and their associated reporting routes, as well as gaps where platform moderation or settings reviews may be required. Regular engagement and mapping with student bodies will highlight changing meanings associated with digital intimacies, whilst also accounting for the nature of hybrid assemblages as being under constant construction (Blok & Jensen, 2011).

Lastly, Figure 5 highlights the multi-stakeholder realities of students' experiences, emphasising the necessity of networked or systems approaches to supporting students (Tyrrell et al., 2024), as discussed further in section 7.5. Together, the findings of this thesis highlight how aligning with frameworks which recognise students as navigating hybrid ecologies made up of sociotechnical assemblages of human and non-human actors (Dyer, 2020b), universities can better address the evolving needs of diverse student populations, fostering inclusive and adaptive environments, even prior to arrival on campus.

Figure 5: Using an Actor-network theory lens to illustrate actors influencing students' experiences of intimate relationships during the transition to, and throughout, higher education.



7.3 Virtual vulnerability: Shifting conceptualisations of risk and trust

Recognising the shifting space and time boundaries for students in a digital age also has implications for the construction of risk, trust, and vulnerability. Influenced by social norms and technological affordances, students' perceptions of trust and risk reflect complex negotiations shaped by their relational and contextual experiences during the transition to and throughout university. The findings of this thesis emphasise how, for students, trust is a crucial foundation for maintaining ontological security and engaging in digital intimacies. For students, online platforms, through affordances like accessibility, perceived anonymity, and disinhibition, provide unique opportunities for trust-building by enabling mutual self-disclosure, which Giddens (1992) identifies as central to the 'pure relationship'. However, these platforms also expose students to risks, such as potential privacy breaches and betrayals of trust, underscoring the dual nature of digital intimacies (Ellison & boyd, 2013; Rotenberg, 2020). Building on Marwick and boyd's (2014) notion of 'networked privacy', my findings reflect the necessity of conceptualising trust, and inherently, risk, as networked.

The concept of risk has changed in society, underpinned by reflexive modernisation, in which we are bound by individualised and heightened uncertainties and risk anxiety resulting from increased awareness of the implications of modernisation (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Subsequently, technological development can be viewed as a new form of 'manufactured uncertainty', with online harms representing 'high-consequence risks' (Rasborg, 2020, p. 28). The evolving spatial and temporal boundaries of virtual spaces, which enable constant connectivity (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) and global interactions, as well as heightened possibilities for anonymity, make it unsurprising that risk is a central theme in discussions about online platforms. Digital technologies have become inseparable from notions of risk, particularly in relation to childhood and adolescence, exemplifying Beck's (1992) 'risk society' thesis, especially concerning sexual risk-taking behaviours such as the sharing of intimate images (Bond, 2014; Dobson, 2017). In this context, the social construction of digital risks is often framed through a lens of harm, with young people depicted as inherently vulnerable and in need of adult protection from the 'dangers' associated with online platforms. These "protectionist ideals", shaped by adult-centric perspectives, have historically defined public and private spaces where young people's online participation is heavily controlled and restricted by formal and legal measures (Phippen & Bond, 2020c, p.123). Consequently, dominant narratives around online safety tend to prioritise risk elimination and protecting children as 'vulnerable' beings.

However, what these prevailing narratives omit, is the importance of risk for building trust, despite trusts circular relation with risk (Misztal, 2011). For example, research continues to highlight how perceived risks associated with digital intimacy practices such as sexting,

provide opportunities for the expression of trust and intimacy toward a partner (Amundsen 2019, 2022; Setty 2018b, 2019). The findings of this thesis build upon research exploring risks in digital intimacies by highlighting the centrality of trust as a bridging mechanism between online risk and vulnerability. In this study, physical separation from partners due to higher education attendance disrupted the visibility of actions and intentions, creating challenges for maintaining trust. In accordance with research exploring sexting practices, the students in my study highlighted how trust was a pre-requisite to digital intimacies, and more trust in a relationship was considered as a safer context for sending intimate images (Setty, 2018b; Burkett, 2015). Interestingly, some students identified that intimate relationships dispersed geographically, require additional trust due to reliance on practices of digital intimacy, presumably due to the inability for actions and thought processes to be continuously visible (Giddens, 1991). Thus, for many students, transition to university, underpinned by a level of uncertainty, was also a time in which they were utilising ‘resources for intimacy’ (Amundsen, 2022), such as sending intimate images, as signifiers of trust.

Not only this, but students reported digital practices, such as sharing passwords and location data, to mitigate insecurities and sustain relational stability, acknowledging possible privacy breaches as potential risks. These behaviours reflect efforts to address both personal and relational ontological security by leveraging the affordances of digital platforms. As Giddens (1991) highlights, trust is central to the sense of stability and maintenance of ontological security, the practices of sharing passwords and location data were subsequently also constructed by my participants as practices of trust. Subsequently I argue that Amundsen’s (2022) concept of ‘resources of intimacy’ can be extended to other practices such as password (Doerfler et al., 2024) and location sharing, as not only signifiers of trust, but practices of risk management. In these instances, sharing intimate content and personal data is conceptualised by students as a means of ‘gifting’ (Mauss, 2022) for the purposes of building trust, but also indicating trust for the purposes of risk management, for example, to protect ones or another’s ontological security. Thus, digital technologies have not only challenged how we might conceptualise risk and vulnerability by blurring boundaries of space, time, public and private (Phippen & Bond, 2020c), but I suggest they have also challenged how we conceptualise trust, as increasing potential vulnerability and risk afforded by online platforms, intensifies the demand for trust.

The findings of this thesis also highlight that despite the common popular rhetoric that children are primarily vulnerable to risk posed by online platforms, vulnerability is not confined to a “self-contained or static group”, therefore adults having a state of “completeness” and subsequently lacking vulnerability is a falsehood (Phippen & Bond, 2020c, p. 123). As Lee (2001, p. 10) emphasises: “over the past few decades, changes in working lives and in intimate

relationships have cast the stability and completeness of adults into doubt and made it difficult and, often, undesirable for adults to maintain such stability”. This is of particular relevance when we consider the changes to society which led to conceptualisation of emerging adulthood as a developmental phase (Arnett, 2000; 2004; 2006; 2015) centred around identity exploration and instability, which has also been linked to the unique contexts of higher education (Murray & Arnett, 2019), and reflects broader theoretical ideas of increasing uncertainty and reflexivity in a late modern risk society (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). The findings of this thesis highlight the constant reflexive process students engaged in, mediated by online platforms, to explore their identity, framed by the multiplicity of spaces they occupy.

Subsequently, as Misztal (2011, p. 365) emphasises, and what I reinstated here, is that we are all vulnerable, as we are all in some way, dependent on others for “social recognition that is fundamental for individual self-realisation”, which requires elements of trust and subsequently risk. As such, I argue that the centrality of risk to student digital intimacies means that preventative mechanisms should focus on risk mitigation and harm reduction, as opposed to risk elimination via criminalising or abstinence discourse that has dominated approaches to children’s online safeguarding (Setty & Dobson, 2023b). This means accepting that students will engage in digital intimacies that are valuable for sexual expression and relationship development, yet this may lead to harmful practices such as non-consensual image sharing. Subsequently, universities should have the necessary mechanisms in place to support the student in reducing harm, such as signposting to reporting channels (e.g., Revenge Porn Helpline), as well as risk mitigation strategies, such as developing students’ digital literacies (Phippen & Bond, 2022b) and awareness of consensual relational behaviours. To account for the networked nature of students’ intimacies, as well as their recognition of collective responsibilities, approaches which provide opportunities for individual reflexivity, alongside community-level “conscious deliberation” of rights, roles, and responsibilities would be beneficial (Setty et al., 2024, p. 442).

While at a national scale, legislative frameworks to protect adults online, such as the Online Safety Act 2023 have come into fruition, FOI research highlights that online safeguarding policies, practices, training, and guidance at higher educational institutions who have safeguarding responsibilities and a duty of care to students are limited (Phippen & Bond, 2020a). I subsequently recommend university policy and practice that is centred around online risk mitigation, harm reduction strategies and digital citizenship, as opposed to risk avoidance, technologically deterministic solutions, and a dominant ‘criminal justice drift’ discourse (Cowan & Munro, 2021). As Towl and Humphreys (2022) emphasise, universities are positioned as communities capable of driving social change both within and outside academic settings, especially when addressing harmful behaviours. This shift reflects a broader view of students,

not just as traditional learners, but as active citizens and future leaders. I argue, therefore that recognising that everyone has the potential for vulnerability, means we can move toward creating socio-cultural communities where skills to negotiate social, and more specifically, intimate situations in hybrid ecologies, are supported collectively across higher education institutions and beyond (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Setty et al., 2024).

7.4 Insights into the blurred boundaries between students' digital intimacies and abuse

While the intention of this research was not necessarily to explore students' experiences of technology-facilitated abuse, it soon became apparent that risks of harm, such as online sexual harassment and intimate partner monitoring and surveillance were integral and ubiquitous in their experience of utilising online platforms for intimacy projects. Similarly to Haslop et al. (2021), my findings highlight the 'normalisation' of varying forms of online harassment and sexual violence, but also the tendency for some students to blur the boundaries between intimacy and abuse by conceptualising some forms of online abuse as 'misguided' attempts at intimacy. The subsequent tolerance, and in some instances legitimisation, of online harassment and sexual violence as an assumed part of interactions in digitised spaces can lead to the minimisation of these behaviours (Haslop et al., 2021; Myers & Cowie, 2017). However, going beyond acceptance at an individual and peer level, I argue that limited action and subsequently, to some degree, tolerance, at an institutional and sector level exacerbates this acceptance.

Some of the students in this study highlighted how institutional responses to incidents of online harassment were unsatisfactory, even with the contextual understanding that interactions online often coincided with in-person interactions on campus, with, for example, online harassment preceding an incident of in-person stalking. This fluidity suggests that universities should refrain from adopting a 'digital dualist' approach (Gosse, 2021), treating online interactions as separate from real-life experiences, and as a by-product, in many cases, treat forms of online harassment as 'lesser'. Instead, as highlighted throughout this thesis, a holistic understanding of students' 'hybrid ecologies' is needed, one that acknowledges how digital and physical contexts intersect to shape students' lived experiences. By recognising the intersection between online and offline abuse and students' conceptualisations of risk and online harms, alongside acknowledging the affordances of online platforms that create unique contexts for abuse (Phippen & Bond, 2021), the higher education sector will be better placed to respond but also prevent forms of online abuse. However, since beginning this research, despite sector-wide recognition that the online welfare of university students is paramount (UUK, 2019a; Bond & Phippen, 2022a; Cowie & Myers, 2023), regulators and many higher

education institutions are still taking limited steps toward the online safeguarding of students. For example, the regulatory condition coming into force for all English HEIs in August 2025 suggests that “harassment and sexual misconduct that is conducted online should be included in a provider’s policies” (OfS, 2024a, p. 9), however this is the extent of the reference to and/or frameworks for preventing or responding to online harassment and sexual violence provided. Instead, I suggest that the implications of online platforms in exacerbating and creating new forms of violence should be embedded across not only policies, but guidance and training for both students and staff.

In addition to forms of online harassment and sexual violence, regulators and universities should also consider wider forms of violence that students may experience, including domestic violence. In the context of my research regarding students’ intimate relationships, the discussion around online social surveillance, in the form of tracking and monitoring, is particularly nuanced. Students shared that digital monitoring, such as using location-sharing apps or tracking online activity, can be perceived as either an act of care or a form of control. This duality aligns with the idea of the ‘Janus Faces’ of surveillance (Widmer & Albrechtslund, 2021; Lyon, 2001; 2003), where technologies designed to foster connection and safety can simultaneously facilitate repression and coercion. For some, sharing their location with a partner was seen as a gesture of intimacy, reinforcing mutual trust. Yet, for others, it was described as invasive, crossing into behaviour that generated anxiety and unease rather than reassurance. The tension between trust and control highlights how digital technologies complicate the boundaries between healthy relational behaviours and coercive practices. What is framed as ‘just checking in’ can, under certain conditions, escalate into coercion and control, that undermines autonomy. Similarly, while my participants highlighted that sharing of online platform passwords and access to devices was a signifier of trust (Doerfler et al., 2024) and intimacy, some also suggested how easy it might be to step beyond the boundary and access without continued consent.

What the findings of this study highlight is the importance of understanding student constructions of risk, trust, and intimacy, but also their conceptualisations of what constitutes technology-facilitated sexual and domestic violence in higher education research, policy, and practice. Currently, although we know that, based on the 2020 CSEW, full-time students were most likely to experience domestic abuse than any other occupational group (Khan, 2021; ONS, 2020), the extent to which this was facilitated by technology, or included forms of stalking and coercion and control is still unknown (Bull, 2023). The introduction of the OfS sexual misconduct prevalence survey across universities in 2025 should also provide further insight into the prevalence of sexual violence, including forms of online abuse (for example, image-based sexual abuse and online harassment). The OfS pilot survey (2024b) highlighted that

33% of unwanted sexual behaviour occurring outside of the university took place online, however, the survey does not breakdown whether incidents occurring in university or college settings occur via online platforms. Whilst large-scale surveys provide us with important insight into the prevalence and scale of the problem, as well as providing an evaluative basis of policy reform, they need to be accompanied by recognition of the in-depth nuanced experiences of students required for preventative socio-cultural systems change work.

Despite sector-wide shifts to focus on issues of online harassment (UUK, 2016; 2019c) and more recently, issues of domestic abuse in UK universities (UUK, 2020a; Khan, 2021; Khan et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2024), there is still a dearth of empirical research exploring university students' experiences of technology-facilitated abuse. The findings of this thesis contribute toward the limited empirical research, by providing further insights into the "perceptions and attitudes to these practices in locally specific contexts" (Haslop et al., 2021, p.1419), highlighting the blurred boundaries between behaviours featuring along a continuum from practices of digital intimacy to online harassment, coercion, and control.

7.5 A hybrid ecological systems approach to student safeguarding

This study most importantly emphasised the importance of viewing students' everyday lives as unfolding within 'hybrid ecologies', where they navigate dynamic socio-technical networks comprising both human and non-human actors (Latour, 1996; 2005; Blok & Jensen, 2011). This perspective challenges the notion of 'digital dualism' (Gosse, 2021) by recognising the explicit and implicit roles that technologies, alongside various actors, play in shaping students' experiences of online harms. Subsequently, I therefore argue that adopting a whole-university or broader systems approach to online safeguarding is essential. This approach aligns with research that highlights the role of legislators, regulators, higher education institutions, and immediate relational networks in fostering effective responses to technology-facilitated abuse experienced by students. As discussed in section 2.2.2, Phippen and Bond's (2022a) adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model provides a valuable conceptual framework for understanding the interconnected system layers that influence and interact with one another to shape the online safeguarding of students (see Figure 1). In addition to these system layers, Phippen and Bond (2022a) emphasise that students carry varied risk and resilience factors shaped by pre-university experiences, some of which were discussed by students in this study. By comprehensively understanding these factors and working to "enhance resilience and address risk" through a holistic, multi-actor approach, universities can positively impact student experiences and foster a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment that promotes participation and well-being (Bond & Phippen, 2022a, p. 404; Bond & Phippen, 2022b).

This thesis provides original empirical insights into how various stakeholders across the system levels in Phippen and Bond's (2022a) conceptual model may interact to create environments which safeguard and support students. Adopting a systems approach to tackling online harms at an institution and sector level could facilitate awareness of how levels of the system can work together, as well as ensuring that all layers of the system are considered when developing safeguarding policy and practice (Tyrrell et al., 2024). The students' narratives in this thesis highlighted various risk factors experienced prior to entering HE, such as experiences of online sexual harassment, for example, receipt of unsolicited sexual imagery as a 'normalised' aspect of engaging with online platforms. However, the students were less likely to discuss factors related to resilience, for example, positive online safety education experiences or positive responses to seeking support, instead they were likely to discuss using self-developed risk management techniques, implying that universities should be cautious in their assumptions about students as resilient 'digital natives' (Phippen & Bond, 2022a). Linking this to the centre of the microsystem, the student themselves, the findings of this thesis advocate for a systems approach which embeds student voice at the core. Aligning with Principle 2 of UUK (2019a) tackling online harassment and promoting online welfare guidance, student engagement should be central to university approaches to addressing online harms, particularly in an evolving digital landscape. By actively listening to student everyday experiences in hybrid ecologies, we can identify, for example, concepts important in shaping digital intimacies, such as risk and trust, as well as practices which have the propensity to blur boundaries between intimacy and abuse.

Insights provided by students can facilitate the development of effective preventative interventions which can intersect both the first and second layer of the microsystem but could also challenge attitudes and ideologies at the macrosystem level. Students in my study highlighted the importance, but also the difficulties, associated with peer intervention, such as determining responsibility, confidence to report and navigating respecting peers' rights with individual ethics and values. Thus, preventative mechanisms that embed individual rights and responsibility which link to emerging adults' reflexive biographies, but also emphasise collective responsibility in creating safe and supportive spaces are necessary. For example, utilising citizenship approaches (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Setty et al., 2024; Henry & Powell, 2017), which encourage equal participation and reciprocal rights online, as opposed to focusing predominantly on criminalising approaches to addressing online risk (Smith et al., 2019; Phippen & Bond, 2023; Cowan & Munro, 2021), may be more suitable for facilitating whole-institution cultural change. The development of digital citizenship approaches, in enhancing digital literacy and as preventative approaches to online sexual and gender-based violence are emerging in compulsory education settings (Abades-Barclay & Banaji, S, 2024;

Setty et al., 2024), their application and evaluation within higher education settings could be an interesting avenue for future practice and research, aligning with UUK (2019a) Principle 4. Training for students, and staff, that is likely being refined or developed at the time of writing this thesis, across English HEIs in response to the OfS Condition of Registration (OfS, 2024a), could benefit from the inclusion of content encouraging digital citizenship in future, to build upon the suggested bystander and sexual consent approaches.

Similarly to Gosse (2021, p. 57), the findings of this study highlighted how students' experiences of online harassment could be denied by universities, making the assumption that "people are somehow less vulnerable as humans in online spaces and thus easily protect themselves from harm and abuse". These experiences perpetuate a cycle of denying victim-survivors experiences (Paske, 2022), which, by inference of the students' narratives, can infiltrate across the student population. Tackling this via appropriate training for staff with safeguarding responsibilities is significant, so they are able to firstly, recognise online abuse, but also importantly, how to respond and reduce harm. Research highlights that training embedding online abuse is limited across HEIs, with just over a half of universities (57 of 106 institutional responses) providing training which refers to forms of online abuse, and subsequently 49 providing no training at all (Phippen & Bond, 2020a). Provision and renewal of training within HEIs is of importance due to technological change, part of this process could be liaising with wider external stakeholders in the layer bridging the microsystem and exosystem regarding changes to national legislation, policy, and support. Involvement of wider stakeholders is key to preventative work, but also processes of responding to and supporting victim-survivors. For example, one of the students in this study highlighted an awareness of image-based sexual abuse as a result of the institutions work alongside Revenge Porn Helpline. Recognising there are external organisations to support students who have experienced forms of online abuse, or mechanisms to report harmful online content (e.g., SWGfL Report Harmful Content), is crucial. As such, centralised guidance regarding national organisations who can support students for the HE sector would be beneficial, to enhance internal report and support mechanisms. Such a resource would not only support staff but would also subsequently enable students to have access to alternative avenues for support, particularly if there are still perceptions of their institution as having limited powers to respond, as identified in this study.

Understanding the microsystem as the most immediate layers encompassing and surrounding the student is important. However, expanding our awareness of the microsystem to also embed digital technologies is significant. Thus, while Bronfenbrenner's work and applications frequently refer to in-person face-to-face settings, recognising the integration of online and offline settings is fundamental. Similarly to Navarro and Tudge (2022), who highlight the

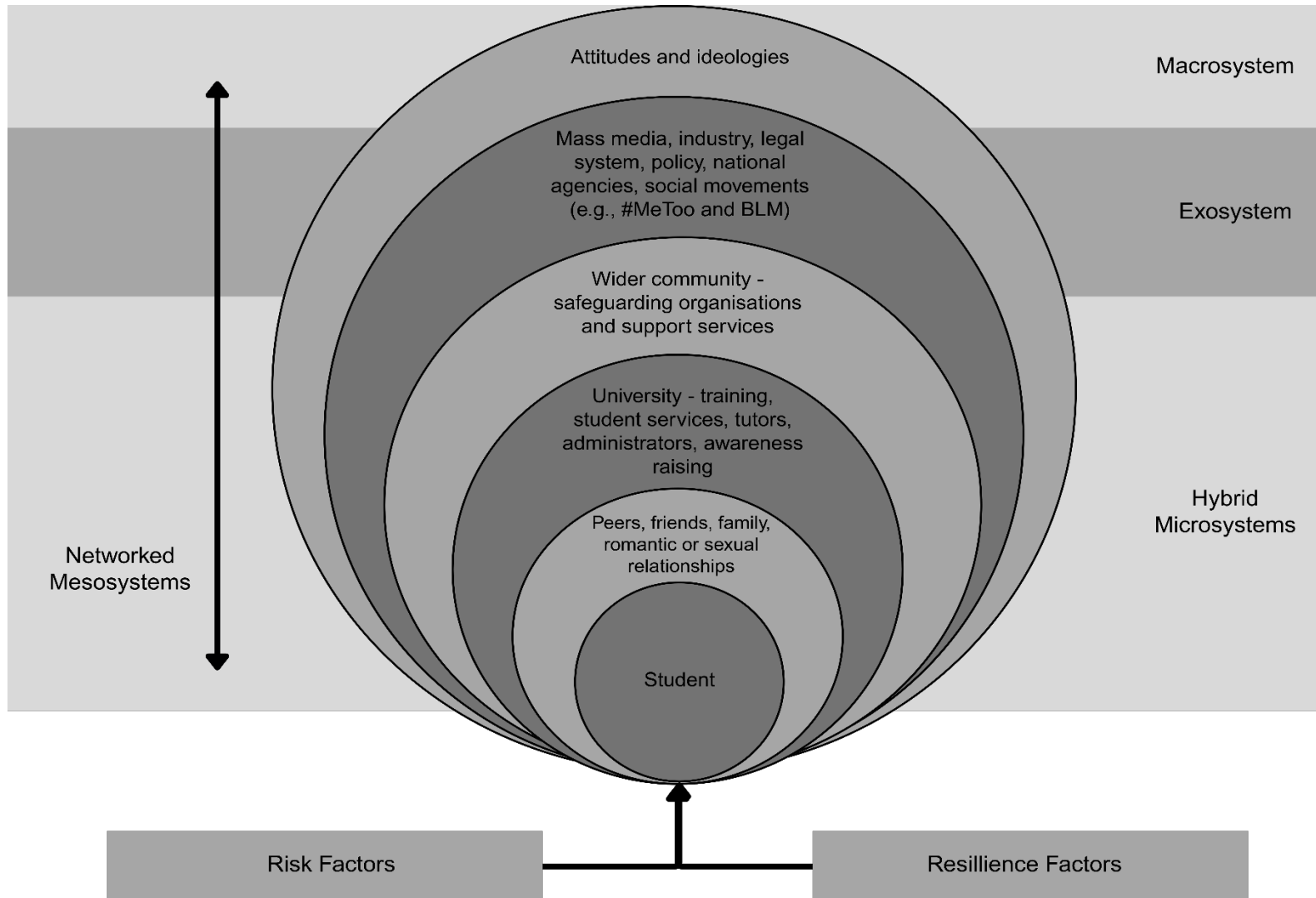
importance of reconceptualising the microsystem to include a physical and digital microsystem, this thesis has highlighted the need to reimagine the socio-ecological systems of students as hybrid in nature due to the ubiquity of digital technologies in their everyday lives.

As such, I propose some adaptations to Phippen and Bond's (2022a) model, drawing on Navarro and Tudge's (2022) Neo-ecological theory and Actor-network theory (Latour, 1996; 2005; Blok & Jensen, 2011), and present these in Figure 6. As Navarro and Tudge (2022) highlight, the microsystem was originally conceptualised as the 'face-to-face' settings in which reciprocal interactions would take place, in which applications of this theorising conceptualise interactions occurring via technologies, yet in physical spaces. Whilst Navarro and Tudge (2022, p. 19341) suggest that instead there should be 'two types of microsystem: virtual and physical' of which the individual can exist in more than microsystem at a time, I propose that, in extending Phippen and Bond's (2022a) model, the microsystem is instead reconceptualised as hybrid. Therefore, instead of two separate systems, the immediate environments that shape students experience, and the actors that influence our approach to prevention and intervention, are a socio-technical network of human and non-human actors. Consequently, this thesis extends existing knowledge by highlighting how instead of moving between two different environments, students should instead be conceptualised as embedded in hybrid systems.

Furthermore, I suggest that the relationships between these systems, the mesosystem, should be conceptualised as networked. As outlined in section 7.2 of this chapter, a student may interact with an assemblage of actors within a network made up of different hybrid microsystems. For example, a student may send an intimate image to another student via WhatsApp, this image could be non-consensually forwarded onto peers, and subsequently the university intervenes to investigate and support. Reconceptualising the mesosystem as networked also enables the potential to expand this idea beyond microsystem interactions, to consider how networks extend to other ecological system layers (e.g., exo and macro systems), as well as further identification of multi-stakeholder interaction and influence.

As emphasised throughout this thesis, prior to systems change, this key conceptual shift is necessary across all layers of the system in which stakeholders operate and interact to support students' welfare. The findings of this thesis implicate that although there are increasing policy drivers for systems change at the level of the exosystem, such as higher education regulatory changes (OfS, 2024a) and the OSA 2023, there is still a long way to go within the more immediate layers of the microsystem surrounding the student.

Figure 6: Phippen and Bond (2022a) stakeholder model for student development (adapted and included with permission).



7.6 Limitations and future directions

While this in-depth study of students' digital intimacies provided rich and meaningful insight into a group of emerging adults everyday lived experiences of relationships and technologies at the centre of the system, a broader multi-stakeholder approach would be appropriate for future research investigating preventative mechanisms addressing online harms in higher education. Aligning with Bond and Phippen's (2022) online safeguarding stakeholder model, exploring perspectives from across the students' hybrid ecologies would enable holistic contextual understanding of the facilitators and barriers to tackling online harms in higher education. An approach which recognises the distinct but overlapping systems, by engaging with participant groups in contexts surrounding the microsystem, may further enhance understanding of the varying leverage points in which change could occur across a complete system. This may include organisations who support students experiencing, for example, technology-mediated domestic and sexual violence, as well as regulators, such as the OfS and advocacy organisations such as UUK. Alongside this systems focus, adoption of different methodological approaches, such as participatory action research, could provide an iterative way of both understanding perspectives across different system layers, but also facilitate an intervention or solutions-focused outcome.

Similarly, a limitation of this study, is the focus on one higher education institution, and although a variety of student perspectives were collected, conducting similar studies across different universities could provide further insight into students' everyday lived experiences across diverse hybrid ecosystems. Furthermore, I was unable to follow-up with all students who participated in the original focus groups, this may have been a consequence of the liminal period of higher education with participation taking place the following year over the summer period, an implication of the COVID-19 pandemic, a choice not to take part further or a result of email address bounce back. Nonetheless, six of the original participants engaged in the follow-up interviews. Whilst the purpose of these interviews was to understand experiences of digital intimacies during the COVID-19 pandemic, interestingly apart from some student alluding to increased reliance on digital technologies for formation and maintenance of relationships, perspectives and experiences had not changed substantially, and therefore did not inform the subsequent conversation and analysis considerably. While this could be considered a limitation of this study due to the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic, instead, the follow-up interviews provided a unique opportunity to discuss topics previously covered in more depth, highlighting attitudinal changes associated with relational changes over time. Further research may benefit from utilising a longitudinal study design to engage students at more regular intervals at the start of their studies, to their final year to explore digital intimacies and their association with student lifecycle stages.

Lastly, whilst this study identified themes from students' narratives of experiences across multiple online platforms, moving away from a focus on singular platforms, it does not negate from the fact that technological innovation continues. For example, the use of artificial intelligence platforms in creating deepfake images, constituting a form of image-based sexual abuse, although not necessarily a new phenomenon (McGlynn et al., 2019) is becoming easier with new technologies, and should be encompassed in university policy and practice (Roe, et al., 2024). As a result, continuing to investigate students' socio-technical networks is key empirically, but also for the purposes of informing interventions and preventative approaches to online harms.

7.7 Summary and concluding statement

To conclude, this study has provided an in-depth qualitative exploration of students' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward digital intimacies. The findings have highlighted the changing nature of higher education boundaries with the shifting of space and time afforded by digital technologies. Furthermore, students emphasised the importance of digital technologies in providing spatial and temporal flexibility, particularly during the transition to university. Online platforms provided opportunities to explore new identities, form intimate connections, and maintain pre-established relationships across socio-technical networks. However, the opportunities afforded by online platforms were also countered by perceived and actual risks. Of particular significance to students was the role of trust as a risk mediator and a subsequent pre-requisite for digital intimacies. The findings of this thesis highlight how 'risky' intimacy practices, such as sharing intimate images, sharing passwords and geo-location data, are constructed by students as signifiers of trust, and by extension, vulnerability. Such findings question dominant narratives of adults as 'complete' and subsequently lacking vulnerability, as well as responses to online harms which prioritise risk-aversion as opposed to recognising that risk is central to trust, a fundamental component of intimate relationships.

Whilst the intention of this thesis was to explore students' digital intimacies, it became increasingly clear from their narratives that the ubiquity of abuse, such as online harassment, was central to their experiences. Not only this, but the findings identified how behaviours, such as online social surveillance, can be constructed by students as care or control, offering unique insights into the continuum between 'normative' technology-mediated intimate practices and abusive behaviours. By examining how and in what contexts students use online platforms for intimacy, including routine, normalised everyday activities, practices, and norms, it deepens our understanding of the spectrum and persistence of violence and abuse. The relevance of these findings are heightened within the context of sector-wide shifts in regulatory requirements, in which Condition E6: Harassment and Sexual Misconduct will come into force

from August 2025 for all universities in England (OfS, 2024a). The findings of this study not only highlight experiences of technology-mediated sexual and domestic violence, but they also highlight how stakeholders within the students' microsystem need to do more to respond to, and prevent, online harms.

As Humphreys and Towl (2020, p.38) eloquently highlight when writing about the role of universities in responding to sexual violence, of which, I argue is also relevant to addressing online harms in higher education:

“Regardless of the legal framework expecting us to do this work, the financial, reputational, and legal risks for not doing work, when we think about the ability to influence society on a macro-level, it begs the question, why wouldn't we...”

The findings of my study advocate for recognition of students' hybrid ecologies, with shifting space and time boundaries afforded by online platforms, utilisation of student-informed preventative mechanisms that focus on harm-reduction and citizenship as opposed to risk aversion, as well as systems approaches to tackling online harms in higher education. With a third of emerging adults enrolling at higher education institutions in the UK, universities are in a unique position to positively shape relational attitudes and ideologies.

8. References

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9. Appendices

9.1 Appendix I: Focus Group Interview Schedule

Focus Group Interview Schedule

Welcome

Introduce Topic

Guidelines and Rights

Discussion: Experiences and perceptions of online romantic relationships

1. What do you think about the use of online platforms (for example, social media or online dating apps) in romantic relationships?
2. What are your experiences (if any) of using online platforms in a romantic relationship?
3. In what ways do you (or would you) communicate with someone you were in a romantic relationship with?
 - What are you communicating about?
 - If using online platforms, which ones are you using?
4. When might you use online platforms (for example, social media or online dating apps) in romantic relationships?
5. What do you think are the positives of using online platforms (for example, social media or dating apps) in romantic relationships?
6. What do you think are the negatives of using online platforms (for example, social media or dating apps) in romantic relationships?

Final questions

Summary

Debrief

9.2 Appendix II: Individual Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

Introductions

Introduce Topic

Guidelines (confidentiality)

Experiences and perceptions of online romantic relationships (**context: COVID-19**)

1. What do you think about the use of online platforms (for example, social media or online dating apps) in romantic relationships?
 - Has your perception changed or been altered by COVID-19?
2. What are your experiences (if any) of using online platforms in a romantic relationship?
 - Has this changed in any way as a result of COVID-19?
3. In what ways do you (or would you) communicate with someone you were in a romantic relationship with?
 - What are you communicating about?
 - If using online platforms, which ones are you using?
4. When might you use online platforms (for example, social media or online dating apps) in romantic relationships?
5. What do you think are the positives of using online platforms (for example, social media or dating apps) in romantic relationships?
6. What do you think are the negatives of using online platforms (for example, social media or dating apps) in romantic relationships?

Final questions

Summary

Debrief

9.3 Appendix III: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (Focus Groups)

Participant Information Sheet

Study title: Romantic relationships online: Exploring online dating culture amongst university students

Main Investigator: Katie Tyrrell

Academic Supervisors: Professor Emma Bond and Professor Andy Phippen

Invitation

You are invited to take part in a study investigating student experiences of the use of online platforms, and more specifically, social media and online dating apps in romantic relationships. This Participant Information Sheet will help you decide if you would like to take part. It sets out why we are doing the study, what your participation would involve, what the benefits and risks to you might be, and what would happen after the study ends. We will go through this information with you and answer any questions you may have. You do not have to decide today whether or not you will participate in this study. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign the Informed Consent Form. You will be given a copy of both the Participant Information Sheet and the Informed Consent Form to keep. Please make sure you have read and understood all the pages of the Participant Information Form. This research is being conducted by Katie Tyrrell, a PhD student at the University of Suffolk, and will contribute toward the write up of her PhD thesis.

1. What will my participation in the study involve?

Your participation in the study will involve taking part in a focus group discuss with between 3-7 other students at the university or an individual one to one interview with the researcher. The focus group will last a maximum of 60 minutes, during which you will be asked a few questions around your views and possible experience of the use of social networking sites and online dating apps in online romantic relationships. All participants will be asked to respect each other's confidentiality and to not disclose the information shared in the discussions outside of the focus group. With your permission, the focus group discussion will be audio-recorded. The only personal information collected will be your name, age and contact details should you wish to provide them for notification of study completion and findings. The primary researcher will have access to the audio-recordings; the supervisory team will have access to the anonymised transcripts only.

2. What are the possible benefits and risks of this study?

There are no direct positive benefits of participating in this study, but your participation in the research will help the researcher to understand student perceptions and experiences of online romantic relationships whilst at university.

3. What if I feel uncomfortable with an aspect of the study?

If you feel uncomfortable with any aspects of the research, you have the right to leave the interview at any time and withdraw your data from the project up to two weeks after the interview has taken place. There is no obligation to answer questions being asked of you.

4. What are my rights?

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. Your data will be completely anonymised and will remain confidential unless you disclose any risk of harm to yourself or others, in which case a safeguarding officer at the University will be notified.

5. What happens if I change my mind?

You can change your mind at any point about your participation in the research and can withdraw your data up to two weeks after the focus group discussion/interview has taken place.

6. What happens after the study?

After the study is completed, the researcher will analyse and write up the findings for inclusion in a PhD thesis. Direct quotations from the discussion will be included in the final thesis and potentially used for academic outputs such as journal papers and conference presentations, with any identifying information removed.

7. Who do I contact for more information if I have concerns?

Should you have any concerns about the Ethics of this research, please feel free to contact the Chair of the Ethics Panel via research.ethics@uos.ac.uk. The researcher will also provide you with contact details for student services, local and national organisations, should any concerns arise as a result of participating in this research.

8. How will my data be stored and for how long?

Audio-recordings will be transcribed, and the original files deleted. Transcripts will be completely anonymised, with any identifying information removed. Interview transcripts will be stored securely for the duration of the research project and for 12 months after completion on the researcher's personal password protected university computer.

Consent Form

The university expects all research to be carried out in accordance with the following principles:

- The emotional well-being, physical well-being, rights, dignity and personal values of research participants should be secured.
- Research participants and contributors should be fully informed regarding the purpose, methods and end use of the research. They should be clear on what their participation involves and any risks that are associated with the process. These risks should be clearly articulated and if possible quantified.
- Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from coercion. Participants have the right to withdraw at any time.

This research has been approved by the University Ethics Panel. Should you have any concerns about the Ethics of this research, please feel free to contact the Chair of the Ethics Panel via research.ethics@uos.ac.uk

Study Title: Romantic relationships online: Exploring online dating culture amongst university students

Main Investigator: Katie Tyrrell

Academic Supervisors: Professor Emma Bond and Professor Andy Phippen

Please initial box:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.

I understand that my responses will be anonymised and any personal or identifying information removed from published materials

I give permission for the researcher to have access to my anonymised responses.

I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

I understand that the data I provide will be used solely for the purposes of the research study outlined and will not be used for any other purpose. I also understand how long my data will be stored for.

I agree to take part in the above research project.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant.

9.4 Appendix IV: Participation Information Sheet and Consent Form (Individual Interviews)

Participant Information Sheet

Study title: Romantic relationships online: Exploring online dating culture amongst university students

Main Investigator: Katie Tyrrell

Academic Supervisors: Professor Emma Bond and Professor Andy Phippen

Invitation

You are invited to take part in a study investigating student experiences of the use of online platforms, and more specifically, social media and online dating apps in romantic relationships. This Participant Information Sheet will help you decide if you would like to take part. It sets out why we are doing the study, what your participation would involve, what the benefits and risks to you might be, and what would happen after the study ends. We will go through this information with you and answer any questions you may have. You do not have to decide today whether or not you will participate in this study. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign the Informed Consent Form. You will be given a copy of both the Participant Information Sheet and the Informed Consent Form to keep. Please make sure you have read and understood all the pages of the Participant Information Form. This research is being conducted by Katie Tyrrell, a PhD student at the University of Suffolk, and will contribute toward the write up of her PhD thesis.

4. What will my participation in the study involve?

Your participation in the study will involve taking part in an **individual one to one interview** with the researcher. **The interview will take place via your preferred method, either online via Zoom using a unique meeting code and password, or via the telephone.** The **interview** will last a approximately **45** minutes, during which you will be asked a few questions around your views and possible experience of the use of social networking sites and online dating apps in online romantic relationships. With your permission, the **interview** will be audio-recorded. The only personal information collected will be your name, age and contact details should you wish to provide them for notification of study completion and findings. The primary researcher will have access to the audio-recordings; the supervisory team will have access to the anonymised transcripts only.

5. What are the possible benefits and risks of this study?

There are no direct positive benefits of participating in this study, but your participation in the research will help the researcher to understand student perceptions and experiences of online romantic relationships whilst at university.

6. What if I feel uncomfortable with an aspect of the study?

If you feel uncomfortable with any aspects of the research, you have the right to leave the interview at any time and withdraw your data from the project up to two weeks after the interview has taken place. There is no obligation to answer questions being asked of you.

4. What are my rights?

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. Your data will be completely anonymised and will remain confidential unless you disclose any risk of harm to yourself or others, in which case a safeguarding officer at the University will be notified.

5. What happens if I change my mind?

You can change your mind at any point about your participation in the research and can withdraw your data up to two weeks after the focus group discussion/interview has taken place.

6. What happens after the study?

After the study is completed, the researcher will analyse and write up the findings for inclusion in a PhD thesis. Direct quotations from the discussion will be included in the final thesis and potentially used for academic outputs such as journal papers and conference presentations, with any identifying information removed.

7. Who do I contact for more information if I have concerns?

Should you have any concerns about the Ethics of this research, please feel free to contact the Chair of the Ethics Panel via research.ethics@uos.ac.uk. The researcher will also provide you with contact details for student services, local and national organisations, should any concerns arise as a result of participating in this research.

8. How will my data be stored and for how long?

Audio-recordings will be transcribed, and the original files deleted. Transcripts will be completely anonymised, with any identifying information removed. Interview transcripts will be stored securely for the duration of the research project and for 12 months after completion on the researcher's personal password protected university computer.

Consent Form

The university expects all research to be carried out in accordance with the following principles:

- The emotional well-being, physical well-being, rights, dignity and personal values of research participants should be secured.
- Research participants and contributors should be fully informed regarding the purpose, methods and end use of the research. They should be clear on what their participation involves and any risks that are associated with the process. These risks should be clearly articulated and if possible quantified.
- Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from coercion. Participants have the right to withdraw at any time.

This research has been approved by the University Ethics Panel. Should you have any concerns about the Ethics of this research, please feel free to contact the Chair of the Ethics Panel via research.ethics@uos.ac.uk

Study Title: Romantic relationships online: Exploring online dating culture amongst university students

Main Investigator: Katie Tyrrell

Academic Supervisors: Professor Emma Bond and Professor Andy Phippen

Please initial box:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.

I understand that my responses will be anonymised and any personal or identifying information removed from published materials

I give permission for the researcher to have access to my anonymised responses.

I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

I understand that the data I provide will be used solely for the purposes of the research study outlined and will not be used for any other purpose. I also understand how long my data will be stored for.

I agree to take part in the above research project.

Name of Participant Date Signature

Researcher Date Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant.

9.5 Appendix V: Participant Debrief Sheet

Participant Debrief Information

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview! 😊



Your participation will enable the researcher to develop an understanding of how social networking sites and associated apps are used within students' romantic relationships.

All participants' responses will be anonymised and any identifying information will not be included in the transcription. The main points and anonymised quotations from the group discussions will be written up into a PhD Thesis and potentially used for academic outputs such as journal papers and conference presentations. The typed transcriptions will be kept securely for twelve months at the University of Suffolk after completion of the PhD then safely destroyed.

If you change your mind at any point about your participation in the research, please let the researcher know within 2 weeks of the interview and your data will be securely destroyed.

If you have any questions, would like further information, or would like to be informed of the outcomes of the research, please contact me using the details below:

Katie Tyrrell: K.Tyrrell@uos.ac.uk, Telephone: 01473 338573

Should you have any concerns about this research, please feel free to contact the Chair of the Ethics Panel: research.ethics@uos.ac.uk

Useful Contacts

If you have been a victim of revenge pornography, the helpline can provide advice and get images removed www.revengepornhelpline.org.uk you can also contact the Revenge Pornography Helpline on 0345 6000 459 or via: emailhelp@revengepornhelpline.org.uk You can anonymously and confidentially report child sexual abuse content; criminally obscene adult content and non-photographic child sexual abuse images here to the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF): <https://www.iwf.org.uk/>

- Reporting indecent or offensive content on Twitter: <https://support.twitter.com/articles/15789>
- Reporting indecent or offensive content on Instagram: <https://help.instagram.com/519598734752872>
- Reporting indecent or offensive content on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/help/reportlinks>
- Reporting indecent or offensive content on Snapchat: <https://support.snapchat.com/en-US/article/report-abuse-in-app>

If you have any safeguarding concerns whilst at the University of Suffolk contact student services (studentservices@uos.ac.uk) or a safeguarding officer (safeguarding@uos.ac.uk)

Lighthouse Women's Aid: Call 01473 745 111 for confidential advice and support. You can also contact the Suffolk Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) via their consultation line on 0345 606499 for advice

9.6 Appendix VI: Dissemination of Findings

- Tyrrell, K. (2026). Virtual Vulnerability: (Re)conceptualising higher education students' experiences of trust and risk online, in Phippen, A. and Bond, E. (2026) (Eds). *The Digital Student – Challenges for Universities in a Post COVID World and How to Address Them*. Elsevier.
- Tyrrell, K., Phippen, A., Bond, E. (2024). Systemic Responses to Online Abuse on Campus. In: Adisa, O., Bond, E. (eds) *Tackling Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence*. Palgrave Studies in Victims and Victimology. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58600-2_8
- Tyrrell, K (2022) Technology-mediated intimacy and abuse: What do we know from the perspectives of students in UK higher education? (Re)Connecting on Gender-Based Violence, The University of Liverpool.
- Tyrrell, K; Phippen, A (2019) 'Why assuming students are 'Digital Natives' fails to safeguard them at university', *Students in Changing Higher Education Landscapes*, University of Surrey.