

**Virtual Harm and Digital Opportunity:
Rethinking Child Protection and Welfare for Children
with Disabilities using the Internet**

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Social Policy

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By

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Declaration

I, Rose Doolan Maher, declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university. This work is entirely my own work except for two integrated peer reviewed publications that have been coauthored with my supervisors Dr. Susan Flynn and Dr. Julie Byrne which are located in chapters four and five.

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Rose Doolan Maher

24/10/2025
Date

Dedication

For my family

Martin

Jerry, Bridget, Michael, Lily, Alice, Marty

and Neddy

My late Mam, Dad, Uncle Stevie and Uncle Liam

Summary

This PhD research is funded by the Provost Award, Trinity College Dublin. Its purpose is to illuminate how internet use by children with disabilities intersects with child protection and welfare. The fusion of these three concepts opens a research gap addressed by the research question: *How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?*

Three methods were used to answer this research question. First a documentary desk based analysis was conducted then qualitative data was collected followed by a survey method. To begin, a scoping review was undertaken, which took a narrow and deep view to identify existing literature on the intersection of ‘disability’, ‘child protection and welfare’, and ‘internet use’. This highlighted a significant gap in theoretical or empirical insights at the intersection of these concepts. The desk-based documentary analysis, also involved thematic analysis of the available literature and provided a broader perspective on the literary landscape of internet use and disability, widening the lens of child protection and welfare within this domain. To further explore how internet use by children with disabilities intersects with child protection and welfare, two primary research methods with children and parents were also used. Thirty-four children with disabilities participated in the second method, bespoke-designed interviews. Finally, parents' perspectives were sought through a survey method, as qualitative findings revealed their integral role in the digital lives of their children with disabilities.

This study contributes to scholarship in three ways. Firstly, from an empirical scholarship perspective, it provides novel findings in a space that has been virtually unresearched. It offers new insights into the digital experiences of children with disabilities through direct accounts from the children themselves. It highlights how the intersection of disability and internet use shapes each child’s agency in unique ways, underscoring the value of a person-centred lens that captures individual circumstances. In addition, a parent's survey portrays a different angle from the perspective of their interconnected relationship with their children with disabilities. Parents' influence on their children’s internet use offers further insights into their children’s agency from a child protection and welfare perspective.

Secondly, this research study contributes to methodological scholarship by explaining approaches to researching the digital lives of children with disabilities. A bespoke method of data collection was used that was driven by a person-centred approach. It encompassed in-depth, semi-structured, dyadic, and problem-centred interviews and vignettes to capture the expressed views of children with disabilities about their internet use. This bespoke method ensured that children with complex communication needs could be included in the study. Additionally, a critical realist approach to data analysis and data collection is presented. Critical realism is used as a lens to uncover deeper layers of understanding at the intersection of internet use, disability and child protection and welfare, recognising that many influential forces are hidden but significantly shape the digital experiences of children with disabilities.

Thirdly, this study contributes to theoretical scholarship by broadening the understanding of child protection and welfare for children with disabilities in their digital environments. In essence, the intersection of these concepts, internet use, child protection and welfare and disability, reveals a research topic which is more than the sum of its parts. Margaret Archer's work on 'structure', 'culture' and 'agency' (SCA) is adopted as an integrated framework from a critical realist lens in this study. This framework exposes how broader structural and cultural factors influence the agency of children with disabilities in the digital landscape. The paradoxical nature of internet use for children with disabilities exposes them to virtual harm and digital opportunities. Conclusions and recommendations are made that promote the agency and rights of children with disabilities in realising their full digital potential. A broader view of child protection and welfare that transcends individualised notions of online risk is recommended. This involves rethinking child protection and welfare for children with disabilities in the digital domain, balancing the need to realise digital potential and opportunity with protection from risk, harm and digital restrictions.

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List of original publications

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Position in thesis: Chapter five: Methodology

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Abbreviations / Glossary of terms

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

UNCRC: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNCRPD: United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities

CR: Critical Realism

PCI: Problem Centred Interviewing

ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder

ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

ID: Intellectual Disability

IDD: Intellectual Developmental Disabilities

CAMHS: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

FOMO: Fear of Missing Out

PDA: Pathological Demand Avoidance

SEND: Special Educational Needs and Disability

Chapter 1 Context

Summary of contents

1.1 Introduction

1.2 About the author: Why this research topic?

1.3 Rationale for the study

1.4 Structure of thesis

1.5 Overview of approach: PhD with integrated publications

1.6 Aims, objectives, and central research questions

1.7 Conclusion

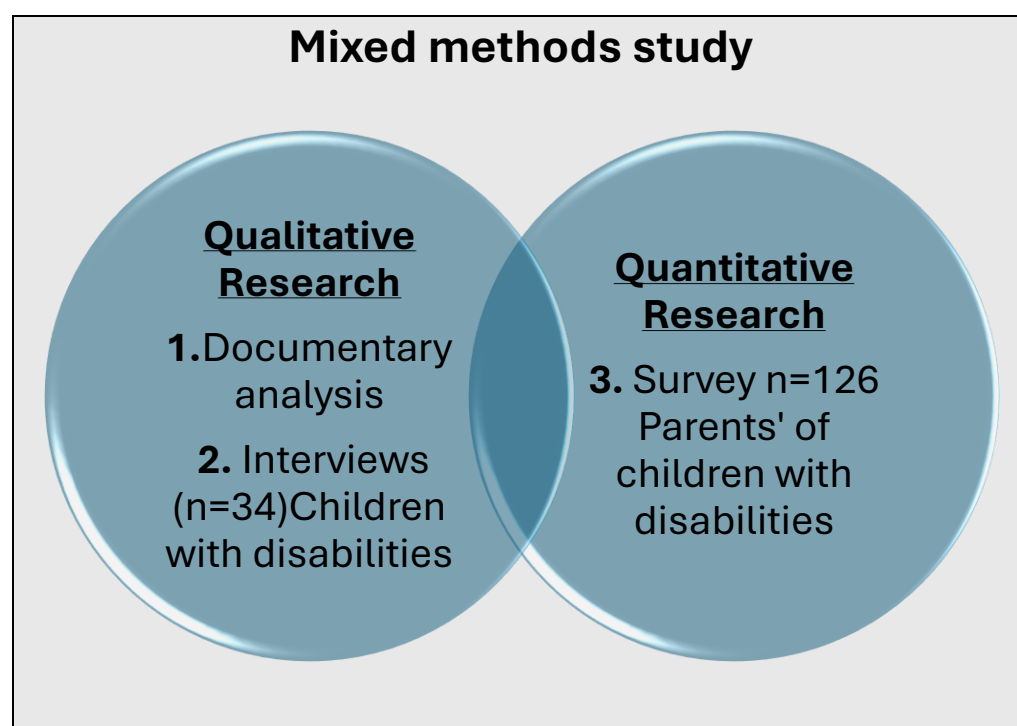
1.1 Introduction

This chapter, titled *Context*, sets the foundation for this thesis by positioning the research within a personal and scholarly landscape. It introduces the author's motivations for pursuing this topic, outlines the rationale underpinning the study, and provides an overview of the approach taken, including the structure of this PhD thesis with integrated publications. In doing so, the chapter identifies the central aims, objectives, and guiding research questions while setting out the roadmap for how the thesis is organised. I begin with an introduction to this study, which is funded by the Trinity Provost Award. It sheds light on the complex intersection between child protection and welfare, disability, and internet use. When these distinct concepts are combined, they offer insights into the digital lives of children with disabilities, while also presenting the duality of risk and opportunity. This thesis presents an analysis of the expressed views of children with disabilities, as well as parents' perspectives, to answer the following research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?

The digital landscape is inhabited by 5.5 billion internet users (Statista, 2024). Ubiquitous and fast-evolving, it offers immense opportunities for socialisation (Li, 2022; Liang, 2024), education (Feng and Tan, 2024; Culduz, 2024; Daoud et al., 2020), and business (Khalil, 2023; Fraccastoro, Gabrielsson and Pullins, 2021) at local, national, international, and global levels. Online risks for children are well documented (Haag and Bui, 2025; Wang et al., 2025;

Estellés and Doyle, 2025). While debate is ongoing as to how to achieve the right balance between protection and opportunity (OECD, 2023; Eurochild, 2025; Park et al., 2025; Livingstone and Sylwander, 2025; Hammond, D'Arcy and Polizzi, 2024; Hammond 2022; Hammond et al., 2022; Hammond, Polizzi and Bartholomew, 2023), this PhD research study examines the perspectives of children with disabilities and their parents about their internet use. As mentioned earlier, three methods were employed to answer this research question; the primary research methods include qualitative interviews (n=34) with children with disabilities and a survey of parents (n=126), which represents a mixed methods approach. The secondary research methods include a scoping review and a thematic analysis of the literature, which is a desk-based documentary analysis method. Figure 1.1.1 below illustrates the methodological approaches within this research study.

Figure 1.1.1: Overview of research methods



Reflexivity is embedded throughout this thesis adopting Olmos-Vega et al.'s view that 'reflexivity should be multi-dimensional and presented throughout the whole manuscript when writing up research' (2023, p. 241). Given that this study includes children with disabilities, careful attention has been paid to issues of power, agency, and vulnerability within the researcher participant relationship.

Such considerations require a continuous reflexive stance to ensure the expressed views of children with disabilities are represented ethically and thoughtfully. This research also adopts a critical realist approach, which recognises the connection between the researchers' interpretations and the underlying structures that shape children with disabilities' digital realities. Within this reflexivity is understood as an ongoing process of acknowledging the researcher's positionality, assumptions and influence throughout the entire research process. The next section begins this reflexive process by providing information about the author and why this PhD research topic was chosen.

1.2 About the author: Why this research topic?

My interest in this research topic and the driving force behind its completion are threefold. Firstly, I am a parent of teenage children, all of whom navigate their internet worlds differently. I had no concept of the internet as a child growing up on a farm in rural Ireland. I have vivid memories of my mother calling the operator using the '0' dial on a black heavy-handed telephone. Once 'put through' to the operator in the local post office, she duly told them the number or the name of the person she wished to speak with. It was not unusual for her to have a quick chat with the operator, exchanging niceties or discussing recent local events. It was also widely known and accepted that the operator listened to most conversations. Having a landline was not commonplace during the mid-1970s, and the idea of mobile technology fell far beyond my imagination. Two decades on, in the early 1990s, I got my first mobile phone; however, it made little impression on me. This is in complete contrast to the joy and pleasure that the device brought to my children when they received their own. I am mindful that my offline childhood inherently shapes my own personal digital lens as I explore the perspectives of children with disabilities and their parents about the internet.

Furthermore, in observing my teenagers' internet journeys, I realised that each of my autistic twins manages their digital lives in their own unique way, very different from each other and very differently from their siblings. This research project came at the perfect time, as this personal interest served as a driving force throughout. Secondly, in my professional capacity as a social care practitioner since 1994, I have worked as an external supervisor, trainer,

educator, manager, residential care worker, house parent and volunteer. The internet has impacted my work in a multitude of ways, from sending emails from internet cafés in Romania and India in the late 1990s to engaging with and teaching students online during the COVID-19 pandemic, to discussions with residential care managers about the internet use of children in their services.

Thirdly, the joy of learning and the desire for academic inquiry brought this funded research project to my door. This, aligned with exceptional supervision, results in the presentation of this thesis, which attempts to contribute to a poorly understood research topic. The following section offers a rationale for this research study.

1.3 Rationale for the study

The rationale for this PhD research study forms its basis within three theoretical and professional components: (1) disability, (2) child protection and welfare (3) internet use. Although each individual concept sees rich literary research contributions, when brought together, there is a noticeable gap. Little is known about children with disabilities' internet use and its implications from a child protection and welfare perspective.

Frameworks for safeguarding children within the digital domain at global, national and local levels rarely take into account the views and needs of children with disabilities in the digital domain. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities requires the involvement of people with disabilities, including children, in decisions that affect them (UNCRPD, 2018). Additionally, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 25 (UNCRC, 2021) is categorical that all children must be involved in policy making about their digital environment. Yet outside of education policy, children, including children with disabilities, are rarely treated as distinct stakeholders (UNICEF Innocenti, Global Office of Research and Foresight, 2023). Moreover, the UK Parliament investigation on government internet safety work found that this work has failed to consult with disabled people (UK Parliament, 2018).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Article 9, promotes “*access for persons with disabilities to new information and communications technologies and systems, including the Internet*” (UNCRPD, 2007). Digital access for children with disabilities is limited (UNICEF, 2021a), and

their lived experience about their internet use is also sparse despite ethical and moral obligations for their inclusion in research (UNCRPD, 2007). UNICEF's Office of Research categorically states that *'The ethical involvement of children with disabilities in evidence generation activities is a moral imperative that recognises both children's rights and their competencies. It is also vital for policy development and can lead to enhanced outcomes for children with disabilities and their families'* (Thomson, Cannon, Wickenden, 2020, p. 1).

A further rationale for this study lies in the ubiquitous nature of internet use and its fast-paced development, posing challenges for child protection and welfare professionals, educators and parents (Flynn, Doolan Maher and Byrne, 2025; 2024; Hammond, D'Arcy, and Polizzi, 2024). Further complexity prevails as added vulnerabilities exist for children with disabilities within the digital domain (eSafety Commissioner, 2020; Seale and Chadwick, 2017; Alper and Goggin, 2017; Normand and Sallafranque-St-Louis, 2016). The fragmented view of child protection and welfare for children with disabilities in the digital environment is evident. Practitioners, parents, and school policies must navigate various laws, regulations, and procedures depending on whether concerns involve safeguarding, criminal behaviour, platform safety, or data protection (Jang, Pan and Turner Lee, 2023; Livingstone, Stoilova and Nandagiri, 2019; Henderson and Phippen, 2025). Consequently, attempts to develop safeguarding policies that encompass the full breadth and depth of digital risk are complex, particularly when considering the additional vulnerabilities faced by children with disabilities (Henderson and Phippen, 2025; Alper, 2020).

The continued omission of the intersection between disability, internet use and child protection and welfare from research, policy and practice risks leaving children with disabilities marginalised in digital safeguarding discourse despite the fact that the digital domain is becoming increasingly central to economic and social life. According to the World Economic Forum, *"broadening digital access is expected to be the most transformative trend - both across technology-related trends and overall – with 60% of employers expecting it to transform their business by 2030"* (2025, para 2). Studies show that digital and AI-related skills are amongst the fastest-growing labour markets (World Economic Forum, 2025; DeRenzis and Aguh, 2024), and yet children with disabilities are frequently excluded from digital policy and skills development

frameworks despite the potential of technology to enhance their future employability, independence, and economic inclusion.

This research study includes the expressed views of children with disabilities about their internet use, offering insights into child protection and welfare and safeguarding in the digital domain. The interconnected role parents play in the lives of their children with disabilities and the influence this has on their internet use plays out in this research study. The agency for children with disabilities is highlighted, and the views of their parents about their internet use are sought to provide a complete research picture. Ultimately, a core rationale of researching the intersection of disability, child protection and welfare and internet use is to promote children with disabilities' right to realise their full digital potential in a person-centred manner. Within this, child protection and welfare balance digital potential and opportunity with protection from risk, harm and digital restrictions. This thesis consists of ten chapters, each of which plays a role in addressing this research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? The structure of this thesis is presented next.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

Chapter One: Context

This chapter, titled "Context," begins with an introduction to the research topic, which provides information about the author and the reason why this topic was chosen. This is followed by a rationale and an overview that delineates the structure of this PhD, including the integration of two publications. This chapter outlines the aims, objectives, and central research questions that underpin this study.

Chapter Two: Background

Chapter two presents the background to this study. The findings of a scoping review are presented first. These findings shape this research study conceptually and methodologically. Subsequently, the conceptual framework for 'disability', 'internet use', and 'child protection and welfare', as well as other important concepts used within the study, is set out. The final section of this chapter focuses on reflection and reflexivity and the importance of their application throughout the entire study.

Chapter Three: Philosophical Position

This chapter introduces critical realism as the core philosophical premise shaping the foundations of this research study. Critical realism is conceptually applied to the research topic, demonstrating its unique fit in understanding the intersection of disability, child protection and welfare, and internet use. Furthermore, the influence of critical realism throughout this thesis is mapped out in relation to the literature, methodological choices, findings and dissemination.

Chapter Four: Literature Review

Chapter four focuses on the documentary analysis, which incorporates three distinct components representing the literature landscape upon which this research study is situated. Each component informed the research study in different ways. The first component was the scoping review, and its findings are presented in Chapter 2, the background to this study. The second component of the documentary analysis addressed in this chapter is a critical literature review, which addresses the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? The third component of the documentary analysis addressed in this chapter is a focused literature review, which informed the secondary research question: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use?

The chapter begins by presenting 11 themes related to the critical literature review, where literature spanned across the three key concepts 'disability', 'child protection and welfare' and 'internet use', reflecting the broad scope of this research topic. Although the representation of children with disabilities is largely absent within the literature, it is important to recognise that they are children first. Therefore, literature on child protection and welfare, and internet use among children more broadly, is presented and related to the topic of disability where relevant. Next, this chapter presents the first of two integrated publications within this thesis. Out of the 11 themes identified in the literature review, the most significant theme related to 'online risks', it is this theme that is addressed in the integrated publication. The theme of data protection, which was the second theme within this critical literature review, is also represented in this integrated publication. This publication in the Journal of Child Care in

Practice is titled “*Shifting mindsets: a critical commentary on child protection and welfare, disability, and online risk through critical literature review*”. The literature review was conducted in January 2022; hence, up-to-date literature pertaining to these two themes follows after the integrated publication in this chapter. Current literature for the other 9 themes is integrated into the discussion on each theme.

Additionally, the literature concerning parents of children with disabilities and their children’s internet use is reviewed. A notable gap exists in knowledge regarding the influence of parents on the digital lives of their children with disabilities. Moreover, parents' perspectives about their children with disabilities' internet use are not well-documented. Guided by the critical realist ontological and layered view of reality, a focused literature review was conducted to explore the impact of parental involvement on the internet use of children with disabilities from a child protection and welfare perspective. This literature assisted in developing a survey to address a secondary research question: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children’s internet use?

Finally, using a critical realist lens, hidden causal mechanisms are highlighted related to the entire documentary analysis. Socio-cultural and socio-structural forces that shape the production of literature related to the intersections where disability, child protection and welfare and internet use meet are presented before this chapter is concluded.

Chapter Five: Methodology

This chapter attends to the methodological processes for the completion of this research study. The rationale for the mixed methods approach is presented, offering a visual representation of the sequential exploratory design employed in this research study. The implications of the study’s critical realist ontological premise are reiterated here as previously established in chapter 3. Furthermore, this chapter outlines the eligibility and sampling procedures, while providing an overview of ethical considerations. This chapter also addresses the recruitment process and comments on sample size in both the qualitative and quantitative components of the study. Data collection and data analysis are elucidated upon, including the use of composite narratives to offer person-centred accounts of children with disabilities' internet use. The trustworthiness of the

research study, alongside a critique of its methodology, is also provided. A commitment was made to return the ‘research story’ to children with disabilities using universal design, as many participants requested this during the interview process. The meaning of the ‘research story’ in this context is a summary of all 34 children with disabilities' views about their internet use, presented in booklet, TikTok, and YouTube formats to each participant. The link to access this research story via YouTube or TikTok is provided in this chapter.

Finally, the second publication is integrated into this chapter. This publication is published in the International Journal of Qualitative Methods and is titled “*Applying a critical realist conceptual and methodological framework to enhance qualitative research with young people with disabilities about their internet use*”. This publication delineates the application of the critical realist philosophical position to the data analysis and data collection phases of this research study.

Chapter Six: Qualitative findings

This chapter is divided into two parts reflecting both micro and macro level interpretations of the qualitative data. The first part presents the first core finding of this research project through person-centred accounts (composite narratives) from 34 children, detailing how their disability intersects with their internet use. Considered collectively, these perspectives reveal a key insight, which is that each child’s agency is distinctly shaped by their disability and expressed in different ways in their daily digital interactions. Although this does not seem unexpected, composite narratives constructed from the expressed views of children with disabilities offer rare insights, are provided in this chapter so as to heighten agency and give more depth to the views of children with disabilities about their internet use. From a critical realist perspective, providing whole accounts reveals the ontological depth of children’s lived realities, portraying their agency. By presenting these narratives, in this chapter, it is recognised that children’s perspectives are socially constructed and that causal mechanisms are at play in their digital realities. Simply put, children with disabilities actively shape and are shaped by their digital realities. Part 1 of this chapter offers a person-centred understanding that recognises the uniqueness of each research participant’ digital experience and situation.

The second part of this qualitative findings chapter comprises of six core themes that represent broader, macro level patterns of online behaviours and interactions. These themes extend beyond individual experiences to identify mechanisms and structures that inform conceptual frameworks for understanding child protection and welfare, disability, and internet use. In this way, the findings move from the empirical (micro) to the structural (macro), consistent with critical realist emphasis on explaining how underlying mechanisms generate observable experiences.

Chapter Seven: Quantitative findings

This chapter presents the findings of the survey that offers the perspectives of parents of children with disabilities about their children's internet use. The survey data does not carry the same weight as the composite narratives and the core themes presented in the last chapter; however, it does provide an important complementary lens. The parents' survey shows a different angle from the perspective of their interconnected relationship with children with disabilities and their influence on their children's internet use. While the qualitative findings explored the empirical layer of critical realism, the survey data connect with the actual and structural conditions that influence these experiences, particularly through parents' perceptions and constraints. This quantitative data is supplementary evidence about the intersection where disability, internet use, and child protection and welfare merge, it is not a standalone quantitative claim. Its purpose is to extend the explanation of how agency is shaped or enabled within structural and relational contexts; in essence, it completes the research picture, which aligns with a critical realist layered view of social reality.

Chapter Eight: Discussion

This chapter connects the qualitative and quantitative aspects of this research study, interpreting their significance in relation to the research topic. To begin, the research findings are discussed from the perspective of existing literature. Then, the discussion is linked to a critical realist philosophical lens. It sheds light on structural and cultural influences identified in the mixed methods findings that impact the agency of children with disabilities using the internet. Following on from this, the discussion moves to the extension of child protection and welfare for this cohort within the digital landscape. Here, Margaret Archer's (1995) work is presented as an integrated framework from a critical realist lens.

Overall, a key finding of this study, discussed in this chapter, is that the agency of children with disabilities related to their digital lives is restricted due to structural and cultural influences that are often hidden and lie outside of their control.

Chapter Nine: Implications and Recommendations

This chapter presents the practice and policy implications, as well as future research questions, of relevance to this topic. Recommendations are offered in this chapter to positively promote the agency of children with disabilities in the digital space. The aim is to ensure that the expressed views of children with disabilities are represented in digital discourse, so their rights within the digital domain are respected, heard, and acted upon for the realisation of their full digital potential.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

This concluding chapter presents a summary of the peer reviewed publications. Reflections on the research process are also outlined. The study's empirical, methodological and theoretical contributions are outlined before offering a final concluding comment.

1.5 Overview of approach: PhD with integrated publications

This PhD is presented with integrated publications. This integrated thesis incorporates two interlinked peer-reviewed journal articles. Both publications were written and submitted during the four-year timeframe of this research project. From a critical realist emancipatory (Bhaskar, 1986) perspective, dissemination is not an 'add-on' but an integral part of the research process. By integrating these publications within this thesis, the intention is to ensure that knowledge does not remain hidden but is available to broader audiences. To this end, chapters 6 and 8 are currently being prepared for submission to peer-reviewed journals.

As each manuscript is designed to be read independently and prepared for peer-reviewed publication, there is intentional repetition in the presentation of the study's background, methodology, and conceptual framework. While these elements are presented in detail in Chapters 2 (background) and 5 (methodology) of this thesis, they are summarised in each manuscript to ensure clarity and completeness for independent readers.

The first publication integrated into Chapter 4 is titled *Shifting mindsets; a critical commentary on child protection and welfare, disability, and online risk through critical literature review*. This publication addresses the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? by offering a critical commentary about ‘online risks’ and ‘data protection’, two of the 11 themes that emerged from the documentary analysis.

The second publication is integrated into Chapter 5 and contributes to the overall thesis by providing conceptual and methodological insights that were used to answer the research question. The title of this publication is ‘*Through a Critical Realist Lens: Investigating Data Collection and Analysis Techniques in a Qualitative Study About Internet-Related Child Protection Risks for Children with Disabilities*’. This publication offers a critical realist data analysis framework to enhance qualitative research. This framework was developed to analyse the data of children with disabilities about their internet use.

Dr. Susan Flynn and Dr. Julie Byrne are coauthors of the articles, as they emerged from the supervision process. I wrote both articles, identified the core focus of each, and served as the first author on both. Dr. Susan Flynn and Dr. Julie Byrne provided excellent advice and feedback at the latter stage of each manuscript’s development.

1.6 Aims, objectives, and central research questions

1.5.1 Research aims

This research aims to

- bridge a knowledge gap where child protection, internet use and disability intersect.

1.5.2 Research objectives

This study's objectives are to

- explore the perspectives of children with disabilities about their internet use and to examine parents’ views of this use so as to understand their intersection with child protection and welfare within the digital domain
- ensure ethical considerations are upheld throughout the research project

- use a critical realist lens to understand the intersection of child protection and welfare, disability and internet use.

1.5.3 Research question

Central research question:

- How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?

Secondary research question:

- What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use?

1.7 Conclusion

The contribution of this chapter is to position this research study within personal and scholarly contexts, outlining the motivations for undertaking the study, the rationale underpinning it, and the integrated publication approach adopted within this thesis. It has set out the overall aims, objectives, and central and secondary research questions while providing a road map for the structure of the thesis.

The next chapter, *Background to the Study*, builds on this foundation. It presents the findings from a scoping review, establishes the conceptual framework guiding this research, and discusses the processes of reflection and reflexivity that shape it. Together, these elements provide the background upon which this mixed methods study is situated.

Chapter 2 Background to the Study

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2.6 Reflection and Reflexivity

2.1 Introduction

The background of this study is laid out in this chapter, beginning with the findings of the scoping review (conducted in January 2022), which revealed a gap in knowledge regarding the intersection where child protection and welfare, and the internet use of children with disabilities, meet. The scoping review is a crucial underpinning element of the documentary analysis that informed the conceptual and methodological development of this research study. The function of this scoping review is not to serve as a full, up-to-date literature review; rather, it scoped out the literature landscape at the beginning of this research project, taking a deep and narrow view at the intersection of disability, child protection and welfare, and internet use. The themes that emerged are presented so as to showcase their influence on the design of the research study.

A more comprehensive and current critical literature review related to this topic is presented in the next chapter. Following this, the conceptual framework for the core concepts ‘disability’, ‘child protection and welfare’, and ‘internet use’ is delineated in this chapter. Other concepts, such as ‘person-centred’ and ‘agency’, which are influential within this study, are also defined. Current regulations and policy frameworks that shape the digital lives of children with disabilities and the perspectives of their parents provide crucial background information within this chapter. Finally, the reflexive and reflection processes for maintaining ethical practice throughout the research process are described. The following section presents the findings of a scoping review that offered insights into the literature landscape related to this topic at the beginning of this research study. These findings, presented within the timeframe in which the review was conducted (January 2022), were not only instrumental in shaping the methodological approach, but they also informed the conceptual framework for answering the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?

2.2 Scoping Review findings

The findings of the scoping review revealed key concepts, gaps, and types of evidence related to the topic of disability, internet use, and child protection and welfare, which are described in the subsequent sections. Each concept ‘disability’, ‘internet use’, and ‘child protection and welfare’ existed in the literature in isolation from one another. However, this scoping review revealed that studies do not focus on disability, internet use, and child protection and welfare as one topic. The findings are presented at the point in time when the scoping review was conducted in January 2022, at the beginning of this research study. A summary of the protocol conducted for this scoping review, which includes thematic analysis to reveal findings from 33 documents, can be viewed in appendix 1. A Table of the 33 included studies with total CASP scores is available in Appendix 2. Distinctive complexities exist at the intersection of disability, child protection and welfare, and the internet. The Table 2.2.1. below presents the seven themes that emerged from this scoping review, followed by an overview of the key findings.

Table 2.2.1: Scoping review findings

Themes
Dimensions of disability
Opportunities and strengths
Digital divide
Risks related to internet use
Complexity of child protection and welfare online
Support mechanisms
Research activity

2.2.1 Dimensions of Disability

A paucity existed in the literature regarding children with disabilities' views on their internet use and the interconnection between child protection and welfare related to their internet use. However, research about children with disabilities in this review included eleven articles encompassing a broader view of disability, inclusive of mental health, autism, physical disabilities, and intellectual disability. Three articles explicitly concentrate on autism, whilst eight articles focus primarily on mental health, and eleven articles focus entirely on intellectual disability. The complexity of defining disability is reflected in the approximation of 52 different terms used throughout the 33 papers to describe disability. These findings informed the conceptual framework set out in the next section of this chapter. The complex and contested space (Goodley, 2016) in which disability is situated provides a broad conceptual framework for understanding disability, which is expanded upon later in this chapter. Before moving forward to the conceptual framework, each of the themes of this scoping review is presented, the second of which is titled *Opportunities and Benefits of Internet Use* and is presented next.

2.2.2 Opportunities and Benefits of Internet Use

Internet use for children with disabilities is represented in the literature as offering positive opportunities, such as the rehabilitative capacity of the internet and its use as a helpful communication tool (Volkova, 2019; Good and Fang, 2015; UNICEF, 2017a). Further internet opportunities represented in the literature include social adaptation, inclusion, and forming friendships (Alfredsson Ågren, Kjellberg, Hemmingsson, 2020; Zebracki, 2019; Normand

and Sallafranque, 2016; El Asam and Katz, 2021a; UNICEF, 2017b; Alhaboby et al., 2017) including romantic relationships (Caton and Landman, 2022), educational benefits (El Asam and Katz, 2018; Wright, 2017; UNICEF, 2017b) as well as enjoyment and entertainment (UNICEF, 2017b; Normand and Sallafranque, 2016; Wright and Wachs, 2019; El-Asam et al., 2021a). These opportunities and benefits of the internet were deemed to be of particular importance within the studies for people with disabilities.

The importance of disability activism in supporting the disability community and challenging ableism and stigma through social media platforms is emphasised by Bitman (2021). However, Bitman is critical of young internet users who symbolically support causes but do not invest time or effort in initiating change; she uses the derogatory term ‘slactivism’ to describe this (2021, p. 3). Ultimately, the importance of the internet related to digital engagement and competence is highlighted when the World Economic Forum states that “65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately end up working in completely new job types that don’t yet exist” (2016, p. 3).

This theme highlights the importance of internet use in the lives of people with disabilities, including children. It serves as a reminder that the conceptual framework for child protection and welfare within the digital lives of children with disabilities extends to limiting or restricting their internet use, as well as protecting them from online risk and harm. Furthermore, the positive aspects of internet use include its role in disability advocacy and its potential for future employment opportunities. These findings informed the development of interview questions within the qualitative component of this research study. Moreover, the digital divide was a prominent finding that formed the third theme of this scoping review, which is presented next.

2.2.3 Digital divide

Lloyd Morrisett coined the term *"digital divide"* in a 1995 study that identified cost and knowledge as the primary obstacles to internet access (Stoicheva, 2000). Access to the internet cannot be underestimated for children with disabilities; however, *‘people living with disabilities in developed countries have found that they are half as likely to have a computer at home as someone without a disability, even less likely to have internet access’* (UNICEF, 2017b, p. 34). The digital divide is presented in literature related to disability, for example,

UNICEF states that *'for disadvantaged children, such as those living with disabilities, connectivity can mean the difference between social exclusion and equal opportunity'* (2017, p. 43). Molin, Sorbring, and Mårtensson (2015) agree that the internet helps with connectivity for children with disabilities who can feel isolated. UNICEF (2017b) posits that living in rural areas, affordability, and access to devices that meet the needs of children with disabilities, as well as parents' lack of understanding about internet use, have implications for the digital divide.

Furthermore, from a rights based perspective, digital inequality has clear implications for future employment and economic participation, particularly for children with disabilities. As education and training pathways, recruitment processes and entry requirements become increasingly digitalised (OECD, 2019; International Labour Organisation, 2021) early exclusion from digital engagement can translate into long term disadvantage in the labour market (UNICEF, 2017; OECD, 2021). Evidence exists that people with disabilities are less likely to access tools, develop digital skills or use the internet for employment related activities such as job searching pointing to well established disability employment gaps (OECD, 2022; International Labour Organisation, 2021).

For children with disabilities reducing digital inequality is an inclusion strategy, it is a preventative step against future barriers to employment (UNCRC, 2021; OECD, 2022). Promoting accessible digital environments and skills development for children with disabilities aligns with broader obligations to promote equality, social inclusion and their right to work (United Nations, 2006, International Labour Organisation, 2007). Progress in addressing digital inequality in relation to labour market participation is increasingly urgent in light of evidence that roles requiring digital and artificial intelligence related skills are among the fastest growing areas of contemporary labour markets (World Economic Forum, 2025; DeRenzis and Aguh, 2024).

Moreover, Good and Fang (2015) suggest that parents' overprotectiveness about their children with disabilities' internet use can also contribute to this divide. El Asam and Katz (2018) add children with disabilities' vulnerabilities to online risk, as well as poverty and lack of skills, as a further explanation for the digital divide. The importance of occupational therapists developing digital

competence as a skill for children with disabilities is promoted by Alfredsson Ågren, Kjellberg, and Hemmingsson (2020). The development of digital competence and the role parents play in the lives of their children with disabilities raises the question of how parents view their children with disabilities' internet use, as well as how children with disabilities view their parents' involvement in their digital world. Such questions have implications for shaping the methods applied within this research study. For example, the use of a survey to seek the views of parents of children with disabilities about their children's internet use offered rich insights into the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? The importance of seeking the views of children with disabilities becomes apparent, as the scoping findings reveal that their views are absent from the literature at the time of this review. Children's views about online risks may differ from those of their parents and from the way risk is represented in literature. This theme of risks related to internet use is presented next.

2.2.4 Risks related to internet use

At the time of this scoping review (2022), literature about online risks and types of abuse was far more prevalent than literature on the opportunities and benefits of the internet for individuals with disabilities. Online risk emerges as the most prominent and consistently emphasised theme in the literature concerning children with disabilities, for example El Asam and Katz refer to "*higher risk online experiences*" or HROE (2018, p 281), for people with disabilities, using "Content, Conduct, Contact, and Cyberscams (4Cs) to categorise online risks (2018, p. 281). Good and Fang (2015) and UNICEF (2017b) also employ these categories to describe online risks. Volkova et al. (2019) concur, stating that "*risk factors are even more prevalent in youth with IDD than in the general population*" (2016, p. 99).

Concerns are highlighted for children with disabilities specific to cyberbullying. This topic is strongly represented within the literature (Wright and Wachs, 2019; Calpbinici and Arslan, 2019; UNICEF, 2017b; Wright and Wachs, 2020; Didden et al., 2009; Saltz et al, 2020; Martínez-Cao et al., 2021; Wright, 2017; Volkova, 2019). Wright and Wach define cyberbullying as "*purposefully being repeatedly targeted by hostile, embarrassing, and/or intimidating*

behaviours via the internet and other digital technologies. Cyberbullying victimization might also involve an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and victim” (2019, p. 2).

Furthermore, Restrepo et al. (2020), Volkova et al. (2019) and Zebracki (2019) raise concerns about problematic internet use (PIU), whilst Zebracki also highlights the concept of ‘Fear of Missing Out’, explaining that it becomes problematic when adolescents become addicted to social media use (Zebracki, 2019). Online risks for children with disabilities extend to pro-anorexia websites and their impact on young people with disabilities (El Asam and Katz, 2018).

Moreover, the permanence of information online (El Asam et al., 2021b) and the potential for risky online behaviour to spill into offline worlds (Bannon et al., 2015) offer insights into the vast, varied, and prevailing nature of risks online. Typologies of cybercrime, outlined by Chadwick concerning young people with intellectual disabilities (ID), exemplify this further as they provide insights into exposure to ‘internet-enabled crime, internet-specific crime, crimes in the virtual world’ (2019, p. 2). Furthermore, radicalisation of young people is raised as a serious online risk by Caton and Landman (2021). Moreover, risks associated with sexual solicitation (Normand and Sallafranque, 2016; Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak, 2007) portray further complexity, highlighting the serious nature of child protection and welfare concerns that exist online for children with disabilities. These risks are ever more dangerous due to the “*bedroom culture, with online access for many children becoming more personal, more private, and less supervised*” (UNICEF, 2017b, p. 1).

The complexity at the centre of child protection and welfare for children using the internet is apparent; the impact of these online risks is important to highlight. For example, Alhaboby et al. explain the negative impact of cyber victimisation on young people with disabilities, “*ranges from harassment incidents to disability hate crimes and causes physical, mental and psychosocial consequences*” (2017, p. 1). The negative impact of harmful online content and behaviour includes depression (Wells and Mitchell, 2014; Wright 2017; Normand and Sallafranque-St-Louis, 2016), post-traumatic stress disorder (Saltz et al., 2020), suicidal behaviour and low self-esteem (Martínez-Cao et al, 2021) addiction to the internet (Good and Fang, 2015), poor school performance

(Smokowski, Evans and Cotter, 2014) and psychological distress and anxiety (Martínez-Cao et al, 2021; Wright and Wachs, 2019).

This theme raises questions about how disability might sway perceptions about online risk. The importance of seeking out children with disabilities' views of risks and whether these risks are similar to their parents' perceptions may provide a better understanding of how child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities. Certainly, a plethora of online risks, including harmful content and behaviours, come to the fore in the findings of this scoping literature review. The next theme highlights the complex nature of safeguarding, child protection, and welfare measures that are necessary to keep young people with disabilities safe online.

2.2.5 Complexity of child protection and welfare online

Notwithstanding the extensive risks that exist for children online, which form part of the role of child protection and welfare professionals worldwide, extending this view of child protection and welfare online is necessary. For example, the literature highlights how children with disabilities can be negatively affected by online content and behaviour. It also points to instances of disability-related antisocial behaviours online, where the actions of children with disabilities may pose risks to other internet users (Molin Sorbring, and Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2015; Chadwick, 2019; Bannon et al., 2015; Didden et al., 2009). Conneely (2022) exemplifies this in a report about a person with a disability accessing child sexual abuse material online; the necessity for training for professionals to confidently address such safeguarding concerns is highlighted in this report.

One further extension of the view of child protection and welfare online involves the boundaries and privacy of people with disabilities, as Goggin and Ellis raise concerns about '*sharenting..... online practices of parents who broadcast details and/or images of their children's lives online, usually on social media*' (2020, p. 222). This theme assists with the development of qualitative interview questions and quantitative survey questions about such practices online. Furthermore, the broader literature review in the next chapter will draw attention to the *sharenting* phenomenon. The need for support is apparent here to address the complexity at the intersection of disability, internet use, and child protection and welfare. UNICEF aptly states, "*The digital revolution is about*

more than learning to use new tools and technologies. It is about a major paradigm shift in people's mindsets and habits" (2017b, p. 51). With this shift comes the need for support for all children, including children with disabilities, in navigating their digital world. The next theme aptly highlights the support mechanisms that enable this process.

2.2.6 Support mechanisms

This theme emphasises parental (Wright, 2017; Calpbinici and Arslan, 2019; Zebracki, 2019) and educational support (Didden et al., 2009; Wells and Mitchell, 2014; Wright, 2017; Martínez-Cao et al., 2021; Chadwick, 2019). Furthermore, Chadwick argues that digital providers and designers need to make support and guidance more user-friendly for people with intellectual disabilities, a view also shared by UNICEF (2017a).

El Asam and Katz call for a *'need for knowledge, not fear'* (2021a, p. 8) to address child protection concerns associated with online activity for people with disabilities. Advocates for increasing digital competency among children with disabilities include Carton and Landman (2021), Gandolfi et al. (2020), Gandolfi, Calabria, and Ferdig (2018), and Bannon et al. (2015). Wright and Wachs focus on the child and young person with a disability, explaining that *'after experiencing a negative event, it is important for adolescents to have someone who can provide physical, social, and psychological support'* (2020, p. 2392). At the time of this scoping review, legal support or regulations did not feature significantly in the literature, with very few children making use of legal recourse on the basis of *'criminal law, civil law, anti-discrimination law, or child protection policy'* according to Robinson (2018) in Martínez-Cao et al. (2021, p. 11).

Moreover, UNICEF advocates for further research around what digital media means for young people when they state that *'parents, policymakers, researchers and the media should not jump to conclusions about what is healthy or unhealthy digital use'* (2017b, p. 105). These findings value the agency of children with disabilities in the digital world. Agency is defined in this research study as children with disabilities (agents) acting with intention and reflection within cultural systems and social structures that influence them but do not determine them (Archer, 1995). Further discussion on *'agency'* will occur in the next section on the conceptual framework. The findings of this scoping review

highlight the importance of seeking the views of children with disabilities on what constitutes healthy and unhealthy internet use, as well as the perspectives of parents on their children's internet use. The final theme of this scoping review presented the research activities related to the topic of child protection and welfare, disability and internet use.

2.2.7 Research activity

UNICEF states that *'there is an urgent need for more robust data collection, not only about whether children are or are not connected, but also why and how they connect, and the conditions that facilitate or block their access'* (2017b, p.123). Martínez-Cao et al. (2021) refer to the absence of research relating to people with intellectual disabilities as perpetrators of cyberbullying and the consequences that are attached to such behaviour. Recognising the agency of children with disabilities is essential, as they are not only vulnerable to online harm but can also be perpetrators of harm, an aspect that is generally overlooked in existing research.

Overall, the literature has called for more research on accessibility, the consequences of, and the meaning of internet use. Attention in research to gender implications for children with disabilities was also advocated. A recurring call across the literature is for children to become an integral part of the conversation about their internet use and policy-making surrounding it. The development of interview and survey questions is influenced by a recognition of children with disabilities as active and empowered agents in their digital world. As such, the questions explore not only their experiences of online risk and harm but also their own behaviours and interactions in online spaces. Furthermore, it appears that literature pertaining to parents' views about their children's internet use requires further inquiry. Ultimately, the expressed views of children with disabilities need to be included in research. There are numerous studies that relate to each of the three concepts of this research study in isolation of each other; however, a paucity of research emerges when disability, child protection and welfare, and internet use intersect as a complete topic. This finding offers clear justification for focusing on the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?

2.2.8 Summary

This scoping review, conducted at the beginning of this research study in January 2022, laid the foundations for a broader critical literature review presented in Chapter 4 of this thesis. Its findings had several significant implications that helped shape how this research study addressed the research question. For example, for the design of the wider research project, the following considerations were based on the findings from the scoping review:

- Incorporating a broad view of disability
- Understanding that child protection and welfare incorporates limiting or restrictive practices as well as protective elements.
- Understanding that parents' behaviour (sharenting) online shapes the child protection and welfare lens within this research study
- Recognising that the representation of risk in literature requires reflection based on the views and biases of children with disabilities, their parents, professionals, policy makers and academics.
- Recognising the agency of children with disabilities in relation to their online behaviour and exposure to harmful online content.

Methodologically, these insights helped shape the broader literature review and the data collection processes, including the development of interview and survey questions. The findings also informed the decision to use a mixed methods approach, incorporating a quantitative component that addresses a secondary research question: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use? The views of children with disabilities about their internet use are entirely absent from the literature, highlighting the need to address this gap. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the primary research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? is an important question to ask in a space where a research gap exists. Findings about how 'disability', 'child protection and welfare', and 'internet use' are represented within the scoping review have assisted with the conceptual development of these core research components within this research study. The conceptual framework for this research study is outlined next.

2.3 Conceptual framework

Establishing definitions for ‘disability’, ‘internet use’, and ‘child protection and welfare’ is essential to provide a guiding reference for the progression of this study. I begin with the conceptual definition of disability.

2.3.1 Disability

There are multiple aspects to consider in the conceptualisation of disability within this study. Disability definitions, models of disability, and terminology related to disability all serve as guiding forces. I begin with a definition for disability, starting with the Irish legislative context, as this research study was conducted in Ireland. This definition states “*Disability, in relation to a person, means a substantial restriction in the capacity of the person to carry on a profession, business or occupation in the State or to participate in social or cultural life in the State by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment*” (Irish Statute Book, 2005). The overarching definition used in this study stems from the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which states that “*Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others*” (UNCRPD, 2007, 4). The inclusion of mental health in this definition is important as it broadens the view of disability. This is the view that is adopted in this research study.

This definition offers a starting point; however, a theoretical lens offers deeper insights into how disability is presented and understood in this research project. Numerous theoretical perspectives and models of disability exist; however, these models are often contested and poorly understood (Goodley, 2016). A rights-based approach is adopted in this research study, as it aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Fundamental rights and freedoms are deeply embedded in each article of the convention. However, it is not the only disability perspective or model that is relevant to this research. According to Goodley, “*disability is a social, relational, political and cultural entity that is lived through as a very personal experience though shaped by some very public encounters*” (2016, p. xi).

Berghs et al. (2016) present a scoping review which offers insights into the trajectory of models of disability over the last century from a public health

research perspective. This review places the medical model of disability within the individual and relates the social model of disability to societal discrimination. In contrast, Degenger (2016) places the human rights model as operational within a socio-legal conceptual sphere. Furthermore, the human rights model, according to Lawson and Bekett (2021), is not distinct from the social model of disability. The concept of impairment itself is questioned within critical disability studies, which expands the notion of disability beyond the structured, rigid definitions offered within the social, medical, and human rights models of disability, encompassing the physical body, the non-physical worlds related to ability and ableness issues (Berghs, 2016; Shildrick, 2012a).

Building on further advancements in disability discourse, Flynn and McGregor (2017) support the use of the affirmative non-tragedy lens within child protection and disability. The affirmative model, as defined by Swain and French (2000), has its origins in the disability arts movement and challenges perceptions of social identity associated with disability. The divide between the disabled person and the non-disabled person is explored, pointing out that non-disabled people have impairments too. Furthermore, it reflects on the spectrum of disablement, including hidden disabilities such as a mental health impairment.

The affirmative model advances the notion of the non-tragedy view of disability, whereby positive facets of life experiences and social uniqueness are considered and respected. Swain and French (2000) explain that the non-tragedy model extends the social model, stating that *“people with disability are not viewed as being the problem, but rather disabled people can and should live fulfilled and satisfying lives”* (Swain & French, 2000, p. 571). According to Corker and Shakespeare, *“the global experience of disabled people is too complex to be rendered within one unitary model or set of ideas”* (2002, p. 15). Moreover, Goodley argues that *“the complicated nature of disability demands a layered interrogation”* (2016, p. xiii). The critical realist perspective, the philosophical premise chosen for this research study and explained in the next chapter, aligns well with Goodley’s view. From a critical realist perspective, Bhaskar and Danermark argue that disability must be understood in terms of a *“laminated system”* akin to the *“layered interrogation”* aforementioned. More specifically, Bhaskar and Danermark make reference to *‘bodily, psychic and social components’* (2006, p. 292).

Flynn argues that “*for parents, families, advocates, activists and academics, it also remains vital that the academy produce disability theory to address issues of serious, everyday relevance to the disability community*” (2024, p. 16). This view is highly relevant to children with disabilities’ exposure to child protection and welfare risks online. Children with disabilities’ use of agency to manage risk online aligns with the affirmative non-tragedy view of disability, whereby their online lived experiences demonstrate powerful digital resilience in what is currently a poorly regulated, potentially harmful digital environment. Helpful here is the alignment by Flynn (2024) of the affirmative non-tragedy model and critical disability theory as an aid to better understand disability and child protection.

To capture the broad and complex nature of disability, this research study will adopt an all-encompassing, bespoke view of disability that acknowledges the affirmative non-tragedy model alongside the social model and human rights model. In practical terms, this means that people with mental health conditions, people who self-identify as having a disability, and those with hidden disabilities can participate in this research study. Such complexity extends to the way language is used when discussing or writing about disability (Andrews, Powell, and Ayers, 2022; Ferrigon and Tucker, 2019; Grech, Koller, and Olley, 2024). Back et al. offer interesting insights in a study on disability language from the perspective of students with disabilities. They noted a high variability within disability language use across three main categories, namely ‘people-first, disability-implicit, and disability-first language’ (2016, p. 1).

More specifically, people-first language emphasises the individual first, with disability positioned after, for example, *children with disabilities* (Back et al., 2016). Disability-implicit language means the reference to disability is indirect or not explicit, for example, people who engage with supports (Back et al., 2016). Disability-first language places the emphasis on the disability first, then on the individual, for example, a disabled person or an autistic person. Back et al. (2016) found that disability-implicit language was used most in their study, followed by people-first language, and then disability-first language.

Adding a person-centred perspective, Stephanie Preissner, (a well-known Irish author and actress) who describes herself as an autistic adult, offers interesting insights on disability language in a podcast with Mary McAleese and

Mary Kennedy (2024). Preissner's description of disability is helpful in this context as she refers to a 'flashpoint' in autism circles about language. She describes the autistic community as people who have an autistic spectrum disorder diagnosis as opposed to the autism community, which includes those people with a diagnosis plus their relatives, carers, and all people in that person's life. Finally, Preissner points out that identity-first language is used predominantly within the autistic community, with people saying, 'I am autistic'; it is not something to 'have' because autism is neither given nor taken away and is, in Preissner's words, 'not something that burdens me'. This view of disability aligns well with the affirmative non-tragedy model (Flynn and McGregor, 2017) discussed earlier in this chapter.

There is much to consider when defining disability. The scoping review reveals additional evidence of this complexity, with approximately 52 distinct terms used to describe disability. Furthermore, disability is often included in the concept of 'vulnerable populations' in the literature encompassing a wide array of social groups, including children in care, racial minorities, migrants, low-income and homeless populations, and LGBTQ+ individuals (Dubois et al., 2022; for Nursing, Ernstmeier and Christman, 2022; Dow and Boylan, 2020). Moreover, the term *vulnerable*, which is commonly used in descriptions of disability, is both reinforced and problematised within the literature (Clough, 2017; Beck, 2024; Yeo, 2020; Snipstad, 2022; Mustaniemi-Laakso, Katsui and Heikkilä, 2023). Beck explains that "*labelling individuals with disabilities as particularly vulnerable before digital government presents another challenge due to the inherent diversity, heterogeneity, and complexity within the disability spectrum*" (2024, p. 281).

I adopt an agency-focused view (Mustaniemi-Laakso, Katsui, and Heikkilä, 2023) and a social model view (Beck, 2024; Satz, 2008) of the term "vulnerable" when referring to children with disabilities' exposure to online risks within this research study. To label all children with disabilities as inherently vulnerable because of their impairments risks overlooking their autonomy as active digital agents. Vulnerability is not a fixed characteristic of disability itself, but something shaped by social structures and regulatory environments. Vulnerability emerges less from individual impairments than from the barriers society creates, which can contribute to risks for children with disabilities in the

digital world. This dynamic allows space for both children's agency and the ways structural forces can amplify vulnerability. Furthermore, Mustaniemi-Laakso, Katsui, and Heikkilä posit that *given the extensive diversity of intra-group variations between persons with disabilities, individualised solutions are needed for agency to be possible for all*" (2023, p. 1581).

Moreover, the choice of terminology about disability used throughout is informed by numerous elements. For example, a survey conducted by Sharif et al. (2022) of over 500 people with disabilities across 23 countries revealed that identity-first language was the preferred terminology for this cohort. Guidelines recommending that United Nations staff use people-first language were published in conjunction with the implementation of the Disability Inclusion Strategy (United Nations, 2019). A study by the National Disability Authority in Ireland (NDA, 2022), based on consultations with disability organisations, posits that there is no universal agreement or consensus regarding disability terminology. Considering the complexity surrounding the definition of disability, I intend to remain respectful and acknowledge the uniqueness of all individuals in my writing; hence, the predominant terminology used throughout this thesis is person-first. However, the findings of this research present the language used by children themselves, and this may include the interchangeable use of people-first, disability-implicit, and disability-first language. I move forward now to providing a conceptual definition of the second core component of this research topic, namely "*child protection and welfare*".

2.3.2 Child protection and welfare

The concept of child protection and welfare is broadly defined in terms of how government policy and agencies (in Ireland) work to prevent and respond to neglect and abuse of children, deeming the welfare of the child as paramount (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2019). Here, child protection and the welfare of children, specifically regarding internet use, warrant further clarification. UNICEF's statement that "*Every child must be protected from violence, exploitation and abuse on the internet*" (n.d.-b) is a robust and succinct statement that underpins this research study. More specifically, online risks are identified as cyberbullying, peer-to-peer violence, exposure to hate speech, messages to incite self-harm and suicide, breach of privacy data, excessive screen time, marketing targeted at children, online sexual

exploitation and abuse, contact from child sex offenders, online grooming, the sharing of images, the production distribution and consumption of sexual abuse material, exhort for explicit content, exposure to live-streamed sexual abuse (UNICEF, n.d.-b). The fundamental issue here that is widely recognised is that the design of digital technologies and the internet itself does not consider children's rights and was not designed with children in mind (UNICEF, 2024; EDRI, 2024; ICO, n.d.; Houses of the Oireachtas, 2024). This neglect is further pronounced for children with disabilities, whose specific requirements are rarely, if ever, incorporated into digital design processes (Shriver, 2024; Lundgard, Lee and Satyanarayan, 2019; Creed et al., 2023).

At this point, stepping back momentarily to examine the concept of risk and better understand its meaning within this study is helpful. For example, within the positivist paradigm, it is believed that, with sufficient data and scientific tools, risks can be identified, quantified, and controlled. Beck's (1992) and Giddens' (1990) pre-internet view of risk is relevant in the context of this study; it is useful for understanding risk as dynamic, complex, and embedded in social relations. Their view is that risk is not just about preventing harm, but also about managing uncertainty related to rapid social change. According to Castell, *"the revolution in communication technologies has intensified in recent years, and because conscious communication is the distinctive feature of humans, it is logical that it is in this realm where society has been most profoundly modified"* (2011, p 1979). The impact of digitalisation on society is well documented (Cohen, 2021; Mosco, 2017; Levin and Mamlok, 2021; Kizilhan and Kizilhan, 2016). Furthermore, the impact of digitalisation on children in society features as a cultural shift impacting their participation, identity, and rights (Boyd, 2014; Loader and Loader, 2007; Kirillova, 2023). Here, the notion of risk has become a central factor within the digital landscape, centering on moral and cultural anxieties (Cohen, 2011; Critcher, 2006), with children often framed as innocent and vulnerable. For example, when risks are amplified, there is justification for restrictive measures that limit children's participation and agency in the digital landscape (Livingstone and Third, 2017; Livingstone and Haddon, 2009; Lupton, 2015).

Within this, child protection and welfare have been associated with the protection of vulnerable populations, children with disabilities being framed as

being particularly “at risk,” resulting in overprotection where their safeguarding from harm limits their autonomy and participation (Sanders, 2006; Franklin, Raws and Smeaton, 2015; Callus et al., 2019; Waldman, Seiver and Perlman, 2019). Essentially, their safety is prioritised over their self-determination, reinforcing restrictive paternalistic practices (Franklin and Sloper, 2009; Curran and Runswick-Cole, 2014). Creating a balance between protecting children with disabilities from harm and promoting their agency and autonomy is advocated by (Lundy, 2018; Fallon-Kund, Coenen, and Bickenbach, 2017; Saaltink et al., 2012). This balance is fundamental to the concept of child protection and welfare in this study.

Furthermore, Munro (2019) advocates for the use of the term “*uncertainty*” in child protection and welfare language, as opposed to the word “*risk*,” arguing that this word has become associated with negative connotations and a tendency towards risk-averse decision-making, driven by a fear of backlash if something goes wrong. Risk imbues a culture of blame (Munro, 2019), an unhelpful culture that hinders the work of safeguarding professionals. In essence, this research study will use the terminology of child protection and welfare, rather than just child protection, to better encompass the broad and complex nature of child protection and the promotion of welfare measures that attempt to mitigate the exposure of children with disabilities to online risks.

In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, this study conceptualises children as rights holders whose capacities evolve over time, rather than as passive recipients of care and protection (UNCRC, 1989). The principle of evolving capacities recognises that children’s agency develops in interaction with their social environment, and that their participation in decisions affecting them, including in digital contexts, is central to their rights (UNCRC, 2021). Within this study, child protection moves beyond a focus on shielding children with disabilities from online risk towards enabling them to navigate online spaces with growing agency. Welfare is not just the absence of harm but the presence of opportunities for participation, expression, and connection, with scaffolding that balances protection and empowerment.

Additionally, fostering digital resilience that allows children with disabilities to ‘recognise, manage and recover from online risk’ as advocated by Hammond, Polizzi and Bartholomew (2023, p. 3682) contrasts acutely with limiting and

restrictive digital child protection and welfare practices, offering insights for parents and safeguarding professionals. The complexity surrounding child protection and welfare work specific to internet use by children with disabilities extends beyond online behaviours to other factors, such as internet access or lack thereof, the role of parents and professionals in breaching online data privacy, legal structures, and cultural contexts, among others.

Houston offers a view of child protection and welfare from the critical realist perspective, positing that “*the realist investigator will attempt to explain and understand how harm to children arises by identifying the causal mechanisms operating within the child, his or her immediate environment, and the wider culture, which when activated, produce harmful outcomes or have the potential to produce these outcomes*” (2001b, p. 225). This research study attempts to explain and understand how the use of the internet by children with disabilities, in their bedrooms, at home, and in school, may produce harmful outcomes that raise child protection and welfare concerns. Adopting a critical realist philosophical approach enables this research to uncover hidden mechanisms associated with internet use. For example, broader structural regulations like age restrictions or legal frameworks may cause children with disabilities to lie about their age (Albert-Lőrincz Csanád, 2015; Aiken, 2022) to get access to social media apps which have the potential to expose them to harmful online content such as child abuse (Powel et al, 2022; Ali et al, 2021; Chiu and Quayle, 2022), cyberbullying and cyber victimisation (Audrin and Blaya, 2020; Craig et al., 2020; Olson, 2021) and mental health risks (Bharucha, 2018; Gassó et al., 2019; Donald et al., 2019). Fundamental to all of this is the unique manner in which children with disabilities navigate their digital worlds, thus requiring a person-centred approach to ensure their full digital potential and participation.

The meaning of person-centred requires a deeper conceptual frame for the purpose of this study. The concept of person-centredness has its origins in humanistic psychology, most notably in the work of Carl Rogers, who emphasised empathy, agency, and the inherent dignity of each individual in therapeutic practice (Rogers, 1951, 1961). These ideas were later taken up in disability contexts during the deinstitutionalisation movements of the 1970s and 1980s, leading to the development of person-centred planning as a way of ensuring that the voices and choices of people with disabilities shaped their own

lives (O'Brien and O'Brien, 1998; Sanderson, 2000). Internationally, this approach has since been embedded in rights-based frameworks, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Building on this history, person-centred identity is understood in this study as recognising children with disabilities as active agents whose expressed views, preferences, and evolving capacities must be central to how they are supported in digital environments. From a child protection and welfare perspective, this means moving beyond safeguarding alone to ensuring that digital spaces and practices enable children to participate, express identity, and belong in their own unique way.

Hence, children with disabilities agency is a key factor within their digital lives that also requires conceptual clarification for the purpose of this research study. Agency is broadly understood as the capacity of individuals to act independently, make choices, and influence their circumstances within social and structural contexts (Giddens, 1984). For people with disabilities, agency is shaped both by individual resources and by the enabling or constraining structures of society, including cultural norms, accessibility, and welfare systems (Shakespeare, 2006). In the digital world, agency involves the ability to navigate technologies, express identity, and participate in online communities — yet it is also mediated by assistive tools, platform design, and broader inequalities that can marginalise or empower users. From a child protection and welfare perspective, recognising the agency of children with disabilities means valuing their evolving capacities and ensuring that digital environments support their choices and participation, even when structural and cultural barriers limit their opportunities. All of these factors are important for realising the full digital potential of children with disabilities. This framing resonates with Margaret Archer's critical realist account of agency, which emphasises the interplay of structure, culture, and personal reflexivity in shaping human action (Archer, 2003).

Having established the conceptual framework for child protection and welfare that encompasses person centredness, the agency of children with disabilities, their digital rights in the realisation of their full digital potential as well as their protection from online harm in this study's context, I now explore

the meaning of internet use, acknowledging its rapid advancement, which limits my ability to define this dynamic and influential phenomenon.

2.3.3 Internet use

The internet, for the purpose of this research study, is defined as the use of computerised networks for digital media so as to access entertainment, instrumental, and socialisation aspects of life. The emphasis is on the use of computerised networks for communication purposes as opposed to face-to-face communication without computer facilitation (Chayko, 2020). Digital media encompasses applications that cater to various needs, including instrumental ones such as health and employment, socialisation needs like friendships, romance, or career development, and entertainment needs like gaming and audio-visual recordings (Stavropoulos et al., 2021).

Terms used throughout this thesis that refer to children with disabilities' engagement with technology include 'internet use' and 'online environment'. Terminology used to describe the place where they engage in internet use includes 'virtual spaces/world', 'digital world', 'digital space', and 'online environment'. Moreover, language that depicts children with disabilities as interconnected with technology across a broad ecosystem includes 'digital lives', 'the digital landscape', and 'virtual worlds'.

Children with disabilities' engagement in digital technology can be conceptualised in three ways that overlap within this study. First, internet use and online environment encapsulate socio-technical contexts through which they interact in digital media (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; Baym, 2015). Second, terms such as virtual spaces, digital spaces, and virtual worlds place these interactions in environments that enable social participation (Schroeder, 2011). Thirdly, the digital landscape captures the integration of digital technologies into children's everyday experiences and social worlds (Boyd, 2014; Couldry and Hepp, 2017). Simply put, digital participation for children with disabilities refers to the practices they experience in digital spaces that form part of their everyday lives.

Furthermore, the concept of internet use within this study is extended to encompass the notion of children with disabilities who may not use the internet themselves but are impacted by exposure to it. For example, children with disabilities who are exposed to online harmful content while in the presence of a

family member(s), extended relative(s), professional(s), friend(s) who are using the internet. Additionally, this cohort may be exposed to data privacy concerns due to the internet use of others in their lives who may share their personal data online.

Further terminology used throughout this research study that requires conceptual clarity includes '*digital social literacy*' which is understood as the various ways children with disabilities engage in social participation through digital technologies. Children with disabilities may use digital media in unique ways to communicate, express identity and build connections. This view of social literacy does not focus on what children with disabilities cannot do but on practices, supports, and accessible environments that allow participation and belonging in online spaces (Alper and Goggin, 2017; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007).

'*Digital linguistic ability*' is conceptually framed as the ways children, including children with disabilities, use language and communication resources within digital environments. This involves moving beyond conventional spoken or written forms to include the use of assistive technologies, multimodal tools, and alternative communication systems that enable self-expression and social participation. The diverse ways in which children create and share meaning online are incorporated in this definition (Light and McNaughton, 2014; Alper, 2017).

'*Disability digital inequality*' refers to the rights of children with disabilities to have equitable opportunities for access, participation, and self-expression in digital environments. It moves beyond access to devices, emphasising the removal of social and technical barriers and the creation of inclusive digital spaces that support communication and a sense of belonging. This conceptual view of disability digital equality aligns with wider calls for digital inclusion (UNICEF, 2022a; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007) and with international frameworks that affirm children's rights to access information, communication, and participation, as set out in the UN convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and its general comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment (UNCRC, 2021) as well as the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (United Nation, 2006).

‘Digital privacy’ for children with disabilities encompasses more than their control over personal information online. It includes the ways in which parents, caregivers, and institutions may share children’s images or data (“sharenting”), the risks of commercial exploitation of children’s data by digital platforms, and the need for protections around sensitive information related to disability and communication. For children with complex needs, privacy is often shaped by others’ practices as much as their own, raising questions of consent, dignity, and rights. Ensuring digital privacy, therefore, requires attention not only to individual behaviours, but also to the responsibilities of families, educators, and corporations in safeguarding children’s data and identities (Livingstone, Stoilova and Nandagiri, 2019; UNCRC, 2021).

‘*Digital rights*’ for children with disabilities refer to their entitlement to equitable access, participation, protection, and agency in digital environments. In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and General Comment No. 25 (UNCRC, 2021), these rights extend to online spaces, recognising both children’s evolving capacities to exercise autonomy and the need for safeguards that respect their dignity. For children with disabilities, this means ensuring that digital technologies are accessible, providing support to enable meaningful participation, and respecting their expressed views and choices regarding internet use. Such a framing situates digital engagement not simply as a matter of access, but as a rights-based issue of equality and inclusion.

There are 1.3 billion people with disabilities in the world (WHO, 2023), a number that is increasing. This equates to 16% of the world’s population and accounts for 240 million children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2021b). Most of these children lack access to educational opportunities or assistive technology. However, the conceptual frame for child protection and welfare in the digital lives of children with disabilities encapsulates numerous facets and access is one of these elements. The importance of highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of internet use specifically related to children is well-documented in the literature, (Dyer, 2018; Moreno et al., 2022; Ophir, 2020; Suresh, Manimozhi, and Elango, 2021; Goodyear and Armour, 2021). For children with disabilities this is no different. Attention is paid to representing this balance of positive and negative aspects of internet use by children with

disabilities later in this thesis, particularly in chapters six, seven and eight. Having established the conceptual framework at the core of this research study, the next section positions it in the current regulatory and policy landscape.

2.4 Existing regulatory and policy landscape

Undoubtedly, there is a global drive to promote digital inclusion for children with disabilities. For example, the European Union's Digital Strategy advocates for a positive human-centred digital agenda for all European citizens. Principle 9 of the UNCRPD promotes digital accessibility, whilst the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 9 and 10 also promote the digital agenda. This research is timely as we enter an era of global digital regulation steered by legislation such as the EU Digital Services Act (2022), (European Commission, 2022a), UK Online Safety Act (2023), (Government UK, 2023), US Safe Tech Act (2023), (Congress Gov, 2023) and the Australian Online Safety Act (2021), (Australian Government, 2024). The full implication of this legislation is not yet clear; however, Australia's recent stance to ban under-16s from social media use is viewed as the strictest government-driven regulatory position in the digital era (eSafety Commissioner, 2025). This decision has sparked debate on practical and political levels, both locally and internationally. For example, the Australian National University (ANU) report, which has more than 140 expert signatures, states that this legislation is "*too blunt an instrument to address risks effectively*" (2024, n.p.). Similar regulatory debates about social media are currently taking place in government houses around the world.

This research is based in Ireland, where the presence of Google, Apple, Facebook (now known as Meta), Microsoft, and X (formerly known as Twitter) places Ireland in the unique position of having regulatory responsibility for some of the world's major tech companies. Coimisiún na Meán is the statutory agency responsible for online safety in Ireland. It is guided by the Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022, the EU Digital Services Act, and the EU Terrorist Content Online Regulation, which formed the basis for the development of an online safety code. The online safety code holds digital companies responsible for protecting people, in particular children, from harm online. It also has the power to sanction service providers who do not adhere to the safety codes. Fines of up to €20 million or 10% of their turnover from the previous year can be imposed.

Coimisiún na Meán has begun a review of compliance of online platforms with the EU Digital Services Act (Coimisiún na Meán, 2024, n.p.). This regulatory space is evolving constantly, and Ireland's current programme for government is strongly committed to investing in digital and data regulation to ensure Ireland's expertise in this field (O'Donovan, 2025). Rapid changes in internet use and a steadfast influx of new digital media options, alongside the exponential growth in internet use by young people since the COVID-19 pandemic (Rideout et al., 2022; Adibelli and Sümen, 2020; Chawla et al., 2021; Ozturk and Ayaz-Alkaya, 2021) ensure this research study is unique, current, applicable, and progressive in its own right.

This research is uniquely situated in Ireland whose position as a global technology hub and regulatory authority makes it a critical location for examining child protection and welfare for children with disabilities in the digital domain. Ireland's geopolitical positioning is unique because Dublin has developed into a global technology hub hosting European headquarters of many major platforms (McIntyre, 2021; Roberts et al., 2015). This concentration of multinational digital firms means the Irish Data Protection Commission acts as the lead supervisory authority under the GDPR for many of the world's largest technology companies (Department of Justice, 2024; DPC, 2024; Bastos and Pałka, 2023). As aforementioned Ireland's regulatory influence is further strengthened by the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022 and the Online Safety Code introduced by Coimisiún na Meán, which impose binding responsibilities on platforms to protect users, particularly children, from harmful content (Coimisiún na Meán, 2024; Irish Statute Book, 2022; Children's Rights Alliance, 2025). This regulatory context is especially significant given substantial evidence that children with disabilities face elevated risks of abuse, and online harm (Cavallini, 2021; Hammond, 2022; Emerson et al., 2022; Katz and El Asam, 2019; eSafety Commissioner, 2023).

Ireland's regulatory role therefore provides a particularly significant setting where global technology governance intersects with child protection and welfare policy across legal, technical and ethical domains. This research highlights child protection and welfare challenges faced by children with disabilities in digital environments reinforcing the importance of Ireland's regulatory role within international and global digital child protection and welfare governance.

This regulatory and policy background helps position this research study, as these external forces impact the lived experiences of internet use for children with disabilities and influence parents' perspectives on their children's internet use. This background offers information that assists in answering the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? This chapter now moves forward to offer a brief conclusion.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter situates the research by outlining the background, noting a research gap it demonstrates how the initial scoping review informed the research design, ensuring that the study develops in direct response to the research problem. By presenting the conceptual framework of disability, internet use, and child protection and welfare, along with other key concepts such as agency and person-centredness, the chapter clarifies the conceptual lens through which the research question is approached. This chapter also incorporates current regulatory and policy frameworks. Although these frameworks are external to the digital lives of children with disabilities and their parents' perspectives about them, they nonetheless shape and have broader implications within their digital worlds.

Finally, the discussion on reflexive processes presented in the next section shows how methodological choices are grounded in the responsibility to protect and respect children with disabilities. In essence, the chapter contributes to the thesis by establishing the background informed by the scoping review, conceptual framework, current regulatory and policy frameworks, and ethical orientation necessary to explore how child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities.

2.6 Reflection and reflexivity

A continuous commitment to reflection and reflexivity was necessary when undertaking this study, which involves children with disabilities and their parents. 'Qualitative research relies on nuanced judgements that require researcher reflexivity, yet reflexivity is often addressed superficially or overlooked completely during the research process' (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023, p. 241). Researchers are advised to go beyond merely detailing their subjective

declarations, confessing, or apologising for their biases, and instead proceed with due attention to reflection and reflexivity within their research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Moreover, reflection and reflexivity are essential within a critical realist approach, particularly when conducting research with children with disabilities, as they assist the researcher in acknowledging their own influence on the research process, and to interpret deeply the impact of structural, cultural and agential influences on their digital lived experiences (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1978).

The words reflection and reflexivity are often used interchangeably and take on multiple meanings, creating a sense of ambiguity (D’cruz, Gillingham and Melendez, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2014). Reflection (Nguyen et al., 2014) enabled me to consider how my own assumptions, perspectives, and decisions shaped the research process, while reflexivity (Jamieson, Govaart, and Pownall, 2023) prompted me to examine the relational dynamics between myself and the children with disabilities who participated in the study. Questions about my positionality, social location, and associated privileges, as well as their influence on this research process, are addressed throughout this research project. For example, I described earlier my digital-free childhood and adolescent life, as well as my lack of technical skills and enthusiasm, which is an acknowledged bias from the outset of this study. The ‘4 Fs’ reflective tool (Greenway, 2018) yielded helpful insights during the data collection phase of this research study. This will be discussed further in the next chapter on methodology, and a worked example of the 4Fs tool is presented in Appendix 4.

Addressing power dynamics within this research process is not straightforward. Stapleton and Mayock state that “*merely involving individuals in knowledge production does not guarantee that power hierarchies are addressed during, much less eliminated from, the research process*” (2022, p. 621). Additionally, they draw attention to the use and control of knowledge that impact critical consciousness and structural factors that shape political, social, and historical circumstances (Stapleton and Mayock, 2022). This study was completed in the Global North; 80% of people with disabilities live in the Global South (UNDRR, 2023). However, the majority of research and theories about disability are based in the Global North (Meekosha, 2011).

McIntosh (1990) prompts thoughtful consideration about 'privilege' in an impactful paper called 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack'. This title connects with a critical realist lens as I am prompted to think about my privileged position as a non-disabled researcher and what is packed into my 'invisible knapsack'. What hidden biases do I hold that influence the power dynamics within the research process? The work of Jrp, Raven and Cartwright (1959) is helpful here as they suggest the meaning of power is not always negative. Five types of power are evaluated in their paper, including reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power.

While gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of power was essential for this project, Yoder and Kahn (1992) offer three distinct elements of power that are exemplified in this research, through the lens of a feminist understanding of women and power. The first is 'power to', involving enablement, achieving control, and using agency. The second is 'power over', representing influence, control, persuasiveness, and the third is 'power with', signifying the sharing of power (Yoder and Kahn, 1992, p.381). For example, 'power to' children with disabilities occurs in this research study when they express their views about internet use and the dissemination process offers insights to parents, policy makers, professionals and academics about their views. 'Power over' occurred when the research project was designed, analysed, and written up without children with disabilities' input. As a researcher, I remained conscious of power dynamics while asking research questions designed to seek good data, whilst also knowing my influence over accommodations had an impact on the interview process.

My aim was to ensure it was a comfortable and enjoyable experience for the 34 children with disabilities who participated in the qualitative component of this research study. 'Power with' occurred through reverse snowballing, whereby children with disabilities contacted me to participate in this study, reflecting their desire to have their expressed views represented. Following the data collection phase, the research story was disseminated to the research participants using universal design (Booklet, YouTube video and TikTok). Children with disabilities were the named authors of this booklet.

Throughout the research project I remained cognisant that "*language is one of the ways individuals with disabilities are held in a marginalized position [...]*"

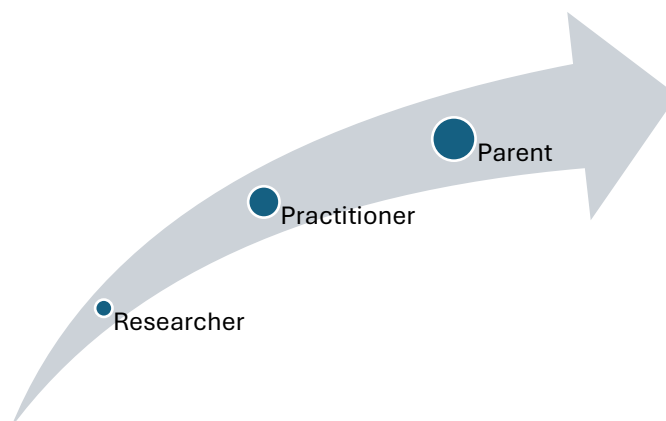
without understanding language's forms and power, it may remain a relatively undeveloped and seldom utilised resource in understanding and improving the experiences of people with disabilities in society" (Back et al, 2016, p.2). Identity-first language, as aforementioned, is used in this research project. An initial assumption I made, that I would not be able to include children with complex communication needs in this research study, was proved wrong. By recognising interdependent relationships and using components of dyadic interviewing (Caldwell, 2014) whilst also adopting an eclectic, flexible approach to the interview process, I could include participants with complex communication needs in this research study.

Furthermore, at the beginning of the project, I wrote about the voices of children with disabilities represented in this study. However, upon conceptualising communication as the sharing of information and ideas both verbally and non-verbally, and understanding that nonverbal communication greatly influences the process (Phutela, 2015), nonverbal communication was also recorded in the data. I subsequently changed the terminology I was using from 'voices' of children with disabilities to the 'expressed views' of children with disabilities.

Researcher positionality plays an important role in this study. Attention to insider/outsider research is promoted by Le Gallais (2008), Chammas (2020), Dwyer and Buckle (2009), Greene (2014), Healey (2017), Hellawell (2006), and Holmes (2020). *"The qualitative researcher's perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others, to indwell, and at the same time to be aware of how one's own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand"* (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 114). As discussed earlier in the 'about the author' section, two significant drivers are presented that detail my researcher insider positionality: first, as a parent, and second, as a practitioner in the field of disability. This insider perspective also has an impact on the quantitative component of this research, which will be explored further in the next chapter on methodology. A reflection of this influence can be seen in an early entry (year one) from my reflective diary when I write, *"Today in supervision, I noticed my defence of identity first language, the language used predominantly in my professional practice and as a parent. I need to engage more with disability*

literature on theory and models to widen my perspective” (diary entry 25/11/2021). The advantages of insider research outlined by Whiting (2023) include building rapport through knowledge of the community, which was particularly pertinent during the data collection phase of this study. Access to research participants and relevant legislation (Whiting, 2023) also proved advantageous for this project. Figure 2.6.1 below depicts my researcher positionality at the beginning of this project.

Figure 2.6.1: Researcher positionality



By consciously engaging in reflection and reflexivity throughout all research stages, I aimed to ensure that participants were respected, their agency was acknowledged, and the research process remained ethically driven. Having explained how reflexivity and reflection fit within this research project, the philosophical position of critical realism, which underpins the approach to this research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? is presented next, as I move forward to Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 Philosophical position: critical realism

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3.1 Introduction

3.2 Philosophical position: locating critical realism

3.3 Critical realism: core principles

3.4 Critical realism applied to the research topic

3.5 Critical realism applied to the research process

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3.1 Introduction

Critical realism is the philosophical position that underpins this research study, which addresses the research question: *How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?* This philosophical position is explained at this stage of the thesis, as it informs the forthcoming chapters on literature, methodology, findings, discussion, recommendations, and the overall research conclusions. By explaining the critical realist position and its overall application to this research topic, the stage is set for its application to subsequent chapters within this thesis. While the ontological and epistemological premises of research are often addressed in the methodology chapter, I present them here for clarity and transparency, as they are integral to the description of critical realism and to the foundations and process of this research project. This chapter will proceed as follows: first, the philosophical position of critical realism as a research paradigm is outlined, followed by an explanation of its underlying tenets, which will then be applied to this research topic. Finally, the journey of critical realism throughout this research study and its implications on the research process are presented.

3.2 Philosophical position: locating critical realism

The purpose of this research is to address the research question: how does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? To situate this inquiry, it is necessary to acknowledge the research paradigm that underpins this study. Guba and Lincoln define

“paradigms as basic belief systems based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions” (1994, p.107). Paradigms represent what we ‘think’ about the world, with the naturalistic paradigm proposing the existence of multiple constructed realities, which result in some level of understanding (‘verstehen’) (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p.15). No single paradigm is superior; thus, debates have been ongoing since ancient Greek times. The term ‘ontology’ comes from the Greek term ‘to be’ (Bryman, 2012). According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), ontology refers to the belief about the nature of reality or the nature of society. Epistemology is a way of understanding and explaining ‘how we know what we know’ (Crotty, 2003, p. 8).

The epistemological perspective underpinning this research is concerned with the nature, source, limits, and validity of knowledge (Bryman, 2012), ascertained from the perspectives of children with disabilities and their parents. This research focuses on how children with disabilities experience their world when using the internet. The views of parents about their child/children’s internet use are also presented. To determine the theoretical framework underlying the digital world for children with disabilities, the distinction between positivist and interpretivist epistemological perspectives requires further explanation. Kolakowski (1972) and Giddens (1995) refer to positivism as the positive function of knowledge. Comte (1974) coined the term, claiming empiricism as its epistemological foundation, and the process of scientific methodology aligns itself with positivism. Park et al. state that *“the positivist paradigm is based in the assumption that a single tangible reality exists, one that can be understood, identified, and measured”* (2019, p. 691). Objectivity and dualism are essential within the positivist paradigm, whereby the researcher is completely objective throughout the research process; hence, positivists operate in a dualistic and objective manner (Park et al., 2019, p. 691).

Two schools of post-positivism include critical realism and social constructionism (Cruickshank, 2012). Constructionism is an ontological position that emphasises not only the impact of social interaction but also the continual evolution of this interaction within the social world. Explicitly, it refers to the active role of human beings in constructing social reality (Cruickshank, 2012). Simply put, social constructivism is concerned with assumptions relating to knowledge, reality and learning that are a distinct departure from positivism.

Knowledge originates from meanings that stem from individuals' social interactions and from their environment. Reality is created through human interaction and learning occurs when a social process is in existence (Kim, 2001). Unlike the positivist perspective, the social constructivist school of thought is not underpinned by dualism and objectivity. In contrast, knowledge is derived from interactions between people and their environments and resides within cultures (McMahon, 1997).

In summary, the social constructivist philosophical underpinning is one where the world has no meaning until it is constructed by individuals' social activity, whereas the positivist perspective posits that knowledge is truth, it is definite, it is harmonious with reality, and it is accurate (Park et al., 2019). From a research perspective within positivism, the development of the truth can only occur when there is a clear divide between the researcher and the research participant (Park et al., 2019). While Kim highlights that *“doing social constructivist research means making empathic and aesthetic connections with participants”* (2014, p. 1).

In this research study, critical realism is positioned between positivism and constructivism. It accepts that reality exists independent of our knowing of it or views about it (positivism); however, our understanding of reality is also shaped by our social and cultural experiences (constructivism). This means that reality in the context of this study is examined as something that exists in its own right whilst also recognising the meaning it holds in the lives of children with disabilities who are the primary focus of this research study.

Complexity exists at the meeting point of child protection and welfare, disability and internet use. Each distinct concept presents a wealth of information, but when combined, it yields a poorly understood research topic. It demands intricate attention to capture all three areas in a manner that ensures in-depth thought and analysis capable of representing this complexity.

Critical realism is positioned within this study as a balanced alternative to social constructivism and positivism. It is presented within this research study, influenced by the work of Stan Houston in his application of critical realism to the social work domain (Houston, 2001a; 2001b; Houston and Swords, 2022; Houston, 2023; Houston, 2024). Critical realism is presented as a means of capturing a deeper level of understanding about the topic of internet use,

disability, and child protection and welfare, where influential elements are not always observable but can have a profoundly impactful effect on the lives of children with disabilities who use the internet.

This research study encompasses numerous layers; however, within disability, child protection and welfare, and internet use, further layers exist, as described in the conceptual framework in the previous chapter. The complexity of each concept aligns with critical realism within this study as it is grounded in the idea of laminated systems in which layers of reality interact (Bhaskar, 2008). Critical realism provides a practical approach to navigating the complexity of this study, enabling the recognition of structural and cultural forces at play as well as highlighting the digital lived realities of children with disabilities, and their parents' perspectives on their digital lives.

Moreover, Bhaskar's early work in critical realism distinguished between structures, cultures, and relationality as key dimensions of the social world (Bhaskar, 1979). Margaret Archer extended this foundation through her development of the Structure, Culture, Agency (SCA) model, which emphasises the interplay between social structures, cultural systems, and human agency over time (Archer, 1995; 2000). In Archer's account, structures such as institutions, laws, and welfare systems and cultures, such as shared beliefs, norms, and values pre-exist individuals, but are continually reproduced or transformed through human action. This perspective shows that while people are shaped by cultural and structural contexts, they are not determined by them; rather, they exercise agency to respond to, negotiate, and sometimes reshape these contexts (Archer, 1995). Within this study, Margaret Archer's SCA framework is integrated, allowing for a deep examination of how child protection and welfare intersect with disability and internet use. Archer's (1995) SCA framework is further explored and utilised to present the findings of this research study in Chapter Eight of this thesis. At this stage, however, it is necessary to further examine the suitability of critical realism as the philosophical foundation for this study. The next section, therefore, provides a deeper explanation of critical realism as a philosophical position in itself.

3.3 Critical realism: core principles

It is not within the remit of this thesis to provide an in-depth overview of the critical realist perspective. Hastings, Sheppard, and Davenport (2025) comment

that critical realism is relatable, noting that they “*have observed that a desire by critical realist scholars to reach a complete understanding of the philosophy is always challenged by the depth and breadth of new knowledge to be acquired. The struggle is partly a result of the complexity and sophistication of the philosophy itself*” (2025, p. 7). I therefore offer insights on this research topic from an ‘*apprentice critical realist*’ lens (Hastings, Sheppard and Davenport, 2025, p.16). Authorities on this subject include Roy Bhaskar, Margaret Archer, Andrew Collier and Andrew Sayer. Their assumptions of critical realism inform this research study.

Critical realism (CR) was developed by Bhaskar in the 1970s and 1980s. It is a theoretical method advanced by other scholars and viewed as an alternative to positivist and interpretivist theories (Archer et al., 2013; Bhaskar, 2013). Furthermore, critical realism, like positivism, sees knowledge as something to be used, but unlike positivism, it does not agree that everything must be directly observed or measured; it looks to hidden structures and causes as well (Cruickshank, 2012). Critical realism is based on unobservable causal laws; it is complex; however, Easton’s description provides good insight when he states that “*critical realists assume that there is a real world out there. However, there is no way that such an assumption can ever be proved or disproved, as social constructivists, pragmatists and even positivists are ready to argue*” (2010, p.119). Critical realism, as applied to this study, accepts that a real world exists, but our understanding of it is always limited.

Likewise, Houston suggests that “*the work of Bhaskar has fundamentally challenged and transcended the assumptions which underpin empiricism and rationalism*” (2001b, p. 839-840). Moreover, De Souza explains that critical realism is “*distinct from mainstream perspectives in proposing that natural and social objects have underlying structures that are real and have causal mechanisms that produce events*” (2014, p. 142). Critical realism acknowledges the social constructivists' perspective of the individual transforming their everyday worlds; yet the role of social factors and structures sets critical realism apart, allowing for a more in-depth account of social life (Houston, 2001b).

The intention for this research study is to think “systematically, deductively and critically” (Houston, 2001b, p. 856) about internet-related child protection and welfare risks associated with disability. Systematic thinking is vital as the

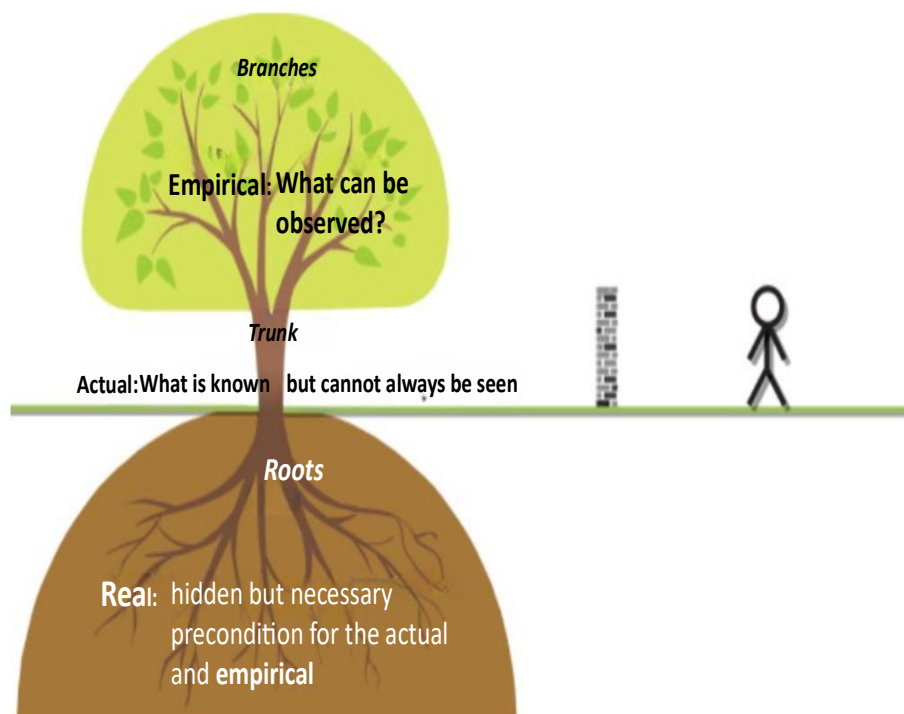
behaviour of children with disabilities is shaped by a series of social systems such as their families, the environment they live in, cultural, economic, political, and global mechanisms, as well as an independent reality. It is this form of reality that is of vital importance to critical realism; it is an independent reality that exists outside of human knowledge or our ability to perceive it (Wynn and Williams, 2012). *“In other words, the nature of reality is not easily and unproblematically apprehended, characterized, or measured, which means that humans experience only a portion of it”* (Wynn and Williams 2012, p. 790). Further clarity is offered by Andrew Sayer, who states that within critical realism, there exists an outside world: *“in both everyday life and social science, we frequently explain things by reference to causal powers”* (2000, p. 14).

Specific to this research inquiry, children with disabilities and their parents will provide insights into the nature of reality that is the digital world, with a focus that is ontologically oriented using a critical realist perspective. The research findings will exist within a universal open social world; the research participants and the researcher will experience only a portion of this world. It is essential, therefore, for the researcher to grasp the *“ontological depth of reality”* (Scott, 2013, p. 4). Bhaskar (1989) makes a clear distinction between ontology, which concerns what reality is (the intransitive) and epistemology, which concerns how we gain knowledge of that reality (the transitive). Bhaskar argues that ontology cannot be reduced to epistemology and coins the term *‘epistemic fallacy’* to critique positivist and constructivist approaches for reducing reality to human knowledge (Ton et al., 2021).

Kuhn and Carrigan note the lack of critical realist attention to *‘postdigital’* research despite its usefulness relating agency to *‘sociotechnical change’* (2024, n.p.). They argue that critical realism offers a number of tools that recognise various causal influences which operate at multiple stages of social reality. Bhaskar (1978) refers to these stages in critical realism as three distinct ontological layers: the empirical, the actual, and the real, which have significant epistemological repercussions. The empirical level refers to what we see and experience, while the actual level encompasses the underlying structures that may stem from the real level and are responsible for what we see and experience, or what we may not see or experience (which may be unobservable). Finally, the real level is the underlying structures and mechanisms responsible

for what we see and experience (Ton, 2021). Each domain interacts with and impacts the other domains. Figure 3.3.1 below provides a visual to help clarify Bhaskar’s critical realist ontological stratification.

Figure 3.3.1: Critical realism ontological stratification



Source: Adapted from Dyson and Brown (2005, as cited in Walsh and Evans, 2014).

The root layer shown above (the *real* domain) sets Bhaskar’s CR apart ontologically from other paradigms. Walsh and Evans refer to the “generative mechanisms” that contribute to our understanding of the ‘actual’, but which are not fully explanatory. Rather, they are ‘tendencies’ or causative agents” (2014, p. 2). Furthermore, Danermark highlights the complexities involved in CR disability research, stating that “*at the lower levels the phenomena in disability research are more often specific and related to natural sciences. At higher strata psychological and social mechanisms are involved which makes the analysis more complex*” (2002, p. 62). The next section applies critical realism in an effort to unravel its complexity and to demonstrate further its suitability to this research topic.

3.4 Critical realism applied to the research topic

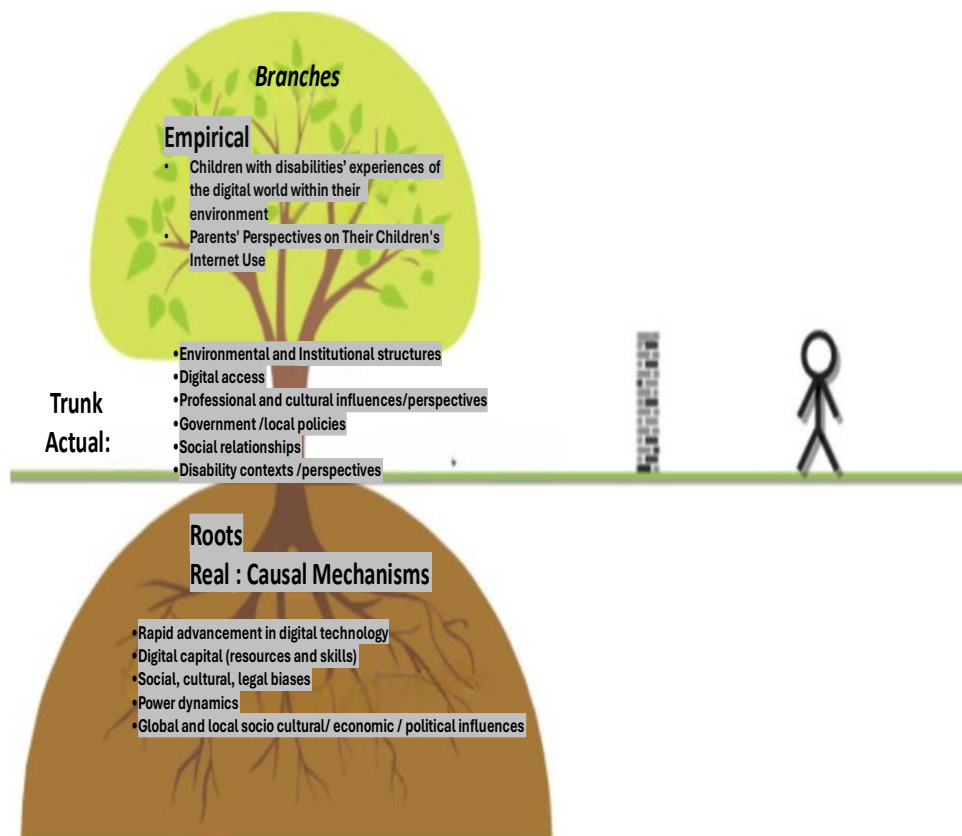
Figure 3.4.1 below illustrates the application of Bhaskar’s ontological domains to this research inquiry, specifically examining how child protection

and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities. Knowledge from all three of Bhaskar's ontological levels (empirical, actual, and real) is essential to understanding the complexity that exists at the centre of this research inquiry.

The presence of the internet in the lives of young people with disabilities exemplifies the critical realist perspective to the real domain. Here, I provide just one example, FOMO (*Fear of Missing Out*), a concept that is now commonly connected to the permanent availability of social media applications. FOMO has altered young people's social interactions; complexity exists but is not always observable, relating to pressure to be continuously socially switched on alongside the ephemerality of online social interactions (Park, 2018). The implication of FOMO for young people with disabilities, based on unique needs like dependence on the internet for social connection (Caton and Chapman, 2019; Hemsley et al., 2024), means FOMO is less visible but more impactful. Likewise, Park (2018) alludes to a 'hidden sphere' in a study about the internet use of young people in Australia and South Korea. This hidden sphere adds complexity to the already complicated online space inhabited by children with disabilities.

Hence, the use of critical realism as a good fit for this study. It delves deep into the lived experiences of children with disabilities at the empirical level. It considers their experiences in the context of structure, culture and agency at the actual level. Critical realism also considers their online interactions at the real level by accounting for hidden mechanisms that may stem from the socio-cultural, political, economic, educational and structural influences in their lives. Figure 3.4.1 below presents a visual of how critical realism is applied to this research topic.

Figure 3.4.1: Critical realism as a fit for this research topic



Source: Adapted from Dyson and Brown (2005, as cited in Walsh and Evans , 2014).

For clarity and as a means of further explaining CR as a robust philosophical position that fits with this research study, five core tenets are presented as they apply to children with disabilities' internet use in the context of child protection and welfare. The first tenet refers to reality existing independently of our social and physical entities, where objective and subjective values are reconciled (Clark, Lissel, and Davis, 2008). Within this research study, reality exists independently of human knowledge and the awareness of all human being including children with disabilities. A simple example here is the rapid development of the digital world. Technologies such as artificial intelligence continue to evolve, often operating within structures that extend beyond or are independent of children with disabilities' own account of them.

The second tenet refers to ontology as stratified to understand reality and causation (Clark, Lissel and Davis, 2008). Three distinct layers of ontology are named *the empirical*, *the actual*, and *the real*; these layers have substantial epistemological implications. Chapter 6 provides examples of this stratified

ontological premise stemming from the qualitative findings of this study. One such example is that hidden algorithms driven by tech companies' economic imperatives and profit motives negatively impact children with disabilities' internet use (real level) through the use of social media applications (actual level), evidenced through the lived experiences of children with disabilities captured through interviews (*empirical level*).

The third tenet refers to causation in a complex world, understood within an open system (Clark, Lissel and Davis, 2008). Complexity is evidenced in a universal open digital world, whereby hidden algorithms have enormous influence on children with disabilities' online experiences, such as keeping them online for longer (Roose, 2020; Kiberd, 2021; Aiken, 2022). This is further complicated by additional vulnerabilities due to disability (Balan, 2018; Borgström, 2021; Chadwick, 2019; Heiman and Olenik Shemesh, 2019; Wells and Mitchell, 2014).

The fourth tenet refers to agency and structure interactions as complex (Clark, Lissel, and Davis, 2008); this has a particular meaning when incorporated into the digital lives of children with disabilities from a child protection and welfare perspective. Sociocultural structures are impactful here and interact at multiple levels and in complex ways. For example, a child with a disability living in a family that embraces technological advances as empowering, liberating and beneficial to their child's social, emotional, and psychological wellbeing will have a very different digital experience from a child growing up in a family that views technological advances as dangerous and harmful to their child's wellbeing. Both examples have child protection and welfare implications, drawing attention to overly restrictive practices or overly liberal responses in the management of children's digital lives.

The agency of the child is an important factor here that is often left outside of digital discourse, a view held by WeProtect Global Alliance, a global movement of 320 members working to end sexual exploitation and abuse of children online (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2025). Moreover, ambiguity relating to the complexity of child protection and welfare risk for children with disabilities plays out for safeguarding professionals (El Asam, 2021a; Taylor, Slemaker, and Silovsky, 2020; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022). The application of critical realism within this study takes on a broad view, encompassing children with disabilities

agency within structures including safeguarding structures in the management of their digital lives.

A final tenet posited by Clark, Lissel and Davis (2008) emphasises the diversity of methodology in post-disciplinary study. Sayer posits that “*Compared to positivism and interpretivism, critical realism endorses or is compatible with a relatively wide range of research methods, but it implies that the particular choices should depend on the nature of the object of study and what one wants to learn about it*” (2000, p. 19). In the case of this research study, the nature of reality is situated at the complex intersection of disability, internet use, and child protection and welfare. The methodological approach taken is a mixed methods one. This approach is described in detail in Chapter 5. Having explained how CR is applied to the research topic, I now move on to explaining how it is applied to the research process.

3.5 Critical realism applied to the research process

The research process is guided by the premise that reality has depth, knowledge is partial and hidden mechanisms are revealed. The critical realist philosophical position has implications from the outset of this research study. For example, the literature review is informed by Pawson’s (2005) view of the existence of an independent reality. Chapter 4 presents causal mechanisms within the documentary analysis. Chapter 5 portrays how a critical realist lens is applied to qualitative and quantitative data collection processes. An exposition of the data analysis frame using a critical realist approach for the qualitative data component of this research project is provided in the second integrated publication in this thesis, positioned in Chapter 5. Furthermore, Appendix 3 provides a summary of data analysis, further exemplifying how critical realism was applied during the qualitative data analysis process of this research study.

Moreover, attention was paid to reflection and reflexivity as promoted by critical realism (Fryer, 2022; Archer, 1995), therefore, throughout the research study, there was critical engagement with assumptions, values and interpretations. This research study was also influenced by the emancipatory commitment inherent in critical realism, which emphasises the importance of dissemination as part of the research process (Hammersley, 2002). In accordance with this view, publications are integrated into this thesis, and

preparations are underway for further dissemination of research findings via peer-reviewed journals.

The critical realist ontological layered view of reality has further implications within this study related to the survey of parents of children with disabilities. The survey extends the explanation of how the agency of children with disabilities is shaped and enabled within the context of their interconnected relationships with their parents, highlighting structural and cultural influences that shape their digital experiences.

The methodological use of Archer's SCA framework portrays how critical realism is applied to the research process. Archer's SCA framework, which distinguishes between structural, cultural, and agential domains, encompasses the ontological premise of critical realism, reflecting a stratified reality. This ontological understanding is linked to the epistemological stance, which considers the qualitative and quantitative findings of this study. Together, these findings provide a layered understanding of the research topic. The method for analysing the findings through this framework is outlined in this chapter, rather than in the methodology chapter. The reason for this is that this chapter is already focused on the philosophical foundations of critical realism. In contrast, the methodology chapter addresses the broader methodological processes underpinning the entire study. The language and terminology used here align with critical realist principles and do not require the same introductory explanations that would be necessary in the methodology chapter.

The method employed to analyse the research data through Margaret Archer's SCA framework combined inductive reasoning (expressed views of children with disabilities to identify patterns and themes) with deductive reasoning (interpretation of these findings through a theoretical lens), known as retroduction (moving from data to theory and back again), to identify hidden mechanisms such as socio-structural and socio-cultural influences. This is referred to later in the methodology chapter as cycling back and forth within the data (Fryer, 2022; Wiltshire and Ronkainen, 2021). The following table 3.5.1 outlines the methodological alignment of Archer's (1995) SCA framework to the findings of this study.

Table 3.5.1: Margaret Archer's SCA Framework methodological alignment

Ontology Critical realism, stratified reality – Structure, Culture, Agency
Epistemology Qualitative & Quantitative Findings Composite narratives, 6 qualitative themes, parents’ survey (partial view of reality)
Method Analysis combines inductive reasoning (expressed views of children with disabilities to identify patterns and themes) With Deductive reasoning (interpretation of these findings through a theoretical lens) Known as Retroduction (moving from data to theory and back again to identify hidden mechanisms such as socio-structural and socio-cultural influences)
Theory Archer (1995) SCA Framework
Findings Constraints versus agency in the digital lives of children with disabilities (discussed in chapter 8).

Having explained how critical realism is applied throughout the research process, this chapter now concludes.

3.6 Conclusion

The contribution of this chapter to the thesis rests on the positioning of critical realism as the philosophical premise and explaining why it is a good fit for this research study. Its position between positivism and constructivism is set out to portray the strengths of critical realism, drawing on both paradigms to underpin the methodological choices made to answer the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? Ultimately, this chapter emphasises the ontological view of social reality as stratified and comprising distinct but interacting domains. The instrumental role of critical realism in this study is outlined in this chapter through its application to both the research topic and the research process. The epistemological stance is acknowledged, recognising that knowledge of this reality is socially constructed, shaped by the experiences of children with disabilities in their digital worlds. This chapter is dedicated entirely

to critical realism, it offers an essential backdrop to all chapters in this study, including Chapter 5 on methodology, highlighting its role in shaping the research design. The next chapter presents the critical literature review that was informed by Pawson's (2005) view of the existence of an independent reality.

Chapter 4 Literature Review

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4.3.2 Review of current literature related to theme1 & 2 online risks and data protection
4.3.3 Theme 3 Legal and policy frameworks
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4.3.10 Theme 10 Research
4.3.11 Theme 11 Parental influence
4.4 Parents' Views
4.5 Critical realist lens
4.6 Reflection
4.7 Conclusion

4.1 Introduction

The documentary analysis for this mixed methods research study incorporates three distinct components that represent the literature landscape upon which this research study is situated, each component informs the research study in different ways. The three components include (1) a scoping review, (2) a critical literature review, and (3) a focused literature review, which collectively provided a baseline to conduct this study which asked the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? The timeline for the documentary analysis is presented in Table 4.1.1 below.

Table 4.1.1: Timelines and purpose of the documentary analysis

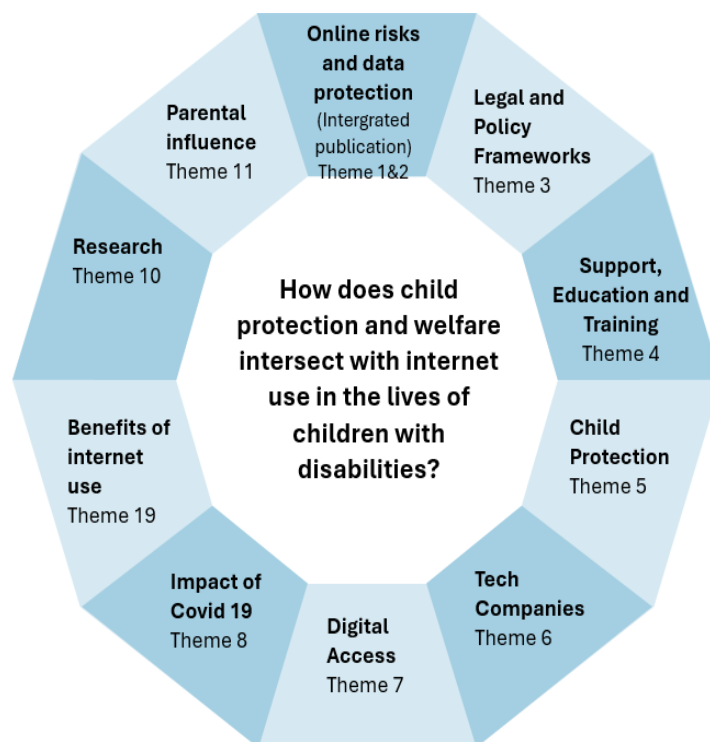
Date	Documentary Analysis	Purpose
January 2022	Scoping Review Grant and Booth (2009). Arksey and O'Malley (2005), and the Joanna Briggs Methods Manual for Scoping Reviews (Peters et al., 2021)	Informed research design
June 2022	Broad literature landscape Critical literature review Aromataris and Pearson (2014). Elements of the " <i>realist review</i> " (Pawson et al, 2005). The PICO mnemonic (Eriksen & Frandsen, 2018)	Informed entire research study
February March 2024	Parents views Focused literature review Cooke, Smith, and Booth (2012); Aromataris & Pearson (2014).	Informed quantitative survey design

A summary of the protocols used for all three literature components in the documentary analysis of this research study is available in Appendix 1. The findings of the scoping review were presented in the last chapter with a summary of their implications for the research study. Appendix 2 provides a Table with the 33 articles included in the scoping review alongside their CASP scores. The scoping review revealed a gap in the literature at the intersection of disability, child protection and welfare, and internet use. It highlights patterns and trends that require further investigation, which this broader critical literature review attempts to address.

This broader critical literature review is presented in this chapter, which forms the second component of the documentary analysis. The review identified eleven themes that highlight the broad and complex intersections of child protection and welfare, disability, and internet use. Some themes, such as digital access, online benefits, and risks, directly relate to the digital lives of children with disabilities, and their connection to this topic is easily identified. Others, such as data protection, legal frameworks, and the role of technology companies, require closer consideration, as they involve external structural and cultural forces, including parental practices, stakeholder data management, and ongoing policy and regulatory changes. These dynamics, although indirect, have

significant implications for the protection and welfare of children with disabilities in their digital lives. The significance of these themes will become clear as they are explored throughout this chapter. Figure 4.1.1 below illustrates the 11 themes that inform this literature review.

Figure 4.1.1: Literature review themes



The first two themes, named ‘online risk’ and ‘data protection’, are presented in this chapter through the first of two integrated publications within this thesis. This publication, co-authored with my supervisors, Dr. Susan Flynn and Dr. Julie Byrne, is titled “*Shifting Mindsets: A Critical Commentary on Child Protection and Welfare, Disability, and Online Risk Through Critical Literature Review*” and is published in *Child Care in Practice* (2023). This publication also serves as a starting point for addressing the gap in the literature around this research topic.

Next, the third literature component related to the documentary analysis is presented, shifting the focus from children with disabilities to their parents’ views about their internet use. The purpose of this component within the documentary analysis is to seek out parents' views about their children’s internet use. Finally, the application of a critical realist lens to documentary analysis is presented, followed by a conclusion. The following section details the background of this broader literature review that addresses the research

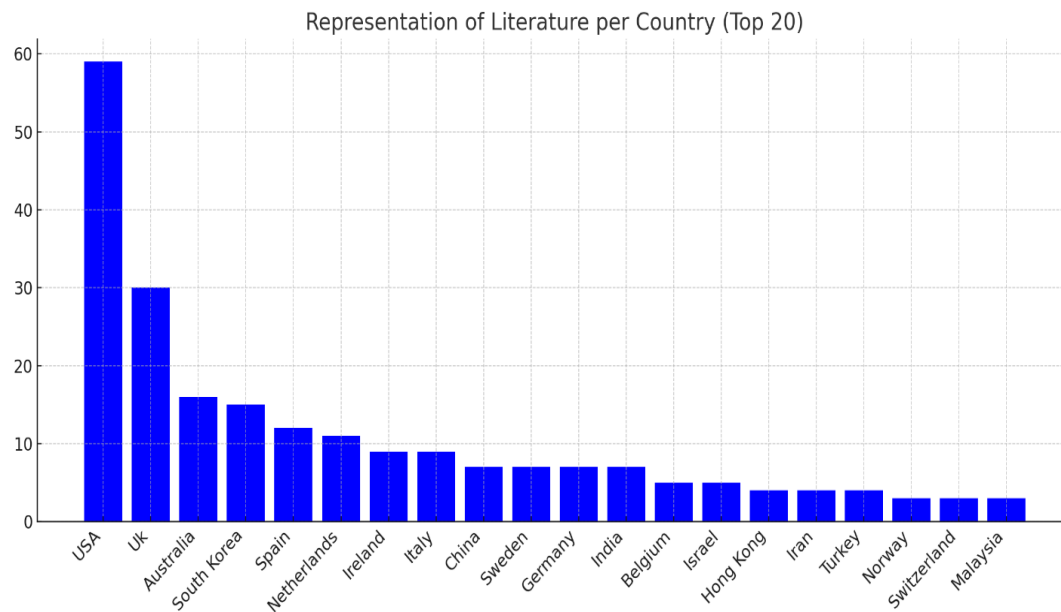
question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?

4.2 Critical literature review background

This critical literature review, conducted in the summer of 2022, took on a broad focus. A summary of the protocol for this critical literature review is presented in Appendix 1. It includes a combination of qualitative thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke (2006) and Gale et al. (2013) to systematically hand-code the final sample (242 documents) to extract themes. Okoli explains *“the distinction between inductive and deductive reasoning, where inductive reasoning takes a specific case and draws a general rule from that case, and deductive reasoning takes a general rule and then infers the situation of a specific case from that rule”* (2023, p. 1). This literature review adopted an inductive reasoning approach in which the findings from the scoping review presented in Chapter 2 revealed observations and patterns in the literature. These laid the foundation for this broader literature review, from which 11 themes emerged (see Figure 4.1.2 above) and are discussed in this chapter. While this literature review was informed by the realist perspective of Pawson (2005), which acknowledges the existence of an independent reality, the analyses did not test preset hypotheses (deductive reasoning).

This chapter opens with a published paper that explores the first two themes—online risk and data protection. Although the paper was published in 2023, following my initial literature review in 2022, I have incorporated more recent studies to ensure that each theme reflects the latest research on this topic. For the first two themes, the updated literature follows directly after the conclusion of the integrated published paper. The other nine themes are each paired with current literature within their own sections. This way, the chapter not only remains closely connected to the literature but also reflects the rapidly changing landscape in which this study was conducted. While the representation of disability is limited in the literature review, the digital landscape is thoroughly explored as a shared environment for all children, including children with disabilities across a wide variety of countries globally. Figure 4.2.1 below illustrates the top 20 countries (out of approximately 72) with the highest representation of literature on this topic, ranked from highest to lowest.

Figure 4.2.1: Top 20 countries represented in literature review



The proportion of literature related to the Global North and the Global South is presented in Figure 4.2.2 below. This chart aligns with Meekosha and Soldatic's (2011) view that most, and in this case, almost three-quarters of the literature and theories about disability originate from the Global North.

Figure 4.2.2: Representation of literature: Global North and Global South

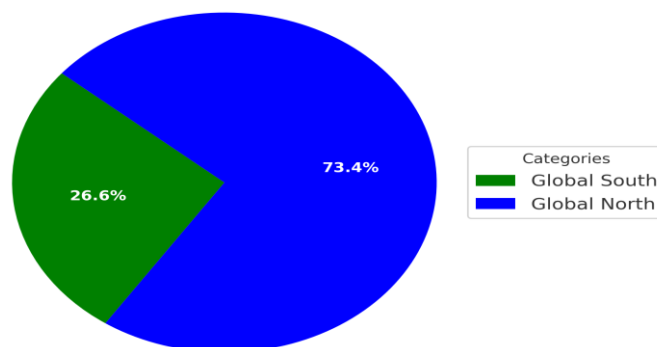
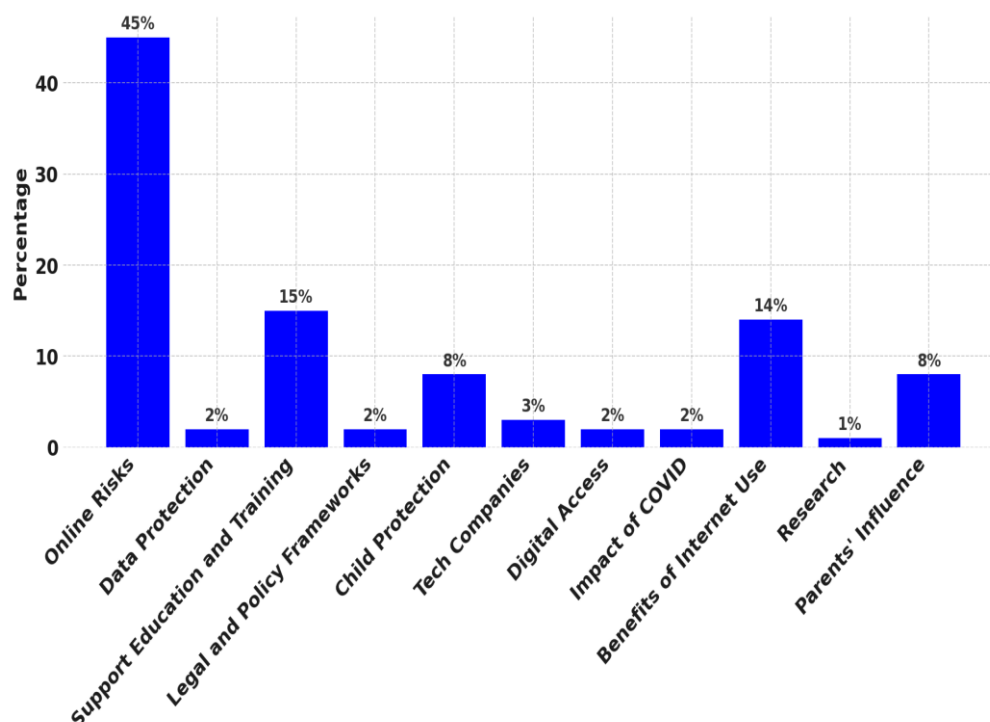


Figure 4.2.3 illustrates the percentage breakdown of the 11 themes that emerged from this literature review.

Figure 4.2.3: Percentage breakdown of 11 themes



Each theme is discussed in the next section in relation to the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?

4.3 Critical literature review findings

Online risk was the predominant theme, accounting for approximately 45% of the literature in this review. Here, I present, as the primary author, the first integrated publication within this thesis. I identified the article's focus, which presents two themes: 'online risk' and 'data protection', based on the literature review findings. Both of these themes have implications for child protection and welfare of children with disabilities using the internet and are portrayed within this publication. I received feedback from my supervisors, Dr. Susan Flynn and Dr. Julie Byrne, during the advanced stages of this paper's development. As previously mentioned, this publication presents the study's background, methodology, and conceptual framework in a manner that facilitates independent reading by readers outside of this thesis.

The following integrated publication is titled '*Shifting Mindsets: A Critical Commentary on Child Protection and Welfare, Disability, and Online Risk Through Critical Literature Review*,' published in *Child Care in Practice* (2023).

4.3.1 Theme 1 & Theme 2: Online risk and data protection

[Integrated publication]

Title

Shifting Mindsets: A Critical Commentary on Child Protection and Welfare, Disability, and Online Risk Through Critical Literature Review

Abstract

Critical commentary is presented at the complex intersection of child protection and welfare, disability, and internet use. A profound lack of research exists on this topic. Findings from a critical literature review focus on the theme of online risk which included the topic of child abuse/online solicitation, cyber victimization/cyberbullying, problematic internet use, and breach of data protection. The approach taken to review literature was adopted from Aromataris and Pearson (2014). Disabled young people are exposed to and impacted by harmful online content. Key points and online resources are highlighted for parents and guardians of disabled children, social care practitioners, safeguarding professionals, and educators. This paper attempts to advance scholarly discourse, policy, and practice, the authors arguing that it is time to shift our mindsets about safeguarding disabled young people online from thoughtful attention to purposeful action.

Introduction

While recent developments in Artificial Intelligence are bringing renewed attention to the impact of the digital world on our societies, the pervasive use of the internet in daily life has been a challenge to grapple with for some time. Not surprisingly, 84% of Europeans are using the Internet on a daily basis (Eurostat, 2022) and 99% of households with children in Ireland are going online every day. Over four in ten of those households are online all the time or almost all the time (CSO, 2022). This paper stems from a funded research project that focuses on the intersection between child protection and welfare, disability and internet use. Vulnerabilities and complexities that exist for disabled young people around their internet use are strongly evidenced in literature (Bălan, 2018; Borgström 2023; Chadwick, 2019; Heiman and Olenik Shemesh, 2019; Wells and Mitchell, 2014).

Attention to such complexities highlights the necessity for deeper consideration and research into the intersection between disability, child protection and welfare and internet use. The specific focus for this paper is to present a critical commentary on findings from a critical literature review carried out in June 2022. Within this, emphasis is placed on the theme of online risk whereby young people, inclusive of disabled young people, using the internet are exposed to harm online.

The authors are based in the Republic of Ireland. The Health Service Executive is the government body that funds services for intellectually disabled people either directly or through voluntary bodies in this country. Children Disability Network Teams are made up of specialised professionals who are situated throughout the Republic of Ireland providing services for children and their families aged between birth and 18 years of age with complex needs (HSE, 2023, para.4). Some definitions elucidated upon in this paper such as disability and child protection and welfare stem from the country in which this paper is set.

This paper will be of particular interest to parents and guardians of disabled children, social care practitioners, safeguarding professionals, and educators alike within the Republic of Ireland and beyond. It also attempts to advance scholarly discourse, policy, and practice around the complex intersection between child protection and welfare, disability, and internet use. Defining what is meant by these terms is essential to frame the context of this paper whilst highlighting key learning for practice. The rationale for this research is explained alongside details of the methodological process. Critical literature review findings highlight the harmful impact of internet use on disabled young people. Ultimately, the authors argue that it is time to shift our mindsets about safeguarding disabled young people online from thoughtful attention to purposeful action.

Context

The relevance of this paper lies in a profound knowledge gap on disability and internet use specific to child protection and welfare risk. The paper uses identity first terminology and language such as disabled young person/ children based on research by Sharif et al. (2022) whose survey of over 500 disabled

people from 23 countries supports this terminology. The paucity in research within this field is problematic for practitioners attempting to provide holistic, person-centred care for disabled children (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; El-Asam et al., 2021a; Taylor et al., 2020). A gap in expertise exists hence difficulties in assisting children with disabilities in the care sector to navigate the issues which occur while engaging in their digital world from social media apps to virtual gaming to technical access issues. The digital generational gap plays out on a daily basis within families (Dyer, 2018; Piguet et al., 2019; Sandberg et al., 2021), care environments (Dimitropoulos et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2020) and educational settings (DeLay, 2020; Goodyear and Armour, 2021).

There has been a rapid change in internet use with a consistent influx of new digital media options available. There has also been exponential growth in internet use by all children including disabled children since the Covid 19 pandemic (Adıbelli and Sümen, 2020; Chawla et al., 2021; Ozturk and Ayaz-Alkaya, 2021). These changes underpin the rationale for this paper. The lack of engagement of tech companies to regulate platforms (Dunn, 2022; Farid, 2018; Gurriell, 2021; Krishna, 2021) also highlights the importance of addressing this topic.

Establishing definitions for disability, child protection and the Internet is essential at this point. In keeping with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), the following definition of disability used in the Irish legislative context forms the basis of how disability is understood in this paper. The Disability Act, 2005, p. 2.-(1) states “Disability”, in relation to a person, means a substantial restriction in the capacity of the person to carry on a profession, business or occupation in the State or to participate in social or cultural life in the State by reason of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment”. This definition incorporates mental health, which aligns itself with this paper.

Furthermore, in terms of a conceptual framework, the affirmative non-tragedy lens within child protection and disability is supported (Flynn and McGregor, 2017). The affirmative model, as defined by Swain and French (2000), originates from the arts movement within disability and challenges social identity perceptions. Exploration of the division between the disabled person and the nondisabled person occurs explaining that the nondisabled person also

has impairments. The non-tragedy model examines disablement pointing out that hidden disabilities also have a significant disabling impact on individuals. Corker and Shakespeare indicate that “*the global experience of disabled people is too complex to be rendered within one unitary model or set of ideas*” (2002, p. 15). Therefore, in order to encompass the broad and complex nature of disability study, an all-encompassing, bespoke view of disability that acknowledges the non-tragedy model alongside the social model and human rights model will be the adopted conceptual framework of disability within this paper.

Child protection and welfare is defined as “government policy and its services working to prevent children being neglected and abused and to intervene when they are. In Ireland, as in many countries, the welfare of children is paramount” (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2019, para.2) whilst on the UNICEF (2022b) website underpinning the heading Protecting Children Online are the words every child must be protected from violence, exploitation, and abuse on the internet. UNICEF (2021a) identify online risk as exposure to numerous threats in terms of online content, online contact, and online conduct. Online content is defined as the child being “*a recipient of advertising content, spam, violent or hateful content, pornographic or unwanted sexual content*”. Online contact refers to a “*child as a participant in situations related to being bullied, harassed or stalked, receiving unwanted sexual messages, being groomed, meeting in person contacts first met online*”, whilst online conduct refers to a “*child as an actor engaging in hacking, gambling, bullying or harassing behaviour, sending sexual material to others*” (Hasebrink et al., 2009 in UNICEF, 2021a, p. 34).

Finally, the Internet is defined as the access to all digital media including influential, social and leisure applications. Media are digital when face-to-face communication is replaced by computerised networks (Chayko, 2020). Digital media can be used for instrumental, socialisation, and entertainment applications (Stavropoulos et al., 2021). Instrumental applications attend to real-life requirements such as employment and health. Socialisation applications are the use of online communities for the purpose of socialising inclusive of engaging in friendships, or sexual or romantic relationships and career development. Entertainment applications provide enjoyment such as digital games and audiovisual recordings.

Method

The approach taken to review literature pertaining to child protection and welfare, internet use and disability is adopted from Aromataris and Pearson (2014). The characteristics of this literature review began with the setting out of the research question using the PICO mnemonic (Eriksen and Frandsen, 2018). The search terms and phrases used for this critical literature review are delineated below (Table 1). The research question formulated was; *How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?* The following inclusion and exclusion criterion was adopted (Table 2). To address the “file-drawer problem” or “publication bias” (Haddaway and Bayliss, 2015) a grey literature search was conducted. Key scholars were emailed to obtain unpublished texts. Any documents retrieved were subject to the above inclusion and exclusion criteria. A comprehensive search of literature was completed for all relevant studies (published and unpublished, grey literature). This literature was evaluated for quality using the Caldwell et al. (2011) Research Critique Framework, as well as the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) framework (CASP Checklist, 2018). Subsequently, an assessment of the validity of the studies chosen was conducted, exclusion decisions based on quality were documented.

Table 1. Search Terms and Phrases

1	ConceptChild* OR “young person” OR minor OR baby OR infant OR juvenile OR kid OR minor OR toddler OR youngster OR youth OR adolescent OR boy OR girl OR teenager OR schoolboy OR schoolgirl OR young lady OR young man OR youth OR teen OR son OR daughter OR offspring OR progeny OR children OR adolescents OR youngsters OR kids OR teenagers OR young people OR youth AND
2	ConceptChildren with disabilities OR disabled children OR adolescents with disabilities OR disabled adolescents OR children with intellectual disabilities OR children with mental health issues OR children learning difficulties OR differently abled children OR children with special needs OR young person with disabilities OR disabled young person OR school children with disabilities OR teenagers with disabilities OR disabled teenagers AND
3	ConceptDisability* OR condition OR disorder OR defect* OR impairment OR illness* OR handicap* OR “learning difficulty” OR “learning disability” OR “intellectual disability” OR “special needs” OR disablement OR differently able OR special educational needs OR mental health problems OR mental health concerns OR disabled AND

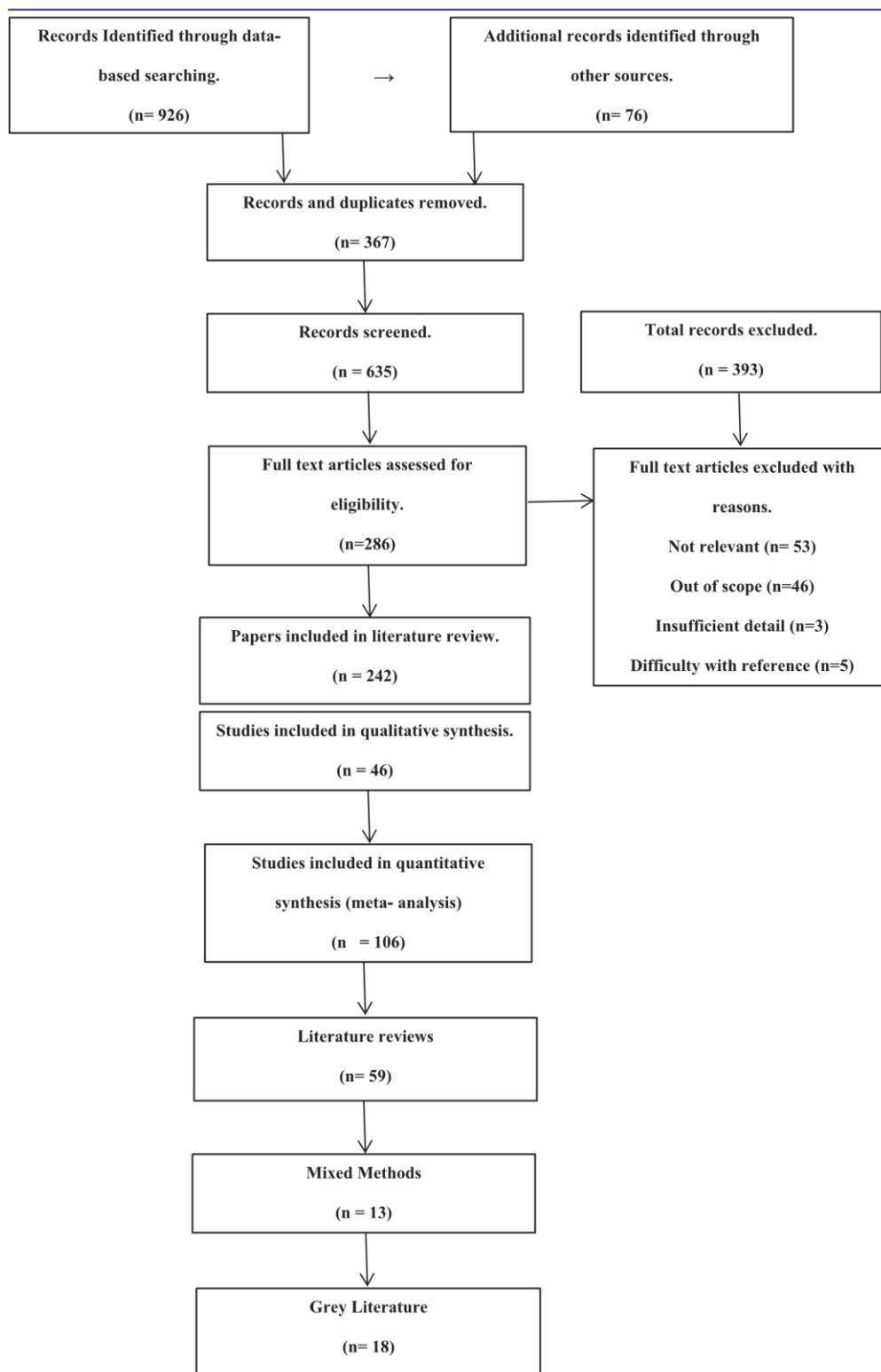
4	Concept“Child protection” OR welfare OR safeguard* OR protect OR cyber bullying OR child abuse OR child safety OR stalking OR child protection and welfare risks OR online grooming OR online child abuse OR online exploitation OR cyberstalking OR cyberviolence OR digital coercive control OR technology-facilitated stalking OR technology facilitated abuse OR technology facilitated coercive control OR online harassment AND ConceptInternet* OR “Internet Use” OR “world wide web” OR “social media” OR “global computer network” OR “Facebook” OR “TikTok” OR “Snapchat” OR “WhatsApp” OR “Instagram” OR “House Party”
5	

Table 2. Inclusion/ Exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion criteria:
- Studies based on qualitative and quantitative research strategies. - Literature of any publication status. - Literature derived from peer-reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters, reports and grey literature searches.	- Published in a language other than English. Literature that focuses on one or more identities without taking an intersectional approach as a central theme. - Research studies deemed to be of insufficient quality as determined using the Caldwell et al. (2011) research critique framework, as well as the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) framework (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018). - Journals that require hand searching. - Relevant literature prior to 2017—results retrieved were too high and the exclusion of literature prior to 2020 was applied on the 27/07/2022.

We used a combination of qualitative thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke (2006) and Gale et al. (2013) to methodically hand-code the final sample of 242 documents to extract themes, two of which, ‘online risk’, and ‘data protection’ are presented in this paper. We also considered elements of the Arksey and O’Malley (2005) approach for this literature review, as well as the development of protocols in line with the Joanna Briggs Methods Manual for systematic literature reviews (Santos et al., 2018). The PRISMA-ScR 2018 (Tricco et al., 2018) (see below) is used to inform the reporting of this desk-based literature review (Table 3).

Table 3. PRISMA- ScR Flow Diagram.



Summary

Studies with a focus on disability are highlighted in this summary however, the lack of research at the intersection of child protection and welfare, disability and internet use is noted in the literature. Hence, findings about online risk on young people in general are also presented. Moreover, the positive impact of internet use for disabled young people is evidenced and promoted ranging from social impact (Burke et al., 2021; McFerran et al., 2022; Pang, 2022), to therapeutic (Comeras-Chueca et al., 2021; Gerhardt and Smith, 2020; Samson et al., 2021) and educational impacts (Hirvonen et al., 2021; Singh and Balhara, 2021; Vassallo et al., 2022). However, 45% of all literature pertaining to the topic of disability, child protection and the internet in this critical literature review related to online risk, hence this is the core focus of this paper.

Types of online harm discussed under headings include child abuse / online solicitation, cyber victimisation/ cyber bullying, problematic internet use and breach of data protection. This evidence of online risk in literature is set against the backdrop of the added vulnerabilities that exist for disabled young people online (Alfredsson Ågren, Kjellberg, and Hemmingsson, 2020; Falla et al., 2021; Hafiar et al., 2020; Martinez-Cao et al., 2021; Volkova et al., 2019).

The availability of the internet is noted with Ahmadu and Kontagora (2022) referring to the global village in terms of how the internet has changed our social interactions. Likewise, Stocker et al. (2023) provide insights into the rapid expansion of broadband and devices that increase access to multimedia virtual applications. With this growing access comes a price and that is increased exposure to online harm.

Unique complexities exist at the intersection of disability, child protection and the Internet. Author and online technology expert Roisin Kiberd writes “I too am addicted to the screen. Sometimes I think I have spent so much of my life online that I was raised by the internet. I’ve forgotten where the borders are, where technology ends and where I begin” (2021, p. xi). Roisin describes the profound impact the internet has had on her teenage and young adult life explaining how her mental health and the internet merged sending her into a spiral that resulted in an attempted suicide. Roisin’s experience presents a stark truth about our current reality, which is that the digital world remains central to

many young people with disabilities and their social realities (Didden et al., 2009; Disability Federation of Ireland, 2020).

Child abuse / online solicitation

Wurtele and Kenny (2016) posit that as online risk has grown, understanding of these risks, such as online sexual exploitation, and ideas on how to prevent their negative impacts on young people are difficult to keep up with. Within this the exponential global growth of online distribution and production of child abuse material and grooming is heavily portrayed in literature (Ali et al., 2021; Chiu and Quayle, 2022; Gandolfi et al., 2020; Hong et al., 2020; Longobardi et al., 2021). Forni et al. (2020) warn that factors such as the length of time online and not knowing who exactly are friends online, relate to an increased risk of cybercrime including online sexual solicitation. The extent of online harm specific to solicitation and exposure to child sexual images is extensive and worrisome, the complex and diverse nature of online grooming plays out as offenders visit children's gaming sites as a way of finding minors in order to engage in sexual activity with them. Witting (2021) adds the dimensions of the transnational nature of child sexual abuse which was the exception prior to the internet, but currently it is the rule. Studies indicating increased susceptibility to online solicitation due to disability are presented by Powell et al. (2022) and Katz et al. (2021).

Cyber victimisation/ cyber bullying

As difficult and complex as online grooming is, the task of child protection and welfare professionals in keeping disabled children safe online is even more complex. Cyber victimisation and cyber bullying feature heavily within the literature (Audrin and Blaya, 2020; Craig et al., 2020; Dhungana Sainju, 2020; Díaz et al., 2021; Faura-Garcia et al., 2021; Olson, 2021). Within this Audrin and Blaya (2020) study of over 1,000 young people report the consequences of cyber victimisation as low self-esteem, anxiety, low social ability, impulsivity and deviant behaviour. The added vulnerabilities of young people with disabilities in relation to cyber bullying and cyber victimisation is highlighted by Wright and Wachs (2020) and Good and Fang (2015).

Problematic internet use (PIU)

In relation to problematic internet use (PIU), Park (2018) highlighted how online social interactions added complexity to normal social interactions for adolescents. Specific attention was paid to the global permanency of online content, the speed at which interactions occur, tethering between online and offline reality whereby adolescents question the genuineness of the “partial reality” that exists online (Park, 2018, p. 439). Here, Roisin Kiberd’s (2021) experience as delineated earlier is relatable. PIU also included online hate speech (Kaakinen et al., 2018; Miškolci et al., 2020), internet addiction (Erdal and Erdal, 2020; Han et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020) as well as Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO), (Park, 2018). The literature presents evidence of numerous complex, diverse and very serious risks for young people whilst using the internet, it can be of no surprise then that mental health concerns (included earlier in this paper in the definition of disability) are highlighted significantly throughout literature (Davoudi et al., 2022; Effatpanah et al., 2020; Nayak and Pai, 2022; Woon, 2020). Gassó et al. (2019), for example, analyse the relationship between sexting, mental health and online victimisation referring to teenagers as a vulnerable group. They found the presence of mental health problems, specifically depression and anxiety among adolescents who engage in sexting.

Validation for concern about the effects of exposure to online risk came in 2018 with a statement from the World Health Organization (WHO) that gaming disorder is a mental health condition in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (WHO, 2018). Such consequences for young people in relation to their potential exposure to online harm presents evidence of the necessity for practitioners, parents and policy makers to engage proactively and to become empowered through knowledge-sharing, information and training about internet use and the digital world.

Breach of data protection

Sharing information online is a growing trend (Brosch, 2016), a specific example is provided by Megan Mennes (2014) who blogs about her son Quinn who has a disability. She writes an open letter to a troll who refers to her child with Down syndrome as ugly on a website called “Mummy pages”. Lupton and Williamson (2017) draw attention to the fact that children have become objects

of digital surveillance, children are engaging in sharing information themselves with parents, teachers, care givers, family members, friends' health care professionals who are also sharing children's information on their behalf. Keen (2022) explains that parents and children's concepts of online privacy harm focused on social rather than technological concerns, thus presenting concerns for children's digital privacy.

The permanency and persuasive nature of data alongside the lack of regulation comes to the fore within this literature review (Biçer and Yıldırım, 2022; Fussey and Sandhu, 2022; Veretilnykova and Dogruel, 2021). Furthermore, debates about sharenting bear out whereby children's rights to privacy, protection and independence is jeopardised by their parent's online behaviour with little or no consequences (Alkhalouf, 2021; Demetis and Kietzmann, 2021; Iskül and Joamets, 2021) thus adding a further layer of complexity to safeguarding online.

Conclusion

UNICEF (2020a) highlight the role of technological companies and parents and caregivers, in a robust child protection system, advocating for listening to the views of young people as a means to problem solve and keep children safe online. Additional themes evidenced in the literature include support mechanisms and interventions, Covid 19 implications, legal frameworks and tech companies as well as digital access and research recommendations, these themes provide further insight into the topic of child protection and welfare, internet use and disability. It is not within the remit of this paper to elucidate fully on these themes, however, the premise of this paper is based on harmful online risk, therefore it is important to explain that new innovative and proactive support mechanisms and interventions exist and assist with online safety.

Such interventions as presented in the literature include technical, practical approaches (Majib and Perera, 2020; Mount et al., 2021; Sripada et al., 2022; Swansea University, 2023), therapeutic interventions (Comeras-Chueca et al., 2021; Gerhardt and Smith, 2020; Samson et al., 2021), as well as the promotion of education and training (Cardoso et al., 2020; Fedosov and Karnaukhova, 2021; Finkelhor et al., 2021; Goodyear and Armour, 2021).

Imperative to a shift in mindset is the role that COVID-19 played in increasing the level of online activity and the role, or lack thereof, that tech companies play to ensure all children, including disabled children, are kept safe online. Moreover, a lack of or outdated regulation places the responsibility for online safety at an individual level, be that the disabled child, their parent/ carer or guardian, or safeguarding practitioners. The lack of available evidence from the perspective of disabled young people is a limiting factor in this paper. Based on the evidence of online risk and harm from literature, key points and online resources outlined above may be useful in addressing child protection and welfare for disabled children using the internet (Table 4).

Table 4. Key learning points for practice.

-
- Internet use for all populations in society has grown and continues to grow exponentially.
 - Complexity exists at the intersection between child protection and welfare, disability and the internet warranting attention to the added vulnerability that disability presents within the digital world.
 - Evidence exists of an abundance of multifaceted online risks for young people using the internet inclusive of cyber victimisation, cyber bullying, child sexual solicitation, problematic internet use, and data protection concerns.
 - The impact of exposure to online risk in the lives of young people is far-reaching and a cause for concern.
 - Parents' behaviour online sharing information and images about their children (sharenting) creates an added layer of complexity to the work of child protection and welfare professionals.
 - Placing responsibility for online safety at a macro level (tech companies, governmental regulation) has not and will not keep disabled children safe online.

Links to useful resources for online safety applications

- . <https://www.barnardos.ie>
- . <https://families.google/familylink/>
- . <https://www.cybersafekids.ie>

- . <https://www.webwise.ie/>
- . <https://www.internetsociety.org/>
- . <https://www.internetlifeguard.org>
- . <https://www.ripplesuicideprevention.com/>
- . <https://hopenothate.org.uk/>

End of integrated publication

4.3.2 Review of current literature related to theme1 & 2 online risks and data protection

Following on from this article, where literature searches were conducted in 2022, the current literature about online risk in the fast-evolving internet landscape incorporates the now-ubiquitous use of artificial intelligence (AI). AI adds a new temporal layer that reshapes existing digital structures and has an impact on the internet use of children with disabilities, albeit that they may not be aware of this influence. For example, Easttom (2025) explains the positive aspects of artificial intelligence, including its importance in medical practice and diagnostics, fraud detection, and the management of smart grids. However, malicious and harmful use of AI includes the generation of child sexual exploitation material (CSAM), cyber-attacks, and deepfakes. In fact, Easttom states that 'AI can be used to identify and exploit vulnerable individuals online, such as for human trafficking, sexual exploitation, or labour exploitation by analysing social media profiles and patterns of behaviour' (2025, p. 499). This use of malicious and harmful AI, alongside the exposure to online risk already delineated, exposes numerous social digital risks, which have implications for safeguarding all children, including children with disabilities online.

In updating literature on data protection, it is important to note that at the time of this review, a complaints mechanism was to be established alongside an Online Safety Commissioner in Ireland. The intention was that online platforms would be obligated to make data available for public interest research and that children's online spaces would be made safe to ensure the protection of children from online risks and harmful advertising (Houses of the Oireachtas 2021). Currently, Ireland's online safety framework encompasses three laws that target online platforms: the EU Digital Services Act (DSA), the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act (OSMR Act), and the EU Terrorist Content Online Regulation (TCOR). The purpose of this framework is to lessen the exposure to illegal or online harmful content for internet users, especially young people, including children with disabilities. These developments reflect the political and structural forces that shape online safety frameworks for children with disabilities; however, these forces may or may not be apparent to them. The next section, which incorporates the third theme of the critical literature review,

addresses the implications of these regulations that encompass data protection.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Legal and policy frameworks

Legal and policy frameworks emerged as a theme within the literature review in 2022. Carrol (2020) explains how child pornography law in the US is outdated and does not consider the complexity of the internet, emphasising the distribution and production of child pornography rather than the possession of child pornography. Carrol states that *‘when Congress passed the Protection of Children from Sexual Predators Act of 1998, it did not quite envision a world in which cloud storage and the internet would radically alter and increase child pornography possession and dissemination’* (2020, p. 727). The dangers and impact of AI-generated sexual content, the production of CSAM, and the breaching of children’s human rights are prevalent in literature about online risks (Kokolaki and Fragopoulou, 2025; Terkovich, 2024; Trivison, 2024; Thiel, Stroebel and Portnoff, 2023). Moreover, because AI can generate fictitious children in its imagery, it blurs the lines and introduces complexity to legal frameworks (Lazaridou, 2025; Parti and Szabó, 2024).

Specific to the Irish context, the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill was debated in the Dáil (parliament) on 11th July 2022. At that time, the legal frameworks surrounding the internet and child protection concerns appeared complex, outdated, and in need of review. Furthermore, the topic of disability was absent from the literature and debate. There was strong hope that the new Bill would be the piece of legislation in Ireland to regulate online platforms: *“the Bill also provides for the issuance of guidance materials on the application of online safety codes and for the protection of minors and the general public from harmful online content and age-inappropriate online content”* (Government of Ireland 2022, p 1).

In December 2022, Ireland enacted the Online Safety and Media Regulation (OSMR) Act. Ireland's media and online safety regulator, Coimisiún na Meán, was established under this Act. Through public consultation, the Online Safety Code (OSC) was developed. This is a binding set of rules for video-sharing platforms, obligating them to block or remove harmful content, to protect young people, and to develop reporting systems. Platforms include Meta (Facebook and Instagram), TikTok and YouTube (Coimisiún na Meán, 2025). The EU Digital

Services Act holds platforms accountable for removing illegal content, ensuring transparency and algorithmic oversight. The EU Terrorist Content Online Regulation (TCOR) requires platforms such as X, TikTok, and Instagram to block or curb terrorist content or face large fines for non-compliance (Coimisiún na Meán, 2025). Considering the previously discussed online risks and data protection concerns, which highlight child protection and welfare risks for all children, including children with disabilities using the internet, having robust legal and policy frameworks is of vital importance.

Further legislative changes that protect children from online harm include the 'Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act,' which was enacted in Ireland in February 2022, also known as 'Coco's Law.' This law, viewed as instrumental at the time, made it an offence to distribute or publish intimate images without consent and with the intent to cause harm, with a penalty of 7 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine. The Act also addresses the taking, sharing, or publishing of images without consent; the penalty for this offense is a fine of €5,000 and/or imprisonment for up to 12 months.

The Criminal Justice Act (2017) enforces offences relating to information systems. Unlawful access to digital infrastructure and hacking under this Act are subject to penalties (Government of Ireland, 2017). Furthermore, as of 21 July 2025, video-sharing platforms in Ireland are required to implement age verification for adult content, and a political debate about raising the minimum age for social media use to 16 is currently ongoing.

Coimisiún na Meán identifies harmful online content as gratuitous violence, pro-suicide or self-harm content, 'challenges' that may be dangerous for a person's health, content that promotes or glamorises eating disorders, cyberbullying, and it is applied to video platforms, messaging applications, and social media. Enforcement powers equate to 10% of global turnover or up to 20 million in fines (Coimisiún na Meán, 2025).

In May 2025, the Irish Data Protection Commissioner fined TikTok €530 million, ordering corrective action, after finding that data belonging to TikTok users in the European Economic Area had been transferred to China (Data Protection Commission, 2025a). TikTok is appealing this decision (O'Donovan, 2025). In July 2025, the Irish Data Commissioner launched a further investigation

based on inaccurate information that TikTok had previously submitted to the inquiry (Data Protection Commission, 2025b). The outcome of this current investigation, as well as when and if fines will be paid, has implications for all social media platforms and the validity and authority of Irish online media regulation going forward. However, the 20th annual Internet Governance Forum, held in Norway in June 2025, revealed a consensus among speakers that meaningful change within big tech corporations would require more than traditional fines (Digwatch, 2025a).

Professor Mary Aiken, a well-known psychologist and author who studies the impact of technology on human behaviour, stated that seismic changes in digital safety were about to occur at the time of this review (Aiken, 2022) and that regulations related to online safety have now established firm boundaries and frameworks for child protection; however, what happens when these regulations are breached remains to be seen. From a global perspective, Bulger et al. (2017) drew attention to three regions, namely the United States, the EU, and South Africa. They claimed that regulatory failings in each region had more to do with how children are viewed in society, rather than the length of time the internet has been in existence in a country, its prevalence within a society, or the country's income rate. Bulger et al. (2017) refer to commonalities in childhood experiences across all nations, including experimentation with peers, curiosity, a sense of invincibility, and the development of their own agency outside of their parents' supervision.

According to Bulger (2017), these commonalities create complex legal dilemmas. The development of legal frameworks as child protection measures to keep children safe has led to the criminalisation of peer-to-peer sexual behaviour. Legislation and regulatory policy must consider these dilemmas in protecting children, including children with disabilities, from online harm while also considering their digital agency (Bulger, 2017).

Moreover, referring to '*Flaws in the Law*', Gurriell (2021, p. 844) reported that the US and Somalia are the only two countries that have not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which obligates countries to take measures to protect children from all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation. The rights of the child include the rights of children with disabilities; however, socio-political forces exist impacting children's rights and agency in the digital

world. Gurriell explains that on a comparative basis with other countries in the world, the US is one of the highest producers and consumers of child abuse material, and that there was an increase of 15000% in relation to abuse files being sent to the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) between 2005 and 2020. Furthermore, she refers to India, which evidenced a 95% increase in child pornography consumption related to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was clear, at the time of this literature review in 2022, that although some progress was being made in relation to establishing legal frameworks to tackle online abuse, a lot more needed to be done. Somalia has since ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, so the US remains the only UN member state that has not ratified the Convention (Harris, 2024).

Livingstone, Carr and Byrne argue '*against an age-generic (or 'age-blind') approach to 'users,'*' because children have specific needs and rights that are not met by governance regimes designed for 'everyone' (2016, p. 6). This problem is further impacted by socio-cultural forces in the form of the often hidden influence of ableism. Regulation, policy framework, and digital tools have been developed to make the digital world safer, but ableism means that the lived experiences of children with disabilities are not just overlooked; they are simply not considered at all. The agency and views of children with disabilities about their internet use were absent in the literature in 2022, and they continue to remain underrepresented in 2025; their specific needs and rights are also not met by governance regimes designed for 'everyone' (Livingstone, Carr and Byrne, 2016). Easttom (2025) posits that the primary defensive strategy currently is diligence, hence the importance of all internet users, including children with disabilities, remaining involved in the development of support tools, education, and training to stay safe online, which is the focus of the next theme that emerged from this literature review.

4.3.4 Theme 4: Support, education, and training

In the context of the literature reviewed, this theme is broken into two sections. The first is the mechanisms available at the time of this review that support children's safe internet use. For example, programmes that attempt to mitigate against child sexual abuse material online are represented well in the literature. The second component of this theme is the educational and training perspective, which reflects engagement by parents, practitioners, and children

in online safety measures. Specific reference to children with disabilities was absent; hence, the literature relates to how child protection and welfare intersect with the internet use of children in general, and this includes children with disabilities.

Placing restrictions on or limiting children's time online is represented in the literature as a means of supporting children to manage their internet use (Kahimise and Bhuna 2019; Lambert et al., 2022). For example, Schmuck (2020) reports a positive correlation between digital detox apps and problematic social media use. However, support mechanisms that assist with the detection, management, and regulation of online sexual abuse dominate this theme. Stathis and Marinakis (2022) argue that utilising modern tools to investigate sexual offences would speed up the process of discovering evidence, sentencing offenders, implementing rehabilitation, and, most importantly, locating victims. The tool advocated is a voice stress analysis used to identify previously undetected sexual offenders. Moreover, Holt et al. (2020) promote strategies that include upskilling those involved in investigating cybercrime, alongside gaining essential skills in acquiring the necessary equipment to address the complex nature of child exploitation material. Numerous examples are provided in the literature that concentrate on managing and understanding offender behaviour as a means to keep children safe online (Kleijn and Bogaerts, 2020; Forni et al., 2020; Hunn et al., 2022; Helpingstine et al., 2021).

Communication and linguistic patterns are represented in literature as tools to identify child sexual offenders (Van Der Bruggen and Blokland, 2021; Stathis and Marinakis, 2022). For example, Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2020) found that linguistic patterns used by convicted online groomers can provide important insights into offenders' use of language whilst targeting minors online. Moreover, in an initiative aimed at fortifying the virtual defences against online grooming, Swansea University leads out with Project DRAGON-S (Developing Resistance Against Grooming Online – Spot and Shield)' (Safe Online, n.d., para 3). This initiative, led by Professor Lorenzo Dus, uses linguistics and AI to empower law enforcement to recognise grooming that occurs online in real-time (Dragon Spot). Dragon Shield provides specialised training for safeguarding professionals in recognising grooming tactics used by offenders, leaving them better equipped to support and protect children from online grooming (Safe Online, n.d.). The

importance of these tools for online safeguarding, considering what is known about the child protection and welfare risks for children with disabilities online, cannot be underestimated.

Currently, child sex offenders are using AI to produce and disseminate CSAM, presenting challenges for safeguarding professionals and law enforcement in keeping children safe online. However, AI has also demonstrated enormous potential in identifying offenders (Safe Online, n.d.). Globally, jurisdictions are addressing this threat. The UK is leading the way in the creation of laws against AI sexual abuse offenses to protect children from the generation of AI images by predators (Gov, UK, 2025).

The importance of education and training for children, parents, and professionals is well documented in the literature (Barrense-Dias et al., 2022; Schoeps et al., 2020; Gandolfi, 2020; Goodyear, 2021; Finkelhor et al., 2021). The instrumental role of educational organisations in providing supportive interventions is highlighted by Oloo (2022). Meanwhile, Dorasamy et al. (2021) report that parents rely on and trust schools to educate their children about the dangers of social media, specifically regarding online grooming and sex education. Within this, Goodyear and Armour promote reciprocal learning between teachers and their students, they state that *“teachers also need to be empathetic rather than antagonistic, and position themselves as ongoing and continuous learners who collaborate with young people to co-construct digital pedagogies”* (2021, p10). Well-resourced schools are more likely to deliver comprehensive digital literacy and child protection programmes, while schools in disadvantaged communities often lack infrastructure, training, or funding to implement effective supports (Starks et al., 2023; NCSE, 2016). For children with disabilities, these disparities are magnified, research shows that assistive and educational technologies remain unevenly available and inequitably distributed, particularly for those from low-income families (Lynch, 2024; Zubairi et al., 2021). These socio-economic inequities intersect with disability to constrain agency in digital spaces, leaving children doubly disadvantaged when protective tools as well as inclusive educational digital safety resources are absent or limited.

Support tools, as well as training and education for children, parents, safeguarding professionals, and educators, are of immense importance in online

child protection and welfare of all children, including those with disabilities. From a legislative standpoint, the move towards more robust regulation in recent times has helped make the digital landscape a safer place for all children. The current status worldwide regarding online safeguarding is presented in the next and fifth theme of this literature review, titled 'Child Protection'.

4.3.5 Theme 5: Child protection

Clark et al. (2020) in the Lancet Commission advocate for children to be placed at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals, so that children's rights and entitlements are a shared human endeavour and the onus is placed on countries to 'make sure children grow up in safe and healthy environments, with clean water and air and safe spaces to play' (2020, p. 605). The digital playground is an important concept here, with the ubiquitous nature of the digital world in the lives of children globally well documented in research (Daniels, Sharma, and Batra, 2021; Craig et al., 2020; Das-Friebel, 2020; Fang et al., 2022; Marengo et al., 2021; Taylor, Slemaker, and Silovsky, 2020; Lo et al., 2021).

Child protection and welfare measures within the digital world include the availability of and access to safety information and support mechanisms for children with disabilities who are exposed to online risks and harm, which were presented earlier in this chapter in the article titled '*Shifting Mindsets: A Critical Commentary on Child Protection and Welfare, Disability, and Online Risk Through Critical Literature Review*'. The theme of child protection highlights the need for safeguarding measures, while acknowledging the complexity of this task for safeguarding professionals, parents, and policy-makers. Representation of children with disabilities in the literature was absent within this theme. A challenge exists for safeguarding professionals to address online child protection and welfare concerns for children with disabilities in this space, where they are poorly represented and understood.

El Asam et al. (2021a) note the lack of attention to how such online safeguarding occurs for vulnerable service users in England in terms of identification, referrals, and responses to them. Moreover, Kamenskaya and Tomanov (2022) question the human brain's ability to keep pace with digital online safeguarding in terms of its capacity for identification, referrals, and responses to these issues, as well as their impact. A further dimension is the

lack of structured training for safeguarding professionals (El Asam et al., 2021a; Taylor, Slemaker and Silovsky, 2020; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the lack of multi-agency collaboration within child protection services is highlighted by Babvey et al. (2021), who describe how, during the COVID-19 crisis, safety measures adopted by countries may have led to an increase in violence against children. The new normal, characterised by increased online interactions, as noted by Babvey (2021), necessitates additional measures to safeguard children (including children with disabilities) from harm. Here, Gross et al. (2021) and Fushtei et al. (2020) advocate for the use of computer technology and internet resources by safeguarding professionals.

However, professionals, including in the court system, struggle to understand the many complexities that surround child sexual offences within the age of digital communication. O'Connor (2021) advocates for training, highlighting the digital divide, whereby the majority of the judiciary did not grow up in the digital era. Furthermore, El Asam et al. (2021b) explain that there is a narrow focus on child sexual exploitation within online child protection services, with other aspects of online harm being neglected, such as grooming and the sharing of explicit images.

Child protection comes to the fore as Mount et al. (2021) recognise the exponential growth of online distribution and production of child abuse material globally. They offer a unique approach to the development of an evidence-based tool to support and enhance law enforcement agencies in effectively identifying child abuse material. The 'CyberTip' alerts tool positively impacts the safety of the child victim and the capabilities of the child protection and welfare teams investigating.

The theme of child protection extends to parents' online behaviour and was referred to earlier in the article about online risks. Attention was paid to how parents' behaviour can jeopardise children's rights to privacy, protection, and independence (also known as 'sharenting'), with little or no consequences (Alkhallouf, 2021; Isköl and Joamets, 2021). Children's digital footprints are now created even before birth through online gender-reveal announcements. Little is known about children's perspectives on this kind of sharing; however, Ní Bhroin et al. (2022) note that parents generally do not seek their children's consent

before posting information about them online. Even with regulations such as the U.S. Children's Online Privacy Protection Act and the European General Data Protection Regulation, the safeguarding implications of children's digital privacy demand urgent attention. Here, the case of Spencer Elden, now 34 years old, whose image features as a naked baby on the front cover of a music album by the band Nirvana, exemplifies how parents' behaviour can have an impact on their children's lives years later. Elden's parents were paid for his image; however, his case rested on the point that he could not give consent as a baby for the image and that Nirvana had engaged in 'child pornography'. Elden lost the case because he had left it too long to file his lawsuit (Wilson, 2023). These examples illustrate structural forces that may remain hidden but are nonetheless impactful on the digital lives of children with disabilities.

The UNCRC General Comment No.25 (UNCRC, 2021), which is the application of the UNCRC to the digital environment, includes children's rights to be safeguarded from harm caused by sharenting practices. The phenomenon of sharenting is situated in a complex and poorly regulated digital landscape, which poses challenges for child protection and welfare professionals worldwide.

Globally, child protection and welfare related to online safety has emerged as a critical area gaining scholarly attention (Oguine, 2025; Jang and Ko, 2023; Schelenz, Stapf and Heesen, 2023; Moti et al., 2024; United Nations, n.d-a.). However, online child protection and welfare related to disability remains poorly understood. Legislation delineated earlier refers to the Irish perspective: legislation in a global context include the UK Online Safety Act (Government UK, 2023), EU Digital Services Act (European Commission, 2022a), the 2021 Australian Online Safety Act (Australian Government, 2024) and the US Safe Tech Act, (Congress Gov, 2023) which are now instrumental in regulating the digital landscape.

Although AI was not represented in this literature review, Negreiro and Gabriela, (2025) report that 'Children are intensive users of digital tools such as artificial intelligence. Generative AI – AI that can create new content such as text, images, videos and music – is becoming increasingly sophisticated, making it difficult to distinguish user-generated content from AI-generated (synthetic) content' (2025, p. 1). From a child protection perspective, according to Negreiro

and Gabriela (2025), the implication is that AI may be risky, as children are still developing their cognitive capacities. They call for stronger AI literacy for children, parents, and educators, alongside the implementation of AI legislation and better efforts by industry to ensure children's safe use of AI.

It is noteworthy that the European Commission has released a code of practice for general AI models, laying the groundwork for the implementation of the AI Act, which is scheduled to take effect in August 2025. This landmark act is currently facing industry pressure: the European Computer and Communications Industry Association, which represents the interests of companies such as Apple, Meta, and Google, has called for the Act's implementation to be delayed, citing the tech industry's lack of readiness (Digiwatch, 2025b).

As the tech industry works on delaying AI regulation, the child advocacy landscape, works tirelessly in the interests of children's digital rights. Such agencies include Save the Children, WeProtect Global Alliance, Eurochild, UNICEF, Safe Online, and the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children. The innovative work of the Digital Futures Commission (DFC) and the 5Rights Foundation in the '*Child's rights by design*' principles (Digital Futures Commission, 2022) is an important step forward. Child's Rights by Design is grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and stems from UN General Comment 25, providing an 11-principle vision to help innovators embed children's rights in the design of digital products and services. Furthermore, for safeguarding children with disabilities using the internet, Hammond, D'Arcy, and Polizzi, (2024) and Hammond, Polizzi and Bartholomew (2023) advocate for building digital resilience in safe and supportive spaces.

In a paper to which I contributed (Flynn, Doolan Maher, and Byrne, 2025), attention is drawn to the poor connection between online abuse, disability, and the online risk versus opportunity debate. The notion of risk competence through a social pedagogical perspective, taking on the non-tragic view of disability, is advocated in this paper as a tool for parents and practitioners to address protective versus empowerment debates that are inherent within child protection and welfare of children with disabilities using the internet (Flynn, Doolan Maher, and Byrne, 2025). Returning to the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children

with disabilities? This theme, ‘child protection’, presents many concerns and challenges related to safeguarding all children, including children with disabilities online. The role the tech industry plays in addressing internet use and child protection concerns is crucial, and is the focus of Theme 6 in the following section.

4.3.6 Theme 6: Tech Companies

The responsibility of tech companies that provide social media platforms to keep children, including children with disabilities, safe online is a contentious topic. Evidence of online risk and exposure to harmful content for children with and without disabilities has been presented earlier in this review; however, tech companies are slow to address such online risks and harms (Farid, 2018; Dunn, 2022).

Examples of the internet's massive influence on individuals are portrayed by the New York Times eight-part podcast series titled ‘Rabbit Hole’, presented by journalist Kevin Roose. This exploration of the digital world and the internet offers insights into the responsibilities of tech companies regarding their algorithms. The podcast follows the story of a young man who shifted from passively watching YouTube videos to creating his own left-wing YouTube channel, whilst explaining the impact of algorithms and digital language. The man explains his mental health struggles, such as feelings of isolation, alienation, and anxiety, and how online spaces had become both a refuge and a risk. His story captures how his mental health disability intersected with his internet use. Socio-cultural and socio-digital risks, in particular, algorithm bias shaped his online experiences and contributed to feelings of online isolation and anxiety.

The podcast also presents an interview with a prominent YouTuber, Felix Kjellberg, known as PewDiePie. It examines his perspective on the 2019 mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, where the shooter stated one of PewDiePie’s viral catchphrases while live-streaming his killings. This example is presented to exhibit extreme online behaviour and radicalisation. However, not all such behaviour is related to the perpetrator having a disability, which is the case here. Another interview in the series, with the (now former) YouTube CEO, Susan Wojcicki, offers valuable insights into the decisions made by tech companies about what content is trusted and what is questionable or dangerous

online. She stated *“my focus on responsibility is probably one of the most important things I'll do in my life because I think we live at this time of tremendous change [...] there are really important decisions to be made about what this future will hold and what will platforms be and how they'll operate in the future - and those rules haven't been written yet. We're in the process of writing them.”* The New York Times (2020, n. p.).

Five years on, it may appear that we are still in the process of writing these rules. However, more robust regulatory measures, such as under the EU Digital Services Act and the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act, mean that tech companies are now being forced to adhere to these regulations or face fines (Data Protection Commission, 2025a).

The potential for harm by online platforms is exemplified in the case of two sisters in the US who were victims of abuse by their father at a young age. Gurriell (2021) explains how the images, preserved on the internet, constantly add to the torment of the survivors. The impact on their mental health is described by the older sister when she says she is *“relentlessly haunted with the fear of being recognised from the images. That's in my head all the time — knowing those pictures are out there”* (Gurriell, 2021, p. 840). Moreover, Gurriell (2021) argues that a lack of action on the part of tech companies has allowed for an enormous amount of harmful videos and images to remain on the internet. Of particular concern, she explains, is how offenders can pick and choose platforms to use, thereby decreasing their chances of detection, as different companies handle illegal material in different ways.

The complexity of the internet, the dark web, advances in technology, legal protections associated with encryption, and the increased availability of communication technologies such as Signal and Telegram, combined, present enormous challenges for law enforcement in dealing with child exploitation material. Such challenges portray a complex safeguarding landscape for children with and without disabilities. The importance of partnership between law enforcement and technological companies is promoted and deemed essential by Holt et al. (2020) to fight against child exploitation material (CEM). They argue that the technology industry must play a vital role in limiting *“the availability of CEM. Collaborations and partnerships exist that demonstrate tech companies' strategic efforts to reduce CEM, such as the implementation of*

scanning tools against websites to proactively identify CEM”(2020, p.6). Gurreill (2021) explains that Facebook, now Meta, is responsible for the majority of child sexual abuse reporting, however, a change in Facebook’s policy relating to privacy settings limited the detection of child sexual abuse material. Krishna (2021) reported that in 2019, the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) received over sixty-nine million reports of CSAM, much of which came from platforms such as Google and Facebook. This widespread availability of harmful content online on platforms that are commonly used by children, including children with disabilities, exhibits the serious nature and complex task associated with digital safeguarding.

Moreover, Borrás Perez (2021) found that tech companies referred to as “*Big Tech*” (2021, p. 550) are negatively affecting adolescent sexual health by allowing misinformation to spread on their platforms and creating roadblocks to public health information. He argues that tech companies must be held accountable and should work collaboratively with health experts to provide accurate and appropriate sexual health information on their platforms. Here, it is evident how biological forces play a part in the digital safeguarding of all, including children with disabilities, related to the dissemination of health information. The literature strongly reflects the view that tech companies could and are able to take greater responsibility for making their platforms safer for all users, including children with disabilities, even if this group is not explicitly mentioned (Gurriell, 2021; Perez Vallejos et al., 2021; Krishna, 2021; Aiken, 2016). However, it is clear that socio economic forces push forward when Alex Cooney, CEO of Cybersafe Kids, stated that ‘*Big Tech empires continue to make billions without properly considering the impact their products are having on young children*’ and that she looks “*forward to the first company that makes a real stand and truly meaningful investment to prioritise children’s safety over user growth and advertising revenue*” (Donnelly, 2022, n.p.).

A pertinent safeguarding question posed by Özkul et al., asks ‘How can the digital world uphold children’s best interests?’ (2025, para 2). Their answer is grounded in and guided by upholding the rights of the child as set out by the UNCRC. Ten key takeaways are provided by Özkul, among them the fact that tech companies also hold responsibility for upholding children’s rights; simply put, tech companies need to prioritise children’s best interests, including those

with disabilities, as well as comply with minimum legal obligations. Regulations vary by region, creating loopholes that complicate oversight of digital services and products across borders.

Recent measures to protect children online include the introduction of effective age checks or age verification systems. Children may be prevented from accessing a site, an app, or a piece of content. Australia, the UK, and several European countries, including Ireland, along with some states in the USA, are enforcing age verification laws this year (2025). Ofcom, the UK media regulator, states that *“Robust age checks are a cornerstone of the Online Safety Act [...] Age assurance methods – which include age verification, age estimation or a combination of both – must be ‘highly effective’ at correctly determining whether a particular user is a child”* (2025a, para. 4). Emerging literature, however, highlights how age verification methods, specifically those using facial or voice biometrics, may disproportionately exclude children with disabilities due to non-inclusive design principles (Livingstone et al., 2024; Bhatia and Aboulafia, 2024).

The responsibility is with tech companies to adhere to these robust age checks or face significant fines. In the case of UK tech companies, fines can be up to £18 million or 10% of their worldwide revenue, whichever amount is the greatest (Ofcom, 2025b). Fines are set against the backdrop of social media companies making enormous profits from children’s internet use. Raffoul et al. (2023) report that social media platforms, including Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter, generated nearly \$11 billion in revenue from advertising based on users aged 0-17 years in the USA during 2022. Current regulations attempt to hold the tech industry to account in a move towards safer online experiences for children with and without disabilities who access the internet. The importance of safe digital spaces is undoubtedly essential for children with disabilities. The complexity of creating a safe digital space is exemplified within this theme, as profit-driven agendas of tech companies test the regulatory environments designed to safeguard children online. Moreover, access to safe digital spaces is not a given for children with disabilities and forms the topic of the next theme (Theme 7), titled 'Digital Access'.

4.3.7 Theme 7: Digital access

The theme of digital access in this literature review presents, albeit limited, findings related to disability. For example, Glumbić, Đorđević, and Brojčin (2022) explain that one of the digital inequalities is the disparity in skills, access habits, and benefits between people with disabilities and those without disabilities, creating a digital divide. The cost of information communication technology and access to specialised equipment, for example, can create challenges for persons with disabilities (Raja, 2016).

UNICEF (n.d.-a) reported that the majority of the 240 million children with disabilities have not had access to available learning opportunities and assistive technologies. Alper and Goggin concur, stating that ‘technologies, especially digital ones, are essential for many people with disabilities to gain key literacies and fully participate in society, however, they remain out of reach for most’ (2017, p. 727).

Furthermore, Alper argues that technology is often viewed as universally beneficial for the ‘voiceless’; however, they are still disempowered by structural inequalities such as class, race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (2017, p. 3). Access to technology devices themselves was not an issue in a study by Wu et al. (2014); rather, the lack of provision of instructional programs hindered children with disabilities' access to technology in schools in Taiwan. Lussier-Desrochers (2017) also noted that more support was needed for people with intellectual disabilities to interact with the digital environment. Within this, Alfredsson Ågren, Kjellberg, and Hemmingsson (2020) urge a broader conceptual understanding of digital accessibility that recognises cognitive abilities as well as social and physical abilities, enabling people with intellectual disabilities to participate more effectively in digital environments.

Johansson, Gulliksen, and Gustavsson (2021) reveal a gender implication in their findings that larger proportions of men than women with disabilities in Sweden do not feel digitally included. Prendella and Alper (2022) stretch the notion of access further, explaining that children with disabilities are discriminated against in an ableist world that denies their full representation in all media. *“Disabled children have not just been excluded from positive on-screen depictions, but they are simultaneously erased as an audience in mass media research”* (Prendella and Alper, 2022, p. 395). These examples

illustrate how hidden but impactful socio-cultural and structural inequalities continue to restrict the agency of people with disabilities by limiting their opportunities to realise their full digital potential.

The timing of this literature review coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Theme 8, titled the Impact of COVID-19, is the next theme presented within this literature review.

4.3.8 Theme 8: Impact of COVID-19

It is well recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the rapid and widespread surge in digital technology use (Abbruzzese, Ingram and Click, 2020; Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021; Pandey and Pal, 2020; Almeida, Santos and Monteiro, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, internet-based therapeutic interventions were presented in the literature as significantly beneficial for users, including children with disabilities. There was a rapid shift from face-to-face therapeutic interventions to the provision of therapeutic support services online during the pandemic (Hollmann et al., 2021; Lenhard et al., 2020; Nordh et al., 2021; Samson et al., 2021; Chan, 2020; Shiotsuki, Sugaya, and Nakao, 2022). McFerran et al. (2021) portray how innovative interventions that occurred during the pandemic, such as the use of online social music gatherings in Australia, increased social connectedness and inclusion for people with disabilities. Psychosocial and socio-cultural structural forces come into play here, contributing positively to the agency of children with disabilities in their digital environments.

However, Eapen et al. (2021) cautioned that e-mental health has limitations and advocate for a blended approach of e-mental health and face-to-face mental health care in the future. Digital literacy and access ensure that such therapeutic interactions are beneficial; however, as described earlier, internet access is not a given for children with disabilities in today's digital world. The forced and rapid shift from offline to online work, play, and interaction is presented in the literature with caution and warnings about the implications of this societal shift.

There were mixed findings relating to the amount of time children spent online and its impact on them. For instance, Chen et al.'s (2021) study of primary school children in China over three time periods during the COVID-19 pandemic suggested that increased problematic use was correlated with a fear of

contracting COVID-19. They advocated for the monitoring of children's online habits to prevent their distress. Similarly, Sarwar et al. stated that "*people with frequent social media exposure during COVID-19 experienced detrimental effects on mental health*" (2021, p. 91). Conversely, Charmaraman et al. (2022) and Burke et al. (2021) questioned social media use as the reason for negative impacts on children's and adolescents' mental health during the pandemic, with Burke et al. (2021) suggesting it might actually have protective effects.

However, UNICEF's (2020a) findings provide stark evidence related to increased vulnerability of children due to school closures, exposing children to more screen time and increased exposure to more risks, such as online predators. Evidence of a 20% increase in child sexual abuse material was reported in Cambodia in the first half of 2020, and a 63% increase in reports to Cybertipline (set up by the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children to report online child sexual exploitation) in Ghana from January to September 2020 (UNICEF, 2020a; 2020b). As a way of protecting children online, Ngamiye recommended that the government of Rwanda establish "*online bodyguards*" (2021, p. 419).

Similar findings about an increase in online offending during the COVID-19 pandemic were presented in the literature by Park et al. (2022) and Babvey et al. (2021). Furthermore, Riem et al. (2021) applied an infodemiology approach, indicating an increase in internet searches related to harsh parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such findings in the literature reveal how internet use posed child protection and welfare risks for children, including children with disabilities, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous structural forces, such as socio-cultural (harsh parenting), socio-digital risks (increased screen time, algorithm risk exposure), socio-economic (inequality of access and support), and biological forces (social connectedness/ social isolation) that often remain hidden, cross-cut within this theme and impact the agency of children with disabilities in their digital lives.

Within this context, Singh and Balhara (2021) advocate for caution regarding online risks and promote "*healthy screen hygiene*", even when using the internet for educational purposes. They further advocate for an optimal balance between off-time and on-time use, with cut-off times for online use, especially at night. The increase in internet use by children during the COVID-19 pandemic was

presented in a cautionary manner, with literature often highlighting the increased risks and potential harms more than the benefits or positives of internet use, which are presented in the next theme of this literature review.

4.3.9 Theme 9: Benefits of internet use

Literature on the benefits of internet use highlights therapeutic intervention delivery, training, and support services for young people and professionals. It also points to the internet's educative function and its use in the dissemination of information within the public health sector. Some of these topics were connected to the COVID-19 pandemic and have been alluded to in previous themes. The literature in this theme primarily relates to children without disabilities, with disability featuring in connection with online therapeutic support.

For example, the United States Food and Drug Administration authorised the marketing of a therapeutic video game called EndeavorRx to improve the attention function of children diagnosed with ADHD (EndeavorRx, 2020). Moreover, Gerhardt and Smith (2020) describe how Minecraft, an online video game, was used as a therapeutic tool to engage an 11-year-old boy with autism. This therapeutic engagement via online games is further exemplified by Finch, who describes a counselling session as a “*therapeutic adventure in Minecraft*” (2021, n.p.).

According to Beyens et al. “*The majority of adolescents do not experience any short-term changes in well-being related to their social media use. And if they do experience any changes, these are more often positive than negative*” (2020, p. 6). The positive impact of social media use is further affirmed by Pang (2022), who investigated WeChat, one of the most widely used social media apps in China. This app was shown to positively impact “*online bridging capital, online bonding capital, and life satisfaction*” for adolescents in China (Pang, 2022, p. 262). There are numerous examples in the literature of children using the internet as a safe space such as for (Austin, 2020), educational benefits (Goodyear and Armour, 2021; Hirvonen, 2021), health information (Aslan Kayiran, 2021; Rosenberg, Mano and Mesch, 2022; Vassallo, Jones and Freeman, 2022), therapeutic support (Cohen et al., 2021; Smith-Frigerio, 2021; Robjant et al., 2020; Comeras–Cheuca et al., 2021; Lenhard et al., 2020). These

examples highlight the psychosocial and positive biological structural forces within the digital domain.

Additionally, Nordh et al. (2021) found internet-delivered cognitive behavioural therapy to be both effective and cost-effective for the treatment of children with social anxiety disorder, through a randomised clinical trial in Sweden. Sanderson, Kouzoupi and Hall (2020) explain that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in England recommends digital therapy to treat depression in children. From a child protection perspective, Egodawela et al., (2020) advocated for the use of mobile phone devices as a means of remotely tracking children's locations, thereby enhancing child safety.

Such child safety strategies adjust the view of child protection from welfare practices from safeguarding children to limiting or restricting practices that impact their agency. Finally, the benefits of the internet as a research tool are highlighted by Bohrer et al. (2020) in their study about eating disorders. They used the social media discussion platform Reddit as a qualitative methodological tool to explore users' concepts of recovery from an eating disorder. Research is the focus of the next section, which is the second-last theme of this literature review.

4.3.10 Theme 10: Research

Recommendations for future research related to this literature review which focused on the topic of disability, internet use, and child protection and welfare included empowering young people to be involved in the design, implementation, and conduct of research. Dennehy, Cronin and Arensman (2019) advocate for the research process to be relevant and reflective of the young person's experience in order for adults to gain insights into their experience of cyberbullying. Placing the expressed views of children with disabilities at the core of research about their digital lives is the intention and driving force of this study.

Griffioen et al. (2020) examined methodological practices related to youth wellbeing and social practices, highlighting a lack of ecological strength, for example, an explanation of their interconnected environments. They advocate for researchers to pay closer attention to methodological processes. Within this context, Alhaboby et al. (2017) identify challenges for research on people with disabilities within the framework of social identity theory. Moreover, Stang (2020)

provided insights into ethical judgements in internet research, stating that “*by developing practical ethical judgement, we can – in some social work contexts – avoid putting people into categories like 'vulnerable' and instead approach the participants in public Facebook groups as citizens with socio-political opinions*” (2020, p. 302).

Specific to the implications of social media use on the mental health of adolescents, both Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens (2022) and Ophir et al. (2020) promote increased rigour in methodological processes. Furthermore, Ferguson (2021) cautions researchers and healthcare professionals to be mindful of unconscious bias, concluding that there exist nuanced complexities associated with social media that interact with internet users' environments, personalities, and motivations. Considering that almost half of the literature reported here relates to online risks, James et al. (2017) make a valid argument that research needs to move forward from studies that examine online risky behaviours to studies that focus on the positive aspects of online social media use.

Finally, O'Reilly (2020) highlights the importance of adolescents' voices in research pertaining to mental health and smartphone use. As aforementioned, the expressed views of children with disabilities regarding their internet use are absent from the literature, and little attention is paid to parents' perspectives about their child's internet use. The rationale for answering the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? is validated based on the neglect of this as a connected topic within the literature. The role that parents play within the digital lives of children with disabilities and their views about their children's internet use is the focus of the final theme of this literature review.

4.3.11 Theme 11: Parental influence

The literature emphasises the role that parents play in protecting their children from online harm and supporting them when online difficulties occur. Attention is also drawn to aspects of parenting that are problematic, such as restrictive practices and online behaviour that can have a negative effect on their children. Again, parents of children with disabilities are not explicitly mentioned in the literature.

The supportive and protective nature of parents regarding their children's internet use is well-documented (Bruggeman, 2019; Dibenedetto, and Saxena,

2022; Samara et al., 2021; Hinduja and Patchin, 2022). Wright and Wachs state that *“Parental social support has a buffering effect on the relationships among cyberbullying victimization, bystanding, and health outcomes among adolescents with intellectual and developmental disorders”* (2020, p. 2390). Sandberg, Sjöberg, and Sundin (2021) posit that parents are conflicted and struggle with digital technology use, which plays out in the moral economy of the household. Furthermore, Forni et al. (2020) explained that seven out of ten adolescents report that their parents rarely supervise or limit their mobile phone use. Moreover, Kim et al. (2022) find a correlation between high levels of smartphone use by mothers and behavioural problems in children. They advocate for strategies to be introduced to reduce mothers' smartphone dependency.

Parents' behaviour online, such as oversharing or putting up photographs of their children online, has implications for their children's rights to privacy and protection (Alkhalouf, 2021; Demetis and Kietzmann, 2021; Zdanowicz, 2020; Iskül and Joamets, 2021). This behaviour was identified and discussed earlier in the theme titled 'child protection.' Livingstone and Blum-Ross, in their book *“Parenting for a digital future: How hopes and fears about technology shape children's lives,”* portray how parents' strategies are diverse in their management of their children's internet use as they “embrace, resist or balance” it (2020, p. 9). Parental interventions such as managing screen time, especially at night, and monitoring internet sites are advocated by Bharucha (2018) for parents to help their children stay safe online. Piguet et al. (2019) suggest that parents and children should discuss online content and activities, rather than focusing on the time spent online.

A recent Netflix series, *‘Adolescence,’* is discussed here in the context of its portrayal of parents' perspectives, particularly in relation to the negative impact of digital influence. The Netflix series depicts a family grappling with the behaviour of their teenage boy (13), whose social media comments and interactions reflect toxic masculinity and misogyny. The fictional story unfolds as the boy is arrested for the murder of a female classmate. His violence was linked to radicalising digital influences. This series was viewed 145 million times in the first part of 2025 (Rosen, 2025) and appears to be a media-driven trigger for digital safety reforms. It promotes proactive parenting in today's digital world

and is viewed as a powerful educational tool, with the French government integrating it into the school curriculum (The Guardian, 2025). The series has been made available to all secondary schools (children aged approximately 12-18) in the UK (ABC News, 2025). It appears that this Netflix series has struck a chord, prompting political debate as it highlights concerns about child protection and welfare for all children using the internet.

Parenting practices around children's internet use, from supportive engagement to protective strategies to conflict and struggles with digital competence, are shaped by and embedded within wider socio-digital, socio-cultural, socio-economic, psychosocial, biological, political, historical, and temporal forces, which collectively influence how children exercise agency and experience risk in digital environments.

The findings of this literature review highlight child protection and welfare concerns for children and adolescents who use the internet, as well as the benefits and opportunities it offers. Parental influence is particularly important in this context, given that parents are the primary caregivers for their children with disabilities (HRB, 2023; Raghavan and Jones, 2023; Beadle-Brown et al., 2016). Little is known, however, about the influence of parents on their children with disabilities' digital lives. Neither are parents' views about their children with disabilities' internet use well-documented. The following section, therefore, shifts the focus from child protection and welfare concerns related to children with disabilities and their internet use to parents' views about their children's digital world.

4.4 Parents' views

The findings of the last component of literature, which relates to the third component of the documentary analysis underpinning this research study and concerns parents' views, are presented next. The study aimed to address the research question: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use? The intended purpose of this review was to assess the literature landscape focusing on parents' views about their children with disabilities' internet use.

A literature search of 138 papers revealed limited findings regarding parents of children with disabilities and their views on their children's internet use. The protocol for this review is outlined in the next chapter on methodology.

Specifically, 5 papers related to surveys or questionnaires of parents of children with disabilities about their children's internet use. Four of these papers draw attention to the vulnerability of young people with disabilities online.

Cyberbullying was featured in two papers, with Mishna et al. (2016) providing a protocol used in a mixed methods, longitudinal study that elicited the views of parents, as well as children and teachers. McHugh and Howard's (2017) mixed methods study on cyberbullying puts forward the view that parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities are vulnerable to cyberbullying and need supervision and monitoring while using the internet. Coutinho et al. (2022) draw attention to the results of a self-report survey of parents of children with neurodevelopmental disabilities, which reveal frequent use of mobile media and a lack of awareness of its effects on this cohort of children.

The positive impact of internet use was portrayed by Raspa et al. (2018), who conducted a survey of 198 parents of children with fragile X syndrome, highlighting the benefits of mobile technologies for individuals and families, particularly in sharing and recording health information. Livingstone and Zhang offer their view of parental influence on children with disabilities' digital lives in an authoritative study titled "*Children with special educational needs and disabilities more likely to encounter harm online, say parents*" (2019, n.p.). This report reveals that "*Three times as many parents of a SEN child (35% vs 11%) reported something online that bothered or upset their child in the past year*" (2019, n.p.). Overall, parents' views are poorly represented within the literature, related to their children with disabilities internet use. To address this gap and gain deeper insights into the reality of children with disabilities digital lives the secondary research question asks: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use?

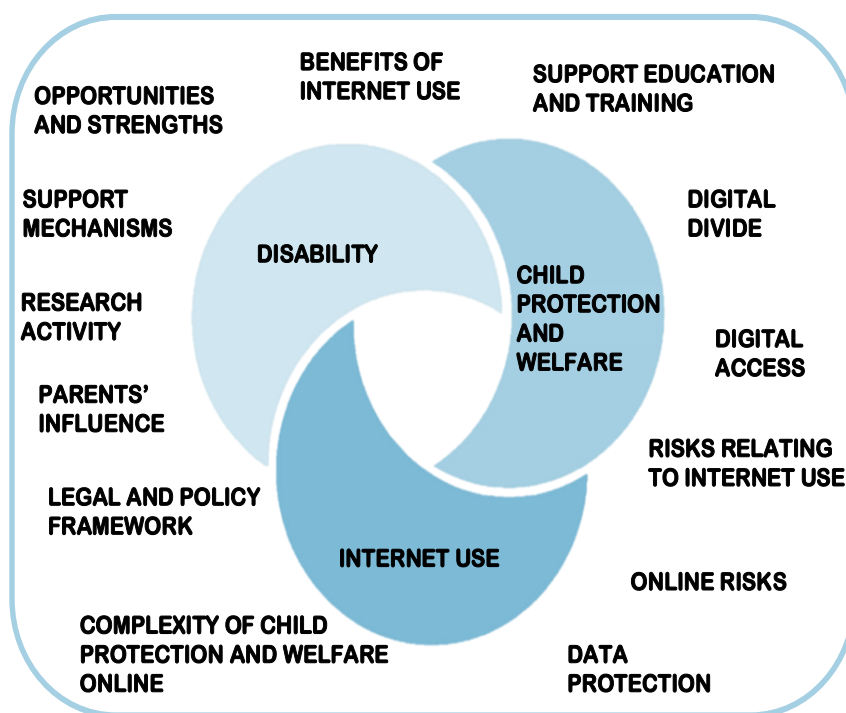
This research study aims to address a research gap at the intersection of disability, child protection and welfare and internet use. Having delineated the current status of literature pertaining to this topic, I proceed to summarise how the overall documentary analysis for this research study can be viewed from a critical realist lens.

4.5 Critical realist lens

Themes identified from the documentary analysis addressing the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in

the lives of children with disabilities? are presented in Figure 4.5.1 below. This figure serves as a conceptual map and a reminder of the core findings of this documentary analysis, as the theoretical framework of critical realism is applied to them.

Figure 4.5.1: Documentary analysis findings



Attention is paid to the notion of ‘independent reality’ (Pawson et al., 2005) in the literature, where the assumption is that underlying theories, both implicit and explicit, exist within the topic of disability-associated child protection and welfare, and internet use. This literature review adopted a flexible, broad perspective, encompassing structural and cultural approaches to understand the complexity of child protection and welfare concerns for children with disabilities in an ever-changing, complex digital world.

Themes identified from the literature are context-sensitive and are not presented as universal truths. A deeper examination of the literature reveals latent or unobserved forces (causal mechanisms) exemplified here through a critical realist lens that acknowledges influences of structure, culture, and agency (Archer, 1995). The meaning of structure in the context of this documentary analysis refers to the systematic barriers, institutional roles, and power dynamics that underlie the production of knowledge and shape social action within the literature. For example, global capital priorities, particularly the

forces driving the tech industry to generate maximum profits, actively push back against a global regulatory agenda that seeks to regulate digital environments. Socioeconomic forces incentivise platforms to prioritise digital engagement and data monetisation over child safety, resisting protective governance and ethical platform design. Structurally, this resistance is often invisible to internet users, including children with disabilities who are unaware of a broader political economy that shapes their digital experiences.

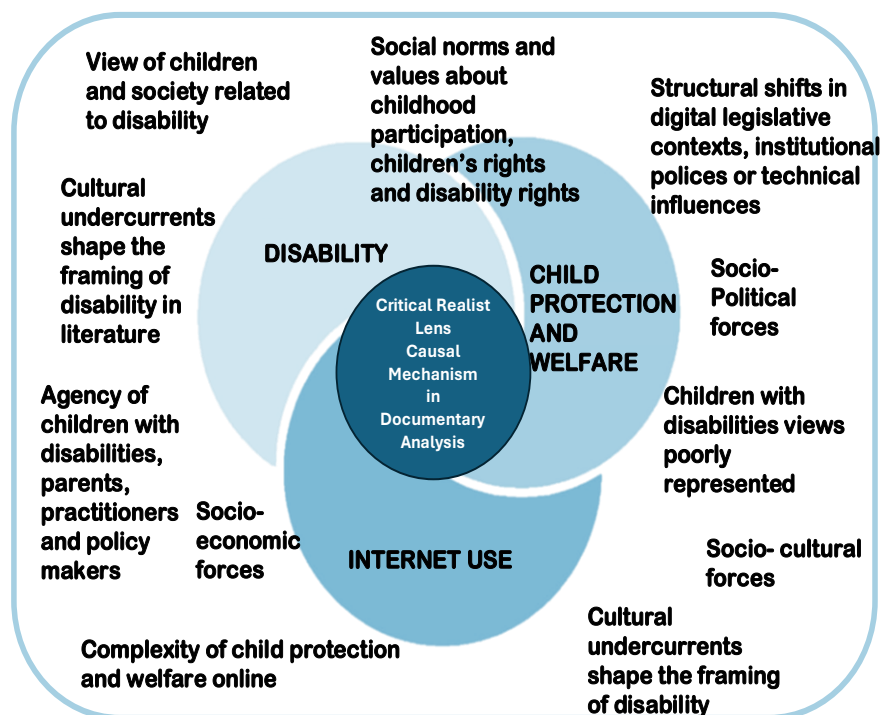
Culture refers to shared meanings, norms, discourses, and belief systems that inform how people interpret the world around them. In line with Archer's SCA framework, these cultural elements are understood as forming part of an objective cultural system that interacts with structure and agency (Archer, 1995). Examples of cultural norms in this documentary analysis include ableist cultural norms that favour the presentation of risks associated with the internet as opposed to representing its enabling benefits. The literature reflects an implicit medical model of disability that concentrates on therapeutic interventions for disability-associated issues (EndeavorRx et al., 2020; Gerhardt and Smith, 2020; Finch, 2021), framing disability through physical and psychological deficits. This perspective excludes broader conceptions of well-being, including emotional, social, environmental, sexual and spiritual aspects, reinforcing a narrow view of disability. Although not explicitly stated, these cultural undercurrents shape the framing of disability in literature and the production of knowledge within the field of disability discourse.

Agency is defined here as the capacity of groups or individuals (agents) to act intentionally by reflecting, adapting, or resisting within a structure and culture that is constrained (Archer, 1995). In this documentary analysis, the agency of children with disabilities is entirely absent; their perspectives on internet use are not represented. Moreover, their ability to shape, in any way, legal and policy frameworks or regulations about digital engagement is non-existent. Currently, socio-political digital debates fail to account for the lived experiences, needs, or rights of children with disabilities. Consequently, digital policies continue to be developed without the participation of those who are most affected by their outcomes, thus reinforcing children with disabilities' exclusion from shaping the conditions of their digital lives.

The evolving view of children and society related to disability, child protection, and welfare from a critical realist lens can be understood in terms of structural, cultural, and agential shifts. Structural shifts include legislative contexts, institutional policies, or technological influences that impact the digital lives of children with disabilities. Cultural change encompasses societal norms and values about childhood, participation, children's rights, and disability rights, as the digital world shapes and influences the conceptual understandings of autonomy, vulnerability, and inclusion. Here, agency reflects how children with disabilities, parents, practitioners, and policymakers navigate, resist, or reinforce (Archer, 1995) cultural and structural narratives, leading to outcomes that may be transformative or remain within the status quo.

This section exemplifies socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural forces that shape this documentary analysis related to the topic of disability, internet use, and child protection and welfare – forces that, from a critical realist perspective, are often latent or unarticulated within the literature. Figure 4.5.2 presents the critical realist perspective, outlining some of the causal mechanisms at play within the literature that influence knowledge production on this topic.

Figure 4.5.2: Causal mechanisms within the documentary analysis

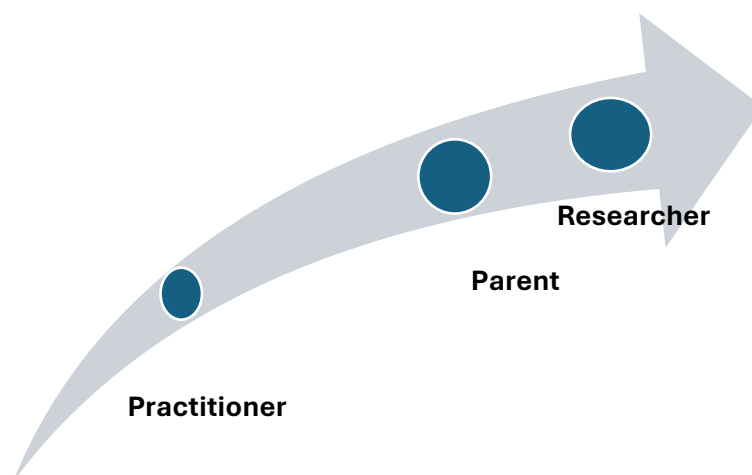


While this chapter does not exhaustively explore every underlying influence, the existing literature landscape has been mapped out to address the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? The following section presents reflections related to this documentary analysis process.

4.6 Reflection

I acknowledge the influence of my experiences as a professional working in the social care sector and as a parent, which may have led me to highlight or emphasise certain narratives while unintentionally overlooking others. My positionality within the research at this point has shifted from the previous chapter, as I recognised parental influences while navigating the literature. Figure 4.6.1 represents the researcher's positionality during the documentary analysis of this research study.

Figure 4.6.1: Researcher positionality during documentary analysis



An excerpt from my reflective journal on June 30, 2022, illustrates my ongoing struggle to remain focused on the research topic. *‘Today, I can only say that I am completely lost, having read and summarised so many papers that I’ve lost count. I literally do not know where to begin, and I have just finished reading a very interesting paper on community involvement and collective action through community gardens that has NOTHING to do with my topic. Note to self: stay focused and return to the research question!’*

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter contributes to this thesis by demonstrating the central role of the documentary analysis in shaping and informing the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? The broader critical review and the focused review work to situate the research within a broad literature landscape where disability, child protection and welfare, and internet use intersect. Eleven themes that emerged from this critical literature review were presented in this chapter. The first two themes are represented in the first integrated publication of this thesis, titled '*Shifting Mindsets: A Critical Commentary on Child Protection and Welfare, Disability, and Online Risk Through Critical Literature Review*'. Subsequently, the nine other themes are discussed in relation to the research topic.

The critical review also revealed that the perspectives of children with disabilities, as well as the views of their parents, remain underrepresented. Framed within a critical realist lens, this chapter highlights the hidden causal mechanisms and layered socio-cultural and socio-structural forces that shape knowledge production on this topic. In doing so, it not only brings together the broad body of literature but also establishes the unique contribution of this thesis, which highlights underrepresented views and critically examines the intersections of disability, internet use, and child protection and welfare.

Moving forward, the next chapter outlines the methodological processes applied to answer the core and secondary research questions: (1) How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? and (2) what experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use?

Chapter 5 Methodology

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5.11 Quantitative data collection
5.12 Quantitative data analysis
5.13 Reflection
5.14 Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the methodological design for this research project titled “*Virtual Harm and Digital Opportunity: Rethinking Child Protection and Welfare for Children with Disabilities using the internet*”. The methods employed to address this research topic consisted of three components: (1) a desk-based documentary analysis, (2) qualitative interviews with children with disabilities, and (3) a survey of parents.

This chapter will proceed as follows: the first section serves as a reminder of the philosophical position of critical realism as set out in Chapter 3, which highlights how the ontological layered view of reality guides this research process. The epistemological and methodological position of this research study is presented. Next, a description of the research design is provided using a visual to illuminate the sequential exploratory research design (Creswell, 2003) that was adopted to address the research questions. Following this, the rationale for

using a mixed methods approach within this research study is presented. Ethical considerations are described in the next section of this chapter, followed by a focus on recruitment processes, highlighting specific issues related to accessing a hard-to-reach population. Building on this, a section on eligibility and sampling, as well as a segment on recruitment and access, is provided. The following section of this paper describes the methods used for data collection and data analysis within this mixed methods study. The second and last published paper integrated into this thesis is presented here and addresses these processes in detail. This paper is titled "*Applying a critical realist conceptual and methodological framework to enhance qualitative research with young people with disabilities about their internet use*". This paper is published in the International Journal of Qualitative Research.

Similar to the first integrated publication, I am the first author of this publication, and I established the focus of this paper. Excellent feedback from my supervisors was provided at the latter stages of this paper's development. Finally, limitations as well as reflection and reflexivity processes are addressed and form the concluding sections of this chapter. At this stage, it is useful to revisit the research aims, objectives, and the research questions, drawing attention to the driving forces behind this mixed methods research project.

This study aims to

- bridge a knowledge gap where child protection, internet use and disability intersect.

This study's objectives are to

- explore the perspectives of children with disabilities about their internet use and to examine parents' views of this use so as to understand their intersection with child protection and welfare within the digital domain
- ensure ethical considerations are upheld throughout the research project
- use a critical realist lens to understand the intersection of child protection and welfare, disability and internet use

This study's research questions are

Central research question:

- How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?

Secondary research question:

- What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use?

5.2 Critical Realist lens

The critical realist philosophical position had implications for the methodological choices of this research study. Chapter 3 provides a detailed overview of critical realism as the philosophical position for this research study. Specific examples of these implications set out in Chapter 3 included attention to Pawson's (2005) understanding of reality as independent of human knowing while completing the documentary analysis phase of this research study. Causal mechanisms that are hidden and have implications for knowledge production related to the documentary analysis are highlighted in Chapter 4. The use of a critical realist lens in data collection and data analysis processes (see Appendix 3). Moreover, critical realism promotes reflection and reflexivity as well as dissemination as integral parts of the research process, thus their influence plays out in this research study.

Of critical importance within this methodology is the ontological layered view of reality that guides this research project. This study adopts the critical realist view of social reality as stratified. The digital reality of children with disabilities is understood as having depth operating beneath their expressed views. Structures (laws, institutions, platforms), culture (norms, discourses, values) exist and have hidden influences on their digital experiences.

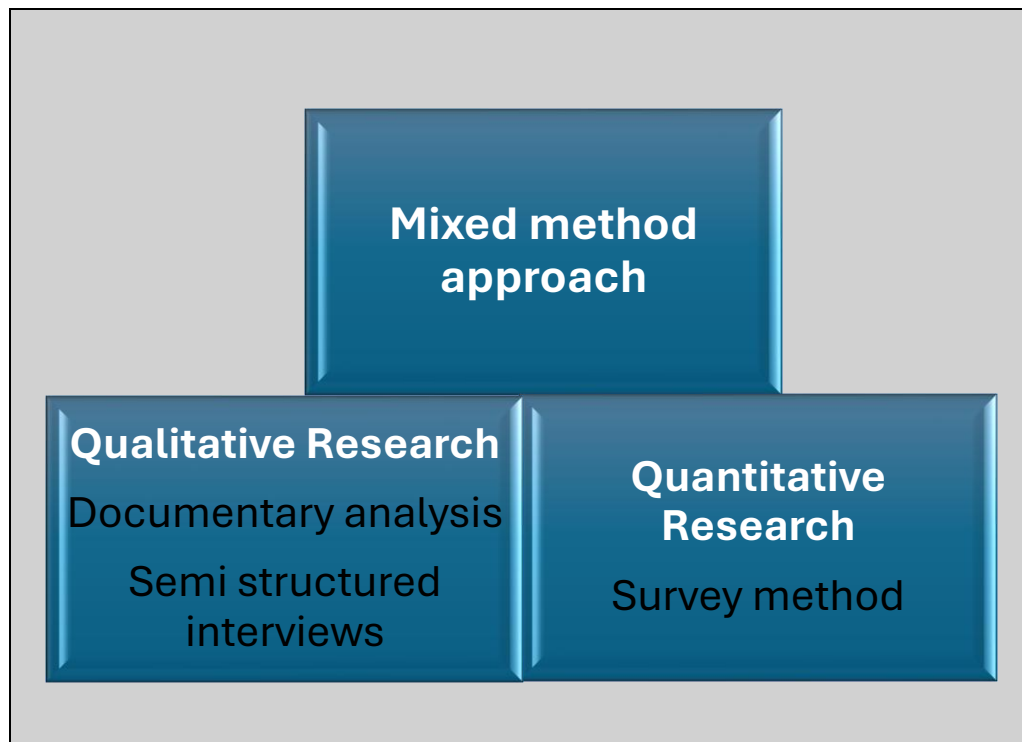
Epistemologically, children with disabilities' realities come from empirical data, composite narratives constructed from the expressed views of children with disabilities and a parent survey. These accounts are not exhaustive truths but situated perspectives that point towards deeper mechanisms. The survey, though not statistically powerful, functions as supplementary evidence that adds depth to children with disabilities' accounts of their internet use. Margaret Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework provides the theoretical lens to identify how these mechanisms operate across time, either reproducing constraints (morphostasis) or enabling change (morphogenesis). The analytic

strategy used to apply Archer’s framework is retroductive, as described in Chapter 3, moving from observed experiences to theorise the structural and cultural conditions that generate them. This methodological alignment allows for a research design that works with ontology, epistemology, and empirical findings in a clear and coherent manner that is guided by the critical realist philosophical position that underpins this research study.

5.3 Research Design

The research design employs a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to answer the research questions. For clarity, Figure 5.3.1 below provides a visual representation of the research design used.

Figure 5.3.1: Research design



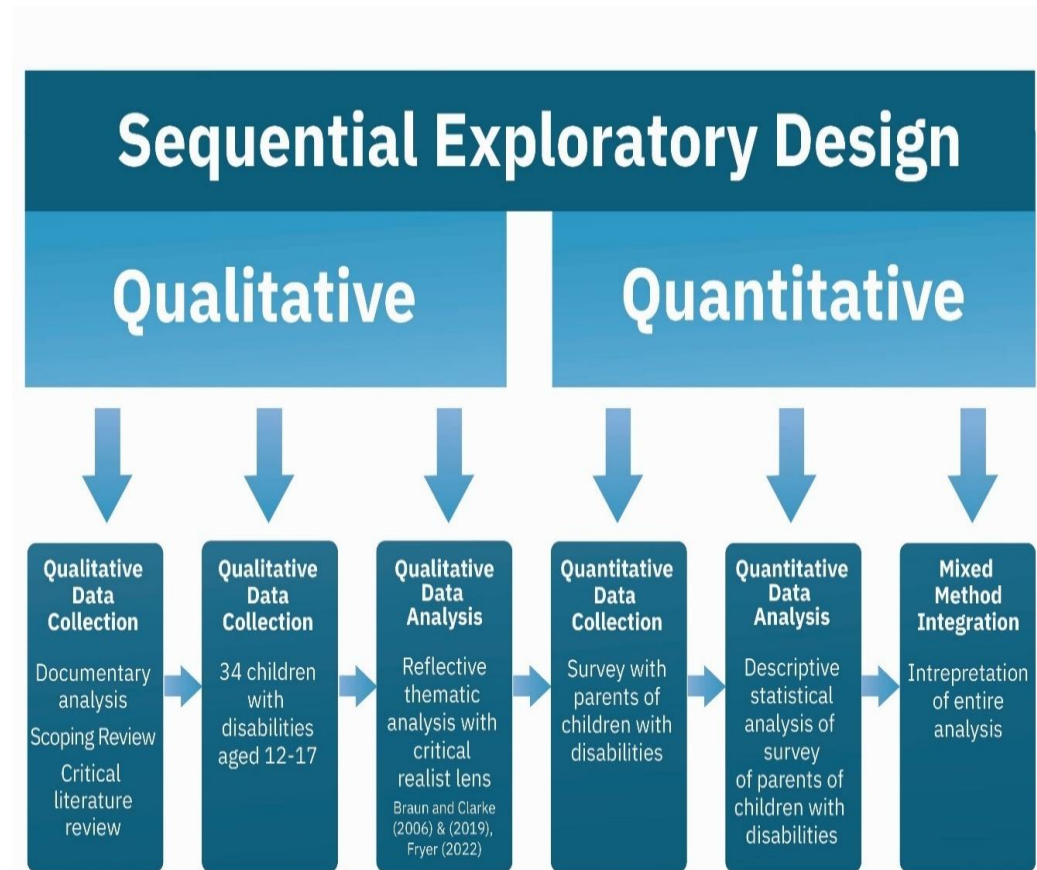
Creswell (2003) explains that mixed methodology helps to create logical designs out of multifaceted data and investigation. He states that mixed methodology “extends the discussion about a research problem that incorporates the need to both explore and explain” (2003, p. 208). Therefore, the sequential exploratory strategy (Creswell, 2003) was employed to answer the research questions.

This strategy is one of six strategies identified by Creswell (2003) that researchers can choose from when designing their research methodology. This sequential exploratory strategy (Creswell, 2003) fits well with critical realism as it presents an opportunity for the researcher to ensure the research maintains an *“ontologically least restrictive perspective, insofar as it is maximally inclusive as to causally relevant levels of reality and additionally maximally inclusive insofar as it can accommodate the insights of other metatheoretical perspectives”* as advocated by Bhaskar & Danermark (2006, p. 294).

The mixed methods approach is applied to maximise the inclusion of both the causal levels of reality and the hidden mechanisms at play within child protection and welfare, as understood through the lens of children with disabilities navigating the digital world and through the views of their parents regarding their internet use. *‘Hence the social scientist should look for mechanisms; and not expect the most significant statements in his or her explanations to report sequences of events, let alone regular ones,’* advise Bhaskar and Danermark (2006, p. 296). Simply put, the mixed method approach allows for a layered view that will encompass two phases within the sequential exploratory strategy that moves beyond descriptions to dig deeper into the complex mechanisms at play within child protection, disability, and internet use.

In the first of the two phases in the sequential exploratory strategy, the focus is on the qualitative research elements which incorporate: documentary analysis (three components of literature with distinct purposes) and 34 interviews with children with disabilities. This qualitative research is given precedence over the quantitative data collection phase, which incorporates 126 surveys of parents of children with disabilities. *“The findings of these two phases are integrated during the integration phase”* (Creswell, 2003, p. 215) and are presented in Chapter 8 of this thesis. Hence, the purpose of implementing this strategy is to utilise the qualitative findings to expand understanding through quantitative findings. Figure 5.3.2 provides a visual representation of the sequential exploratory strategy applied to this research study.

Figure 5.3.2: Creswell Exploratory Sequential Design



Documentary analysis is predominantly a qualitative method. Qualitative methodologies fit best with little understood phenomena (Chadwick, Wesson and Fullwood, 2013), such as the intersection where child protection and welfare, disability and internet use converge. This is because qualitative epistemology offers an open consideration of the subject matter through exploratory rather than confirmatory endeavours (Bryman, 2012; Silverman, 2021).

Documentary analysis in this research study included three components of literature that had three distinct functions within this research study. The first method employed to answer the research questions was a scoping review. Scoping reviews offer opportunities to establish the scope or range of literature on a particular subject matter, they provide information about the amount of literature available on a specific topic and offer a synopsis of the focus of these studies (Munn et al., 2018). The purpose of the scoping review within this study was to identify research gaps in the existing literature where no research has been conducted and to summarise findings in this area (Arksey and O'Malley,

2005). These findings were presented in Chapter 2 and helped to shape the conceptual framework and methodological choices relating to this research topic, where child protection and welfare disability and internet use intersect. The scoping review, according to Jesson and Lacey (2006), can be used as a standalone methodological endeavour or part of a wider research project, the latter of which is the case in this research study.

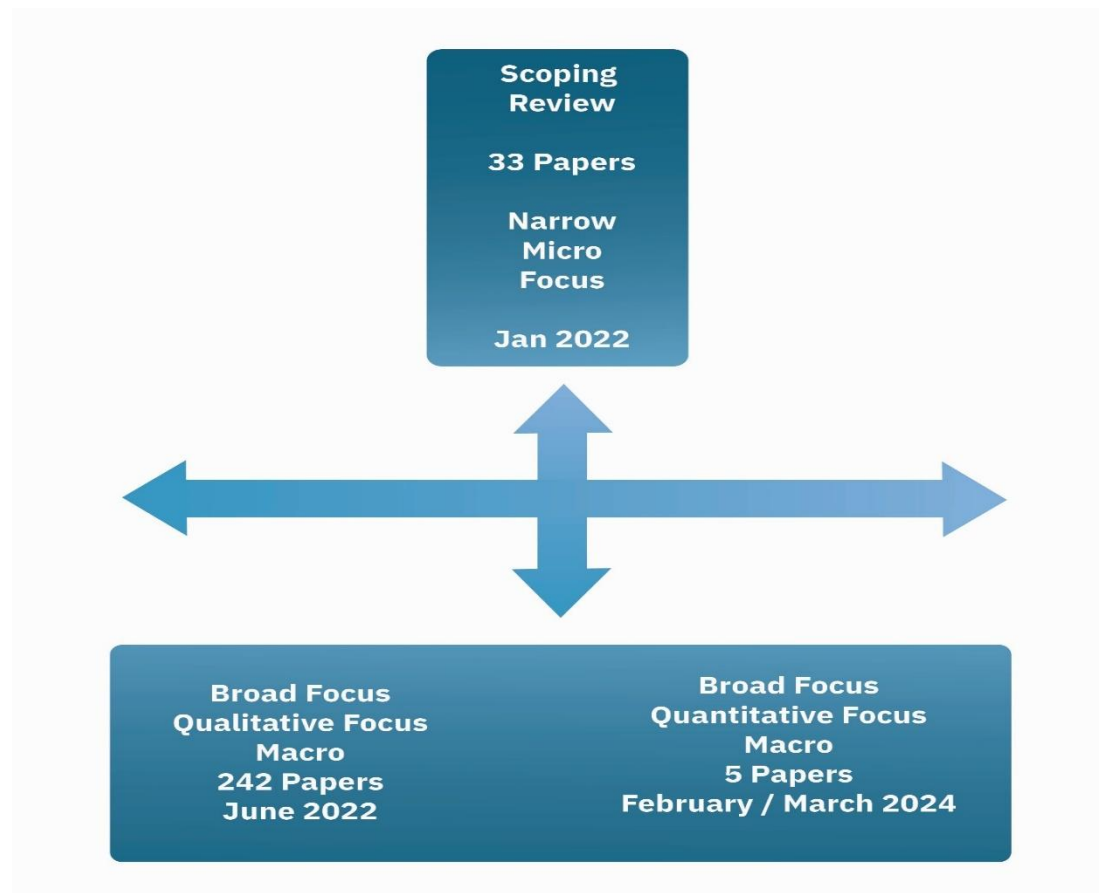
This scoping review was carried out with my supervisor Dr. Susan Flynn in January 2022. This provided an excellent opportunity to learn about the process involved in doing a scoping review whilst also scoping out the range of the literature pertaining to this research topic. We began by dividing the work of qualitative data collection and analysis between several databases and conducted our searches. We focused on literature that pertained to victims of online abuse and perpetrators of online abuse. After combining and refining our results by deleting duplicates, we scanned titles and reviews to reach a final sample of 33 documents.

Braun and Clarke (2006) and Gale et al. (2013) were used for analysis and theme extraction. A knowledge gap was identified, which framed the research questions and informed the subsequent methodological process relating to this research topic. A broader critical literature review was conducted in June 2022 (Grant and Booth, 2009) for the purpose of answering the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?

Critical literature reviews “*aim to demonstrate that the writer has extensively researched the literature and critically evaluated its quality*” (Grant and Booth, 2009, p. 93). Chapter 4 presents the findings of this extensive literature review, which shapes the current landscape of literature on this research topic. Informed by the findings of the literature and the qualitative analysis, the third component of the documentary analysis related to this research topic was addressed. This focused literature review was conducted between the end of February and the beginning of March 2024, shifting the focus from children with disabilities' views to parents' views of their children's internet use to complete and expand the research picture (Zachariadis, Scott, and Barrett, 2013). Although this review yielded limited findings, it was important for

the survey design. An overview of documentary analysis pertaining to this research topic is provided in Figure 5.3.3.

Figure 5.3.3: Overview of documentary analysis



Peters et al. (2021) advocate for increased clarity and transparency among researchers conducting scoping reviews, recommending that they report criteria and use methodological guidance that is up to date. Grant and Booth refer to the ambiguity that exists “*in the degree of process and rigour*” (2009, p. 92) across all types of literature reviews. To this end, appendix 1 provides a summary of the protocols for each literature review, delineating the steps taken for increased clarity and transparency (Peters et al, 2021; Grant and Booth, 2009).

A PRISMA flow diagram is provided in Figures 5.3.4, 5.3.5, and 5.3.6. This flow diagram visually summarises the literature searches and selection processes, illustrating how studies were identified, screened, and included or excluded for the three searches conducted in this research study.

Figure 5.3.4: PRISMA- ScR Flow Diagram: Scoping Review

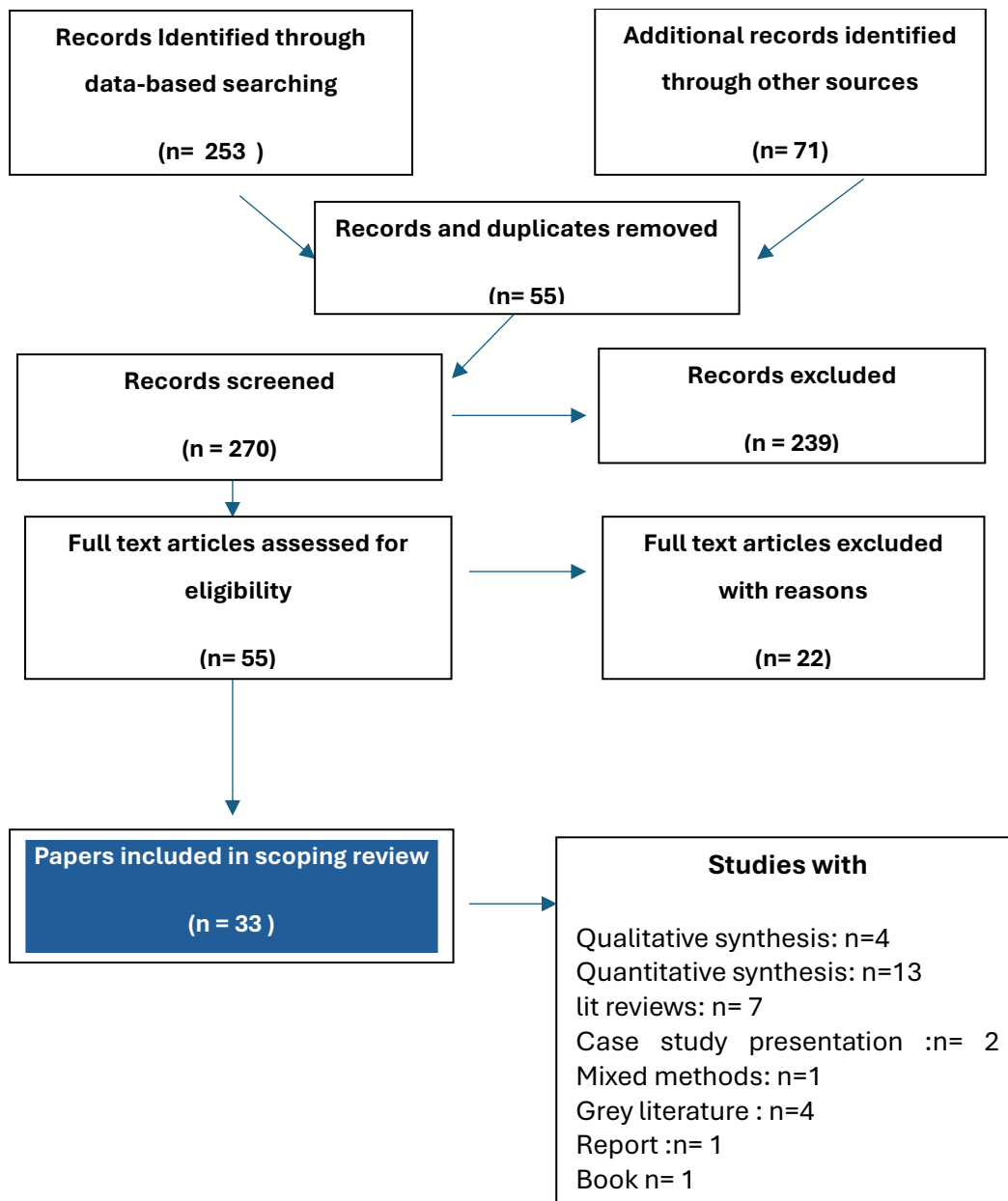


Figure 5.3.5: PRISMA- ScR Flow Diagram: Critical literature review (qualitative)

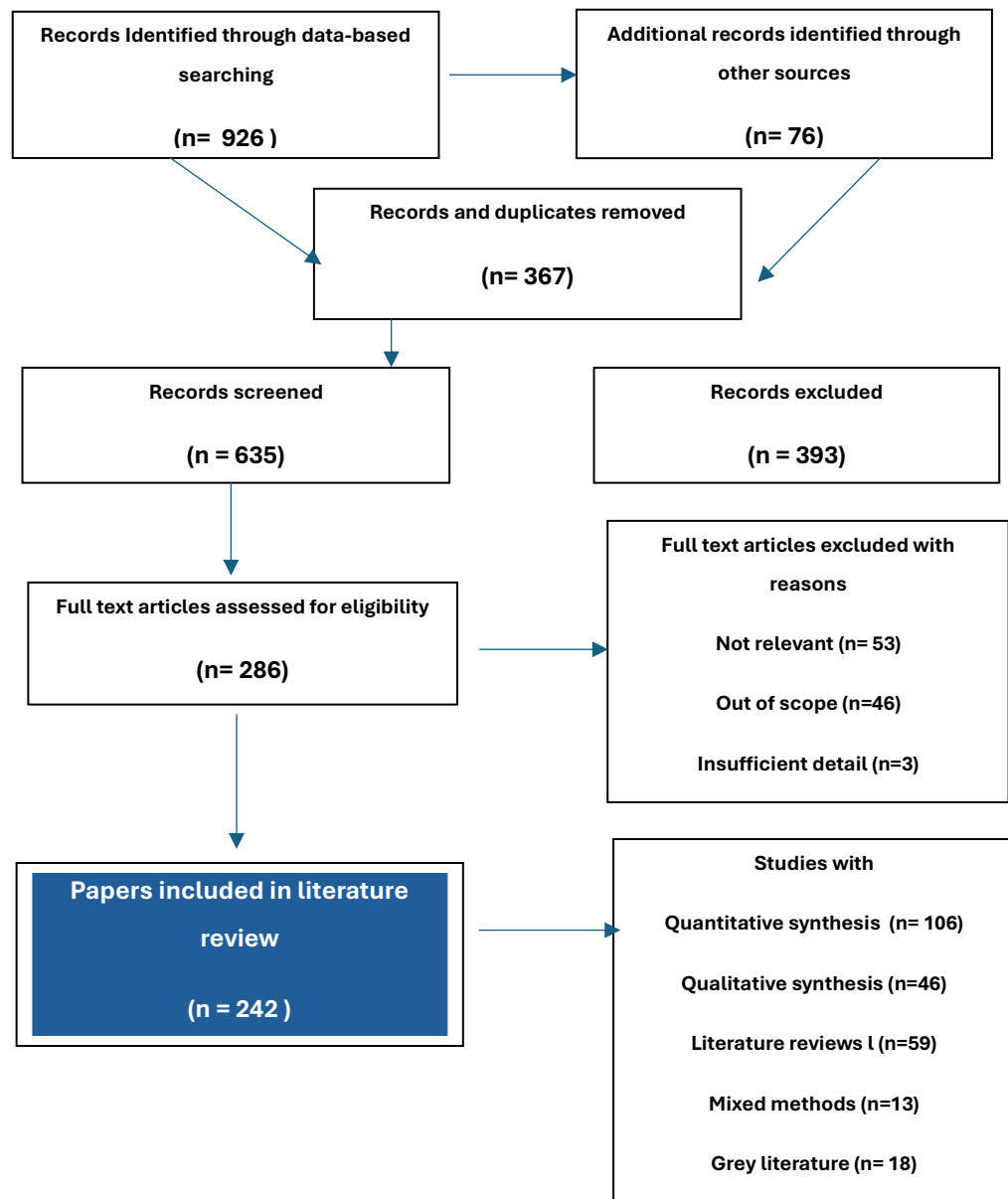
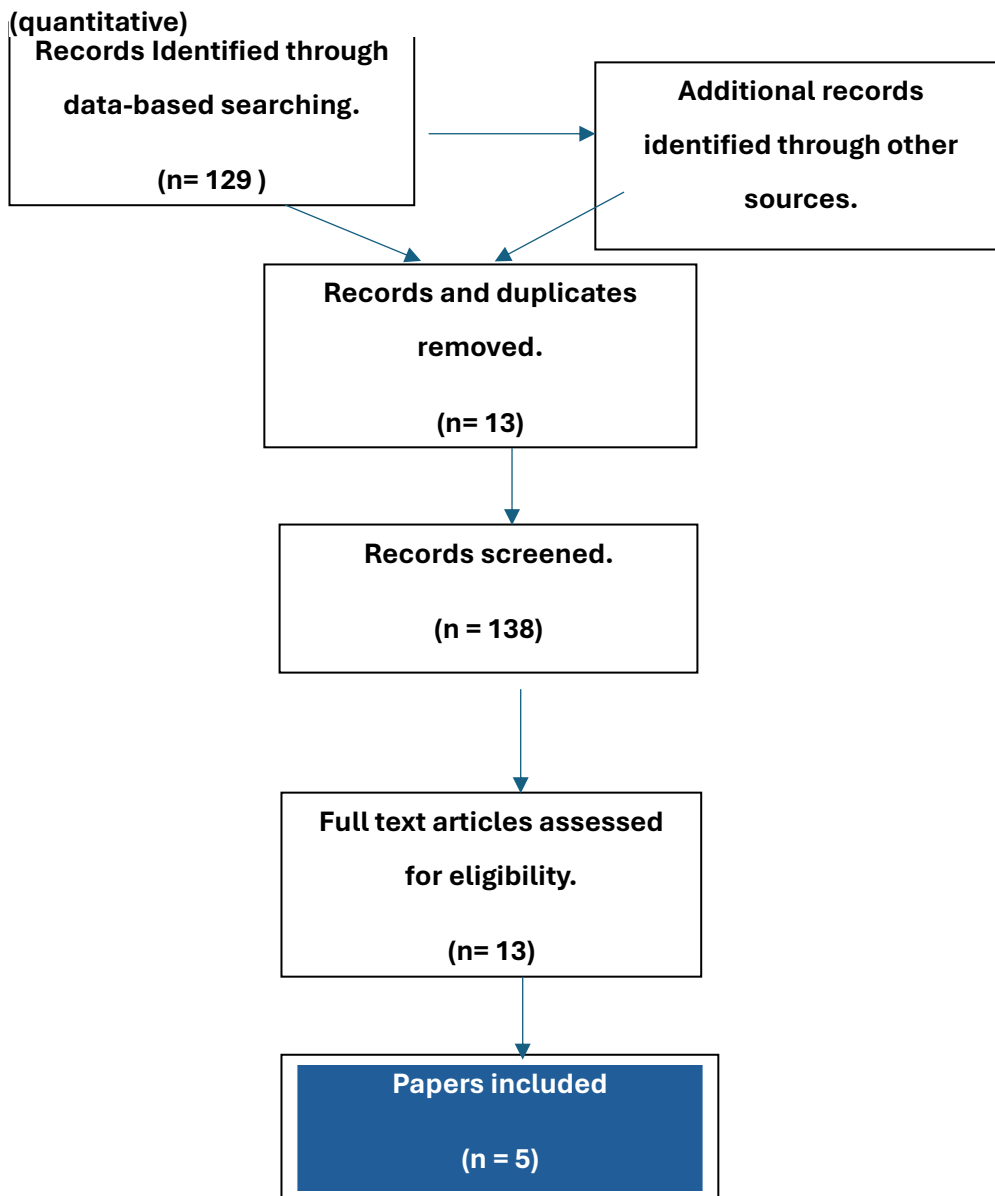


Figure 5.3.6: PRISMA- ScR Flow Diagram: Critical literature review



5.4 Rationale for mixed methods

Creswell argues that “a mixed method is useful to capture the best of both quantitative and qualitative approaches [...] a researcher may want to both generalize the findings to a population and develop a detailed view of the meaning of a phenomenon or concept for individuals” (2003, p.22). The underpinning theoretical framework for this research study, as set out in Chapter 3, is critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978). Wynn and Williams (2012) posit that critical realism research methodology provides new prospects for researchers to scrutinise complex organisational occurrences.

Methodological eclecticism was referred to in Chapter 3 as one of the core tenets of critical realism in post-disciplinary study (Clark, Lissel, and Davis 2008, p.72). Further explanation about the application of critical realism to the qualitative component of this study is presented in the second integrated publication of this thesis, titled “*Through a Critical Realist Lens: Investigating Data Collection and Analysis Techniques in a Qualitative Study About Internet-Related Child Protection Risks for Children with Disabilities*,” published in the International Journal of Qualitative Methods. The purpose of this publication within this thesis is twofold: first, it further explains critical realism as a theoretical fit for this research study, and it provides an exposition of qualitative data analysis undertaken through a critical realist lens. This integrated publication will be presented later in this chapter.

Critical realism aligns well with mixed methods, as it acknowledges that different research strategies will contribute to a layered realist ontology (Zachariadis, Scott, and Barrett, 2013; Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010). Robson (2024) and Caruth (2013) urge researchers using critical realism to be clear about the purpose of using mixed methods in their research. According to Zachariadis, Scott, and Barrett, the reasons for mixing methods in critical realism are for ‘complementarity, completeness, developmental expansion, corroboration/confirmation, compensation and diversity’ purposes (2013, p. 865). Although mixed methods are common in critical realist research, the use of qualitative methods to guide quantitative methods is less usual.

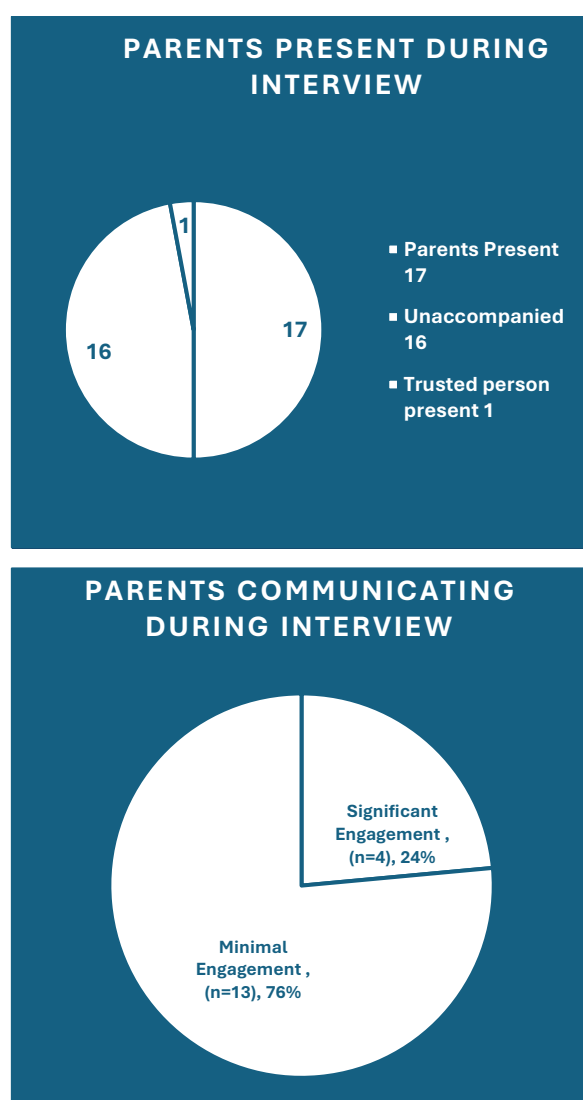
The reason for mixing methods in this manner within this study is for the purpose of completeness and expansion. Completeness is to ‘ensure a complete picture (as detailed as possible) of the phenomena under study’ (Zachariadis, Scott, and Barrett, 2013, p. 865). Expansion provides ‘explanations or expands the understanding obtained in previous research’ (Zachariadis, Scott, and Barrett, 2013, p. 865). Completing the picture means expanding understanding of the unique role that parents play in the lives of their children with disabilities (Arellano and Peralta, 2013; Floyd and Gallagher, 1997).

Caldwell (2014) posits that the expectation for people with intellectual disabilities to participate in research independently, unsupported, is in fact disabling. The importance of interconnectedness or interdependence within the relationships for children with disabilities is recognised in this study. Seeking the

views of children as a ‘*unit of analysis*’ ensures that children with disabilities who had complex communication needs were represented in this research (Caldwell, 2014, p. 492). The word ‘unit’ in the case of this study predominantly reflects a parental child unit. Within the literature, the role of parents as primary carers in the lives of children with disabilities is evidenced (HRB, 2023; Raghavan and Jones, 2023; Beadle-Brown et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the qualitative component of this study reveals the unique role of parents in the digital lives of their children. For example, Figure 5.4.1 below outlines parental input specific to qualitative research data.

Figure 5.4.1: Parental involvement in the interview process



In addition to parental involvement within the interview process, parental influence played out in 33 out of the 34 interviews with children with disabilities. A summary of qualitative data (see Appendix 3) provides a snapshot of how

children with disabilities expressed their views on the influence of parents on their internet use. These qualitative findings reveal that parents of children with disabilities play an integral role in the support, guidance, and management of their children's internet use. The use of mixed methods attempts to 'expand' our understanding of the influence parents have on their children's digital lives, thus 'completing' the research picture. Having presented the research design and the rationale for the mixed methods chosen to answer the research questions: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? and the secondary question: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use? I proceed to outline the ethical considerations that were crucial to the progress of this research study.

5.5 Ethical considerations

The expressed views of 34 children with disabilities are at the heart of this study, their participation is indispensable to its depth, direction, and meaning. The conceptualisation of disability within this research study was provided in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Throughout the research process, the dignity, privacy, and contributions of all participants were respected and acknowledged. Every child who participated in this study had unique needs that required ethical and practical considerations to ensure the research process was accessible, engaging, enjoyable, and not harmful.

Attention to consent and assent was an essential component throughout the research process. Two separate ethical approval applications were successful. The first ethics approval is from Trinity College Dublin School of Social Work and Social Policy and was obtained in July 2022 (see Appendix 8). The second came from Enable Ireland, a national disability provider, and was obtained in January 2023 (see Appendix 9). Garda clearance (also known as police vetting) and Children First Training certification (equivalent to child protection/safeguarding training) were submitted as part of the ethics application. Moreover, Table 5.5.1 below presents the steps, both broad and participant-specific, that were taken to ensure the ethical integrity of this project.

Table 5.5.1: Steps taken to ensure the ethical integrity of research study

Broad steps	Participant-specific steps
Adherence to guidelines /policies • The Guidelines for Best Practice Research with Children with Disabilities (Whyte, J. 2006) • Guidance for Developing Ethical Research Projects Involving Children (Cleary et al., 2012) • Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care; Department of Health (2005) • Trinity College Dublin good research practice (V4.8 2021) • The British Educational Research Association [BERA] Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018) • Research guidelines as set out by the Teaching Council Ireland (n.d.) • Sociological Association of Ireland Ethical Guidelines, (n.d.). Guidance • Iriarte et al., (2023a). Pedagogical approaches in inclusive research. In <i>Handbook of Teaching and Learning Social Research</i> • García Iriarte et al. (2023b). <i>How we work: Reflecting on ten years of inclusive research.</i> • Disability Research Seminar (Trinity College) Training • Participation in the webinar series <i>Assisted Decision Making Capacity Act</i> (2015). Connecting with disability organisations • AsIAM • Enable Ireland • Down syndrome Ireland • National Disability Authority • Headspace • PDA society Use of professional and personal experience of parenting and working with children with disabilities. Experts advice • Thesis committee advice and feedback (Dr. Eburne Garcia Iriarte and Dr. Michael Feely) • Supervisor guidance and feedback	Use of Universal design for • Participant Information booklet (Appendix 10) (PowerPoint with audio) • Assent form and consent forms (see Appendix 11) • Participant invitation letter (Appendix 12) Attention was paid to power dynamics within each interview and in the overall research project, building trust and ending relationships. Use of pseudonyms to protect the identity of research participants Use of a reflective tool • The four F's Greenway (2022) after each interview (see Appendix 4) • Onion model (personal reflection) (Evelein and Korthagen, 2014) • Reflective journal Access to a social worker through the service provider for participants from Enable Ireland a national disability provider Development of a wellbeing research statement (participant support plan) (see Appendix 13) Check in 24 hours post-interview List of local support services Consent and Information for supporters' information booklet provided (see Appendix 14) Attention to interview mechanics: person-centred accommodations for each participant

The topic of internet use from a child protection and welfare perspective involved asking children with disabilities about times they felt upset or worried about something they saw or experienced online. Sensitive information was

shared, and some research participants expressed anger, upset, disbelief, anxiety, worry, and sadness about their interactions or exposure to harmful content and conduct online. Respect for the agency of children with disabilities was fundamental to this component of the research project.

The well-being of the children with disabilities was held in the highest regard. All children who expressed upset during the interview process were offered various options to help them cope with their emotions. Specific strategies such as taking breaks, staying with the pause, not rushing participants when emotions occurred, and checking on assent, were used in these incidences. My professional experience as a social care practitioner was crucial in understanding the difference between distress and upset, as well as in having the confidence to be led by the child participating in the interview. All children were very clear that they wanted to continue with the interview to express their views about their internet use, including the difficulties that they encountered.

Six children with disabilities were supported through Enable Ireland, disability service they attended, by having a social worker available to them after the interview if they wished to avail of this support. Managing emotions for the other 28 participants was facilitated by a wellbeing plan (see Appendix 13) that outlined strategies for managing any upset and ensured that participants had access to contact numbers for national and local support lines.

It became apparent from some of the children with disabilities viewed the interview as a teaching opportunity to tell others about how to stay safe online. For other participants, it was a demonstration of their agency in managing difficult experiences in a digital landscape that they enjoy so much. I noted an example of such agency in my reflective diary entry on the 21/04/2023 “*it appears to me that Rachel has had to navigate an online and offline world that has been extraordinarily difficult and yet she articulates its impact on her with wisdom that is way beyond her 14 years, this is both inspiring and sad*”.

Children with disabilities asked many questions about the research process and explicitly sought to hear the research story. I made a commitment to each participant to give back the research story after all the interviews were complete. All research participants received the research story through a booklet, YouTube or TikTok link. Children with disabilities were named as the authors of the research story (see Appendix 15). The following link provides

access to the YouTube video (click ‘videos’) and TikTok clip (click ‘shorts’) which were shared with each participant:

<https://youtube.com/@rosedoolanmaher?si=WrY7e6BCm1NWZVwH>.

Universal and person-centred accommodations are discussed in detail later in this chapter under the heading interview process. Before describing these accommodations, I will explain the eligibility and sampling techniques I used to recruit children with disabilities for this research study.

5.6 Eligibility and Sampling

Currently, first-person accounts from children with disabilities about their experiences of internet use are rare in research. This study attempts to fill this gap. Participants eligible to take part in the qualitative component of the study included children with disabilities aged between 12 and 17 years old. Parents of children with disabilities participated in the quantitative component of this research study. Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2007) posit that if the goal is to gain an understanding of a phenomenon, the researcher makes purposeful selections of individual groups or settings, which is often the case in the qualitative component of a mixed methods study. Hence, children with disabilities were selected because, as mentioned, their views are rare in research and they were “*information rich*”, providing maximal understanding of their views about internet use (Patton, 2002, p. 169).

A snowball sample occurs when a researcher uses contact information to access informants that is given to the researcher by other informants. “*This process is, by necessity, repetitive: informants refer the researcher to other informants, who are contacted by the researcher and then refer her or him to yet other informants, and so on. Hence the evolving ‘snowball’ effect*” (Noy, 2008, p. 330). Whilst snowball sampling occurred in this study, so too did ‘reverse snowball sampling’.

In this study, reverse snowballing refers to the process by which children with disabilities, who participated in an interview, shared information about this research study with their friends, who then contacted me directly to participate in it. This method of recruiting children with disabilities for this project aligns with the National Disability Authority’s (Ireland) ethical recruitment practices. The initial target of 20 research participants was exceeded, with 34 children with disabilities taking part in this study. The data collection phase paused when no

more children with disabilities contacted me to participate in the interview process. Moreover, the participation of 34 children with disabilities demonstrates their enthusiasm for expressing their views in research.

Additionally, 126 parents of children with disabilities participated in a survey about their children's internet use. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the findings of the interviews with children with disabilities are the basis upon which the survey questionnaire was designed, solidifying the direct connection between the qualitative phase of data collection and the quantitative phase. This sample for the survey was calculated based on the total population of children with disabilities in Ireland, related to the percentage of children with disabilities aged 12-17 years. Cochran's (1977) formula for finite populations was employed with a 95% confidence level adopted, leaving a 5% margin of error.

Using these parameters, a sample size of 126 parents of children with disabilities equates to statistically valid results that incorporate a level of accuracy that is appropriate. Hence, the survey respondent rate of 126 parents is statistically robust, providing a representative sample of parents of children with disabilities regarding their children's internet use. SurveyMonkey was the tool used for dissemination. The challenges that exist for parents of children with disabilities are well documented (Hamilton, Mazzucchelli and Sanders, 2015; Kerr, Sharry, and Wilson, 2023; Pozo, Sarriá and Briosio, 2014; Heiman, 2002; Staunton, Kehoe and Sharkey, 2023; Resch et al., 2010), making this population hard to reach.

Disability agencies, including Enable Ireland and Down Syndrome Ireland, assisted in the recruitment process. The National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, as well as professional and personal networks, were also utilised to recruit participants for this survey. The survey was anonymous; there is no way of knowing if any parent who responded to the survey was a parent of a child or young person who participated in the qualitative component of this research. The recruitment and access of these research participants are addressed in the next section, offering further clarity on how these processes occurred.

5.7 Recruitment and access

A broad recruitment strategy was employed at the beginning of this project (September 2021). Potential organisations that constitute gatekeepers, from which participants could be recruited, included:

- Enable Ireland
- The Brothers of Charity
- The Daughters of Charity
- Teachers Council Ireland (Parents of children with disabilities in special education classes in secondary schools)
- Parents of children with disabilities (voluntary parent support groups)

I am very grateful to Enable Ireland who agreed to participate in this research. A gatekeeper was assigned, and six children came forward, playing a key role in kick-starting the qualitative component of this research study. Figure 5.7.1 presents an overview of recruitment specific to the qualitative component of this study.

Figure 5.7.1: Recruitment qualitative component



The benefit of insider researcher status (Whiting, 2023) was evident in this part of the research process, as my professional and personal knowledge of the disability community facilitated the recruitment of children with disabilities and their parents for the survey component. The broad conceptual framework that underpins this research study, as outlined in Chapter 2, had implications for the recruitment strategy. For example, the invitation letter did not categorise disability but did specify the age of the participants as 12-17 years. This letter

was initially sent to Enable Ireland, a national disability provider operating across 14 counties in Ireland, offering services to children and adults with physical, intellectual, and sensory disabilities, as well as autism.

The first six participants who contacted me about the research were from this national disability service. Emphasis was not placed on the child or young person's disability, except to ask the participant's parent or supporter if there was anything they wanted me to be aware of before the interview. In all cases, the answer was no. This meant that I did not know anything about the child with disabilities prior to meeting them at their chosen location, usually their homes. Many of the children who participated in this research study had complex communication needs. The meaning of this within this research project is explained further in the next section on data collection. Moreover, the names of all participants were changed, and attention to their privacy and confidentiality was held in the highest regard throughout the research process. Table 5.7.1 below provides details about the research participants in this study.

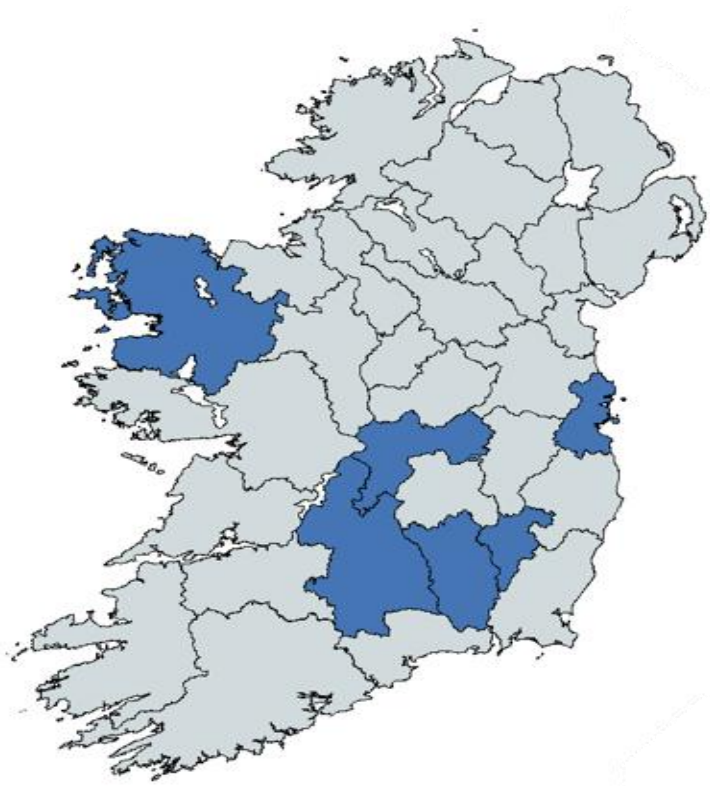
Table 5.7.1: Research participants (qualitative component)

	Pseudo name	Age	Gender	Sibling	Disability	Parent / Trusted person present	Parental engagement during the interview	Use of dyadic interview techniques	Consent and Assent signed
1	Sam	12	Female	No	Spina Bifida	Yes	Yes (minimal)	No	yes
2	Simon	13	Male	Yes (Terry)	ASD Dyspraxia Dyslexia	No	No	No	yes
3	Jack	13	Male	Yes (Simon)	ASD	No	No	No	yes
4	Cathal	15	Male	Yes (Elizabeth)	Intellectual Disability	Yes	Yes (significant)	Yes	yes
5	Elizabeth	14	Female	Yes (Cathal)	CAMHS Dyslexia	Yes	No	No	yes
6	Alan	13	Male	No	Ataxia	Yes	No	No	yes
7	Kathleen	17	Female	No	Hearing impairment Physical disability	No	No	No	yes
8	Rachel	14	Them /they	No	ASD Cerebral Palsy, CAMHS	Yes	Yes (minimal)	No	yes
9	Oliver	17	Male	No	Intellectual Disability	Yes	Yes (significant)	Yes	yes
10	Michael	15	Male	No	Intellectual Disability	Yes	Yes (minimal)	yes	yes
11	Donal	15	Male	No	Intellectual Disability	Yes	Yes (significant)	Yes	yes
12	Terry	16	Male	No	ASD CAMHS	Yes	No	No	yes
13	Tom	14	Male	No	ASD	Yes	Yes (minimal)	No	yes
14	Lily	15	Female	No	ASD & CAMHS	No	No	No	yes
15	Marty	13	Male	No	Dyslexia	No	No	No	yes
16	Jerry	14	Male	No	ADHD	Yes	No	No	yes
17	Bridget	15	Female	Yes (Alice)	ASD & CAMHS	No	No	No	yes
18	Alice	12	Female	Yes (Bridget)	ASD CAMHS	Yes	Yes (minimal)	No	yes
19	Mark	12	Male	No	Cerebral Palsy	Yes	Yes (minimal)	No	yes
20	Noel	14	Male	No	Cerebral Palsy Dyslexia	Yes	No	No	yes
21	Dan	16	Male	No	Learning disability	No	No	No	yes
22	Clara	17	Female	No	ASD	No	No	No	yes
23	William	12	Male	No	Intellectual disability	No	No	No	yes
24	Ruary	15	Male	No	CAMHS Special Educational Needs	No	No	No	yes
25	Lurcan	17	Male	No	Physical and Intellectual disability	No	No	No	yes
26	Jenny	15	Female	Yes (Tim)	ASD	Yes	No	No	yes
27	Lauren	15	Female	Yes (James)	Sensory Processing Disorder & ASD	No	No	No	yes
28	James	15	Male	Yes (Lauren)	Speech impairment Learning Disability	No	No	No	yes
29	Tim	13	Male	Yes (Jenny)	ASD	No	No	No	yes
30	Luke	13	Male	Yes (Paul)	ADHD Dyslexia	yes	Yes (minimal)	No	yes

31	Paul	16	Male	Yes (Luke)	ASD & ADHD	Yes	Yes (minimal)	No	yes
32	Eamon	16	Male	No	Dyslexia	No	No	No	yes
33	Cillian	14	Male	No	ASD & ADHD	yes	Yes (minimal)	No	yes
34	Olive	15	Female	No	Tourette's syndrome	No	No	No	yes

The location of research participants is shown in Figure 5.7.2 below. Participants were interviewed in Kilkenny (7), Carlow (11), Tipperary (1), Mayo (1), Dublin (7), and Offaly (7).

Figure 5.7.2: Location of research participants in Ireland



Moving forward, the focus of the methodological research processes remains on the qualitative component of this study, specifically the interview process. Again, my insider researcher status came to the fore in the development of a unique, eclectic approach to the design of the interview process so that the expressed views of all 34 children with disabilities about their internet use were captured. Whilst this eclectic approach was instrumental in the data gathering process, the literature also played an important role in the development of the interview questions. The following section focuses on the influence of this literature.

5.8 Literature informing the development of qualitative interviews

This section outlines how the literature informed the development of the qualitative interview instrument used with children with disabilities to address the primary research question: *‘How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?’* The development of the qualitative interview schedule was informed by disability frameworks, including the non-tragedy (Swain and French, 2000; Flynn & McGregor, 2017), social (Oliver, 2013), and human rights models (UNCRPD, 2006; Degener, 2016) of disability. The interview schedule was also informed by literature on child protection and welfare, and online safety and methodological literature on child-centred qualitative research with children with disabilities.

First, disability frameworks emphasising agency, participation, and rights informed the overall framing of the interview questions. The interview schedule was designed to foreground children’s abilities, preferences, and lived experiences. This is reflected in the use of open-ended, strengths-based questions such as *‘Would you like to tell me a little bit about yourself?’* and *‘Would you like to tell me about your abilities?’*, which align with social and human rights models of disability.

Second, child protection and welfare literature concerning children’s online lives informed the substantive focus of the interview topics. Of immense importance here is the UNCRC General Comment No.25 (UNCRC, 2021) which outlines children’s rights to be protected from harm in the digital environment. The most prevalent theme within the literature accounting for almost half of all the literature in the critical literature review focused on risks online. This body of literature highlighted the need to consider both the opportunities and benefits of internet use (Good and Fang, 2015; UNICEF, 2017a; Alfredsson Ågren, Kjellberg, Hemmingsson, 2020; Zebracki, 2019; Normand and Sallafranque, 2016; El Asam and Katz, 2021a; UNICEF, 2017b; Alhaboby et al., 2017) alongside potential risks and harms (Wright and Wachs, 2019; Calpbinici and Arslan, 2019; UNICEF, 2017b; Wright and Wachs, 2020; Didden et al., 2009; Saltz et al, 2020; Martínez-Cao et al., 2021; Wright, 2017; Volkova, 2019; Krishna, 2021). In response, the interview schedule included prompts addressing what children enjoy about being online, as well as questions exploring experiences that made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe and their perceptions of available support and

safeguarding mechanisms. Such questions included *“What is your favourite thing to do when you go online or when you use the internet?, Do you feel safe using the Internet?”*

Literature related to children with disabilities rights to privacy, independence and protection through the online behaviour of their parents (sharenting) (Alkhalouf, 2021; Isköl and Joamets, 2021; Ní Bhroin et al., 2022) were influential in the design of questions such as *“How do you feel about your parent/ guardian/ sharing pictures or information about you on their social media accounts?, How do you feel about your teachers/ sports clubs’ sharing pictures or information about you on their social media accounts?”*

Third, methodological literature on qualitative research with children, particularly children with disabilities, informed the choice of a bespoke method of interviewing children with disabilities. Drawing on semi structured (Longhurst, 2009), problem-centred interviewing approaches (Witzel and Ritzer, 2012) and dyadic methods (Caldwell, 2014), as well as the use of vignettes (O’Dell et al., 2012) this flexible format was selected to support rapport-building, accessibility, and meaningful participation across a wide range of communication styles and support needs of research participants. The use of vignettes was further informed by this methodological literature, as vignettes provide an accessible means for discussing sensitive child protection and welfare issues without requiring direct disclosure of personal experiences. Vignette-based prompts enabled exploration of how children understood online risks, boundaries, and appropriate responses, thereby supporting the examination of how child protection and welfare intersect with their internet use. Methodologically, this approach is positioned against a literature base in which research on children with disabilities internet use has frequently relied on quantitative designs and/or parental and professional proxy perspectives. Moreover, qualitative work is often concentrated on intellectual disability rather than on adopting a broad disability framing (Borgström, 2021, 2023; Chadwick et al., 2013; Molin, Sorbring and Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2017). Overall, the views of children with disabilities in research about their internet use remain underrepresented.

This study is informed by a critical realist epistemology, which recognises that children with disabilities digital participation is shaped by real social

structures and material conditions while also being mediated through their own meaning-making. Brönnimann's, (2022) work influenced the development of interview questions so that the focus remained on the ontological premise. From a critical realist perspective, the aim is not simply to describe experiences, but to develop explanations of the mechanisms that enable or constrain participation, including mechanisms that operate through relationships, norms, and supports (Bhaskar, 1978; Archer et al., 2013). This aligns with placing emphasis on disability as relational and socially produced (rather than located solely within individual bodies), and with children's rights frameworks that establish an ethical and moral obligation to include children and young people with disabilities as rights-bearing participants in research about issues affecting them (Priestley, 1998; Goodley, 2013; United Nations, 1989, 2006).

Overall, the design of the research instruments was guided by established qualitative methodological principles, including the use of unambiguous language and the avoidance of bias in question formation during data collection. The critical realist philosophical approach that underpinned this study was also instrumental. Alongside this the literature informed both the content and structure of the interview instrument. Disability frameworks shaped the strengths-based and agency-focused language of questions; child protection and welfare literature informed the inclusion of topics relating to online opportunities, risks, and support; and qualitative methodological literature guided the use of semi-structured, dyadic, problem centred interviews and vignette-based approaches. The approach taken for data collection, specifically the details surrounding the interview mechanics, is described in the next section.

5.9 Data collection: Interview mechanics

The qualitative component of this research study incorporates an eclectic approach by including aspects of inclusive research, in-depth, semi-structured interviews, dyadic interviews, and problem-centred interviews. Vignettes were also included in this part of the research process. Qualitative interviews were the chosen method for capturing children's expressed views about their internet use, as they *produce knowledge through the social interaction between the researcher and the participant* (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.162). This social interaction incorporates a view of communication that encompasses verbal or

non-verbal sharing of ideas and information (Phutela, 2015). Whyte posits researchers should make '*a commitment to inclusiveness and to facilitating the equal participation of those for whom obstacles might make it difficult without additional support (Inclusivity)*' (2006, p. 7). This research study was committed to including the expressed views of children to seek out the answer to the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?

For clarity, the inclusive elements of this research lie predominantly in the recruitment, data collection, and dissemination phases. For example, elements of dyadic interviewing were used within this research as it is a technique that values interdependence when interviewing people with intellectual disabilities (Caldwell, 2014). According to Caldwell, "*it does not hold people with intellectual disabilities to the unrealistic expectation that they be 'able' to participate in the interview while unsupported, 'independently'*" (2014, p. 492). Research participants and their gatekeeper were informed of the option to be accompanied (n=17) or unaccompanied (n=17) during the interview process. Stage 1 of a three-part technique described in dyadic interviewing was used in this project, namely, "*meet participant and build rapport, observe environment in context, gain general understanding of the issue, identify key support person*" (Caldwell, 2014, p. 498).

According to Iacono, "*as the complexity of the disability increases, so does the complexity of communication needs and of finding an alternative system; and people with disabilities must also rely on the skills of others to help them to be a part of a conversation*" (2014, p.83). Reliance on the "*interdependent relationship*" came to the fore primarily within four of the interviews conducted. Communications observed and recoded within the data included but were not exhaustive to gestural cues such as hand clapping to show excitement, rapid hand movements, gentle tapping of objects or parts of their body, facial expressions, body movements, eye gaze patterns, vocalisations, touch interactions, repetitive actions like rocking, and physically moving around. I was led by the person-centred nature of communication for each research participant.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with children with disabilities (n=34). The information booklet (see Appendix 10) was designed

using universal design principles, providing details about the interview process and including potential research questions in advance of the interview.

Longhurst explains that *‘in-depth, semi-structured interviews are verbal interchanges where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions’* (2009, p. 580).

In the case of interviews conducted with children with complex communication needs, the emphasis was placed on the ‘expressed views’ of these participants rather than *‘verbal interchanges’*. Research participants who were non-verbal or had complex communication needs are included in the research through the recording of observations and responses to questions by their parents in the presence of their child, thus recognising the “interdependence” of their relationship (Caldwell, 2014). This method, although not inclusive in terms of Walmsley and Johnson’s depiction of inclusive research that involves *“people who may otherwise be seen as subjects for the research as instigators of ideas, research designers, interviewers, data analysts, authors, disseminators and users”* (2003, p. 10), it did however allow for research participants with complex communication needs to have their expressed views represented about their digital lives. Relational conceptions of agency (de Haas et al., 2022; Kittay, 2011) were important here. De Haas et al. advocate for *‘research with and alongside those with profound intellectual disabilities that celebrate different kinds of agency and personhood and that support relational autonomy’* (2022, p. 1). Relational autonomy is evident in how the data is recorded. For example, in interviews with participants who had complex communication needs, the terms used by participants themselves, their family members, or a trusted person to refer to one another are recorded in the transcripts.

Semi-structured interviews promote flexibility, increasing data reliability and credibility whilst also keeping the interview on track (Longhurst, 2009). The process of *“interview guide bureaucracy”* (Schmidt, 2004, p. 207), for example, was stringently avoided by not ticking off questions and sticking to formality whilst collecting data. The approach during data collection was informal; in fact, it was very important to ‘go with the flow’ and follow the lead of the research participants. Adopting Witzel and Reiter’s (2012) Problem Centred Interview (PCI) style alongside the semi-structured interview process proved useful to

encompass a deeper examination of researcher positionality. In this way, the balance between my knowledge of the research area and the immense value of research participants' lived experiences was attended to. This form of interviewing aligns itself well with mixed methods, acknowledging both inductive reasoning (participants' responses to interview questions) and deductive reasoning (use of the researcher's prior knowledge) and contradictory knowledge sources.

PCI is described as a method “*suitable to investigate actions and experiences, their justification and evaluation, as well as individual opinions. It is directed towards topics, objects and their interrelations which are little explored*” (Witzel and Reiter, 2012, p. 8). The intersection where disability, internet use and child protection and welfare meet has not been explored, hence the application of “*the well-informed traveller*”, a tool used in PCI, works well in this study (Witzel and Reiter, 2012, p. 10). For instance, my knowledge of the research topic and the research community is ‘well informed’, this knowledge forms the background to a story that is told by children with disabilities as they navigate their digital worlds, allowing me to travel with them at one point in time on their journey. PCI promotes trust, listening, concentration, waiting, staying open to interpretation and requesting revision in an egalitarian, collaborative interview process (Witzel and Reiter, 2012).

Interviews were led by the children with disabilities, which meant that the mechanics of the interviews varied depending on each participant. The following figures 5.9.1 and 5.9.2 provide insights into the interview mechanics, so that each research participant felt comfortable sharing their lived experiences about their digital lives.

Figure 5.9.1: Description of interview mechanics

Wellbeing	Breaks Wellbeing plan Support services availability Availability of a social worker (National disability provider)
Building Trust	Go with the flow- activities before, after and during the interview Answer questions including, questions about personal life Adhere to 3 P's: Personal, Professional and Private information (Holthoff and Harbo, 2011) Clear about contact after the interview.
Language	Nondirective questions - Awareness of Pathological Demand Avoidance Essential to use positive language: 'That's a great answer', 'Brilliant', 'That's very interesting'.....
"The perfect answer"	Reassurance about giving 'the perfect answer' <i>"Children with ASD will show higher levels of dysfunctional and perfectionistic beliefs compared to typically developing children"</i> (Greenaway and Howlin , 2010, p.1180)
Staying with the PAUSE	Essential for research participants to process information Often the information provided after the pause was really insightful Count to ten slowly used as a tactic. Data would be very different if the pause was not allowed to happen
Mapping the Interview	"First, we are going to...., then we are going to...., we are almost finished, two more questions and then...."
Use of Vignettes	Research participants were freer in their opinions when they talked about other children's online behaviour, often the statement " <i>if it was me in that situation I would.....</i>" emerged
Mindful of Seven senses	Sight, smell, taste, hearing, touch, vestibular, proprioception Did not wear perfume, choice of figgets provided, location of interview wherever the research participants choose. Prepared to taste food research participants prepared or provided.
Sense of Humour	Laughter was extremely important – having fun about football teams, music, memes. All research participants expressed their view that they enjoyed the interview experience and liked the fact that their opinion and views are being heard. It was the first time for all of the participants to engage in research.

Interviews took place in tents, in dens, at kitchen and living room tables, while walking, attending to pets and farm animals and on trampolines. Research participants moved around during the interview. Most research participants used fidgets, which were brought to each interview in a box for use if they wished. Interviews took place at times that best suited the participants' schedules; those conducted in the evenings after school proved most tiring for them.

Flexibility prevailed throughout the interview process. For example, the questions about internet use engaged participants more than questions about themselves. In fact, many participants became animated when expressing their views about the internet, as opposed to non-engagement or providing one-word answers about hobbies, school, and friendships.

Attending to the power dynamics (Yoder and Kahn, 1992) was important in the data collection process. Where possible, participants were given the opportunity to take over the operation of the recording device. This was important for the participants who were curious about the recording device and for those who were nervous about this part of the interview process. I always kept a notebook and pen with me, explaining before the interview began that I might take notes throughout the interview process. I was nervous that if I passed over the recording device to research participants, the data might not be recorded, or the device could inadvertently be switched off. Thankfully, this did not happen. Figure 5.9.2 below provides a visual specific to the interview mechanics of this research process.

Interview Mechanics

The diagram illustrates the 'Interview mechanics for Ch/Yp with Disabilities' through a central concept and five surrounding principles, each supported by a relevant image:

- Be prepared to have lots of fun interactions**: Accompanied by an image of children jumping over a bar.
- Ensure Ch/Yp choice trusted person comforters**: Accompanied by an image of a dog and a cat.
- Ch/Yp with Disabilities interviews in safe spaces and places**: Accompanied by an image of a trampoline.
- Awareness of the Seven senses**: Accompanied by an image of a hand holding grapes.
- Interview mechanics for Ch/Yp with Disabilities**: The central concept, accompanied by a diagram of the seven senses (Touch, Taste, Sight, Hearing, Smell, Vestibular, Gustatory).

Having delineated the mechanics of the interview process, the second integrated publication related to this research study focuses on the development

of research questions and the data collection procedures incorporating the critical realist lens. I am the primary author of this publication titled “*Through a Critical Realist Lens: Investigating Data Collection and Analysis Techniques in a Qualitative Study About Internet-Related Child Protection Risks for Children with Disabilities*”, published in the International Journal of Qualitative Methods. Valuable feedback was provided by my supervisors at the latter stages of this paper’s development. The repetitive nature of this publication is acknowledged for clarity for independent readership. This publication, presented next, is integrated into this thesis as it addresses two core components of this research methodology; data collection and data analysis. It also provides an exposition of how critical realism is a good fit for this research study.

5.10 Qualitative data collection and data analysis through a critical realist lens [integrated publication]

Title

Through a critical realist lens: Investigating data collection and analysis techniques in a qualitative study about internet-related child protection risks for children with disabilities.

Abstract

This paper applies a critical realist philosophical position to collect and analyse data from 34 children with disabilities about the child protection and welfare issues associated with internet use. This study utilised a blend of methods for data collection and a defined data analysis frame which is presented in this paper. This data analysis frame offers learning about how qualitative findings can be applied to critical realism, explaining the position of causal mechanisms within the digital realities of children with disabilities. The purpose of this paper is to add to emerging critical realist methodological literature by delineating the data collection processes involved in doing research with children with disabilities and by providing a step-by-step guide to qualitative data analysis through a critical realist lens. This paper offers learning for academics, researchers, and policymakers interested in engaging children with disabilities in qualitative research.

Introduction

A critical realist philosophical approach was used in a funded research study to examine the expressed views of children with disabilities about their internet use, positioned within a child protection and welfare background. This topic is complex, poorly researched, and overlooks the lived experiences of children with disabilities. This paper focuses on the methodological process, specifically data collection and data analysis. Henceforth, reference to '*the study*' pertains to the qualitative study that underpins this paper as opposed to reference to "*this paper*," which sets out the methodological process of data collection and analysis with a critical realist lens.

Critical realism is put forward as a middle ground alternate to positivism and interpretivism. The adoption of the critical realist philosophical approach can be viewed in nursing and health sciences (Parlour and McCormack, 2012;

Williams, Rycroft-Malone and Burton, 2017; Ryan, 2024; Rajab Dizavandi and Heydari, 2021), social work and social sciences (Oliver, 2012; Houston, 2001a; 2001b; Blom and Morén, 2010; Samsonsens and Heggdalsvik, 2018), as well as business and management research (McAvoy and Butler, 2018; Ryan et al., 2012; Saxena, 2019).

Moreover, critical realism has been applied on an individual basis to the core concepts within this research topic; disability (Bhaskar and Danermark 2006; Mckechnie, 2007; Shakespeare, 2013), internet use (Eynon, 2021; Wheaton and Kreps, 2023) and child protection and welfare (Samsonsens and Heggdalsvik, 2023; Walker, 2004). However, overall, less attention is paid in the literature to the methodological processes within critical realism. Here, the work of Fryer (2022), Christodoulou (2024), and Wilshire and Ronkainen (2021) informs this paper, providing key methodological guidance on the data analysis frame presented later and used to address a qualitative study on internet-related child protection and welfare risks for children with disabilities.

This paper intends to add to emerging literature on the application of a critical realist position to data collection and analysis, as well as focusing on the critical realist application to data analysis within a funded qualitative research study. While it does not provide an exhaustive account of critical realism, it nevertheless establishes critical realism as an appropriate choice of philosophical framework for the study. For example, this qualitative study captured the expressed views of children with disabilities, which are, by their nature, subjective, contextual, and shaped by diverse life experiences. This can be seen to be in opposition to a positivist approach, which posits that knowledge is truth, definite, harmonious with reality, and accurate (Park, Konge and Artino, 2019). While positivism may offer a structured way of knowing, it tends to overlook the complexities that exist within children's rich, varied, and non-linear views of their digital worlds.

Several methodological debates in literature offer insights into critical realist application to qualitative research relative to social constructionism and positivism (Cruickshank, 2012; Lawani, 2021; and Saleh, 2009). Social constructivism and social constructionism are philosophical paradigms where the world has no meaning until it is constructed by individuals' or groups of individuals' social activity (Berger and Luckman, 2016; Gergen, 1999). The

questions raised by Berger and Luckman, “What is real? How is one to know?” (2016, p.13), have particular significance when related to critical realism's epistemological and ontological premises.

Tensions lie in their epistemological positions, for example, critical realism posits reality exists independent of human knowingness, while social constructivism/ social constructionism emphasises human construction and interpretation of reality (Taylor, 2018; Elder-Vass, 2012). Ontologically, the layered view of reality that is mind-independent and can only be partially known through research (Bhaskar, 1975) is different from social constructivism/ constructionism, whereby reality is constructed through interaction (Berger and Luckman, 2016; Gergen, 1999). Critical realism and social constructivism can co-exist compatibly, specific to structures and mechanisms that underlie social phenomena (critical realism) that can be interpreted and given meaning by individuals (social constructivism) or groups (social constructionism) (Bogna, Raineri, and Dell, 2020).

The rationale for adopting a critical realist approach to this research study is not in opposition to social constructivism/ constructionism or positivism per se; it is based on its particular fit for this research topic. Peters et al. looking at constructionism and critical realism applied to business networks point out that “*this is not a deliberation of which orientation is ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ but instead how our understanding (or basic assumptions) informs (and reproduces) real-life research practice*”(2013, p. 340). Specifically, internet use, by its very nature, is shaped by structural mechanisms such as socio-infrastructurel/socio-economic influences, which exist and materialise in hidden algorithms, market-driven by tech companies to keep their consumers online longer. These structures have implications for the digital realities of children with disabilities.

On a practical level, Stavropoulos et al (2021) highlight functional aspects of internet use such as socialisation (friendships, romantic/ sexual relationships), instrumental (real-life needs such as health), and entertainment (gaming, audio-visual recordings). In the context of this paper, the internet is defined as ‘a network of interconnected networks that can communicate with one another thanks to shared protocols and standards’ (Perarnaud and Rossi 2024, p. 2175). The authors feel that a critical realist lens is of great utility to

understand causal powers, often hidden, that impact children's digital experiences.

This study is framed within the child protection and welfare domain, which incorporates the risks associated with internet use for children with disabilities. Houston posits that critical realism reconciles objectivism to bring “*our attention to the deep-seated causes of harm or the underlying mechanisms that, when activated, give rise to situations involving risk*” (2001a, p. 219). Child protection and welfare within this paper is guided by UNICEF’s unequivocal statement that ‘every child must be protected from violence, exploitation and abuse on the internet’ (2022b, no page). This statement about child protection and welfare online aligns well with this research study, as it is clear, succinct, and non-ambiguous in its ambition.

Furthermore, a broad conceptual understanding of disability (Goodley, 2013; Shildrick, 2012), positioned at the complex intersection of internet use, child protection and welfare, underpins the scope and direction of this research study. The social, human rights (Degener, 2016) and the non-tragedy model of disability (Swain and French, 2000; Flynn & McGregor, 2017) guide its way. This broad view of disability is essential in the context of the internet itself, as it is non-discriminatory in terms of its users, ensuring children with disabilities who are severely underrepresented in research can express their views about their digital lives.

More specifically, the UNCRPD definition aligns with this research study as it states that “*Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.*” (2007, p. 4). A broad spectrum of disablement is reflected, which aligns well with critical realism as a deeper understanding of a phenomenon is sought. For instance, mental health is included in this definition, which is often not visible but can enormously impact a person’s participation in society. People who self-identified as having a disability and those with hidden disabilities were also included in the study.

Having set out the landscape, we progress with a justification of how a critical realist approach was conceptually applied in the research study that

explored internet-related child protection and welfare risks for children with disabilities.

Critical realism justified and conceptually applied.

Clark, Lissel, and Davis (2008) offer five tenets on which critical realism is based. In an attempt to conceptually apply critical realism to this research study, a brief description of each tenet is presented, specific to the complex intersection where child protection and welfare, disability, and internet use meet. The first tenet of critical realism refers to “*the existence of independent social and physical reality: reconciling the objective and subjective values*” (Clark, Lissel and Davis 2008, p. 68). In other words, the view of critical realism is that social structures exist but are independent of or stand outside of the individual. These structures, such as class, culture, and discrimination, exist regardless of human knowledge or understanding.

Critical realism posits that the truth is out there but is always mind-independent. Things exist, separate from our beliefs or our accounts of them (Clark, Lissel and Davis, 2008). For example, living in a country where access to the online world is limited or censored, for example, China, Russia, and North Korea (Bischoff, 2022), will impact a person’s online experience; however, they may not be aware that socio-political forces are influencing their access. Similarly, the rollout of fibre broadband increases accessibility of internet use and is a government-driven initiative in Ireland, the country where this study is set; this directly impacts how a young person with disabilities experiences their internet. However, this government initiative, driven by numerous elements including Sustainable Development Goal 10, may not be observable to children with disabilities. Hence, within critical realism, structures are present that apply influence irrespective of whether this is known or accepted by human beings (Clark, Lissel and Davis, 2008).

The second tenet relates to ‘a stratified emergent generative ontology: understanding reality and causation’ (Clark, Lissel and Davis 2008, p. 69). Bhaskar (1978) argues that critical realism has three distinct ontological layers: empirical, actual, and real, which have significant epistemological repercussions. The empirical level is explained as what we see and experience; the actual level is the underlying structures that may stem from the real level and

are responsible for what we see and experience, or what we may not see or experience (may be unobservable).

Finally, the real level is the underlying structures and mechanisms responsible for what we see and experience (Ton et al., 2021). To gain a deeper understanding of the intersection between internet use and child protection and welfare risks related to disability, one needs knowledge from all three of Bhaskar's ontological levels {empirical, actual, real}. The data collection and data analysis processes outlined in the next section of this paper attend to this layered view of ontology.

Furthermore, the omnipresence of the internet in the lives of children with disabilities aligns itself with the critical realist perspective, specifically in relation to the empirical, actual, and real levels. In the real domain, the digital world exists and is growing irrespective of whether children with disabilities, their parents, or professionals experience it. Moreover, children's experiences of the digital world (empirical domain), coupled with the nature of online networks (actual domain), have changed the perception of temporality in social interactions. This perception draws on continual presence (real domain), reshaping how people experience constant presence and awareness in the digital spaces (empirical domain).

Hence, by using critical realism as the philosophical premise for the qualitative study, the authors attempt to 'explain' how the internet might pose child protection and welfare risks for children with disabilities through Bhaskar's stratified ontology, namely the empirical, actual, and real domains. Added complexity exists here in trying to keep up with a fast-paced, ever-evolving, and advancing digital world.

The third tenet of critical realism focuses on "an explanatory-focused open system view: understanding deep causation in a complex world" (Clark, Lissel and Davis, 2008, p.71). Critical realism unequivocally recognises the open nature of the social world in which multiple factors exist and connect in vastly complicated and changeable ways within context and over time (Clark, Lissel and Davis, 2008). Furthermore, Sayer states that within critical realism, there exists an outside world. In both everyday life and social science, we frequently explain things by reference to causal powers (2000, p. 14).

In this study, children with disabilities provided insights into the nature of reality, which is their view of their online world. The research findings exist within a universal open social world; the research participants and the researcher will experience only a portion of this world. Unobservable causal powers within an open world can be explained in relation to the digital domain. Only a portion of the online world is known to users who engage with it; hidden algorithms deeply embedded in the internet are powerfully influential in ensuring individuals stay online longer (The New York Times, 2020; Kiberd, 2021; Aiken, 2022).

The impact of this hidden domain within the online world is more pronounced and dangerous when it is combined with the added vulnerabilities and complexities that exist for people with disabilities (Borgström, 2021; Chadwick, 2019; Heiman and Shemesh, 2019; Wells and Mitchell, 2014). The final section of this paper exemplifies how two of the qualitative research findings that stem from this study are enhanced by the researcher's understanding of the importance of the deeper level of ontology within child protection and welfare risk associated with internet use for children with disabilities.

The fourth tenet of critical realism is the recognition of complex agency and structure interactions (Clark, Lissel and Davis, p. 72). Simply put, critical realism recognises factors that are within individuals as well as factors that are contextual. For example, the context of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the online behaviour of children all over the world (Rideout et al, 2022; Adibelli and Sümen, 2020; Chawla et al., 2021; Ozturk and Ayaz-Alkaya, 2021). The physical, biological, social, psychological, environmental, economic, and cultural influences that exist for children with disabilities are some of the mechanisms within the actual, real and empirical domain that this research aims to address.

Critical realism acknowledges the social constructivists' perspective of the individual transforming their everyday worlds; yet the role of social factors sets critical realism apart, allowing for a more in-depth account of social life (Houston, 2001b). The complex nature of risk associated with internet use by children with or without disabilities forms a part of the caseloads of child protection and welfare professionals. Critical realism offers a broader view of the complex internal and external mechanisms at play specific to these phenomena;

however, there exists a lack of clarity, a sense of ambiguity on how to respond to such complex online safeguarding concerns (El Asam, 2021a; Taylor, Slemaker and Silovsky 2020; Dimitropoulos et al., 2022). The application of critical realism in this research study aims to gain a broader insight into structure and agency at play within the child protection and welfare realm for children with disabilities using the internet.

The fifth tenet emphasises ‘methodological eclecticism and post-disciplinary study’ (Clark, Lissel and Davis 2008, p. 72). The qualitative research approach used in this study is chosen so that the reality of the online child protection and welfare risks for children with disabilities can be viewed in a manner that pays attention to complex mechanisms at play as these concepts intersect in an open system. Lawson refers to an open system as one that occurs *“in a world that is open and complex, unforeseen developments are always occurring”* (2003, p. 100) as opposed to closed systems, which Mearman describes as being *“cut off from external influences”* (2006, p. 45).

Such complex open systems may include the nature and view of disability, inclusive of hidden disabilities, the complexity of child protection and welfare concerns that may stem from professionals' and parents' breach of children's data privacy, or the progressive advances of the digital world moving into the metaverse, a virtual reality space and the advancement of artificial intelligence. Findings from this research project are presented with the understanding that they represent a view of agency and structures at play within child protection and welfare, disability, and internet use. This particular tenet is developed upon later in this paper using Margaret Archer's (1995) Structure, Culture and Agency framework.

The findings of this qualitative study are based on the open nature of the social world in which multiple causal factors exist and connect in vastly complicated and changeable ways within context and at one point in time. The layers of mechanisms at play in a complex open system allow the researcher *“to explore the variety of modes of co- and multiple determination in fields such as disability research”* (Bhaskar and Danermark 2006, p. 295). The layers of mechanisms at the intersection of child protection and welfare and internet use for children with disabilities are explored through qualitative interviews informed by critical realism. The journey taken to present structural mechanisms that

impact children's digital experiences, specifically the data collection and analysis processes involved in this study, is presented next.

Data collection

A qualitative approach was employed to elicit the views of children with disabilities (n=34) aged between 12 and 17 years. This research study incorporates an eclectic approach by including elements of dyadic (Caldwell, 2014), semi-structured in-depth (Longhurst, 2009), and problem-centred interviewing (Witzel and Reiter, 2012). Vignettes were also used; these are fictional short stories (O'Dell et al., 2012) relating to internet use by young people, which participants were asked to comment on.

Two separate successful ethical applications were made for this research study, one from the Research Ethics Committee in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, and another from a national disability services provider in the country where this research is set (Ireland). Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, utmost attention was paid to the well-being of the children with disabilities who participated in the study. A social worker was available to participants who came through the national disability services provider, and a wellbeing plan was designed outlining procedures should a young person become upset during the interview process. This plan identified local supports available to participants if they required them after the interview process. We now define the core conceptual framework before describing how a critical realist lens was methodologically applied.

Danermark's instrumental paper on "*Interdisciplinary research and critical realism the example of disability research*" (2002, p. 56) offers learning about the application of disability research to uncover hidden mechanisms allowing for explanations rather than descriptions in research. This research study used a primary purposeful sampling technique (Patton 2002) to recruit children with disabilities to express their views about their internet use.

Professional contacts were utilised to recruit participants, reverse snowballing occurred whereby young people who participated passed on information about the research to their friends who then used contact details to ask for information and request permission to participate in the study. Our initial target number of participants of 20 was surpassed, demonstrating the desire of children with disabilities to participate in the research process. Six young people

participated in this study through a gatekeeper from Enable Ireland, a national disability services provider, 29 young people were recruited through purposeful sampling.

Frauenberger (2015), referring to the complex nature of disability from a critical realist perspective, urges reflection to increase understanding of “*disabled experiences*” (2015, p. 93). Inclusive methodology is essential here; Salmon et al. (2018) demonstrate an approach whereby research participants had a few options available to them. Two such options included children with disabilities opting to participate either individually or with a supporter present, resulting in 16 young people taking part in the interview unaccompanied, 1 young person selected a trusted person to be present, and 17 young people chose for their parent to be present.

Concerning the 34 young people with disabilities who participated in this research, there were 7 children/ young people with physical and sensory disabilities, 11 children/ young people with intellectual and learning disabilities, and 16 children/ young people with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, and mental health disabilities. The nature of disabilities was categorised according to participants' self-identification during the data collection phase of the study; these are not intended to be mutually exclusive categories, nor is there the intention to overlook the complexity and intersectionality of disability experiences. In fact, the author's use of the UNCRPD broad definition of disability, as mentioned, takes “*on a more meaningful and inclusive understanding of disability, which considers several domains of functioning, including those related to psychosocial well-being*” (UNICEF, 2023, Para 3).

To address insider bias, acknowledgment of researcher positionality is important (Collins & McNulty, 2020). As advocated by Collins & McNulty (2020), the author who conducted the interviews engaged in reflective consideration, recognising the influence and impact of being a parent of children with disabilities, a social care practitioner within the disability sector, and a researcher conducting the research practice of this project.

Andrew Sayer, a significant contributor to the development of critical realism, criticises the notion of ‘value-free’ social research, claiming all research is “*value-laden*” (Sayer, 2010, pp. 28, 149-150). He promotes attention to power imbalances and positionality, especially when doing research with marginalised

groups (Sayer, 2000). The positionality and power dynamic within the research relationship was attended to in this study using Roger Greenway's (2018) reflective model. Young people steered the interview in their chosen safe places and spaces. Interview questions were not asked in a linear manner and vignettes were not used with all the participants.

The researcher was led by the children and their ability to express their views, expressions were observed and recorded, forming an important part of the data. Interviews took place on trampolines, in dens, at kitchen tables, while walking, with pets and whilst attending to farm animals. A data management plan was put in place and the names of children with disabilities who participated in the interviews were changed to protect their identity.

Smith and Elger (2014) recognise interviewing actors in critical realism as a means of accessing empirical representation through lived experiences. In this study, the individual's autonomy was respected and the method of interviewing, which included dyadic, semi-structured, in-depth, and problem-centred interviewing as well as vignettes, was deemed appropriate to capture children with disabilities' experiences of the internet. Information about the research study, including details about interview questions, data management and the overall purpose and function of the study, were provided to each young person in advance of the interview using universal design principles.

Smith and Elger explain "*that critical realists seek to utilise interviews and other social research methods both to appreciate the interpretations of their informants and to analyse the social contexts, constraints and resources within which those informants act*" (2014, p. 6). The qualitative interview produces knowledge through the social interaction between the researcher and the participant (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.162). Semi-structured interviews require the interviewer to have a prepared list of questions and topics, which can be asked in different ways with different interviewees. Semi-structured interviews were used as they increased the flexibility and the responsiveness of the interview while keeping the interview on track, improving the reliability and credibility of the data, whilst also promoting researcher reflexivity and positionality (Longhurst, 2009).

'Critical realists also view agency as relational, which gives rise to the concept of 'collective agency' – focusing on the collectivity or cooperation of

people in taking actions. This type of agency is indeed helpful in understanding the capability of people with severe disabilities (Ton et al., p. 195). Here, Caldwell promotes the use of dyadic interviewing as a means of accommodating people with intellectual disabilities' choice and self-determination within the research process. The agency of children with disabilities was recognised, they chose who they would like to support them to do the interview, as *"it does not hold people with intellectual disabilities to the unrealistic expectation that they be 'able' to participate in the interview while unsupported, 'independently'"* (Caldwell 2014, p. 492).

Sayer (2010) places significance on how social positioning has an impact on knowledge, recognising social contexts and power dynamics as having influence on how knowledge is constructed and understood. Within this, Ton et al. state that *"People with disabilities have unique and invaluable insights into the complexity of their disabled experience"* (2021, p. 192). Flexibility within the interview process was necessary to ensure that children with disabilities participating in the interview had the freedom to express their views in their unique individual manner. A deeper analysis of researcher positionality occurs within the Problem Centred Interview (PCI) perspective; hence, elements of this approach were adopted alongside the semi-structured, dyadic, in-depth interview process. A Problem Centred Interview (Witzel and Reiter, 2012) is not dissimilar to the semi-structured interview; however, emphasis is placed on the researcher's knowledge, or familiarity with the subject area, whilst also placing enormous value on research participants' lived experiences. Problem-Centred Interviewing (PCI) has been accepted as an elaborate manner of collecting oral data.

PCI is adopted within this study as it assists in understanding the lived experiences of children with disabilities within their digital world, while also allowing for exploring causal or hidden mechanisms within this reality. The intersection between disability, internet use, and child protection and welfare is *"little explored"; hence, a problem-centred approach was used in the form of the researcher acting as the 'well-informed traveller'"* (Witzel and Reiter, 2012, p. 10). This form of interviewing begins with the researcher's knowledge of background information, yet the trip made, and the story told about it afterwards will depend on the people met on the journey and their insider (research participant)

knowledge (Witzel and Reiter, 2012). Problem-centred interviewing encourages the interviewer to listen, be attentive, to wait, to keep interpretations open, and to seek revision in an interview process that is egalitarian. It promotes trust so that the meaning associated with the research problem/question is explored in a collaborative manner (Witzel and Reiter, 2012).

Each question had a visual representation and was printed out using a large font and placed in the view of the young person with disabilities participating in the interview. Vignettes are described by O'Dell et al. (2012) as short stories with a fictional character or fictional scenarios that relate to the research study. In this study, two vignettes with fictional characters and fictional scenarios were portrayed visually. Vignettes allowed for deeper exploration of children with disabilities' views about online interactions in the context of social dynamics in group chats and parental decision-making.

From a critical realist perspective, Harrits and Møller explain 'vignette experiment as a way to bring forward a meticulous and nuanced analysis of how social and cultural contexts and categories are causally linked with micro institutional interpretations and practices' (2021, p. 542). Vignettes used in this study are fictional, not drawn from real-life events, but designed to reflect common themes and challenges in children's online experiences. Vignettes provided a context for children with disabilities to express their views in a manner that was less personal and non-threatening (Hughes, 1998).

Vignettes also allow researchers to study sensitive topics, allowing participants control over disclosure of personal information (O'Dell et al., 2012). The topic of internet use is a sensitive one, evoking both positive and negative emotions for children with disabilities during the interview process. Here, the importance of the well-being plan, as mentioned earlier, came into play.

Critical realists, as opposed to positivists and relativists, strive to use in-depth information collected from qualitative interviewing methods to explain social world phenomena (Bhaskar, 1978). Brönnimann suggests that "*a more transparent method for interview questions can lead to increased validity and afford replicability of mechanism-based theories resulting from empirical realist research*" (2022, p.1). Interview questions were developed with a focus on the ontological premise, such as people, events, culture, and structure

(Brönnimann, 2022). Research questions encompassed a critical realist lens in preparation for the interview process.

The questions' wording and structure changed depending on the research participant's communication preferences. Complexity existed in framing the research questions in a manner that was accessible, for example, plain English and visuals for each question were used to engage children in the research study. The onus was on the researcher to thoughtfully consider each research question's design, integrating a critical realist perspective. This critical realist lens was applied in the data transcription and analysis as the researcher used it as a guide, writing reflections/ notes throughout these processes. Examples of interview questions alongside the researcher's application of them to a critical realist lens are provided below;

Would you like to tell me about your abilities? Critical realist lens:

recognition that abilities are relational (influenced by social, environmental, and institutional contexts), not fixed but context-dependent (for example, tools, technologies, or accommodations available). Seeking a deeper layered understanding of children with disabilities' reality.

Do you use the internet? Critical realist lens: Children's agency using the internet. Power structure that limits or enhances internet use.

Observable factors (physical access to the internet) and hidden mechanisms (policy decisions, social barriers).

What do you think about the Internet? Critical realist lens:

examination of agency and power. Personal experiences are viewed as they interact with broader systems. The complex layered nature of children with disabilities' interaction with the internet. Empowering and restrictive aspects of the internet as they interact with societal structures.

Have you ever chatted to someone you did not know online? Critical realist lens: emphasis on agency -choice of children with disabilities specific to online communication, motivations, and desires. Implications of constraints and autonomy. Impact of social structures, perceptions of online risk, accessibility, inclusion, and exclusion. Enablers and limitations specific to lived experiences.

An example of one of the vignettes used in this study included the following:

“Tom and Emma are playing their favourite online game. Tom's mum said he could chat to Emma, but if people he didn't know joined in their conversation, Tom was told he had to leave the game. Emma loves talking to people online. She has made friends online and plays with them all the time. Sometimes they say nasty things, but Emma laughs or says something nasty back. Tom only talks to Emma when he plays the game. He does not tell his mum about the other people in the game because he does not talk to them. Tom does not like some of the bad language, but he loves the game”. Questions asked included: What do you think about the rule Tom's mum made? What do you think about Emma chatting to strangers online? Do you think Tom should tell his mum about the nasty comments and bad language? The researcher applied a critical realist lens to this vignette to understand the layered reality concerning parental control, online safety concerns, and digital agency.

Later in this paper, reflections on mechanisms that drive negative online interactions from the perspective of the research participants and the complex intersection where agency, social norms, and hidden mechanisms exist are discussed. First, the data analysis process requires attention and is presented in detail in the next section.

Data Analysis

The critical realist approach regards data as informative of reality. Still, it goes further, requiring the researcher to interpret the data to reveal underlying structures or hidden mechanisms at play to reveal the whole reality of young persons with disabilities. Braun and Clarke (2006) posit that thematic analysis (TA) can be used from several epistemological perspectives, such as social constructionist, phenomenological, and realist. Braun and Clarke's (2019) article “*Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis*” explains that they intended to offer their approach, endorsing flexibility in the doing of TA. They do, however, emphasise researcher transparency in articulating the theory informing their approach and how exactly they applied TA. Their book “*Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*” (2021) consolidates and offers a practical framework and a robust guide to reflexive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019; 2021) inform the data analysis process of this research study.

Critical realist approaches to data analysis are emerging, and within this, the work of Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021), Fryer (2022), and Christodoulou (2024) also informs this study. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method of identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes is developed upon by Fryer (2022) to create a five step model of TA that encompasses an ontological realist approach to data analysis.

This research study pays attention to Braun and Clarke's reflexive TA (2019, 2021) whilst adopting Fryer's (2022) 5-step method to code data using a critical realist lens with each step set out as follows:

Step 1: Develop/ reflect on research question(s)

Step 2: Researcher familiarity with data

Step 3: Apply Codes

3.1: applies data-driven descriptive codes. (Applied codes are given a number C1, C2.....)

3.2: **Develop Codes** - Consolidation and standardisation of data- unites codes using similar words and theoretical terms. (Developed codes are given a number CD 1, CD2.....)

3.3: **Review Codes** – following application and standardisation of the entire data set (Reviewed codes are given a number CR1, CR2, CR3.....)

Step 4: Develops themes with causal explanations and review's themes through assessment of their validity.

Step 5: Validity checking- reflection on analysis and review of conclusions.

Critical realism advocates the seeking out of causal explanations in research (Bhaskar, 2008). Fryer's (2022) viewpoint that social research should move from exploring people's experiences to producing causal explanations plays out in step 1 of this data analysis frame. Christodoulou argues that 'causal knowledge of a research area for which there is no previous theoretical knowledge might also be exploratory' (2024, p. 40).

Braun and Clarke are clear in their statement that 'quality reflexive TA is not about following procedures 'correctly' (or about 'accurate' and 'reliable' coding, or achieving consensus between coders), but about the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process' (2019, p. 594). Reflective and

thoughtful engagement occurs throughout coding, analysis and reporting of data provided by children with disabilities in this research study.

The middle ground between positivism and social constructivism/ social constructionism plays out in the language used to explain the data analysis process applied within the research study. For example, reference to validity, a term commonly used within positivist research, warrants further explanation. The process of data analysis delineated here refers to validity as the importance of staying close to the perspective of the young person with disabilities. Fryer (2022) refers to *descriptive* validity as ‘asking whether your codes accurately describe the data’ (2022, p. 372). Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) promote researcher reflexivity as essential to rigour and validity in critical realism. Fryer (2022) further posits that the doing of rigorous TA as a solo researcher or as a team member poses no problem if attention is paid to the justification of the conclusions based on theoretical, descriptive, and interpretive validity. Fryer’s (2022) step 2 requires the researcher to familiarise themselves with the data by skim reading and writing down initial thoughts and questions. Greenways (2018) ‘Four F’s’ reflective tool was adopted after each interview. Data was placed in a frame that included a reflective column. The researcher used this reflective column to apply the critical realist lens, aligned with each research question and the vignettes described earlier in the paper.

Step 3 applies data-driven descriptive codes, unites codes using similar words and theoretical terms, and finally reviews codes by assessing their validity. This step is data-driven, allowing for surprises in the data and challenging preconceptions. During this step, ‘standardisation of codes’ (Fryer 2022, p. 372) occurs, which is the merging of codes that say the same thing but may be articulated differently by participants. ‘Code consolidation’ (Fryer 2022, p. 372), *the process of considering theoretical or general terms that might be used in the descriptive code*, was also adopted whilst continually going back and forth between code application and development. This process applied in this research study is aptly named ‘cycling between’ codes (Fryer, 2022, p. 373). Step 4 develops themes with causal explanations and reviews them by assessing their validity (Fryer, 2022). This step occurred after the application and development of the complete data set. Emphasis is placed on the importance of validity once all codes have been applied and developed across the full data set. Step 5 (Fryer,

2022) requires reflection on analysis and review of conclusions, checking their validity.

Checking for validity involves continually returning to participants' data with codes and themes. Communication of the report is also considered in this step. In this method of TA, Fryer explains how “experiences are located mainly in the data, events are located mainly in the codes, and causal mechanisms are located in the themes” (2022, p. 381). Table 1 below portrays the data analysis frame used for this research study.

Table 1: Data analysis frame

Interview 1: Data Experiences	Codes Events			Theme Causal Mechanisms	Reflection
	Apply	Develop	Review		
Participant Data					

This approach to data analysis is not linear (Fryer 2022); therefore, there was constant movement between data, codes, and themes to reflect on the validity of the research process. In this research study, the development of codes occurred after every third interview. To manage the large volume of codes that existed within the 34 interviews, each code was ascribed a number, for example, applied codes C1, C2..., developed codes CD1, CD2..., and reviewed codes CR1, CR2..... In total, there were 862 codes applied (C), 202 developed codes (CD), and 24 reviewed codes (CR) that formed six themes. For practicality purposes, each interview and every sentence within the interview were numbered. Therefore, participant quotes have numbers in brackets after them, for instance, 3.45 will mean interview three, line 45. This was important for usability of this large data set. We move forward at this juncture to explain how the application of a critical realist lens had implications for the findings of this qualitative study.

Critical realist application to findings

Ultimately, using this data analysis framework, findings can be presented in a manner that allows for the identification of causal mechanisms, reflecting children with disabilities' experiences through various events that are evidenced by their expressed views in the data. One worked example of how research

findings can be represented in this manner is adopted from Wiltshire and Ronkainen (2021) and shown in Figure 1 below.

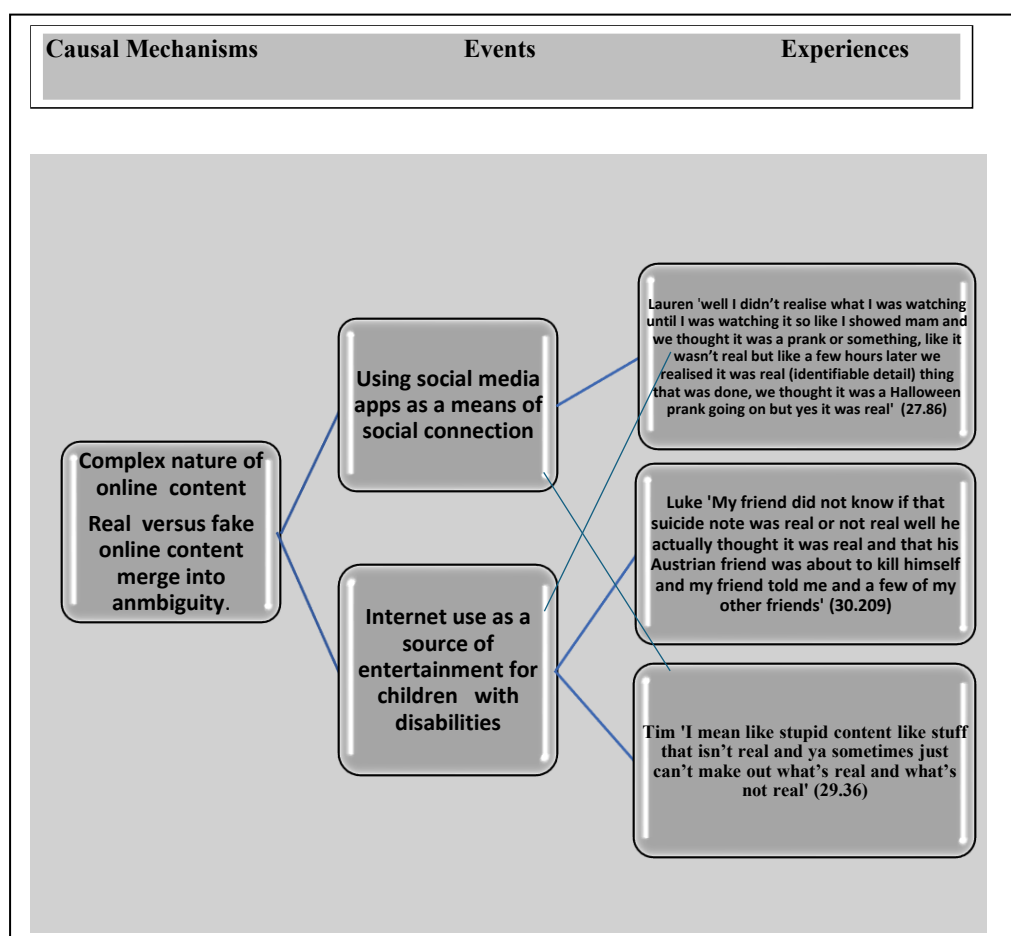


Figure 1: Research findings through a critical realist lens

Hidden or causal mechanisms in this example for children with disabilities relate to a poorly regulated internet landscape that pushes content onto social media platforms (real domain). The events that allow these hidden mechanisms to occur are driven by a sociocultural context within a digital world where children with disabilities rely more heavily on it for social and entertainment purposes than their nondisabled peers (actual domain) (eSafety Commissioner, 2023). The application of Margaret Archer's (1995) framework provides a better view of this mechanism, presented from a Structural, Cultural, and Agency (SCA) level.

Structurally, this mechanism is embedded within the design of digital platforms, whose algorithms prioritise engagement, the push to keep children online often blurring the distinction between reality and fiction. Culturally, this ambiguity feeds into widespread societal anxieties about the dangers of online

spaces, leading to moral panic (Phippen, 2025), parental restriction of children's internet use, and/or restrictive legislation. The outcome directly impacts children's digital experiences due to digital exclusion/ restriction based on parental and societal fear. Children with disabilities use their agency to resist, adapt, or self-advocate. If change occurs, Archer (1995) calls this 'morphogenesis'. If there is no change, a state of reproduction occurs, which Archer calls 'morphostasis'. The quotes by Tim, Luke, and Lauren (empirical domain) offer the researcher a deeper view of the impact of internet use from a child protection and welfare perspective, specific to their lived experiences.

Another example from the findings is presented to clarify further how this data collection and analysis frame identifies causal mechanisms that impact children with disabilities' digital lives, related to accessibility barriers, including platforms with complex means of communication, such as Snapchat. This represents discrimination in the Snapchat application design, prioritising digital communication norms that exclude some children with disabilities from using it (causal power at the 'real' ontological level of critical realism). Social media trends are the drivers for the Snapchat application (events at the 'actual' ontological level of critical realism). Snapchat is reported to be one of the most popular apps used by teenagers in recent times (Gallagher, 2025). Children with disabilities express their views and frustration about the complexity of the digital literacy rules required to use this digital application (experiences at the empirical level of critical realism).

Additionally, when applied to Margaret Archer's (1995) SCA framework, structural digital design that lacks any form of disability input is shaped by tech industry norms. These norms encourage a culture of fast-paced digital interactions that constrain children with disabilities' agency, whereby they respond in different ways, such as avoidance of Snapchat, limited use of it, or seeking help. In this case, 'morphostasis' is being reproduced as structures and culture remain rigid, reflecting the reactive agency of children with disabilities who withdraw, are passive, or adapt to complex social media applications such as Snapchat. An example of how 'morphogenesis' (Archer, 1995) or change may occur would be through the adoption by tech companies of the 'Child's Rights by Design initiative' (5 Rights Foundation and Digital Futures Commission (DFC) that

incorporates digital principles that consider the rights of all children in the design and development of digital products (Digital Futures Commission, 2022).

Finally, six core themes relating to this study were explored further using a critical realist lens. These themes include 1. parental, school, and friendship influence, 2. exposure, management, and impact of problematic behaviour, harmful and dangerous content online, 3. level of engagement -supportive, fun interactions and therapeutic internet use, 4. online activities and accessibility, 5. online identity and privacy, 6. view of reality, time, and communication processes online. These themes were born out of the data frame above and are explored from a critical realist lens. The focus of this paper is on the explanation of the methodological process, not on the exploration of each theme. Research participants were provided with the findings of this study, which they aptly named 'the research story' using universal design, including a booklet, TikTok, and a YouTube clip. This was just one component of the dissemination of findings that concludes the steps advocated in the data analysis process above.

Conclusion

This paper offers a description of the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological framework employed to engage 34 children with disabilities in a qualitative research study about their internet use through a critical realist lens. The combination of approaches used for the data collection and analysis is described in detail, offering a framework that seeks to enhance understanding of doing qualitative research with children with disabilities. Specifically, this paper provides a step-by-step guide offering a data analysis framework that incorporates a critical realist philosophical perspective to address the deprived research topic of internet-related child protection and welfare risks for children with disabilities. The application of critical realism throughout the methodological process of this study, from the development of interview questions to data analysis, produces structural and causal mechanisms with selected examples discussed in the latter part of this paper. Moreover, this paper is presented as an addition to the emerging literature on critical realist methodological approaches in social research.

By clearly and transparently laying the methodological foundations that guide the application of a critical realist lens, within a qualitative research study

that centred on the internet use of children with disabilities within a child protection and welfare framework, we aim to enhance learning for academics, policymakers and researchers alike working in this field.

End of integrated publication

5.11 Quantitative data collection

Having delineated the qualitative data collection and analysis through the integrated publication in the last section of this chapter, the focus now turns to data collection and data analysis for the quantitative component of this mixed methods study. The data collection phase for the quantitative component of this research study involved the dissemination of an anonymous survey to parents of children with disabilities to obtain their views about their children's internet use. Overall, this research study aimed to seek out mechanisms that explain the views of children with disabilities about their internet use whilst also encompassing the parental viewpoint, so as to complete the research picture and expand our understanding of this poorly-researched topic. Children with disabilities in this study referred to parental involvement in their digital lives in all but one interview (see Appendix 6). Survey questions are informed by the qualitative findings of this research study as well as a global research toolkit from Global Kids Online (Byrne et al., 2016). The design of the questions was guided by the overarching research question: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use? Table 5.11.1 displays the connection between the quantitative survey questions and the qualitative findings encompassing the critical realist lens.

Table 5.11.1: Qualitative findings inform survey questions with a CR lens

Qualitative findings	Quantitative survey questions (sample)	Critical realist lens
Parental management function n=11 participants (establishing boundaries around their children's internet use, access to phones, monitoring time online, use of apps)	As far as you are aware, in which of these places does your child use the internet these days? (Choice of places provided) Thinking about your child's internet use, do you worry that they may be... (List of online risks some outlined by participants during the interview) As far as you are aware, in the past year, has anything happened online that bothered or upset your child in some way?	Actual interactions can have a cultural, structural, and agential impact. The fact that events occur in the actual domain that research participants may not be aware of. Behaviours that caused particular change events.

	On a scale of 1 to 5, how happy are you with your ability to keep your child safe online? On a scale of 1 to 5, how happy are you with your child's ability to stay safe online? On a scale of 1 to 5, how happy are you with the quality of your child's interactions online?	
Parental supportive function. n= 18 participants (expressed views about problems, sorting things out, using common apps to communicate)	In general, where do you get information and advice on how to help and support your child on the internet to keep them safe? To what extent, if at all, do you feel you are able to help your child to deal with anything on the internet that bothers them? Do you think your child's disability has an impact on how they use the internet? What additional support do you feel you need to help your child to deal with anything on the internet that bothers them? Please tick any options that you feel are relevant to you.	Actual interactions can have a cultural, structural and agential impact. Causal powers and conditions that affect research participants. <i>Conditioning events</i> or how existing structure and culture impose on research participants.
Parental lack of understanding, n=5 participants (expressed views about getting banned, being judged, no awareness)	How would you describe your level of digital competence? Do you use any of these things in relation to your child's internet use? (List of ways of managing their children with disabilities' internet use)	Conditioning events or how existing structure and culture impose on research participants.
Parental sharenting	Please indicate if and how you share information about your child/ children online	Actual interactions can have a cultural, structural and agential impact.

Parental perspectives within this study were also driven by the critical realist premise that underpins this research presenting a layered view of mechanisms (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006) that exist where child protection and welfare intersect with children with disabilities internet use. Quantitative

measures were understood as capturing patterns at the empirical level (parents' perceptions), which point toward but do not exhaust the real and actual layers of social reality (Bhaskar, 1978; Archer et al., 2016). Existing literature underscores the importance of parents' central role in shaping, mediating and supporting the digital lives of their children with disabilities (Livingstone and Zhang, 2019; Raspa et al., 2018; Coutinho et al., 2022; McHugh, and Howard, 2017; Mishna et al., 2016). The international survey-based research Global Kids Online (GKO) toolkit (Byrne et al., 2016) provides a well-established framework for examining children's digital participation, risk, and parental mediation, however, there exists an under representation of the perspectives of parents of children with disabilities about their children's internet use.

The GKO toolkit does not focus on disability, this research study did utilise this Toolkit's core components in relation to parental mediation practices, perspectives of online risk and harm, digital confidence and safety strategies. The GKO toolkit was extended to capture the perspectives of parents of children with disabilities about their children's internet use. The National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH, 2023) and the Irish Census Statistics on disability health and carers (CSO, 2022) offered contextual influence in terms of how large surveys structure questions about disability. However, the terminology and breakdown of disability used to capture parents' experiences of their children with disabilities internet use was designed to be non-medical and inclusive. Broad impairment type groupings (Kelly et al., 2023) inclusive of "neurodivergent", "hidden disability" and "chronic illness" and "other" for free text response reflected limitations of fixed categories aligning with an affirmative, non-tragedy view of disability (Flynn and McGregor, 2017, Swain and French, 2000). Survey questions were informed by quantitative and mixed methods studies that examined digital lives and online risks and support needs of young people with disabilities (eSafety Commissioner, 2023; Alfredsson Ågren, Kjellberg and Hemmingsson, 2020; Macmillan et al., 2020). In addition, questions related to parental information seeking and sharenting practices were informed by Blum- Ross and Livingstone, 2020; Goggin and Ellis, 2020; Bessant, 2018; Ní Bhroin et al., 2022. From a critical realist perspective, the Global kids Online Toolkit (Byrne et al., 2016) was used as a flexible , theory informed framework rather than a fixed instrument. Its extension allowed for the

examination of the experiences of parents of children with disabilities about their children's internet use.

The survey was piloted in May 2024 to parents of children with disabilities (n=10), their feedback (see table 5.11.2 below) and continuous supervisory feedback was extremely helpful to ensure this survey was ready for wider dissemination and user-friendly.

Table 5.11.2: Pilot survey parents (n=10) feedback

Parents'/ guardians' views on the internet use of their child/ children with disabilities .	
Comments by parents	Survey adaptations
Time to complete: 15, 6, 30, 20, 10, 15, 10, 6, 5 minutes A few minutes.	Timing noted- and parents informed at the beginning of the survey the approximate time based on the average from pilot survey
Parents comments "I had difficulty with Q7,6 and q7,7." " My child is not allowed to use a device without me or another trusted adult observing their online activity." "We are asked to tick never, sometimes often, etc. I found this choice of replies confusing." "Maybe how I help my child with the internet and if I am with him at all times. I find this difficult to gauge as internet is so accessible from so many devices and with school, friends etc. plus you'd never know what could pop up at any time." "The next question 7,7: My child is not allowed to use a device with internet access.. I found this confusing also with regards to the choice of responses. Perhaps a choice of different responses could be used for these two questions. Maybe, true, somewhat true, not true at all etc"	Q7- changes made for more clarity to this question.
"Generally fine -maybe some possible double negative aspects to q7 last two questions"	Changes made to Q7 to address this.
"For the question on additional supports- could if possible supply links to these supports -if they exist -after the survey, for interested parents-to help them?"	Support links provided
General feedback	
"Yep the questions were v straightforward and the responses were easy to choose. Loved that it was online so could click and go."	
Survey Intro: "Well, explained." "Yes it was very clear. I read it twice to ensure I understood." "Extremely Easy"	

“Very easy” (n=2)
Understanding of questions asked: “Quite Good.” “Quite easy in general” “Very easy” (n= 2) “Simple enough”
“I think the results from the survey will be a very valuable resource in helping young people with disabilities to navigate and get the very best from online resources both educationally and socially.”
“The online security questions really made me think about my child’s safety.”
“I think it was a very interesting survey. As a parent some of the questions were eye opening in that I had to think about it for a few minutes before answering. A lot of the time you just assume your child is safe using social media.”

The sample size (n=126) and dissemination of this anonymous survey is discussed earlier in this chapter under the heading eligibility and sampling. The survey was not an exhaustive inquiry about parents’ views of their children with disabilities’ internet use. Its purpose, as delineated earlier in this chapter, was to further explain the layers of complexity that exist within child protection and welfare, disability and internet use.

5.12 Quantitative Data Analysis

Features of the Survey Monkey tool include data analysis functions such as the provision of charts, filters, offering real time results as well as contextual and statistical analysis (Survey Monkey, n.d.). The tool provides YouTube tutorial videos for ease of use. However, despite the accessibility of the Survey Monkey tool, I became aware that my skillset specifically relating to quantitative data analysis was limited. This was despite the completion of a quantitative data analysis module and SPSS training.

Assistance was needed to provide robust examination of the survey analysis component of this research. To this end, Aisling Fitzgerald, a student on the quantitative analysis module of the Applied Social Research course in Trinity College (2023) provided invaluable assistance with the data analysis part of this project. I owe a depth of gratitude to Aisling, who, through the use of IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27), ensured the survey responses were processed accurately. Descriptive statistics were utilised, offering a synopsis of data trends and patterns. Descriptive responses by parents in the survey were analysed using the data frame that was used for the qualitative component of this research study.

Table 5.12.1 below provides the results of this quantitative data analysis from parental descriptive responses.

Table 5.12.1: Results of parents' descriptive survey responses

Codes reviewed	Themes	Reflection -
CR1 Defining disability CR2 – Internet use of children with disabilities CR3- Negative interactions online for children with disabilities CR4 Negative impact of the internet on children with disabilities CR5- Children with disabilities negative impact on others online CR6 – Children with disabilities agency staying safe online CR9- Disability related technical issues	Parents' views that disability related interactions impact their child's online activities	Critical realist perspective causal mechanisms also indicate a lack of control or hidden algorithms that exist when children use the internet, reference to 'pop-up ads in data, content change' (26.28) and (3.76)
CR7- Problematic/harmful content reported by parents CR8- Parental strategies for keeping children safe online CR10- Disability related concerns of parents for their child's internet use CR11- parental involvement in child's internet use CD12- Parental positive view of internet use CR13- Sharenting	Parental views, interactions, and concerns lead to monitoring, the use of parental controls, and the restriction of children's internet use.	Most parents' actions are to restrict, observe, and monitor with minimal positive commentary about internet use for their children concern stemming from disability related manner of using the internet

The analysis of the survey responses and the findings of this survey method are presented in Chapter 7, aimed to answer the research question: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use? A topic guide for survey questions is provided in Appendix 7. Before concluding this chapter and moving to the presentation of both the qualitative and quantitative findings of this mixed methods research study, I present a reflection on the methodological process.

5.13 Reflection and reflexivity

Due to the sensitive nature of this research topic and the unique perspectives of the children with disabilities who participated in the qualitative

component, it was incumbent on me as a researcher to be reflexive throughout the entire research process. Adaptability, flexibility, and creativity were essential components of the methodological processes within this research study. Within this, the Greenway (2022) reflective model documented many observations after each interview. However, there are several key takeaways from the overall interview process that are important to reflect upon.

For example, I established clear boundaries at the outset of each interview, which involved meeting children with disabilities just once for the duration of the interview. Questions such as ‘Can you come to my school?’, ‘Are you coming again to talk about the internet?’, ‘Will you come and see my football game/see me bowling?’ were asked on numerous occasions. The use of the 3 Ps, the private, personal, and professional self (ThemPra, 2025) from social pedagogy theory, helped ensure clear boundaries were set for each child or young person who took part in the interview.

For example, a typical answer to such questions was *‘Thank you so much for asking, I have come today to this interview/to chat to you about internet use and I am delighted with how it went. I won’t be coming back but I will make sure you get the research story and I will check in tomorrow with your [parent/supporter] to make sure you are feeling ok after this chat. I really am delighted with how it went, and I am grateful for your time’*.

It was, however, important for building trust that questions asked by research participants about my personal life were answered meaningfully. Such questions were about my children, their likes and dislikes, where I lived, my family, hobbies. Having a background knowledge from my own teenage children, for instance, about popular Netflix shows, football teams, and music artists was helpful in building a trusting, comfortable interview environment. The interviews proved to be a safe space to share an array of emotions from happiness, excitement, pride, and hope to upset, sadness, frustration, anxiety, and uncertainty. The timeframe for each interview varied, ranging from over one hour to three and a half hours for the longest interview.

Children with disabilities guided me through the process, indicating the time they wished to spend prior to or after the interview on other activities, such as online and offline recreational activities. This building of trust was essential, in all cases, children with disabilities expressed their view that they enjoyed the

interview and were happy the focus was on them. It is fair to say that the data collection process was an immensely enjoyable component of this research study.

Other reflections about the data collection process proved helpful in assisting with each interview. For instance, the length of time spent going through the assent forms prior to the interview was what some participants described as their least favourite part. This part of the interview process required a creative approach, most research participants had watched the PowerPoint with audio explaining that they understood the purpose and process of the research. I asked at the beginning of each interview what each participant understood about why I had come to talk to them. As they explained, I used the assent form with visuals to point out where they could tick. This helped to speed up the assent form process. For research participants with complex communication needs, their supporter/parent assisted as they used various forms of communication to express their assent. Crucial to the success of the interview process was the use of my professional experience working with children with disabilities and knowing when the participant had more to express despite a parent/supporter response to a question.

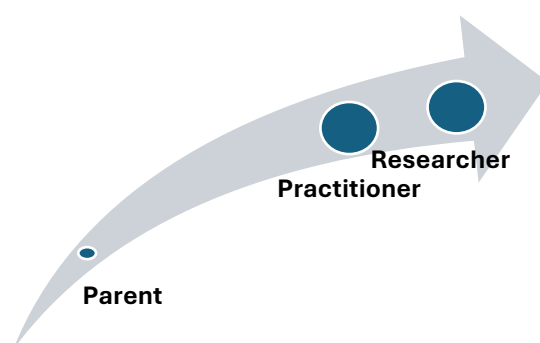
Furthermore, some research participants were anxious about their information being kept on a recorder. In these cases, they were offered an opportunity to take the recorder and power it on and off as they so wished. I explained that I would write notes to record their information, and if a research participant was particularly worried about the recording of the interview, which occurred twice, I agreed to notify their parents when their data was transcribed and anonymised. In all cases, the research participants disregarded the recorder almost immediately after the interview began.

Additionally, in relation to the qualitative component of this study, a note from my reflective journal dated 22/04/2024 offers insight relating to the uniqueness of each individual interviewed and that pressing reset after every interview was an essential part of my role as a researcher. I wrote *“I am trying to understand why this final interview did not go as well as I thought it would. I realise that having completed 33 interviews, I had not prepared as well for this one. Possibly, I have become somewhat overconfident. I think tiredness following a long drive, combined with not having the time for my usual 15 minutes that I*

took before every other interview to prepare mentally and practically (checking my bag, making sure visuals are in order), affected this interview process. She was the most lovely young girl, willing to engage; however, the fault rests with me, and I can't help but feel I have left behind some important, valuable data".

Moreover, in terms of quantitative data analysis, I realised that despite excellent tuition, my skillset in this area was limited. Hence, the assistance of Aisling Fitzgerald proved immensely important for data cleaning, transferring to SPSS, and analysing the quantitative component of this study. Finally, at this point of the research process, the strong influence of practice in the qualitative component of this study, combined with the acknowledgement of an increase in research skills, reflects my researcher positionality (see Figure 5.13.1 below).

Figure 5.13.1: Researcher positionality during the methodological stage



5.14 Conclusion

This chapter contributes to this thesis by mapping out its design and signposting its methodological journey. The details about the methods employed aim to provide insight into how each decision, from design to analysis, thoughtfully attends to the core and secondary research questions. At the heart of this chapter lies the sequential exploratory design (Creswell, 2003), which describes the construction tools used to assemble this research study.

The design of this study is chosen to ensure a layered investigation into the central research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities? and the secondary question: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use?

A further contribution of this chapter is the delineation of protocols that guide the documentary analysis. Its three distinct components, each offer a unique lens. When put together they form the foundations of a rich, literature-informed study. Ethical considerations are treated as integral to this chapter, ensuring that respect, care, and responsibility permeate the entire research process. Methodological rigor is maintained sensitively as the practicalities of eligibility, sampling, recruitment, and access are described in detail. Although some of the methodological processes set out in this chapter are repeated for external readership, the integrated publication “Through a Critical Realist Lens: Investigating Data Collection and Analysis Techniques in a Qualitative Study About Internet-Related Child Protection Risks for Children with Disabilities” makes a significant contribution to this thesis by outlining the analytical pathway related to this study.

In conclusion, the chapter transitions from the practical aspects of the research to reflections on the ethical and methodological lessons learned, providing insights into the research process as a whole. Moving forward, the next chapter, Findings Part 1, presents the results of the qualitative component of this research study.

Chapter 6 Findings: Children with disabilities' perspectives

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6.4 Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the qualitative findings of this research study. The expressed views of children with disabilities ($n = 34$) are presented in two distinct parts. First, this chapter summarises how disability and internet use intersect at the individual micro level. This intersection occurs in a unique and person-centred manner for each research participant. Although this finding may seem expected, composite narratives are incorporated to heighten the agency of children with disabilities. According to Johnson (2024, p.2), “*Creating the composite narrative involves knitting the participants' words together to create a story, or 'narrative,' that communicates the research finding that was drawn from the data*”.

Presenting children with disabilities' accounts through a summary of thematic findings would risk reducing the richness of their narratives to generalised categories. Such a reduction may inadvertently blur the person-centred and nuanced ways they engage with the internet, contributing to the broader tendency to view disability as a homogeneous category. In contrast, composite narratives offer a space where the complexity of disability can be

uncovered and which demonstrate how each child may share a similar disability category, yet where their agency distinguishes them in how they manage and negotiate interactions with the internet.

This relates to the empirical and actual layer of critical realism, recognising that reducing or generalising the expressed lived experiences of children with disabilities about their internet use would render this research complicit in adding to systemic and structural causal mechanisms that often constrain children with disabilities in the digital domain. Essentially, the individual perspective of children with disabilities about their internet use is presented first and acknowledged as a key research finding in its own right, before moving to the macro level which offers a broader perspective about the intersection of disability child protection, welfare, and internet use.

The first set of findings highlights the agency and the person-centred nature of each child's individual experience at the intersection of disability and internet use. The second set of findings, pitched at the macro level, identify broader contextual patterns of behaviour and interaction across digital environments, presented in six core themes. Interviews with children with disabilities about their internet use result in rich data, which is analysed with a critical realist lens. While disability is widely theorised within the literature as a complex and contested social, political, and conceptual space, this framing was not reflected in how children spoke about disability in their own accounts. Each composite narrative begins with the child's name and the language used by them to describe their disability. Children participating in the qualitative interviews introduced themselves in this way describing their disability as part of who they are. This approach allows for an analysis that reflects how children themselves use language about their lived experience of disability, rather than imposing the researcher's constructions onto their accounts.

The first set of qualitative findings are presented next that address the research question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?

6.2 Qualitative findings: (Part 1) Children with disabilities

composite narratives

Overall, children with disabilities who engaged in the qualitative interview process were not interested in sharing information about their disability or about their well-being in general. The internet and digital realm captured their attention and are where they expressed their views, often animatedly, using the methods outlined in Chapter 5. The composite narratives serve to present the child's expressed view in its own right, rather than being absorbed into a homogenised account. This approach situates children's internet use not simply as data to be coded but as expressions of identity, belonging and participation in their digital worlds. Pseudonyms are used to protect their anonymity. The disability terminology used in the vignettes reflects the language used by the children with disabilities, parents, and supporters during the interview process.

Sam is a 12-year-old girl who has spina bifida and is a wheelchair user. She lives in an urban community with inaccessible infrastructure, meaning she is largely restricted to her house. Sam mainly uses her phone to access the internet and connect with friends. She explained its therapeutic benefit but described having difficulty using social media applications and experiencing the feeling of FOMO. She says, *'I can chat away with my friends when I can't go out or I don't want to go out because they are all playing soccer, that's why I love the internet'*. She describes her mood as dictating how she manages the internet. She has experienced cyberbullying, explaining that *"they made an account with a famous YouTuber and sent messages about me on it."* Sam demonstrated agency in her management of cyberbullying.

Simon is a 13-year-old boy who lives on a farm in a rural area. Simon is autistic and has ADHD, dyspraxia, and dyslexia. He does not have a mobile phone and has little interest in getting one. He says, *"I'm happy I don't really want a phone, you get dragged into stuff – like I listen to the lads at school, and it's enough to hear about phone stuff just during school hours."* Simon has an advanced understanding of technology, engineering, and physics, but is frustrated by the lack of assistive technology to help him pursue his special interest.

Jack is Simon's 13-year-old brother. Jack has Asperger's syndrome. Jack found it difficult to make eye contact and spoke in a very low voice. Jack explains that he is very anxious to get the questions in the interview right. He does not have a phone and has no intention of getting one. He finds conversations at school about phones and the internet overwhelming, and finds the internet *"a bit unpredictable, you never know what you are going to see on it."* Despite a lack of interest in using the internet, Jack is highly technically confident.

Cathal is 15 and has a moderate to severe learning disability. Cathal has complex communication needs, which meant that he understood some questions asked and offered insights through movement, writing, and verbalising some words. Cathal's father said he was happy that Cathal was asked to be involved in the research, as he uses the internet a lot. Cathal is deeply immersed in the internet and spends a significant amount of time on it every day. He does not use social media, instead navigating the internet by exploring areas of interest and using algorithms to view relevant content. Cathal's dad explains that Cathal can access the internet without communication and typing skills, and that finding his interests is easy once his initial interest area has been entered by a parent or sibling. *"Cathal has a telly in a room for himself, he watches it a lot when he wants to. He has internet on it – there is no limit – he scribbles a lot on paper, he uses the internet a bit to relax, and we don't restrict him."* Cathal watches a YouTube video of a big slide in a waterpark, he says *"big slides (laughing and jumping)"*.

Elizabeth is Cathal's 14-year-old sister, who asked if she could do an interview after having observed Cathal's interview. Elizabeth explained that she attends Child and Adolescents Mental health Services (CAMHS) and that she is awaiting an assessment for ASD and ADHD. Elizabeth is very eager to talk about the internet and has had several difficult encounters in online groups, especially WhatsApp and Snapchat. She has mixed feelings about the internet, saying that *"the internet can be really handy and at the same time it's a really toxic place – a toxic environment for children"*. Elizabeth spends a lot of time online and uses many social media applications but explains that it affects her mental health and that *"it can be really toxic and cause a lot of pain, say like when I was at home and I was watching my friends out posting TikToks and I wasn't invited – it's really hard... it makes me very angry; I get really angry sometimes"*.

Alan is 13 years old and has motor ataxia. He cannot play sports, though he says he would like to. Alan enjoys gaming online with friends and uses the internet at school for entertainment purposes. Alan thinks artificial intelligence (AI) is a positive aspect of the internet, explaining that *“AI that can give you medical advice immediately like I was watching one documentary where it was someone who needed medical attention and the AI told them what to do immediately”*. Alan does not use social media apps, though he has a Snapchat account, preferring to play Minecraft online with friends. He explains: *“We have fights in the game. We get gear like armour, and we try kill each other”*.

Kathleen is 17 years old. She is a wheelchair user and has a hearing impairment. She uses hand gestures as well as words to express herself. Kathleen is extremely enthusiastic about the internet. She says *“you can do anything from the comfort of your own home but like if you didn’t have it you’d have to go to the library, so like brush your hair, get dressed put on your coat, get coffee and then actually go to the library and that can take hours so if you’re at home you can (tapping like typing sounds on table with hands) you can just Google”*. The internet gives Kathleen the freedom to express herself and make disability-related online connections. Her words resonate when she says: *“Like I don’t play basketball but I can do it online (laughing, pause) for example I can’t fly in real life but I can online its free for your imagination and what not”*. Conversely, for Kathleen social media is *“also painful to look at – so like when you’re on Instagram or TikTok and you see a bunch of your own friends and you see that they are able to do stuff that you are not able to do”*.

Rachel is aged 14 and uses she/they pronouns. She is autistic and has cerebral palsy and also attends CAMHS. Rachel has not returned to school since the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding access to services, she explains that *“you can have autism and be autistic, you can have a physical disability, but don’t you dare have mental health problems – that’s not allowed, in fact, it doesn’t exist, so just stop that!”* The internet has been an extremely important part of Rachel’s world since she was 6 years old. Moving into an urban area allowed better broadband connection for internet access. Rachel explains, *“I realise being on the internet that long is not healthy, but so you’d rather make yourself feel better after all that trauma somehow, and that’s how I choose.”* Rachel describes an experience of being groomed online and how her mother helped her recognise

what was happening. She also talked about watching violent content online. Rachel describes problems when trying to access assistive technology at school. She provides an example of an interaction with a teacher: *"Yeah, and when I tried to tell her yeah I use this iPad because I am disabled, she said you look fine to me – what do you mean you're disabled, you don't look disabled."*

Oliver is 17 years old and has an intellectual disability. Oliver has complex communication needs; his mother is present during the interview and interprets his communication. Oliver's speech is slow, and it takes a little while to understand his words. Oliver moved around his house, walking and jumping. Oliver holds his iPad during the interview, and when asked what he watches on YouTube, laughing, he says, *"YouTube"*, pointing to the YouTube app. It is clear that Oliver very much enjoys using the internet and was very excited when he said *"Britain's Got Talent (laughing and jumping)"*. Oliver uses WhatsApp to message family members, and his mum explains the therapeutic benefits of the internet for him.

Michael is aged 15 and has an intellectual disability. Michael has complex communication needs. Michael answered every question; his mum repeated his words when I did not understand him. Michael loves music, dance, and sports, both online and offline. Michael enjoys sharing dance moves and watching YouTube clips, and he loves gaming with his brother, who moved away to college recently. While dancing and laughing, showing me his dance moves, Michael explains *"Yep, I did my moves his dance moves, I like keeping fit to One Direction music. I do the moves to exercise class it keeps me fit"*. One of Michael's favourite things to do online is look up places on Google Maps. He gets extremely frustrated when his iPad does not recognise his voice instructions.

Donal is 15 and has an intellectual disability. Donal has complex communication needs and communicates through actions and sounds. His mum explains that those who know Donal understand his communication well. She explains that he uses picture exchange communication (PECS) in school but does not like using it at home. Donal used louder sounds and moved around rapidly when he was excited about something. Donal carried his iPad around with him throughout the interview, leaving it on the couch for the times when he went to hug his mother. Donal watched his iPad and the television, which was on in the background. His eyes moved between both screens during the interview.

Donal's mum describes Donal's use of the internet, *"You love the internet, don't you? [Donal goes to his mum and hugs her] You will eventually put it down on the floor beside the locker. It's there ALL the time, but all you watch is cartoons. It is a really big benefit for you, actually, it's huge because one (speaking about an iPad) went wallop on us there recently, and oh my God, it was so hard to manage with one iPad for a few days until we got the money together to get another one."*

Terry is 16. He is autistic and has PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance). He attends CAMHS. Terry lives in a residential centre and describes connecting and building relationships with staff members through online games. Terry explains that he has no friends offline but thousands of followers online. He explains that he uses offensive language online in response to offensive language and that he has accessed the deep and dark web but does not access it anymore. *"Like you have a normal web like kid web, then you have the deep web which is the adult web like porn and all that, and then you have the dark web which is like buying drugs seeing people kill themselves and all that"*. Terry dislikes Twitter (now called X) he says *"Twitter has all that rape and all that shit, like there was this video that I saw on twitter, it was this guy in America getting a gun and shooting up this store."* Terry offers advice on how to keep safe, explaining that harmful and dangerous content online is the norm, not the exception.

Tom, 14, is autistic and is immersed in the internet. He loves watching YouTubers and gaming online with friends or by himself. He has an in-depth understanding of all things relating to the internet, gaming, and even the meaning of clickbait. Tom does not like social media apps but downloaded Snapchat on his mum's advice because many teenagers his age have it. He says, *"I'm no good at using those apps to message people I don't know, where to start or what to say."* Tom also uses the internet at school and, overall, feels it is very enjoyable. He comments, however, *"It's that the internet has created a message all of its own, I'm not even sure if they are speaking English anymore."*

Lily is 15 years old. She has autism and attends CAMHS. Lily enjoys using the internet for entertainment and watches videos on YouTube. However, she finds online interactions difficult. She says *"I guess I am fearful of interacting online and I'm not very bothered either, a bit of both because sometimes I don't want to interact with people but other times I have it where I don't know how to initiate a conversation, and I am not very good at social cues and social rules and stuff, so*

I get a bit nervous.” Pinterest is one of Lily’s favourite apps. She experiences technical difficulty using Snapchat, saying, *“I guess that there are benefits to it, but like it’s a bit confusing for me, it’s also hard to understand the rules with it, it’s vague”*. Misinformation online, especially about autism, causes Lily to get frustrated and upset.

Marty is 13 years of age and is dyslexic. He enjoys gaming online and connects with friends as well as cousins. Marty describes how he pushes back against parental boundaries that are set around his internet use. He says *“I’d probably play with my cousin a bit and then do a bit of online FIFA that my dad doesn’t know about it, but I do it.”* Assistive technology is important to Marty as he explains *“I use the computer for touch typing and it means I can finish an exam, I wouldn’t be able to finish an exam if I was writing”*.

Jerry is 14 years old and has ADHD. Jerry’s mum is present during the interview. Jerry describes the impact of parental internet restrictions: *“Like in primary school people used to talk about video games a lot, but I wouldn’t be able to talk about it because I wasn’t allowed play then and because of that it would be really hard for me to talk about it. That is the only thing they talk about.”* Jerry enjoys connecting with friends online and watching videos; however, he says *“it makes you kind of tired, well I used to be on it a lot, it used to make me tired after a while and it makes me actually get headaches.”* After the interview finished, Jerry’s mum stated that she learned a lot from listening to her son talk about the internet and feels that limiting his access has impacted him a lot.

Bridget is 15 years old. She has autism and attends CAMHS. Bridget loves music, Netflix shows, and thinks Google Translate is an excellent app to help with homework. Bridget uses social media to connect with friends online, but dislikes the group dynamics that occur online, especially on Snapchat. She talks about staying safe online, for example, she says, *“I just wouldn’t want to talk to strangers, they can access ANYTHING online, they can access your IP address, they can access your Eircode just from chatting to you, so it’s a no-no for me.”*

Alice is 12. She is Bridget’s sister and has autism. Alice was shy, quiet, and nervous, but became engaged and animated when talking about the internet; other general questions yielded very little response. Alice has just got a mobile phone and explains that she is learning to use it. She uses assistive technology in

school and is learning to type. She says, *“Sometimes I use a computer to type out my homework because I don’t like writing that much.”* Alice is animated when talking about her online activities *“Two games that I play a lot right now are Pokémon Unite and Sonic Forces”*. She learns about how to manage online interactions from her sister and her mum.

Mark is 12 and has cerebral palsy. Mark is very shy and speaks very slowly, processing words as he speaks. He enjoys playing games online such as FIFA and Farming Simulator. He plays mostly alone, not with friends. It is the games themselves that are enjoyable for Mark, not so much the social connections. He seems anxious about online interactions, remarking that random videos of people are posted online, which he does not like. *“They think it’s funny and it will make people laugh but if the person doesn’t know about the video, it’s not fair. People are always videoing random things; I don’t like it.”* Mark talks about online safety a lot, specifically about how to fact-check information online.

Noel is 14 and has cerebral palsy. The interview was carried out in an open-plan kitchen and sitting room area. It was difficult to hear Noel due to the noise of his younger brother and friend, who were animatedly playing Fortnite in the same area. Noel enjoys watching Netflix series on the internet, both alone and with his immediate family, who have a tradition of sitting down and watching shows together. He has family abroad and thinks the internet is good for connecting with them but does not like sharing pictures or information about himself online. He allows his dad to share some things about him to his family abroad. Online social interactions, especially on Snapchat, are difficult for Noel to engage with. For example, he says, *“The posting of images of the ground or window on Snapchat, for instance, yes, really, I just don’t know why.”*

Dan is 16, he has a learning disability and a speech impairment. Dan speaks slowly; he takes time to process words and sometimes repeats his words a few times at the end of sentences. I have represented the pauses in his communication through the use of *“.....”*. He uses hand gestures, such as a thumbs up, and facial expressions during the interview. Dan uses the internet to pursue his special interest, which is photography. Dan relies on assistive technology, which he says he is grateful to have in school. He explains, *“A lot of my work, like the teachers could not read it..... or understand it..... so, it is a lot better typing and stuff.”* Dan does not use social

media but loves watching Netflix shows and YouTube. He occasionally gets frustrated with the time restrictions his parents place on his internet use. He says time limits are *“set by my parents..... so like I can’t open apps (repeated twice) after a certain time.”*

Clara is 17 years old and is autistic. The interview takes place in a noisy café chosen by Clara. She takes on and off her noise-cancelling headphones during the interview. Clara enjoys pursuing her special interest in K-pop music online, explaining that *“because of K-pop, I have so many people I talk to, because of like other interests I’ve had, it’s really nice to connect with other people, and you learn stuff, and that’s mainly what I use the internet for.”* Clara explains that she wants to achieve a better balance between her online and offline activities, as she spends a significant amount of her day online. Clara talks about dangerous content, including radicalisation and misinformation, as well as social media’s impacts. She says *“Everyone has opinions of you constantly online and the human brain is not wired for that – it just isn’t and it causes a lot of problems where people have their entire personality and their entire self-worth decided on – everyone on the internet has an opinion and it’s a problem.”*

William is 12 and has an intellectual disability. William required time to process communication. William does not use social media; he watches his older brother (18) play online with his friends. William explains that he attends a special school. He is frustrated with assistive technology, explaining that *“I use the mouth and sometimes it doesn’t always understand what I’m saying because you have to speak with a clearer voice”*. William enjoys watching YouTube to pursue special interests in adventure, travel and history. William is anxious about connecting online with friends, however. He says *“Well, I’m afraid like (pause) kind a.... they would put up something that might not be good.”* William was strongly influenced by online safety talks provided by local police in his school.

Ruary is 15 and has special educational needs. He attends CAMHS. Ruary has a part-time job and lives in a densely populated urban area. He is a gifted artist; his artwork is displayed all over the living area of his home. Ruary explains that he has great difficulty reading but is very unsure if he will get support in school for this next year. He sometimes gets angry. Ruary describes being bullied offline and online, referring to his community, he says *“Well they text ya*

saying you're a handicap, saying all this shit about ya and all and there are some people around here that are mental, and they say ah I'm going to kill ya and all."

He also describes the importance of the internet for him, saying "Yeah, sometimes if I'm in a bad mood then I'd start scrolling and I feel better." Ruary is the youngest of three in his family and values the support he gets from his mum and siblings, as he says, "*I don't have any friends.*" He is impressed by family members who are influencers online. He describes how he "*hated*" online school during the COVID-19 pandemic and opted out. Ruary provides many practical examples of how to stay safe online.

Lurcan is aged 17 and has physical and intellectual disabilities. Lurcan loves music and plays the drums in a band. He describes his integral role in his local Gaelic football club: "*I am not able to play like other people my age are... I help coaching, I'm part of every team, I just love it, I just genuinely love it. I'm a true [name of club] supporter, helper all round, whatever needs doing club man!*" Lurcan describes how he uses the internet to look up football fixtures and to play music or backing tracks for his drum practice. Lurcan is influenced by online safety talks provided by local police in his school. He describes learning from a mistake online, explaining that "*He text to say what school do I go to and all that sort of stuff and I text him back and I shouldn't have but I sorted it out I told my parents.*" Lurcan is conscious of sharing personal information online and provides examples of how he safely navigates his digital world.

Jenny is 15 years old and has autism and a sensory processing disorder. She was anxious about the interview and very cautious, asking many questions about what happened to the interview data. This cautiousness about her personal data played out in the interview discussion about sharing information online. Jenny does not permit her parents or school to share her pictures online. Jenny loves the internet and uses it for entertainment, such as watching movies, listening to music, and accessing music note sheets to play music. Getting a phone was a big deal for Jenny; she says "*I wanted the phone so badly, I asked my mam and dad to get me a phone so many times, I begged them (laughing) I really did, I thought it might cheer me up, instead of being like, being bored.*" Jenny says that living on a farm and tending to animals, which she enjoys, helps her put her phone away. She says: "*I think about getting some fresh air, so I like to go and find something to do.*" Jenny has social media apps, but she particularly enjoys

an app called Tasty for sharing recipes. Jenny thinks the internet is a great source of topics to talk about with her friends.

Lauren is 15 years old. She is autistic and has a sensory processing disorder. Prior to the interview, Lauren's mum explained that a serious incident had recently happened in their community where a person known to them had been killed violently, and that Lauren had been exposed to disturbing images of the incident online. She also explained that the whole family was receiving support around this, and she was getting additional support to help her children cope with it. Lauren talked a lot about this, explaining that the support for this was not sufficient in school and that she was getting support at home. Lauren described how it was unavoidable when this incident was put up online for her not to see it: *"Well like it was put on [identifiable detail]'s story, so ya have like a story on Snapchat and you can make ones for certain people but like [identifiable detail] put it on [identifiable detail] their main story so that everyone can see, and you can't like not see it once you click on it"* Lauren explained how she was not sure if it was real or a prank. Lauren described how she feels she has reached a balance between online and offline activities, explaining that she plays a lot of sports and has a babysitting job.

James is Lauren's brother; he has a speech impairment and a learning disability. James describes himself as a very sensitive person. It is clear before the interview begins that he will take his time to process things and that he thinks deeply about the questions. James referred to the incident that Lauren was exposed to; he did not talk about it except to say that he did not see it and he had heard about it from his family. James described how cyberbullying had impacted him, becoming tearful and upset: *"I think they don't mean it and stuff though, but you're just like aghhhhhh, they don't know how much like it affects you."* He explains how his older siblings help him navigate social media, especially Snapchat. As online interactions can be difficult for him, he says: *"It's much harder to tell what a person means online, like in school, you'd know if they were messing because you see them."* James is cautious about his parents and school sharing images or information about him on their social media accounts.

Tim, who is 13 and autistic, uses the internet for both entertainment and social purposes. He explained that he deleted TikTok because, as he put it, *"maybe I wasn't watching the right thing and some stuff was getting stuck in my*

head, so I just deleted that, I got rid of it." Tim has a Fire TV Stick for watching current movies and a PlayStation for gaming. Tim follows YouTubers and explained that in computer class, he learned about how to use the internet. Tim talked about how some of his friends watch darker stuff and said, *"Well, I haven't watched that much of it, like porn to be honest, well not much really, but on TikTok I was starting to watch some stuff, so I just deleted."* Tim talked about how he learned 'by doing', using social media apps like Snapchat.

Luke is 13 years old and has ADHD and Dyspraxia. He thinks that *"the internet is more good than bad."* He was surprised when he got a phone from his parents when he was 12. He uses social media and explains that using Snapchat *"It's overwhelming at first, but I think... I kinda feel it's kinda like a tribe once you learn the language, it's easier."* Luke uses the internet for entertainment and is not sure how long he spends online. He says *"so I am not much aware of the time as it is, so when I'm online I have absolutely no idea of the time and I don't check it."* He describes how his granny and grandad play games with him on the Oculus virtual reality headset. Luke describes the language online as "vulgar" and that it is the norm, explaining that language has a different meaning online than offline.

Paul is 16 years old and is autistic. Paul describes the meaning of the internet for him: *"Ah, my life is the internet since primary school, I'm not even sure I remember when but it was like in second class when I first went to look at the internet and I was engaged and for years I have loved the internet but this year I may be starting to regret and want to get off it in the way things have been lately."* Paul is deeply immersed in the online world, discussing games online as if they were real. There is an urgency and an intensity to Paul's conversation as he talks in depth about the influence the internet has had on him over the course of four years. He remembers a time when he says, *"I actually disconnected from my old friends in secondary school thanks to an incredibly toxic, evil person online. It was also partly due to my fault."* Paul demonstrates his ability to manage the internet, explaining how he stays safe online and advising others what to do. During the interview, Paul provides many examples of exposure to online harmful content and difficult interactions online. He describes past interactions that he is not proud of when he looks back.

Eamon is 16 and is dyslexic. His view about the internet is that *“I think that there are dangers, obviously, there are bad people in real life, there are going to be bad people on the internet – well, I think the internet overall is good because you can learn things and you can talk to people.”* The social element of the internet is very important to him, for connecting with friends. TikTok is Eamon's favourite app because of its short videos. Eamon views the internet as being important for disabled people to connect with one another, or for people who are gay to have a community if they find it difficult to be accepted in their homes. Eamon describes his younger internet experience when he explains *“Marketing sexism to younger boys... that was a rabbit hole that I kind of fell down for a bit, and well, I think the internet was what showed me opinions from the other side and helped me get out of that. So, it’s a kind of double-edged sword.”*

Cillian is 14 and has autism and ADHD. He says that *“talking about the internet, I have a very good understanding of it – that’s one of my abilities, like I am brilliant on computers, like I don’t use consoles... it’s a mouse and a keyboard”*. Cillian talks about the nuances of how games are made and the frustration he has with some players. He explains, *“Well, I only ever broke one TV and one controller (laughing), and that was when I was 6 years old.”* He explains that he uses bad language online because everyone does; it’s the norm. Cillian animatedly describes social media as being dangerous and overly commercial. He explains how he stays safe online and offers advice to others, including staying away from social media.

Olive is 15 years old and has Tourette's syndrome. Olive says that *“there is like multiple perspectives of the internet, I usually use the internet for like scrolling on TikTok or Snapchat or just to communicate with my friends.”* Olive explains that she uses the phone at night, and it can help her fall asleep. Olive has online friends with whom she shares the same interests; they've never met offline. Olive explains that the *“internet can be kind of addictive... I kinda get hyper-fixated and stuff, say I enjoy something – I probably scroll or do the stuff for like longer than I’m supposed to.”*

These composite narratives illustrate that while some children may share a common diagnosis, each uses their agency to interact and manage their internet use in unique ways. For example, children with autism responded in very different ways to negative online language – for Jack (13), it caused anxiety and

fear to the extent that he rarely went online, for Cillian (14), it was humorous and the norm. He used that same language to interact with others online. Tom (14) did not understand this language, which led to his withdrawal from online spaces, leaving him feeling isolated at school while his peers talked about their online games or memes.

These findings represent the intersection of individuality and disability in internet use. In essence, this intersection was not reduced to a single theme or a few themes but rather represents their person-specific views. A one-size-fits-all solution to managing child protection and welfare concerns for children with disabilities is not useful and often limiting for them. A person-centred lens is advocated, through which parents, professionals, policy makers, practitioners and regulators can view child protection and welfare for children with disabilities in the digital world.

The second part of the qualitative findings is presented next, moving from a person-centred focus to broader findings that encompass child protection and welfare perspectives in the digital environments of children with disabilities. The integrated publication in Chapter 5 details a 5 step approach to thematic analysis that incorporates an ontological realist approach to data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2019; 2021; Fryer, 2022), resulting in six core themes which are presented next.

6.3 Qualitative findings: (Part 2) Six core themes

This section presents the qualitative findings under six core themes that address the research question: *How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?* Based on the findings, children with disabilities disclose challenging discriminatory practices alongside immense opportunities and enjoyment of the internet. The importance of children with disabilities' agency in forging safe, secure online experiences is represented.

6.3.1 Theme 1: Parental, friendship, and school influences

The digital divide has an impact in relation to parental restriction or lack of supervision, shaping the online activities of children and young people with disabilities. Sam (12), when asked if she used social media, replied, “No, nooooo way – my mammy and daddy still have to talk about getting that for me.” Donal’s

(15) mum reflected on how being constantly present made it easier to keep Donal safe online. In terms of adhering to parental rules, Marty (13) explained, *“like Dad was saying during the exams, don’t use the iPad too much. I’m like yeh yeh yeh until he took it away from me (laughing).”* Parental management of children and young people with disabilities’ internet use prevails, however, their views about this intervention vary. Kathleen (17) remarked that *“... parents usually jump to conclusions”*. Having explained how his parents deleted his Snapchat, Jerry (14) laughed and, looking at his mum, he insightfully said, *“it’s hard to be a young person in the world of the internet and it’s hard to be a parent in the internet world”*. It appears that it is not a lack of technical competence among parents that creates a divide between parents and children in the digital environment, so much as their limited understanding of internet language, such as that used in memes, gaming, and social media. Eamon (16) said that he would have *“to explain something to my parents before having to get their help and if there was something bad I don’t want to be banned from using my phone completely.”* Rachel (14) is proud of her mum’s digital skills and states *“well you’re (pointing to her mum) rather tech savvy as you have worked from home all this time”*, whilst Luke (13) is not as complimentary about his mum’s social media skills, saying *“I’d have WhatsApp for talking to mum because obviously she’s not young, hip and Snapchatty!”*

The importance of friendship online for children with disabilities is a core finding within this theme. Friendships are made and maintained online. Lily (15) says, *“I know people get very nervous about the catfishing aspect of the internet, that you forget that you can generally meet people who are just normal people on the internet”*. Kathleen likes to *“interact with other people who are also disadvantaged physically and intellectually, I guess I can see things from their point of view”*.

Social and psychological factors like peer pressure and group norms influence children with disabilities’ internet use. Elizabeth (14) illustrated this: *‘In my opinion, Snapchat is not a great app, but I use it a lot because everyone has it’*. Recent studies have linked algorithmic feeds to mental health vulnerabilities in adolescents (Conte et al., 2025; Costello et al., 2023). During the interviews, children with disabilities expressed how they felt left out when they saw their friends meet up offline without inviting them but can see them online having fun.

Elizabeth (14) exemplified this: *“Well like it can be really toxic and cause a lot of pain... I was watching my friends out posting TikToks and I wasn’t invited.”*

Moreover, many children in this study have large numbers of online friends, which draws attention to how the concept of friendship may be seen differently online and offline. In Kathleen’s case, she said *“...actually I don’t know the number of how many friends I’ve got but no matter who I’m with I just give them my Snapchat.”* Terry (16) explained he has no friends offline but was proud to say *“I had 5000 people that viewed my story every day.”*

It is also clear that social media apps with online trends shape the internet behaviour of children with disabilities. Bridget (15) explained how this content made her feel, *“like you’re seeing all these super models on your feed... everyone is like I want to be like her, I’ve to stop eating. It’s so damaging.”* Elizabeth’s opinion about TikTok is more conflicted when she said *“...like it’s also fun to post videos of you and your friends..... you can have a laugh, but like it’s really toxic’.*

Disability-related communication problems can limit children and young people with disabilities' online engagement. For example, William said, *“I can’t spell, so you know I use the mouth... it doesn’t always understand.”* For Jack (13), anxiety limits his online interaction. Speaking about the internet, he stated, *“it’s a bit unpredictable, you never know what you are going to see on it.”* For many others, it is the complex communication processes that create problems, as Dan (16) explained, *“well, (pause) it was kinda hard to understand their communication too (pause) especially in groups, I found it hard (pause) when to talk, what to say.”* However, for Lily (15), communicating online was complicated because *“I overthink everything and it stops me from talking and interacting online”* but on the other hand, *“it definitely removes some stress... cause... I don’t really have to worry about that expression matching piece.”*

Online communication carries into the school environment: even if children with disabilities are not allowed to use their phones in school, conversations are often about the online world. Tom (14) said *“it’s that the internet has created a message all of its own, I’m not even sure if they are speaking English anymore.”* Schools play an influential role through their policies on internet use, digital literacy, and online security, as they can determine children with disabilities' navigation of the internet world. For example, Rachel

(14) commented, *“I had Ms B, and she tried to get me to learn touch typing because I typed like a woodpecker... it was like this terrible programme... it was traumatising (laughter).”* Children with disabilities face additional risks of being excluded online and offline when school policies adopt a “one size fits all” model (Seale, 2022). Almost all young people talked about online safety classes or talks at their school. Cillian (14) was not impressed by what he learned in online safety talks at school *“I mean, the police came in one time and talked to us about it, and it’s so unreal.”*

Children with disabilities use agency and are very enthusiastic when describing their lived digital experiences. Their agency is particularly evident when exposed to harmful online contact, conduct, and content (Byrne et al., 2016) as is presented in the next theme. The 4th C (Byrne et al., 2016) ‘contract’ risk does not feature in the data findings.

6.3.2 Theme 2: Management and exposure to harmful online contact and conduct

Emerging evidence suggests that content, contact, and conduct risk (Livingstone and Stoilova, 2021) are prevalent in the internet use of children with disabilities (Álvarez-Guerrero, 2024; Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2019; eSafety Commissioner, 2020; Macmillan, 2022). The level of exposure to harmful content and its impact on children with disabilities in this study is concerning. Rachel (14) described the impact of disturbing content online: *“Well I’m going to be honest, and I know this might sound a bit gross but honestly him blowing his head off it looked like watermelon, so I think that’s the reason I was slightly less horrified.”* Terry (16) also illustrated the level of violent content he had seen online: *“Like there was this video that I saw on Twitter, it was this guy in America getting a gun and shooting up this store.”*

Children’s accounts of exposure to violent, disturbing, and harmful online point to hidden mechanisms that produce such experiences. Algorithm-driven feeds, lack of regulation, and commercial-driven incentives have an impact on their digital experiences. Some encounter online grooming: Clara (17) explained *“We were having a great time until the person running the game messaged me and was asking me personal questions but more about sexual things and I was very uncomfortable.”* Others, like Ruary (15), suffer from

cyberbullying: *“Well they text ya saying you’re a handicap, saying all this shit about ya and all and there are some people around here that are mental, and they say ah I’m going to kill ya and all.”* Exposure to pornographic content was also described a number of times during interviews. Terry (17) highlighted how *“there is another level of porn that is different like incest and all that and I don’t (pause) I also skip it or get out of it, but I don’t go on the dark web anymore.”*

The digital landscape is exposing them to harmful content and behaviour online. However, safeguarding practices and policies rarely, if ever, consider how disability intersects with their internet use; what is problematic for one person may be viewed as normal by another. For Elizabeth, interactions online make her anxious, having experienced cyberbullying in primary school: *“Like sometimes I just feel like I could be just doing my own thing, and somebody could message me nasty things, so being honest, I don’t really feel very safe using the internet.”* For Paul (16) chatting online is the norm: *“Well the friendly people don’t insult you or anything and of course I listen to them. The trolls sometimes they are harmless... stuff like get free amazon cards here, click on me for sex, that kind of thing so not great.”* Rachel explains how watching online videos in school with her class was upsetting: *“I starting crying. It was really depressing honestly, I don’t even fully remember what exactly I was crying about but it was about something really bad going on in a third world.”*

On a positive note, the agency of children and young people with disabilities is evident within this theme as they actively use supports to manage harmful and dangerous content online. The person-centred view comes to the fore here, for example, when asked who he would go to for support if he had a problem online, William (12) said, *“Well I’d feel better if I told my parents, but if my parents weren’t there I’d tell my brother and sister.”*

While adults often set the terms of what is considered safe or unsafe, children develop their own strategies to navigate risks, protect themselves, and build friendships online. The influence and power that teachers have, as well as their position within the school, are also important in providing support. Lurcan (17) said, *“If there is a Principal in the school that’s who I’d go to or if he’s not around then the deputy then if not the year heads.”* Simon (13) thinks that social workers are a good option to provide support with problems online, he explained that *“Social workers in general should have enough knowledge to help.”* Support

from friends with problems online does not feature as significantly as support from parents, schools, or authorities such as police. The complexities around ideas of friendship and the difficulties encountered by children with disabilities related to social interactions are evident in this study, which may account for this finding.

It is important to note that asking for support or help with problems online can be difficult for children with disabilities. Tim (13) explained *“I am a bit scared, like I would be scared of not getting my phone I suppose and I would be (pause) scared in case they’d judge me maybe.”* In contrast, Clara (17) demonstrates active agency in keeping herself safe online, she said, *“when it happened I just blocked them and left the group, I didn’t really pay attention to it.”* However, children and young people with disabilities are not generally confident that tech companies will help with online problems. Paul (16) explained, *“Well you could report them and by the time you got something back the world would have ended.”*

Children with disabilities are exposed to online risks including cyberbullying, problematic behaviour and language, porn, grooming, dangerous and harmful content. Hidden causal mechanisms, such as algorithm-driven feeds and the design of media applications, prioritise engagement in online activity over online safety. Several children and young people with disabilities describe this happening, including Tim (13) who stated *“You might watch something quite sincere well like something quiet innocent and then, and then a recommendation pops up and it’s slightly less innocent and slightly more em kind of bad for ya if you know what I mean (pause).”* Children with disabilities encounter risks not only through their choices but through structural forces that are built into digital technologies, which can influence their online interactions. The following theme presents a more positive perspective on internet use among children with disabilities in this study.

6.3.3 Theme 3: Engagement in supportive and therapeutic internet use

Children with disabilities are heavily immersed in the online world. Lily (15) explained *“I keep my phone with me at all the times day and night really... I keep it next to my bed on my locker at night.”* Each young person had their own view of

what is the right amount of time to be online. Donal's mum explained that Donal's (15) reliance on the internet *"all the time, absolutely all the time – we have to, it's unlimited in the house."*

Children with disabilities have fun pursuing their hobbies and special interests online. Children with intellectual disabilities and complex communication needs feature significantly in this finding; most had their iPad with them during the interview, showing their favourite shows, games and music. It was clear that the internet provided immense enjoyment in their lives. Donal's mum explained, *"Well it's important to know that although Donal you don't use words and you are non-verbal, the internet is a very important part of your world – it helps you to relax, and you are very happy when you are using it."* The internet offers children with disabilities a more immersive experience for pursuing and enjoying their special interests. The table below illustrates the wide array of interests that children with disabilities enjoy pursuing online.

Table 6.3.1: Online interests of children with disabilities.

Online interests of children with disabilities					
Gaming	Learning	Entertainment	Youtubers	Music	Sport
Splatoon	Quantum physics	Holidays on YouTube	Danny Gonzollaz, Kurtis Conor Jarvis	Indie K-pop	Soccer
Jet Set Radio	Science	Water parks	Johnson	Listening to music	Hurling
Chess	YouTube	and rivers, lots of rivers	Dan TDM	Adele	Liverpool Man
Farming Simulator	Sharks	Cartoon-related stuff	Jack Septic eye	Carpool	United
Minecraft	Under the sea	Horror	MR Beast	Karaoke	Football matches
Minecraft (2D)	History	Fan art	PewDiePie	Spotify	European matches
Dungeons and Dragons	Music sheets to play songs	Animates	Ryan O Brian	Coldplay	Premier League
Lego	Sports photography	Mumbo Jumbo	LD	Taylor Swift	World cup
Batman	Science-physics and space	Docm77	Call me Kevin		Boxing
The Sims 4	Google translate	Amphibia	GoodtimesWithScar		Rugby
FIFA	Irish homework	Duck Tails	Pete Philips		
Airsoft	Google maps	2017	Jeff Marshall		
Fortnite	Documentaries	Browse the web	IShowSpeed		
Among Us	Business ideas	The Owl House	Stampi		
Call of Duty	Cooking	Samurai Jack	Markiplier		
Crazy Game Poki	Recipes	Gravity falls			
Horizon		Darts			
Roblox		Britian's Got Talent			
Football Manager		Barney			
Pokémon		Pirates band			
Sonic		SpongeBob			
Forces		Fun fails			
Subway		Disney Plus			
Surfers		Netflix			
Mario Kart		Ted Lasso			
		Derry girls			

Sonic the Hedgehog Tera Raid Valve Games ULTRAKILL Fall Guys Word Search Township Stickman Fighting Dream League Soccer Oculus Richie's plank experience Blade Sorcery Karaoke		Carmen Sandiego British Pathe (royals) Puppies Skyglass Great British Bake Off Ireland's fittest families Mickey Mouse Postman Pat Fireman Sam			

Research shows clear therapeutic benefits of online activities for children with disabilities (Comer et al., 2015; Boisvert et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2023). For example, Oliver's mum explained that Oliver (17) got very anxious every morning, checking to make sure the bus would collect him. Now he uses the iPad and relaxes; when the bus comes he is happy to put it away and get on the bus. Life is much easier now, she explained. Donal's mum also offers insight here: *"The internet really helps to make you feel calmer, happier, and more relaxed."*

The therapeutic element of children with disabilities' internet use should not be underestimated. The joy, laughter, fun and animated discussions that occurred during the interviews are difficult to represent on paper. When Oliver (17) was asked, *"If I put your phone and your iPad on the table, which one would you choose to use?"* He answered *"both"* with infectious laughter. Children with disabilities can exercise more control over their social and emotional experiences by engaging in positive, supportive, fun, and therapeutic internet use, thereby demonstrating agency and fulfilment. For this reason, restrictive practices that hinder children with disabilities from having positive interactions online are a child protection and welfare concern.

A sense of autonomy exists for children with disabilities through their use of the internet. Their online activities and internet access, as presented in the next section, are fundamental to this sense of autonomy.

6.3.4 Theme 4: Online activities and accessibility

Social media, for the purpose of this study, is defined as any platform where social interactions can occur and content can be shared. Social media plays a prominent role in the digital lives of children and young people with disabilities. For Lily (15), her favourite thing to do online is *“to watch animations or animatics”*. Views about social media apps varied widely, from Terry (16) who explained that his last TikTok on his public account *“had 6000 followers, 6033 likes”* and Clara (17) who has *“an entire TikTok account just dedicated to K- pop where I just meet people and talk to people about videos on K- pop and it’s great”*. In contrast, Cillian’s (14) view of social media was that it *“is the most horrendous and horrible place on the internet”*. Children with disabilities view Twitter (now ‘X’) as a negative social media app. Terry remarked *“OHHH Twitter is the worst, you can talk shit about anyone, and you won’t get banned”*. Clara also stated *“Twitter is exactly what I said about the internet on steroids.”*

Accessibility barriers exist within this theme. The app Snapchat is described as being very important within peer groups, but is also complicated to use, leaving many children with disabilities frustrated and confused about its usefulness for them. Lily (15) explained why she feels frustrated with Snapchat: *“I used to have Snapchat, but I found that very strange to use. I just deleted it.”* Elizabeth (14) explained, *“I don’t like Snapchat but like everyone has it, so that’s why I have it.”* For Tim (13), the safety aspect of Snapchat proves problematic: *“Well, it’s risky too, Snapchat cos like you can look up any name and add them and there is no consequences.”*

Internet accessibility for children with disabilities varies in a multitude of ways. Technical design specific to devices, as well as complex social media applications, can limit internet use. For Simon (13), his internet experience is limited because *“well like I can’t really get into any conversations as I can’t type, and I don’t use headphones.”*

Children with disabilities' use of the internet in the Irish educational context is influenced by the school’s policies regarding internet use and the availability of technology to facilitate engagement and learning. Access to devices specific to children with disabilities' learning needs is not an automatic right. For example, Dan (16) explained, *“so I get like typing support, that was last year (pause), I don’t know if it’s going to be continued next year (pause)?”* It

appears that teachers can also impact a young person with disabilities' educational experience positively or negatively, depending on how they engage with their students. Marty (13) uses a computer for school he described difficulties he encountered when he emailed his work to his teachers. Dan's (16) experience is similar, he says, "*some teachers are good at replying and some are not so good.*"

Children with disabilities' online activity is shaped by both enabling and constraining structures. On the one hand, the pursuit of special interests, such as anime, K-pop, and creative media, can foster identity, motivation, and social participation, with social media platforms offering children opportunities to share content and gain followers. On the other hand, hidden causal mechanisms, such as the complex design of applications (e.g. Snapchat) and the unequal provision of assistive technology in schools, create structural barriers that limit access and exclude some children from peer interactions. These barriers are not just technical but institutional: school policies vary in how devices and supports are managed, meaning that access to technology is not an automatic right, but dependent on school resources.

Children nevertheless exercise agency by finding alternative ways to engage and connect. For many children with disabilities, the internet is used to portray their online identity, which is discussed further in the next theme alongside their views about online privacy.

6.3.5 Theme 5: Online identity and privacy

This theme focuses on the views of children with disabilities regarding sharing information online and consent issues. Their view of their online image and identity is also addressed. Some interviewees were cautious about sharing personal information online. For example, Luke (13) stated, "*I literally keep myself completely anonymous*" while Alice (12) explained, "*I'd prefer to keep my personal information safe with the people I know.*" Their views about their parents or family members posting pictures or information about them on social media forums were mixed. Noel (14) said, "*it's ok, it's a good way to keep in contact with family who live abroad.*" Clara (17) prefers to check the image first: "*I'd prefer to approve.*" For Lurcan (17) his consent is needed before posting anything online: "*I really don't mind it as long as they get my consent before they post anything.*"

Luke (13) is more cautious: *“ah like if it’s an embarrassing picture I am like DO NOT SEND IT!”*

When asked about the school or clubs sharing information or pictures online, the answer is a categorical *“No, absolutely not! (laughing, pause)”* from Jenny (15). Eamon (16) also explained, *“I actually don’t really like that either”*. Online privacy settings are often complex, which can undermine the autonomy, privacy and safety of children with disabilities. Eamon (16) is dyslexic and exemplified this well: *“I see add terms and conditions and there is a huge amount of text, and I couldn’t be bothered reading it, so I just say decline all or if I can’t do that, I just say accept it and hope it’s not bad like cross my fingers (laughing).”*

For some children with disabilities, privacy means having anonymity and flexibility within digital spaces, where they can minimise disability in their online worlds. Kathleen (17) explained this well when she stated, *“people don’t think much on the internet... online nobody knows what age I am, nobody knows even if I am a girl or a boy and it’s awesome.”* Other children with disabilities may place their disability to the fore in their digital discourse. For example, Rachel (14) said, *“I’m very open about it, it’s like hey it’s me I’m the one with the autism the cool one, it’s a core part of my identity.”* Online platforms enable the expression of identity that often transcends the limitations of offline environments. Kathleen’s (17) statement resonates: *“Like I don’t play basketball, but I can do it online – I can’t fly in real life, but I can online it’s free for your imagination.”*

Many young people with disabilities find supportive online communities that contribute to their sense of self. For Jack (13), it is an online chess community. Others experience discrimination or negative commentary that shape the formation of their online identities and contribute to a feeling of marginalisation. This was the case for Ruary (15): *“Online people keep taking pictures of me, and saying ah look at him he’s handicapped and all.”*

Many children refer to the importance of being asked for consent before their information or images are shared, highlighting how family and institutional practices often overlook their autonomy. On the other hand, digital spaces provide agency by allowing children with disabilities to manage privacy, experiment with anonymity, and explore identities beyond their disability.

Online participation enables children with disabilities to express themselves, develop friendships, build supportive networks, and advocate

against misinformation about disability. Lily (15) explained that *“I am definitely more sensitive to misinformation about autism... because I’m autistic it’s more upsetting to me.”* Bridget (15) described users as *“keyboard warriors, you don’t know who they are because they are too scared to say it to your face, so they say it online.”* In essence, opportunities to express themselves, build supportive networks, and explore their identity form a crucial part of the online worlds of children with disabilities.

These findings illustrate how online environments both reinforce structural inequalities (e.g., ableism, misinformation about disability) as well as offer opportunities for children with disabilities to construct and protect their identities on their own terms. This identity exists within their view of reality, time, and their online communication processes.

6.3.6 Theme 6: Reality, time, and communication processes online

This theme focuses specifically on internet language and online communication, which differs from disability-related communication as addressed earlier. There exists a category of internet language that is cruel, negative and abusive. This type of communication is viewed as normal and acceptable. Paul (16) exemplified this when he said, *“if you are behind the screen and you tell someone to kill themselves... this is normal.”* Elizabeth (14) also explained how *“people can send death threats, they can say things like go kill yourself... or shaming them for something they don’t have control over like a disability.”*

The normality of nasty language is explained by Cillian (14): *“Everyone says nasty things... and laughing and saying things back is really the norm, that’s just the way it is online.”* Clara (17) observed that *“there is a huge disconnect and people tend to say whatever they want on the internet, and people can disconnect themselves from who they are online.”* Ambiguity exists for children with disabilities about the meaning of online language and what is real online. For example, after describing seeing a shooting online, Terry (16) said, *“when I watch shit online, it’s just internet shit, it’s there and it’s gone just like that.”*

Online communication exposes children with disabilities to both supportive and harmful interactions. Structural mechanisms, including the culture of normalised abusive or aggressive language, shape the communicative

environment. Research indicates that online hate speech, harassment, and violent talk are often experienced as “part of online life” by young people, which can normalise abusive behaviour and reduce sensitivity to its harms (Byrne et al., 2016; Chadwick, Wesson, Fullwood, 2013). For children with disabilities, the ambiguity of internet slang, hostile exchanges, and pressure for rapid responses can make participation particularly difficult, often leaving them excluded from games or group interactions.

Confusion exists when distinguishing what is real from what is fake for children with disabilities in the internet space. Lauren (15) was exposed to viewing a violent crime online. She explained that *“I didn’t realise what I was watching until I was watching it so like I showed mam and we thought it was a Halloween prank going on but yes it was real.”* Algorithm influence is hidden, and harmful content and language have become normalised online. Such harmful content and language online has a significant impact on children with disabilities leaving them feeling confused and anxious as they attempt to make sense of it. It is also important to highlight that children with disabilities also use strong language when describing their online games for example, when Cillian (14) talked about playing an online game: *“When I kill the entire team and there is one guy left and then he kills us all – that would make me like frustrated.”*

For children with disabilities with complex communication needs, the internet can both enhance and restrict their digital experience. Online norms, such as fast online interactions and quick responses, do not align well for some children with disabilities. For example, Simon (13) explained that *“I am really bad at typing and I kinda would like to be able to comment, it would be more enjoyable for me.”* This theme also focuses on temporal patterns, such as the online schedules of children and young people with disabilities, and their complex view of how they experience time online.

Studies show that young people often struggle to evaluate online information and can experience anxiety when confronted with harmful or misleading content (Livingstone, Stoilova, and Nandagiri, 2019; Ofcom, 2022). For children with disabilities, this difficulty is aggravated by accessibility barriers, disability related impairments, making the interpretation of “real versus fake” information more complex and potentially distressing.

Lack of awareness of time spent online is common among this cohort of children, for instance Tom's (14) mum explained, *"I think that you spend a lot more time online Tom if we were honest about it, it's just that you don't realise the time"* and Mark's (12) mum stated *"the concept of time online and offline are two very different things."* Time spent online by children in this study suggests the addictive nature of online content. Lily (15) said, *"I don't realise the time when I'm online and I could be watching something, and I realise it's after midnight."* Olive (15) is clear about its addictive nature when she said, *"I think the internet can be a little bit addictive... I kinda get hyper-fixated and stuff."* The temporal consciousness of children with disabilities offers insights into how they understand and perceive their time online. In essence, many spend as much time online as they do offline, with some allocating most of their day to the online world, making it their reality. Clara (17) explained this well: *"Time just goes... after like 10 or 20 minutes it's difficult, I'm lost in the online world, and I have no concept of real time."*

Studies have shown that children generally underestimate the time they spend online, with temporal confusion linked to the addictive nature of the internet (Hiniker, Schoenebeck and Kientz, 2016; Kardefelt-Winther, 2017). For children with disabilities, these temporal patterns can both enhance their experience, by offering structure and routine, or create exclusion when online schedules or interactions are too fast for them to keep up.

The interviewees in this study offer rich findings about their lived digital experiences and how they encounter hidden mechanisms, socio-structural and socio-cultural influences. Factors include exclusionary digital design, discriminatory practices, and ableist views. These findings have implications for the intersection of child protection and welfare, and the internet use of children with disabilities.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter amplifies the expressed views of children with disabilities about their internet use. Their perspectives provide rich data and findings that should inform and shape safeguarding practices for children with disabilities in the digital landscape. The person-centred nature of internet use when it intersects with disability is critical to understanding child protection and welfare practice

for this group. It respects the agency of children with disabilities valuing their views about how the internet can both increase and alleviate disability related barriers. Moreover, children with disabilities exemplify how, although they may have the same formal diagnosis and are using the same internet application, each child's experience is unique and different. Hence, these person-centred findings are presented at an individual micro level.

This chapter contributes further to understanding how child protection and welfare intersect with the internet use of children with disabilities by offering a macro view of shared patterns, structures, and influences that shape or constrain the person-centred digital experiences of children with disabilities. Together, these micro and macro level findings create a layered view of this research topic, offering rich insights into how child protection and welfare intersect with the internet use of children with disabilities.

Parents' influence on their children's internet use offers further insights into their children's agency from a child protection and welfare perspective. Next, their perspective is sought to expand our understanding further on how their influence intersects with child protection and welfare in their children's digital worlds. The question put forward is: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use? This question shifts the focus temporarily from the views of children with disabilities about their internet use to those of their parents. The answer to this question is presented in the next chapter, entitled Findings: Part 2.

Chapter 7 Findings: Parents perspectives

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7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the quantitative findings of this mixed methods research study. The purpose of mixing methods in this study, as set out in Chapter 5, was to achieve completeness and expansion. Zachariadis, Scott, and Barrett explain that completeness means to 'ensure a complete picture (as detailed as possible) of the phenomena under study' (2013, p. 865). They further explain that expansion occurs through the explanation of previous research, which expands our understanding. The qualitative component of this research study revealed that half of the children with disabilities (n=34) selected their parent as their supporter. Additionally, qualitative data indicated significant parental influence on the digital lives of children with disabilities, with 33 of 34 children referring to their parents' influence (see Appendix 6). Here, completing the picture means expanding understanding of the unique role that parents play in the lives of their children with disabilities (Arellano and Peralta, 2013; Floyd and Gallagher, 1997). This component of the research project follows the sequential exploratory design, whereby the qualitative component of this research informed the quantitative component, and survey findings were sought to answer the secondary research question: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use?

A further rationale for this survey of parents of children with disabilities relates to the critical realist ontological layered view of reality, as it extends the explanation of how the agency of children with disabilities is shaped and enabled within the context of their interconnected relationships with their parents. As previously highlighted, parents are the primary caregivers for children with disabilities (HRB, 2023; Raghavan and Jones, 2023; Beadle-Brown et al., 2016); however, little is known about their influence on their children's digital lives. Moreover, there is limited research on parents' views about their children with disabilities' internet use. The quantitative findings are presented next. To enhance clarity, the overall themes are labelled using letters (e.g., 7.2A, 7.2B, 7.2C). This approach is used to ensure the themes are clear and do not get confused with the figures and tables throughout the chapter.

7.2 Quantitative findings; parents' perspectives

The quantitative findings from the parents' survey do not provide an exhaustive account of parents' views on their children with disabilities' internet use. They do, however, explain the layers of complexity that exist within child protection and welfare, internet use, and disability. The focus now shifts from children with disabilities' internet use to parents' views on their children's digital world, as presented in the parents' survey findings.

7.2 A Survey details

An anonymous survey (n = 126) was administered via Survey Monkey to parents of children with disabilities between August 1, 2024, and December 5, 2024. The survey sought to answer the research question: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use? Descriptive statistics are presented to provide an overview of the findings rather than an in-depth statistical analysis. A sample of cross-tabulations is provided in Appendix 17 to illustrate relationships between selected variables, which are used descriptively to support interpretations of patterns observed in the data.

Using Cochran's (1977) formula, the survey respondent rate (n=126) provided a robust representative sample of parents of children with disabilities from an Irish context. It is important to reiterate at this point that although this survey is statistically robust, several disabilities are represented in small proportions, therefore, limitations exist in terms of generalising these findings.

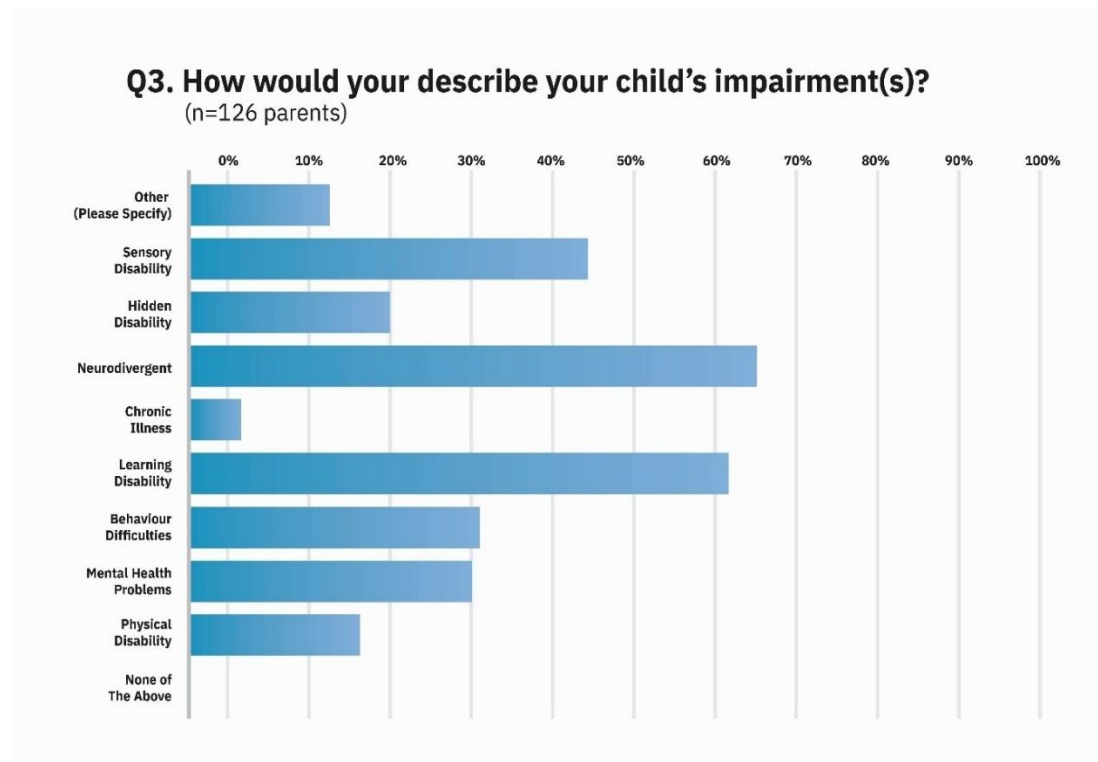
Furthermore, responses to the survey questions should be treated cautiously, as they reflect parents' answers to questions about their children's internet use; however, the context in which those answers are formed is not captured. This survey serves as supplementary evidence within the broader research study, providing insights into parents' influence on their children's digital lives with disabilities and its implications for child protection and welfare in this digital world.

Findings from this survey relate to parents' views on internet use by their child/children with disabilities aged 12-17 years. The central age point was 15 years. 96% of respondents were the father or mother of a child or children with disabilities, with a central age point of 48. The majority (86%) of respondents were mothers. There was a broad representation of disability categories within the survey.

7.2 B Parents' description of disability

In describing their child's impairments (see figure 7.2.1 below), neurodivergence and learning disability were the most common disabilities named by parents in this survey. Other disabilities specified by parents included 'ASD and ADHD, dyslexia, Asperger's, down syndrome, epilepsy, rare chromosome deletion, nonverbal autism and lack of social skills and extremely negative thinking'.

Figure 7.2.1: Disability categories



Building on parents' descriptions of their child's disability, their perspective on how disability impacts their child's internet use is presented next.

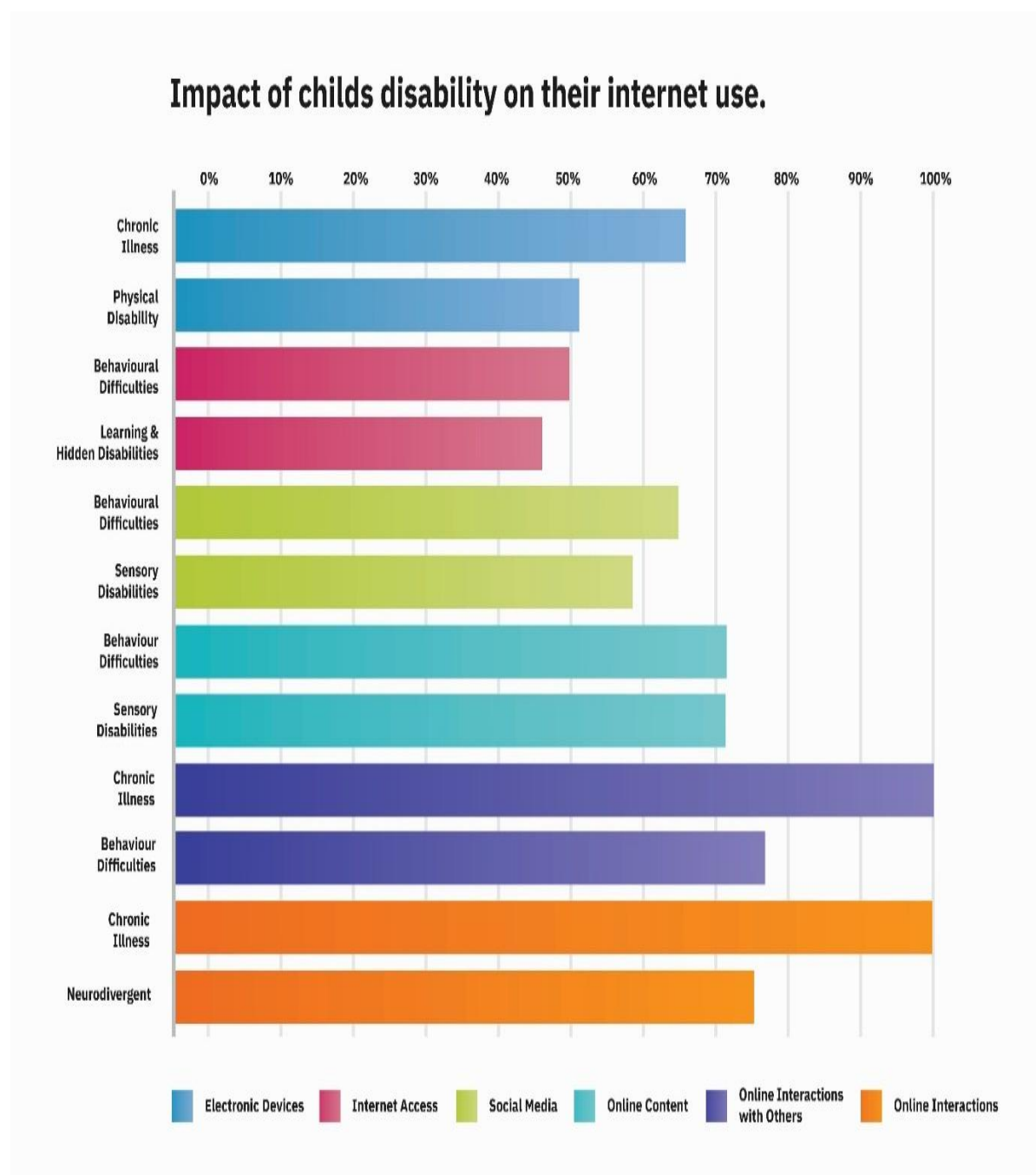
7.2 C Parents' view of the impact of their child's disability on their internet use

In response to the question: Do you believe your child's disability affects their internet use? parents pointed to the fact that interactions online through exposure to online content and social media apps, be it with friends or 'others', were impacted by their child's disability. In fact, 64% reported that this impact is 'moderate' to 'extremely' impactful, specific to their child's interactions online. 40% of parents reported that internet access and use of electronic devices were 'moderately' to 'extremely' impacted by their child's disability. Whilst almost a third of the sample (33%) confirmed the same 'moderate' to 'extreme' impact on their child's social media use due to their child's disability.

Figure 7.2.2 below presents the two highest responses from parents regarding the 'moderate' to 'extreme' impact of disability on their child's internet

use. Percentages reflect parents' reports of the extent to which their child's disability impacts their child's internet use. Here, parents believed that chronic illness 'extremely' or 'moderately' impacts their child's use of electronic devices and online interactions with others and with friends. Considering chronic illness accounts for just over 2% of disabilities represented in this survey, its proportionally small sample size presents high variability in the results. For children with physical disabilities, internet enabled electronic devices are problematic, overall, according to parents' a total of 62% of children with physical disabilities internet access was 'somewhat', 'moderately' or 'extremely' impacted by their physical disability. Furthermore, for children with behavioural difficulties, issues that 'moderately' or 'extremely' impact them included internet access, online content, and interactions with others online. Parents reported that internet access impacts children with learning disabilities and those with hidden disabilities. Children with sensory disabilities were reported to be 'extremely' or 'moderately' impacted by online content and social media, whilst neurodivergent children are reported to be 'extremely' or 'moderately' impacted by online interactions with friends.

Figure 7.2.2 Parents' views of the impact of their child's disability on their internet use.



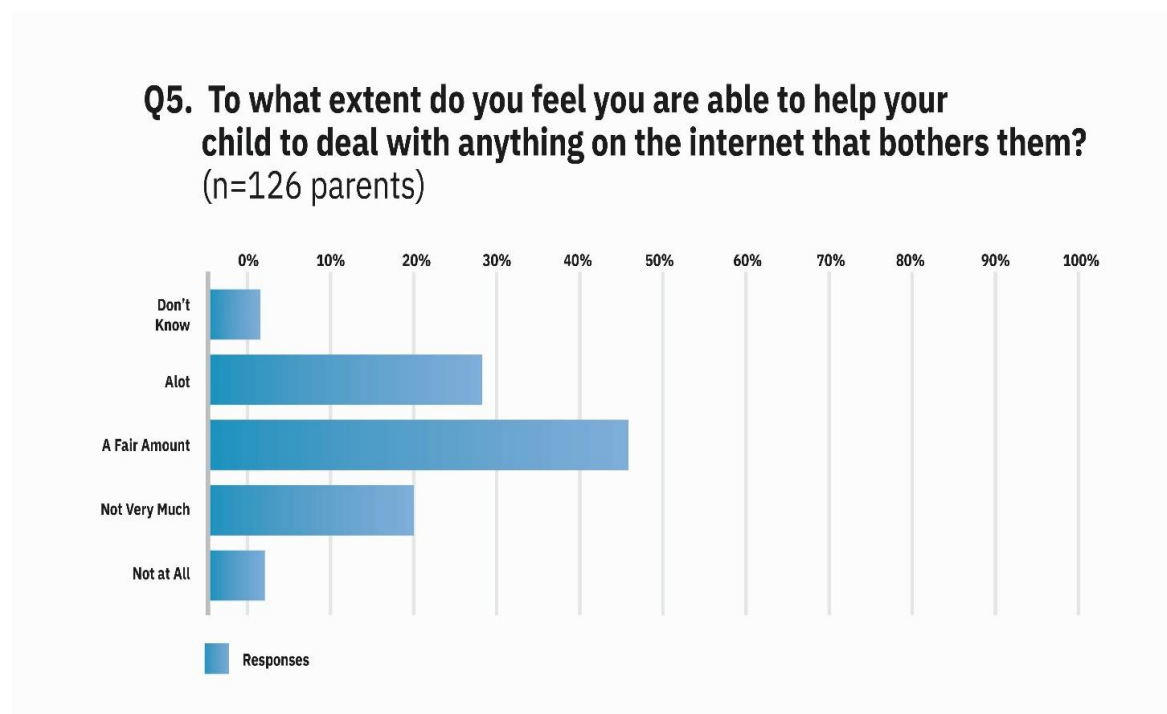
Comments by parents relating to the impact of their child's disability on their child's internet use included *'My daughter is very impressionable, so will take people at their word. She mirrors others to try and fit into society. She's not on any social media as I don't think she's mature enough yet.'* Whilst another parent stated *'Kids on spectrum use internet to communicate more as they don't have friends and can be socially awkward and may not understand how to*

protect themselves'. Snapchat issues are reported by another parent who states that their child had '*some miscommunication /misunderstandings with friends on Snapchat*'. Whilst another parent stated that they '*Do not allow social media or online with friends.*' Moving forward, parents' responses about their ability to help their child stay safe online yield interesting results.

7.2 D Parents' views about helping their children with problems online

A moderate correlation existed between parents' confidence in helping their children with problems they experience online and parents' own level of confidence in using the internet ($r = 0.366, < p 0.01$). Simply put, parents who felt more confident using the internet themselves were more likely to feel confident in supporting their child with challenges they faced online. However, survey responses from parents are confusing, for example, despite this moderate level of digital confidence, one quarter of parents in this survey stated that they 'don't know' or are unable to, or don't think they can, assist their child very much if they need help with something that bothers them online. See Figure 7.2.3 below.

Figure 7.2.3 Parents' view of their ability to help their child deal with problems online.



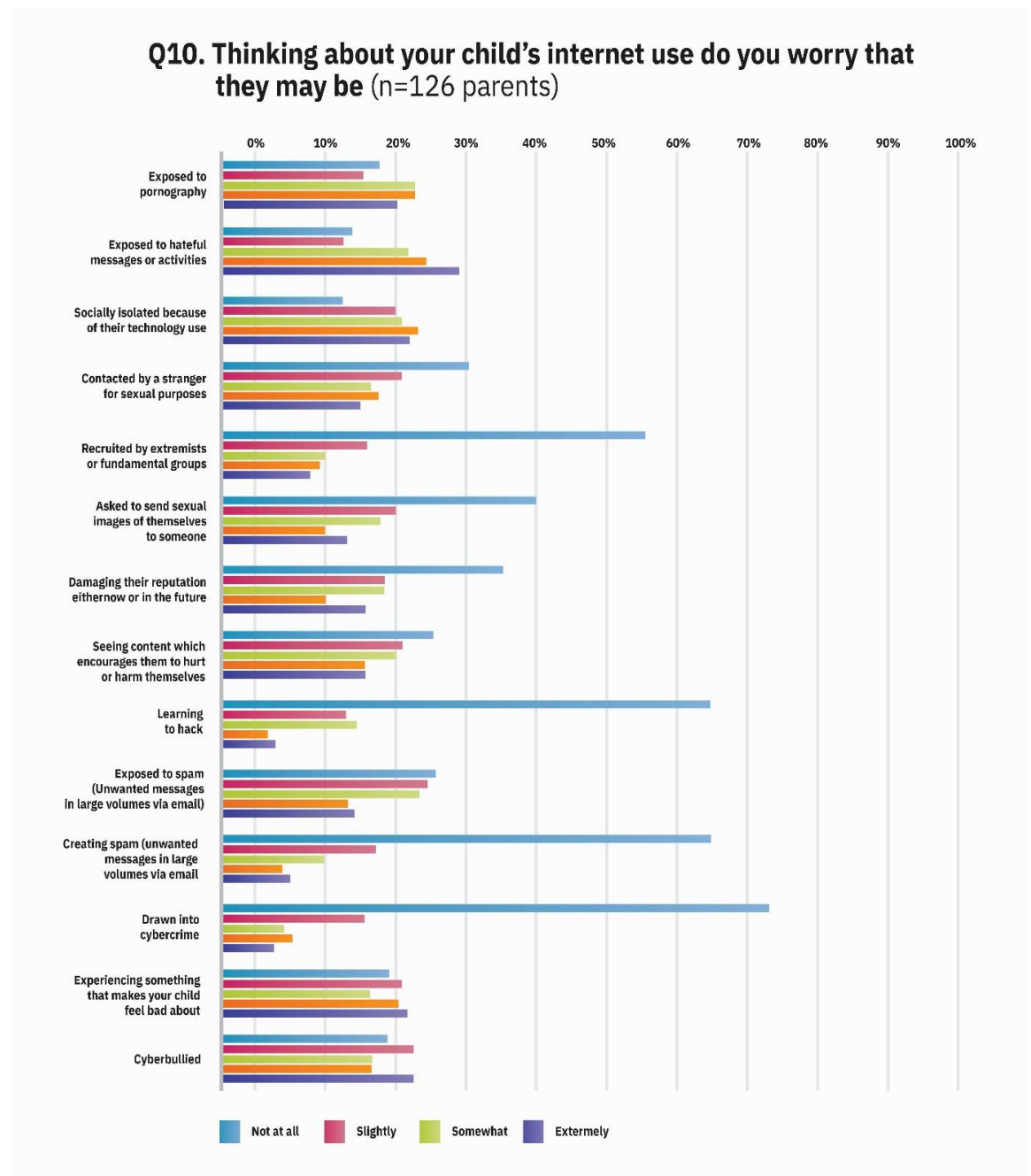
A key finding related to the child protection and welfare of children with disabilities using the internet was that over 50% of parents reported that nothing

has bothered their child online, while 37% of parents stated that their child was upset online, with over 13% of parents also responding that they 'don't know' if their child had ever been upset online. Within that, parents reported the highest results as 66% of children with chronic illness, 50% of children with mental health issues, and 44% of neurodivergent children were bothered or upset by something that occurred online. Parents also responded to a question about more specific worries that they had about their child with disabilities' internet use.

7.2 E Parents' concerns about their child with disabilities' internet use

Parents reported that they were not as worried about their child being drawn into cybercrime, creating spam, learning to hack, or being recruited by extremists or fundamental groups as they were about their exposure to other online risks or harm. However, over 68% of parents were 'somewhat', 'moderately', or 'extremely' worried that their child may be exposed to pornography. The statistics are higher (73%) in relation to exposure to hateful messages or activities, and just under 66% were concerned that their child was becoming socially isolated because of their technology use. 47 % are 'somewhat', 'moderately', or 'extremely' concerned that their child will be contacted by a stranger for sexual purposes. 41% of parents were ('somewhat', 'moderately' or 'extremely') concerned that their child may be asked to send sexual images of themselves to someone. Almost 55% of parents were 'not at all worried' or 'slightly concerned' that their children's internet use was damaging their reputation either now or in the future. Over 55% of parents were 'somewhat', 'moderately', or 'extremely' worried about their child experiencing something that made them feel bad about themselves. Moreover, 58% of parents were worried that their child would be cyberbullied when using the internet, with almost 75% of parents concerned that their child would be exposed to hateful messages or activities online. Figure 7.2.4 below presents these findings.

Figure 7.2.4 Parents' Concerns about Their Child with Disabilities' Internet Use.



Evidence of concern and worry by parents regarding their children with disabilities' interactions online existed for all disability categories represented in the survey. Findings reveal that the highest statistical rating of parents being 'somewhat', 'moderately', or 'extremely' worried about their children applies to their children who are neurodiverse, have hidden disabilities, present with behaviour difficulties, and have mental health issues. Management strategies

and support of their children with disabilities' internet use were also addressed in this survey.

7.2 F Parents' mediation and support

The rationale for how parents ranked management strategies regarding their child's or children's internet use may stem from their views on whether their child was upset or bothered by something that occurred online, alongside their concerns about their child's exposure to online risks and harm. The impact of their child's disability on their internet use is also of significance here. Talking to their child about online dangers and seeking out information about how to keep their children safe online, as well as the use of parental controls, ranked highly amongst this cohort of parents. Across all disabilities represented, over half of the parents engaged in online activities with their children.

Furthermore, just over 50% of parents agree and strongly agree that they provided disability related support to enable their child to use the internet. Almost 22% of parents 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that their child was not allowed to use the internet unsupervised. This represented a 100% agreement from parents of children with chronic illness, over half the parents of children with physical disabilities, a third of the parents of children with behaviour difficulties, and 31% of parents of children with sensory disabilities. Moreover, 6.5% of parents agree or strongly agree that their child was not allowed to use a device with internet access. Parents of children with chronic illness (100%), behaviour difficulties (13%), hidden disabilities (12%) and learning disabilities (10%) had the highest proportional representation of being restricted from using the internet.

A second question offered a broader range of management strategies specific to their child's internet use for parents to choose from. The top four most common strategies 'often' or 'always' used by parents to manage their children's internet use relate to setting boundaries in relation to time spent online, interacting with their children about their online activities and using parental controls. These are highlighted and presented in Table 1 below. Parents of children with learning disabilities provided the highest level of interaction (76%) in terms of talking to their children about who else can see what they do or post online. Parental controls were utilised by parents of children with chronic illness (67%), which also ranks high as a management strategy used by parents of

children with physical disabilities (57%). Suggesting ways that their child can use the internet safely was also used by parents of children with physical disabilities (35%). This finding suggests that parents of children with physical disabilities monitor their children's internet use more than parents of children with any other category of disability within this survey. Of relevance here is the fact that 29% of parents of children with physical disabilities reported being aware of something that happened that bothered or upset their child online, and 5% of parents in this group stated they didn't know.

Parents of children with behaviour difficulties rank the highest (30%) by often or always making rules about how long or when a child is allowed to go online. Strategies that were least common among parents in the management of their children with disabilities' internet use were doing shared activities with their child online (19%) and talking to their child about how their disability may impact their internet use (13%). Parents of children who had hidden (40%) and physical disabilities (40%) talked to their children more about how disability may impact their internet use than parents of children who are neurodivergent (37%), children with learning disabilities (33%), mental health issues (32%), sensory disabilities (33%), behaviour difficulties (28%), sensory disabilities (33%) and chronic illness (33%). This is despite the fact that parents reported a high rate of knowing that something had happened online that bothered or upset their child with chronic illness, neurodivergence and mental health issues.

Considering the concerns that exist for parents about their children with disabilities' internet use, the three most common sources of information and advice that parents 'sometimes' or 'often use' to keep their children safe on the internet were 1. family and friends (72%), 2. websites and safety information (69%), and 3. television, radio, newspapers or magazines (62%). Parents stated they 'rarely' or 'never' used AI (91%), manufacturing or retailers selling devices or products (81%), or information from their child (73%) to help and support them to keep their child safe online.

Furthermore, the additional supports that parents reported that they need to help keep their children safe online are outlined in Table 7.2.1 below. Interestingly, training on parental controls, educational and awareness programmes, and guidance on setting boundaries for their children's internet use are the most popular additional supports that parents select.

Table 7.2.1: Additional supports parents need to help their child with disabilities with problems online.

Q12. What additional support do you feel you need to help your child deal with anything on the internet that bothers them? Please tick any options that you feel are relevant to you (n=126)	Percentage
Education and awareness programmes	53%
Access to parental control software	45%
Training on how to use parental control software	60%
Guidance on setting boundaries for your child's internet use	52%
Spaces to share experiences with other parents	25%
Specific training on how to use social media platforms	24%
Specific training on how to manage problem behaviour online	38%
Shared platforms with children to address internet concerns	24%
Engagement with school on internet safety education	31%
I don't need additional support	7%
Other (please specify)	3%

This survey revealed that parents of children with disabilities (n=126) share information about their child/children online ‘occasionally’ and ‘sometimes’ rather than ‘often’ or ‘very often’. Parents revealed that they predominantly share information through disability related online communities and forums (46%). Pictures/ video clips are shared through personal social media accounts (33%). ‘Occasionally’ and ‘sometimes’ information is shared through a combination of personal and advocacy platforms (27%) and personal social media accounts (29%).

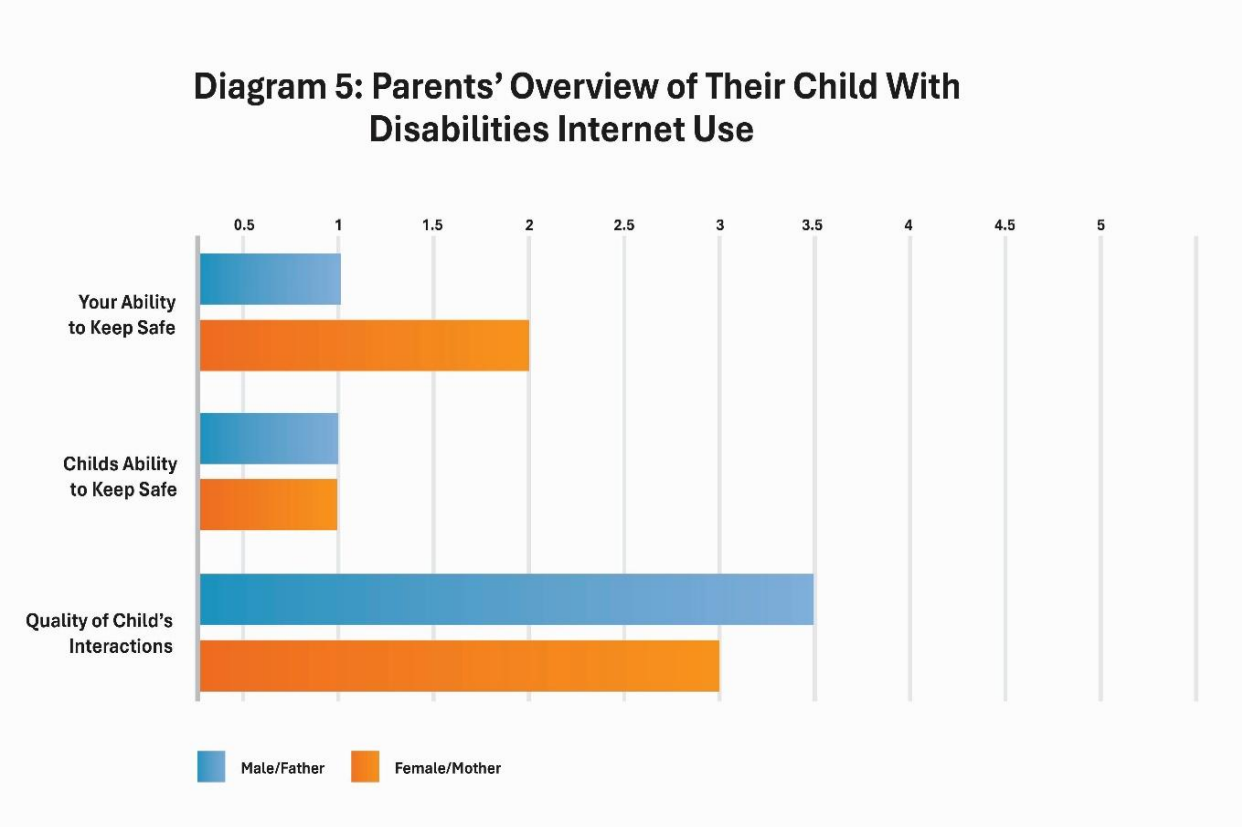
The highest proportion of parents who ‘occasionally’, ‘sometimes’, or ‘often’ share information (46-48%) and post videos (36% and 41%) about their child through their personal media accounts are parents of children with hidden disabilities and behaviour difficulties. Parents of children with mental health problems (43%) and sensory disabilities (41%) ‘occasionally’, ‘sometimes’, or ‘often’ share information through disability related online communities and forums. Parents of children with chronic illness shared pictures/video clips through disability related online communities and forums (100%), and parents of children with hidden disabilities (60%) also ‘occasionally’, ‘sometimes’, or ‘often’ share in this manner. Parents of children with physical disabilities share most information about their children via blogs and advocacy forums, followed by parents of children with hidden disabilities and sensory disabilities. See Table 7.2.2 below.

Table 7.2.2 Parents' share information about their child with disabilities online

Q14. Please indicate whether and how you share information about your child/children online.	Occasionally	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Total
I share information through personal social media accounts	14%	8%	6%	0.00%	28%
I share pictures/ video clips through personal social media accounts	18%	11%	4%	0.00%	33%
I share information through disability-related online communities and forums	22%	15%	8%	1%	46%
I share pictures/video clips through disability- related online communities and forums	7%	8%	2%	0.00%	17%
I share information through dedicated blogs or websites	9%	4%	1%	0.00%	14%
I share pictures/ video clips through dedicated blogs or websites	2%	4%	1%	0%	7%
I share information through a combination of personal and advocacy platforms	20%	4%	2%	1%	27%
I share pictures/ video clips through a combination of personal and advocacy platforms	10%	2%	2%	0.00%	14%

The following diagram portrays parents' overall view of their child with disabilities' internet use, alongside their child's ability to stay safe online, and parents' capacity to keep them safe online. Scores ranged from 0 to 5 where 0 represents very low parental satisfaction and 5 represents very high parental satisfaction.

Figure 7.2.5 Parents' overview of their child with disabilities' internet use.



Overall, parents of children with disabilities reported an average score of 2.8 out of 5, suggesting moderate concerns about the quality of their child’s interactions online. Fathers who represented 14% of respondents were somewhat happier with their children with disabilities’ interactions online than mothers. Neither mothers nor fathers are happy with their ability to keep their child safe online, though mothers are slightly happier in this regard. Both parents were less happy with their child’s ability to keep themselves safe online. Although these findings are not generalisable they provide insights from parents’ perspectives about the digital lives of their child with a disability.

Additionally, parents self-rated their competence level specific to their internet use on a scale from ‘very weak’ (‘I do not use the internet at all’) to ‘excellent’ (‘I am a confident user of the internet, engaging with social media apps and using the internet daily’). 37% of parents rated their competence level as ‘excellent’, 45% selected ‘very good’, and 14% stated ‘good’ (‘I use the internet, but I do not feel confident using it’). Just 4% of this cohort reported their competence level as ‘weak’ or ‘very weak’. The survey reveals a high level of

confidence among parents of children with disabilities in their ability to use the internet.

Despite this high level of competence, the survey findings reveal some inconsistency in parents' responses. For example, while parents expressed confidence in their own internet skills, they also reported dissatisfaction with their own ability to ensure their child's safety online. Additionally, half of the parents reported that nothing has bothered their child online, and approximately one quarter of parents restrict their children with disabilities from unsupervised internet access. These mixed responses suggest uncertainty or inconsistency in parents' perceptions of online safety, revealing a potential gap between parents' digital skills and their understanding or confidence in applying those skills to online safety for their children with disabilities.

One possible explanation for such inconsistencies may lie in the highly individual and person-centred nature of disability and internet use as portrayed in composite narratives constructed from the expressed views of children with disabilities presented in the qualitative findings. Parents' perceptions of competency and safety may be shaped by their child's unique circumstances, leading to diverse, sometimes contradictory responses.

Overall, the findings reveal that while half of parents reported that nothing has bothered their child online, over one-third reported that their child was bothered or upset by something that occurred online. This suggests that negative online experiences affect a considerable proportion of children with disabilities. Two-thirds believed that their child's interactions online are impacted by their disabilities. Key parental concerns include exposure to pornography, hateful messages, or activities online, and the risk of social isolation due to technology use. A low proportion of parents of children with disabilities share their children's information or images online (sharenting). More than a quarter of parents either restrict or do not permit their children to have unsupervised internet access.

For the purpose of this study, this survey addresses the research question: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use? In doing so, it explains how the agency of children with disabilities is influenced by their parents' mediation of their internet use. For example, a child with a disability who lives in a family that embraces and

encourages internet use, viewing it as empowering and beneficial for their child's social, emotional and psychological wellbeing, will have a very different digital experience from a child who lives in a family that views the internet as harmful to their child's wellbeing. In both cases, overly liberal or overly strict practices have implications for child protection and welfare for children with disabilities in their digital lives. This is reflected in responses from parents in this survey, with respondent 107 commenting that "*the internet does not pose new dangers to kids, just a different medium. Educate the kids, don't control them,*" as opposed to respondent 20 who says "*I wish there was a law that only over 18s could have smart phones,*" or respondent 56 who comments that "*my child is not allowed social media,*" or respondent 96 who says "*We choose what she watches.*" These survey results reveal how parental mediation affects the agency of children with disabilities in the context of child protection and welfare. These findings will be discussed further in the next chapter, following the conclusion.

7.3 : Conclusion

This chapter contributes to the thesis by providing a quantitative foundation for understanding how parents of children with disabilities experience their children's internet use. By identifying and describing patterns, trends, and variations across the survey data, it strengthens the evidence base for interpreting the qualitative findings. This contribution is central to the thesis because it demonstrates not only the scope and prevalence of key issues in child protection and welfare in the digital landscape but also situates children with disabilities' lived experiences of internet use within a broader context. In doing so, it ensures that this thesis offers a deeper, more layered view of the intersection of child protection and welfare for children with disabilities using the internet. The discussion chapter that follows will present both qualitative and quantitative findings, drawing on the literature to examine how child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities. The following discussion chapter also interprets the layered view of reality through a critical realist lens, encompassing all three methods employed to address this research question.

Chapter 8 Discussion

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8.1 Introduction

8.2 Discussion and integration of mixed methods findings

8.3 Application of a critical realist lens

8.4 Application of Margaret Archer's SCA framework

[Broader view of Child protection and Welfare]

8.5 Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This discussion chapter brings together the findings from the overall methods employed to answer the research question: *How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?* From a child protection and welfare perspective, the complexity that exists within the digital world that children with disabilities use is evident from the findings of this research study. Disability, child protection and welfare and internet use are all complex topics in their own right, and when combined, a deeper layer of complexity emerges. Online risks intersect and coexist within the digital space occupied by children with disabilities. This chapter ties the overall findings of this research study (qualitative and quantitative data findings and documentary analysis) to explore these layers of complexity in light of relevant literature and through a critical realist analysis.

The importance of person-centredness, the agency of children with disabilities, their digital rights in the realisation of their full digital potential, as well as their protection from online harm, comes to the fore in this chapter. Through a critical realist lens, hidden causal mechanisms (identified throughout this thesis) are portrayed and exemplified in this chapter to expose how they shape the digital lives of children with disabilities. These mechanisms are presented as socio-cultural, political/structural, biological, historical/temporal, psychological, and economic influences that impact the agency of children with disabilities in their digital world. A broader view for child protection and welfare within the digital landscape is presented for consideration so that children with

disabilities are given the best possible opportunity to reach their full digital potential. This broader conceptualisation of child protection and welfare is grounded in Margaret Archer's (1995) morphogenesis cycle.

This chapter will first present a discussion of the mixed methods findings and relate it to relevant literature. This section pays attention to overarching dimensions that exist throughout this thesis, which include children with disabilities' person-centredness in the digital landscape, the agency of children with disabilities and the rights and realisation of children with disabilities' digital potential. Next, causal mechanisms from the lens of critical realism are presented to unpack layers of complexity at the core of this research topic. The subsequent section integrates Margaret Archer's (1995) theoretical framework to offer a broader view of child protection and welfare for children with disabilities in the digital domain. I begin with the discussion and integration of the mixed methods findings.

8.2 Discussion and integration of mixed methods findings

The qualitative component of this research study, reported in Chapter 6, highlights unique, person-centred accounts of disability and the internet that emerge at a micro level. These are followed by six core themes presented at a macro level that incorporate a broader view of the data, addressing the intersection of child protection and welfare and the internet use of children with disabilities. Subsequently, quantitative findings (Chapter 7) shed light on parents' experiences of their children with disabilities' internet use. The focus then turns to the interpretation of these findings for child protection and welfare in the digital domain, ultimately answering the research question: *How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?*

Child protection and welfare intersect with the internet use of children with disabilities, where children with disabilities are exposed to online risk from harmful online content, contact, and conduct. This includes hateful messages, sexual or coercive content, and aggressive interactions. Participants in this study described being exposed to a variety of online harms, including grooming, cyberbullying, violent material and language, and pornography. The power of algorithms became apparent as the desire of children with disabilities to remain

online often outweighed their consideration for their online safety. Each young person's interaction with risky and harmful content was unique, as was how they used their agency to manage it. In this space, a power struggle ensues as parents attempt to keep their children with disabilities safe online and children with disabilities attempt to stay online despite their acknowledgement that content online can be harmful, upsetting, or dangerous.

The findings of this mixed methods study revealed that the manner in which each child with disabilities managed this exposure is unique. For example:

- Different communication challenges and levels of digital literacy and social isolation had unique impacts on their agency in the digital environment.
- Abusive or offensive online language and behaviour sparked anxiety, anger, fear, and annoyance in some children, while other children ignored it, did not process it, laughed at it, or engaged with it.
- Responses reflected the influence of each child's digital environment, support system, and disability.

Recent research reports that children with disabilities are exposed to inappropriate or distressing material through online platforms (Chiner et al., 2024; Jang and Ko, 2023). Their experiences appear to be shaped by how online platforms are designed, such as algorithm-driven feeds and commercial systems that prioritise engagement over safety (Wang, Kameswaran and Kacorri, 2025). From a child protection and welfare perspective, it is important to understand that disability changes how children experience and respond to these risks; what may seem ordinary for some can feel harmful or isolating for others. However, within this study, many children with disabilities show agency and resilience, developing their own strategies to manage harmful or dangerous content.

Of significance here is the survey data from parents of children with disabilities, which were inconsistent, but they nonetheless revealed a notable level of concern about their child's internet use, with more than one-quarter of parents significantly limiting their child's digital activity. These parents face the difficult task of finding an appropriate balance, on the one hand, they recognise the very real risks of harmful content their children encounter online, while on

the other, they acknowledge the considerable opportunities and enjoyment that the digital environment provides. The role parents play in the digital lives of their children with disabilities is evident, as over half of the parents surveyed reported that they help their child to access the internet. Additionally, all but one of the children with disabilities in the qualitative component of this study referred to their parents' influence on their internet use.

It is therefore unsurprising that parents of children with disabilities experience tensions in this area. Although many parents in the survey data report feeling confident in their own digital skills, they report a lack of confidence in their ability to keep their children safe online and similarly doubt their child's ability to protect themselves when using the internet. As a result, more than a quarter of parents report using restrictive or limiting practices, reflecting the challenge of navigating digital safety in a complex online environment. The central issue here does not appear to be parents' technical skills, but rather their lack of understanding about their children's online interactions and communication. Communication, in this context relates to rapidly evolving online modes, trends, and language, which has the potential to be unifying, overwhelming, divisive, or isolating, depending on how parents engage with or manage their child with disabilities' internet use. Simply put, children with disabilities recognise their parents' technical competence but pointed to their parents' lack of understanding of nuanced internet communication, like online language, slang, memes, and broader online rules and norms. The unique digital experiences of children with disabilities underscore the need for targeted support for families.

Empowering children with disabilities to exercise agency can foster digital resilience and support parents in keeping their children with disabilities safe online. Children with disabilities have expressed unequivocal views about the positive benefits of the internet. This includes its importance for online social connections, especially for children with social anxiety, its value for entertainment and fun, such as online gaming, and its use as a tool for regulation (eSafety Commissioner, 2023).

A moderate proportion of parents indicate that education and awareness programs would help them to support their child with disabilities if they encountered problems online. However, the key to adequate support is its

design. The focus here is less on digital skills and more on fostering risk competence in digital environments, whereby young children with disabilities are drivers in this educational space. The majority of parents in this study do not seek information from their children about how they stay safe online or how disability affects their internet use, and fewer than a quarter of parents use shared platforms with children to address internet concerns. However, the expressed view of children with disabilities in this study about their internet use highlights their strong sense of agency in managing risk and staying safe online. Here, an untapped resource exists that enables children with disabilities to exercise their agency further by supporting both their own and their parents' digital empowerment and resilience. Within this, digital resilience is defined as *"a dynamic process whereby individuals and/or groups learn how to recognise, manage, and recover from online risks within and across individual, home, community, and societal levels"* (Hammond, Polizzi and Bartholomew, 2023, p. 3703).

This study's survey findings reveal that only 4% of parents encourage their children to explore and learn things on the internet. Of relevance here is Hammond, Polizzi, and Bartholomew's (2023) notion of maintaining a constant balance. This plays out in the exposure to risky online experiences, which in turn builds digital resilience in young people. They argue that risky online experiences are necessary to develop resilience in the context of their home community and society. If children with disabilities are less exposed to risky online experiences in their homes, this study indicates that their ability to build digital resilience will be adversely impacted. Furthermore, Hammond et al. (2023) and Hammond, D'Arcy and Polizzi (2024) advocate for the adoption of a digital resilience lens by educators of children with disabilities, particularly in learning environments where restrictive digital practices exist.

Focusing specifically on the child with a disability, Usca and Vindece (2020) advocate for a differentiated approach to digital education for young people with disabilities, where clear goals are set and tasks are developed in accordance with individual ability and skill set. They advocate for this support to be provided on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. Whilst there is no one 'right' approach to keeping children safe online, three specific classifications related to parents' approaches to their children's internet use are helpful here:

embrace, balance, and resist (Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2018). These approaches provide insights into the stances parents use, as well as when and why they employ these stances to address their children's internet use. Of importance here is the incorporation of approaches that encompass risk adversity as well as risk-competence.

Adopting the right balance in the mediation of children with disabilities' internet use is important, considering how immersed they are in it. One example here is how these approaches work within internet provided opportunities for them to build and sustain friendships online. Friendships take a variety of forms, ranging from virtual acquaintances and contacts or followers on social media platforms to meaningful and supportive relationships grounded in shared lived experiences of disability or shared special interests such as chess or K-pop music. The significance of these friendships varies for each individual. In this context, communication encompasses the various applications, modes, and norms of the internet, which are influential and have an impact on children with disabilities' internet use in both positive and limiting ways. For example, Snapchat, one of the most frequently used applications among teenagers (Gallagher, 2025), was found in both qualitative and quantitative findings to be difficult to navigate for some children with disabilities, leaving them frustrated and unable to use the platform. This kind of digital design limits internet usability and represents a clear example of disability digital inequality in the research findings.

Moreover, internet slang, memes, and the pressure to reply quickly made it difficult to process what was real, what was fake, or what was a joke online. Many interviewees expressed their views about the normalisation of nasty or aggressive language, which some tried to ignore or disconnect from, while others engaged with it. Hateful and violent speech and harassment were part of what some experienced online, reflecting broader patterns of online disinhibition where people say things they would not say offline (Syrjämäki et al., 2024). Algorithm-driven content and peer pressure made participation challenging, sometimes leading to exclusion from games or group chats. Perez Vallejos et al. explain that there is no transparency and no information for online users regarding 'Algorithmic decision-making', leaving users 'blindly' in the hands of service providers (2021, 2).

Conversely, engaging with special interests and hobbies was central to children with disabilities' online activities, offering them greater autonomy over their social and emotional lives. This autonomy is particularly important, as some children with disabilities use digital spaces to inform, advocate and educate others about disability, while others value the anonymity of the internet and enjoy interacting without being identified as disabled. Children with disabilities demonstrated how they used the internet to regulate and for therapeutic purposes, such as to help them sleep, for relaxation, and comfort. This was particularly important for children in the study who had complex communication needs. These findings reflect more recent research about adults with intellectual disabilities experiencing both support and harm online (Triantafyllopoulou et al., 2025).

Additional findings from this mixed methods study reveal that children navigate power in complex group dynamics amongst their peers online. It also reveals social isolation in the form of FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), whereby children and young people with disabilities watch their friends' social interactions online, feeling frustrated and isolated when they are not invited or unable to go out due to their disability. The manner in which each child and young person with disabilities manages FOMO is unique in this study. For example, FOMO has resulted in frustration stemming from a lack of physical infrastructure, sensory-appropriate venues, a lack of time to process the invite, reliance on carers or parents, feelings of being left out, anger, jealousy, apathy, upset, and sadness. At the individual level, children with disabilities describe how they are left watching their peers online having fun without them. The Centre for Mental Health in the UK reports that FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) can be linked to low mood and a reduction in life satisfaction as a result of 'always on' culture (2018, para. 6). The difference between children with disabilities and their nondisabled peers is that FOMO is forced upon them as the physical and psychological barriers to socialising offline are in many cases not possible to overcome. Akbari et al's (2021) systematic review concludes similar findings that children with disabilities might have more pronounced experiences of FOMO due to fewer offline opportunities. Inequality exists with lack of attention and understanding about children with disabilities vulnerabilities online exacerbating

the impact of problematic or harmful content on their psychological and emotional wellbeing.

Moreover, in this study, time takes on a different meaning in the online environment. Children with disabilities report having little or no sense of time when they are online. This finding played out differently for each child with disabilities who took part in this study. Algorithm-driven feeds, such as TikTok's For You page, actively shape their experience of temporal reality. Findings show that the distinction between online and offline time becomes blurred for children with disabilities, as time spent away from a device is often still occupied with thinking about or talking about online experiences. Examples of the person-centred nature of this include using the internet as a source of content for offline discussions with classmates; feelings of exclusion due to limited access; frustration with being unable to play trending games; disinterest in popular games or viral content; difficulty navigating complex social media applications, feelings of information overload; and a lack of understanding of internet-specific language.

However, not all the research participants were challenged in this way; many participants in the study displayed exceptional and intricate understanding of technological engineering, game design, and development. Recent influential research on children's digital landscape is presented by Smahel et al. (2025)'s authoritative study. They support the view that children with higher digital skills but low developmental maturity can be more exposed to online risks, based on a desire to explore more online. This research is important as it demonstrates that children who are highly digitally skilled do not just consume information online; they interact more in online spaces and are more exposed to harmful online behaviour and content.

Children and young people with disabilities demonstrated awareness of the risks associated with sharing personal information online and expressed doubt that technology companies would offer meaningful support when problems arise. Their scepticism appears justified in light of recent cases, such as the £530 million fine issued to TikTok by the Irish Data Protection Commission due to the transfer of users' data to China (a ruling currently under appeal). Furthermore, children with disabilities within this study were cautious about sharing their personal information online and about parents sharing their

information about them online. They were exceptionally clear that their parents, schools, and friends must obtain their consent before posting anything on their online platforms. A low proportion of parents of children with disabilities in the survey shared information or photos of their children online.

This attentiveness to online privacy also extends to how parents and schools share information and images about children and young people with disabilities. Findings show that children consider it very important to be asked for consent when parents post about them on social media, and likewise when schools publish information or pictures of them online. Sharing and engaging online to connect with supportive communities is well documented (Treadgold et al., 2020; Gruebner et al., 2022; Livingstone and Zhang, 2019; Ammari, Schoenebeck, and Morris, 2014). Quantitative findings indicate that parents primarily share online to seek support, and only a small number of parents use online communities or forums for disability-related information.

Attention to children with disabilities' views about 'sharenting' is important, as oversharing or putting up photographs of their children online by parents has implications for their children's rights to privacy and protection (Alkhalouf, 2021; Demetis and Kietzmann, 2021; Zdanowicz, 2020; Iskül and Joamets, 2021). The paradox of parents closely monitoring their children's online activity, often out of concern that they may overshare personal information, stands in stark contrast to parents' own practice of sharing their children's lived experiences online, including inclusive audio and visual imagery (Ní Bhroin et al., 2022).

Furthermore, children's right to privacy is routinely overlooked in child and family blogging, as well as in the growing sphere of 'kid-influencing' (Rafsanjani, 2022; Tur-Viñes, Núñez-Gómez and González-Río, 2018). Khojir and Khangheshlaghi explain that *"Kid influencers are advertising and attracting followers while sleeping, playing, traveling, having fun, acquiring basic developmental skills, etc., and they can be referred to as a category of exploitation in the moment. It can also be said that the goal of all activities of kid influencers' pages is ultimately to gain advertising and financial profit"* (2024, p. 155). Although not as common, children with disabilities also feature as part of the kid-influencing phenomena, for example, on the family YouTube channel 'Dad V Girls', all five daughters are regularly featured, including Sophie, a 13-

year-old with a disability. Lendvai (2024) presents guidelines aimed at addressing the legal and social challenges associated with sharenting practices. There is little doubt that a universally accepted etiquette for sharenting is long overdue.

There is extensive empirical evidence on how digital technologies intersect with family life (Mannell et al 2024; Erstad et al., 2024; Qian and Hu, 2024; Beynon et al., 2024 and Lafton, Wilhelmsen and Holmarsdottir, 2024). Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross, in their book ‘Parenting for a Digital Future’, offer numerous unique family perspectives of parenting in a digital world. They call on “*society-policy makers, educators, journalists, designers, industry, and more – to hear parents’ voices, value their efforts, address the inequalities that divide them, all to better support them as they strive to make sense of, and prepare for, the digital future*” (Livingstone and Blum- Ross 2020, p.196). Recent literature indicates that children with disabilities face a disproportionately higher level of risk online in comparison to their nondisabled peers (Cavallini, 2021; Hammond, 2022; Emerson et al., 2022; Katz and El Asam, 2019; eSafety Commissioner, 2023). Findings from this study revealed that harmful or problematic online content, contact, and conduct are often normalised and embedded in the everyday digital experiences of children and young people with disabilities. The high level of exposure to problematic content, contact, and conduct is presented in multi-country studies such as Smahel et al. (2020), Stoilova, Livingstone, and Khazbak (2021), and Jang and Ko (2023).

This study found that existing literature related to the topic of child disability protection and welfare, and children with disabilities, is heavily weighted toward risks associated with internet use for all children, including children with disabilities. Public debate and media coverage of online child safety often adopts a sensationalist tone that can generate a sense of moral panic. Research on young people’s internet use frequently references moral panic (Robards, Goring and Hendry, 2025; Benbow, 2024; Aguerri, Gatti, and Jiménez, 2025). Within this, Phippen (2025) argues that this sensationalist media coverage of online child safety that generates moral panic results in online child protection policies that are overly reactive and lack an evidence base. He advocates for a more balanced approach that tackles genuine risks in order to improve young people’s digital experiences. Such predominant risk-oriented framing may reinforce restrictive parental practices, narrow opportunities for

digital participation, ultimately shaping how child protection and welfare of children with disabilities are perceived and responded to in the digital domain.

Notably, the current Global Online Safety Survey reports that online risk has remained steady at 66% and that following an experience of online risk, teens have spoken to someone about it (Microsoft, 2025). Furthermore, the notion of childhood within the digital landscape requires closer examination, as children are often the most digitally skilled members of their families, which shifts the dynamics of autonomy and authority in the household (Wang, 2020; Turner et al., 2022; Akter et al., 2022). Additionally, the view that children are the first to encounter harms online heightens the importance of ensuring their views are heard, represented and responded to in shaping child protection policies (Sonia Livingstone, 2025). Ensuring the representation of children with disabilities about their internet use in digital discourse is essential to their safeguarding in the digital domain.

Current frameworks on child protection and welfare in the digital domain (UNCRC General Comment No.25 (2021), Council of Europe Guidelines (2018a), European Commission Better Internet for Kids+ (2022b) focus on individualised risks, such as grooming, cyberbullying, harmful content, exploitation. However, there is a lack of consideration around structural barriers that children with disabilities face, such as inaccessible platforms, complex communication barriers, restrictive parental controls, and poor assistive technology that limit their digital participation within these frameworks. Children with disabilities are sparsely represented and usually referred to under ‘vulnerable groups’ or are implicitly included under the category of ‘all children’ within these frameworks.

The person-centred view of disability and internet use is fundamental to this research. By contrast, there is very little work that explicitly applies a person-centred framework to the digital domain of children with disabilities, a concept well established in disability services, education, and health care. In service provision, person-centredness emphasises individual preferences, autonomy, and tailored support (Sanderson, 2000; O’Brien and O’Brien 1998), but these principles are seldom translated into digital policy or research. Existing digital studies tend to prioritise safety, inclusion, or usability at the group level, rather than the personalised planning and decision-making that person-centred practice entails. Taken together, the lived experiences of children with

disabilities about their internet use show that disability and digital life do not intersect in a singular or predictable way. Instead, each young person demonstrates a person-specific configuration of agency, shaped by the particular features of their impairment and the conditions of their digital environment. A structural gap exists in that digital environments are largely designed for mass audiences, making individual tailoring more challenging and a resource issue. This finding lays the foundations for a recommendation to engage with children in a manner that values person-centredness as the key to the realisation of their full digital potential. This lack of person-centred attention to children with disabilities in the digital domain consequently reflects the lack of attention to their agency.

Qualitative findings reveal that the digital environment can both limit and enable children with disabilities' agency. The composite narratives constructed from the expressed views of children with disabilities portray their unique ways of navigating internet access and content. For example, the algorithm-driven nature of online content allowed more autonomy for children with complex communication needs to navigate their online content independently.

However, their agency was constrained by parental restrictions; a lack of digital social literacy among adults; children's fear that seeking help would lead to further restrictions; and data and privacy decisions being made by others, such as schools. Structural factors that shape and limit their digital experiences include ableist design of digital platforms and technologies; inadequate accessibility legislation and enforcement, paternalistic norms in digital environments, lack of structured digital literacy and safety training, and data privacy concerns. Overall, while digital spaces provide opportunities for autonomy and positive engagement, these benefits are often undermined by structural barriers and restrictive practices that limit the full exercise of agency, posing child protection and welfare implications. The agency of each child and young person with disability comes to the fore in this study in unique ways. Emerging research about the digital exclusion of people with disabilities by Björnsdóttir, Gunnarsdóttir, and Gunnarsdóttir (2024) shows four key socio-cultural barriers that stem from ableism: paternalistic attitudes from non-disabled people, lack of digital training and education, poor quality disability services and support and lack of inclusive design. Black and de Pablos-Ortega

(2025) note the lack of proper training, rather than access to digital tools, as a significant barrier to digital inclusion for people with disabilities. Child protection and welfare risk exists in the exclusion of children with disabilities from realising their full digital potential, in an environment that they themselves express that they greatly enjoy.

A recent OECD (2025) report titled “Enhancing child well-being in the digital age: A four-pillar policy,” sees one pillar promoting the importance of children’s active participation in the design of digital spaces and supports. Critical examination that exclusively focuses on how children with disabilities’ agency is represented or omitted within digital environments exists but is less well documented (Alper and Goggin, 2017; Chadwick and Wesson, 2016; Goggin and Ellis, 2020). The promotion of children’s agency within the digital environment is well established in children’s digital rights discourse (EuroChild, 2025; Livingstone, 2025; Özkul, 2025; UNICEF, 2025; Stoilova, Livingstone and Khazbak, 2021). The realisation of these rights for their full digital potential forms an overarching dimension running through this research study.

This study frames child protection and welfare for children and young people with disabilities in the digital environment as both protecting their digital rights and safeguarding them from online harm and risky online content. This view aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and General Comment 25 (UNCRC, 2021). Furthermore, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires that children with disabilities enjoy all human rights without discrimination (2007, Article 7). Additionally, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021) emphasises children’s ability to safely navigate and benefit from the digital environment. The Council for Europe digital rights guidelines further call for policies balancing protection, participation, privacy and access.

In line with these frameworks, this study’s findings highlight how children with disabilities gain immense benefits from digital engagement, including therapeutic benefits, and they are also exposed to harmful risk content online. Moreover, this study takes the view that the rights of children with disabilities can be compromised via parental misunderstanding or lack of understanding of online interactions and content, which can be impactful on their digital

autonomy. Within this 'sharenting' practices also have implications for child protection and welfare within this domain.

Parents profiting from sharing their children's personal information and images online is a common occurrence, even as they supervise and restrict their children's own online activities (Laude, 2024; Dunn, 2024; Carrêlo, 2022; Morris, 2023). Although Paragraph 18 of the UNCRC General Comment No. 25 clearly states that children are entitled to protection from digital harm, including harm perpetrated by parents or caregivers, sharing practices are widespread and frequently occur without the child's consent (Baxter and Czarnecka, 2025; Archer, 2019; Bessant, 2018). Sharenting illustrates how the agency of children is shaped across complex socio-cultural, economic, psychosocial, biological, political, and historical contexts. While often motivated by support-seeking (as in this study), it can also be driven by financial incentives, potentially leading to children with disabilities' information being shared and permanently stored online without adequate legal protection (Barud et al., 2025; Goggin and Ellis, 2020; Rodrigues, Oliveira and Garcia, 2025).

Although international recognition of the digital rights of children with disabilities exists, in reality they remain compromised by complex structural inequalities. These extend beyond children with disabilities' own online behaviours and interactions to encompass parental practices and regulatory frameworks. Hence, child protection and welfare for children with disabilities incorporates wider socio-structural barriers and socio-cultural factors that require further unpacking. Here, the application of the critical realist lens proves helpful.

8.3 Application of a critical realist lens

The overall findings of this study point to structural forces which include socio-cultural influences, socio-economic, psychosocial, biological, political and historical and temporal forces that exist and are impactful at the intersection where disability, child protection, welfare and internet use meet. Specific examples of these influences are highlighted next, related to children with disabilities expressing their views about their internet use.

For example, the socio-cultural influences shaping the digital lives of children with disabilities reveal how values, norms, and family beliefs can

impact their access and participation online. Many children described parents as supportive but cautious, often viewing the internet through a lens of protection rather than participation. They drew attention to parents' limited familiarity with online language, such as gaming, memes, or social media slang, meaning that children with disabilities often had to negotiate spaces their parents neither understood nor trusted. For others, because of their care needs, their parents were constantly present while they used the internet. For some, this created friction and feelings of surveillance, for others, safety and reassurance. Cultural assumptions about childhood, risk, and disability position children with disabilities as dependent and vulnerable rather than as competent digital actors. Such dynamics illustrate how cultural mechanisms of care and control shape the boundaries of online freedom for children with disabilities.

Additionally, socio-psychological influences reflect how online spaces shape the emotional and relational lives of children with disabilities. Many children described the internet as both a place of belonging and of anxiety, where friendships could be made, but also a place where the meaning of friendships was minimal interaction but lots of followers. For children with disabilities who felt excluded offline, digital platforms offered visibility, recognition, and shared humour, but also feelings of comparison, rejection, and fear of being misunderstood. Unique complex communication, whereby overthinking online interactions, worrying about tone or timing, and experiencing social fatigue, created problems for some children with disabilities in this study. Internet applications are not designed for consideration of communication nuances, restricting children with disabilities' online interactions.

Furthermore, socio-biological influences expose how disability and technology merge in shaping digital participation. Children with disabilities described physical fatigue, headaches, wrist strain, or sensory overload while using the internet. Assistive technologies were helpful but not always available. Children with disabilities also described the internet as calming, a space where sound, colour, and movement could soothe or help regulate emotions. These accounts reveal how digital engagement can both exacerbate and relieve physical or sensory strain, depending on design and accessibility.

Moreover, socio-technical influences show how design, interface, and algorithmic systems shape children with disabilities' experiences of participation

and exclusion. Applications were described as confusing or “too fast”, particularly when accessibility features were limited or buried within complex settings. Others spoke about platforms like TikTok or YouTube as both creative outlets and sources of frustration when algorithms push unwanted or upsetting content. Twitter (now X) was viewed as a particularly negative application. The design of these applications prioritises engagement and visibility rather than inclusion, embedding inequality into everyday online life. For children with disabilities, the technical limitations of assistive tools and the constant adaptation demanded by new updates expose hidden mechanisms of exclusion built into the architecture of the internet itself.

Equally important here are the socio-economic influences, which reveal how digital platforms prioritise digital engagement for economic gain over child protection online. Children with disabilities express their view that tech companies do not help them if they encounter problems online. Although regulatory frameworks impose legal obligations on companies to enhance online safety, compliance lags behind. Hence, the socio-political influences highlight how structures of power and representation shape digital agency for children with disabilities. Political mechanisms play out where digital rights for children with disabilities are recognised rhetorically, but are rarely enacted in practice. Important here is that some children with disabilities described the internet as empowering, a space to express disability identity, find supportive communities, or advocate for change. Others, however, encountered hateful commentary, misinformation, and political invisibility.

It was noted that socio-historical influences are deeply hidden but nevertheless impact children with disabilities' internet use, specifically relating to their views about access to and use of assistive technology. The value of assistive technology, particularly referred to within their educational context, pointed to insufficient resources and limited teacher training. The idea that technology is not an essential learning tool but an optional aid or a reward for good behaviour was expressed by interviewees. These challenges stem from the historical neglect of inclusive education and disability support in public educational policy.

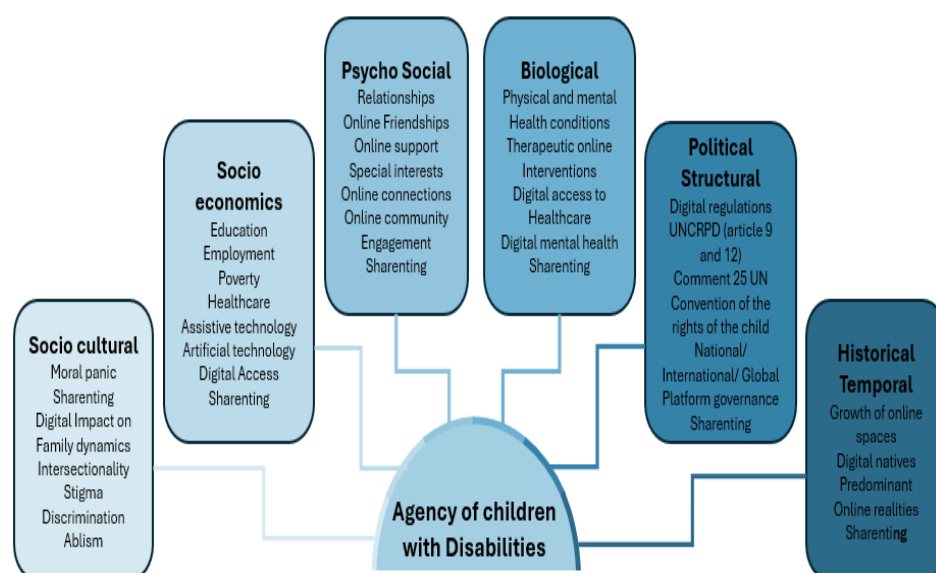
Finally, temporal influences highlight how time online was influenced by limited offline opportunities. Yet, the “always on” nature of digital life also brought

fatigue, guilt, and anxiety as children with disabilities described losing track of time while scrolling, chatting, or gaming, sometimes realising hours had passed without noticing. These patterns reflect deeper temporal mechanisms, where digital life provides escape, connection, and self-expression, while also reinforcing dependency.

Appendix 18 provides an overview of interrelated social influences that stemmed from the overall findings of this research study, including the documentary analysis and the findings from qualitative and quantitative data. The findings of this mixed methods study identified aspects of power, responsibility, and structural inequalities that lie at the intersection of children with disabilities' internet use and child protection and welfare. The welfare of children with disabilities in the digital domain is multifactorial and concerns much more than just access or inclusion. Their protection within the digital domain is much more than just online risks and exposure to online harm. The findings of this mixed methods study identified the welfare of children with disabilities as multifactorial and complex. The following section discusses how the structural inequalities that emerged within this research study have wider implications for safeguarding children and young people with disabilities. In essence, the justification for widening the view of child protection and welfare within the digital domain has been demonstrated.

Figure 8.3.1 portrays a summary of the complex nature of child protection and welfare that encompasses several interrelated social influences that impact the agency of children and young people with disabilities in digital environments that have emerged from the overall findings of this study.

Figure 8.3.1: Interrelated social influences on the agency of children with disabilities



The influences outlined in the figure above were evidenced within the data of the qualitative and quantitative components of this mixed methods study and within the documentary analysis that sought to answer the research question: *How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?* The influences presented in this table are not discrete experiences but interrelated social conditions and processes that shape, constrain and enable children’s agency in their digital domains. These influences stem from children’s reported lived experiences, parental perspectives and documentary analysis. Some influences span several areas, for example, in the context of disability sharenting crosscuts all domains as it has implications for children’s agency, bodily privacy, identity construction and public perceptions of disability. Hence it does not fit into a single category.

+Furthermore, factors such as affordability of assistive technology and the profit driven practices of technology companies position parents as key agents between structural economic conditions and children’s digital participation.

A broader view of digital child protection and welfare requires opening up wider debates so that all actors operating within the digital environment are clear about the meaning of safeguarding children with disabilities in the digital domain. Positioning regulation within this broader digital child protection and welfare approach does not diminish its value; rather, it recognises regulation as an essential tool for keeping children safe. The UN General Comment No. 25 (UNCRC, 2021) which clarifies how the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child applies in digital contexts, is especially important here, particularly its recognition of the right of children and young people with disabilities to digital inclusion. Building on these regulatory foundations, the *Child's Rights by Design* initiative was developed by the 5 Rights Foundation and the Digital Futures Commission. This is a framework that comprises eleven principles to guide the development of digital products for children, advocating for a more proactive integration of children's rights in digital innovation (Digital Futures Commission, 2022). The Commission also stresses the need to protect the rights of children with disabilities in digital design, given the distinctive challenges and pressures they may face online (Digital Futures Commission, 2022).

There is, however, a notable absence of discourse about disability and the potentially restrictive effects that regulations may have on the digital lives of children with disabilities. For example, the EU Digital Services Act requires online platforms to adopt measures that prevent the profiling of minors, which raises the question of how compliance can be achieved when the age of the user is not always known (EDRi, 2024). This leads inevitably to age verification discussions, where data, privacy, autonomy and anonymity risks are well documented (EDRi, 2024; Kelley and Schwartz, 2023; Forland, Meysenburg, and Solis, 2024). Yet meaningful discussion about how age verification intersects with disability – including its definition, application, and consequences has barely begun. In practice, discrimination exists at the technical level because many computer vision and machine learning tools are trained on datasets that overrepresent able-bodied white male examples (Bhatia & Aboulafia, 2024).

Cultural norms, organisational structures, and governance models also present challenges for implementing digital strategies for people with intellectual disabilities (Eriksson and Ineland, 2023). Although there are numerous policy and practice guidelines aimed at helping professionals keep

children safe online (TUSLA- Child and Family Agency, 2024; UK Safer Internet Centre, n.d.; NSPCC, n.d.), much less guidance is available on how professionals should engage and communicate online with children with disabilities in their care. A deeper understanding is needed around how online and offline spaces coexist and together shape the realities in which practitioners and children with disabilities interact, build trust, and receive social services. Broadening the concept of child protection and welfare is essential in order to challenge the assumption that digital protection efforts should primarily focus on the online actions of children with disabilities.

8.4 Application of Margaret Archer's SCA framework

[Broader view of child protection and welfare]

Applying a critical realist lens, this research study draws on Margaret Archer's morphogenetic sequence (1995) as an integrated framework for understanding the ways in which social structures are shaped by human agency, and how such structures can be explained at particular points in time and in particular places (Hastings, 2024). In this context, it is recognised that the agency of children and young people with disabilities is influenced by structural conditions and cultural conditions that are not always visible or known to them or to parents or professionals around them. These hidden mechanisms still exert causal influence even if they are not consciously perceived by social actors.

Accordingly, Archer's (1995, p. 2000) "*Structure, Culture, Agency*" framework is adopted. Before applying the framework, it is important to clarify the meaning of structure and culture, and to reiterate the concept of agency, which was discussed earlier in this chapter and has particular relevance here. Structure or institutional structure refers to sets of internally related objects (which may be physical, material resources) and practices (carried out by human resource)' (De Souza, 2013, p. 144). From a critical realist standpoint, these structures possess causal powers that can both enable and constrain what individuals are able to do.

It is important to acknowledge that even at an individual level, children with disabilities, parents, and professionals are working hard to build supportive, inclusive digital environments. Currently, overarching systems of education, social care, as well as digital policies and child protection frameworks, lack the capacity, flexibility, and awareness to provide adequate protection to enable

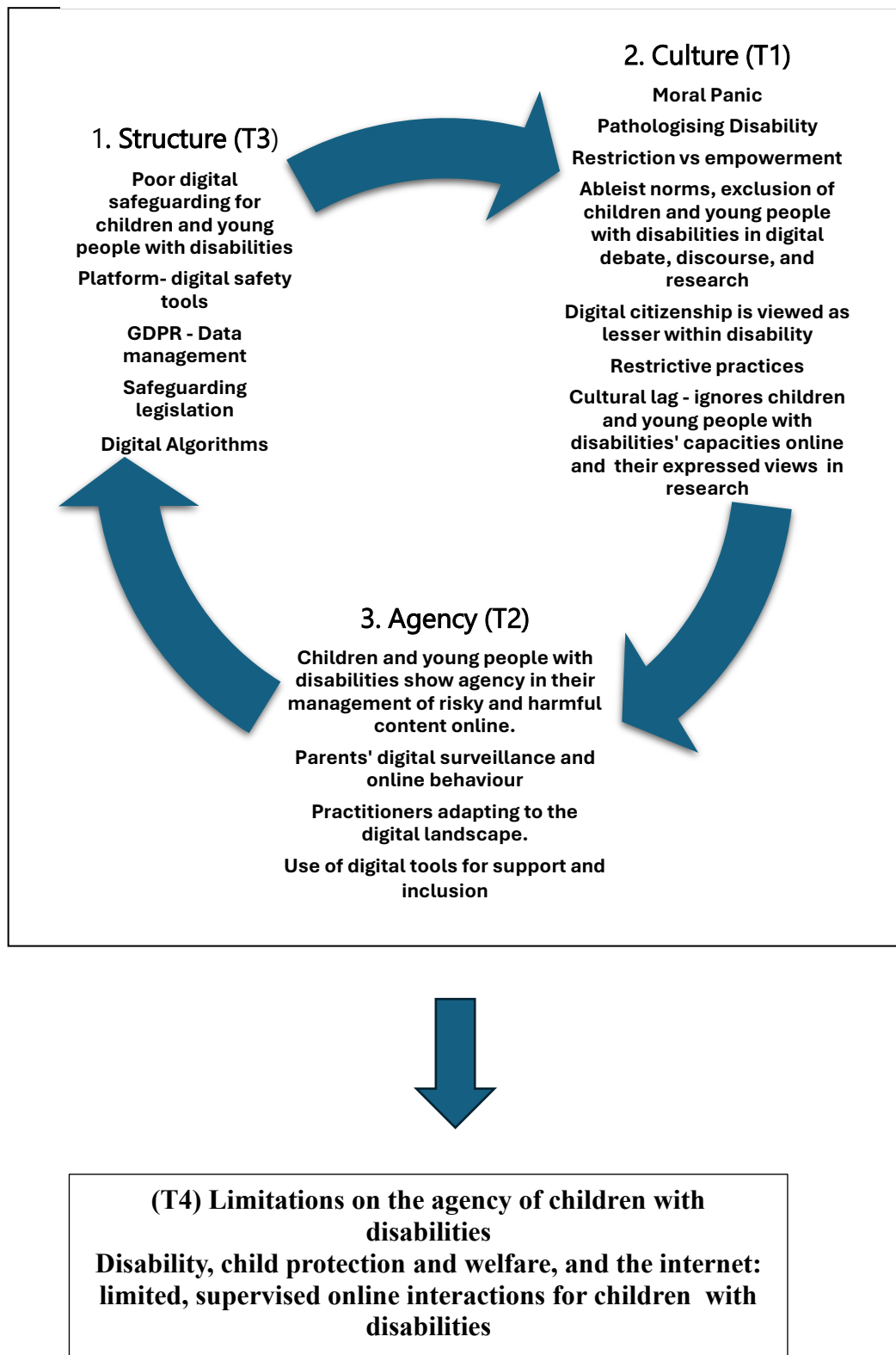
safe, meaningful online participation. The outcome is that systematic barriers to safe online engagement are created for children with disabilities.

Culture represents the realm of intersubjectivity and deals with *“relations pertaining between ideas and the ideational influences operating between people”* (Archer, 1996 in De Souza, 2013, p. 145), encompassing beliefs, values, and ideas that guide and regulate social action. Agency, as conceptualised by Archer (1995), is the capacity of individuals or groups to act deliberately and reflectively. Although agency is influenced by structural and cultural conditions, it is not wholly determined by them. Importantly, agents emerge within structure and culture and retain the potential to transform them. When social change occurs, Archer terms this process morphogenesis; when the existing order is reproduced, the process is called morphostasis (Archer, 1995).

Within this theoretical perspective, Archer’s morphogenetic sequence over time (T) is adapted to the digital context in order to explore the hidden mechanisms operating at the real level in relation to child protection and welfare, and disability in online environments. T1 refers to the prevailing cultural attitudes, practices and policies that shape structural and cultural conditions around disability and digital engagement. T2 captures the ways in which agents, including children with disabilities, parents, and practitioners, respond to and navigate these conditions. T3 represents the phase in which the potential for transformation emerges and supportive structures begin to develop across disability, child protection and digital use. T4 reflects the empirical findings of the mixed methods study, which indicate that children with disabilities experience digital spaces as restricted and constrained, due to a structural and cultural landscape that is poorly aligned with their digital needs and rights.

Figure 8.4.1 below portrays the morphogenic sequence (Archer, 1995) that applies to this research topic: child protection and welfare, disability and internet use.

Figure 8.4.1: Morphogenic sequence (Archer, 1995)



Archer's (1995) morphogenetic sequence, as applied to this research topic and shown in Figure 8.4.1 above, illustrates how a poorly developed digital safeguarding structure, combined with a culture of over-protection, constrains the agency of children and young people with disabilities. In response, these young people exercise their agency by pushing back and expressing a desire to engage fully and safely in the digital world. This interaction results in morphostasis (Archer, 1995), whereby the existing structural and cultural conditions are reproduced and remain.

While findings of this study indicate a dominant morphostatic outcome, Archer's morphogenetic framework also allows for the identification of alternative possible scenarios, contingent upon shifts in structural and cultural conditions. For example, regulatory or technological developments may become more robust without cultural change resulting in uneven expressions of agency. In this scenario children with disabilities have increased access to digital spaces but remain subject to heightened surveillance, as a result, their autonomy remains restricted. Another possible scenario is one in which moral panic intensifies, online risk becomes the predominant frame deepening constraints and limiting agency and the realisation of children with disabilities full digital potential. A final scenario and one which the expanded view of digital child protection and welfare would accommodate and advocates for is a morphogenetic outcome in which structural and cultural domains undergo meaningful change. In this scenario more inclusive regulatory and technological developments are accompanied by cultural shifts that recognise children with disabilities as active digital citizens, enabling their participation in digital design, practices and policy formation.

Simply put, for morphogenesis or social change to occur, there must be shifts within both the structural and cultural domains. Such shifts would enable children and young people with disabilities who are active agents in their digital environments to experience more inclusive person-centred digital engagement. The discussion that follows supports an extended view of digital child protection and welfare, one that moves beyond risk and protection alone, and actively promotes the agency of children with disabilities.

By expanding the view of child protection and welfare within the digital domain, children and young people with disabilities (as agents) are afforded

greater opportunity to influence and transform the cultural values, beliefs, and understandings that shape their digital landscape. Put simply, morphogenesis (Archer, 1995) becomes more likely when children with disabilities are recognised as active agents within an expanded view of digital child protection and welfare. Coupled with the view that at the point where disability intersects with internet use, a more person-centred approach to safeguarding children with disabilities is required for the realisation of children and young people with disabilities' full digital citizenship.

Figure 8.4.2 below portrays this broader structural view of child protection and welfare, which moves beyond children with disabilities' online behaviour and activities to include the online interactions and behaviours of parents, professionals and regulators in their management of children with disabilities' digital experiences.

Figure 8.4.2: Extension of the structural view of digital child protection and welfare



The findings of this research question have led to the design of a broader view of child protection and welfare within the digital domain.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter sets out the interpretation of the qualitative and quantitative findings of the research. It demonstrates how the perspectives of children with disabilities, alongside those of their parents, broaden the prevailing understanding of child protection and welfare in the digital domain. Through a critical realist lens, the study uncovered the underlying causal mechanisms and socio-structural forces, biological, psychosocial, socio-cultural, economic, political, historical, and temporal, which shape children with disabilities' digital lives. Archer's (1995) morphogenetic cycle provides a valuable way of illustrating how the agency of children with disabilities can be constrained within these layered structures. Building on this, the chapter advances a broader conceptual view of child protection and welfare in the digital domain for this cohort. This view accounts not only for the agency of children with disabilities but also for the behaviours of parents, practitioners, and regulators that influence their opportunities to engage online and realise their full digital potential.

This broader conceptual view of child protection and welfare developed in this study is underpinned by three core dimensions: the rights and realisation of the digital potential of children with disabilities; the recognition of their agency; and the commitment to person-centred approaches within the digital landscape for children with disabilities. This study contributes to the scholarship by reframing child protection and welfare in the digital age as a relational and structural issue, rather than solely a matter of individual online interactions. More specifically, children with disabilities are not only absent from child protection and welfare frameworks, but they are also limited by them. This analysis generates important implications for policy, practice, and future research, leading to recommendations for collaborative approaches that will help to create a more secure, supportive, and empowering digital environment in which children with disabilities are recognised as active agents in the realisation of their digital rights and their full digital potential.

Before moving forward to the implications and recommendations, the following two figures present an overview of the entire research study. The house in the first figure (8.4.1) has three pillars at its centre, portraying the core findings from this mixed methods study that represent the expressed views of children and young people with disabilities and their parents' perspectives. The second

figure (8.4.2) presents an overview of the methodological alignment that integrated Margaret Archer's framework as a theoretical contribution used to address the research question: *How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?*

Figure 8.5.1: Overview of research study

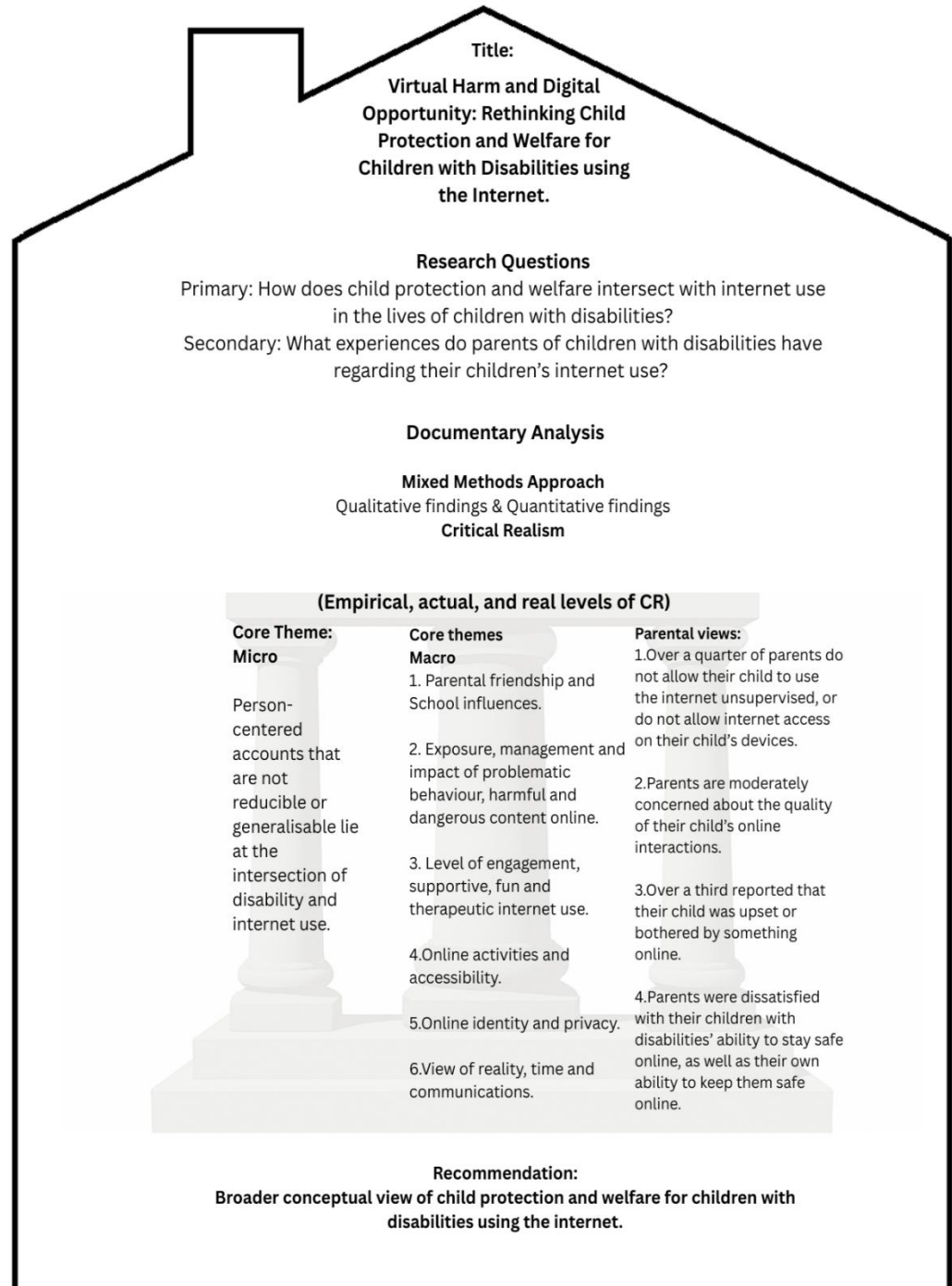
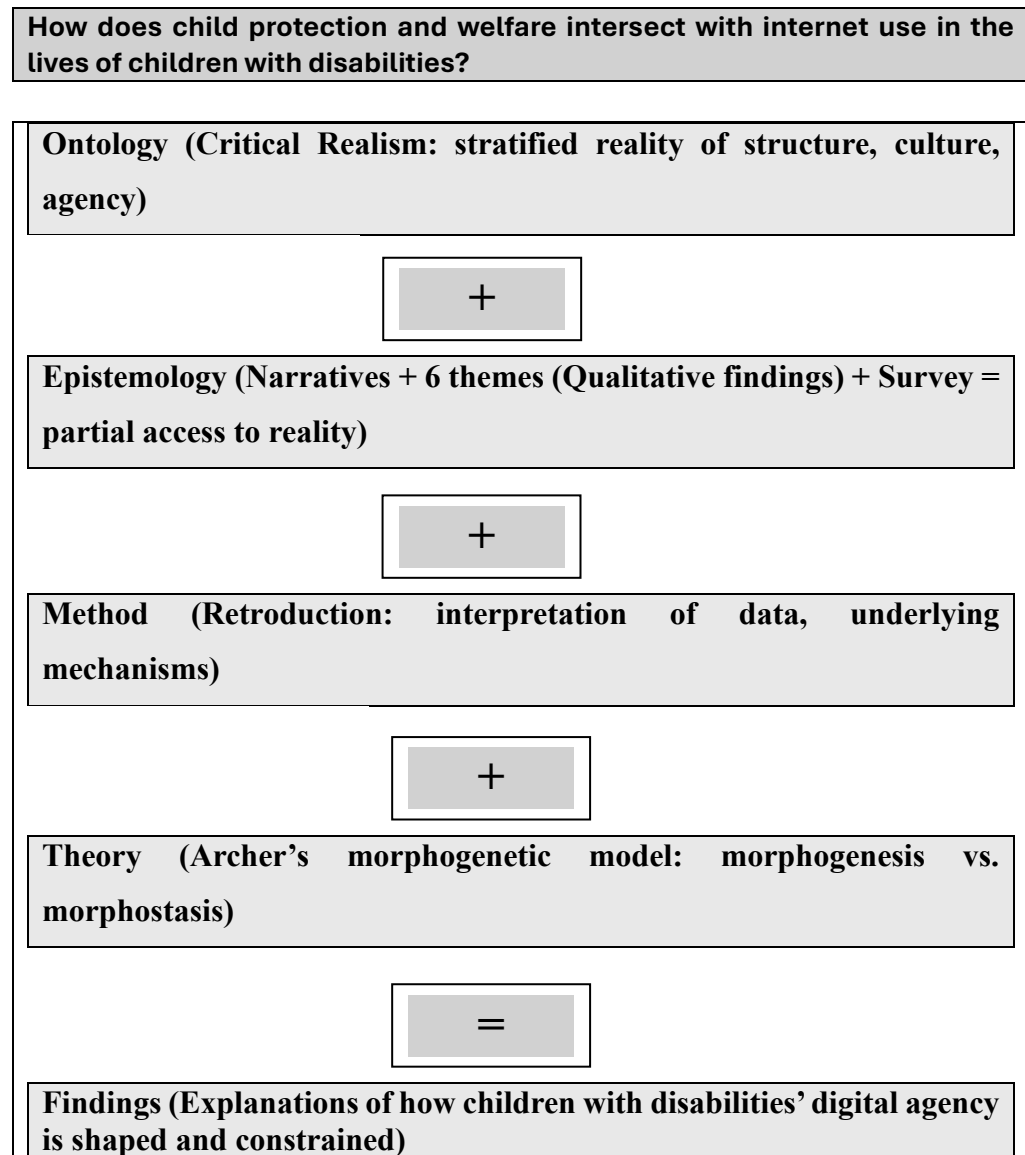


Figure 8.5.2. Theoretical methodological alignment



Chapter 9 Implications and recommendations

Summary of contents

9.1 Introduction

9.2 Implications and recommendations: research, policy & practice

9.3 Strengths and limitations

9.4 Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the implications of this research study, followed by recommendations for practice, policy, and research. Roy Bhaskar, the founder of critical realism (2014), advocates for emancipatory research that identifies sources of domination and oppression and seeks to change them. This research study uncovers underlying mechanisms, including socio-cultural, socio-economic, psycho-social, biological, political, structural, and historical/temporal, that impact the digital lives of children with disabilities. The exposure of these structural mechanisms leads to the proposal of a broader view of child protection and welfare that promotes the explicit inclusion of children with disabilities within the digital domain. Recommendations are made that move beyond risk to include the rights of children with disabilities to realise their full digital potential.

Mascheroni et al. suggest that *“adopting linear responses to foster digital skills – where more access and use is associated with more opportunities, more skills and more resilience – may not be enough if interventions do not also empower children and help them gain confidence in their ability to use the Internet and handle digital challenges”* (2022, p.454). Recognising the role of digital maturity, Tercova and Smahel (2025) promote the importance of prevention strategies that address risky online behaviours. Here, Hammond, Polizzi and Bartholomew (2023) advance an understanding of how children aged 8-12 develop digital resilience through a socio-ecological lens. They encourage collective efforts that extend beyond the child to include families, communities, and educators, and which encompass broader societal structures in fostering digital resilience. In addition, Hammond et al. (2024) emphasise the value of

promoting digital resilience approaches that encourage exploration rather than protection for educators of children with disabilities within their digital space. Further, Hammond, Polizzi and Bartholomew (2023) highlight the importance of allowing exposure to manageable risks within safe, supportive environments in order to build digital resilience which is a practical and vital approach to safeguarding children with disabilities online.

Furthermore, person-centred approaches to digital design for people with intellectual disabilities are taken in a participatory research project by van Calis et.al. (2025). This work values the person-centred digital lived experiences of children with disabilities, providing learning for online child protection policy and practice. WeProtect Global Alliance recently launched an initiative entitled ‘SafetyNet Manifesto’, which highlights over 100 young people’s insights about their digital rights and the risk of child sexual abuse online (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2025). This safety manifesto includes the right to digital tools, the right to protection, and the right not to be afraid online. Children “*want a digital world designed with them that protects their wellbeing*” (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2025, para. 7). So too do children with disabilities; their space for digital inclusion has not yet been carved out.

Moving forward, the implications of this study, which are followed by recommendations for policy, practice, and research, seek to carve out a space for children with disabilities within the digital landscape in matters related to online child protection and welfare. A space where current culture and structure often restricts their agency.

9.2 Implications for policy, practice, and research

The implications presented below arise directly from the findings of this research. They highlight how current policy, practice, and research intersect with the digital lives of children with disabilities and illustrate where tensions and opportunities exist, specifically in child protection and practice. The findings suggest that digital participation is central to the lives of children with disabilities and must be understood through person-centred, inclusive, and rights-based perspectives. Within this, the implications of this study are presented in the context of an extended view of child protection and welfare that fully encompasses the digital landscape in which children with disabilities exist. The

findings of this study highlight that for children with disabilities, online risks are an integral component of child protection and welfare. Equally restrictive practices by parents, practitioners and regulators, although they may be well-intentioned, also shape and constrain children with disabilities' digital participation, impacting their wellbeing. Furthermore, engagement in risk behaviours by children with disabilities, as well as parents and practitioners, exposes the complex nature of safeguarding within the digital domain.

9.2.1 Policy

Policy frameworks related to disability and internet use require a person-centred approach, recognising that where online interactions and behaviour intersect with disability is uniquely different for every individual. Taking a homogeneous or one-size-fits-all approach creates inherently exclusionary policies. Furthermore, digital spaces are not optional extras but are central to the person-centred lives of children with disabilities. Regulation that restricts or fails to protect children with disabilities' use of digital technologies denies their agency and expressed views, reinforcing structural discrimination. Critical to this is how child protection and welfare within the digital domain for children with disabilities is viewed, moving it beyond the view of safeguarding from online risks and harmful behaviours at the individual level. This wider view encompasses the role of parents, practitioners, and regulation in the management of their digital experiences.

Moreover, children with disabilities need to be represented within digital safeguarding, design policies, and regulations, which have an enormous impact on their digital rights and citizenship. This means engaging with the 'expressed views' rather than the 'voices' of children with disabilities so that children with complex communication needs can become involved in policy that impacts their digital rights and citizenship.

Additionally, digital inclusion requires more than access alone. Children with disabilities require accessible design and tailored literacy support that provides opportunities to develop digital maturity in environments that acknowledge their digital agency and rights. Within this structural change is needed. Many child protection and welfare risks arise from systemic factors, such as ableist digital design, ableist views and actions that exclude children with disabilities from discourse about design, research and policy.

A further implication from this study is that assistive technology should be person-centred. A universal fit-all approach is restrictive and limiting for children with disabilities. Within this, the promotion of digital support in school settings should include direct leadership from children with disabilities and resources that ensure bespoke training that is person-centred, disability focused, and technically effective.

Finally, privacy and data protection must be strengthened. Both practices by platforms and ‘sharenting’ by parents, schools, and social services can compromise children’s digital privacy. Essentially, the findings of this study point towards the need for stronger safeguards and clearer consent practices to respect children with disabilities’ digital privacy. Beyond implications for policy, this study’s findings also reveal how everyday practices within schools, families, and services shape the digital experiences of children with disabilities from a child protection and welfare perspective.

9.2.2 Practice

This study’s findings underscore the need for approaches that empower children with disabilities to realise their full digital potential, involving parents, practitioners, educators and all those who support children in navigating their digital environments. Such practice implications mean that person-centred digital support should be embedded in professional and parental practice, recognising that children with disabilities are experts in their digital lives. Furthermore, the creation of safe spaces that allow for building online resilience, where children can recover and learn from risky online experiences, is useful for child protection and the welfare of children with disabilities in the digital domain. Here, parents require assistance with digital social literacy, the hope being that by strengthening this alongside more constructive supports, the need for restrictive practices may be reduced.

Moreover, implications for practice include the balancing of child protection with digital autonomy. Well-intentioned parental restrictions can unintentionally limit participation, self-expression, and social development. Protection strategies need to be built with children with disabilities, not simply applied to them. Essential here is recognising and supporting the agency of children with disabilities. They actively create content, advocate, and educate

others online. They are also responsible and accountable for their actions online. Children with disabilities are not passive internet users. Recognising and supporting this agency is essential for their meaningful digital participation. In addition to informing policy and practice, this study's findings suggest several directions for future research.

9.2.3 Research

Overall, there is a lack of representation of people with disabilities in research, and this is even more pronounced for children with disabilities. This under-representation extends to the topic of this thesis. Most disability research is located in the Global North, including this research study. Participatory research that is guided by children with disabilities on their lived experiences about disability-associated child protection and welfare risks related to internet use is entirely absent. Furthermore, literature on this topic focuses predominantly on online risks. The opportunities and benefits in the digital world for children with disabilities are acknowledged but under-researched.

The findings from this study reveal that comparative studies with children without disabilities related to this topic are rare, and research into the intersectionality between disability, internet use, and child protection and welfare is also underrepresented. Moreover, there is a lack of research incorporating the views of safeguarding professionals working with children with disabilities related to this topic. Overall, practical guidance on the methodological processes for doing research with children with disabilities is also weak. The implications of this study highlight key areas for change. The following recommendations extend the discussion by identifying actions to strengthen policy, inform practice and guide future research related to child protection and welfare for children with disabilities in the digital domain.

9.3 Recommendations for policy, practice and research

Staying informed about current discourse, research, and developments in digital child protection and welfare for children with disabilities is a challenge.

Nevertheless, organisations such as UNICEF, United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, 5 Rights Foundation, Lucy Faithful Foundation, Digital Futures Commission, WeProtect Global Alliance, Terre des Hommes,

National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), Webwise, Cybersafe kids, Better Internet for Kids, Global Kids Online, and Parenting for a Digital Future are just a few of the actors and initiatives advocating for safe digital spaces. These organisations are active in national and international debates on digital regulation, development, and safety.

The following recommendations relate to the implications of this research study that arose from the overall research study findings. Underpinning these recommendations is the adoption of the expanded view of child protection and welfare that stems from the findings of this study. It recognises three interconnected dimensions: (1) children with disabilities' exposure to online risk, (2) the impact of restrictive practices by practitioners, parents, regulators and (3) the engagement in online risk behaviours by children with disabilities, parents and practitioners.

9.3.1 Policy recommendations

The following policy recommendations are not presented in any order of priority. In spaces where children with disabilities are not represented, implementing any of these recommendations will mark important progress. Underpinning all of them is a call for a person-centred, inclusive, and rights-based digital policy that recognises the centrality of digital participation to the everyday lives of children with disabilities. They include:

Recognising digital participation as a right for children with disabilities

Policy should recognise digital participation as a core aspect of inclusion and citizenship for children with disabilities. Access to safe and meaningful online spaces should be protected as part of children with disabilities' broader rights to education, communication, and social engagement.

Viewing children with disabilities as active digital agents

Children with disabilities should be viewed as capable and responsible digital participants who make choices, take risks, and make mistakes in their online environments. Policy must therefore move beyond protective or deficit-oriented models to embrace a more balanced understanding of agency, one that recognises children with disabilities as both entitled to protection and accountable digital citizens.

Developing person-centred and flexible digital policy frameworks

Regulation and policy should be flexible enough to accommodate the diversity of children's abilities and experiences. A one-size-fits-all approach risks exclusion and should be replaced with person-centred principles that adapt to individual needs.

Integrating disability perspectives into digital safeguarding policy

Safeguarding and online safety policies must explicitly include the perspectives of children with disabilities. This requires consultation with children, families, and advocacy groups to ensure that their experiences inform policy design and digital safeguarding discourse.

Promoting intersectional and inclusive digital regulation

Policy should address how disability intersects with age, gender, and socio-structural and socio-cultural influences that shape children with disabilities' online experience. Inclusive regulation should ensure equitable access and protection for all children with disabilities.

Strengthening privacy, consent, and data protection measures

Data protection and privacy policies should safeguard the personal information of children with disabilities. Clear, accessible consent practices and strict regulation of data sharing are necessary to address issues such as 'sharenting' practices, as well as data shared by schools, parents, and digital platforms.

Ensure equitable access to assistive and adaptive technologies

Policy should guarantee that person-centred assistive and adaptive technologies are available and affordable. These tools must be recognised as essential supports rather than optional extras with limited resources. In this context, funding for training for children with disabilities, parents, and professionals is critical.

Mandate accessibility standards across all digital platforms and services

Digital accessibility standards should be legally mandated and monitored to ensure equal participation. Accessibility should be built into platform design, content creation, and online services during their development, not added as an afterthought.

Foster cross-sector collaboration and accountability

Policy should promote collaboration between the education, social care, and technology sectors to ensure coherent digital inclusion strategies.

Accountability mechanisms must be in place to monitor progress and outcomes for children with disabilities.

Together, these policy recommendations aim to embed inclusion, accessibility, and agency at the heart of digital governance. They move beyond safeguarding to recognise the active digital citizenship of children with disabilities and to ensure that policy protects, empowers, and enables children with disabilities to realise their full digital potential.

Building on these policy recommendations, the next section outlines corresponding practice recommendations that focus on practitioners, educators and families in their support of the digital rights and agency of children with disabilities.

9.3.2 Practice recommendations

Practice recommendations arising from this study highlight the importance of inclusive, participatory and rights-based approaches to disability, child protection, and welfare. Akin to policy recommendations, these practice recommendations are also grounded in the broader view of child protection and welfare that recognises three interconnected dimensions: (1) children with disabilities' exposure to online risk, (2) the impact of restrictive practices by adults, practitioners, parents, regulators and (3) the engagement in online risk behaviours by children with disabilities, parents and practitioners. Practice recommendations include;

Viewing children with disabilities as active digital agents

Similar to policy recommendations, practitioners must move beyond a protective or deficit-oriented view of disability to embrace a more balanced understanding of agency that recognises children with disabilities as both entitled to protection and accountable digital citizens. Children with disabilities should be viewed as capable and responsible digital participants who make choices, take risks, and influence their online environments.

Adopting a participatory framework that recognises expertise by experience

Practice in disability, child protection, and welfare should be guided by a framework that treats children with disabilities as experts in their online lives. Their perspectives should directly inform assessments, interventions, and safeguarding strategies. This approach repositions practitioners from protectors

of children to collaborators **with** children, fostering mutual understanding and empowerment.

Integrating digital literacy and agency into everyday practice

Professionals working with children with disabilities should embed digital literacy and digital agency within their routine work. This includes supporting children to understand online risks, privacy, and safety without restricting access or autonomy. Digital competence should be recognised as a developmental and protective factor and not just as a risk factor.

Strengthening inter-professional collaboration

Practitioners should adopt integrated approaches to digital welfare, ensuring that the expressed views of children with disabilities inform digital decision-making and digital safety planning.

Providing disability informed training for practitioners

Training across child protection and welfare sectors should include awareness of how digital environments intersect with disability. Practitioners should have an understanding of assistive technology, online accessibility barriers, and the ways children with disabilities navigate risk and opportunity online.

Embedding accessible communication and consent practices

Practitioners should use communication methods that are accessible and adapted to each child's needs. Informed consent and assent should be viewed as a continuous, participatory process that enables children with disabilities to meaningfully engage in decisions affecting their digital lives.

Promoting safe, supported, and inclusive digital spaces

Practice should aim to create and advocate for digital environments that balance safety with participation. This involves supporting families to establish healthy online boundaries while ensuring that children with disabilities are not excluded from digital citizenship or peer interaction. Children with disabilities can assist parents and practitioners with the nuances of online communications.

Recognising the role of parents and caregivers as co-educators in a space where children with disabilities are the experts in their digital lives

Practice frameworks should empower parents through training, guidance, and shared responsibility with professionals. They should encourage

open communication about online life rather than surveillance or restriction. To ensure a person-centred understanding of digital participation by practitioners and parents, practical training with children with disabilities is recommended.

Practical recommendations include:

- Developing an individual support plan that addresses problems online with children with disabilities, identifying their designated support person(s).
- Developing internet safety talks beyond 'guest speakers' to more interactive workshops that consult children with disabilities as the 'experts'. For this purpose, safe digital spaces should be set up to build online resilience.
- Emphasising the view that restricting internet access for children with disabilities can be considered a child protection and welfare concern, as they remove opportunities for engagement in special interests and for therapeutic, positive internet use.
- Ensuring that children and young people with complex communication needs have opportunities to both access the internet and benefit from person-centred assistance and assistive technology to use the internet as independently as possible.
- Understanding the person-centred view of disability and internet use. Children with disabilities use digital devices and technology for social connections, regulation, and therapeutic use. Physical barriers can often restrict social interaction offline; hence, time spent online has unique value for each child depending on their disability.
- Conducting internet training workshops led by children with disabilities, focusing on topics such as:
 - What is real and what is fake online, misinformation management
 - Internet language and online communication
 - Appropriate sharing of information online
 - Supportive online communities
 - Meaning of time online
 - Meaning of friendships online

- Social media applications – how to use, positives and negatives.
- Technical designs of applications and devices (practical demonstrations)
- Privacy settings meaning (practical demonstrations)
- Algorithms meaning (practical demonstrations)
- Harmful online content, language, and behaviour
- Raising awareness of practical initiatives that reduce children's exposure to harmful content is important for safeguarding in the digital domain. The following non-exhaustive list presents initiatives working toward safer digital spaces for all children online, which are useful tools for safeguarding practitioners:
 - **Thorn:** A nonprofit organisation aiming to defend children against grooming, sextortion, and sexual abuse (Thorn , 2025)
 - **PhotoDNA:** A proprietary image-identification and content filtering technology used by online service providers to stop online child exploitation (Ith, 2015)
 - **eGlyph:** An algorithm that analyses online files to screen out extremist content (Counter Terrorism Project, 2018)
 - **R;pple:** An internet browser extension that flags searches for suicide or self-harm content and activates crisis intervention (R;pple, n.d.)
 - **Project DRAGON-Spotter & Shield:** An interactive, multi-media training portal for tackling online grooming (Swansea University, 2023)
 - **Hope not Hate:** An advocacy group countering far-right extremism (Hope not Hate, n.d.)
 - **Lantern:** A cross-platform industry initiative to combat child abuse and exploitation (includes Discord, Google, Mega, Meta, Quora, Roblox, Snap, and Twitch) (Tech Coalition, 2023)
 - **ROOST:** A non-profit organisation providing free AI tools to protect children from online harm (roost, n.d.)
 - **Internet Matters:** A non-profit organisation supported by UK internet service providers to offer child internet safety advice (Internet Matters, 2025)

- **Cybersafekids:** “Ireland’s online safety charity”
<https://www.cybersafekids.ie/>
- **Webwise:** “Irish Internet Safety Awareness Centre”
<https://www.webwise.ie/>

Collectively, these generic and practical recommendations encourage a shift in practice from a deficit and protection-oriented approach to child protection and welfare of children with disabilities in the digital domain toward an approach that is grounded in participation, partnership, collaboration and person-centred inclusion. Viewing children with disabilities as experts in their digital lives ensures that practice upholds their rights, autonomy, and safety while strengthening child protection and welfare in the digital domain. In addition to informing policy and practice, this study identifies several priorities for future research in relation to the digital lives of children with disabilities from a child protection and welfare perspective.

9.3.3 Research Recommendations

The findings of this study reveal a marked underrepresentation of children with disabilities in research, as well as a lack of inquiry into how child protection and welfare intersect with disability. The following recommendations call for a deeper exploration into this topic. These recommendations include:

Increasing representation of children with disabilities in research about their internet use

Research must actively include children with disabilities as participants to ensure their perspectives inform digital policy and practice. This requires ethical frameworks that accommodate diverse communication and accessibility needs. Representation of and collaboration with research studies in the Global South is also highly recommended.

Adopting participatory and children with disabilities-led research methodologies

Future studies should adopt participatory, co-creative approaches that position children with disabilities as collaborators and experts in their online lives.

Investigating structural ableism in digital policy and design

Further research should explore how structural ableism influences digital governance, algorithms, and design practices, impacting the digital lives of children with disabilities.

Developing accessible and inclusive research tools and technologies

Researchers should design and employ tools that are accessible to participants with diverse abilities, ensuring that data collection methods are inclusive and equitable. The meaning of communication for children with disabilities requires attention in research.

Examining family, practitioner and educator roles in children with disabilities' digital lives

Future studies should investigate how parents, teachers, and practitioners support and shape children's digital engagement, and how this varies across disabilities and contexts.

Promoting cross-disciplinary collaboration in digital disability research

Advancing knowledge on the topic of child protection and welfare and children with disabilities' internet use requires collaboration across disciplines, combining insights from education, social policy, disability studies, and technology research.

Asking more research questions

This research study opens the door to a multitude of research questions related to the intersection of disability, child protection and welfare, and internet use.

These include:

- How does the internet use of children with disabilities intersect with child protection and welfare in comparison to their nondisabled peers?
- How do practitioners/teachers view children with disabilities' digital participation?
- How do children with disabilities view their parents' 'sharenting' practices?
- What might a manifesto of digital rights for children with disabilities look like?

Collectively, these recommendations call for a research agenda that recognises the expertise of children with disabilities, embraces participatory and inclusive methodologies, and addresses the complex intersections of disability,

child protection, and internet use. Having presented the policy, practice and research recommendations, the following section considers the strengths and limitations of this research study.

9.4 Strengths and limitations

The core strength of this research project rests in the representation of the views of children with disabilities in research about their internet use. Their insights offer a unique perspective in a poorly researched area. The critical realist lens provides a perspective within this research project that offers explanations rather than descriptions of the research findings. The emancipatory view of critical realism (Bhaskar, 2014) extended the research to look for recommendations for transformation so that children with disabilities' representation within the digital landscape is promoted and valued.

The complexity of this research topic, which incorporates three very distinct subject areas, limits the depth of research within the areas of disability, internet use and child protection and welfare practice in their own right. Due regard is paid to the definitions placed on each of the core concepts of research, offering a snapshot rather than an exhaustive portrayal of the complex intersection between disability child protection and welfare and internet use.

This topic of internet use lends itself to data of a sensitive nature, so limitations may have arisen in responses from research participants. For example, children with disabilities may have aimed to please, providing the 'perfect answer' (Greenaway and Howlin, 2010) rather than truthful accounts of their experiences. Participants may also have felt that if they disclose that they have been exposed to harmful content online, whilst a parent or trusted person is present, their device may be taken from them, or internet access may be limited (Zaman and Nouwen, 2016).

Moreover, the intention was to provide the most up-to-date literature relating to the research question: *How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?* However, the lack of literature on children with disabilities related to this topic meant that findings about all children featured in the literature.

Furthermore, keywords used in the literature searches did not include 'AI, 'ChatGPT,' or any AI-related words. In 2022, AI was not as ubiquitous as it is

today. In fact, AI entered the mass market in November 2022 (Campbell, 2025) after the literature search was complete. Considering how AI has become an integral feature of children's current internet use, its omission is a limitation within this research.

This research study does not provide an exhaustive account of critical realism or high-level critical realist meta-analysis, it does, however, highlight key methodological and ontological propositions to assist in the understanding of the complex intersection of disability child protection and Internet use.

Additionally, attention to gender dynamics within the literature was not prioritised, for example, the predominance of male participation in the qualitative component of the study. This research study did not focus on how gender influences the perceptions of online risk or on why mothers are the primary survey respondents. These questions warrant further investigation to deepen our understanding of gender dynamics in the context of this research topic.

A final limitation of this research study is highlighted by Hansen et al (2016), who suggest that mixed methods studies, especially sequential designs, are time-consuming. Given that this study addresses an under-researched topic in a rapidly evolving context, numerous areas of interest emerged, hence the research questions asked led to more questions for future attention.

9.5 Conclusion

This chapter contributes to the thesis by situating rights, agency and participation at the centre of recommendations for the child protection and welfare of children with disabilities in the digital domain. The pace of change in the digital world is rapid and often exceeds human capacity to keep up, academically, regulatorily and in practice. The contribution of national, international and global safeguarding organisations, therefore, remains critically important. As this chapter closes, it is important to clarify that while the focus has been on shifting power toward children with disabilities in the digital domain, this does not imply the abandonment of adult responsibility for their online safety. The aim is rather to advocate for a more equitable digital landscape, while partnering with children with disabilities to navigate the digital world with them in a secure and supportive learning space. By reframing child protection

and welfare in the digital domain, this chapter offers recommendations for policy, practice, and research as a roadmap towards children with disabilities full realisation of their digital potential. The concluding chapter of this thesis will now offer an overview of the entire research process, including an exposition of its empirical, methodological, and theoretical contributions.

Chapter 10 Conclusion

Summary of contents

10.1 Introduction

10.2 Summary of peer-reviewed papers

10.3 Empirical, methodological and theoretical contribution

10.4 Reflection and reflexivity

10.5 Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the peer-reviewed publications integrated into this thesis, followed by the study's empirical, methodological, and theoretical contributions. The reflection and reflective processes are presented inclusive of the European competency framework. This framework maps out the PhD research journey, illustrating the development of research skills and competencies acquired during the PhD. This chapter concludes my thesis with the words of Michael, one of the 34 children with disabilities who generously gave their time to participate in this research study.

10.2 Summary of peer-reviewed papers

The following summary of peer-reviewed articles integrated in this thesis is presented as a reminder of their relevance to this research study. I have established that the integrated publications were developed during the period of this research study to contribute to a complex and poorly understood research topic. The integration of these papers results in unavoidable repetition regarding the background, conceptual framework, and methodological processes integral to this study. These two integrated articles align with the critical realist philosophy, which emphasises the importance of dissemination as well as knowledge production, recognising that sharing knowledge is central to empowerment and social change (Bhaskar, 1986; Archer et al., 2013).

Publication 1

The first publication stems from the critical literature review and is located in Chapter 4.

Doolan Maher, R., Flynn, S., & Byrne, J. (2024). Shifting mindsets; a critical commentary on child protection and welfare, disability, and online risk through critical literature review. *Child Care in Practice*, 30(1), 38-53.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2024.2309097>

Journal impact factor: 1.1

This article focuses on two themes, online risk and data analysis, which emerged from a critical literature review conducted at the beginning of this research project. Attention is drawn to the finding that children with disabilities are exposed to and impacted by content online that is harmful. Topics considered in this paper include child cyber victimisation/cyberbullying, abuse/online solicitation, breach of data protection and problematic internet use. Aromataris and Pearson's (2014) approach to reviewing literature is presented. Online resources are provided for safeguarding professionals, parents and educators. This paper aims to advance discourse about children with disabilities using the internet. The article encourages a mindset shift regarding the safeguarding of children with disabilities using the internet. This shift is advocated for parents, practitioners, policy makers and academics to move from thoughtful attention to purposeful action so as to assist with safeguarding children with disabilities online.

Publication 2

The second publication presented is located in Chapter 5.

Doolan Maher, R., Flynn, S., & Byrne, J. (2025). "Applying a critical realist conceptual and methodological framework to enhance qualitative research with young people with disabilities about their internet use". *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*

Journal Impact Factor 3.8.

This paper presents a novel, step-by-step methodological approach to data collection and analysis, incorporating a critical realist perspective on researching the digital lives of children with disabilities. Methodological insights are presented with a critical realist philosophical position applied in a worked example stemming from this research study. This article offers learning for policymakers, researchers, and academics to enhance qualitative research methods when doing research with children with disabilities using a critical realist lens.

10.3 Empirical, methodological, and theoretical contribution

This research study makes a distinct empirical contribution by offering original insights in a space that has been largely underexplored. It provides novel and direct accounts of the digital experiences of children with disabilities, allowing their expressed views to shape understanding of their online lives. The study highlights the person-centred nature of internet use, enabling children with disabilities to showcase their unique ways of engaging with digital environments. Furthermore, the inclusion of parents' perspectives deepens understanding of how child protection and welfare intersect with the digital experiences of children with disabilities. This study calls for a person-centred approach to internet use from a child protection and welfare perspective.

Methodologically, this study's contribution is the development and application of a bespoke, qualitative approach designed to capture the expressed views of children with disabilities. This approach combines in-depth, semi-structured, dyadic and problem-centred interviews to create a flexible mode of data collection. Vignettes were also used to capture the expressed views of children with disabilities. The inclusion of children with complex communication needs represented a methodological challenge that required the adoption of a critically reflexive approach to data collection and analysis. The creation of a data analysis framework informed by a critical realist perspective further enhances understanding of disability, internet use, and child protection and welfare.

From a theoretical perspective, this research adopts Margaret Archer's (1995) work as an integrated framework for a critical realist lens, advancing theoretical insight into how structural and cultural conditions shape the digital

lives of children with disabilities. This framework illuminates both the risks and opportunities of online engagement and underscores the roles of multiple stakeholders, children, parents, practitioners, and policymakers, broadening the view of child protection and welfare in the digital domain. The study contributes to theory by highlighting how children's agency is shaped and constrained within digital environments and by advocating for an expanded conception of child protection and welfare that promotes agency, rights, and the realisation of children with disabilities' full digital potential. Upon reflecting on these contributions, the following section turns to reflexivity, considering the researcher's positionality, decisions, and insights gained throughout the project.

10.4 Reflection and reflexivity

Chapter two of this thesis sets out the importance of reflection and reflectivity. The fluidity of my research positionality is reflected throughout the research study. Particular attention is paid to this process in Chapter 4, which presents the literature background to this study, and Chapter 5, which outlines the methodological procedures. Returning now to the reflective process and adopting a critical realist perspective, I refer to Andrew Sayer, who states that *“far from being a contaminant threatening the objectivity of social research, values may help achieve adequate understanding”* (2017, p. 417). He further posits that ‘value-free’ research is not possible, nor is it desirable. To this end, my research is ‘value-laden’ (Sayer, 2017, p. 417) stemming from an insider researcher perspective. Before moving to the conclusion of this chapter, Figure 10.4.1 below presents important reflexive considerations from my position as an insider researcher that emerged and are addressed at various points throughout this thesis.

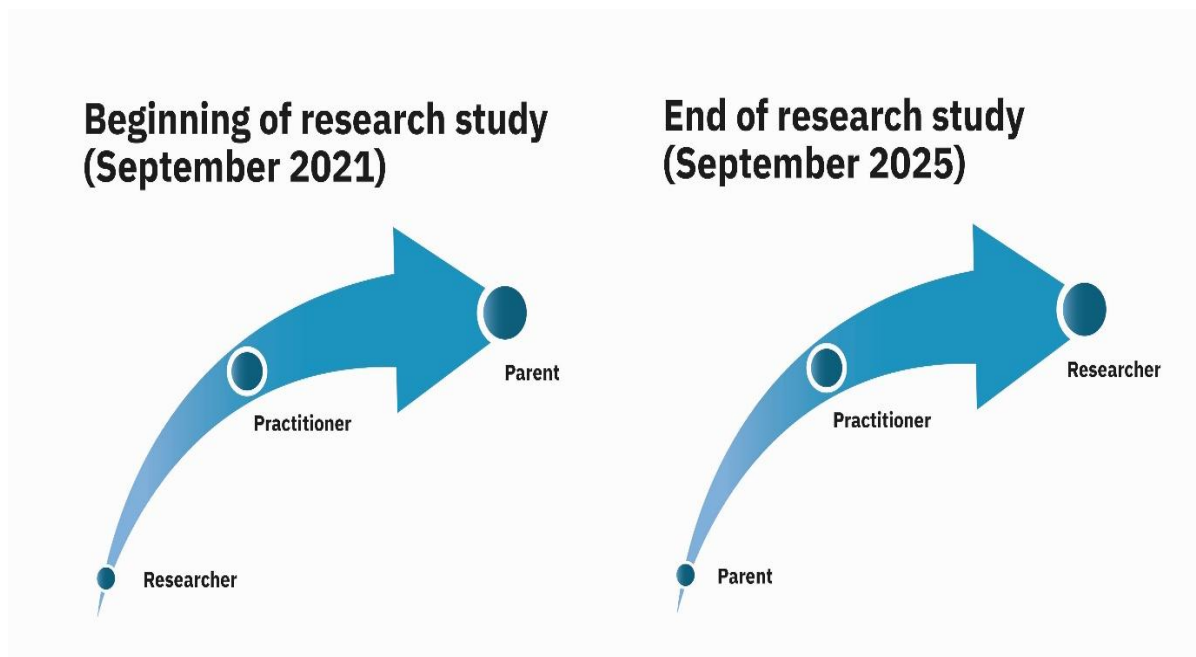
Figure 10.4.1: Reflexive considerations

Personal	Interpersonal	Methodologic	Contextual
• Assumptions- unable to represent non verbal participants in research • Limited view of the scope of child protection and welfare concerns: my focus was on online risk not restricted access • Biases- language, digital generational divide, research location • Privilege- non disabled researcher	• Practitioner influence • Parental influence • Power dynamics • Children poorly represented in research • Children as experts in their own lives, value of lived experiences	• Mixed method study • Critical realist influence • Trustworthiness of research • Ethical considerations	• Disability theory and conceptual understanding • Disability in a national, international and global context • Disability language

(Adopted from Olmos-Vega, et al., 2023).

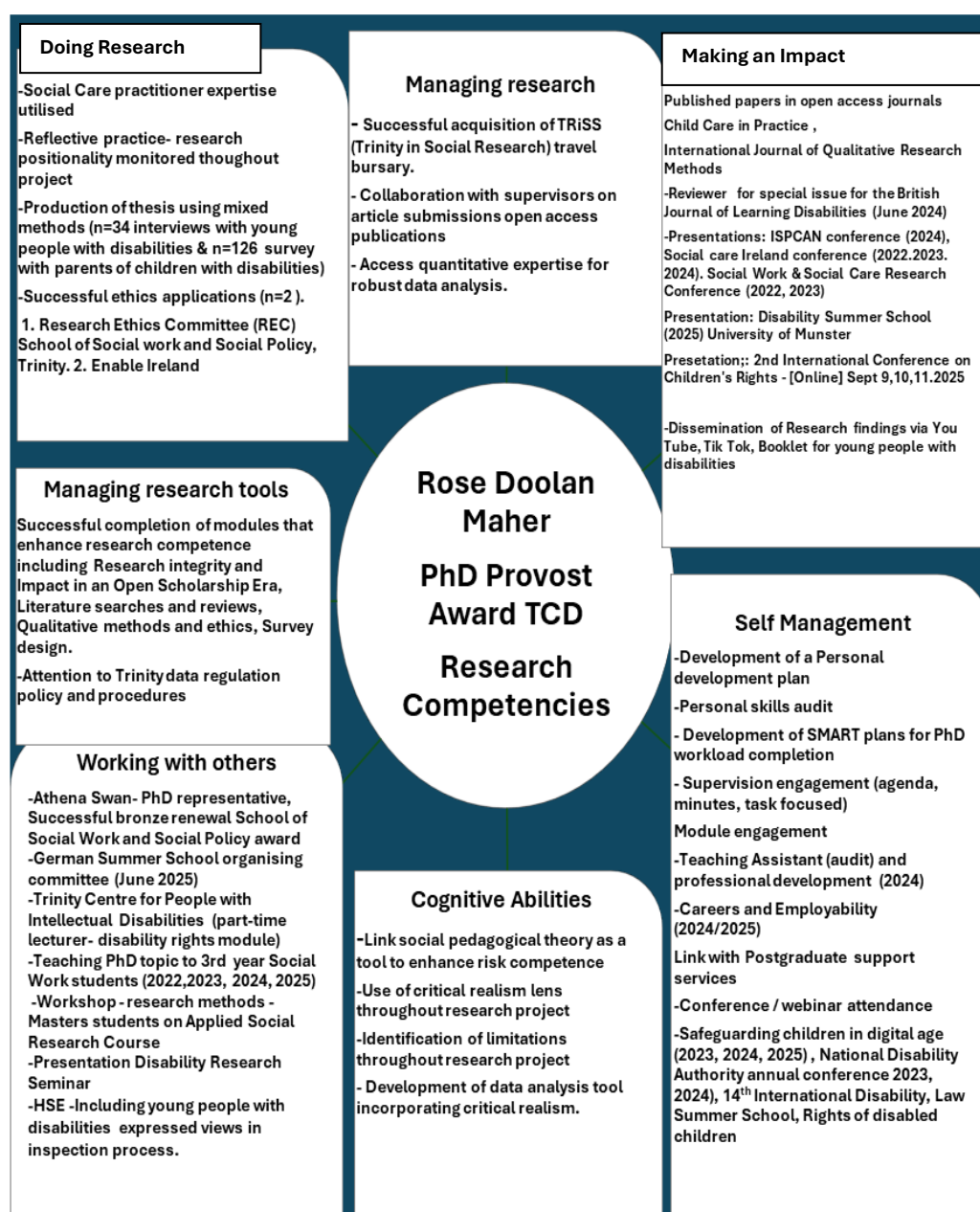
The advantages of insider research outlined by Whiting (2023) include rapport-building due to knowledge of the community, which was particularly pertinent during the data collection phase of this study. Access to research participants and relevant legislation (Whiting, 2023) also proved advantageous for this project. Figure 10.4.2 below illustrates my researcher positionality at the beginning and end of this project.

Figure 10.4.2: Researcher positionality



The following European competency framework maps my PhD research journey, offering an overview of the competencies I acquired over the four years of this funded PhD programme.

Figure 10.4.3: European Research Competence Framework



10.5 Conclusion

As this research project draws to a close, it is my hope that its insights into the complex intersection of child protection and welfare in the lives of children with disabilities using the internet will endure. Both virtual harm and digital opportunity exist at this intersection. The findings of this study advocate for the rethinking of child protection and welfare for children with disabilities using the internet. Ultimately, this research highlights that children with disabilities are not merely subjects of protection but agents of participation, whose full digital

potential should be recognised, supported and realised through inclusive, empowering practice.

As I write these final words, I think of the complex, fast-evolving digital landscape that is now a daily topic across news feeds globally. There exists a sense of uncertainty, an unease about where the digital world will take us. This uncertainty is increasingly evident in discourse about the implications of digital intelligence. For example, today, Mustafa Suleyman, Microsoft's head of artificial intelligence, warns about 'AI psychosis', as AI is increasingly interpreted by humans as being sentient, which disconnects people from reality (The Times, 21 August 2025). Despite this, Microsoft has invested \$13 billion in OpenAI since 2019 (Reuters, 2025). This fast-paced digital world is where children with disabilities are growing up and experiencing both risk and opportunity. It is where policymaking has become a battleground, where the tech industry is pushing back against regulation, and where children's rights groups work tirelessly for the protection and welfare of all children in the digital world. It is a space where children with disabilities are poorly represented in discourse, research, and regulation. It is also a source of immense enjoyment for Michael (15), who has an intellectual disability. He says, *"I love my phone, the computer, and the iPad."* It is only right that he should have the final word.

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Appendix 1 : Summary of protocols for documentary analysis

Scoping review	Literature review (qualitative focus)	Literature review (quantitative focus)
• Method: Grant and Booth (2009); Arksey and O'Malley (2005); Joanna Briggs Methods Manual for Scoping Reviews (Peters et al. 2020). • Outline of search terms (concepts 1-5- Concept 5 extended taking onboard views from expert in field of the internet) • Inclusion/ Exclusion criteria agreed • Databases, grey literature and experts contacted listed • Synchronized approach to data-based searches adopted. • Search strings and keywords with truncation, phrasing and Boolean Operators utilised • PRESS (2015) checklist (McGowan et al. 2016) method for our search strategy • First 300 results reviewed via title at end of each data search. Extension to concept 5 applied and data bases searched again.	• Method: Aromataris & Pearson (2014). Elements of the “<i>realist review</i>” (Pawson et al 2005). • The PICO mnemonic (Eriksen & Frandsen, 2018) (adapted) for research question development. Dr Lynne Cahill expert advice and input sought. • Search strings and keywords with truncation, phrasing and Boolean Operators utilised • Template used to record dates of searches, databases, search terms entered, results retrieved, and comments. Grey literature included websites, newspaper articles, podcasts, unpublished dissertations, contact with service providers • AACODS' checklist (Flinders University 2010) was utilised to evaluate grey literature	• Method: Development of research question using SPIDER framework (Cooke, Smith and Booth, 2012). SPIDER questions identify five concepts: sample, phenomenon of interest, design, evaluation, and research type. • Search method: strings and keywords with truncation, phrasing and Boolean Operators using SPIDER framework. • Template devised for dates of searches, database used, search terms entered, results retrieved, and any comments • List of databases searched, grey literature including podcasts, relevant organisations websites • 'AACODS' checklist (Flinders University 2010) was utilised to evaluate grey literature

• Scan read' sources (Fabinowska, 2018) using the Jesson, Matheson and Lacey (2011, p.86) adaption of Hart's (2003) questions. • Agreed approach to selecting the relevant literature was established using Caldwell, Henshaw and Taylor (2011) Critical Appraisal Skills Program, (CASP framework) (2018) • Trial run to ensure agreement on the selection process • Scanned the literature independently (55 papers) selected the final 33 papers for review together. • Analysis- agreed key definitions for core concepts • Review of research questions • Trial run of using Braun and Clarke (2006) and Gale et al 2013 to systematically hand code papers. This process of analysis was used for the final sample of 33 documents (23 documents Rose, 10 documents Susan) • PRISMA-ScR (Tricco et al., 2018) for the reporting results (see Fig 2.5 below)	• PRESS (2015) checklist (McGowan et al. 2016) method for the search strategy. 'Scan read' sources to refine them to the final sample in line with Fabinowska (2018) using the Jesson, Matheson and Lacey (2011, p.86) adaption of Hart's (2003) questions. • Inclusion/ exclusion criteria applied • First 500 results reviewed via title at end of each data search • Selected relevant literature using Caldwell, Henshaw and Taylor (2011) Critical Appraisal Skills Program, (CASP framework) (2018) • Analysis -development of key definitions. Use of a template recording; author and year, article name, country, aim and purpose, sample and methods, major findings and themes, article inclusion. • PRISMA-ScR (Tricco et al., 2018) for the reporting results (see Fig 2.6 below)	• PRESS (2015) checklist (McGowan et al. 2016), method for the search strategy. 'Scan read' sources to refine them to the final sample in line with Fabinowska (2018) using the Jesson, Matheson and Lacey (2011, p.86) adaption of Hart's (2003) questions. • Inclusion/ exclusion criteria applied. • Analysis -development of key definitions. Use of a template recording: author and year, article name, country, aim and purpose, sample and methods, major findings and themes, and article inclusion. • PRISMA-ScR (Tricco et al., 2018) for the reporting results (see Fig 2.7 below)

Appendix: 2: Table of 33 scoping review studies with CASP scores

CASP Score: 8-10 high; 5-7 moderate; 4 low

Author; Year; Location;	Sample size	Methodology	Key contributions to research question	CASP Score
(1) Wells, M., Mitchell, K.J., 2014. USA	1,560 youth Internet users, ages 10 to 17 years	Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS)	Different types of disability lead to different type online victimisation, Access, Future research, Type of online abuse, Prevalence of online abuse, Statistics, Characteristics of youths that are at risk to online harm, Internet Activity – patterns of use by people with disabilities as opposed to their nondisabled peers, Reporting of online abuse, Definition of disability, Support for people with disabilities specific to online activity	8
(2) Alfredsson Ågren, Kjellberg, Hemmingsson, 2020. Sweden	Parents with adolescents with ID (n=94) Parents, to adolescents without ID, aged 13–18 years n= 828	Cross sectional comparative study using a national parent survey	Importance of digital expertise for access internet Disability defined Power of Support networks for people with ID to use the internet Parents views of their children with ID internet use Further study / research Parents versus adolescents internet knowledge Online risks Offline risks connect to online risks Support Mechanisms Characteristics of youths that are at risk to online harm Digital divide	7-8

(3) Aiman El Asam & Adrienne Katz., 2018. UK	2988 young people (aged 10–16 years)	Questionnaire Instrument known as the “Cybersurvey”	Online risks Online risks connect to offline risks Support mechanisms Characteristics of youths that are at risk to online harm Digital divide Children who are vulnerable due to family problems Children with special educational needs (SEN) Children with communication difficulties Mental Health difficulties Physical disabilities Age and Gender Association between the 4Cs	7-8
(4) Volkova, Koroleva, Bogdanovskaya, Ikonnikova, Mashkova, 2019. Russia	90 secondary students, Grade 9-10 30 normally developing students 20 with learning problems 20 visually impaired adolescents 20 blind children 50 females 40 males	Criteria for diagnosing internet addiction Survey Criteria for diagnostics for cyber communication addiction High School Personality Questionnaire (HSPQ) Multi-level Personality Questionnaire PAP ANOVA	Opportunities of internet use Generic Risks associated with Internet use Specific risks PIU, Internet addiction and Regulatory Internet use Defining Disability Defining Internet Prevalence of internet use Specific personality traits of people with disabilities that lead to problematic internet use Relevant generic findings and comparisons of the research study Further Research	6-7

		Sheefe test Pearsons Correlation		
(5) Wright, M., Wachs, S., 2019. USA	Adolescents with ASD (n=128) aged 11-16	School based questionnaire Traditional Face-To-Face Bullying Victimization Scale Cyberbullying Victimization Scale Depression Scale Anxiety Scale Peer rejection scores SPSS V25	Negative impact of Internet – online risks Disability terminology Positives of Internet use Methodology Internet terminology Characteristics that leave young people more vulnerable to online risk Link between ASD and cyber bullying and victimisation Further research Internet terminology Reasons why young people use technology Disability Defined Parents approach to their children with disabilities internet use Striking a balance between risk and opportunities Characteristics that lead people with disabilities to be vulnerable online Opportunities from online engagement Risk associated with online activity for people with disabilities	8-9
(6) Restrepo, Scheininger, Clucas, Alexander, Salum, Georgiades, Paksarian, Merikangas Milham, 2020 USA	564 (190 female) participants between the ages of 7–15 with and without psychiatric disorders	Self-report (SR) and parent-report (PR) questionnaires, including the Internet Addiction Test (IAT). Physical testing as part of the Healthy Brain Network protocol	Problematic internet use (PIU) is an increasingly worrisome issue, as youth population studies are establishing links with internalizing and externalizing problems. Page 1 PIU is positively associated with depressive disorders (page 1) “The internal consistency was adequate in the current sample with a cronbach’s alpha value of 0.91 for self-report and 0.95 for parent-report.” (page 3) questionnaires assessing basic demographic characteristics, dimensional assessments of domains associated with mental health, substance use, socioeconomic status and internet use. Information about the participant’s race was collected (page 2)	6-7

			Findings were generally convergent between self and parent reports”	
(7) Piteo and Ward, 2020 UK/ Australia (International evidence)	19 studies (no single participant count)	Systematic review (Jan 2005- March 2019) Narrative synthesis	Synthesises evidence on social networking use and anxiety/depression in youth Identifies internet use as a risk context for vulnerable young people. Highlights greater risk for those with existing mental health or disability needs Informs safeguarding and child welfare risk identification Uses transparent, systematic review methods	6-7
(8) Normand CL, Sallafranque-St-Louis F. 2016. Canada	Children and adolescent diagnosed with intellectual or developmental disabilities	Literature Review Online sexual solicitation and risk: papers n=57 IDD related n=2	Online activity Risks identified from online activity Prevalence of Internet use Opportunities of online activity Personal, characteristics and circumstances that increase risk online Disability terminology	5-6
((9) Calpbinici P, Tas Arslan F. 2019 Turkey	426 adolescents	Cross-sectional survey with self-report measures including BSI	Links heavy internet and mobile phone use to poorer adolescent mental health Identifies cyberbullying as a significant online risk factor for youth wellbeing Supports safeguarding awareness of digital behaviours linked to harm. Provides indirect relevance to vulnerable groups, though not disability-specific	4-5
(10) Good and Fang, 2015 Canada	No sample size Children and adolescents with neurodevelopmental disorders, parents of those children	Literature review and intervention proposal	Highlights unique online risks and benefits for youth with neurodevelopmental disabilities Emphasises the role of parents in supporting safe and responsible internet use Proposes a parent–child digital literacy intervention to reduce online harm Links digital safety practices to child protection and welfare frameworks	7-8
(11) Nomy Bitman, 2021 Israel	Disability status self-identified Participants were aged between 20 and 70 years and included 13 men and 16 women	Qualitative study In-depth Interviews/ narrative accounts Lived experience	Explores how adults with communicative disabilities negotiate identity and activism online Highlights risk–benefit decision-making around disability disclosure on social media Demonstrates how disability shapes online representation and participation Informs inclusive approaches to internet use for people with disabilities	4-5

(12) Michelle Wright, 2017 USA	Adolescents (n = 131; 13–15 years old; with intellectual and developmental disabilities completed	2- wave (1 year) Questionnaires on their face-to-face and cyber victimization, perceived social support and depression	Shows cyber victimization predicts later depression in adolescents with IDD Finds parent and teacher support buffer (reduce) cybervictimization-related depression Supports safeguarding responses that strengthen trusted adult support around online harm Reinforces need for disability-inclusive anti-cyberbullying prevention in schools	8-9
(13) Martínez-Cao, Gómez, Alcedo and Monsalve, 2021 Spain	Young people up to 18 years with intellectual disabilities	Systematic review 2007- April 2019 37 papers	Synthesises evidence on bullying and cyberbullying affecting young people with intellectual disability Identifies key risk factors and vulnerabilities relevant to safeguarding and welfare Summarises psychological and social impacts of bullying for youth with ID Highlights need for disability-specific prevention and child protection interventions	7-8
(14) Saltz, Rozon, Pogge, Harvey, 2020 United States	50 adolescent psychiatric inpatients ages 13-17 years	Cross sectional clinical survey study Cyberbullying Questionnaire Childhood trauma questionnaire & Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children	Identifies prevalence of cyberbullying among adolescents in acute psychiatric inpatient care Links cyberbullying exposure to higher depression, PTSD, anger, and dissociation symptoms Demonstrates association between early emotional abuse and cyberbullying vulnerability Supports integrating online risk and trauma assessment into child protection and mental health services	8-9
(15) Chadwick, D. D. (2019). UK	People with intellectual disabilities	Narrative Review (number of papers not specified)	Synthesises evidence on online risks and cybercrime affecting people with intellectual disabilities Identifies heightened vulnerability linked to social isolation, reduced risk awareness, and support needs Highlights child protection and welfare implications of online exploitation and victimisation	7-8

			Emphasises need for balanced safeguarding approaches that promote safety without restricting digital inclusion	
(16) Proud mum hits back at internet troll who called her Down's... (mummypages.ie)	Single Child with Downs Syndrome (mothers account)Parents perspective	Grey literature Personal narrative blog/post	Provides a real-world example of online harassment targeting a child with Down Syndrome Highlights emotional harm and safeguarding concerns arising from disability-specific online abuse Raises awareness of gaps between lived experience and formal child protection responses to online harm	4-5
(17) Caton and Landman, 2021 UK	Young people with learning disabilities, practitioner perspectives	Conceptual Narrative review	Identifies online radicalisation as a safeguarding risk for young people with learning disabilities Highlights increased vulnerability linked to social exclusion and online suggestibility Emphasises the need for disability-inclusive internet safety education and support Informs child protection and welfare practice through a prevention-focused framework	7-8
(18) Zebracki, K., 2019 UK	Focus on adolescents with psychological cognitive and physical disabilities	Editorial review Expert narrative commentary	Provides conceptual insight into disability-associated risks and protections in online and social media environments, supporting child protection and welfare perspectives on safeguarding adolescents with disabilities Offers practice-relevant discussion on balancing online participation and protection for adolescents with psychological, cognitive, and physical disabilities, contributing to disability and internet use literature despite the absence of empirical data	3-4
(19) Harrison, K. 2010.	Discusses high risk offenders as described populations	Book Expert synthesis	Provides expert-led insights into community risk management approaches designed to protect children and the public from high-risk sexual offending, supporting child protection and welfare frameworks Includes discussion of internet use and cyber-sex offending, alongside consideration of disability-related offender subgroups (e.g. intellectually disabled offenders), making it relevant to understanding online risk, safeguarding, and disability within child protection contexts	4-5
(20) Malaeb et al., 2020 Lebanon	General adolescent population, 1810 adolescents	Cross-sectional study Illinois Bully scale was used to	Demonstrates a clear association between child abuse, bullying victimisation, and poor mental health outcomes, strengthening evidence for early child protection and welfare interventions	4-5

	between 14 and 17 years of age.	measure bullying victimization	Identifies internet addiction as a significant factor linked to bullying involvement, highlighting the importance of online environments in adolescent safeguarding and welfare	
(21) Wright and Wachs, 2020 US	121 adolescents (63% male; M age = 14.10 years) with intellectual disabilities and developmental disorders	Short-term quantitative study Questionnaires at 2 time points Time 1- 7 th grade Time 2 8 th grade	Demonstrates that parental support plays a protective role for adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities who experience cyberbullying, reducing negative health and wellbeing outcomes Highlights cyberbullying as a significant child protection and welfare issue for adolescents with disabilities in online environments, supporting the need for family-centred safeguarding approaches to internet use	6-7
(22) UNICEF, 2017 Global	Children and adolescents (underage of 18) experiences of marginalised groups including disability	Global report synthesising multiple data sources Global statistics Youth opinion data	Identifies online environments as key spaces of both opportunity and risk for children, reinforcing the need for child protection and welfare systems to address digital safeguarding alongside offline protection Highlights widespread exposure of children to online harms such as cyberbullying, harmful content, and exploitation, supporting policy and practice responses focused on prevention, protection, and children's rights online Demonstrates how digital access and safety are shaped by inequality, with marginalised groups, including children with disabilities, more likely to experience digital exclusion and increased vulnerability Provides global evidence to inform inclusive, rights-based approaches to internet use that balance access, participation, and protection for all children	6-7
(23) Löfgren-Mårtenson, Sorbring, and Molin, 2015 Sweden	Parents and professionals of people with intellectual disabilities aged between 18-20 years	Five semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with professionals (n = 8) working on special programmes in	Identifies key child protection and welfare concerns related to young people with intellectual disabilities using the internet for sexual purposes, including risks of exploitation, abuse, and online harm Highlights tensions between safeguarding and autonomy, showing how over-protective responses can limit the rights, development, and social inclusion of young people with intellectual disabilities Emphasises the need for supported, educative, and rights-based approaches to internet use that balance protection with participation for young people with intellectual disabilities	6-7

		upper secondary schools and with parents (n = 5)		
(24) Gandolfi et al., 2021. Italy	Children and adolescents exposed to online grooming	Narrative review 38 papers	Conceptualises online grooming as a form of child sexual abuse, reinforcing its significance for child protection and welfare systems in digital environments. Explains how internet and social media platforms facilitate grooming through anonymity, accessibility, and prolonged contact, supporting prevention and safeguarding responses. Although not disability-specific, the analysis highlights vulnerability factors (e.g. Cognitive immaturity, social isolation) that are particularly relevant to safeguarding children with disabilities online.	4-5
(25) Alhaboby, Barnes, Evans and Short, 2017 UK	Adults with disabilities and chronic conditions who experienced cyber victimisation	Mixed methods study Online surveys In-depth interviews	Shows how internet use can increase exposure to cyber-victimisation for people with disabilities, highlighting online spaces as important safeguarding contexts Identifies welfare and ethical challenges in online research with vulnerable groups, informing protective and trauma-informed approaches Raises awareness of disability-specific vulnerabilities online, supporting inclusive child protection and digital safety responses Provides methodological insight to improve future research and interventions on online safety and disability.	4-5
(26) Mitchell, K. J., Ybarra, M., & Finkelhor, D. (2007).	General population children and adolescents 10-17 years	Quantitative study 1,501 youth Internet users Structured questionnaires Self-reported experiences Measures of depression, delinquency and substance use	Demonstrates that online victimization is associated with depression, delinquency, and substance use among children and adolescents, establishing internet-related harm as a child protection and welfare issue Shows that online victimization contributes uniquely to negative wellbeing outcomes, supporting the inclusion of internet use within safeguarding and child welfare frameworks Although not disability-specific, the findings are relevant to children with disabilities who may experience increased vulnerability to online victimization and related mental health risks	4-5

(27) Conneely, 2022 Ireland resident at a HSE centre for people with disabilities in the northwest	Adults with disabilities in residential care, children as victims	Journalistic reporting (grey literature)	Highlights safeguarding concerns within disability services, emphasising the responsibility of child protection and welfare systems to manage risk while upholding the rights of adults with disabilities Demonstrates the complexity of disability-inclusive safeguarding, where adults with disabilities may be both vulnerable and can be involved in harmful online behaviour Provides real-world contextual evidence to inform policy, practice, and oversight in child protection and disability services	4-5
(28) Krishna et al., 2013 USA	One “young man” diagnosed with schizophrenia/psychotic disorder	Case report with clinical discussion	Provides contextual insight relevant to child protection and welfare by showing how online environments may contribute to harm or increased vulnerability among individuals with disabilities, supporting safeguarding awareness	3-4
(29) Didden et al., 2009 Netherlands	Students (n=114) with intellectual and developmental disability who were between 12–19 years of age	Quantitative cross-sectional study Questionnaire containing questions related to bullying and victimization via the internet and cell phones.	Provides early empirical evidence that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities experience cyberbullying, establishing online harm as a child protection and welfare concern within special education settings. Supports disability-inclusive child protection approaches by showing that online victimisation intersects with existing social and communication vulnerabilities.	5-6
(30) El-Asam et al. 2021, England	Twenty-nine professionals from varying Children’s services and local authority agencies, seven males and twenty two females	Qualitative study Semi-structured interviews Focus groups Thematic analysis	Identifies a clear gap in child protection and welfare practice, where vulnerable young people’s online lives are not consistently assessed or integrated into safeguarding and intervention processes. Demonstrates that internet use is central to young people’s risk and vulnerability, yet practitioners often lack training, confidence, and tools to address digital harm effectively. Although not disability-specific, the findings are highly relevant to young people with disabilities, who may experience heightened online vulnerability and require inclusive, digitally informed safeguarding approaches.	4-5

(31) Bannon, McGlynn, McKenzie and Quayle, 2015 Scotland	Young people with additional support needs (ASN) in local schools aged 13-18, n=36	Qualitative focus groups (6 groups)	Shows that young people with additional support needs actively engage with the internet and face distinct online risks, positioning digital spaces as relevant to child protection and welfare Highlights the importance of tailored safeguarding and online safety support for children and young people with disabilities, recognising both vulnerability and capability Emphasises the role of schools and supportive adults in promoting safe and inclusive internet use for young people with additional support needs	7-8
(32) Iglesias, Gómez Sánchez and Alcedo Rodríguez, 2019 Spain	181 adolescents with intellectual disabilities or Asperger syndrome compared to peers without a disability mean age of 16 years old	Quantitative cross sectional survey Cyber-aggression Questionnaire Adolescents Cyber-victimization Questionnaire and questionnaire on social media and new technologies.	Links cyber-victimisation and cyber-aggression to young people with disabilities, reinforcing cyberbullying as a child protection and welfare concern requiring targeted prevention and support in schools and services. Helps identify whether patterns of cyberbullying involvement differ from non-disabled peers, informing tailored safeguarding, education, and intervention approaches	7-8
(33) Glumbić et al., 2021.	420 non-disabled participants and 67 participants with mild intellectual disability aged 15-19 years	Quantitative cross-sectional design Questionnaires Mobile phone problem Use Scale	Demonstrates that adolescents with mild intellectual disability actively use mobile phones, but with different usage patterns compared to non-disabled peers, highlighting the need for disability-informed digital inclusion and online safety approaches. Shows that mobile phone and internet use are integral to adolescents' social lives, reinforcing child protection and welfare responsibilities to provide tailored guidance and safeguarding for young people with disabilities.	6-7

Appendix 3: Summary of data analysis

Codes (C862) codes developed (CR 202), reviewed (CR25), themes (6).

(small excerpt)

Research Question: How does child protection and welfare intersect with internet use in the lives of children with disabilities?

Themes	Causal Mechanisms Real	Events Actual	Experiences Empirical	Reflection
Parental, School and Friendship influence.	Real level: Parental influence stemming from values and norms, power dynamics within the family. The digital divide has an impact at this level for YP with D parental restriction or lack of supervision shaping YP with D online activities. Cultural norms, parental education and socio-economic influences have an impact on YP with D access and engagement with the internet.	CD4 Parent as advocate CD11 Importance of familial attachments CD21 Parental management (understanding) of their children internet use CD65 Unsupervised access to the internet CD74 Parents understanding of their child's mood while using the internet. CD 91 Child's view of parents as restrictive around internet use (family members who do not live with CD 93 parents' view of the internet. YP with D CD 120 Children feel they cannot ask their parents for help with an online problem.	Parental influence Jerry's mum- "here we don't put games in the house, so he is 14 and kind of left out actually, like there is nothing in common if you don't play games". (16.26) J's mum- we have a family link up Jerry, so there is parental control (16.69) Cathal's Dad – We are always close to Cathal, so we know if he is upset about something online. He goes into the other room and his room and watches the internet, but we know if he is upset. (4.183) Donal's mum "as regards the actual safety in seeing stuff you never seems to click on anything that is inappropriate and you are always with us so we can see what you watch" (11.95) K– so like I love my parents but like I'm worried like that they are too pause..... not small-minded but too like you know (long pause) they don't get the full picture and they always jump to conclusions, that's what I'm afraid of (7.294).	Impact of internet use on children with complex communication needs Mico level -person centred perspectives, agency . Return to data to check CD 65 and CD74

Appendix 4: Application of Greenways reflection tool to interviews (Four F's)

Application of the Greenway (2018) Reflective tool to interviews (Four F's)

Facts:	Overview of the interview process
	Sam is 12 years old. Sam chose to have her mum present during the interview. The research was explained, and the consent and assent form were signed prior to the commencement of the interview. Sam was bored with the assent forms and tells me so! Time was spent prior to the interview having a chat. Sam asked a lot of questions about my family life, particularly my children. Sam had a lovely sense of humour and loved chatting about where I was from, my children, ages, classes, hobbies. Sam is a wheelchair user. We begin the interview at 6.05 pm- Sam's mum is not present for the first 5 minutes. She comes in and out of the room throughout the interview. I have sheets with the questions in large print and visuals beside it on a large A4 sheet. I ask Sam's mum to read the vignettes before we begin to ensure she is happy with their content, prior to asking Sam's views about them.
Feelings:	Emotional reactions (YP and mine)
	Sam seemed excited about doing the interview and told me so whilst also laughing and clapping her hands, explaining how she was looking forward to giving <i>MY OPINION</i> (her words) Sam was slightly anxious about the questions-she said she hoped she would get the questions right! I was nervous as this was my first interview, I was confident of my ability to ensure Sam felt comfortable and secure during the interview, stemming from years of professional experience – the doing of the interview correctly was where my nerves came from. I very much enjoyed the interview experience. Sam enjoyed the interview experience and said so at the end.
Findings:	Learning that I took away from the interview
	Informal chat was essential for building trust before the interview. Going through the consent/ assent forms took some time and was the part that Sam said she least enjoyed at the end and the beginning of the interview. (as I left the house she commented while laughing “apart from the ticking the form I had great time”).

	Having the box of fidgets was important - Sam immediately sifted through to find her favourite which she asked to keep at the end of the interview. Sam was extremely tired at the end of the interview. Once we chatted and the interview progressed my nervousness dissipated. Using visuals with the questions was important – they served to keep Sam focused on the questions asked. Taking a break was essential.
Future:	Incorporating learning into subsequent interviews
	Ensure to keep checking in and ask if participants would like a break. Prior to beginning the interview make time for questions about the interview process. Bring the box of fidgets to all the interviews. Work on staying with the pause balancing the need to ensure the YP is comfortable and secure in the interview process versus needing time to pause for processing information and preparing answers to questions.

Source: (<https://www.ed.ac.uk/reflection/reflectors-toolkit/reflecting-on-experience/four-f>)

Appendix 5 : Topic guide for qualitative interview question

Research Question: How does internet use intersect with child protection and welfare in the lives of children with disabilities?

Interview Topic Guide

Topic	Questions
Introduction; rapport build trust; foreground strengths; support ongoing assent	Would you like to tell me a little bit about yourself? What do you enjoy doing?
Abilities everyday life Explore child-led understandings of disability and participation	Would you like to tell me about your abilities? What makes it hard for you to do the things that other children your age are doing?
Internet access Understand access, frequency, and modes of use	Do you use the internet? What do you think about the internet? How long do you spend on the internet every day?
Social Media Interaction	Do you use social media? What device do you use when you want to use the internet? Have you ever chatted to someone you didn't know online?
Emotions well-being Identify emotional impacts and child protection concerns	What is your favourite thing to do when you go online or when you use the internet? What makes you feel happy when you use the internet?

	What makes you feel upset or sad after you use the internet? Do you feel safe using the Internet?
Support, help-seeking, understand protective relationships and supports	Who would you talk to if you wanted help or you felt upset when using the Internet? Who helps you when you use the internet?
Sharenting ; Explore consent, privacy, and adult decision-making	How do you feel about your parent/ guardian/ sharing pictures or information about you on their social media accounts? How do you feel about your teachers/ sports clubs' sharing pictures or information about you on their social media accounts?
Vignettes (Optional) fictional scenarios Explore awareness of risk, safety, and reasoning without self-disclosure	Involving online rules, parental mediation chatting to strangers, and image-sharing
Interview mechanics embedded across all interviews	
• Person-centred flexibility order, wording, and pacing of questions adapted to each child; visuals aligned with each question, plain English, vignettes not used in every interview • Communication support; questions may be answered by the child, jointly with a parent, or by a parent with the child present where complex communication exists • Processing time pauses extended time allowed for processing; silence respected; interviewer remains with pauses • Ongoing assent: treated as continuous; children reminded they can stop, pause, or skip questions • Well-being : breaks offered, well-being plans in place; local support services contacts offered and social worker availability for Enable Ireland participants • Non-directive language, plain English, open, positive, strengths-based phrasing; awareness of demand avoidance and 'perfect answer' seeking. • Interview mapping clear signposting of interview stages (e.g. beginning, nearing end) to support predictability and regulation • Sensory awareness attention to sensory environment (noise, light, comfort, movement); adjustments made as needed • Use of vignettes fictional scenarios used selectively to support discussion of risk and safety without personal disclosure • Reflexivity post-interview (Greenway's, 2018 -4 F's model) informed adaptations to subsequent interviews	
Person centred driven interview process	

Appendix 6: Qualitative interview data

Parents' influence on their children's internet use

Interview 1-Sam	Interview 2-Simon	Interview 3- Jack	Interview 4-Cathal	Interview 5-Elizabeth
"Yep, the parents can help".	"well like you could say stuff and get caught and then get banned off YouTube, parents could come in and hear him say something out of context to them and he could get banned"	"She should tell her parents (long pause)"	Cathal's dad spoke to interpret Cathal's responses, and also made sense of Cathal's communication.	" Ah I'm being happy to talk to my parents? But sometimes I think they can be a bit judgemental and I'm just like OH I regret telling you now – or Oh I should never have told you"
Interview 6-Alan	Interview 7-Kathleen	Interview 8- Rachel	Interview 9-Oliver	Interview 10 Michael
"I think it depends on the age, if they are not mature enough, like I am old enough to listen to him and my parents are fine about it"	"So, like I love my parents but like I'm worried like that they are too pause..... not small minded but too like you know (long pause) they don't get the full picture and they always jump to conclusions, that's what I'm afraid of"	"I mean I don't know but there is still that possibility, if my mum hadn't noticed and she wasn't in fact a very responsible parent there is a possibility that I would have gotten groomed and then it's just like AGGHHHHH.....gross"	Oliver's mum helped when I misinterpreted something that Oliver said, making sense of Oliver's communication.	Michael's mum adds some information to Michael's answers as she explains at the onset of the interview that Michael's speech can be difficult to understand if you are not very familiar with him.
Interview 11-Donal	Interview 12-Terry	Interview 13- Tom	Interview 14-Lily	Interview 15-Marty
Donal's mum makes sense of Donal's communication	Does not live with parents, selects a trusted	"R- Ok Tom, so if you were in trouble online and needed	"I don't talk to people when I get upset by the internet,	"I wasn't allowed online until much later

on. Donal runs to his mum several times for hugs during the time I am there.	person to be present at the interview and does not refer to parents throughout the interview	help who would you talk to?" "Tom- My parents of course."	I've never had a time where I decided I would talk to somebody about it but if I was to I would say it would be a friend or a parent."	dad had a big thing about online that he didn't like"
Interview 16- Jerry	Interview 17- Bridget	Interview 18- Alice	Interview 19- Mark	Interview 20- Noel
" well on snap chat my mum said like it's bad cos like these people add you and you don't even know who they are. So, my mum told me to delete it so I deleted it and Instagram was kinda like too addicting (pause)"	R-"So, do you think it's a good thing that parents check their kids phone?" Bridget- "yeh my mum does it to mine"	"...now that we are on the summer holidays, I tend to spend the same amount all the time, mum is trying to limit my screen time because it is affecting my sleep a bit (laughing)"	R-" so who would go to for help if you were ever to get upset?" Mark – "My Mam or Dad or a friend"	"yes, I had a thing I'm not sure if it's still on my play station and every time me and my brother went over our time my dad got a text and usually my dad turned it off cos we are allowed to play a little longer than that"
Interview 21- Dan	Interview 22- Clara	Interview 23- William	Interview 24- Ruary	Interview 25- Lorcan
R- "who sets the time limit?" Dan- "its set by my parents so like I can't open apps after a certain time".	"I'd talk to a parent first, then the schoolteachers' things like that – I'd probably also go to the guards"	"Well, I'd feel better if I told my parents, but if my parents weren't there I'd tell my brother and sister".	"Yeh but like it's a good app just like to get in touch with your friends and see if they are going out and all that or if your mam is on snapchat it's good to get connected."	"I told my parents that day and they sorted it out, they just blocked the number and from then on I was careful"
Interview 26- Jenny	Interview 27- Lauren	Interview 28- James	Interview 29- Tim	Interview 30- Luke
"I wanted the phone so badly- I asked	"Well, I'm lucky I have my mam and	"Ah no, I'm ok actually – well I have my supports and	"Well, I am allowed my phone, but I	"I'd have contact, I'd have

my mam and dad to get me a phone so many times, I begged them (laughing) I really did, I thought it might cheer me up- instead of being like, being bored”	dad and family, but it is a bit weird the way they done it cos they just said don’t send videos, don’t talk about it and then we just went on with the school day. It was a bit weird the way they done it.”	myself and my mam still talk about it. and I just let my feeling out and If I feel bad or anything I go straight to her, and she is great.”	don’t bring it to school, ma doesn’t allow me I have to be in third year to bring my phone”	WhatsApp for talking to mum because obviously she not young hip and snapchatty! !”
Interview 31- Paul	Interview 32- Eamon	Interview 33- Cillian	Interview 34- Olive	
“I did not play among us this year because my mum said I wasn’t allowed it”	my siblings or my friends would use the internet more than my parents so they would understand it more compared to having to explain something to my parents before having to get their help and if there was something bad I don’t want to be banned from using my phone completely.	“I mean the police came in one time and talked to us about it and it’s so unrelatable (pause) Om the way that they word everything like talk to your parents like NOBODY would do that like I’m being so serious”	“well, my mum really didn’t want me to have it in primary school so she wanted me to get a phone in first year so that I could like since like. I could get home and stuff communicate and stuff”.	

Appendix 7: Topic guide survey questions

Topic Guide: Quantitative Survey

Research question: What experiences do parents of children with disabilities have regarding their children's internet use?

Projected dissemination date: August 1, 2024, and December 5, 2024

Informed by: Global kids Online toolkit (Byrne et al. 2016)

Overview and rationale
This survey explores parents' and guardians' experiences of their children with disabilities (aged 12–17) internet use. It examines digital confidence, support strategies, perceived risks, and support needs, recognising that online experiences are shaped by individual circumstances, family resources, digital environments, and wider social and technological structures Demographic questions are placed at the end to maximise engagement and reduce early drop-out.
Section 1: Eligibility, consent, and context setting
Purpose: To confirm participant eligibility and obtain informed consent for participation and use of data in related research Key topics explored: Parental/guardian role, Consent for research use of responses
Section 2: Parental digital confidence
Purpose: To understand parents' self-perceived digital confidence and competence. Key topics explored: Confidence in using the internet Digital confidence is treated as shaped by access, learning, and social context
Section 3: Child's disability and support needs
Purpose: To capture the diversity of children's impairments as understood by parents Key topics explored: Type(s) of impairment: physical, sensory, neurodivergent, learning disability, mental health, chronic illness, hidden disabilities other, provision of free text for parents description
Section 4: Parental mediation and support capacity
Purpose: To explore parents' perceived ability to support their child when online experiences are upsetting Key topics explored: Confidence in helping children deal with online issues Parents perceived effectiveness of providing support for online issues
Section 5: Contexts and locations of internet use
Purpose: To understand where and under what conditions children access the internet Key topics explored: Internet use in the home, school, friends' homes, and public spaces
Section 6: Parenting practices and digital mediation strategies
Purpose: To explore how parents manage and support their child's internet use Key topics explored: Communication about online risks Shared online activities Use of parental controls and restrictions

Disability-related supports
Section 7: Parents perception of child's exposure to harmful online content, contact conduct, contract (4C's)
Purpose: To identify whether parents are aware of upsetting or harmful online experiences Key topics explored: Parents awareness of upsetting of harmful experiences their child has encountered online
Section 8: Disability and online vulnerabilities
Purpose: To examine how disability may shape online engagement and risk Key topics explored: Impact of disability on access, interaction, and online interactions
Section 9: Parental concerns about online risks
Purpose: To capture the range of parental worries regarding online harm Key topics explored: Exposure to harmful content such as exploitation, grooming, cyberbullying, pornography
Section 10: Sources of advice and support related to their children's internet use
Purpose: To understand where parents seek guidance. Key topics explored: Schools, government, service providers, media, family, peers, children, and AI tools
Section 11: Support needs related to their children's internet use
Purpose: To identify gaps in resources and support. Key topics explored: Training, education, peer support, school engagement
Section 12: Ongoing parenting strategies and communication related to their children's internet use
Purpose: To explore everyday rules and communication practices. Key topics explored: Rules, boundaries, rewards Explore online safety and disability impacts
Section 13: Parental sharing of children's information online
Purpose: To examine parental practices around sharing children's information online. Key topics explored: Sharing photos, videos, and personal information
Section 14: Parents perceived satisfaction with online safety and wellbeing
Purpose: To assess parental satisfaction with online safety and wellbeing Key topics explored: Child's ability to stay safe online Parent's ability to protect their child while using the internet Quality of online interactions
Section 15: Demographic Information
Purpose: To contextualise findings Key topics explored: Child's age and gender Parent's age, relationship to child, and marital status Design note: Placed at the end to minimise participant fatigue

Appendix 8: Trinity College Dublin ethical approval



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Fri, 15 Jul, 13:37

SWSP Ethics

to Edurne, Susan, Julie, Rose

Dear Rose,

Thank you for your email. The outcome of your ethics application is as follows:

Decision: The recommendation in relation with the presence of a nominated person has been satisfactorily addressed. The ethics application is approved subject to the other recommended changes being addressed by the student and approved by the supervisors (please refer to REC decision sent on 16th June 2022). This ethics application does not need to be re-submitted to the REC.

Thank you

Jennifer

All recommendations were addressed Rose and approved by Dr. Susan Flynn & Dr. Julie Byrne.

Signed:

Dr. Susan Flynn

Dr. Julie Byrne



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Research Ethics Committee School of Social Work and Social Policy Trinity College Dublin,
The University of Dublin <https://www.tcd.ie/swsp/research/ethics.php>
swsp.ethics@tcd.ie

01st May 2024

Reference: Internal ID No 1013.

Dear Rose

Thank you for your recent application to the Research Ethics Committee (REC) for the approval of changes to your ethics application: *Disability associated child protection risks in the virtual world: The exposure of young people with disabilities to child protection concerns online*.

The proposed changes have been reviewed by The School of Social Work and Social Policy REC and approval has been granted.

On behalf of the committee, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to read this application and I wish you the very best with your research project.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Edurne Garcia Iriarte

Chair Research Ethics Committee
School of Social Work and Social Policy
Trinity College Dublin,
The University of Dublin

Appendix 9 : Enable Ireland ethical approval



Enable Ireland Research, Ethics and Quality Committee

Research Proposal Approval Form

Date: 31 January 2023

Reference Number: RA87 Jan 2023

Applicant Name: Rose Doolan Maher

Proposal Title: Disability associated child protection risks in the virtual world

REQC Feedback

Approved:

You may proceed with the research as outlined in the research proposal submitted to the REQC. The REQC Co-ordinator will contact you for an Interim Progress Report which you must complete at a later date. A final copy of the study must be submitted to the REQC Co-ordinator after completion to the following address:

Kate McMahon

HR & Corporate Affairs

Enable Ireland

8 Russet Court

Churchyard Lane

Ballintemple

Cork

Kate McMahon

Kate McMahon – Research, Training & Quality Officer Enable
Research, Ethics and Quality Committee

Ireland

Appendix 10: Participant information booklet



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION BOOKLET

What is research?

I am doing a research project in a university called Trinity College. It is in Dublin.



This means that I have some questions to ask you and I want to find out your answers to these questions. Because I am asking the questions I am called the researcher.



When I meet to ask you questions this is called an interview. When you have gone through all the information about this project you can decide if you want to be a part of it. You do not have to be a part of it if you prefer not to. If you say Yes, I would like you to answer some questions or be interviewed. If you decide later or during the interview you don't want to do it, that is OK. It is your voice, and it is your choice.



I have two supervisors or people who make sure I do this research properly and that I ask the right questions. They are professors or teachers in Trinity College. When I have all the answers that you give me put together with the other 19 young people taking part in this research. I will study it and look at how it answers my question. My supervisors will check what I write to make sure what you have said is understood and written about correctly.



What kind of questions will be asked?

The questions I ask will be all about what you think about using the internet.



Who is the researcher?

The researcher is the person who interviews you or asks you questions. My name is Rose Doolan Maher. I will be the researcher or the person who will ask you questions about using the internet.



Why are you asked to take part in this research?

You have been asked to be involved in this research study because I am trying to find out more about what children with disabilities think about using the internet. It is important that your voice is heard. Before you decide to take part I would like you to know

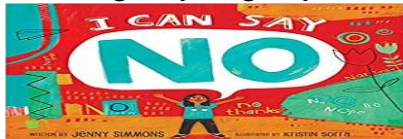
What you have to do?



You can talk to somebody for example a parent or any person you choose to help you decide if you want to take part.



You can decide not to take part or to stop taking part at any time before the information you give me is written into a research story. This decision is ok and will not change anything for you with your service now or in the future.



Your answers will be put together with the answers of 19 other people who will also be asked the same questions. When all 19 peoples questions have been answered and recorded then ALL these answers will be written into the research story together.

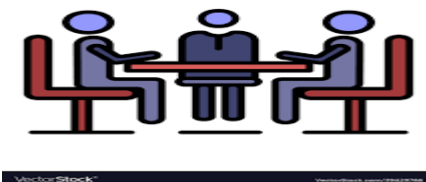


Your name will NOT appear in the research story.

You can decide to do the interview with me by yourself or with a person present, a person that you choose to support you.



OR



You can ask me any question you like about this research.



What do you have to do?

If you agree to take part in this research. You will take these steps
Discuss your decision with a parent or person of your choice



Agree to take part by providing your signature on a form that I provide. You can also agree by allowing me to record your agreement



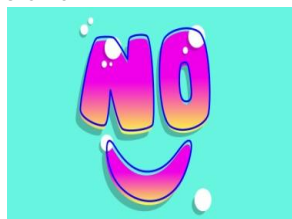
Allow me to visit you for an hour to do an interview. This means I will ask you questions about using the internet



Know that at any point during the interview or before and after it you can say **NO** to taking part in this research / interview and this will have no impact on your current or future Enable Ireland Service. If you decide to say No "I would prefer not to take part in this research project" this decision will not affect your current service or your future service with Enable Ireland.



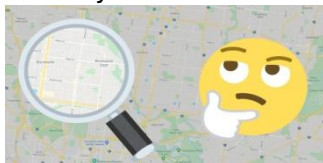
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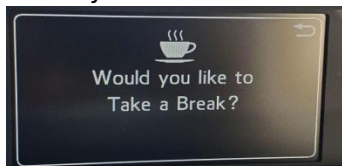
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Agree the best way for you to do an interview
Where you would like it to take place?



Would you like a break during the interview?



Would you like to do the interview with me on your own or would you like a support person to stay with you during the interview?



Know how long it will take ?



Know that if you are not happy with any part of how I am doing the interview then you have the right to make a complaint – you can say I am not happy with how you are asking me questions – you can tell another person in Enable Ireland and they will help you. I will stop asking you questions straight away.



More information about this research

I will talk to twenty children with disabilities.



I will ask each child the same questions



This research is about hearing your voice and the voice of 19 other people about using the internet.



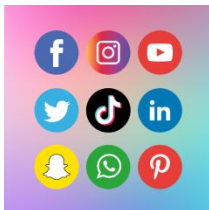
I would like to know what you like about using the internet.



I would also like to know what you don't like about using the internet.



I would like to know if you use social media.



I will ask you a few times during the interview if you are happy to keep going to answer my questions. You can always say NO or STOP .



A few days after the interview I will ask you or if you prefer I will ask your support person if you are ok after answering all the questions about the internet.



I will listen to and record all your information so that I can listen back and write out your answers.



When I write out your answers you can have a copy of what I have written if you want it and you can ask me any questions about what I have written. I will ask you if you would like a copy when I talk to you after the interview.



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I will put all your answers together with the answers of the other 19 people who agreed like you to take part in this research study. All of your voices- the answers you give to the questions will be put together to make up the research story.



My supervisors will check that I do this research correctly.



When I have finished the research I will tell what I have found out. I will tell you the research story.



Can this research cause me harm?

I would hope that you would enjoy doing this research but it is important to know that the interview will be one hour long and you might feel tired after doing it.



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If you were ever afraid when you were using the internet talking about this feeling may make you feel upset.



If you saw a picture on the internet and you didn't like it – this may make you feel worried



If you tell me about something that caused you to be afraid a lot while you are answering my questions- this information is important to share with your parent or support person so that they can help you with your worries or fears.



If you tell me something that may have hurt or harmed you or is harmful to you when you are using the internet – this information is also very important to share with your parent or the person that is caring for you. We will have talked about this before the interview and we will put together a plan to support you. I will start putting this support plan in place to help you with the sad or upsetting feelings. If you tell me that something on the internet is very harmful to you as well as using the support plan I will also talk to professionals such as the Garda or a social worker so that they can help you also.



twinkl.com



There may be a very small chance that somebody might recognise you in the information you give me in the interview or that your information gets lost. I have a plan to make sure this doesn't happen but there is still a very small chance.



Do I have to take part?

No you do **NOT** have to take part in this research. It is your choice. If you decide that you do not want to take part that is no problem at all. Saying no will have no affect on your service everything will stay the same. You must not worry about saying NO. Sometimes it is nice to please others, we don't have to please others all of the time. If you don't want to take part it is OK to say NO .



If you say yes at the beginning but change your mind –THATS OK TOO. All you have to do if you change your mind is call me and I will say that is ok thank you for telling me.



What happens if I take part to the Interview?

By agreeing to take part this means you agree to let me ask you questions about how you use the Internet.



These are examples of some of the questions I will ask:
Do you use the internet?



What do you think about the Internet?



Do you feel safe using the Internet?



Who would you talk to if you wanted help or you felt upset when using the Internet?



Is the information I share with you public or private?

The information you tell me is private. If you choose to do the interview on your own the only people who will know about the information you told me will be me the researcher, if you choose to have a support person they will also know.



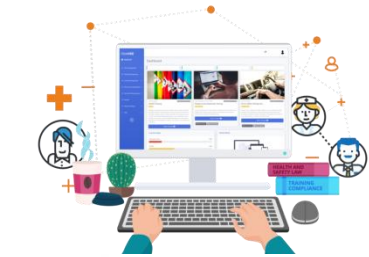
Your interview will be recorded. This recording WILL NOT be shared with anyone.



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If you tell me something that may have hurt or harmed you or is harmful to you when you are using the internet – this information is also very important to share with your parent or the person that is caring for you. If it is very harmful to you I will talk to professionals such as the Garda or a social worker so that they can help you also. Before the interview you and I and your parent and or the person from Enable Ireland where you attend a service will talk about the best possible way to give you

the support you need if you get upset or are unhappy during or after the Interview. We will all make a support plan together to help you. It is important to have a plan to make sure you feel safe and know that if you get upset that you will get the help you need.



twinkl.com



I will keep this recording locked away in a very secure place and I will delete it after 3 days. Your answers will be typed onto pages – this is when your name will be changed.

This means your information is anonymous.



When I write out your answers you can have a copy of what I have written if you want it and you can ask me any questions about what I have written. I will ask you if you would like a copy when I talk to you after the interview.



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When your information is made anonymous – this information will be locked away and stored for 5 years. This information may be used by me again or by other researchers.



My supervisors may also read this information.



The research story will be available to read by a lot of people.



What happens when the research is finished?

When the research is finished – I and my supervisors will tell people about it. We will tell you the research story and we will also tell students, teachers and other organisations as well as Enable Ireland.



What are your rights when you answer questions in an interview?

You have a right to know what happens to your information. The answers you give to questions I ask you is also known as research data.



It is my Job and the colleges that I attend to be careful and protect or mind your information or data.



When your information has been made anonymous your information or data will be kept in Trinity College Dublin.



There is a person in charge of taking care of your information or data and they are called the Data Protection Officer.



The address for the Data Protection Officer is
Secretary's Office
Trinity College Dublin
Dublin 2
The email address is Dataprotection@tcd.ie

It is important that you know that you can contact me or the data protection officer about YOUR PERSONAL information (example name, age, date of birth)



CONTACT



Dataprotection@tcd.ie

OR



OR doolanmr@tcd.ie

When data has been anonymized, we will not be able to access or delete it, as we will have no way of being able to link the data to you.



You have a right to

Get a copy of the answers you give me in the interview.



Say STOP: I don't want you to write out my answers or share my information anymore



To rub out, delete or get your information removed from the research project.



Before I take out your name from the information you gave me - you can also say stop I do not want you to use any personal information about me



Say can you correct my information because it is wrong



Say: I don't want Trinity College to hold my information I want a different organisation to hold it

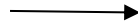


If I have taken out your name to make your information anonymous, I will not be able to get rid of or remove your information.

What do I do if I have more questions?



If you have more questions please ask me.



THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME- There is ALOT of Information



Appendix 11: Consent and assent forms



Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

The University of Dublin

Consent to facilitate research

I..... voluntarily agree to help facilitate this research study.

I understand that even if I agree to help now, I can withdraw at any time without any consequences of any kind.

I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

I understand that I will assist with identifying participants and distributing cover letters, consent forms and participant information sheets.

I understand that all data collected in this study is confidential and anonymous.

I understand that I am free to contact the researcher to seek further clarification and information.

Please note that the interview with participants will be carried out in a **sensitive and non-stressful** manner.

Rose Doolan Maher , PhD Student , School of Social Work and Social Policy, the University of Dublin. Children's Research Centre,3-4 Foster Place, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2.

Telephone: 0868411538.

Signature of gatekeeper

Date

I believe the gatekeeper is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date



Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

The University of Dublin

YOUR CONSENT OR PERMISSION TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH

NAME OF STUDY: WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE INTERNET?



Consent to take part in research



I would like to take part in this study.
(put your signature or your name here)

I know that if I say yes to taking part now that later I can say NO or I can say I don't want to answer that question.



I know that when the Interview is over before two weeks pass I can ask Rose not to use my Information. Rose will delete my Information.



I understand what it means to take part in this research from the information given to me and from the PowerPoint presentation.



I understand that I will take part in an Interview. The researcher Rose will ask me questions. It will take about one hour.



I will be given a voucher for **10 euro** doing this interview for Dunnes Stores.



This voucher is to say THANK YOU for giving your time. If you want to stop doing the research after the Interview that is OK . – you still get the voucher for your time.



I understand that the interview will be recorded.



I understand that the information I give in the interview will be private. The only people present when I am answering my questions will be Rose or maybe a support person if i choose this as an option for myself .



I understand that when my interview is finished and when all the other children's interviews are finished no one will know who I am or the information I gave in the research story. This means my name and all the children's names will be changed in the research story.



I understand that some of the answers I gave when I was doing the Interview might be used to tell people about the research story. Nobody will know it is my answer because the name will be changed.



I understand that if I tell Rose about something that upset me or hurt me when I was using the Internet that she will let me know that this piece of information is very important to share with people who can help me. Ever if I don't want to share it. Rose will tell people who are trained to help me. The support plan that we put together before doing the interview will help me also.



I understand that this consent form when I sign it will be kept by Trinity College for 5 years. After 5 years this form will be shredded or destroyed. Or the recording I give to Rose to say "Yes I agree to doing this research/ interview" will be deleted or gotten rid of.



I understand that the answers to my questions that were typed out will be deleted after 5 years.



• I understand that I have the right to get my information while it is being kept safely and securely by Trinity college. I can contact Rose or the Data protection officer in Trinity about this.



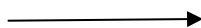
doolanmr@tcd.ie

Dataprotection@tcd.ie

I understand that the interview will occur in a place that I decide , in a relaxed and kind way and I will tell Rose what works best for me to the answer questions she asks.



I understand if I have any other questions about this research I can ask Rose.



Please put your name here

Signature of participant

Date

Parents/ guardian signature

Parent

Date

Name of researcher:

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix 12 : Participant invitation letter

LETTER OF INVITATION



WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE INTERNET?

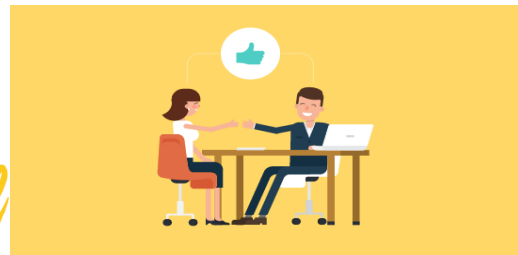
Hello _____,
My name is Rose Doolan Maher



I am a student in Trinity college Dublin and I am looking for your help to do research.



I would like to hear your views about using the Internet. If you are interested in taking part I will do an interview with you and I will ask you questions about what you think about the Internet.



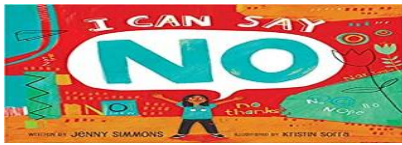
I am a student. I have two supervisors who make sure I do this research correctly. They check my work.



If you would like to take part in this study, please talk to your parents/ support person or person you trust about it. They will tell me you are interested and I will come and visit and tell you more about this research. . You can ask lots of questions about it.



There is an information booklet that tells **A LOT** about this research project- if you are interested you can look at it with your parent (s) /support person or a with a person you trust. You do not have to take part in this research if you do not want to.



If you decide to say No “I would prefer not to take part in this research project” this decision will not affect your current service or your future service with Enable Ireland.



+



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Thank you very much



Yours sincerely

Rose Doolan Maher
 Rose Doolan Maher (086 8411538)

doolanmr@tcd.ie

PhD student

Trinity College Dublin

Appendix 13: Wellbeing research statement

Name of Research Project:

Virtual Harm and Digital Opportunity: Rethinking Child Protection and Welfare for Children with Disabilities using the Internet

Proposed Research Methodology :

Best practice guidelines and principles to support children/research participants during the research process.

The guidelines for best practice research with children with disabilities will be stringently adhered to throughout this research project. (Whyte, J. 2006). Guidance for developing ethical research projects involving children will also be adhered to (Cleary et al., 2012)

Ethical Principles will be adhered to, including a commitment to the well-being, protection and safety of participants; a duty to respect the rights and wishes of all research participants; a responsibility to conduct high-quality scientific research; and a commitment to disseminate and communicate the results to participants. (Cleary et al., 2012, p. 8)

In addition to core ethical principles, this research with children with disabilities requires adherence to legal and policy commitments related to children, especially national and international child protection policies and guidelines, and the adoption of a child-centred, inclusive approach to research. (Cleary et al., 2012, p. 8)

Risk Assessment

Below is a list of the areas of risk identified and the procedures for managing these risks.

	Risk identified	Procedure in place to manage identified risk
1	Expresses upset / sadness due to exposure to online content.	Reassure –talk through the event, allow emotional expression, be guided by the participant as to whether to proceed or stop the interview Ensure a trusted/ nominated person is present and aware that this emotional upset may happen – have a support plan in place with a nominated/trusted person to assist the participant Alert participants, their support person, and gatekeepers that there is a possibility of emotional upset. Contact the parent/ trusted person the day after the interview to check on the participants' well-being after their engagement in the interview process.
2	Disclosure of online abuse	A plan will be put in place with the relevant agency to activate. This plan will be in line

		with Children's First national guidance and TUSLA's Child Safeguarding: A Guide for Policy, Procedure and Practice The interview will stop. The child will be made to feel safe; his/her trusted person will be present or asked to come to reassure him/her during the interview The DLP Designated Liaison Person will be notified The researcher will link in with the DLP to ensure the disclosure has been followed up on.
3	Participants' view of the risks involved in doing an interview about their internet use	Participants' view of what support they would like if the risks identified happen.

Procedures

The following procedures support my intention to keep participants safe while engaging in this research:

Garda clearance for the researcher is provided to the organisation

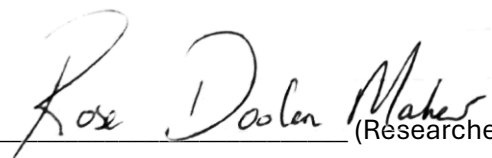
The child, parent/manager/social care practitioner/person present will be aware of the risk of disclosure of online harmful content and conduct prior to participation in the interview process – a specific plan in line with the above guidelines will be implemented.

Participants will know before taking part in the interview that the researcher will prioritise their safety and that if a disclosure is made, she will address it and follow up with the relevant professionals.

A resume of the researcher is provided, evidencing prior experience working with children with disabilities. Evidence of the researchers' up-to-date certificate for the *"Introduction to Children's First" Training*. The day after every interview, the researcher will telephone the parent/supporter to check in on the young person's well-being.

Implementation

The implementation of this research support statement is an ongoing process. I commit to implementing this participant support statement, and my intention is to keep children safe from harm while participating in this research study.

Signed:  (Researcher)

Appendix 14: Consent and information forms for supporters

Research Project: Virtual Harm and Digital Opportunity:
Rethinking Child Protection and Welfare for Children with Disabilities using
the Internet



Hello, my name is Rose Doolan Maher, and I am doing a PhD research study at Trinity College. The topic of my research is Disability, child protection, and the Internet. I am doing this research project under the supervision of Dr. Susan Flynn and Dr. Julie Byrne.

I would like to invite the person you support to take part in this study. The person you support has said you will provide support to him/her to take part in the study. Before you make a decision to take part, I want to explain:

why I am doing this research and
what will you do if you take part.

Please take time to read this form and to ask questions if anything is not clear or you want to know more about the study. You should take time to make a decision to take part by supporting the person.

This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. This means that we know and we will respect your rights if you take part.



Who can take part in this study?

I am looking for children with disabilities who are 12 years – 18 years old who would like to take part in an interview about their internet use.

What will the person you support and you do if he/she takes part?

If the person you support takes part in this study, he/she will be asked to do an interview for about one hour. In this interview, I will ask the person you support to tell about their experience of using the Internet.

If he/she doesn't want to answer any of the questions, that's Ok. He/she can tell that to the researcher and we will ask another question. The person you support can make a decision to stop taking part in this study at any



time. That will be Ok and nobody will be upset. **Your role as supporter will be to help him/her communicate this view if that's what he/she decides.**



To keep things, he/she says and to use his/her own words, we would like to audio-record the interview. Some people do not like being recorded. If he/she doesn't like being recorded, that's Ok, we will take notes instead. An information booklet will be provided to participants telling them all about this research. A power point presentation with audio will also be available explaining this research to the person you support.

I and my supervisors want other people to know about internet use by people with disabilities. The findings of this research will be provided to Enable Ireland, students and teachers and other interested agencies.



Are there any risks if the person you support take part?



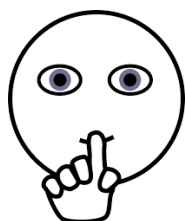
If the person you support has an experience when using the Internet that is upsetting he/she may get upset during the Interview. If this happens I will stop the interview and ask if he/she wants to continue later or at another day. I will also ask if he/she wants to talk to someone about feeling upset. I will made a support plan together with the person you support before the interview so that they will know and have their own individual plan ready and they will know what will happen if they get upset.



If I think he/she or someone else has been harmed or is in danger, or if a crime has been committed, I will have to break confidentiality and let the relevant authorities know about it. The person you support and you will be made aware of how this works before the interview begins. The support plan will also be followed to ensure the person you support gets every support necessary to help them.

Are there any benefits of taking part?

The person you support will receive a 10 euro Dunnes voucher as a thank you token for their time. I hope the study informs safe guarding, child protection policy and help practitioner to know more about what it is like for a person with a disability to use the Internet.



Will taking part be confidential?

I will keep recordings and written versions of what the person you support says for five years.

I will be the only person to listen to the recordings. The person you support can also ask for his/her recordings or written files anytime during those 5 years.

I will not include the name of the person you support or your name when I type out what he/she said in the final research story .



As mentioned earlier when the person you support tells us his/her story, if we think he/she or someone else has been harmed or is in danger, or if a crime has been committed, we will have to break confidentiality and let the relevant authorities know about it. We will tell him/her first, who we are going to talk to.

The information the person you support gives us will be stored as follows:



The consent form will be stored in a locked file cabinet at Trinity College



The recordings of the interview will be stored first in an audio recorder device and then transferred into my computer. This computer is password protected and I will be the only person to have access to it.



When I type out what the person you support said, I will delete his/her name and any other personal information that can identify him/her. These transcripts will be kept in my computer for five years and I will be the only that will have access to them.

Under freedom of information legislation the person you support is entitled to access the information he/she has provided at any time during those five years.

What will happen to the results of the study?

I plan to use what the person you support and 19 other interviews from other people with disabilities to tell the research story which will be



presented to participants and Enable Ireland staff



Presented in research papers and conferences

Do you have any questions?



If the person you support wants to take part, I'll ask him/her to sign a consent form. I'll also ask you to sign a consent form as a support person.



The person you support and you can tell me if you want to take part next week.



He/she can stop taking part in this study at any time and that is ok.



Can you tell me what you will be doing if the person you support takes part in the study?

Who should you contact for further information?

You can contact:

Rose Doolan Maher doolanmr@tcd.ie
or 0868411538.

Thank you!

Consent Form: Supporters

Research Project: Disability associated child protection risks in the virtual world: the exposure of young people with disabilities to child protection concerns online.



____ I have read the information form about this study.



____ I know that taking part in this study means that the person I support will do an interview of about one hour, and I will record this interview along with 19 other interviews this interview will answer the research question / make up the research story



____ I know that my role is to support the person communicate their views and decisions (and not mine).



____ I agree not to speak on behalf of the person.



____ All my questions have been answered.



____ I know that the person I support can stop taking part in this study at any time. This is his/her decision and not mine.

____ I know that there are not benefits from taking part in this study.



____ I know that what I say will be treated confidentially.



____ I know that in any report of this research my name will not appear and that other details about me will be hidden.



____ I know that if the person I support or someone else is at risk of harm, the researcher will talk to the relevant authorities. They will let the person I support know this first.



____ I know that my consent form will be kept for 5 years in Trinity college in locked cabinets.



____ I know that I can contact Rose Doolan Maher involved in the research to learn more about the study.

____ I agree to provide support to the person to take part in the study.

Rose Doolan Maher, Trinity College Dublin

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Appendix 15: Research story booklet



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Research Story

What do
you think
about the
Internet?



34 young people with disabilities aged 12-17 express their views about the Internet.

Authors: Young people with disabilities.

Acknowledgments



Thank you for taking the time to express your views about your internet use.

Thank you to your parents for supporting this research.

Your views are important to help people learn how to keep young people with disabilities safe when they are using the internet.

Contact: Rose Doolan Maher, doolanmr@tcd.ie

Dr. Susan Flynn, Dr. Julie Byrne (Trinity College Dublin)

Appendix 16: Vignettes

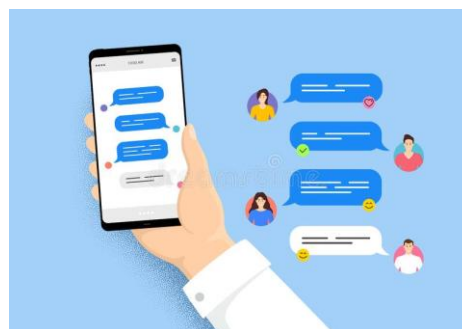
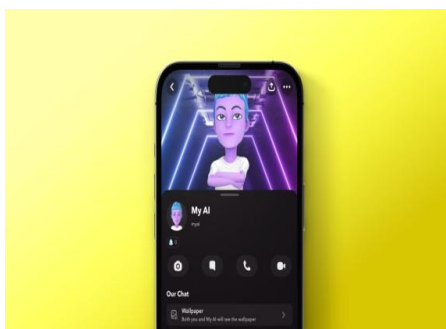


Tom and Emma are playing their favourite online game. Toms mum said that he could chat to Emma but if people he didn't know joined in their conversation Tom was told that he had to leave the game. Emma loves talking to people online. She has made friends online and plays with them all the time. Sometimes they say nasty things, but Emma just laughs or says something nasty back. Tom only talks to Emma when he plays the game. He does not tell his mum about the other people in the game because he does not talk to them. Tom does not like some of the bad language, but he loves the game.

What do you think about the rule Toms mum made?

What do you think about Emma chatting to strangers online?

Do you think Tom should tell his mum about the nasty comments and bad language?



Jamie is in first year in secondary school. His class have set up a chat group. Jamie notices that Kasey, a very quiet girl in his class is being teased and laughed at in the group. Some people in their class are calling her names and sending images of private body parts saying that the pictures are kasey's. Jamie is uncomfortable because Kasey is in the group, and he knows she can see everything the other girls are putting up. Jamie wonders what he can do?

What do you think Jamie should do?

What should Kasey do?

Appendix 17: Sample of survey cross tabulations

Do you believe your child's disability affects their usage of internet access

*** Does the child have a physical disability Crosstabulation**

			Does the child have a physical disability				Total	
			Yes		No			
			N	%	N	%	N	%
Do you believe your child's disability affects their usage of internet access	Not at all		9	42.9%	23	22.5%	32	26.0%
	Slightly		1	4.8%	14	13.7%	15	12.2%
	Somewhat		3	14.3%	23	22.5%	26	21.1%
	Moderately		5	23.8%	24	23.5%	29	23.6%
	Extremely		3	14.3%	18	17.6%	21	17.1%
Total			21	100.0%	102	100.0%	123	100.0%

Do you believe your child's disability affects their usage of internet access

*** Does the child have behaviour difficulties Crosstabulation**

			Does the child have behaviour difficulties				Total	
			Yes		No			
			N	%	N	%	N	%
Do you believe your child's disability affects their usage of internet access	Not at all		7	18.4%	25	29.4%	32	26.0%
	Slightly		3	7.9%	12	14.1%	15	12.2%
	Somewhat		9	23.7%	17	20.0%	26	21.1%
	Moderately		8	21.1%	21	24.7%	29	23.6%
	Extremely		11	28.9%	10	11.8%	21	17.1%
Total			38	100.0%	85	100.0%	123	100.0%

Do you believe your child's disability affects their usage of internet access

*** Does the child have a learning disability Crosstabulation**

			Does the child have a learning disability				Total	
			Yes		No			
			N	%	N	%	N	%
Do you believe your	Not at all		17	22.4%	15	31.9%	32	26.0%
	Slightly		9	11.8%	6	12.8%	15	12.2%

child's disability affects their usage of internet access	Somewhat	15	19.7%	11	23.4%	26	21.1%
	Moderately	19	25.0%	10	21.3%	29	23.6%
	Extremely	16	21.1%	5	10.6%	21	17.1%
Total		76	100.0%	47	100.0%	123	100.0%

Do you believe your child's disability affects their usage of internet access

*** Does the child have a hidden disability Crosstabulation**

			Does the child have a hidden disability				Total	
			Yes		No		N	%
			N	%	N	%		
Do you believe your child's disability affects their usage of internet access	Not at all		8	33.3%	24	24.2%	32	26.0%
	Slightly		1	4.2%	14	14.1%	15	12.2%
	Somewhat		4	16.7%	22	22.2%	26	21.1%
	Moderately		5	20.8%	24	24.2%	29	23.6%
	Extremely		6	25.0%	15	15.2%	21	17.1%
Total			24	100.0%	99	100.0%	123	100.0%

Do you believe your child's disability affects their usage of internet access

*** Does the child have a sensory disability Crosstabulation**

			Does the child have a sensory disability				Total	
			Yes		No		N	%
			N	%	N	%		
Do you believe your child's disability affects their usage of internet access	Not at all		13	24.1%	19	27.5%	32	26.0%
	Slightly		4	7.4%	11	15.9%	15	12.2%
	Somewhat		13	24.1%	13	18.8%	26	21.1%
	Moderately		13	24.1%	16	23.2%	29	23.6%
	Extremely		11	20.4%	10	14.5%	21	17.1%
Total			54	100.0%	69	100.0%	123	100.0%

Do you believe your child's disability affects their usage of social media

*** Is the child neurodivergent Crosstabulation**

		Is the child neurodivergent		Total
		Yes	No	

		N	%	N	%	N	%
Do you believe your child's disability affects their usage of social media	Not at all	14	17.5%	12	27.3%	26	21.0%
	Slightly	12	15.0%	5	11.4%	17	13.7%
	Somewhat	15	18.8%	6	13.6%	21	16.9%
	Moderately	13	16.3%	6	13.6%	19	15.3%
	Extremely	26	32.5%	15	34.1%	41	33.1%
Total		80	100.0%	44	100.0%	124	100.0%

Appendix 18: Overview of interrelated social influences

Socio-Structural influences	Overcoming physical barriers to participation through online platforms Expanding opportunities for education, hobbies, and socialisation More equitable disability engagement Limited offline opportunities increase time online Schools, family shaping of perceptions of 'acceptable' amount of time online
Socio-cultural influences	Power structures in families View of childhood in the family A child's dependence on parents due to disability increases surveillance and mediation Parental views about 'sharenting', sharing information/ images online Different norms online and offline Online acceptable or appropriate Communication is complicated Stigma and stereotypes about disability Normalisation of hateful language online Cultural tolerance for ableism Online communities value disability identity and expression Diverse views recognised Normalisation of self-advocacy and peer support Opportunities to participate in shared interests Help-seeking patterns stem from trust in parents, schools Tech companies are perceived as unhelpful – lack of accountability Dependency on family, not friends, for help with online problems Hierarchy in Schools is important – principal, then year head, then teacher. Normalisation of diverse social connections and interests Greater inclusivity and celebration of difference online Normalisation of always online culture Blurred boundaries between online and offline friendships / social life Pressure to stay connected to avoid FOMO
Psycho-social influences	Peer pressure, group norms, social comparison Identity formation online

	Reduced offline opportunity increases online reliance Ableism, isolation, exclusion FOMO Discrimination Social fatigue, cognitive fatigue Problems with decoding language, non-verbal cues Social interaction anxiety, overthinking responses, worry about misinterpretation Decreased confidence in online social interactions/ increased confidence in online social interactions Intersectionality- gender influence Vulnerability to grooming Anxiety and fear due to cyberbullying and hateful language online Increased exposure to marginalisation Increases self-confidence Increased sense of belonging Empowering online sense of identity Reduced anxiety through humour, distraction, and comfort Emotional regulation via soothing content Increased autonomy and confidence from self-directed activity Strengths in identity in pursuit of special interests Therapeutic effects – sensory engagement Stress relief and relaxation, positive mental health outcomes Absorption in the online world, the addictive nature of content Difficulty shifting between online and offline activities
Socio-technical influences	Application design leads to exclusion A platform-driven view of acceptance Access Accessibility- complex app design Platform governance – moderation and algorithmic Internet language – different dialect (gaming, memes, slang, emojis) Rapid pace of online interactions Accessibility barriers School internet safety and reliability Algorithm-driven feeds and the design of media applications, prioritise Engagement in online activity over online safety Platform tolerance of trolls and predators Algorithms increase spread of negative commentary and harmful content Poor tech support- tech reporting and complaint measures are limited and complex, with no outcome
Socio-biological influences	Physical symptoms from poor assistive tech Pressure to ‘keep up’ online Mental health online Fatigue/stress due to inadequate support Specific impairment not matched to support Additive nature of content Anxiety Shift from face-to-face therapeutic interventions to the provision of therapeutic support services online during the pandemic
Socio-economic influences	Affordability of accommodations Tech companies do not consider the impact their products have on all children, including children with disabilities Tech companies are profit-driven
Socio-political influences	Regulations National Global frameworks National, Global, and local disability advocacy

	Collective expression of views Policy frameworks on digital rights Restrictions on agency – lack of disability representation in digital policy discourse Disability advocacy -amplified Recognition of children’s digital rights
Socio-historical and temporal influences	Historical underinvestment in inclusive educational tech supports Difficulty with self-regulation and awareness of time passing Anxiety when time offline includes conversations that focus on online activity Fast-paced, ever-evolving digital landscape.