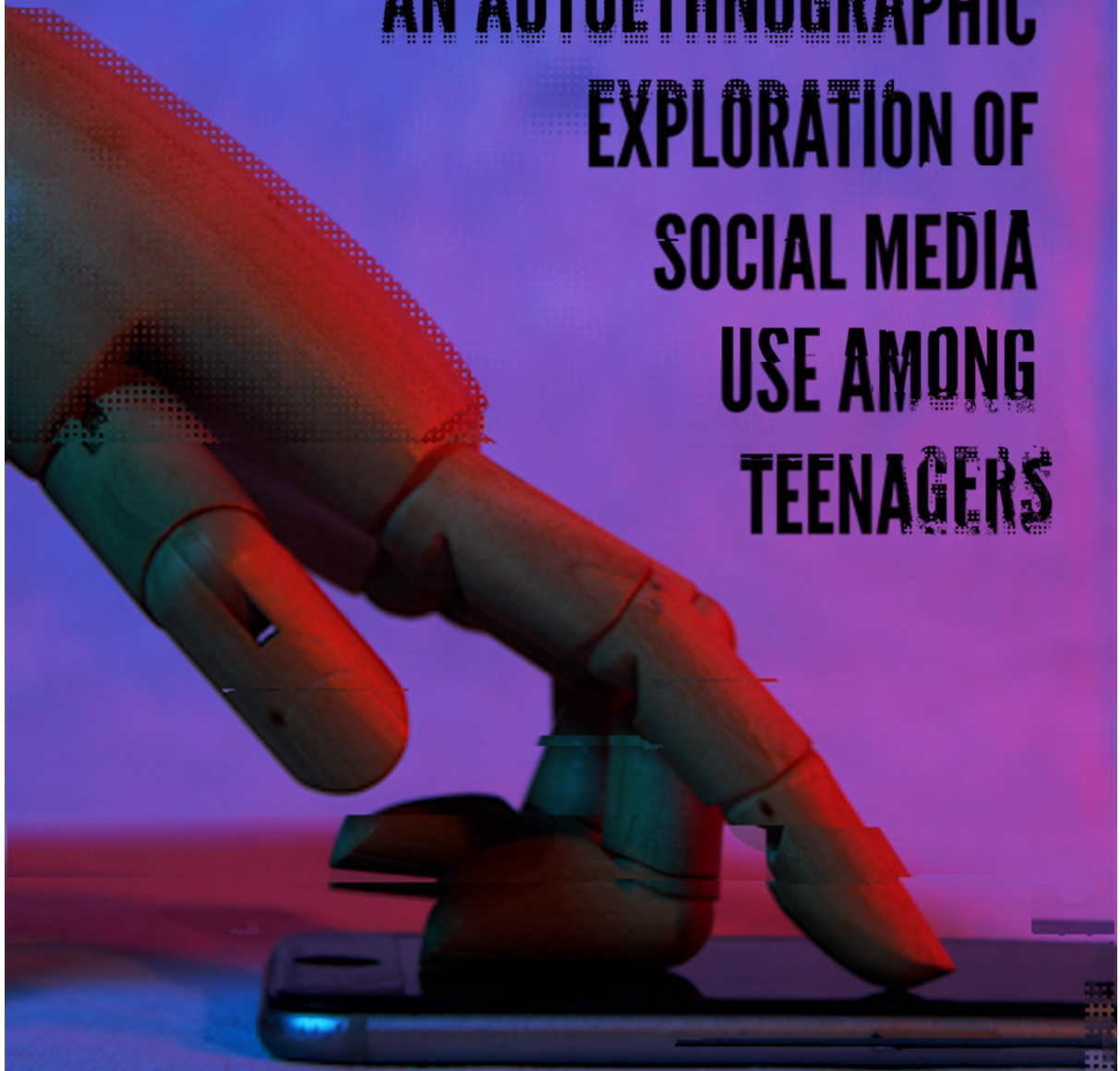


MEDIA AND YOUTH

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE AMONG TEENAGERS

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Social Media and Youth: An
Autoethnographic Exploration of Social
Media Use Among Teenagers

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Abstract

The New Zealand Government has drafted a bill that will raise the social-media account creation age from 13 to 16 years old, following the Australian Government's social-media ban. To provide nuance against a total blanket ban and to bring the importance of teenager's perspective of social-media use, this dissertation uses an autoethnographic documentary film artefact to analyse the benefits of using social media as a teenager. These benefits include learning and enhancing content creation skills, identity curation and finding community. Reflecting on my social-media use has shaped my skills in navigating social platforms, developing my creativity, improving my language skills as a dyslexic person and discovering my LGBTQIA+ identity; these aspects have formed my identity as an adult creative practice researcher.

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Signed by Tara Jade Bellairs:

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This research used data collection and processing tools of Mendeley for gathering and referencing, and Miro for autoethnographic research.

I acknowledge the use of AI (artificial intelligence) by using the program Grammarly for spell-checking, grammar, and as a thesaurus to help with my learning disability. I do not use the generative AI function, such as AI chat, proofreader or paraphraser.

This research did not require ethics approval as there was no research involving other human beings, biological materials or animals.

Intellectual Property Rights

I hold the rights to the images, script and creative artefact that are part of this master's dissertation. The documentary, as a creative artefact, contains music that is free of intellectual property restrictions (copyright-free) and a separate reference list with the copyright-free assets that were used in the artefact will be listed at the end of the exegesis.

Research Question

How does social media enable users to learn creative skills, express themselves and explore aspects of their identity?

Introduction

On 6th March in 2025, Wedd (2025). from the New Zealand National Party proposed a bill (Social Media (Age-Restricted Users) Bill 2026), that follows Australia's new amendment (Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2026), the bill intends to raise the social-media account creation age from 13 to 16 years old. The New Zealand Government has followed an international trend calling for teenagers under the age of 16 to be restricted from creating accounts on major social-media platforms and used the same justifications as those cited in Australia (that social media use can have a negative effect on mental and physical health, that young people can be exposed to inappropriate content, they may experience loneliness and cyberbullying, and that social media can be addictive), while ignoring the benefits those platforms can offer for teenagers (Alimoradi et al., 2019; Conway-Moore, 2026; Deschamps & McNutt, 2016; Franco & Boniel-Nissim, 2024; Kelly et al., 2018; Nelson Oshodi, 2024; The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023; Twenge et al., 2019; Viner et al., 2018). The dominant argument of social-media policymakers intent on prohibiting under-16s from using the social-action features of interacting and creating content is that it will keep them safe (Livingstone, 2026), however, many scholars, activists and news publications have highlighted concerns about the effectiveness of the bill, calling for nuanced approaches in improving digital literacy skills and content moderation (Beattie, 2025 Chen & Chen, 2026; Cohny et al., 2025; King, n.d.; Maidaborn, 2026; Prendergast & Dyer, 2026; Writes, 2026). To explore why teenagers are interested in social media and what the benefits teenagers would miss out on if a ban is passed, I have taken an autoethnographic approach to examine my teenage social-media use ten years ago to provide insights into what policymakers should consider when restricting teenagers from social media. Particularly in terms of the impact that may have on their creativity, development of skills, and ability to explore their identity.

Rationale

Mitchell and Moore (2018) and Quijada Cerecer et al. (2013) express the importance of critical youth studies when addressing policies and political change that affect children and teenagers. Critical youth studies centre the voice of young people, positioning them as holders of knowledge, rather than passive subjects (Jennings et al., 2006). I will take this approach to review my social-media use as a 14-year-old ten years ago by focusing on my perspective at that time. When developing social-media safety guidelines and policy for children and teenagers, it is important to thoroughly research the benefits, negatives and understand why they use these platforms when considering restrictions (Humphry et al., 2025; O'Reilly, 2020; West et al., 2024). Scholars have called out the issues around restricting social media, particularly the lack of consideration of teenagers' need for online social spaces where they can explore their identity, express themselves and find community (Cover et al., 2025; Fardouly, 2025; Jackson, 2019; Johnson, 2025; Lancet Digital Health, 2025). The importance of finding community and exploring identity is vital for teenagers in marginalised communities, such as people of colour, indigenous people, people with disabilities, and the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual and other) community (Cserni & Talmud, 2015; Davis & Farmer, 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2025; Hitchcock, 2025; Kowalkowski & Smith, 2025; Rice et al., 2016). Using Ellis' and Bochner's (2000) autoethnographic approach to investigate my use of social media as a teenager, this would contribute to the gaps in research on teenage social-media use. To present my findings, I produced a documentary that explores my own social-media use and presents the filmmaking skills I have developed from using social media. Using an autoethnographic documentary filmmaking methodology provides evidence of how teenagers use social media for learning skills, content creation and identity curation as a dyslexic and LGBTQIA+ person (Dyer, 2020; Erlambang et al., 2025; Harlan et al., 2012; Tartari, 2015; Uhls et al., 2017). My research aims to provide insights about the importance of social-media use for teenagers under the age of 16; insights that can lead to options to keep young New Zealanders safe and well on those platforms without a total restriction on their use.

Literature Review

Defining Social Media

Scholars such as Dyer (2020) and Taprial and Kanwar (2012) explore how social media typically involves sharing and communicating information through the internet, categorising social media as a digital platform that allows one to be ‘social’ online with others through content sharing and messaging. For social-media users to access the majority of social features that these platforms offer, users are encouraged to create a custom account with a profile that describes the user, their interests, and to upload a profile image to represent themselves (D. M. Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social-media users with accounts are then provided with interactive abilities, including the ability to contribute through user-generated content and the curation of the content they see, which is driven by liking, following, reposting, and commenting on digital assets in the form of images, videos, written media and audio media (Balfour, 2020; Guy et al., 2016; Laeeq Khan, 2016; Ma et al., 2025; Van Looy, 2022; Wolf et al., 2018). User-generated content is one of the key aspects that is ubiquitous among social-media platforms; it gives social-media users the ability to create and engage with content as a form of communication (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Gyimóthy & Larson, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Boyd and Ellison (2007), Dhingra and Mudgal (2019), and Sajithra and Patil (2013) pinpoint ClassMates.com (established in 1995) and SixDegrees (established in 1997) as the precursors to the modern social-media platforms that are now commonly used; these were some of the first online spaces that provided the capabilities to create profiles and for people to make new social connections online through messaging on a global scale. MySpace, LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, which is now known as X, started to emerge from the early-2000s as popular social-media platforms, providing new online socialising opportunities (Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2010). Facebook and X encourage user participation and account creation, offering photo- and video-sharing, messaging, user interactions such as liking or reacting, and profile-curation features (Caers et al., 2013; Edosomwan, 2011; Kravets, 2024; McCool, 2023; Murthy, 2013). YouTube is one of the most popular video-based social platforms, allowing users to watch, share and participate in content creation through videos (Snickars & Vonderau, 2009). With the rise in demand for short-video content during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, the short-video platform TikTok grew in popularity among

teenagers with its ability for users to create and interact with video content with ease (Wei & Wang, 2022). Instagram and Snapchat are photo- and video-sharing social-media platforms, with messaging abilities incorporated (Moreau, 2018; Piwek & Joinson, 2016). All of these social-media platforms have prevalent functions around creating and interacting with user-generated content; these are some of the aspects that draw teenagers into creating social-media accounts (Harlan et al., 2012; Maheux et al., 2025).

Why are Teenagers Interested in Social Media

Teenagers make up a large proportion of internet users, and many studies have been done on the social-media use, habits and engagement of those aged 16 years and younger (Kristensen et al., 2021; Tartari, 2015). About 90% of teenagers used social media, with 62% of teenagers starting their social-media use around the ages of 10-13 years old (Boer et al., 2025).

Brooker's (n.d.), Goodwin's et al. (2024), and Sheikh's (2026) studies indicate that some of the most popular social media platforms among Generation Z (who were born between 1995 and 2012) are YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram. According to O'Connor (2025), Generation Z prefers short-form content due to the style of content delivery, which includes platforms like TikTok, YouTube Shorts, Instagram and Facebook reels, with videos that often contain videos under 60 seconds.

With the magnitude of what social-media platforms can provide users, these spaces create a place for teenagers to go beyond traditional in-person communication and explore connecting through entertainment and virtual worlds (Dhingra & Mudgal, 2019; Jain et al., 2018; O'Keeffe, 2011; Tartari, 2015). As young teenagers are maturing and exploring themselves and the world around them, social platforms provide a reflection of the adult world, with influencers and celebrities having an online presence and positioning themselves as role models; social-media platforms also offer users the ability to explore spaces that may not be available to them in person (Boyd, 2014). The opportunities these social platforms offer when it comes to accessing information, creating content and interacting with people online can provide positive and beneficial advantages for strengthening socialising, creativity, education and finding community (Erlambang et al., 2025; Tartari, 2015; Uhls et al., 2017). Policymakers need to consider how restricting account creation for under-16-year-olds would deprive them of the benefits of using social media as a tool to express themselves.

Benefits of Social Media for Teenagers

Social media provides teenagers with the opportunity to engage in activities that may not be able to be accomplished in person, such as non-face-to-face socialising, digital creativity, expanding digital literacy and social skills, sharing digital information, exploring their identity through a digital landscape and finding important online resources (O’Keeffe, 2011; Uhls et al., 2017). The benefits of social-media use are relevant to this study; as a researcher, I reaped many of the benefits of social media, including digital creativity, learning skills online and digitalising my identity (Dyer, 2020; Erlambang et al., 2025; Harlan et al., 2012; Tartari, 2015; Uhls et al., 2017). These benefits are what policymakers seem to overlook when restricting social media.

According to Bifarin (2016), Shruthi (1999), and Wareshallee and Choudhary (2024), socialisation is an innate part of being a human being; socialising provides individuals with important opportunities to learn about others and learn about cultural values. The health benefits that socialising offers include reducing symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression and reducing feelings of loneliness (Allen & Jay, 2022; Bertie et al., 2021; Leach, 2015; Pearce et al., n.d.; Rodríguez-Romero et al., 2021). Studies from West et al. (2024) show that social media is integral to the social lives of teenagers when it comes to strengthening existing in-person friendships, finding new friends and enhancing belongingness through contributing towards online culture, such as messaging, playing games and sharing and creating content in the form of memes, images, videos and gifs. According to Ray (2025), social media is often used by teenagers alongside in-person socialising, they use social media during in-person interactions, such as finding physical events and locations, and they use it when they cannot socialise in-person or when they would like to extend socialising outside of physical interactions. The unique interactive abilities social media offers teenagers provide important social skills for progressing into society; sharing information through social media strengthens important social, cultural, and contextual knowledge (Shcherban & Samoilov, 2024). Young teenagers do not have the same accessibility to social spaces as adults, especially due to limitations in physical environments, which often translates to more social interactions in virtual environments (Hartas, 2020; Kurz & Jahng, 2022). An example of young teenagers facing restrictions for social spaces is the limitations of transportation, as driving a car is age-restricted, resulting in the use of other forms of transportation like public transport, being driven to places, walking, using bikes or scooters, which may be limited in

some cities and suburbs that are low socioeconomic and/or do not provide adequate transportation options (Bourdeaudhuij et al., 2016; Khalifa et al., 2024; Maljak et al., 2014; Sukmayasa et al., 2025; Ward et al., 2018). Policymakers should consider how restricting online socialisation can reduce the opportunities for teenagers to strengthen social bonds and how social media provides spaces for teenagers who may struggle to socialise outside of digital spaces.

Digitalising Creativity

Creativity is an important developmental aspect for teenagers; it provides skills in problem-solving as well as improving social and emotional well-being (Irwanti & Morissan, 2024). Social media has driven innovation in creative industries, including media, arts and entertainment (Flew, 2018). Social-media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Pinterest and X enable creatives to digitalise their skills and interests (Duffy et al., 2021). The creation of digital avatars, websites, videos, gaming content, and animations contributes towards essential skills in problem-solving, creating new content and ideas, and socialising with peers, providing interactive spaces to collaborate on projects and gain constructive feedback on creative outputs such as creative writing (Jansz et al., 2015). Erlambang et al. (2025) conducted a study on how teenagers used social media as a creative avenue, concluding that the wide access to information, ideas, and opportunities that social media offers allows teenagers to engage in positive, creative, and innovative thinking, inspiring them to learn, collaborate, and share creative works.

YouTube offers many searchable videos in self-education, tutorials and skill acquisition in almost every topic (Lange, 2018). YouTube and other video-based social-media platforms have provided accessibility for users to learn and delve into the creative art of filmmaking, especially with a plethora of YouTube tutorials on how to produce, film and edit videos (Müller, 2009). Video-based platforms have also provided a space to learn about creative fields like crafts, at no cost to the learner. One such example is Cooke's (2024) case study, which looked at beginner sewers who use online tutorials (often in the form of YouTube videos) to learn how to sew clothing, a skill that is traditionally taught in person. Social-media platforms can also be used in a creative way to improve existing skills. In the study by Tarigan et al. (2021), students were encouraged to post pictures about particular topics and practice their writing skills through captioning their posts, this allowed the students to

practice their grammar and spelling skills, which reflects some of the skills I used to practice as a dyslexic teenager on social media. Social media can be an effective tool towards driving creative innovation, collaboration, learning creative skills and sharing creative works (Erlambang et al., 2025).

Digitalising Marginalised Identities

Shaw et al. (2012) state that an important role for teenagers is developing a sense of identity; identity being the ability to provide a sense of self and to develop as an individual in relation to others. Teenagers from marginalised communities such as the LGBTQIA+ community, people of colour, indigenous people and people with disabilities particularly use social media to find others in their community, seek resources and learn about their own community (Cserni & Talmud, 2015; Davis & Farmer, 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2025; Hitchcock, 2025; Kowalkowski & Smith, 2025; Rice et al., 2016).

According to Doyle et al. (2022), Miller (2024) and NeuroLaunch Editorial Team (2024), neurodiversity is a term Judy Singer coined in 1998 to describe people with diverse neurocognitive functions when compared with most of the population, who are considered to be neurotypical. Neurodiversity encompasses disabilities like autism, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and learning disabilities such as Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, and Dyspraxia (Hudson & English, 2024; E. K. Jones & Orchard, 2024; Norell, 2024). Social media offers neurodiverse teenagers opportunities and affordances that might not be accessible in person, providing an affirming environment for finding community, learning about neurodiversity, supporting mental well-being, and socialising with peers through features such as sharing posts about neurodiverse experiences (Eagle & Ringland, 2023; Sweet et al., 2019; van Asselt, 2026; Zhang et al., 2026). Innovations in digital technology to assist in disability and learning support for neurodiverse people, including computer-based programs for memory training, audiobooks and screen-reading, have helped to make social-media platforms accessible for neurodiverse people, enabling them to interact without the stigma their challenges may provoke in face-to-face interactions (Black, n.d.; Dawson et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2012; Jónsdóttir, 2022). People with dyslexia often struggle with the reading and writing aspects of social media, often resulting in using verbal and visual-based language in the form of visuals, videos and text-to-speak, or spelling and grammar checking tools (Dawson et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2019). Despite social media creating

barriers for dyslexic people, social media can also provide empowerment through content creation, assisting in education, finding a sense of identity and using visual and verbal communication (Barden, 2014a; Vezzoli et al., 2017). Social media can provide further support and can help neurodiverse teenagers with disabilities like dyslexia. Barden (2014b) studied how dyslexic students used Facebook, allowing the students to take control of their learning through using multimodal methods of learning information through video, reading a range of online texts and communicating with peers on topics.

Historically, the LGBTQIA+ community has been disenfranchised; its members have dealt with the repercussions of discrimination, of the spread of misinformation about LGBTQIA+ people leading to violence towards them, and they have seen their human rights removed or limited in legislation, such as the 2025 UK Supreme Court decision (*For Women Scotland Ltd (Appellant) v The Scottish Ministers (Respondent)* 2025) to define “woman” based on biological sex (Bowmani & Cukor, 2021; Corpuz, 2023; J. Jones, n.d.; Lin, 2019). The LGBTQIA+ community is vastly underrepresented in traditional media (television, film, print media and news media), particularly in media targeting younger generations, with the negative and stereotypical portrayals affecting the perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ community (Bond, 2015; Crees et al., 2023; O’Brien, 2021; Scott, 2026; Vaandering & Rosenzweig, 2024). With the dwindling of safe spaces in society, LGBTQIA+ people often gravitate towards safe and more hidden spaces, such as bars, community centres and online spaces (Are et al., 2024; Jugănar, 2018). Social media offers young LGBTQIA+ people a place to safely explore and learn about their community (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Lucero, 2017; Tropiano, 2014). This affordance to find resources online and find community for LGBTQIA+ youth becomes an act of resilience, especially as finding members of the community may not always be plausible or safe to do so, but also confiding in each other and raising awareness in LGBTQIA+ rights has been proven vital in liberation (Berger et al., 2021; Charmaraman et al., 2021; Craig et al., 2021). New Zealand’s plan to follow in the footsteps of Australia’s social-media ban would be detrimental for young members of marginalised communities. Teenagers from marginalised communities are the most disadvantaged by the restriction of social-media account creation since it is difficult for them to access in-person resources; online platforms can bridge the gap of accessibility, dissipate and prevent further marginalisation and discrimination (Prendergast & Dyer, 2026; Robinson et al., 2025).

Social Media's Harmful Effects on Teenagers

Though social media presents many benefits for teenagers, there are questions around the negative effects on the health and well-being of its users. Studies to investigate excessive use and misuse raise concerns about how harmful the effects can be for children and teenagers (Dyer, 2020; Nagata et al., 2022; Orben, 2020; Twenge et al., 2024). Concerns about excessive screen use have led to research into internet addiction, a behavioural addiction characterised as having similar behavioural patterns to drug addiction and gambling (Haidt & Rausch, 2026; Alavi et al., 2012). These harmful effects of social media on young teenagers have prompted Australia to pass a new bill (Online Safety Amendment Age Bill 2024), which raises the legal age to create a social-media account from 13 to 16 years old. The New Zealand version of this bill (Social Media (Age-Restricted Users) Bill 2026) was drafted by Catherine Wedd from the New Zealand National Party, and follows the same age restrictions for account creation, citing key concerns around risky social-media use, commercial and data exploitation and encouraging healthier social offline interactions and activities (New Zealand Government, 2025; Wedd, 2025).

Risky Social-Media Use

The New Zealand Government (2025) states that the latest draft of the bill (Social Media (Age-Restricted Users) Bill 2026) will “reduce the risks to young people of cyberbullying, harmful content, and online exploitation”. According to Li et al. (2024), cyberbullying translates aspects of traditional in-person bullying (such as victimisation and repetitive harm) to online spaces. Cyberbullying has a disruptive effect on young people, particularly on their mental health (Deschamps & McNutt, 2016; Schneider et al., 2012). Mental-health statistics in New Zealand for children and teenagers have been on an incline. Between 2024 and 2025, 22.9% of people aged 15–24 experienced high to very-high levels of psychological distress, an increase from around 12% in 2020 (Te Hīringa Mahara—Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, 2024). Reports around the increase of social-media use and the increase in mental-health-related symptoms and cyberbullying among teens have been one of the catalysts prompting the New Zealand Government to lobby to raise the social-media account creation age (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2025; Marsh, 2025). However, Fardouly (2025), Özçiftci and Dem (2026), and Prendergast and Dyer (2026) argue that

enforcing boundaries and promoting digital literacy education could be more effective in preventing cyberbullying, particularly on platforms that might not be included in the ban.

When the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2025) and New Zealand Government (2025) refer to Livingstone & Stoilova (2021) as a resource in defining preventing ‘harmful content’ for teenagers, positioning it as content that is exploitative, violent and sexual. The anonymity of social media can result in users receiving messages or content that goes beyond the legal boundaries, private or unmonitored areas of the internet, such as chat rooms and private messaging, can become spaces where sexual predators target young social-media users (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). Teenage victims of sexual assault, such as sexting (the act of sending sexual messages or visual content (Strohmaier et al., 2014)) often suffer from emotional distress and mental-health conditions (Hall & Liu 2022; O’Keeffe, 2011; Winstone et al., 2021). Social-media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube can also promote violent, distressing content in the form of gore, torture, murder, animal abuse and gun violence content towards teenage users (Franco & Boniel-Nissim, 2024; Lorenz, 2023; Nelson Oshodi, 2024; Snickars & Vonderau, 2009). However, J. Fatt & Fardouly (2025) state that despite preventing social-media account creation for teenagers under 16, the change in legislation will not stop young teenagers from consuming harmful content offline, nor will banning account creation prevent harmful content from being consumed on social media, because platforms like YouTube can be viewed without an account. Davies (2026) suggests that educating teenagers with critical-thinking skills around digital media and equipping them with important skills on the subjects that they will encounter through digital media, like fake news, misinformation, disinformation, AI, and cyberbullying, will be more effective in mitigating the harms of social-media use than banning it.

Commercial Exploitation

Livingstone & Stoilova (2021) associate commercial exploitation of children with age-inappropriate marketing and promoting gambling towards children. Examples of age-inappropriate marketing towards teenagers include social-media influencers promoting the consumption of alcohol and tobacco (Conway-Moore, 2026). According to Iwanicka (2022) and Lajnef (2023), teenagers on social media look up to influencers, especially when exploring identity formation and finding community. Teenagers and children themselves have

also been used in marketing exploitation in the form of ‘kidfluencers’, where underage social-media influencers, like Ryan Kaji of Ryan’s World, are used in promoting materialistic behaviour (Rasmussen et al., 2022; Shabahang et al., 2022). Despite there being regulations towards promoting age-inappropriate products, social-media influencers and brands have posted branded age-inappropriate content towards minors by not disclosing their adverts (Nagata, 2023; Vassey et al., 2023). Alam et al. (2024) and Tarigan et al. (2021) suggest that to avoid commercial exploitation of teenagers, age-appropriate design on social-media platforms should be the default, age-restricted regulations should be enforced, and platforms should be held accountable in terms of the transparency of advertisements, rather than teenagers being prevented from going online.

Encouraging Healthier Social Interactions and Offline Activities

In introducing the new bill (Social Media (Age-Restricted Users) Bill 2026), the New Zealand Government (2025) states that it encourages teenagers under the age of 16 to foster healthier in-person relationships over virtual ones. It has been found that social media can promote unhealthy behaviours that can affect mental and physical health, increasing symptoms of depression, anxiety, social-media addiction, eating disorders, body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem and sleep deprivation (Alonzo et al., 2021; Pedalino & Camerini, 2022; The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory, 2023). Teenagers are perceived as impressionable; through developing their identity and growing up, they can be influenced by what they perceive online, which can contribute towards unhealthy social-media use (McCoy et al., 2024; Norden, n.d.; Saleh et al., 2025). Social media can present unrealistic and unhealthy standards towards teenagers regarding beauty standards, body image, and romantic relationships (Alava & Chaouni, 2024; Kulkarni et al., 2019; Pedalino & Camerini, 2022; Phan & Dinh, n.d.; Saleh et al., 2025). However, Saleh et al. (2025), Taba et al. (2020), and Xie (2024) suggest that when teenagers are equipped with critical-thinking skills and media-literacy skills, they can identify unhealthy and unrealistic expectations when curating their online identities. Furthermore, Cover et al. (2025), Kurz and Jahng (2022), and Prendergast and Dyer (2026) note that there is an absence of offline spaces and activities that cater towards teenagers, preventing teenagers from going online, which potentially contributes to further isolation, particularly for those in marginalised communities and those living in geographically isolated areas.

Social Media as a Wicked Problem (It's Complicated)

Despite the argument of preventing teenagers from using social media due to the magnitude of harmful effects that can be caused by this technological innovation, simply banning teenagers under the age of 16 will not fix the problems that are commonly associated with social media (Lancet Digital Health, 2025; Robinson et al., 2025). Kurz and Jahng (2022) compared a similar social-media ban in Texas, United States, to authoritarian figures in the mid-20th century, blaming comic books for tempting teenagers into crime, and censoring web access for school students depending on what values school districts hold. Governments intervening in teenagers' social-media use by putting age restrictions in place does not always result in solving the social-media problem; there are larger and more complex problems around teenagers' social-media use that are not frequently addressed, which is why I argue this topic should be treated as a wicked problem over a tame problem (Alford & Head, 2017; Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Intervention for a Nuanced Problem

Rittel & Webber (1973) explain that a wicked problem contains several factors from other ongoing problems that require an extensive amount of understanding, and a thorough knowledge of all possible solutions; a wicked problem cannot be fixed with a “one-shot-solution”, and it does not fit into a good or bad binary. Referring to Alluhidan's et al. (2024) and Pangrazio's et al. (2020) studies, social media is not inherently a “good” or “bad” thing for teenagers, and it deserves a nuanced approach. O'Reilly (2020) and West et al. (2024) reflect on the importance of working with teenagers around their social-media use to contribute towards a nuanced approach to social-media use. Contributing my autographic research from my time as a teenage social-media user adds to this body of critical youth theory and will offer aspects for policymakers to consider when restricting social media for teenagers.

Methodology/Study of Design

To answer the question: How does social media enable users to learn creative skills, express themselves and explore aspects of their identity? I used Ellis' and Bochner's (2000) methodology of autoethnographic research examining my social-media experiences as a teenager in 2016, to present the positive aspects of social-media use and to delve into considerations around restricting social-media use. In 2016, I was a fourteen-year-old who filmed and took photos of dolls, using social-media platforms such as YouTube to improve my skills in producing stop-motion videos with dolls, and I used Instagram to practice photography and Photoshop skills with dolls. Reviewing my social-media use as a fourteen-year-old in 2016 provides a retrospective argument on how teenagers under the age of 16 can use social media for community, creative, skill and educational purposes, when digital-literacy skills and particular restrictions are implemented for protection and for balanced social-media use (Cooke, 2024; Duffy et al., 2021; Dyer, 2020). I noticed during the autoethnographic research and curation of the documentary that my filmmaking and language skills were shaped by my social-media exploration as a young teenager, using platforms such as YouTube and Instagram as tools for my creative endeavours. As Boyd (2014), Humphry et al. (2025), O'Reilly (2020), and Spooner (2002) have noted, participation of teenagers in social-media research is vital, providing a voice for curating guidelines, changes and education in social media. Analysing social-media use from the perspective of a researcher who was a teenager using social media provides important insights into why teenagers engage in social media.

Practice-Based Research

According to Candy (2006), practice-based research involves a creative artefact being produced from researching a particular topic; the creative artefact can be in the form of designs, music, digital media, performances and/or exhibitions. Batty and Zalipour (2025) define practice-based research as using knowledge and/or experience of a profession as part of the research journey, as the practice and the theory are intertwined in this methodology. As a researcher who is a filmmaker and uses social media to develop skills in filmmaking, my creative artefact is in the form of an autoethnographic documentary. Producing an autoethnographic documentary utilises my skills in filmmaking that I developed as a young teenager when answering the research question. Through autoethnographic research, I

discovered that my social-media use as a young teenager was positive, as I learned and improved on the creative and language-based skills I struggle with as a dyslexic person, social media provided a space to explore the neurodiversity and LGBTQIA+ community, and I used it as a creative outlet.

Autoethnography

Based on Ellis' and Bochner's (2000) account of autoethnographic research, the researcher connects themselves to their research through personal experiences from social and cultural aspects. Autoethnographic research is vital to this study, as research on teenagers' social-media use is often conducted through a perspective separate from the researcher's, although researchers are encouraged to include teenagers' perspectives and experiences in social-media-related research (Humphry et al., 2025; O'Reilly, 2020). Young people are frequently a focal part of research studies in the many fields that impact them, such as educational, cultural, political and social issues (Lahusen & Kiess, 2020). Quijada Cerecer et al. (2013) discuss the importance of critical youth studies as a means to include the experience and knowledge of young people as researchers rather than treating them merely as research subjects, because young people are contributing members of society who deserve participation in research that impacts them, such as education and policymaking.

Using critical youth studies as a methodology is integral towards understanding diverse perspectives through understanding the needs of children and teenagers (Mitchell & Moore, 2018; Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013). Researching my own social media use as a teenager from ten years ago will help provide more insight into the positive perspectives of social-media use and what policymakers need to consider when developing restrictions on social media. Though I position myself as an adult researcher, using an autoethnographic method on the artefacts produced by my younger self can contribute to a better understanding of a young person's perspective through an outsider's point of view of an adult researcher and contribute to understanding the behaviour of teenage social-media users (Conrad, 2003; Ellis et al., 2011). Using critical youth studies as a methodology is important to research that affects children and teenagers, as these younger voices should be part of the discussion of social-media restrictions (Delic & Johnson, 2025; Member's Bill, n.d.; Netsafe, 2025).

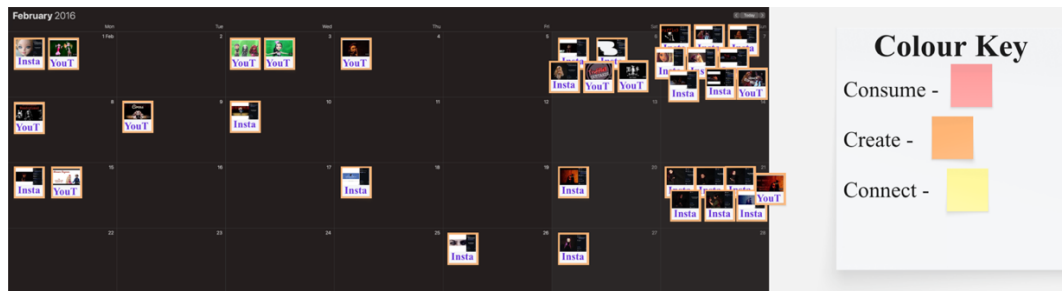
Autoethnographic research through the perspective of marginalised researchers fosters diverse perspectives in intersectional reflectivity; reflecting on my experiences as a LGBTQIA+ and dyslexic researcher provides unique insights into how people from these communities may interact with social media (Castro, 2021). The LGBTQIA+ community are frequently stigmatised, disenfranchised and victimised, resulting in the community migrating to safe spaces such as social media for validation, escapism, and to establish community (Bandopadhyaya & Kenix, 2023; Berger et al., 2021; Craig et al., 2015, 2021).

Autoethnographic Research

Adams et al. (2017) describe the process of autoethnographic research as finding cultural artefacts from past experiences to reflect on us through memory. Referring to Figure 1, I gathered videos and images from YouTube and Instagram from 2016 and put them on a digital whiteboard using the program Miro to help visualise this process. Visualising my gathered data is an important part of this research, not only as social media is a predominantly visual technology, but visualising my data helps with my dyslexia, as the use of colours, images and icons can help dyslexic individuals with decoding information (Berget et al., 2016; Nor et al., 2020; Rasamimanana et al., 2026; Sigurdardottir et al., 2021). Using Solis (2010) theory of the 3 C's around social-media use and being a creative, I compiled the data into a list of the content I created, consumed and connected, discovering that most of my social-media use was content created by myself. To further categorise the data I collected, I organised my data using thematic analysis to identify patterns in social-media use, which guided my themes in curating a documentary script (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Most of the themes I found from my social-media use as a teenager were around content creation in the form of stop-motion animation, learning skills around crafting and art, and exploring my dyslexic and LGBTQIA+ identity, which was included in the scripting of the documentary.

Figure 1

Miro Board Data Collection.

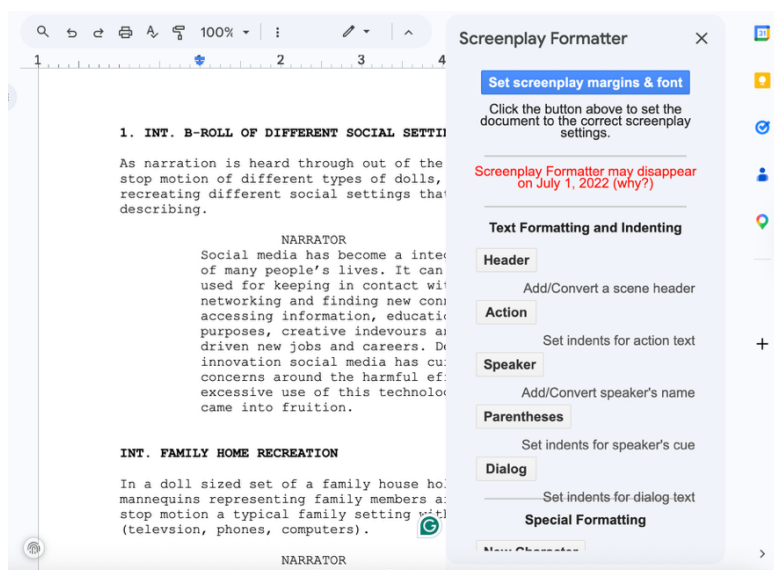


Pre-Production

I used Hueth's (2019) guide on *Scriptwriting for Film, Television and New Media* to format my script. The script was structured into chapters that were based on the themes that emerged during the autoethnographic research; these themes included teenagers navigating social-media spaces, content creation, and digitalising identity. As shown in Figure 2, I wrote the documentary script in Google Docs and used the Screenplay Formatter extension to follow script writing conventions. I used Grammarly to aid in grammar and spelling before filming the documentary (see Figure 3).

Figure 2

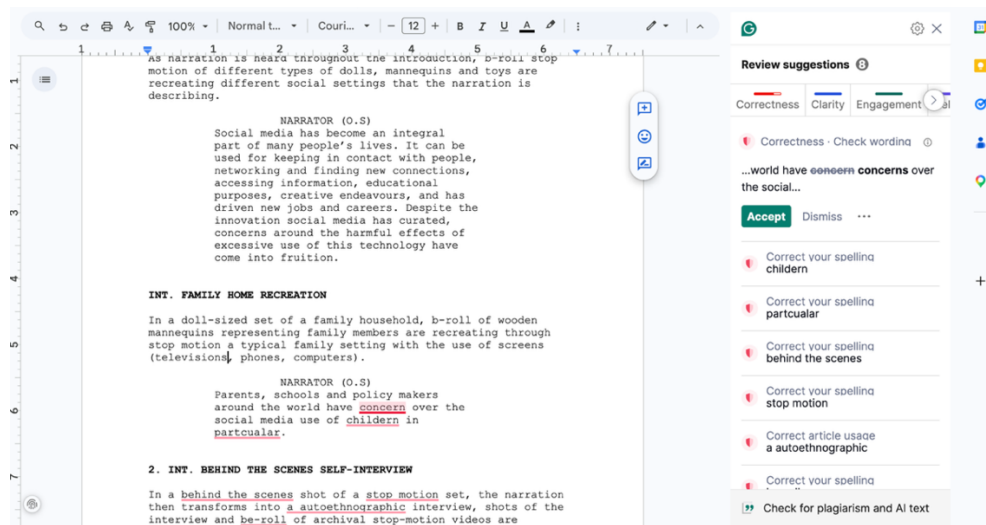
Screenplay Formatter Extension on Google Docs.



Note. Screenshot of documentary script draft with the Screenplay Formatter Extension. Own work.

Figure 3

Grammarly Extension on Google Docs.



Note. Screenshot of documentary script draft with Grammarly extension. Own work.

Production

Filming the autoethnographic documentary to capture my life as a teenager involved using multiple film techniques, including stop-motion animation, self-interviewing and filming b-roll of artefacts from past experiences. Stop-motion animation is a form of film illusion that requires taking multiple still photos with slow increments of one or more objects to create a moving film (Purves, 2010). To create a visual narration around teenage social-media use and to reflect on my stop motion skills, I filmed multiple stop-motion videos on my iPhone using an application called Stop Motion Studios, to drive the narrative around teenagers' interest in social-media use and content creation (see Figure 4). The documentary shows behind-the-scenes footage of me creating the stop-motion videos that are used in the editing of the final film. Films typically do not show the behind-the-scenes making of the film to present a 'immersion' of the fictional film world; this idea of breaking this 'immersion' is known as breaking the fourth wall and was used to strengthen the argument using social media to upskill in content creation in the form of stop-motion (Brown, 2022).

Figure 4

Filming Stop Motion.

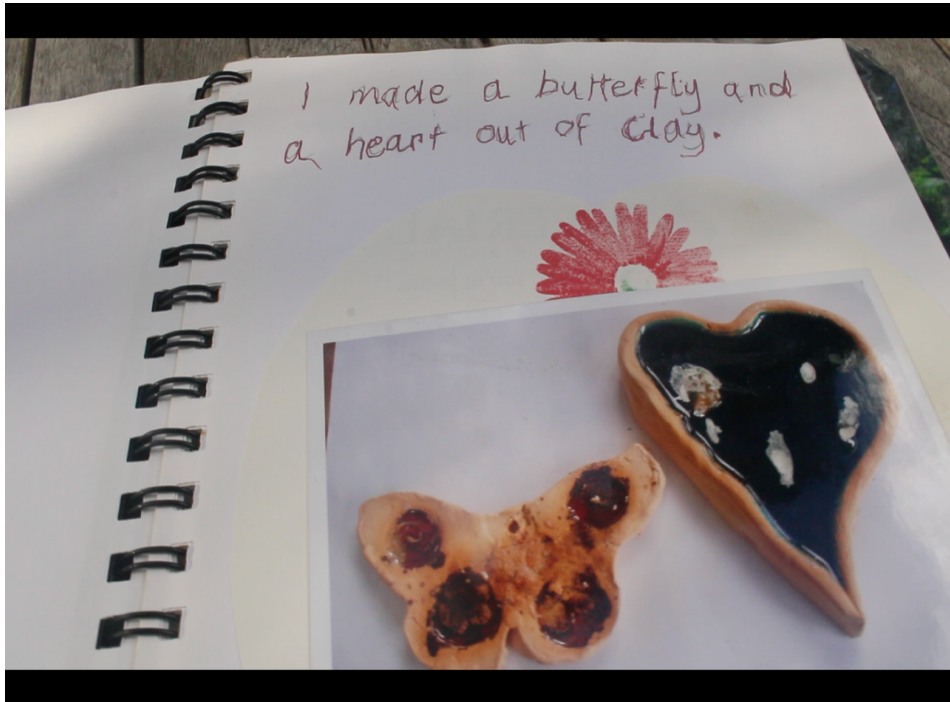


Note. Behind-the-scenes photo of filming a stop motion animation using Stop Motion Studios on an iPhone. Own work.

To implement an autoethnographic narration of social-media use, I scripted self-interview questions around my social-media use as a teenager and reflected on the data I gathered on myself for why my past-self engaged with social media. I then integrated this storytelling with b-roll (Crawley, 2012). Murphy & Alley (2023) describe b-roll film shots as visual evidence that supports your main message. I used stop-motion animation and, using my own Canon camera, filmed artefacts from past experiences to support the main message around my positive social-media use as a teenager. Reflecting on past artefacts contributes towards an autoethnographic research, becoming an “art of memory” which became a vital part of my documentary storyline (Muncey, 2005). Figure 5 shows me looking at past artefacts from the documentary, the footage films me looking through an old scrapbook, the scrapbook shows pictures of items I made, with my handwriting being a visual descriptor of the scrapbook and a reminder of my young dyslexic self practising my handwriting. Reflecting on my past hobbies by looking at things I had made reminded me of my desire to pursue the opportunities social media offered me as a teenager to upskill existing hobbies, learn about new hobbies and improve my language skills as a dyslexic teenager.

Figure 5

B-roll of Past Artefacts.



Note. This is a screenshot of me filming me looking through a scrapbook I made as a child, which contains photos of pottery I have made and my own dyslexic handwriting. Own work.

Post-Production

When I captured all my stop-motion videos, I selected an appropriate frame rate on Stop Motion Studios to make the motion smooth and then uploaded the footage to Premiere Pro for editing on my iMac. I uploaded and stored all my footage to my iMac, a hard drive, and a backup laptop. As shown in Figure 6, to create a digital glitch effect in the film and poster, I used a plugin called Premiere Composer to visually reference social media as a digital technology and to transition between different chapters of the documentary. To create a distinction between my voice in the narration and my self-interview, I used an Old-Time Radio preset and a hard limiter to make my narration voice sound as though it was a digitalised version of myself reflecting on the documentary themes. I incorporated archival b-roll by downloading YouTube videos I made from my old YouTube channel and included screenshots of Instagram posts I had made. To aid in the pacing of the documentary and evoke emotional storytelling, I used copyright-free music from Pixabay and YouTube's copyright-free library.

Premiere Pro Timeline.

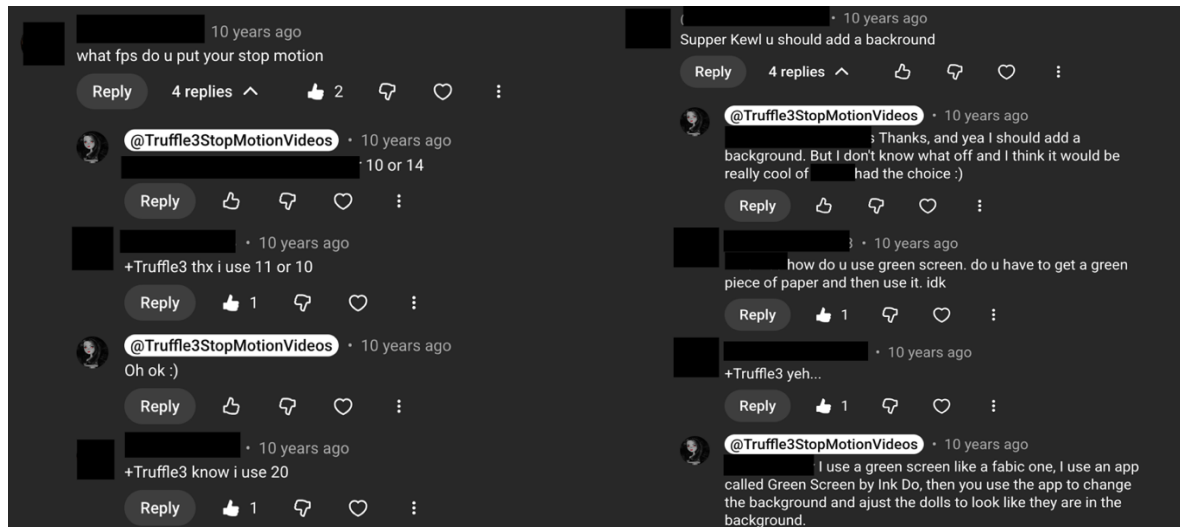


Through autoethnographic research into my social-media use as a teenager, I identified themes of creative content creation, learning about skills and digitalising my identity. Platforms such as YouTube and Instagram provided information around upskilling in existing hobbies such as sewing and crafting, while teaching and inspiring me to create content in the form of stop-motion animation videos and photography using dolls. Content creation digitalised my creativity, which became an asset for me as someone growing up with dyslexia, providing me with reading and writing abilities through user interactions such as commenting and posting written information, along with producing visual content. Figure 7 shows how digitalising creativity and content creation are important aspects for young creative teenagers to learn and practice these skills, with social-media platforms being places to expand these skills, particularly through user-participation and user-generated content, which helped improve my content-creation skills from online interaction and feedback. Policymakers who are considering restricting social media for teenagers under the age of 16 need to consider how teenagers may desire the possibilities/opportunities social-media accounts provide when seeking creative avenues; these can inspire teenagers to pursue

creative interests in the future in the forms of job opportunities and hobbies (Harlan et al., 2012; Kobiruzzaman et al., 2018). For teenagers to safely pursue online creative avenues, it is important to instil digital literacy education instead of completely removing the possibilities of using social media as a tool (Chen & Chen, 2026; Orlando, 2024).

Figure 7

Social-Media Comments on my YouTube Channel.



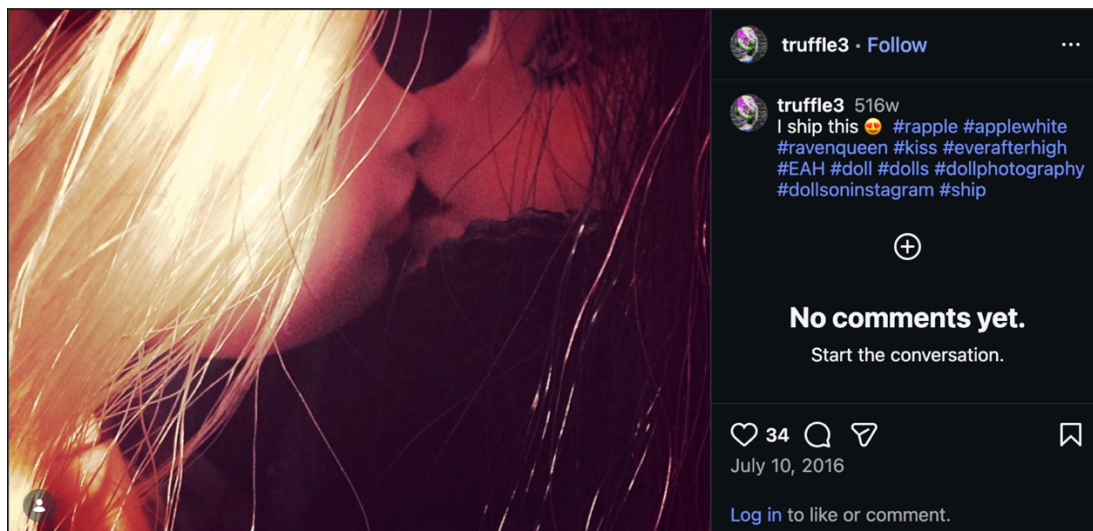
Note. There are screenshots of comments from YouTube videos I made ten years ago, the comments are asking questions about how I make my stop motion videos through feedback and skill-related questions, such as what frames per second (fps) I used for my videos. Own work.

Marginalised communities, such as the LGBTQIA+ and disability communities, often use social media to learn about their identities, find community, inclusion, and resources (Bandopadhyaya & Kenix, 2023; Berger et al., 2021; Craig et al., 2021; Ingouf, 2021; Vezzoli et al., 2017). During my autoethnographic research, I found that as someone who is dyslexic and therefore struggles with language-based skills, I was practising my reading and writing skills through social media by writing scripts and stories, and reading comments and descriptions of how-to videos (Berninger et al., 2008; Hebert et al., 2018; Morrison, 2023). People with dyslexia often use visuals in the form of images and videos to understand written information a lot faster and more accurately (Barden, 2014b; Vezzoli et al., 2017). This is where my social-media use as a content creator and someone who consumes content around learning new skills helped develop my reading and writing skills as a young teenager. Social

media also provided a safe space for me to explore the LGBTQIA + community, which is common for LGBTQIA + teenagers who desire a safe space to explore their identity (Craig et al., 2015; Lucero, 2017). I would explore my own identity through consuming LGBTQIA + content in the form of videos, images and quizzes, as well as creating my own LGBTQIA + content. Figure 8 shows an example of how I would explore my sexuality through curating videos, images and written stories around same-sex relationships, and how I would voice both male and female dolls in videos to explore my gender identity. Because I was constantly seeking out new information through social media, this resulted in improving my literacy skills as a dyslexic person and seeking out new information about my LGBTQIA + identity.

Figure 8

Exploring my Sexuality on Social Media.



Note. This is a screenshot of an Instagram post I made in 2016, showcasing two female dolls kissing each other as an example of me exploring my sexuality through using dolls and photography. Own work.

Conclusion

On the 6th May in 2025, Wedd (2025) from the New Zealand National Party put forward a drafted bill (Social Media Age-Restricted Users Bill) that proposes raising the minimum age of creating a social-media account from 13 years old to 16 years old. The draft of this bill would initiate my research question on: how does social media enable users to learn creative skills, express themselves and explore aspects of their identity? As mentioned before, social media is a wicked problem, one that requires a nuanced approach through analysing both the positive and negative attributes it presents, as simply banning teenagers under the age of 16 will not prevent social media harm.

As a researcher who was a teenager using social media ten years ago, I used autoethnographic research and created a documentary around my research findings on my social-media use as a teenager from 2016, implementing critical youth studies that examine the past perspective of a fourteen-year-old ten years ago. Creating an artefact that reflects on my young teenage social media use is significant in understanding the importance of social media for teenagers. Finding that my interest in stop motion and doll photography on YouTube and Instagram became an extension of my passion for content creation, developing creative and technical skills that helped my dyslexia through reading and writing, and exploring my LGBTQIA+ identity. My findings would aid in answering what elements of social media are used for creativity, learning skills and exploring identity, from the perspective of a researcher who used social media as a teenager. Policymakers need to consider that teenagers would miss out on the importance of content creation and improving digital literacy skills when restricting social media accounts for young teenagers, particularly for young teenagers in marginalised communities who use social media for seeking community, resources and safe spaces.

Further Research

Due to the time constraints, I could not get ethics approval for this research, which would have allowed me to explore the experiences of other teenagers' social-media use. Future research on teenage social-media use should encourage recruiting participants from a diverse range of experiences and communities, implementing critical youth studies from the perspective of how teenagers under the age of sixteen navigate emerging social media topics like AI-generated content (Davies, 2026; Fogarty & Song, 2025; Mitchell & Moore, 2018;

Quijada Cerecer et al., 2013; Sula et al., 2026; Taghipour & Lu, 2025). Recruiting older teenagers and young adult participants who grew up using social media could reflect on their social-media use; this could also contribute to the conversation on how their experiences have shaped their lives, when compared to participants who are teenagers under the age of 16. My autoethnographic research has highlighted important aspects of the benefits of social-media use for younger New Zealanders, particularly in terms of that aspect of exploring identity for groups that are often under-represented in research (Gallegos et al., 2023). Though my experiences would differ from those of other participants in marginalised communities, conducting more studies around marginalised communities and social-media use would be valuable when considering social-media restrictions, as marginalised communities benefit from online spaces for finding community and self-expression and removing access to online support could be seriously detrimental to the well-being of under-16s (Davis & Farmer, 2016).

The use of qualitative research methods and creative outputs in this research contributes towards understanding social-media use; the thematic and visual information could contribute to wider, nuanced discussions on social-media use. West et al. (2024) conducted a study on teenagers' social-media use and incorporated rich picture mapping (RPM) as a visual qualitative research method to help participants freely express their responses to the research question. The artefact I created as part of this research could serve as a conversation starter or exemplar for further studies involving under-16s in the discussion of social-media use. Using a mixture of qualitative research methods can provide a broader understanding of teenagers' social-media use; using practice-based research in my own study provided useful insights into my own social-media use. Through autoethnographic research and producing a creative artefact, I discovered where my creative skills derived from my passion as a teenage content creator on YouTube and Instagram. For future studies on teenage social-media use, qualitative research methods and practice-based research can aid researchers in understanding teenagers' interests in the creative side of social media, such as content creation and learning new skills. Researching teenagers' interest in social media and the benefits they gain from their use should be taken into consideration when restricting media use for teenagers under 16 years old.

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