About DEIS UK

DEIS UK CIC is a youth-driven non-profit organisation established in 2021. We call ourselves 'youth-driven' rather than 'youth-led' as our approach is to provide young people with the agency to design, lead, and implement their own projects. We operate on the belief that young people are best supported when they are the primary decision-makers in their own environments and that youth work is at its most valuable when the scene is set by the young people themselves.

We primarily work with young people aged 14 - 25 across London. Many teenagers and young people seek to be part of something bigger than they are and engage in their communities, so we provide opportunities to build leadership capacity and community resilience. Our activities focus on education, social action, and peer-to-peer support, ensuring that every young person involved has a seat at the table and a voice in the organisation's direction.

DEIS UK also has a 'sister-organisation' Asociația DEIS in Baia Mare, Romania, where the co-founders of DEIS UK, Bea Konyves and Jeanine Celine, experienced the model as young people themselves. The two organisations are fully independent of each other, but we do collaborate when we have the opportunity.

TRUSTED ONLINE – mapping future [in]equity in digital relationships between young people and trusted adults

A DEIS UK exploratory study project funded by the INCLUDE+ Network at the University of Leeds.

Introduction

Do you consider yourself a 'trusted adult'?
If you are an adult who works directly with young people or who a young person engages with directly, and you know that your relationship is built on trust and safety, you most likely are one.

Do you ever use technology to interact with a young person?
The technology in cause may mean phone calls, text messages, emails, or even creating content aimed at younger audiences, although this list is non-exhaustive.

If you answered yes to these two questions, this resource may be of interest to you.
While its context is rooted in a layer of policy, this report aims to provide a glimpse into young people's digital world as seen through the lens of 10 young researchers – 5 based in London, England, and 5 based in Baia Mare, Romania. The raw insights were analysed and collated in this report by myself – a youth worker and researcher, originally from Baia Mare, but I currently live and practice in London. The discussions that generated the insights were facilitated by me, together with my colleague Jeanine Horgoș, who provided the logistical and organisational support to organise the offline and online discussions and ensured they ran smoothly.

This report has 2 focus areas which can be viewed as standalone outcomes:

- understanding the present digital landscape – who do young people consider trusted adults, how do they interact with them, and what stands out in their day-to-day use of digital technology;
- creating a series of future scenarios based on the present – what do young people hope will happen, what do they fear will happen, and what do they expect will most likely happen.

The process that led to them is in itself documented here and can be reused to generate new outcomes and discussions with young people who may be in a completely different context.

Context

In December 2025, England launched its first dedicated youth strategy in two decades. The document acknowledges that young people today are 'the first generation to be entirely born into a digital world' (DCMS, 2025, 'Ministerial Foreword'). Its first chapter goes on to talk about 'people who care' (DCMS, 2025, 'Chapter 1: People who care'). From a digital youth work perspective, this project aimed to link up the two by gaining an understanding of young people's current digital landscape, mapping who they consider a 'trusted adult' in their lives, and engaging young researchers in an exercise to create a series of future scenarios based on their current reality.

On the 10th of December 2025, the government published 'Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy'. This is the first strategy for young people in the last 'two decades' (DCMS, 2025, 'Ministerial Foreword'), so the policy document was welcomed as a step forward by national bodies and youth practitioners, while maintaining a reflective critical lens (see NYA, 2025 and Weavers, 2025, for example). It sets out a vision for the next 10 years, which is meant to serve as a guidance for all those who work with young people, regardless of their professional qualifications, and for the stakeholders who support the youth sector such as funders. The foreword acknowledges that 'this is the first generation to be entirely born into a digital world' (DCMS, 2025, 'Ministerial Foreword'), which feels particularly relevant in the context of digital youth work practice.

Digital youth work can be defined 'as a practice that brings digital technologies into youth-centred initiatives in ways that support digital literacy and citizenship' (Digital Youth Work Research Hub). In itself, this form of youth work tends to remain largely invisible in policy documents, as highlighted by the 'Where is Digital Youth Work? - Policy Invisibility and the Case for Recognition' policy scan by Dr Alicja Pawluczuk and Cristina Bacalso:

> Whilst young people feature prominently as a priority group in digital inclusion strategies, the infrastructure that could most effectively support them—digital youth

> work and non-formal education spaces—appears to remain largely invisible. (Pawluczuk and Bacalso, 2026, np [1])

The strategy does not mention 'digital youth work' specifically, but the document mentions the words 'online', 'media', and 'digital' a total of 85 times ($44 + 21 + 20$) according to a Voyant Tools Word Analysis [2], more than 'school*' (70) or 'mental health + wellbeing' (63). Digital themes are most prevalent in 'Chapter 1: People who care', which also introduces the concept of 'trusted adults' as one of its 3 actions: Action 1. Trusted adults, Action 2. Strengthening the workforce, and Action 3. Friends and relationships

> For the purposes of the NYS, a trusted adult is a safe, respectful adult that is chosen by a young person as a trusted figure that listens to them and supports them. This could be an adult within a young person's family and home, an adult they interact with at school or in an education setting, or an adult that works with them outside of school, for example a youth worker, mentor or sports coach. (DCMS, 2025, 'Key terms: Glossary and acronyms')

'Trusted adults' is used as an umbrella term for all different adults who may be supporting a young person and tasks them with a diffuse range of responsibilities including spotting signs of loneliness and managing online wellbeing, as well as mentoring young people. Youth workers are specifically mentioned in Action 2 alongside volunteers and trusted adults. It combines professional roles with the more informal, indirect support that can be offered by the wide range of trusted adults, making it unclear where this strengthening will take place and what it might look like. Finally, Action 3 emphasises online safety and peer relationships, shifts the focus from either professional or informal trusted adults, but places a general responsibility onto schools and parents/carers. Zooming into this chapter of the strategy, we became interested in understanding who do young people see as trusted adults and analysing the intersection between digital worlds and trusted adults.

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[1] Please note, as of 10/08/2026 when this quote was extracted from the article, the national youth strategy is not accounted in this scan.
[2] Voyant Tools analysis here: https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=efc75ce5bda7b46ad4c76e587ec601ed&query=%22mental%20health*%22&query=young&query=school*&query=digital*&query=online*&query=%22trusted%20adult*%22&query=%22youth%20work*%22&query=tech*&query=digital&query=media&query=digital%20media&query=social%20media&query=wellbeing&query=school&query=mental%20health&view=CorpusTerms

We worked with 5 young researchers from the UK and 5 from Romania aged between 16 and 21, with two exceptions, but who were under 25. As our starting point was England's strategy, our initial proposal was working with English young people. However, we decided to collaborate with our 'sister-organisation' based in Baia Mare, Romania. The young people from Romania acted as a 'control group' which allowed us to understand that the needs of young people in the context of digital relationships are similar despite geographic and political differences.

The proposed social media ban for under-16's in the UK was also published during our research, in June 2026. This naturally shifted the conversation in that direction and echoes of it can be felt in the young researchers' insights and the scenarios they created. Although our London-based researchers are already over 16 and will not be impacted by the full extent of the ban, they felt it was essential to reflect on the impact it might have on other young people and think about the future taking this into consideration. Similarly, the young researchers from Romania felt it was a good opportunity for them to explore their own thoughts on it as they have heard about both the Australian and British ban, but they are unsure what the future of social media access for young people might look like in the EU and Romania. All the researchers felt that this ban would create a ripple effect in the future and were concerned about its impact on their own privacy and freedom.

As Darran Gillan's article suggests, relationships are 'foundational' for valuable digital inclusion and integrating collective care. He also points out the importance of a 'dialogical approach focused on the lived experiences of those navigating the shifting landscape of digital society'. The insights from the Digital Youth Work Conference 2025 article also notes the importance of a more nuanced, intersectional approach to digital skills in youth work (a result of signal spotting exercises, a method we will be using in this project). These were the guiding principles of our research process.

Methodology

Our main methodological approach utilised future foresight tools rooted in ethnographic futures research (EFR) with young people in the United Kingdom and Romania. We shaped our findings with our group of young researchers, and began our research by proposing the methods, including signal spotting, mapping and horizon scanning. The methods were built on existing

practice within the IN+ network (as can be seen here, during the Digital Youth Work Conference 2025). Listening to feedback and suggestions from our signal spotters, we adapted some of the methods to ensure they were accessible to them, as well as time efficient as 6 of the young people involved had exams and assessments taking place during the research period.

The European Youth Work Academy in Slovenia describes the future foresight methodology (used in their study *Futures of Youth Work*) as "a well-established field with strong academic foundations", utilising "participatory approaches that recognise the inherent unpredictability of the future but emphasise the power of imagination" (Evrard et al., 2024, p. 17). The process starts with "horizon scanning", defined by the Foresight Horizon Scanning Centre as "a structured evidence-gathering process", which "engages participants by asking them to consider broad sources, typically outside the scope of their expertise" (Foresight Horizon Scanning Centre, 2008, n.p.), engaging participants as "signal spotters". The methodology "involves identifying and analysing emerging trends, drivers of change, patterns, and potential disruptions that will shape the landscape of youth work in the coming decades" (EAYW, 2023, n.p.).

In this context, a "signal" refers to:

> "a piece of information or an early indicator that suggests the possibility of a significant shift or emerging trend in a particular domain. It can be a pattern, event, observation, technology, behaviour, or any other observable phenomenon that carries potential meaning for the future" (EAYW, 2023, n.p.).

Overall, framing this study as future-oriented is particularly relevant in the context of digital youth work, as technologies are ever-changing and evolving. Based on the signals gathered at this stage, the young people involved were able to imagine different futures and highlight the most prominent factors of potential change or concern.

In the same framework as future foresight, from an ethnographic perspective, Textor explains that "the cultural futures researcher uses EFR to elicit from members of an extant social group their images and preferences (cognitions and values) with respect to possible or probable future cultures for their social group" (Textor, 1980, p. 14). This rooting allowed our work to connect to a larger corpus of previous academic work in anticipatory anthropology, "designing the future, through articulating alternative future scenarios" (Textor in Mead, 2005, p. 21).

The existing practice within this type of research is centred around three key questions: "within the context of overall trends and possibilities as you perceive them, what potential changes in your sociocultural system do you (1) want, (2) fear, and (3) expect?" (Veselesky & Textor, 2007, pp. 31-32). This framing provided a clear focus point for our signal spotters after the horizon scanning period, constructing the three different future scenarios (Ideal, Dystopian, and Most Likely) based on the gathered signals.

The process, in practice

Step 1: Recruiting young researchers

We started with an open call for young people to sign up.

Ideally, for a wide range of perspectives and signals that can be spotted, the group should be quite diverse. Our initial plan was to include a wider range of lived experiences by engaging diverse young people, including those involved in youth clubs or sports clubs, those who are not, and young people engaged in the youth justice system.

Actions:

- We partnered with the Albany in Deptford (CAYA programme), advertised on social media platforms, and recruited 2 young people from previous projects.
- Attempted outreach to local schools, colleges, and Greenwich Youth Justice team.
- Created an online form asking a few general questions, introducing young people to the topic:
    - Age
    - their usual connections (e.g. school/college staff, youth workers, sports coaches, creative leads, social workers, youth justice workers, parents/guardians, other family members, other connections) and how they connect with them (saw them in personal in the last month, had digital contact (Text, DM, Call, Email) in the last month, no contact, other)
    - how do they usually talk to adults digitally (WhatsApp, text, email, phone call, social media messages, gaming platforms, official apps/portals, other)
    - how are they finding these interactions (anxiety-inducing, awkward, neutral, preferable)

  - what makes an adult a ‘trusted adult’
  - one thing that makes them feel safe/comfortable when talking to an adult online
  - contact details and availability
- Recruited 5 young researchers from the UK and followed up by also recruiting 5 from Romania aged between 16 and 21 (with two older exceptions under 25). Romanian cohort acted as a 'control group' to understand if young people's digital relational needs are similar in spite of geographic and political differences.

Learning:

DEIS UK’s public-facing activity has been on pause since 2023 due to multiple factors including limited funding and being unable to secure a physical location for the organisation to run; the two factors link to each other. This meant that our direct link to young people was weak as many of those we worked with previously have aged out of our target group, moved away, or were unable to participate. We had 2 young people join us who were part of previous projects.

Our initial recruitment plan included reaching out to local schools and colleges as well as leveraging a strong relationship with the Greenwich Youth Justice team and contacting local and national youth organisations at different points of the research. We had minimal responses from schools and colleges which is something we had encountered in previous projects both at DEIS UK and in other independent youth work outside of our organisation, as well as other youth practitioners sharing similar challenges with few exceptions. Although, we had some great planning discussions with Greenwich YJS, due to staff capacity and, because of that, safety concerns, we were unable to set up a group of young people from them, despite proposing different models and working ideas. We encountered similar challenges when trying to establish groups in connection with other youth organisations.

On a more positive note, the initial sign-up form gave us a starting point for the conversations in our training session.

Step 2: Training session

This step had 3 main objectives:

- Onboarding the young researchers onto the project and presenting the aims, ethics, and research responsibilities as 'signal spotters'. This also served as a way for us to obtain informed consent from the young researchers as per our organisational policy.
- Map the idea of 'trusted adults' with the young people (who they are specifically, how to they connect with them, what do they usually need from them).
- Tailor the next step (signal spotting) to their time and preferences.

Actions:

We had 2 training sessions: one for the London-based young researchers, one for the Baia Mare cohort. The structure of the sessions was similar, but the London-based group had slightly more power to change the structure of the project.

- Training 1 (face to face, London-based):
  - Getting to know each other - using 3 Dixit cards[3], present what your relationship is with digital media
  - Introduction to the project and a 'signal spotter' toolkit (what is a signal, how to spot signals etc.)
  - Introduction to the first research tool - Mindful Scroll - for 5 minutes, scroll on a social media platform of your choice. Participants have to pay attention to what kind of content they are getting and how do they feel about it. This is followed by a discussion on the content and feelings associated. We explained that this is something they can choose to do for a few minutes as part of their research, focusing on any trusted adults they are interacting with and considering what signals they notice.

[3] https://www.libellud.com/en/our-games/dixit/ - for our icebreaker, we used the cards that come as part of the game as a storytelling tool for young people to make connections between the images they saw and their own experiences within the online world. Other materials that can be used for similar exercises are emoji cards or other abstract art. This can also be done as a collage-style exercise if magazines/newspapers are available, asking participants to create a collage that represents their relationship with digital media.

- Introduction to the second research tool - Mindmapping - starting from a list of trusted adults from the form, we discussed how each of them understands the concept and what their needs are from them online.
- Discussing next research steps - this section was more of a Q&A where the young researchers shared some of their questions/concerns. One of the key asks they had was for us to create a series of guiding questions for their signal spotting, similar to how we asked them to focus on content & feelings during the mindful scroll. Together, we decided on the topics of the questions:
    - does the online world make them feel part of a community
    - how often to they actually see concerning content online and what is their reaction
    - becoming more aware of the online and offline blurred boundary and how often do they reach out to 'real-life' people online
    - how to they message people in different ways
    - how the content they see online might impact their offline life
    - reflecting on what adults tend to do online in relation to them and how would they like to change it.

Most of these points were raised as a response to the conversation we had during the training session (e.g. young people tend to blur the lines between online and offline, so they wanted to see how often they do it and how does it happen; one of them had seen a TikTok about mental health during the mindful scroll, so they were curious how often do they see content that is either informative or 'concerning') which the young researchers felt they wanted to understand more in-depth.

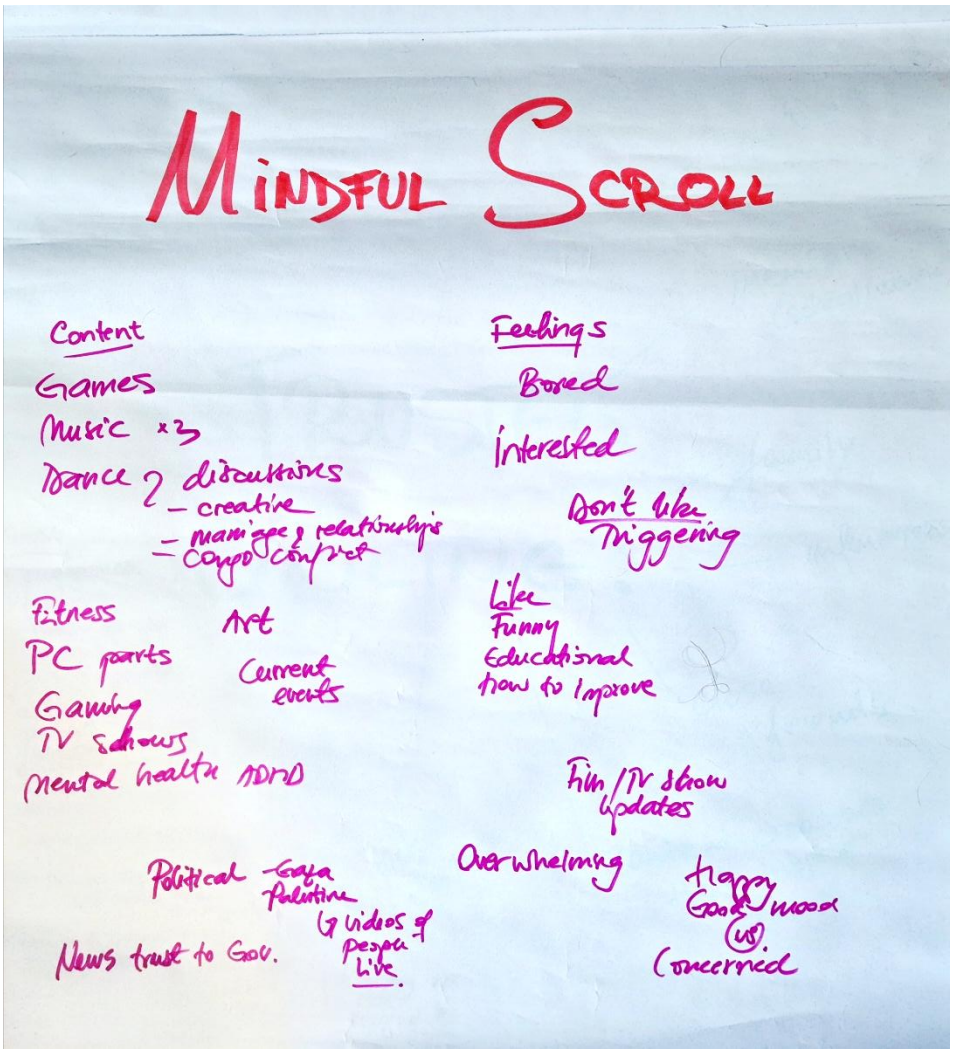

Figure 1. Notes made during Mindful Scroll exercise

- Training 2 (online, Baia Mare-based):
  - Getting to know each other - thinking about the last weeks in your life, what is the first thing you do online when you wake up
  - Introduction to the project (see above)
  - Introduction to the first research tool - Mindful Scroll (see above)
  - Introduction to the second research tool - Mindmapping (see above)
  - Discussing next research steps - as the structure was already established by the London-based young researchers, the young people from Baia Mare were happy to follow the same process.

As we originally started the research with the London-based young researchers, we were unable to involve the young researchers from Baia Mare at the same level. Ideally, we would have liked both groups to work together and have equal weighting in structuring the process. However, we only recruited the second group while the first one was half-way through 'signal spotting'. This meant that the young people from Romania had to carry on with the process as it was.

Learning:

Originally, signal spotting has little guidance in terms of what the signal spotters need to observe. However, having some questions to guide them was something that our researchers asked for and appreciated. In our discussions, they also mentioned that 'having structure gave us more freedom to talk about other points that weren't in the original question. Like if I know I already answered your question, I can also think about other stuff' (Young Researcher, London, Scenario Meeting, transcript).

Step 3 & 4: Signal Spotting

> "In this context, 'signal' refers to a piece of information or an early indicator that suggests the possibility of a significant shift or emerging trend in a particular domain. It can be a pattern, event, observation, technology, behaviour, or any other observable phenomenon that carries potential meaning for the future" (EAYW, 2023, n.p.).

The purpose of the 2 weeks of signal spotting, was for the young researchers to gather some snippets of what they consider relevant in their day-to-day use of social media and digital technologies and what are the things happening today that might impact the future.

Actions:

Step 3: First week of signal spotting

After our initial meeting, the young researchers received an email from us outlining 3 of the topics that they would be focusing on that week (as outlined by them, during the training). The email contained 3 guiding questions, rephrased based on their discussion points:

- Did anything you saw online recently make you feel connected to your community? What was it - content like reels or posts, talking to/messaging friends, talking to a trusted adult, etc.?
- Did you see anything concerning online? If you did, did you share your concerns with anyone? This can include friends, trusted adults, or leaving a comment on that content.
- Do you feel that you have people in your life you could easily reach out to online for support? Tell me about them. This can include messaging someone to meet up in person!

The questions acted as a reminder to our previous conversation and a starting point for them to report back on.

At the end of 7 days (before the next set of 3 questions was sent), the young researchers reported back via email.

Step 4: Second week of signal spotting

After they sent back their reflections on the first 3 questions, we emailed the young researchers with the next set of 3:

- Have you noticed any unwritten rules about how or when you message different people online? For example, would you send a voice note to a friend at 2 AM, but only email a teacher or text a youth worker during the day? What makes an online space feel professional versus casual to you?
- Has an algorithm or a new app feature ever changed how you interact with people in real life? This could be an app showing you local events, a TikTok trend you and your friends tried out in person, or a feature like location sharing or read receipts that changed how you communicate.
- If you could completely redesign how adults (like teachers, mentors, or even influencers) use social media to reach out to young people, what would you change? Think about what feels cringey or invasive versus what feels helpful and genuine. Where is the boundary between an adult being supportive online and overstepping?

Again, the questions were based on the topics they pointed out during our initial meeting.

At the end of another 7-day period, the young researchers reported back via email.

Learning:

Across the 2 weeks of signal spotting from both London-based and Baia Mare - based young researchers, they shared a wide range of ideas. Some of their answers started from the topic but then went on a tangent which also provided a lot of insight into their thoughts and feelings (see more in *Findings* section, below).

Step 5: Future scenario creation

For this step, we summarised the signals received from all young researchers. We had a discussion to ensure that the signals reflect the depth of experiences they reported and gave them an opportunity to feed back on the process.

Using the signals, we moved onto the futures research stage.

> "The existing practice within this type of research is centred around three key questions: 'within the context of overall trends and possibilities as you perceive them, what potential changes in your sociocultural system do you (1) want, (2) fear, and (3) expect?'" (Veselesky & Textor, 2007, pp. 31-32).

Before this session took place, the proposed under 16's social media ban in the UK was announced. When I sent out the second email for the young researchers, I asked if they felt it would be useful to have some dedicated time to discuss the ban during our upcoming call and they all unanimously agreed they would like that.

Actions:

This session had 3 dedicated sections:

- reviewing the signals
- discussing the social media ban
- generating future scenarios.

Both sessions took place online as the signal spotters asked for that, and most of the session was free dialogue. At this point the young researchers felt comfortable to contribute equally and share their thoughts.

For the ‘future scenarios’ exercise, we asked what their ideal/dream future is, what their dystopian/pessimistic view of the future is, and what do they think is most likely to happen.

Learning:

It is worth noting that the ban announcement was something that weighed heavily on young people’s mind. As you will see in our Findings section, their most likely future brings in themes of restricted access and privacy concerns, which echo some of the conversations that took place at that time. Potentially, this is a shortfall of our method as well. When something takes place and the signal spotters’ attention moves in that direction, their observations will most likely reflect that. It is important to remember that this project as well as other signal spotting exercises, are a snapshot of a moment in time (see more in *Findings* section).

Step 6: Summarising data and dissemination

In the final step of our research, we collated the different views, shared reflections, and encouraged other youth work practitioners to join this process.

Actions:

- Collated all the data and created materials to present it
- Organised an online event for ‘trusted adults’ where 2 of our young researchers chose to participate but remain anonymous, to share the results and speak about meaningful digital inclusion with youth work practitioners. The event structure was the following:
  - Introduction to the project
  - Sharing findings (signals, scenarios)
  - Deep dive of the most likely scenario, asking practitioners to contribute with ways they can be involved in improving it by responding to young people’s needs

Learning:

The participants (mostly youth work practitioners, alongside some of our young researchers) showed the value of collective care and responsiveness needed as a community of practice. Technology and digital media are ever-changing landscapes, meaning the present will need to be mapped and re-mapped multiple times alongside future scenarios. They were eager to contribute to our exercise and reflected a lot on a point initially brough up by the young people around

‘grassroots resistance & user counter-culture’ as they felt this was the point where ‘trusted adults’ can contribute the most.

Step	Purpose	Action	Learning
Step 1: Recruiting young people	Initial commitment to diversity, equality, and inclusion was meant to include a wider range of lived experiences (youth clubs, sports clubs, youth justice system). Romanian cohort acted as a 'control group' to see if digital relational needs are similar across geographic/political differences	Worked with 5 UK and 5 Romanian young researchers aged 16–25. Partnered with The Albany in Deptford (CAYA programme). Recruited via social media, previous projects, and attempted outreach to schools, colleges, and Greenwich Youth Justice.	DEIS UK direct links were weak as previous youth aged out during operational pause. Minimal school responses and unable to form Youth Justice group due to staff capacity and safety concerns. Highlights 'trusted adults' balancing time with administrative work in fast-paced environments.

Step 2: Training session	Onboard young researchers on research aims, ethics, and responsibilities while introducing core future foresight and horizon scanning tools.	Conducted one training session explaining research and responsibilities, sharing research methods (mindful scroll, storyboarding, brainstorming) at The Albany, followed by an online session for the Romanian group of young researchers.	Adapted methods to be accessible and time-efficient as 6 young people had exams during research. Respected youth decision to turn off social media/communications during exams; learning is about project timing.
Step 3: First week of signal spotting	Engage young researchers as 'signal spotters' in 'horizon scanning' (Foresight Horizon Scanning Centre, 2008) to capture 'signals', early indicators of significant shifts or emerging trends (EAYW, 2023).	Reported back on 3 questions: 1. Online content/messaging building community connection; 2. Concerning content seen and shared; 3. Reaching out to online support networks or meeting in person.	Major announcements (e.g. social media ban) weigh heavily on participants' minds, directing signal spotters' focus toward immediate topical concerns. Signal spotting also serves as a snaposhot of a moment in time, where observations directly reflect real-time events.
Step 4: Second week of signal spotting	Uncover implicit communication norms, platform boundaries, algorithmic impacts, and ideal adult outreach behaviours in digital youth environments.	Reported back on 3 questions: 1. Unwritten rules/messaging boundaries (casual vs professional); 2. App/algorithmic impacts on real-life interactions; 3. Redesigning adult social media outreach and boundaries.	
Step 5: Future	Structure future scenarios around EFR practice and Textor's three core	Co-created three collective future scenarios based on gathered signals:	Young people created a 'realistic' scenario with significant overlap with

scenario creation	questions: "what potential changes in your sociocultural system do you (1) want, (2) fear, and (3) expect?" (Veselesky & Textor, 2007).	Optimistic (Ideal / what they want), Pessimistic (Dystopian / what they fear), and Realistic (Most Likely / what they expect).	their 'dystopian' scenario. Reflects hyperawareness of surveillance, AI control, inequality, and proposed under-16 social media bans.
Step 6: Collecting data & dissemination	Collate findings, share reflections, and encourage practitioners to make small changes for better interactions with young people.	Collected all data, produced dissemination materials, and hosted an online dissemination event with youth work practitioners and young researchers.	Event demonstrated the value of collective care and responsiveness in a community of practice. Proved digital environments must be mapped and re-mapped multiple times as technology changes. The process can be restarted in any environment by practitioners who have learned about it.

Findings

In our sign-up form, when asked how they feel about digital interactions with adults, all our young researchers selected **“🙄 I’m neutral – it’s just how things are done"**. This points to the fact that this group of young people views digital communication with adults as something normalised, a background aspect of their daily lives, which is not inherently special. The young researchers took their time to answer our questions and support us in developing the primary data for three main resources: a map of trusted adults, relevant signals/trends for the future, and a series of future scenarios.

Who are 'trusted adults'?

One of our first interests as part of this project, was to have a better understanding of who do young people consider ‘trusted adults’ and see what their needs might be in relation to them. We wanted to create a map, which combines points from the sign-up forms, initial training discussions, signals, and scenarios. This map is a snapshot of who 10 young people from the UK and Romania view as trusted adults in their lives, how they might interact with them online, and what their needs are from them. You will see that a lot of their online needs might be mirrors of general needs (for example, having someone who listens to them without judgement), so while our research was rooted in digital practice, this can also be interpreted in a broader youth work sense.

Collating notes and responses from our young researchers, we created a working definition of a ‘trusted adult’:

> A **trusted adult** is an individual (family member, youth worker, teacher, friend, public person etc.) who demonstrates **empathy, non-judgmental guidance, and respect for youth agency without abusing power or forcing information out of them**. **Trust** is established through **reliable offline presence or transparent online content history**, allowing young people to feel safe, comfortable, and uncensored in their interactions.

There are a few key points in this definition. One of them is the emphasis on being treated with dignity, respect for their point of view, and ethical use of power.

"A trusted adult is someone who doesn't abuse their power and has my best interests at heart..." (Young Researcher, London, Sign-up Form)

"Someone who respects you and understands your POV... Knowing that adult trusts me." (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Sign-up Form, translated)

"Being capable of understanding me and capable of being a decent human being." (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Sign-up Form, translated)

"a trusted adult for me is someone who does not use their authority in a negative way and who respects my opinions even if they are different." (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, training session, transcript, translated)

The young reseaerchers were also focused on psychological safety and a need to be uncensored, for them, a trusted adult creates a judgement-free environment where they feel safe to share sensitive, personal experiences without fear of being misunderstood.

"A trusted adult is someone who is close to me and who I can go up to comfortably to talk to about many things, especially more sensitive discussions. They feel like a friendly face that I'm happy to see." (Young Researcher, London, Sign-up Form)

"Someone I am comfortable being my uncensored self while around and have in depth discussions with..." (Young Researcher, London, Sign-up Form)

"An adult that you can feel open to talk to, about anything, and have trust that the information stays between you two..." (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Sign-up Form, translated)

There was also an important distinction made between genuine support and invasive overstepping, noting that trusted adults provide assistance while respecting personal space and emotional boundaries.

"A trusted adult would be someone that can make you feel like you are able to act yourself, while also providing safe guidance and helpful advice to ensure positive growth and kind actions towards others." (Young Researcher, London, Sign-up Form)

While placing a lot of emphasis on respecting professional boundaries and understanding that 'trusted adults' may not always be available online, the researchers pointed out that, in digital contexts, trust is reinforced by prompt, consistent communication when support is requested within the limits of clearly communicated boundaries such as working hours.

"Being able to contact them whenever needed to ask for advice or support, either through calling or messages, and knowing they will respond promptly helps me feel secure when communicating online." (Young Researcher, London, Sign-up Form)

"When an adult talks to a young person on social media or messaging platforms, it should feel respectful and appropriate to the relationship... messaging someone like a teacher or colleague in the night would feel both unprofessional and disrespectful. This is because I know that I've met them through their job (not privately) and they only operate within specific hours." (Young Researcher, London, Signals)

Lastly, a key point brough up by the young researchers was that before establishing online trust, they actively verify an adult's offline identity, institutional role, or public content history to assess their reliability.

"When I'm talking to an adult online, I usually feel safe by acknowledging who they are outside a digital space before I then communicate with them online, making me feel assured..." (Young Researcher, London, Sign-up Form)

"Having enough interactions with them (in-person) for me to be able to see that they are reliable and have a stable mind... (if I haven't met them in person) being very familiar with their content. If they don't post any content, then I would not feel safe as I don't have anything to refer to understand them as a person." (Young Researcher, London, Sign-up Form)

"A profile picture that represents who [he/she] is in real life." (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Sign-up Form, translated)

"I noticed in our high school a much greater closeness towards teachers who use social media constantly and show a bit of support on this side. (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, training, transcript, translated)

A trusted adult's characteristics based on notes from the 10 young researchers:

→ Equal share of power (young person's best interests at heart; not exploiting authority)

→ Psychological safety (young person can be themselves, uncensored, feeling comfortable to share sensitive information)

→ Non-invasive guidance (caring advice without asking invasive personal questions or forcing conversation)

→ Consistent responsiveness (may not be prompt at all times, but availability is communicated reliably)

→ Verifiable identity (they are known offline or post enough online content that the young person can form an opinion about them).

Based on discussions with the young researchers, we grouped their trusted adults in 3 main groups, based on how the researchers interact with these people: inner circle & family (close and personal interactions), professional & community roles (support and informative interactions), and digital & public roles (learning and content-based interactions).

1. INNER CIRCLE & FAMILY

A. Parents & Guardians

- **Channels & Communication:** direct WhatsApp / Text messages, phone calls, video calls, and short-form video sharing (TikToks / Reels).

The sign-up form shows that for this group of young people parents and guardians are the most frequently contacted adults digitally, using WhatsApp/SMS and phone calls daily. During our conversations with the researchers, they mentioned that usually, their parents are the ones to initiate contact and check-in.

A specific interaction between young people and parents/guardians is location sharing.

> *"And, for example, an app I use with several friends is Bump... a location sharing app... And I also use this with my mum at the same time... just for fun... it helps a bit so we don't bombard each other with phone calls like 'Hey, where are you?'"* (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Signals, translated)

The young person who shared this considers that location-sharing is more for functional convenience and it appears to be reinterpreted as a tool for mutual care rather than monitoring and surveillance. In this case, the interaction was discussed between the young person and their mum, the decision to share was made transparently, so the young person is comfortable with this.

During our scenario building meeting, both groups of young people also explained that while they would appreciate adults taking more time to understand them and empathise with them, potentially making them more trustworthy for young people as well. More emphasis was placed on parents/guardians for this. The young researchers indicated that they seek real effort from adults to understand their humour, satire, and digital culture, rather than dismissing their online activity as "brainrot" (a derogatory term used to define short-form, low effort content, often generated using artificial intelligence, which is associated with young people's media consumption).

The young researchers also highlighted that they would like parents/guardians to avoid digital penalties (such as taking away their phones or access to internet) as they have become more than just ways to interact with friends and it is directly impacting their ability to access learning resources or receiving essential information from schools or extracurricular clubs.

B. Other Family Members (Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, Cousins etc.)

- **Channels & Communication:** WhatsApp / Text messages, traditional phone calls, and casual video calls.

Other family members were also mentioned by the young researchers as trusted adults in their lives, but engagement with them is not as regular as that with parents. In this case, the young researchers pointed out appreciating consistent, supportive family presence, but would prefer that the connection is maintained on their terms, rather than being expected to always share personal information. They also pointed out that in the case of intergenerational trust, they would like to be assured that private disclosures would remain strictly confidential between them and the family member they shared with. During our scenario building exercise when we reviewed the list of trusted adults and signals, one young researcher mentioned that they find it difficult to get that assurance and that they would not necessarily consider anyone in their wider family a trusted adult according to their definition.

C. Close Friends

As all of our young researchers were over 16 and some were over 18 themselves, they considered that a lot of the time their peers can become trusted adults. A friend who they consider a trusted adult is

- **Channels & Communication:** Social Media DMs (Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat), WhatsApp, private/encrypted messengers (Signal, Briar).

Specifically, one of the researchers pointed out that *"I feel that Instagram has become the most accessible communication platform in our generation. That is, it surpasses SMS, WhatsApp, and others... All my friends communicate here, while WhatsApp or others are for adults, businesses, etc."* (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Signals, translated)

During our scenario building exercise with the London-based young researchers, one of them described the way they speak to friends as "chaotic mode": lowercase typing, voice notes, rapid-fire messaging, sending images, and sharing short-form videos/memes. This is contrasted with “scholarly mode” which is reserved for more official, professional communication.

In the case of close friends, the young researchers consider them trusted adults as they are *"someone I am comfortable being my uncensored self while around and have in depth discussions with"* (Young Researcher, London, Sign-up Form).

The young researchers highlighted the importance of uncensored psychological safety, including being able to write in a ‘chaotic mode’, not having to worry about proper grammar and punctuation. This is contrasted with the ‘scholarly mode’ that the young researchers would use with most professional trusted adults (as can be seen below). The terms came directly from the young researchers as a way to describe how they may adapt their tone across digital spaces.

3. PROFESSIONAL & COMMUNITY ROLES

A. Teachers & Tutors

- **Channels & Communication:** Emails, official school portals, scheduled in-person meetings.

In the case of teachers/tutors, the young researchers emphasised a desire to make a good impression by writing in "scholarly mode”, characterised by formal grammar, full punctuation, capitalisation, and proper email etiquette to safeguard digital reputation.

The researchers pointed out that they are aware of who this person is offline so that *"when I'm talking to an adult online, I usually feel safe by acknowledging who they are outside a digital*

space before I then communicate with them online, making me feel assured" (Young Researcher, London, Sign-up Form).

One particularly interesting point raised by the young researchers within their signals, was their awareness of boundaries and understanding of working hours:

> *"This is because I know that I've met them through their job (not privately) and they only operate within specific hours. Therefore, messaging them outside of their work time would be me overstepping in our relationship."* (Young Researcher, London, Signals)

This contrasts concerns raised by practitioners, including in our final dissemination call, where it is not uncommon for adults to think that a young person would expect an immediate reply if they made themselves available online and/or outside of working hours.

One of the young researchers from Baia Mare also highlighted that a trusted adult with an online presence, especially teachers, seem to gain more trust from the young people they interact with.

> *"And I noticed in our high school a much greater closeness towards teachers who use social media constantly... You feel a different level of closeness and, automatically, it seems to me that it also improves the way you learn in class..."* (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Scenario meeting, transcript, translated)

When teachers, specifically, and other trusted adults, generally maintain a visible, authentic online presence, it may foster a more approachable, inclusive, and relatable learning environment. Due to young people's emphasis on boundaries, they would also be aware of the professional relationship and make sure there are no breaches.

B. Youth Workers, Community Leads & Mentors

- **Channels & Communication:** WhatsApp messaging (strictly during project/working hours), organisational and Youth Hub social media channels.

Similar to how the National Youth Strategy tends to place youth workers into their own category (textually), listing them as its own form of 'trusted adults', young people made a distinction as well. When asked directly by us if they would consider youth workers a 'trusted adult', they mentioned that youth workers sit in an in-between space: 'of course I trust [name of

youth worker from Baia Mare]! However, youth workers are not the first that come to mind when someone says ‘trusted adult’ to me. I think of youth workers as youth workers’ (young researcher, Baia Mare, transcript, training).

For those who frequent youth clubs, youth workers are adults who they trust and would have no reservations asking for their advice, disclosing a situation, or celebrating their successes. However, they do not follow the same 'rules' as others. They see a level of formality in their relationships with teachers, therapists, or coaches, which they do not feel is necessary with youth workers. Both groups of young researchers have also pointed out that their key need from trusted adults is that they take more time to understand them, while considering that youth workers already do this and are a model of good practice.

Moreover, some of the young researchers who are active in the youth club in Baia Mare, have also highlighted how much they enjoy being part of the creation of the club’s online image.

> *“The reels we make at [name of youth club] make me feel very connected to the community and the people themselves because I know I am part of the very space that is being represented and that I AM in those reels too sometimes.*" (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Signals, translated)

In the case of youth workers, therefore, there is something unique about not only interacting with them online but also co-creating the online presence of different projects or clubs. The young researchers who pointed out the importance of being involved with the social media materials created, also highlighted that usually young people around them respond positively to promotion and outreach where their own voices and creative contributions are genuinely heard and represented.

C. Sports Coaches & Creative Leads (Art, Music, Drama)

- **Channels & Communication:** Group messaging apps (WhatsApp), formal email updates, structured in-person sessions.

The discussion about sports or arts coaches was short as most of the young researchers had limited interactions with them. They considered that the main reason for online communication with them was feedback and skill development.

4. DIGITAL & PUBLIC ROLES

A. Content Creators & Social Activists (Inspiring Action / Journalism)

- **Channels & Communication:** Following public accounts, liking/commenting, sharing short-form videos (Reels/TikToks) with peers, consuming independent media/journalism, accessing "links in bio".

This category was unexpected, but young researchers from both groups pointed out that they have some content creators that they would consider trusted adults according to their own definition. What can make a content creator a trusted adult would include "*being very familiar with their content. If they don't post any content then I would not feel safe as I don't have anything to refer to understand them as a person*" (Young Researcher, London, Sign-up Form).

Young people were also very vocal about the importance of ethical, educational content. This was also brought up in the scenario building exercises.

> *"It is a tool and could be used positively... paid influencers should be receiving more credit for the information they give, fact checking... that way no one would make brain rot content anymore... the algorithm should invest more to put important, interesting things..."* (Young Researcher, London, Scenario meeting, transcript)

B. Virtual Doctors, Online Therapists & Support Accounts

- **Channels & Communication:** Direct messages on verified platforms, official health portal tools, anonymous helpline/chat apps.

The young researchers, particularly those from London, mentioned that doctors and therapists, including online/virtual, can be trusted adults. They mentioned finding a level of safety in virtual health spaces especially if they can receive prompt responses and quick help. One of the London-based researchers had used online mental health services such as Kooth and that they appreciated the ease of communication.

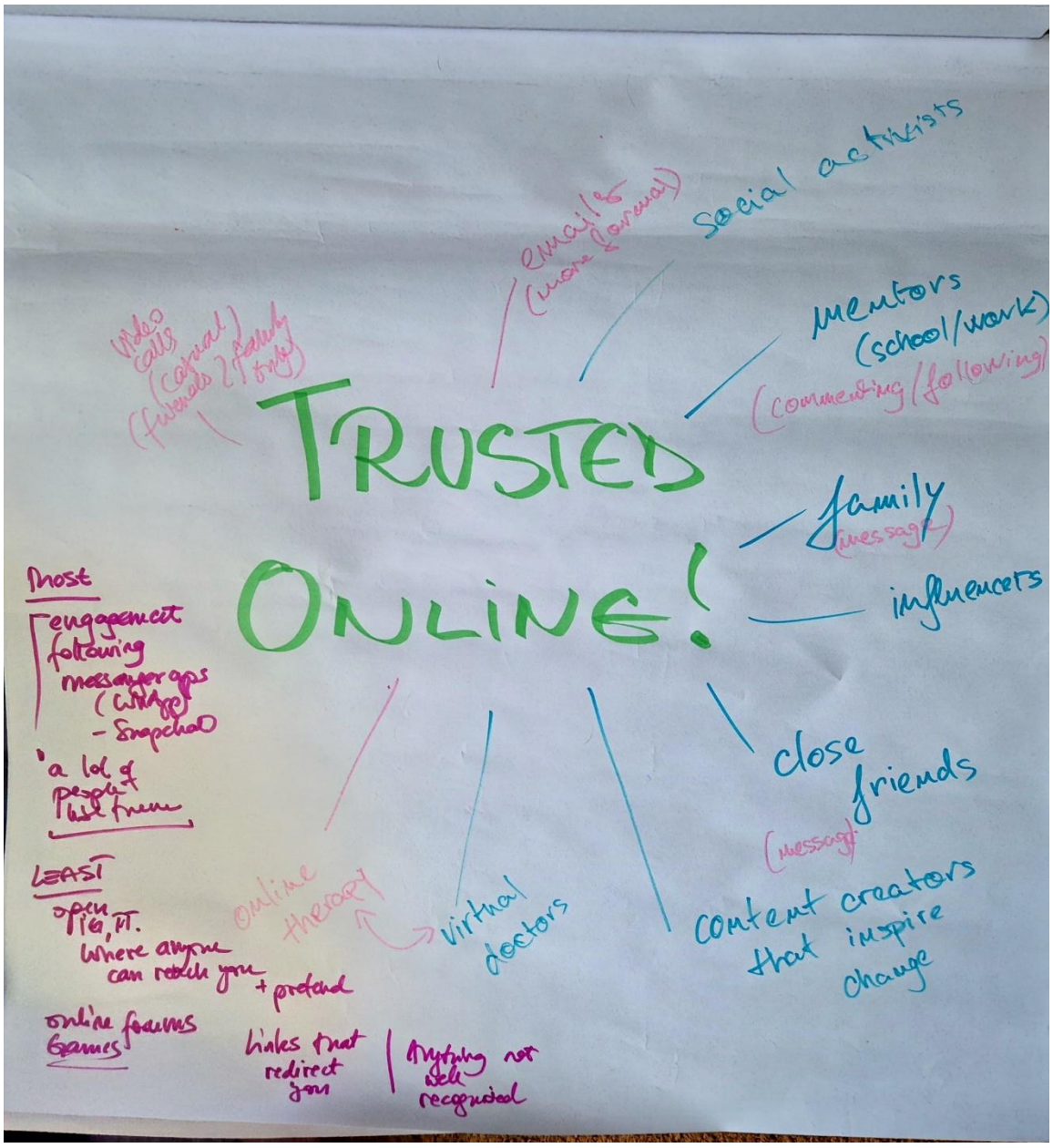

Figure 2. Notes on who the young people consider trusted adults and how they might interact with them online

Inner Circle & Family	Parents & Guardians • Direct WhatsApp / Text messages, phone & video calls. • Sending TikToks/Reels back and forth (e.g., humour, parenting POV videos, daily checks).	Needs: • Support, belief, and help during tough times. • Avoiding extreme digital punishments (e.g., arbitrarily taking phones away as a harsh measure). • An effort to understand youth humour, satire, and digital culture.
	Other family members (e.g. Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles, Cousins etc.) • WhatsApp / Text messages, traditional phone calls and casual video calls.	Needs: • Consistent presence without invasive personal questions. • Respect.
	Close Friends • Social Media DMs (Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat), WhatsApp, private/encrypted messengers. • Chaotic mode - typing lowercase, voice notes, random short-form videos.	Needs: • A space where they can be their uncensored selves.

Professional & Community Roles	**Teachers & Tutors** • Emails, official school portals, in-person meetings. • Scholarly mode - formal language, full punctuation/capitalisation, proper email etiquette, to safeguard digital reputation.	**Needs:** • Respect for their point of view and a safe environment where they don't fear speaking up or being wrong. • Enthusiasm that supports growth rather than fear-based power dynamics.
	Youth Workers & Community Leads, Mentors • WhatsApp during working hours. • Organisational social media channels.	**Needs:** • Authentic, non-promotional outreach (projects promoted by young people's voices, not forced corporate ads). • Someone who doesn't abuse power and acts as a relatable "friendly face". • Strict observance of boundaries by the young people (e.g., no late-night messaging unless it is a severe crisis). • Supportive guidance that encourages active youth participation.
	Sports Coaches & Creative Leads (Art, Music, Drama) • Group messages (WhatsApp/Messaging apps),and formal email updates.	**Needs:** • Encouragement, skill development, and structured boundaries.

Digital & Public Roles	<u>Content Creators & Social Activists (Inspiring Action / Journalism)</u> • Following accounts, liking/commenting, sharing short-form videos (Reels/TikToks) with friends, or direct messaging. • Consuming factual journalism and independent media accounts.	Needs: • Fact-checked, meaningful content that avoids clickbait or "brainrot". • A clear, authentic profile representing who they are in real life so young people can verify their credibility. • Inspiration to create positive local real-life change (e.g., "links in bio" for local events/gatherings).
	<u>Virtual Doctors, Online Therapists & Support Accounts</u> • Direct messages on verified platforms, official health portal tools, or anonymous chat apps.	Needs: • Confidentiality, non-judgmental guidance, and clear safety protocols. • Easy redirection to professional help without forcing information out of them.

Signals

In this context, a "signal" refers to:

> "a piece of information or an early indicator that suggests the possibility of a significant shift or emerging trend in a particular domain. It can be a pattern, event, observation, technology, behaviour, or any other observable phenomenon that carries potential meaning for the future" (EAYW, 2023, n.p.).

For the purpose of this research project, the young researchers were also trained as signal spotters and for a period of two weeks they noticed things around them and reported back. During our initial training and discussion, the young researchers from London set six topics they wanted to focus on in their signal spotting:

- does the online world make them feel part of a community
- how often to they actually see concerning content online and what is their reaction
- becoming more aware of the online and offline blurred boundary and how often do they reach out to 'real-life' people online
- how to they message people in different ways
- how the content they see online might impact their offline life
- reflecting on what adults tend to do online in relation to them and how would they like to change it.

I turned these into six questions and split them as follows:

- **week 1:**
    - Did anything you saw online recently make you feel connected to your community? What was it - content like reels or posts, talking to/messaging friends, talking to a trusted adult, etc.?
    - Did you see anything concerning online? If you did, did you share your concerns with anyone? This can include friends, trusted adults, or leaving a comment on that content.
    - Do you feel that you have people in your life you could easily reach out to online for support? Tell me about them. This can include messaging someone to meet up in person!
- **week 2:**

- Have you noticed any unwritten rules about how or when you message different people online? For example, would you send a voice note to a friend at 2 AM, but only email a teacher or text a youth worker during the day? What makes an online space feel professional versus casual to you?
- Has an algorithm or a new app feature ever changed how you interact with people in real life? This could be an app showing you local events, a TikTok trend you and your friends tried out in person, or a feature like location sharing or read receipts that changed how you communicate.
- If you could completely redesign how adults (like teachers, mentors, or even influencers) use social media to reach out to young people, what would you change? Think about what feels cringey or invasive versus what feels helpful and genuine. Where is the boundary between an adult being supportive online and overstepping?

The questions served as guidance and a reminder of what we had discussed, inviting the signal spotters/young researchers to reflect on them and share their observations at the end of the week. Most of their answers would start from the question, but they felt comfortable to go 'on a tangent'.

Signal 1: Conversation partner awareness

The signals brought by the young researchers, indicate that young people tend to be very aware of who receives their communication. Rather than using a blanket approach for all online interactions, the participants mentioned actively adjusting their style depending on the perceived status of a trusted adult, balancing a more informal peer to peer connection with a more professional discourse. One of the points brought up in a signal was around reputation:

> *"I sense that I'm more scholarly when talking to a professional because it feels more of a reputation thing and having a firm attitude... while casual conversations are simpler - voice messages and sending videos/photos to my friends."* (Young Researcher, London, Signals)

They also try to mimic the writing style of the person they talk to in order to make them feel comfortable and make their communication easier to navigate:

> *"Adults use upper case so that's what I generally use when communicating with adults... In contrast, with my friends we don't use diacritics[4], we don't use punctuation marks... when an adult writes to me, I try to modify my written language so that I am on the same level as them."* (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Signals, translated)

Also, as mentioned above while mapping the different trusted adults, the signals from the young researchers also point to a level of awareness for working/non-working hours. They also mentioned that they would avoid late-night messaging unless they are facing a severe crisis. They themselves already have boundaries in place when talking to their friends, including turning on their Instagram 'sleep/quiet mode' (name differs depending on version of Instagram) during the night where they stop receiving notifications and people can see a message saying that the person is in sleep mode and may not respond until the morning.

Signal 2: Authenticity & Digital Tone

The signals from the young researchers suggest that they consistently seek authenticity and avoid any corporate or overly polished digital communication. They expressed a preference for genuine, relatable content from either adults or institutions. Most of them pointed out that they do not mind adults entering their digital spaces, but they do need for their intentions to be transparent, ethical and not harmful.

> *"To gain further interactions with young people in social media, I think adults should focus on being more authentic and relatable. Instead of just posting promotional or professional content, they could share relatable experiences or behind-the-scenes moments that feel personal..."* (Young Researcher, London, Signals)

Some of the signal spotters also became more aware of their and their trusted adults' digital tone. This is also linked to the conversation partner awareness signal above, but one of the signal spotters pointed out that *"the full stop, 3 dots, and 'ok' TERRIFY young people, and I*

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[4] Romanian has a few special characters: ă, î, ș, ț, â. They are important for writing correctly and using a, i, s, t instead can change the meaning of the word. However, most people, when writing informally, will ignore them and meaning is usually understood in context.

recommend sending a smiley face or a heart to let us know they are not mad or anything like that." (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Signals, translated).

Signal 3: Blended Digital-Physical Communities

Signal spotters repeatedly highlighted that for them digital and physical spaces are interconnected and do not see them as separate realms. This was something that the London-based researchers have not even considered prior to this exercise, so they were particularly curious to observe how often they do or do not transition between the two. Overall, they signalled that social media feeds and group messaging apps function as direct catalysts for physical plans and meet ups.

One of the London-based signal spotters also pointed out the cultural significance of these blended communities:

> *"I have seen several events happening throughout my community these past weeks, including posts for Eid festivals... community cycling, skating sessions... These posts make me feel more connected because they highlight how people of all ages are coming together..."* (Young Researcher, London, Signals)

The online world can also serve as a way for young people to learn about events happening in their communities:

> *"I recently saw several posts and reels on social media about events organised in my community... I discussed with my friends going to the ART4HOPE festival and with my mother (the trusted adult) to let me go."* (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Signals, translated)

For both of these young people (as well as the other young researchers, when I presented the signals to them) sharing these local experiences can create a sense of connection even between strangers as long as there are commonalities such as locations (neighbourhoods or towns) or culture.

Signal 4: Digital Self-Regulation & Harm Management

This signal became more prominent in the light of the under-16 social media ban. The London-based signal spotters specifically became more aware of how they treat their own safety online.

Generally, their signals as well as those of the young people from Baia Mare, pointed towards actively exercising their agency and self-regulating when encountering distressing content. Most of the young researchers prefer not to engage in public online conflict, but rather prefer to set their own boundaries by blocking creators, reporting content, or simply moving on without engaging. During the mindful scroll exercise in their training session, but also through the signals, most of the young researchers noted that their feeds are quite well curated for their preferences.

> *"I rarely see any concerning content online however when I do come across something that's a bit of a red flag I'll report the video/post. Otherwise, I won't share it further with any friends and I will never interact with the post."* (Young Researcher, London, Signals)

However, the signals point to a certain level or desensitisation. Because of that, young people may find distressing content easier to ignore and prefer not to share it with anyone else in order to protect themselves and the other person.

> *"No I don't really share it with anybody to be honest because people are so desensitised this day with concerning stuff such as extremist posts... most people would just laugh it off treating it as a joke. Also if they don't see this content already, I'd rather them not get it at all in their feeds."* (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Signals, translated)

There is also a discussion about whether young people might treat distressing content as a joke. When I asked the signal spotter for more details on this, they explained that personally, they can just ignore whatever they do not want to see. They feel that if they were to share their concerns with someone else, either they would laugh it off as a joke or they fear it would impact the other person's algorithm and cause more distress.

Scenarios

Once the young researchers have completed their horizon scan and pointed out some of the signals they noticed through the two week period, we met again to turn them into future scenarios. The horizon scan and scenarios that young people created have been collected as a series of points which they collectively shared and developed in two dedicated online sessions (one for the London-based young researchers and one for those Baia Mare-based).

Our invitation is that, if you are a youth worker, please take these points to the young people that you work with and ask them to put them together into a 'day in the life...' story. The text of the scenarios that you can see below 'recycles' as much as possible of the words used by

the young researchers in our call but has been edited for coherence and consistency. Text in Romanian had to be translated, but we made an effort to preserve as much of the original meaning as possible.

The Ideal Future	**Youth-led communication & authentic promotion** • youth-driven projects thrive because opportunities are promoted using young people's own voices and influence, replacing unsuccessful adult-led promotion. **Adults entering young people's digital world** • adults make a genuine effort to understand how young people use social media platforms, learning their humour, satire, and visual language (e.g., communicating via photos/reels rather than text), 'just like we made an effort with them on Facebook'. **Mutual boundaries & self-regulation** • **young people develop emotional discipline and self-regulation from an early age, understanding that choices have consequences. Adults model standards, stay updated on current digital trends, and actively take responsibility to learn.** **Algorithms promoting value, not "brain rot"** • **algorithms invest in highlighting meaningful, high-effort, and interesting content on the For You page based on what users actually value. Paid influencers are held accountable through fact-checking, eliminating low-effort clickbait and AI-generated "brain rot."** **Social media as a safe, educational tool** • **social media is used positively as a tool. Basic digital literacy is universal, allowing young people to navigate online environments, access global perspectives, and safely interact with trusted adults.** **Smooth societal roles** • **"Everyone has their role in society and everything runs smoothly," where creators are credited fairly and content producers focus on quality over empty views.**
The Dystopian Future	**Orwellian surveillance & underground networks** • **mandatory ID scanning to enforce bans creates an Orwellian state where governments track posts, censor opinions, and flag communities (e.g., pro-Palestine support). High surveillance spills into physical spaces, driving people into uncomfortable, "deep web"-style underground networks just to socialise without monitoring.** **"Dead Internet Theory" & AI cyber wars** • **comment sections are overrun by AI bots and deepfakes. Fake AI videos made by 14-year-olds trigger cyber wars between age groups, stripping the internet of authentic human essence.**

	Adult "brain rot" & out-of-touch hypocrisy • adults use phone confiscation as an increasingly harsh punishment while their own brains sink into online "brain rot." Meanwhile, parents and grandparents cringe-post on youth trends without actually understanding young people. Loss of self-expression & "power play" • rigid hierarchies persist in schools and universities and make their way into online worlds. Young people stay silent out of fear of saying something wrong, engaging in an "illusion of power play" just to please adults. Isolation & loss of support systems • blanket social media bans cut off access to vital mental health resources (e.g., MIND) and trusted youth workers. Older people make top-down decisions without listening to youth perspectives or remaining open-minded.
The Most Likely Future	Social media ban pushing youth to unsafe spaces • blanket bans on under-16s go ahead, but young people easily bypass restrictions. Instead of protecting them, restrictions push youth onto dodgy, unregulated platforms. Corporate dominance & disinformation wars • the future remains grim as AI and platforms are controlled by corporations putting profit ahead of user wellbeing. Disinformation creates extreme polarisation, and 'you hear one thing from the left, another from the right, with nothing in the middle', while AI is weaponised for military purposes. Deepening digital inequality • cancel culture worsens, community divides widen, and no incentives are created to address digital poverty. Deepfakes frame people and groups as offensive, breeding distrust and harm. Surveillance & youth disillusionment • omnipresent camera surveillance and algorithmic control become normalised. Young people grow up with the illusion of having no rights ('that's just a child, ignore them'), leading to apathy, seeing 'ignorance as power', or simply 'turning the other cheek'. Grassroots resistance & user counter-culture • despite corporate control, the online majority attempts to push back, working to depopularise AI overuse, improve cybersecurity, and demand safer digital boundaries.

Creating the scenarios with the young researchers took the form of a focus group where topic was placed in front of them and they contributed their thoughts to it. As facilitators of this process, we tried to intervene as little as possible, asking more clarifying questions rather than leading the young researchers in any direction. Some of the points they raised are less digital and more concerned with the state of the world in the future, but generally they have linked everything back to our discussions about trusted adults and online interactions with them. Despite having two separate groups for the London-based and Baia Mare-based researchers, a lot of their points overlapped.

The Ideal Future (the dream)

Overall, the young researchers would like a future in which digital platforms are governed by transparent algorithms that users have control over. They would like to see a lot of authentic co-creation and mutual respect between generations.

One of the main points that the young researchers brought up was about the quality of content aimed at them. Firstly, in an ideal world according to our group of young researchers, young people would be involved in the creation of any promotional content that is aimed at them. They highlighted this as essential especially in a youth work context where, the young researcher who shared this, mentioned appreciating the effort the youth workers they know put into creating content, but that sometimes it would be easier to just allow the young people to take over.

> *"When I see adult youth workers try to promote something for young people, they are often unsuccessful... things that do get promoted really well are the things that are promoted via the voices of young people and they actually influence decisions."* (Young Researcher, London, Scenario meeting, transcript)

The young researchers also suggested that they would appreciate adults putting in more effort to understand their use of social media platforms. Both groups brought up this point, but one of the researchers from Baia Mare had summed it up as:

> *"If adults learned a little more how young people use Instagram and other platforms, there would be more support... In an ideal world they would put more effort to understand why and how and what we post and enter our world more. To make an effort just like we made*

with them on Facebook." (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Scenario meeting, transcript, translated)

This quote implies that young people have already invested effort in understanding the adult world on the platforms they use (such as Facebook). In this ideal scenario, the young researchers pointed out the importance of that effort being reciprocated. At the moment, those who regularly engage in youth work are the only ones who mentioned ever feeling that some adults (youth workers) are taking the time to talk to them about their digital habits and preferences. This is something they would like to extend to parents, teachers, and other trusted adults. Moreover, as the young researchers observed their own digital discipline and self-regulation, they also think that adults would stay updated on digital trends and actively take responsibility to learn.

In this ideal world, the young researchers also explained that they would like platforms to take more algorithmic accountability over the content they promote. They are aware that currently their feeds are full or 'brainrot' (low quality, repetitive, often AI-generated short form content designed for engagement). The young researchers think that '*the algorithm should invest more to put important, interesting things, without brainrot...*" (Young Researcher, London, Scenario meeting, transcript) in their feeds.

Linking back to the present moment, this scenario recommends:

- **Youth engagement that works better when adults include young people and give them full agency to co-create digital communication rather than imposing top-down campaigns;**
- **Practitioners (and other trusted adults) would be appreciated to take more time to empathise with young people's preferred digital communication styles and the content they like to engage with digitally;**
- **Platforms should actively promote high quality, informative content, rather than low-effort posts generated using artificial intelligence, filmed at a low quality, or are paid for.**

2. The Dystopian Future (the nightmare)

The main element of the dystopian future in the eyes of the young researchers, was a fear of surveillance and algorithmic manipulation. They see the opposite of their ideal agency in a rigid hierarchy that silences youth voices.

"It would become very Orwellian if the government would use scanning IDs to track what we post and engage with, increasing censorship, flagging people and communities who

would want to support Palestine for example." (Young Researcher, London, Scenario meeting, transcript)

"...where there is high surveillance and uncomfortable surroundings... it would lead to a deep web kind of system where people will use this as an opportunity to try to socialise with each other without being surveilled by government or other authorities. It would be giving Orwell." (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Scenario meeting, transcript, translated)

Both groups made references to George Orwell's novel *1984* when talking about this scenario.

The young researchers from Romania also referenced some of the common experiences they have had in school where teachers impose a level of authority, which young people often interpret as power play, when *"questions are asked in front of the class, everyone is silent, many people don't have the courage to speak... the illusion of power play... X pleasing Y who asked the question..."*. In the dystopian scenario this type of *"hierarchy like this everywhere, including online, so everyone just posts what they think other people want to see, nothing authentic"* **(Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Scenario meeting, transcript, translated)**. The young researchers often see unsurveyed digital spaces as spaces where they can be authentic and fear a future in which institutions silence young people, forcing them into a degree of performative compliance.

Linking back to the present moment, this scenario warns against:

- **Utilising punitive measures (technology confiscation, age-specific bans) which can also impact a young person's access to learning and resources;**
- **The risk of bans driving young people into unregulated, unsafe digital spaces;**
- **Adults utilising power and authority in ways that break trust and alienate young people.**

3. The Most Likely Future

Notably, this scenario shares overwhelming overlap with the dystopian scenario created by the young people. Especially as our discussion was somewhat influenced by the recently announced (at that point) under-16s social media ban for the UK and other similar discussions being triggered across Europe, the young researchers were highly critical of social media platforms and digital inequity. However, looking within their own communities, all young researchers pointed out some hope in grassroots user resistance.

The young researchers already highlighter that *"if you restrict people from using things, people will try to find other routes, go to platforms that are less safe..."* (Young Researcher, London,

Scenario meeting, transcript). This person also mentioned that having talked to younger family members, they are already thinking about ways to override the ban.

Similarly, looking at the perceived spread of disinformation within their communities, both groups of young researchers considered that *"the future is grim with AI and social media controlled by corporations that put revenue first instead of user wellbeing... from the left you'll hear something, from the right something else, nothing in the middle. There will be a disinformation war..."* (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Scenario meeting, transcript, translated). This quote also points out the increased awareness the young researcher has of algorithmic polarisation, which can be linked to a series of events surrounding the Romanian presidential elections across 2024 and 2025: a far-right candidate had created his own echo chamber, mostly on TikTok, attracting many voters to his side by spreading false information and making impossible promises.

When we asked why they view their most likely future in this way, both groups had similar answers as they saw the signals they spotted ad looked reflectively at the present moment. One of them mentioned that their generation heard a lot of "*that's a child, don't mind them*" and that after "*you said your point of view 100 times and nobody paid attention, you don't really want to speak up anymore...*" (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Scenario meeting, transcript, translated). The young researchers highlighted that being dismissed by the adults in their lives has led to them feeling somewhat apathetic and powerless, especially when it comes to major systemic changes.

However, towards the end of the session, both groups of young researchers included that within their communities, they also feel a sense of hope coming from the grassroots level and upwards.

> *"It will depend on the vast majority – many online want to make a change for the better, like to depopularise the use of AI. Maybe cybersecurity and stuff will advance too, and it will depend on the majority of users... power is in our hands."* (Young Researcher, Baia Mare, Scenario meeting, transcript, translated).

Linking back to the present moment, this scenario highlights:

- **Young people consistently fear that platforms will not take accountability for the content they promote, but rather implement more surveillance tools;**
- **Spreading disinformation and ignorance amongst young people and the general population;**

- **Hope in safe digital spaces where grassroots resistance can be nurtured to combat the effects of the above; practitioners can advocate for youth agency.**

During our dissemination event, practitioners also discussed the most likely scenario from the perspective of changes to practice or sharing best practice that already exists. In the Padlet they worked on, in small breakout groups, practitioners noted:

- *"Offer more credible sources of information to counter the controlled information."* (Practitioner breakout room 1, Dissemination Padlet)
- *"Our experiences of discussing AI with young people were consistent - they are well-informed about AI but deeply skeptical about the future when AI is getting more embedded in everyday technologies. They want choice and control over when and how they engage with them"* (Practitioner breakout room 2, Dissemination Padlet)
- *"Tech companies need to build trust - if they can't trust big tech with social media they arent going to trust big tech with ai ... from a wellbeing perspective as well... in my research with the consciously digital institute what we are seeing in regards to cognitive offloading gives good reason for them to want to pause from using economy of attachment that is being persued by big tech now on top economy of attention"* (Practitioner breakout room 2, Dissemination Padlet)
- *"We need to bring ethical tech designers together with young people and trusted adults to redesign and rethink the future - but the money is in exploitation and manipulation of users, not their protection."* (Practitioner breakout room 1, Dissemination Padlet)
- *"As a researcher, I think we need to create the spaces for young people to talk and share about their hopes for the future and then provide a platform for their voices"*(Practitioner breakout room 2, Dissemination Padlet)
- *"Grassroots resistance/counter-culture needs to be coupled alongside these tech companies having accountability. Would be good if the gap between the two of these functions could be bridged through conversation, research."* (Practitioner breakout room 1, Dissemination Padlet)

In ethnographic futures research, the idea of building scenarios is not an abstract exercise, but rather a way to understand and diagnose the present. The strong overlap between the dystopian and most likely scenarios reveals how the young researchers currently feel a level of

digital anxiety and it reflects current events such as the proposed social media ban, the expansion of AI tools, and disinformation being spread online.

Further research

Working across two countries with 10 young researchers, provided us with an important snapshot of their current experiences. The young people from Romania allowed us to balance our findings and ensure we are not overly London-centric, an issue which is occasionally pointed out in British research. The diversity of our group, albeit less vast compared to our initial plan, allowed us to highlight that some of the digital relational needs are shared across borders despite plenty of structural and cultural differences.

Part of this research can be taken further by any practitioners reading this report. This is a snapshot of the life of 10 young people across May and June 2026. Working within other organisations, practitioners can re-map digital environments in their daily practice. How can this be done?

- **Regular horizon scanning** → asking young people questions about their current digital lives. This can happen regularly in informal check-ins or ad-hoc during conversations. Practitioners may ask young people what platforms they are using, what content is popular, what upsets them about their digital environments etc.
- **Co-creating and encouraging agency** → one of the most prominent points brought up by all young researchers was the importance of authentic youth-led content as well as a willingness to be part of its creation. In terms of a youth club's or a project's online presence, this might mean allowing young people to create content or simply reviewing the content together.
- **Building new scenarios or discussing the ones within this report** → understanding that maps, signals, and scenarios are living documents that can be re-mapped as new technologies, algorithms, and policies emerge.

Apart from this more practice-grounded research, there were some limitations in our current study that we would like to address. Working with 10 young researchers from London and Baia Mare and engaging them as signal spotters already gave us a level of depth that expands across geographical or cultural borders. However, future iterations might benefit from expanding

the sample size to validate signals further. It would be interesting, for example, to explore if the awareness of conversational partners and the differences in tone such as 'scholarly' and 'chaotic' modes hold true across communities with varying levels of digital access or young people from more vulnerable communities.

As previously stated, our research took place during a time marked by discourses around the risks of social media and bans for young people. Future research may adopt a longitudinal design, tracking young people's digital practices over a longer period of time (6, 12 or even 24 months) so that speculative fears anchored in the present may have time to dissipate and lead to more objective scenarios.

Our approach to signal spotting was also slightly different to the more open method as we introduced the focus topics together with the participants. We also had an asynchronous period of signal spotting, and, due to timing, we were unable to bring all researchers together. Future studies should explore if a synchronous method might provide a larger variety of shared experiences. In our study, data collection relied on WhatsApp messages, emails, Padlet boards, and workshops. Future studies should also explore if different mediums including structured sessions, notes, or informal discussions could impact the depth and spontaneity of signals collected from the young researchers, strengthening the youth-led nature of digital youth work research.

With the digital world being everchanging, there is a need to continue horizon scanning and signal spotting in order to generate new scenarios or become aware of which ones we are heading towards. There is also one key point that we think deserves to be unpicked further and we hope to find the resources to do it: **adults need to take time to understand how young people exist in and navigate the online world**. Both groups of researchers made a strong point about their generation taking time to understand the humour and preferences in communication of older generations but feel that it is not often reciprocated. They acknowledge that youth workers often do it and appreciate us for it. This is, after all, the nature of our profession and we adapt our practice as we learn with and from the young people we work with. However, we do not often share our reflections with other 'trusted adults'. It might be time to do it.

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Note: Throughout this report, Artificial Intelligence tools were used. Mainly Gemini was used for the translation of quotes and information from the Romanian young researchers in order to obtain the most accurate version, closest to the original text.