

‘Infants in the Timeline of IT’

An exploratory study, seeking to assess the risk of misinformative radicalisation and subsequent challenges to safeguarding young people posed by the Covid-19 Pandemic and the social media surge in usage which followed



Alexander Kounoupas

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Dr Aram Ghaemmaghami

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PRINT NAME: Alexander Kounoupas

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Abstract

The recent phenomena of the Covid-19 pandemic, and subsequent lockdowns, have exposed vulnerabilities within the safeguarding infrastructure of young individuals. This study has sought to assess the risk of radicalisation online, which has increased due to a swell in social media usage during, and as a legacy effect, of the lockdown. Specifically, this research study seeks to address the hypothesis that the pandemic has increased this risk through a '*perfect storm*,' dynamic pertaining to themes of isolation, mental health, and a lack of support systems.

Through quantitative research methods, this dissertation will seek to address whether a correlation exists between an increase in social media usage and a rise in the risk of radicalisation. This data has been collated via the use of a large-scale survey. In addition, this research contains qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews with practitioners from a range of multi-agency partners. This data has been collected as it is concerned with evaluating what challenges have been faced by such partnership in relation to safeguarding the youth during the lockdown, and where areas for improvement are required.

By appropriating Felson & Cohen's Routine Activity Framework (1979), this primary research will cover a broad area pertaining to the nature of online radicalisation and vulnerability. Since this area of research is undeveloped due to its recent nature, it is the hopes of this dissertation that academics and professionals will be enticed to develop on this topic.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation is tasked with ascertaining whether there is a positive or negative correlation between an increase in screen time and subsequent social media usage due to the national lockdowns of 2020-21 to an increase to the risk of radicalisation online. Specifically, this study is concerned with young people and how the nature of the Covid 19 pandemic exacerbated this risk due to a '*perfect storm*,' of isolation, pre-existing mental health conditions and a lack of support systems during the lockdown periods. In essence, this study aims to emphasize the challenges encountered in protecting young individuals during this period through multi-agency approaches, and offer strategies to effectively address them as they develop into the post Covid-19 landscape. In order to do so effectively, this study uses Cohen & Felson's 'Routine Activity Theory,' (1979) to appropriate its core hypothesis. The basic principle of this framework asserts that for a crime to occur, there must be three elements present: a suitable victim, a lack of a capable guardian and a motivated offender. Currently, there is existing research which suggests that the Routine Activity Theory is an appropriate method by which to gauge levels of Radicalisation (Wikström & Bouhana, 2016)

Basit (2020) argues that during the Covid-19 pandemic there was a 50-70% increase of internet data usage. Many of these users are younger people, since 1.5 billion globally were students who were out of full-time education due to coronavirus restrictions put in place by governments worldwide. Out of these 1.5 billion, around 400 million were, and potentially are still, at a greater risk of online radicalisation and exposure due to them being directly affected by conflict or violence, due to their geographic location. In 2020 Neil Basu, head of UK counter terror policing and Assistant Commissioner for the UK Metropolitan Police, stated that the pandemic provided a '*perfect storm*' for online radicalisation (Sheptycki, 2020) and that it had become so widespread that it could not be policed (Dearden, 2020). Amid isolation during lockdown, extremism on social media has also had a surge in following nationwide, particularly in young people (Baker, 2022). Certain forum-based websites have reportedly low content moderation policies (White, 2020), therefore giving way to an influx of hate speech and extremist views (Boucher, 2022). A main contender is 8chan, which has become a home to white nationalistic and alt-right ideologies online (Stewart, 2019).

As well as political extremism, campaigns of misinformation and conspiracies have gained traction as a result of increased social media activity due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Rutschman, 2020). Such example is the Covid 5G conspiracy theory, which claims that 5G towers are emitting Coronavirus (Meese et al, 2020), or conspiracies regarding the validity of the vaccine or origin of the pandemic (Mylan, & Hardman, 2021). Online extremist recruitment and the spreading of misinformation is certainly an issue worth investigating as it is not only prevalent in today's context, within the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic, but it is also a largely underdeveloped area of research within the

criminal justice system. Due to the recent nature of the pandemic, there are few academic journals that explore whether or not the isolative nature of the national lockdowns has increased the chances of exposure to extremist groups or groups that spread misinformation online, especially with regards to the younger generation. Therefore, it can be argued that it is appropriate to conduct a study and literature review surrounding this hypothesis to obtain more information. The need for further research will be highlighted in this study's Literature Review section.

The research aim of this study is to assess the extent of risk faced by young people both during and potentially after the pandemic, particularly in relation to the long-term consequences of the national lockdowns implemented in 2020-2021.

This dissertation will employ two specific research questions in order to best assess the hypothesised, inflated levels of risk towards the youth as a result. These questions are the following;

- 1) *Do any legacy effects exist as a result of the isolation experienced by younger individuals due to the pandemic?*
- 2) *Can a correlation be drawn relating to an increase in social media usage during (or as a legacy effect of) the pandemic, and a rise in the risk of misinformative radicalisation as a result?*

This research will make use of both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.

Respectively, these will be a large-scale survey and a series of semi-structured interviews. The survey was distributed around students from the University of Portsmouth by posters placed in university buildings. The purpose of this survey was to create a stratified random sample by which the researcher could infer the level of access individuals have had to material online which made them question their pre-existing beliefs surrounding issues regarding the pandemic. The hypothesis is that this may have been facilitated through an exponential increase of social media usage during and as a result of the lockdowns. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners, from a range of multi-agency backgrounds, who all have (or have previously had) responsibilities surrounding the safeguarding of young people. This was done in order to gain professional perspectives from these practitioners in order to assess the challenges to safeguarding and the management of misinformation during the pandemic. These professionals worked in the following sectors: Local Authority, Higher Education & Law Enforcement Agencies. These research methods are appropriate for this study, since a blend of quantitative and qualitative approaches both supplement each other and account for each other's weaknesses. Where qualitative data collection may run the risk of catering to bias, quantitative research methods are systematically unbiased in nature. Therefore, both methods can be used to

answer the same research question, which then allows researchers to cross-validate results and cancel out each other's respective weaknesses.

More context regarding the basis and justification for this research will be provided in the next section of this study, the Literature Review. This chapter will focus on the background to this research area, the most appropriate criminological framework for this study and where the gap in literature exists for such an underdeveloped area of study. Following this, the Methodology section will cover the research questions pertaining to this study, the specific methods by which the researcher will be conducting data collection in order to meet these and why these methods are most appropriate. Leading on from this, will be the analysis and discussion chapter, where the study's data will be analysed and reflected upon, in relation to the research questions. Respective to each method of data collection, this chapter will be divided into two parts pertaining to quantitative and qualitative data analyses. Finally, the conclusion will provide a review of the study, address what key learning has arisen from each the research questions, provide reflection and discuss the opportunity for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Context

Early 2020 witnessed the introduction of worldwide national lockdowns as a counter measure to a relentlessly increasing rate of coronavirus infections. This virus posed significant challenges to public health due to its high infection rate and severity, especially toward those in vulnerable groups (Lee et al, 2020). Countries shut their borders and advised citizens to conform to protective measures put in place to stem infection rates against the virus, such as the washing of hands and social distancing (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020).

During the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Munich Security Conference in February 2020, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director General, warned that the world was "not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and it is just as dangerous" (WHO, 2020). Where individuals were advised to stay at home, there was an exponential increase in social media usage and general screentime, ergo an inevitable increase in following towards specific groups which have deliberately sought to spread misinformation and to radicalise (Home Office, 2021). The Commission for Countering Extremism found that during the pandemic, there was an increase in the visibility of several conspiracy theories or unverified stories which were responsible for pushing an agenda of misinformation, as well as those of a potentially radical nature. These ranged from those of an anti-vaccine, anti-establishment and anti-minority nature. One such theory, is that the pandemic was related to the distribution of the 5G network in Wuhan, China. The Commission for Countering Extremism found that 37% of respondents to a survey, were aware of the 5G conspiracy and over a third found it credible. Additionally, in April 2020, around 50 network masts were targeted by vandalism and arson because of an increased following towards this conspiracy. It was also found that over 90% of all posts containing misinformation were not acted upon by social media companies, despite being flagged and reported by volunteers (Home Office, 2021).

85% of UK homes have internet access. With a surge in internet accessibility, and a dramatic increase of use during the pandemic, the opportunity for extremist recruitment had also grown in tandem (Von Behr et al, 2013). In 2020, the Head of Counter Terror stated in a press conference, that the Covid-19 pandemic had caused a 'perfect storm' for younger people to become exposed to groups that were of a radical nature and that it was nearly impossible to police (Dearden, 2021). This is due to the amalgamation of isolation due to lockdowns imposed by the UK government and the pre-existing mental health and environmental conditions of those affected by such restrictions. Kruglanski et al (2020) argue that despite heavy media coverage towards the pandemic, physical terrorism is still rampant in the middle east. In March 2020, the Islamic State was still able to launch significant

attacks in seven countries. Hossain (2018) argues that, with regards to Islamic radicalisation, the internet has become a tool by which recruitment can become widespread across the world. Groups such as ISIS have used social media platforms to recruit, train and liaise with supporters internationally as it is a faster and cheaper method of communication. This shows that radicalisation can occur via a different medium, rather than in the traditional form i.e. physically (Rowa, 2023).

As opposed to just terrorist outreach from overseas organisations, it can be argued that nationwide lockdowns imposed by the UK government have intensified existing political polarisation and dissidence (Russack, 2021). In turn, this has created an opportunity for radical groups, such as those of a more extremist nature from the UK far-right, to have a larger reach on social media (Andrews, 2020). The convergence of socio-technological processes has enabled many conspiracists and radicals to expand beyond the outer rims of the online fringe and to incorporate themselves within mainstream discourse on social media (Forberg, 2022).

In conjunction, Bruns et al (2020) found that pre-existing anti-5G conspiracy groups were able to gain traction as a result of an increased opportunity to engage with a wider audience, due to a general inflation of social media usage during the lockdown, and a lack of content moderation or information verification on social media. This supplements Allport & Postman's (1946) theory that during times of national uncertainty, the spreading of rumours and misinformation is more likely to increase within the public sphere. In conjunction with this idea, Van-Prooijen & Douglas (2017) hold that conspiracy-led beliefs increase greatly during times of crises. Furthermore, Bruns et al (2020) argue that, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, citizens were more likely to supplement their news intake, with information that has not come from verified sources and are, therefore, more likely to become misinformed. Additionally, they claimed that especially with unverified news content or information lacking authenticity, people are more likely to resonate with articles that supplement their pre-existing world views and can downplay the severity of the situation or even provide a viable scapegoat for their suffering. Some smaller groups or individuals may even deliberately cause confusion via the use of misinformation. Bruns et al (2020) aim to contextualise Allport and Postman's notion by explaining that the Covid-19 pandemic has provided a plethora of examples by which researchers have been able to observe the dissemination and consumption of misinformation.

There has been a multitude of baseless theories regarding 'magic cures' for Covid, including those at the extreme end of the spectrum, which state that consuming toxic substances such as chlorine dioxide and chloroquine, a common pool disinfectant, can cure the virus. This has resulted in the deaths of multiple individuals in the United States. Further misinformation regarding the validity of the vaccine has perpetuated vaccine hesitancy worldwide, leading to more deaths and increased infection rates as a result of anti-lockdown protests (Gisondi et al, 2022). Beliefs regarding the origin and ulterior motives regarding the conception and spread of coronavirus have flooded social media sites such as

Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. Such theories infer a connection between Covid and 5G, and some even consider Bill Gates as being a proponent of the spread of the virus (Papaioanou et al, 2021).

One of the largest examples of the spreading of misinformation during the covid pandemic is seen on the popular social media site, Facebook. A major campaign on misinformation that had circulated within the year 2020 was the debunked theory that 5G network towers were ‘emitting’ Coronavirus (Boulianne & Lee, 2022). After the end of March 2020, there was an upsurge in discussion regarding the 5G conspiracy. One factor in the reason behind this increased popularity may have been the reaction to a Belgian network television interview with a doctor, who discussed the validity of the theory (Brown, 2020). This was shared across sites such as Facebook. For many social media consumers, this provided a sense of much sought-after clarity due to the uncertain nature of the causes or origin of Coronavirus. It propelled the theory forward and provided a cloak of legitimacy to its believers. Both Meese et al (2020) and Bruns et al (2020) found that there was an increase in 5G conspiracy consumption by the public via social media sites such as Facebook after March 2020. Specifically, following developed exponentially after March 25th, just after the UK entered its first of three national lockdowns. This supports the notion that during times of national uncertainty, and more importantly a lack of clarity or guidance from the relevant authorities, individuals are more likely to intake ‘fake news,’ and misinformation which coincides with their pre-existing biases or world views (Allport & Postman, 1946).

Another example of social media’s struggle to gatekeep the spread of misinformation due to the ‘supply and demand’ nature of its algorithms, can be found within the popular social media app TikTok. Tiktok is a medium that allows users to watch, create and share videos ranging from 15 seconds long to 10 minutes. The app is notoriously addictive and has high levels of engagement (Investopedia, 2023). Social Media algorithms, with a prime example being TikTok, have arguably unintentionally facilitated the mechanisation of customised and filtered news feeds, which have provided users’ video intake entirely with content related to what they had originally ‘liked,’ or videos which resonated with their opinions. As a result, an influx of specific, targeted and potentially inauthentic new media sources will initiate the risk of enabling users to cement and remain steadfast in their pre-existing biases. Within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, large-scale campaigns of misinformation from groups and individuals poses a serious risk to public health (Shang et al, 2021). In the age of social media, this dynamic is not new as this was a prevalent issue in the 2016 US Presidential election, where social media users’ pre-existing political biases were catered to via the manipulation of Facebook’s algorithm (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This algorithmic data was additionally used during the UK’s referendum to leave the EU in the same year. The emergence of a digitally mass-connected climate, merged with the historical phenomena of misinformation has unintentionally enabled a platform by which conspiratorial radicals can perpetuate a mass suspicion of

established knowledge, which many claim to have associations with the elite and powerful (Bleakley, 2021). This is a problem for the content moderation of social media sites, as it has now become harder than ever to distinguish between fact and fiction (Bergmann, 2020). During the more recent time of national uncertainty, catalysed by a lack of Governmental clarity or consistent guidance, small-time misinformative agendas and conspiracies have swelled in following and have remained unchallenged for long periods of time (Pantazi et al, 2021).

Furthermore, there is a plethora of academic discourse which exists surrounding the validity and authenticity of media & news sources. De Coninck et al (2021) conducted a study which broadly explored this topic on a global scale. By conducting a survey with a sample of over 8,800 respondents from a range of eight countries/regions, the results indicated that a greater exposure to traditional forms of media was associated with a lower count of misinformative or conspiracy beliefs. In addition, Van Prooijen (2016) held that a consistently applied level of education within a society, would predict a decrease in conspiracy-led or unverified beliefs, as critical thinking skills can be developed and furthered within an individual, providing an ability to scrutinise information and question its validity. Thus, there is a requirement to support the notion that a lack of education and appreciation of the validity of verified media sources will lead to the subsequent victimisation of individuals when exposed to misinformative material online. In order to do this, it would be appropriate to employ a steadfast criminological framework. This is required, since the purpose of this study is to ascertain how the level of vulnerability to misinformation and radicalisation has increased due to an increase in social media usage.

Appropriation of the Routine Activity Framework

The most ideal framework by which to measure and account for the issue of cyber victimisation in this context would be suitable for Cohen and Felson's 'Routine Activity Theory' (1979). This theory held that for a crime to occur, there must be three elements present: a suitable victim, a lack of a capable guardian and a motivated offender. This literature review's theoretical framework is based on this premise. In the context of radicalisation online, these elements can be argued to be transmissible (Knott & Lee, 2020). A suitable victim could be seen as any individual, vulnerable to misinformation or radicalisation via the medium of social media or video gaming platforms. A lack of a capable guardian, in this scenario, would be the recent issues faced by social media to gatekeep against misinformative sources (Rahlf, 2023). Finally, a motivated offender would be either those deliberately seeking to disseminate misinformation, with the possible intention of radicalising, via the digital sphere. A suitable target would be those who are exposed to misinformative or unverified content which radically alters their views toward specific topics such as the Coronavirus pandemic (Barnum & Logan, 2023).

In addition, Hernandez & Puente (2022) undertook a research study, focusing on a sample of Columbian youth to explore whether or not their susceptibility to be radicalised fit into the Routine Activity Framework. They held that there was robust enough evidence to assert that Cohen & Felson's (1979) Routine Activity Approach was an applicable framework by which to ascertain whether or not younger individuals were more predisposed to certain levels of radicalisation online through the platform of social media.

Although research exists in order to advocate for the appropriation of the Routine Activity Framework, there is a lack of research or literature which specifically seeks to explore how the increase in screentime exacerbates the risk of radicalisation in the youth.

Gap in Literature

There is a gap in literature surrounding the more specific area of misinformative radicalisation because of the UK national lockdowns. This area is specifically concerned with the effects of the pandemic on the younger generations, especially those classed as vulnerable individuals, who are more predisposed to intaking radical ideas without scrutiny (Walter et al, 2021). Specifically, there is an underdeveloped area of research pertaining to both operational and organisational responses to cases of misinformative radicalisation online, with a focus on the youth. The hypothesis in question is that the nature of national responses to the pandemic had inadvertently facilitated a 'perfect storm,' as stated by the UK head of Counter Terror (Dearden, 2020), for misinformative radicalisation and a breeding ground for recruitment. Additionally, there is a need for an in-depth, qualitative examination as to how practices regarding the safeguarding of individuals have changed or adapted within the local authority, police and education sectors as a result of the increased vulnerability for radicalisation posed by an amalgamation of isolation and increased social media usage (Karell, et al, 2023). This study will seek to explore first hand operational and organisational responses to the pandemic and how the safeguarding of young individuals has changed as a result. In essence, there is a prevalent gap in literature, which needs to be addressed in future research. This will be highlighted in the study's 'methodology' section and will display how this dissertation has used an informed approach to best identify and explore this area.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Aims & Individual Research Questions

The primary research aim of this study is to ascertain whether there is a positive or negative correlation between an increase in screen time and subsequent social media usage due to the national lockdowns of 2020-21 to an increase to the risk of radicalisation online. The underlying hypothesis of this is that a mixture of isolation, pre-existing mental health conditions and a lack of support systems during the lockdown periods was what formed a ‘*perfect storm*,’ of factors which facilitated the risk of radicalisation. In essence, this study sets out to emphasize the challenges encountered in protecting young individuals during this period through multi-agency approaches, and offer strategies to effectively address them as they develop into the post Covid-19 landscape.

The individual research questions of this dissertation are the following;

- 1) *Do any legacy effects exist as a result of the isolation experienced by younger individuals due to the pandemic?*
- 2) *Can a correlation be drawn relating to an increase in social media usage during (or as a legacy effect of) the pandemic, and a rise in the risk of misinformative radicalisation as a result?*

Qualitative research seeks to provide in-depth, detailed information which explores issues and their contexts. At its core, qualitative research seeks to identify and explain patterns and themes found in people and events (Tewkesbury, 2009, p.50). A pitfall of qualitative research, however, is that it can be subject to bias and systematic prejudices (Ikeyi, 2021). One way to overcome this issue can be the implementation of quantitative research methods, which are systematically unbiased in nature.

Therefore, employing both qualitative and quantitative research methods is appropriate to answer this study’s research question and subsequent aims. This is because combining both methods can be used to answer the same research question, which then allows researchers to cross-validate results and cancel out each other’s respective weaknesses (Abusabha et al, 2003). In the following section of this chapter, the chosen mixed methodology design of this study will be explored in more detail.

Chosen Method

For this study, a mixed method approach was employed. Mixed methods research can be used to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular topic in detail, whilst generalising findings towards a larger population (Hennick, M. et al, 2020, p.42). A mixed-method approach is good for criminological research due to its self-complementary nature (Abusabha et al, 2003). Therefore, this is beneficial for the study's research aim and questions, which both encompass a blend of quantitative and qualitative research methods.

The quantitative data for this study was gathered via the use of an online questionnaire. This was distributed around to University of Portsmouth students via the dissemination of posters around university buildings. Following permission from site teams and faculty staff, posters containing a QR code link to the JISC survey were purposefully placed in areas of high foot traffic. They were placed across 10 University buildings in order to gain a wide a sample from an array of faculties.

A total of 67 participant responses were collected. Respondents consisted of undergraduate, postgraduate, and postdoctoral students studying a spectrum of subjects and from a varying range of ages. This was to gain a stratified random sample in order to represent students from all faculties and to provide them with the opportunity to provide responses.

Links to this survey had also been shared across social media platforms to generate traffic. The researcher used JISC Online Survey for this. Quantitative data in the form of a questionnaire is beneficial for the scope of this study, since questionnaires can be useful tools to gather quantitative data and can be sent out and received quickly at a low cost (Gray 2004, p.188). In contrast, Pattern (2017, p.2) argues that there are multiple criticisms of using questionnaires in research. One such point is that the response rate to surveys is generally very low, especially when the researcher is unfamiliar with the respondents. Another drawback is that questionnaires often provide only a 'snapshot' of a larger area of concern. This is due to the nature of this data-collection method, where respondents are only required to provide short term responses to each question. This could encourage them to move through the questionnaire quickly and only give responses that first come to mind.

Qualitative data was garnered via the use of semi-structured interviews with the Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSL) of a Higher Education institution located within the southeast of England. Individuals from Senior Leadership positions within the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences were invited for interviews. These individuals encompass specific roles within the university such as Programme Area Leaders (PAL), Module Coordinators and Senior Lecturers. Additionally, the researcher reached out to a PREVENT practitioner who works for the local authority for a city in the Southeast of England. This individual works as a Hidden Harms Lead for their local council and works with partner agencies to prevent and pursue radicalisation within their area. To gain an

operational perspective on the safeguarding of young individuals during the pandemic, the researcher also contacted a Chief Inspector and a Superintendent from two separate police forces in the southeast of England who have historically worked with the youth within their operational roles.

Semi-Structured, non-standardised interviews can be very useful for qualitative data collection, as they can be a valuable tool for discovery. Additionally, semi-structured interviews can provide researchers with the versatility to motivate interviewees to form a nexus amongst multiple themes and to explore their opinions towards certain topics or answers to questions (Queirós, et al., 2017). In contrast, Ikeyi (2021) holds that the main drawback of using semi-structured interviews in research is that they can be subject to bias and systematic prejudices. In turn, this may lead to interviewees to not give complete information or the interviewer to alter responses. A conventional, structured, interview would not be appropriate for a study such as this since they are less versatile and predominantly useful for when the researcher has a much more clearly defined notion as to what the views of their participants would have regarding the questions asked (Gilbert et al, 2016, p.283).

A reflexive approach is also important to adopt in this situation to minimise the risk of bias. Reflexivity with regards to research is, in essence, the way in which individuals may hold 'internal conversations' with themselves and become self-aware as to their role within their research (Archer, 2007, p.7). This approach may cause the researcher to question whether their pre-existing beliefs may make them predisposed to reason that their data points towards a particular conclusion. Therefore, a reflexive approach has been adopted to meet this study's aims as there is a lot of qualitative data collected by the researcher, which may be at risk of being subject to such biases.

With participant consent obtained via a consent form, the interviews were conducted and subsequently transcribed via Microsoft Teams or Zoom (with a manual transcription), with the data collected being thematically analysed using Nvivo 12. Thematic analysis is a useful way of describing the data that has been collected from a study to later be constructed into themes. The reason why this method is most appropriate for this research question is due to its versatility to be used in tandem with a range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks. In turn, these can be applied to a large array of research questions and designs (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). In contrast, Javandi & Zarea (2016) hold that, although flexible and simple to use, thematic analysis can be vulnerable to the biases of researchers. This could, in turn, threaten the validity of this framework which could in turn lead to a weak analysis.

The researcher collated participant responses corresponding to each section on the code framework. Nvivo 12 is a software which enables users to form 'nodes.' These are codes in which researchers can put multiple references of data into from a number of different sources (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019, p.77). Throughout the incipient stages of data analysis using NVivo, it is wise to ascertain nodes that

could be beneficial to use later on. These can be subsequently merged, renamed, redefined or altered as a project progresses (Edhlund & McDougall, 2019, p.139). Using the 'nodes' function is useful to a researcher using NVivo, since it is a good way of indicating that a specific piece of data is relevant to a particular theme or topic (Wong, 2008). These key themes and sentiments identified during as a result of the interviews will be put into a concept map.

Ethical Considerations

This study's methodology followed the ethical guidelines and protocols outlined by the University of Portsmouth's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice Studies. The aim of this policy is to provide a framework for professional practice and decision arise in the work of the University within research, innovation, learning and teaching (University of Portsmouth, 2020). Following application, ethical approval for this study was attained prior to data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4: Analysis & Discussion

Section 1 - Quantitative Data Analysis

Survey Findings

A JISC survey was used in order to gain participants for this study. This was in order to obtain quantitative data with the intention of seeking to address the research questions of this dissertation. All 67 of those who took part were students at the University of Portsmouth and their identities were kept anonymous. The sample was collected by disseminating a poster containing a QR code linking to the survey across a range of buildings around the University campus. This achieved two objectives; to collate a range of participants from a broad array of faculties and to garner a population of varying ages. This was done in order to generate a stratified random sample in order to prevent bias. The makeup of respondents from each faculty were as follows; 37% from Humanities & Social Sciences, 22% from Technology, 18% from Science & Health, 14% from Business & Law and 9% from Creative & Cultural Industries (see figure 1).

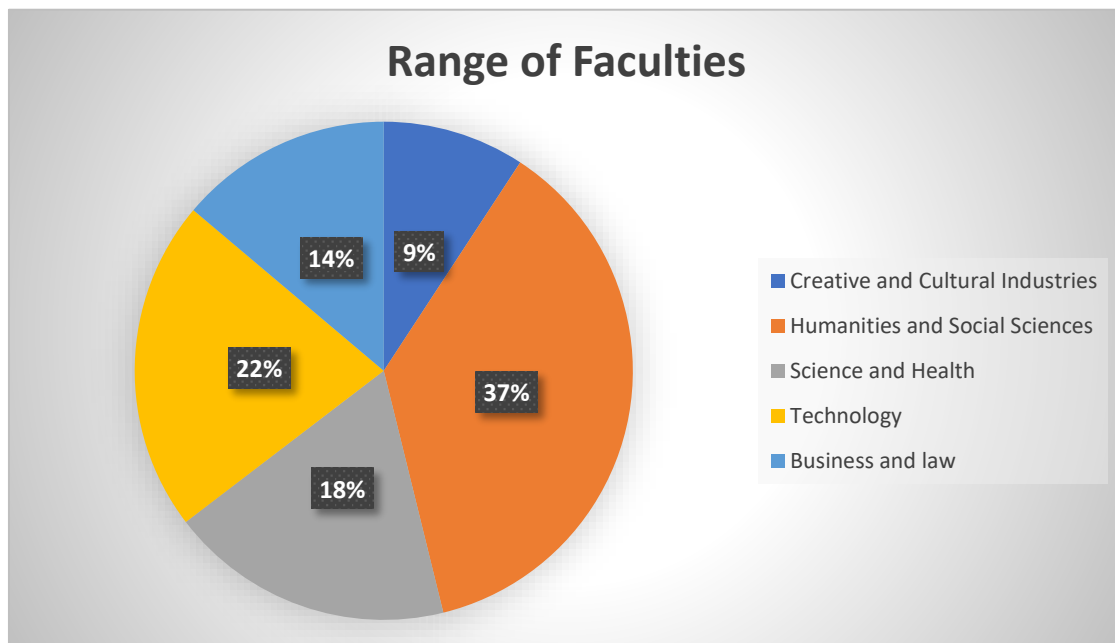


Figure 1

The range for respondent age were as follows; 46% were between 18 to 21, 39% were between 21 to 24, 9% were between 24 to 28 and 6% were older than 28 (see figure 2).

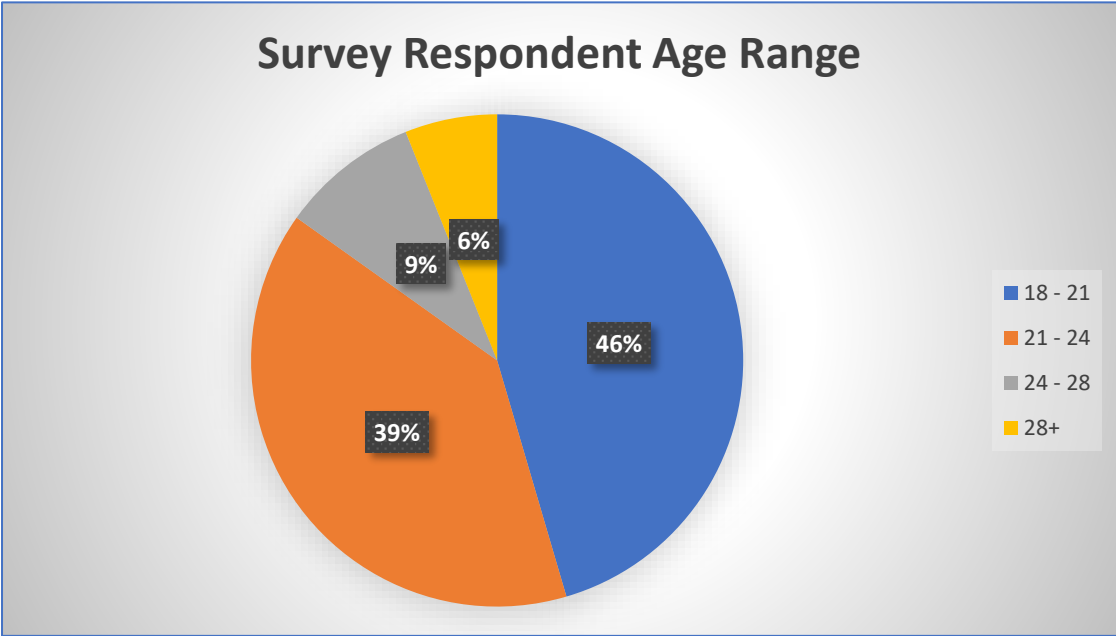


Figure 2

Of these respondents, 73% were at undergraduate level, 24% were postgraduate and 3% were postdoctoral (see figure 3).

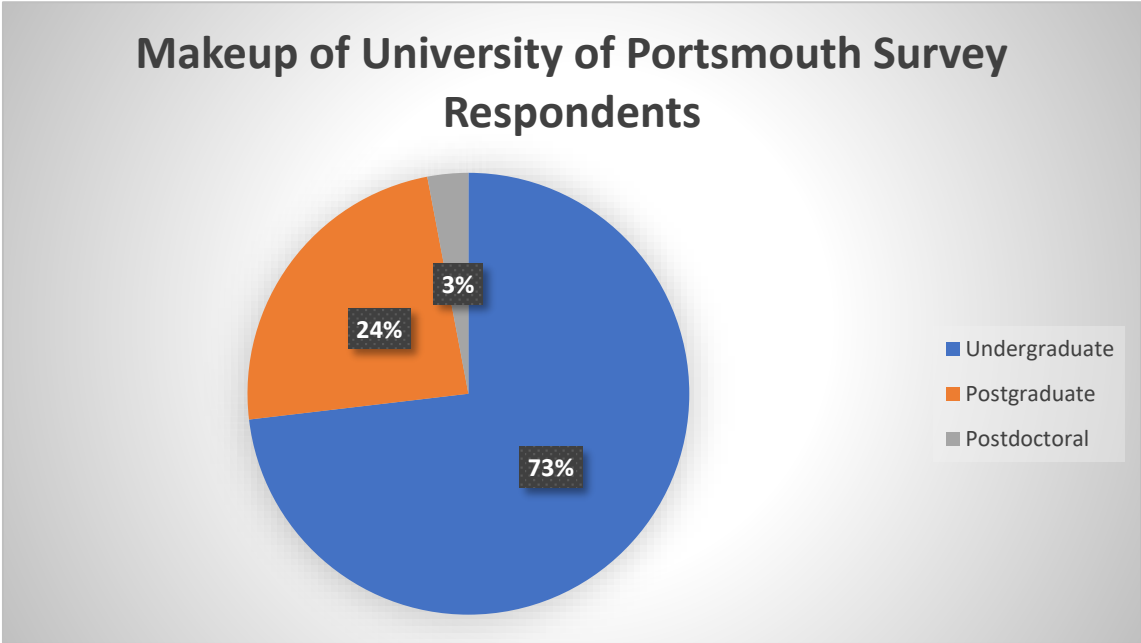


Figure 3

These attributes were taken into account in order to gain a stratified random sample from across the university. Having a stratified random sample of participants is useful for a study such as it allows researchers to best represent the entire population which is being studied (Qualtrics, 2023).

One of the underlying hypotheses of this dissertation is concerned with exploring whether a correlation exists between an increased level of activity on social media due to the pandemic and a rise in the risk of misinformative radicalisation. In the context of this survey, the purpose was to explore whether any respondents had their pre-existing beliefs surrounding the pandemic changed or altered by an increased interaction with social media, caused by an inflation of screentime during the pandemic. 80% of all survey respondents agreed that they had been more active on social media since the first national lockdown in 2020 (see Figure 4), with a large emphasis on this increased usage admitted to be on sites such as TikTok, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Reddit (see Figure 5).

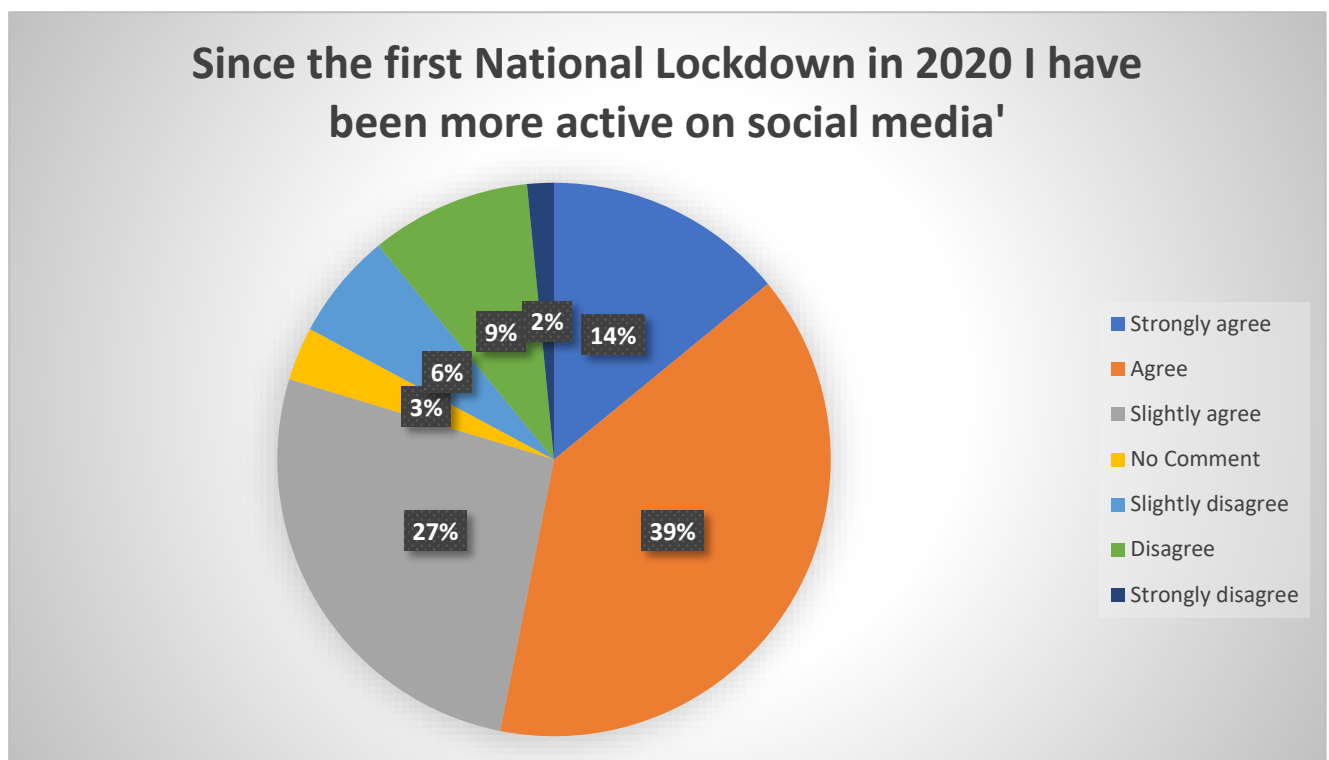


Figure 4

Despite there being an increased usage in other sites, too, these were the main contenders. Given that several of these main contenders, namely TikTok, Facebook and Reddit have had issues regarding content moderation and misinformation since the pandemic, it can be argued that an increased following can only exacerbate the pre-existing risk of radicalisation online (Baumel et al, 2021).

20% of survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked whether they scrutinized or questioned information as it came up on their news feeds on social media (see figure 5).

Although this was only a fifth of total respondents, it is arguably a worrying statistic since it indirectly supports this dissertation’s hypothesis that even a minority of individuals are potentially susceptible to misinformation online (Wu et al, 2019). In addition, a frequency count was taken by the researcher to see which social media sites were the most popular which respondents had admitted to having used more since the beginning of the pandemic. The main sites were YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter (see figure 6).

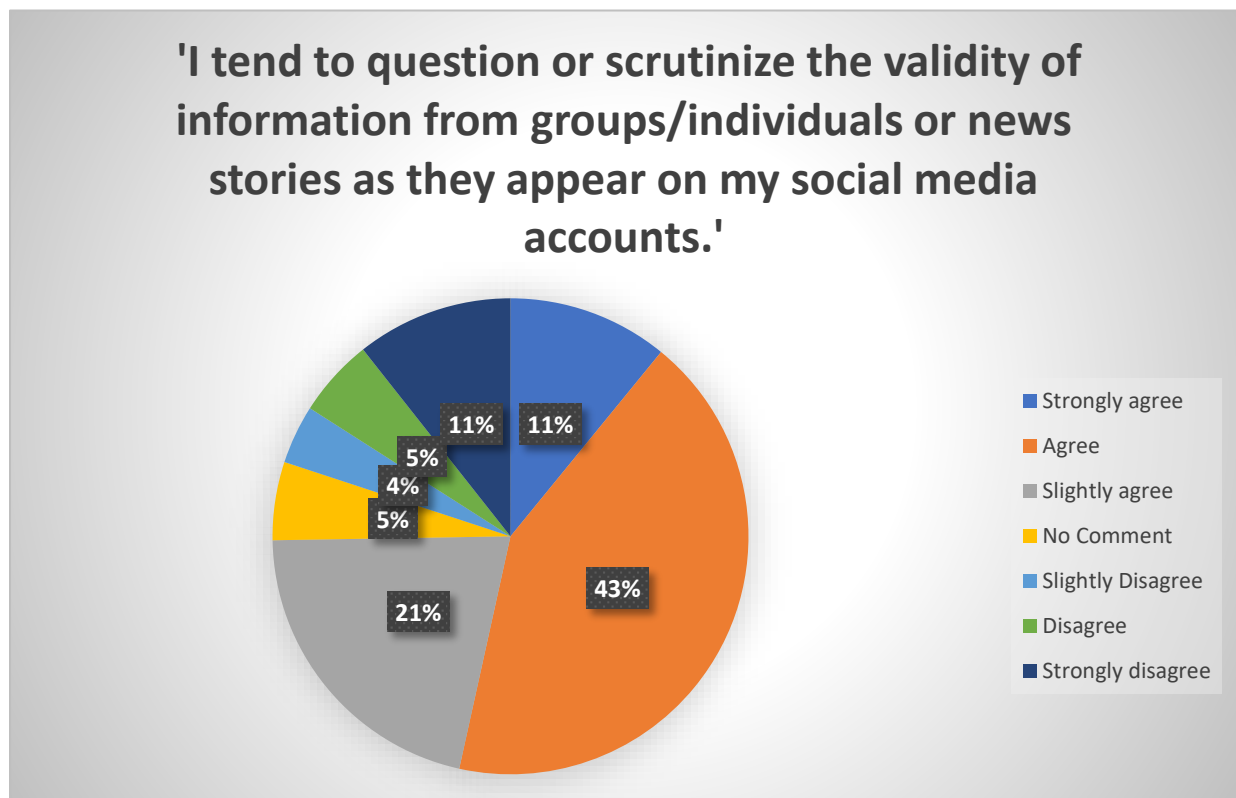


Figure 5

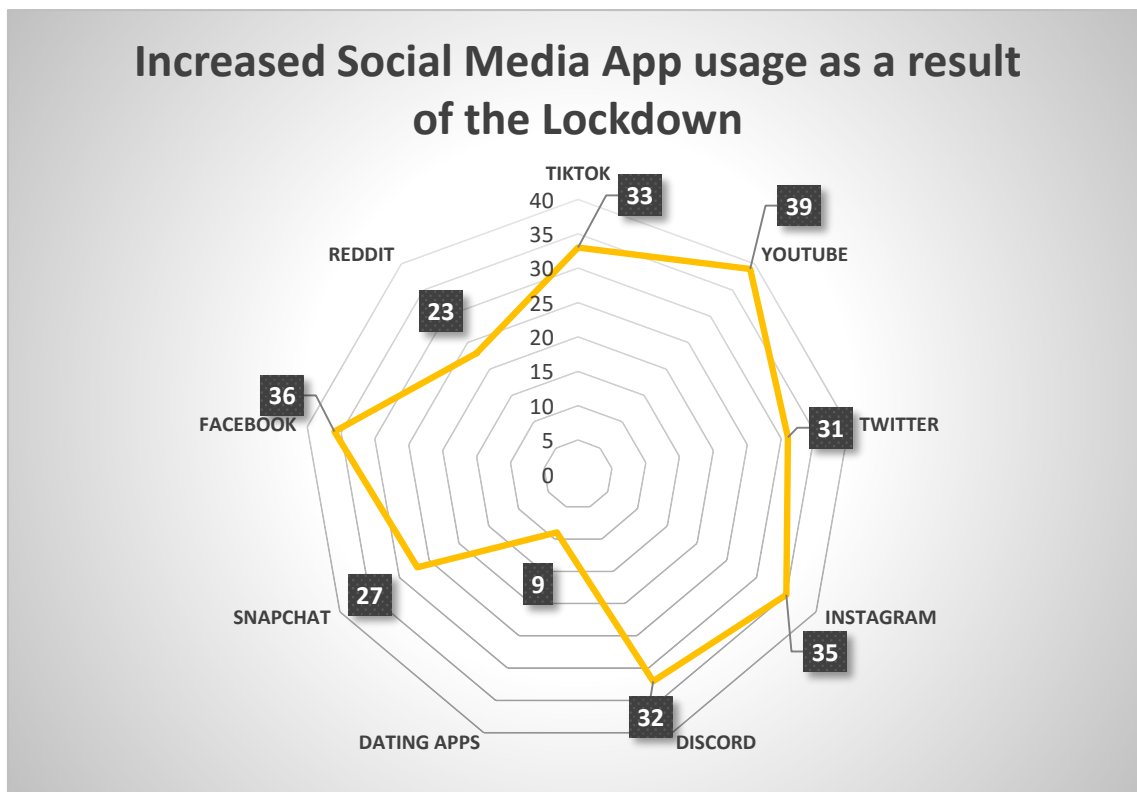


Figure 6

Survey free-text responses

The survey had several prompts in which respondents could provide free-text responses when asked where they had encountered material which had them question their pre-existing beliefs surrounding topics such as the covid pandemic. There were several survey respondents who had agreed that they had experienced content on social media which had them question their pre-existing beliefs around topics linked to the covid pandemic.

Several respondents provided the following free text responses when asked whether they had experienced any material which had changed their pre-existing beliefs surrounding topics relating to the covid pandemic. Out of the free text responses, two key themes appeared consistent. These were vaccine hesitancy and conspiracies. One respondent provided a detailed account of how their pre-existing conceptions regarding the vaccine changed during the lockdown. They mentioned that their *'belief of the validity of the vaccine,'* had changed because of what they had seen on social media since the lockdown. They that after first believing what the government had told the public about the vaccine *'being harmless,'* they soon discovered that the vaccine had *'deadly side effects and consequences,'* which were revealed *'with the passage of time.'* Such alleged side effects mentioned

ranged from an increased infectivity rate of covid to memory, fertility, and muscular issues. This respondent admitted to using Twitter more because of the national lockdown, and that this is where they encountered content which had them question their pre-existing beliefs surrounding the pandemic. Another respondent stated, *'Originally I just read the news and assumed that was 100% accurate. Forums and posts allow the open discussion of the news especially covid and provides a space for debate. Beliefs such as the idea that we had to isolate for several weeks, couldn't see loved ones even in exceptional circumstances (e.g., on their deathbed) and that antivaxxers were terrible people. These beliefs have now changed to much more open and positive perspectives.'* This respondent claimed that it was material they had seen on Reddit, TikTok and Instagram which had changed their views on this topic.

Themes surrounding conspiracy theories were also prevalent in the free text responses. One respondent simply stated that; *'The origin of it and conspiracy theories about who's behind it all,'* was what had them question their pre-existing beliefs around topics surrounding the covid pandemic. They had specified that it was material they had seen on TikTok and YouTube which had altered their perceptions on this topic. Furthermore, another respondent similarly stated that they had encountered *'evidence'* regarding covid conspiracies on the forum website 4chan.

It can be argued, therefore, that the previously mentioned social media sites such as TikTok, Twitter and Facebook are among those of the most predominant which contain misinformative conceptions regarding issues such as the pandemic, in the guise of conspiracy theories from unverified sources (Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021). Additionally, anonymous forum-based sites such as Reddit and 4Chan also allow the sharing of unverifiable opinions and discussion surrounding conspiracies relating to recent topics such as the pandemic, which can lead to individuals becoming misinformed (Chou et al, 2018).

One of the main foci for this dissertation is concerned with evaluating the increased risk of misinformation because of increased social media usage during and as a legacy effect of the lockdown. Thus, taking an evidence-based approach, a direct correlation can be drawn from those who have stated that they have spent more time on social media sites due to the lockdown, to experiencing material online which has had them question their pre-existing beliefs surrounding the pandemic. It is evident from this survey that recurring themes of vaccine hesitancy and the discourse of conspiracies have been most prevalent in a few key social media sites. Themes of vaccine hesitancy were prevalent in TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. In addition, the discussion around the validity of conspiracy theories were located largely around anonymous forum-based sites, namely 4Chan and Reddit. It can be argued that the pandemic has highlighted that there is a need for reliable, verifiable information, particularly with relation to health information and how it is being

disseminated to the public. With conjecture to this study's literature review, this is a consistent issue faced by TikTok, since it is an emerging social media giant used by young adults in order to access health information (van Kampen et al, 2022).

Section 2 – Qualitative Data Analysis

By employing the use of semi-structured interviews, qualitative research was undertaken to address the following research questions of this study.

1) Do any legacy effects exist as a result of the isolation experienced by younger individuals due to the pandemic?

2) Can a correlation be drawn relating to an increase in social media usage during (or as a legacy effect of) the pandemic, and a rise in the risk of misinformative radicalisation as a result?

Interviews were conducted with five practitioners from several sectors. Their identities have been kept anonymous and their names replaced with pseudonyms. The sectors in which these practitioners worked consisted of, Local Authority, Law & Higher Education. For the Local Authority Sector, an interview was conducted with the Hidden Harms Practitioner for a City Council located in the Southeast of England. Two separate interviews were conducted with Chief Inspector and a Superintendent for two Police Forces in the Southeast. This was to gain an operational perspective on the impact of the pandemic on young people. A further two interviews were carried out with two individuals who work at a university located in the Southeast of England.

Demographic Information

Firstly, participants were asked to briefly describe their roles and outline what responsibilities they've had with regards to the safeguarding of young people. 'Percy' works at the Local Authority level as a Hidden Harms practitioner for their city council, located in the Southeast. He works closely with the PREVENT duty, which seeks to prevent and counter extremism in the UK. As well as local policy, Percy works with national policy and is currently working on an international project with partners in Belgium, the Netherlands and France. This is the 'Orpheus project,' which seeks to develop critical literacy skills online and to discuss controversial issues amongst others in a safe environment.

Carl is a Chief Inspector for a Police Force in the Southeast of England with 23 years of service throughout the ranks, all in frontline roles of operational policing. Most recently, Carl has been a district commander for key metropolitan areas within his county and has supported other commanders. He works closely with the hate and business crime teams. He has had responsibilities in

the educational sector around the PREVENT strategy, ensuring that staff and children are compliant with it and that adequate training is in place. Similarly, Gina is a Superintendent for a separate force in the Southeast of England. Her remit covers Criminal Justice, Custody and Victim & Witness care. She has 22 years of operational experience across several frontline roles.

Brenda is a lecturer and the associate head of students for the School of Criminology & Criminal Justice Studies at a university in the southeast. She has responsibilities regarding areas such as student engagement, student well-being and the overall experience of all those within her faculty. Similarly, Felicity works for the same university within the same department. Her current role is as associate head for Global Engagement, which covers the oversight of student exchanges and international recruitment within the school.

The Covid Pandemic

The Covid Pandemic affected all participants in different ways, respective to their operational and organisational commitments. For all participants, the pandemic meant that they had an increased opportunity to work from home. Percy stated, *'We managed to transition quite quickly to doing a lot of our work online, apart from the community engagement side of it.'* In addition, Carl gave an insight into how the pandemic affected his operational capability to protect the public and safeguard individuals. Carl stated that the lockdown impacted his work style *'massively,'* and that it was interesting to look back on how it affected his force's working practice. He mentions that *'Overnight it changed how we had to engage with society, and we had to up our game significantly around our use of IT systems.'* Carl mentions that the police is quite a *'risk adverse organisation'* in the sense of how it was operating at the time, *'We were protected around the infrastructures of what we could or couldn't access, but we were forced into a different game, with a much better opportunity for us and how we operate.'* He holds that the pandemic altered the way in which his force *'communicated with individuals and responded to incidents,'* and goes on to state that it meant that their *'way of doing things was transformed with regards to our personal safety in the circumstances of a pandemic,'* and also how their interaction with others put everybody at risk. Similarly, Felicity states that the lockdown *'forced people into isolation, even if they were living with friends and family.'*

When asked how the pandemic may have affected his operational capability in order to safeguard individuals, Carl goes on to state that the nature of the high-risk work police officers carried out during the pandemic increased the physical risk of infections and greatly altered the operational perspective; *'As a police officer, you take your warrant card, you put your uniform on and you put yourself at risk – that's fine. [However], your interaction puts your colleagues at risk, your peers, and your family at risk.'* He claims that this dynamic forced a *'whole different way of thinking,'* in that a

frontline officer's actions might put themselves or others at risk. Carl concludes; *'How you are then operationally effective in engaging in the safeguarding of others during a time of national crisis, became really complex.'* Additionally, Gina elaborates on this idea by stating that although partnership and most operational meetings were all moved online, *'a lot of the face-to-face work continued around high-risk,'* and that there was little choice to change this dynamic, despite the increase in risk of infectivity and harm to others. In a similar vein, Percy mentioned that the risk posed by the lockdowns with regards to safeguarding practice meant that support networks were *'removed by accident, [whether] it was a school or a youth centre.'* He goes on to mention that an increase in time online has *'increased some levels of anxiety or mental health challenges.'*

Carl goes on to suggest that, although the lockdown caused a significant drop in response calls, the reports of domestic abuse and violence *'Crept up massively. What you had was a position where victims couldn't call for help since they were trapped and living with the perpetrators.'*

With regards to how the pandemic had affected his operational capability to safeguard young people, Carl held that there was a *'radio silence of real unease in information sharing,'* since schools were closed, and schools are a *'massive source of information of the needs to safeguard young people.'* He goes on to elaborate that the amount of information sharing between organisations needs to be significant (Cohen & Bosk, 2020), and within the context of the pandemic the *'tap was turned off completely.'*

A key research question raised within this study is primarily concerned with evaluating the increase to the risk of harm and the potential for radicalisation to occur as a result of the lockdowns. Carl provided an insightful response by stating that there were 13 repeat suspects within the last 12 months of hate and intolerance, from the time of the interview (November 2022). These offences were largely based around race. Out of these 13 suspects, only 4 were adults. Of the remaining 9 suspects, all of them were in the care system, one of which even had a radicalisation referral. These 9 young people ranged from the ages of 10-17 and were *'Massively vulnerable and searching for something to make them feel safe.'* He stated that their *'search for answers and search to feel safe sits in their hands,'* before gesturing a mobile device. *'Their IT is the only thing they've got, and a looked after child [who is greatly at risk] in the care system during a lockdown without the care, love and understanding of somebody who has complex vulnerabilities – they're going to turn to the easiest solution to get answers.'* This idea corroborates Allport and Postman's 1946 theory that during times of national uncertainty, the public will intake news and media which supplements their pre-existing views, which is one of the underpinning theories of this study to support its research questions. In addition, what Carl and the others suggests here further appropriates the Routine Activity Framework (1979) as an infrastructure by which to gauge the level and severity of the risk of harm to young individuals as a

result or legacy effect of the pandemic, especially to those who are already greatly at risk (Miro, 2014).

When asked whether individuals had ever had to deal with the misinformation or misinformative grooming during their career, there were several prominent responses which arose. Carl described a case in one of his operational areas of remit regarding a young individual who had become high risk due to an amalgamation of his pre-existing vulnerabilities and the isolation experienced during the lockdown, this boy became victim to radical material. *'While he was in school, he was never a problem child. [There were complex domestic issues which posed difficulties for this young person]. While he was going to school and interacted with other adults on a regular basis, he and his brother were completely under the radar.'* Carl goes on to elaborate that the individual concerned had encountered several websites which were heavily concerned with misinformative material around the topics of relationships which changed his views into believing that he would *'potentially be better off becoming a suicide bomber.'* He goes on to divulge that this child was self-educating himself on how to make bombs and how to cause damage. What was originally a 'Section 17,' right to enter a dwelling with the intent to arrest (PACE, 1984), for a domestic abuse incident response for the parents led to the investigating officers to discover *'ball bearings buried in the walls [and printouts from various terrorist websites].'* In essence, this young individual was attempting to create bombs during the lockdown with the intention to cause harm. *'This was a 14-year-old boy who was very lonely, sad, upset and confused. He lost his network, had reached out and had found an alternative perspective on life which resonated with him, and he worked towards it.'* Carl goes further by stating that this boy was tried in court and is still to date the youngest person to be charged in the UK with acts of preparation. The individual was found not guilty, which relieved Carl as he explains that *'The impact of that on his life would have been forever tragic.'* In his eyes this was a, in police terms, a 'zero to hero,' case, meaning that this was an instance of somebody who was previously off the radar reached a point where he was *'operating at maximum capacity for risk and harm.'* With regards to the Routine Activity Framework (see Figure 7), this can be attested to the narrative of becoming a vulnerable victim during the lockdown without capable guardianship (Pratt et al, 2010). Carl concludes by stating we are *'infants in the timeline of IT,'* and that *'we do not understand the platforms which we have created and the potential that they have.'*

With regards to an educational perspective, both Felicity and Brenda largely mention that their university quickly migrated online for teaching, although this had its challenges. Brenda mentions that there was a large quantity of extra material put online for students to supplement their studies, although it was face to face teaching that students largely craved during the academic year of 2020-2021. Elaborating on this concept, Felicity mentions that although there was a larger amount of educational material put online due to the nature of social distancing and restrictions, the intake of

such material still was not as high as expected. Felicity raises a pertinent point *'we were providing support online, which was only adding to the big array of online activities they were already doing.'* She explains that, although the university was trying to get on the same level of students by putting more support online *'it wasn't as fast paced or as exciting as any other activities that students were finding online at that time.'* As a result, she concludes that students found it very hard to concentrate on any learning types or activities that the university provided, since they *'didn't necessarily provide the fun element of it. Academia was competing with other types of activities and shamelessly lost, in some sense.'*



Figure 7 – Routine Activity Theory

One of the aims of this study is to build an evidence base in order to assess whether any legacy effects exist as a result of the covid pandemic. This was presented as a question posed to interview

participants, who gave an array of answers. There were a spectrum of organisational and operational perspectives which supported this. Carl held that, even now, there are many younger individuals who still *'can't work out how to interact with their peer groups,'* two years since lockdown. In addition, both Brenda and Felicity both give an organisational perspective from the education sector by highlighting the *'before and after'* contrast in attendance to lectures, seminars and workshops. Brenda specifically views the isolative nature of the lockdown as having *'a generational effect on people,'* where public perceptions in the way in which education is delivered have been altered. Similarly, Gina states that a substantial legacy left from the lockdowns have been the mental health of children and young people. In turn, she suggests that the *'strain on mental health services nationally will be an issue now and for many years to come,'* since there is a severe lack of resources available to cope with the increased demand since the pandemic (Leukfeldt & Yar, 2014) *'[I think one of the legacies resulting from the pandemic will become a mental health pandemic].'* Gina mentions that this is her opinion which has been informed by conversations with partner agencies and with what she's seen in recent years with young people and children.

Percy raises an insightful point into the nature of misinformation intake. He states that many individuals online will *'move to the extremes [as that generates traffic and clicks and monetisation, etc. – Once you give them a platform, they just move into the extreme as it plays into their crowd narrative]'* as opposed to an environment where some content creators are not in front of an audience and are more rational and nuanced in their views. Furthermore, he raises the point that generally there is more *'unregulated information'* in circulation online since the lockdown, and an increase in screentime has led to *'increased access to it,'* which he puts forward as one of the issues relating to the pandemic's legacies. Providing a hopeful outlook, he goes on to state that *'The best way of dealing with misinformation would be by [simply] pushing out more evidenced material'* (Vraga & Bode, 2020). This supports the notion that there has to be an influx in educative and verified material in order to compete with the growing rates of misinformation on social media sites (Wang et al, 2019). Felicity expands on this theory by providing her insight in that *'Within the online sphere, individuals cannot be confronted and called out on their opinions as easily in reality, therefore making it easy to misinform.'* Brenda stated that she saw *'a lot of anti-vax and DNA microchipping conspiracies on Facebook,'* and that she would imagine that people would be influenced by a lot of *'unverified content,'* they would have seen on Instagram and Twitter.' Percy concludes by sharing his opinion that the initial increase in the risk of radicalisation as a result of the pandemic was more than just *'a correlation with screentime,'* it was more so about *'the lack of support structures in place.'* This idea elevates the appropriation of the Routine Activity Framework by highlighting the requirement for capable guardianship where victims are vulnerable. In this instance, along with Carl's case study, it is clear that support structures are vital to the prevention of radicalisation. Where the pandemic affected

the infrastructure of such support services due to distancing requirements, there was an increased risk in vulnerability and harm (Yang & Tian, 2021).

Overall, professional perspectives pertaining to this study's research questions were attained from a plethora of industries and professional roles from the southeast of England. The use of semi-structured interviews with such practitioners have assisted in providing the researcher with an evidence base to assert two concluding statements. First, the pandemic has impacted younger generations negatively since the risk of radicalisation has increased in tandem with the expansion of screentime usage during and as a result of the lockdown (Fernandez et al, 2019). Secondly, that there are many legacy effects which have manifested as a result of the lockdown (Werner & Woessmann, 2023). Operational perspectives have focused predominantly on the mental health aspect of the pandemic, how pressure on services will only increase, and how a lack of support structures in place had made this disparity worse during the lockdown (Pearce & Miller, 2020).

The final chapter of this dissertation will provide a holistic overview of this dissertation and a focus on how the specific research questions of this study have been answered. Recommendations for best practice and the opportunities for further research will be provided, too.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has explored a relatively broad area pertaining to a largely underdeveloped domain of research (Haleem et al, 2020). Owing to the recent nature of the covid pandemic there are, of course, many avenues by which this research may topic be explored further by professionals and academics (Ward, 2020). In essence, this study has sought to address the issues which have arisen as a result of the covid pandemic with regards to the younger generations. The criminological framework of the Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) was found to be most appropriate in order to highlight the nature of this phenomenon. The main issues that this study has focused on have been greatly interlinked with themes of isolation, mental health, radicalisation, social media and multi-agency partnership. Although this study has broadly addressed the key issues posed by the pandemic in relation to the risk of radicalisation and mental welfare of young individuals, it has highlighted a substantial requirement for this research to be developed further.

Key Findings

The two key research questions pertinent to this study were chosen by the researcher as they were specific and realistic enough to observe at undergraduate level. Of course, this can and should entice further research and academic work to be undertaken by other professionals.

1) Do any legacy effects exist as a result of the isolation experienced by younger individuals due to the pandemic?

This study has sought to answer this research question by seeking the opinions of practitioners from the education, law enforcement and local authority sectors. This is in relation to how the isolation during the pandemic will affect young people in time to come.

Both Felicity and Brenda, having worked as lecturers during the pandemic were very much focused on the state of attendance to lectures, seminars and workshops since the end of the pandemic and the easing of social distancing and distance learning restrictions. They both mentioned that there has been a large fluctuation in attendance since the pandemic ended, and this has carried through to the present day. Brenda thinks that this is potentially a generational change for future cohorts coming into university within the next few years, not just in the United Kingdom but possibly worldwide (Qazi et al, 2020). In turn, a lack of attendance to university functions, could potentially affect the ability of those with safeguarding responsibilities at university to recognise and screen for any risk in students, due to the independent nature of the higher education system.

Law Enforcement practitioners predicted that the most prevalent long-standing effect resulting from the pandemic was that of the mental health implications faced by young people and how adversely they have been affected. Gina, especially, stated that the covid pandemic has evolved into a '*mental health pandemic*,' and has put immense strain on services, which cannot cope with demand (Salimi & Gere, 2021). Carl states that anxiety in the youth has increased greatly. He presses the point that young people are still '*unable to interact with each other*,' as a result of the pandemic, and that this social inability may last indefinitely.

The key learning from this research question is that the isolation experienced during the pandemic by young individuals has provided legacies which have increased risk and the potential for harm in young people, across a multitude of factors (Gkatsa, 2023). In addition, it can be concluded from the survey data that there is a legacy effect in that more people are using social media, out of habit, since the lockdown. Thus, the hypothesised increase to the risk of misinformation has evidently grown, from those who have admitted to using social media more as a result of the lockdown or those who have admitted to not actively scrutinize material as it appears in their feed.

2) Can a correlation be drawn relating to an increase in social media usage during (or as a legacy effect of) the pandemic, and a rise in the risk of misinformative radicalisation as a result?

Operational perspectives were mostly focused on the mental health aspect of young individuals and how the isolative nature of the lockdown had in some cases directly caused young people to fall off the radar and fall victim to radical ideals online. Carl and Gina both impressed the struggles faced by operational frontline officers to safeguard and protect young individuals for a multitude of reasons. One such reason was the severance of support structures and services during this time. Carl suggested that the closure of schools during the pandemic posed a huge threat to risk detection in the youth since schools are a '*huge source of information*,' and the '*tap was turned off completely*.' Schools are indeed a vital source of information sharing between partner agencies and law enforcement (Johnson & Hohl, 2023). In addition, Percy provided some insight from the local authority's perspective by stating that it was simply the lack of effective support structures in place during the pandemic that perpetuated the ongoing risk of radicalisation online.

The Key learning from this research question provides a dichotomist picture. Firstly, it is clear that there is an incessant need for a solid, stable and robust structure around information sharing with regard to the safeguarding of young people. This must be able to withstand large shifts in national change and periods of uncertainty (Allport and Postman, 1946). The nature of the Lockdown '*turned*

the tap off completely,’ for information sharing between partner agencies, putting young people (especially those within the care system) greatly at risk of harm and radicalisation.

The second area of learning from this research question was proposed from evidence gained from the JISC Survey. This showed there are two common narratives emerging from the participant free text responses of those who did admit to experiencing material online which had them question their pre-existing beliefs regarding topics around the covid pandemic. Strong themes regarding hesitancy and ulterior motives pertaining to the Covid vaccine and vaccination effort were found to have been most prevalent on TikTok, followed by YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. General paranoia conspiracy theories regarding the origin of the Covid-19 virus were most prevalent on forum-based sites such as 4-Chan and Reddit, where anonymous individuals can express opinions without scrutiny. Although less popular, these theories can range to the more extreme levels of the radicalisation spectrum.

Recommendations & Further Research

There is a general need for more education around misinformation, fake news and an increase in scrutiny of news feeds from unverified or unauthentic sources. This could be implemented through educational establishments through community engagement events with police forces or partner agencies in order to raise awareness towards radical material online and how to help prevent extremism. Newer roles within modern organisational policing, such as that of the Cyber Protect Officer (Metropolitan Police, 2023), are currently and should be implemented further within this capacity, nationwide. As a long-term recommendation, this could be valuable to the public’s resilience when combatting online misinformation with future generations.

A shorter-term recommendation, would be to directly combat misinformation simply through employing better methods of identification, as seen with ‘TikTec,’ (Shang et al, 2021) an AI misinformation detector which has been proven by researchers to identify fake news more effectively than TikTok’s existing content moderation system. Passive approaches are beneficial in this regard, as this would save on manpower and resourcing needs. Alternatively, as stated by Percy, an equally effective short-term solution would be to simply *‘push out more verified information’* into the social media sphere (Chou et al, 2020), thus emboldening the general consumer’s ability to scrutinize a multitude of sources and discern what is the most valid.

The deliberation of the dissemination of misinformative agendas by individuals or groups in order to garner monetary gain or an increase in business interest works in tandem with the ever-developing

design of social media's 'supply and demand' algorithm (Munger & Phillips, 2022). Further content moderation procedures are needed by media platforms in order to counter this, as has been seen with the rise of 'Tateism,' and other 'toxic masculinity' figures' rising popularity on TikTok and YouTube, which has caused sharing of content out of business interest opposed to actual subject interest (Walling, 2022). The exploitation of the design of social media algorithms needs to be robust enough to withstand and counter such fervent business-oriented sharing of misinformative or potentially radical ideals from social media '*personalities*,' such as Andrew Tate and others. Percy mentions that he has experienced individuals who act on extreme levels as a social media '*personalities*,' who have zealous views on subjects such as conspiracies or relationships in order to gain viewership and grow their businesses. He states, however that these individuals are completely normal when '*out of the limelight*,' and have generic views. Although the motives behind the sharing of such business platforms are innocent on surface level, an increase in the intake of such material (whether misinformative or not) due to events such as a national lockdown will inadvertently increase outreach through 'recommended videos,' which are based on viewing and 'like' history. Thus, this could create a snowball effect leading to a risk of further radicalisation (Kongerslev, 2021). This was seen in the example of Carl's case, where a boy had lost his support network and had experienced radical material online pertaining to relationships, which had caused him to prepare for a suicide bombing.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there are both short- and long-term solutions required for the detection and prevention of misinformative and radical information online. These come in the form of both physical and non-physical approaches.

This study has highlighted that there is an both an organisational and operational need for further research within this field. This can be implemented by the public sector and partner agencies in order to advocate for a robust infrastructure around the continuation of safeguarding vulnerable individuals during times of national change or uncertainty. An evidence-based approach is the most feasible in this instance, in order to inform senior leadership officials within the policing, local authority and educational sectors. Without the presence of capable guardianship, vulnerable victims may become prey to radicalisation (Cohen & Felson, 1979), as seen in the case Carl puts forward.

Key Messages

Holistically, this study has highlighted an area of concern for multi-agency partners with regard to the safeguarding of individuals during times of national uncertainty. By gathering data from a range of sources, this research has also brought forward recommendations for areas of improvement.

Most importantly, it is the hope of this research that it will assist in creating a strong, academic foundation by which this area can be explored further. Perhaps, one day, further research into this domain could assist in the implementation of policy which will directly enrich and embolden the infrastructure by which young people are safeguarded during times of challenge.

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