



SDDS PEER RESEARCH GROUP

Your Data, Your Terms

What young people and researchers told us
about donating data for public good



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Introduction

We live in an increasingly digital world. Online spaces are part of almost every aspect of our day-to-day lives, and young people are at the forefront of a changing internet. Younger generations have only ever known a world connected by the internet, and will live through the huge social and cultural changes it brings.

As members of the Smart Data Donation Service (SDDS) Peer Research Group, we carried out the interviews and focus groups that this report is based on. We came together to decide the main questions we would want asked and answered about SDDS, data and our digital lives. We had different views on data storage and donation, which helped make our decisions as a group informed and balanced.

We wrote questions for the team behind SDDS and for focus groups of young people aged 16–25. The lead co-investigators also gave input on these questions, which is an example of the kind of collaboration this report argues for. The focus groups aimed to build a detailed picture of how young people relate to their data, and how willing they might be to sign up and donate to SDDS.

The differences between people who know the project well and people hearing about it for the first time were revealing. A key question in this report is where young people's apathy about their data comes from. Many feel they cannot influence what happens to their data, and SDDS has a chance to change that by giving them more control.

This was clearest in discussions about AI. Young people in the focus groups often raised AI as an issue, while the SDDS team mentioned it much less. This shows a gap between generations in how they think about this fast-changing technology.

What also stuck with me is how much young people want engagement, contact and connection from SDDS, which are the things young people themselves are known for online. Honesty and transparency are missing between young people and tech companies. If SDDS wants to connect with young people, it needs to build both.

From our research and our time in the SDDS Peer Research Group, the most important takeaway for me is that SDDS needs to create an environment where young people want to get involved. SDDS can empower young people, as long as their concerns are heard and acted on.

Young people will live through the biggest technological changes of the coming decades. They should be at the centre of this work, involved in ways that build their sense of control and their trust.

Isy, peer researcher

The SDDS Peer Research Group



This report was researched and written by the SDDS Peer Research Group: seven young people who agreed the questions, ran the interviews and focus groups, analysed what they heard and wrote every chapter. Thank you to all of them for a fantastic year of work.



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Supported by Matthew Walsham, Sharon Long, Julia Dantas, and Aspen Eliasov from Partnership for Young London

This work was supported by the Smart Data Donation Service, including Jonathan Hook, Ros Galabo, Lindsey To, David Zandle, Faye Chivers, and Nicola Thomis.

Key findings

The world young people are in

- 1** The young people we spoke to feel that platforms are designed to exploit them. They described feeds made to hold their attention, tactics aimed at moments when people are at their lowest, and adverts and prices that change depending on how vulnerable someone is. They understand that free apps are paid for with data, and that *"you're the product"*. They see profit as the reason behind it. They also feel they cannot leave, because leaving would mean losing touch with friends and much of everyday life.
- 2** Young people raised AI as a separate worry, and they raised it seven times as often as the researchers did. They worry about AI being built into the apps and devices they use, and using their data, without them having any real choice.

How young people see their data

- 3** The young people we spoke to do not think of data as one thing. They already share a lot with platforms, but they are clear about which types of data they are happy to share and which they are not. Asking people to donate *"your data"* can sound like asking for all of it, including types many are wary of sharing, such as search history, private chats, exact location and health information.
- 4** Many of the young people we spoke to feel their data should belong to them, but that in practice the companies that hold it control it. Many have accepted this because they feel they have no

choice, which is different from agreeing with it. Where they do feel ownership, it is about being able to choose what they share, take it back, and know when it will stop being used.

- 5** Young people do not see the consent they give to tech companies today as real consent. Nobody reads the terms, and ticking a box does not mean you understood anything. For SDDS, consent needs to be informed, active and ongoing, and SDDS needs to be honest about the limits of pulling out. Young people also want a say in how their data is used, as well as what is shared. Some would share for research but never for commercial use.

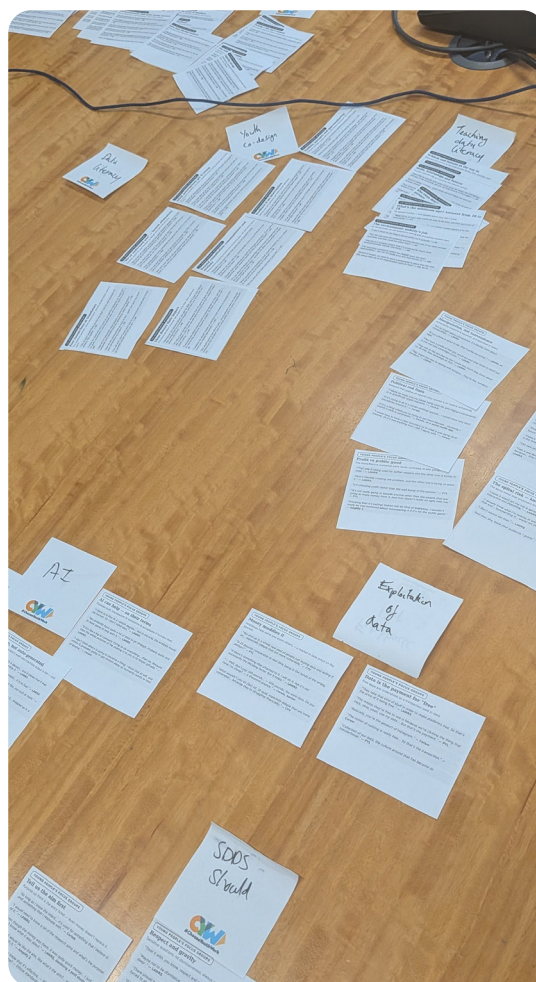
What young people made of SDDS

- 6** Young people reacted well to the fact that SDDS exists and is visible. To keep their trust, SDDS needs to be open about who it is, who funds it and what it does with data, and to show donors what their donation led to.
- 7** Most young people we spoke to trusted universities more than government, and companies least, but this was not automatic. Some said universities have links with industry too, and that you have to look closely at who you are giving data to. Most said they did not trust big tech. Their reasons came down to motive. Universities are seen as wanting research and progress. Organisations seen as making money from data are trusted least.
- 8** The co-investigators and the young people we spoke to both see platforms

as exploiting young people, but they put the weight on different harms. Young people talked more about misinformation and political messaging, though they raised eating disorders too. The research team talked more about gambling, eating disorders and child influencers, though some also raised political manipulation.

What turns interest into donation

- 9 Young people want to know what the research is for before they donate. Payment would encourage some people, but it does not replace a clear purpose. Some are also drawn by the chance to be part of something bigger and to push back against companies they feel powerless against.
- 10 Being asked to donate also makes some young people worry about getting into trouble. Their data could show they have broken rules, for example by having an account under the age limit, using a platform after a ban, or using a VPN to get around restrictions. They want to know what would happen to them before they hand anything over.
- 11 Young people expect something back for donating. They want to hear about results and impact, and for SDDS to stay in touch afterwards. They also liked the idea of being able to see their own data in future, as long as it is done with care and without judgement. The co-investigators think this kind of feedback could help people make healthier choices.
- 12 Donated data will only improve the evidence if the people donating reflect all young people. The young people the research most needs to understand, those who are vulnerable, disadvantaged or struggling, are the least likely to volunteer and the hardest to reach. Recruiting them through community organisations they trust is therefore central to the project.



- 13 For the young people we spoke to, data literacy covers more than data sharing. They linked it to spotting misinformation and scams, as well as understanding what is collected. They want it taught over time: in schools before anyone donates, explained at each step of donating, and most of all by letting people see their own data.
- 14 Young people decide whether to donate by working through five questions in turn, which we call gates: purpose, trust, safety, control and give-back. Purpose usually comes first, though for some, safety came before it. If any gate is failed, the answer is no, and money does not make up for a failed gate.

Recommendations

1 Start with purpose.

At the start of every conversation, consent screen and message, say what the research is for, how data will be used and what it is expected to achieve.

2 Protect the trust that comes from being a university project.

Keep SDDS clearly university-led, bound by ethics rules and independent of industry. Publish who funds it and who it partners with, including partners in other countries. Before agreeing any new partnership, ask whether young people would see it as moving SDDS closer to government or to companies.

3 Make consent informed, active and ongoing.

Replace long terms and conditions with plain language and formats people understand. Let people take their consent back, and give it a time limit by default. Be honest that data cannot always be removed once it has been used in finished analyses. Check that people have understood what they are agreeing to, for example with a short quiz.

4 Treat different types of data differently.

Search history, private chats, photos, medical information, exact location and passwords are the most sensitive. They need clear explanation and should only be shared if the donor actively chooses to include them. Let donors choose which items they share and what they can be used for, because the same person may be happy to share for health research but refuse commercial uses. Avoid talking about “*your data*” as if it were one thing.

5 Give something back.

Report results and impact to every donor in short, easy formats, and keep in touch after they donate. Build interactive, game-like ways for donors to explore their own data. Design these carefully so they do not judge people or leave them feeling worse about their habits.

6 Recruit donors who reflect all young people, and check whether this is happening.

Reach beyond the young people who usually take part in research by working with trusted community partners and a wide range of schools and colleges. Track who is missing from the donors, and report this openly.

7 Treat data literacy as something that continues over time, and cover more than data sharing.

Teach about data in schools and PSHE-style lessons before anyone is asked to donate. Link it to the misinformation and scams young people already worry about. Explain each step of donating as it happens. Use donors' own data, shown safely, as the main way of teaching. If donation is ever offered in schools, make sure no one feels pressured to take part.

8 Involve young people in running the work, beyond consulting them.

Keep the SDDS Peer Research Group going and treat its members as co-investigators, with real roles in analysis, paid opportunities, internships and training. Let young people's own research questions shape what donated data is used to study.

9 Adopt an environmental policy for data.

People are asking about SDDS's environmental impact, and views in the team differ on how large it will be, especially if AI is used to process data. Work out the environmental cost of storing and processing donated data, give someone responsibility for it, and publish a short statement.

10 Agree answers to the hard questions before donors ask them.

The team should agree one position, or say openly that the answer is *"not settled yet"*, on minimum age, who owns donated data and the limits of pulling out, so that every co-investigator gives the same answer. Build the donor journey around the five gates, in this order: the aim of the research, who SDDS is and who funds it, safety, control over what is shared, and what donors get back.

11 Decide what happens if donated data shows rule-breaking, before the first donation.

This includes having an account under the age limit, using a platform after a ban or using a VPN. Publish the answer, keep repeating it, and put protections in place before asking anyone to donate.

How we did the research

This report comes from a peer research project. Peer research is part of a shift from doing research on young people to doing research with them. It treats young people as co-researchers who help define the question, design the methods, carry out the fieldwork, analyse the data, develop recommendations and push for change. We followed the approach in Partnership for Young London's toolkit, *Involving Young People: A toolkit for peer research* (2025). The toolkit describes what successful peer research has in common. Young people are recruited because of their lived experience. They make real decisions about the research, and they get training and support to do it. They are paid for their time and credited for their work. The research is linked to action from the start, and ethics and safeguarding are taken seriously throughout.

7

peer researchers

50+

young people applied

13

co-investigators
interviewed

6

focus groups with
around 30 young people
aged 16 to 25

Who we are

We are seven young people in the SDDS Peer Research Group: Angel, Aspen, Isy, Lara, Ohemaa, Pravit and Yash. We were recruited through an open advert shared with Partnership for Young London's network of more than 3,000 youth sector organisations. More than 50 young people applied, and each was interviewed. The board was chosen to bring together a range of backgrounds, lived experiences and attitudes towards our own digital data. Partnership for Young London supported us throughout, including with training, setting up the fieldwork, running the analysis and writing this report.

We were paid the London Living Wage for our time. Our training followed the curriculum in the toolkit. Each session paired learning a research skill with making a decision about our own project, such as agreeing our research questions or finalising an interview guide. The training covered setting research questions, choosing research methods, designing interview and focus group guides, research ethics, consent and information sheets, safeguarding, preparing for fieldwork and analysing data.

What we wanted to find out

It had been agreed that the research would include interviews with the SDDS team and with young people. Apart from that, we made the decisions about the research. We agreed our own research questions, which were:

Our main research question was: how do young people aged 16 to 25 think and feel about their digital data, and what would make them willing to donate it to the Smart Data Donation Service for public interest research? Underneath that we asked what the people building SDDS hope it will achieve, how young people respond to SDDS when they first hear about it, and what SDDS would need to get right on trust, consent, feedback and data literacy for young people to take part.

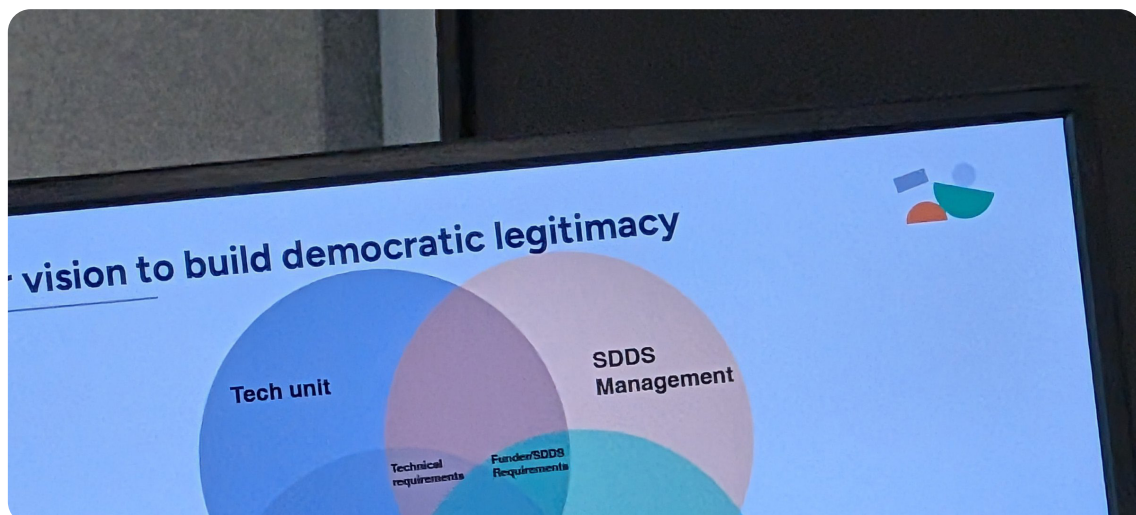
Each of us then drafted questions for the interviews and focus groups, and we sorted them together into a final shortlist for each guide.

Stage 1: Interviews with the SDDS team

Between January and March 2026, we interviewed 13 members of the SDDS team. In this report we call them co-investigators. They included academic researchers as well as people working in technical, design, engagement and management roles.

The interview guide was based on the questions we thought young people would ask. It covered each person's role and motivation, what data SDDS collects, who owns donated data, consent and minimum age, the environmental and social impact of SDDS, how young people from all backgrounds can take part, what difference SDDS could make for young people, and what the data could be used to research. Each interview ended by asking for one key message for young people. Most interviewees were sent the questions in advance.

The interviews took place online and lasted between about 20 minutes and just over an hour. Each was led by one or two peer researchers, and each was recorded and transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured. The main questions were asked in roughly the same order, but each interviewer followed up on what people said, and some questions were skipped when time ran short.



Stage 2: Focus groups with young people

We used what we learned from the interviews to design the focus group guide.

Between April and July 2026, we ran six focus groups with around 30 young people aged 16 to 25. Five groups took place in person and one took place online. The groups were set up with youth organisations and services in London. Group sizes ranged from three to ten people, and sessions lasted between about 20 minutes and an hour and three quarters. Four groups were led by peer researchers and two were led by project staff.

Most groups covered the same areas. These were how young people use apps and social media, what counts as their data and how they feel about it, whether they trust big tech companies, what they made of SDDS once it was explained, a short scenario comparing different uses of a young person's data, and what would make them willing or unwilling to donate. The guide changed from group to group. Some groups ran short of time, one used a different scenario, and one added a comparison with blood donation and an exercise in designing a study.

With support from SDDS staff, we created information sheets and written consent forms for everyone who took part, including the SDDS team, and the research received ethical approval from the University of York. In most focus groups, the person running the session also reminded participants at the start that the session would be recorded for note-taking, that what they said would stay confidential and their names would not be attached, and that they could skip any question or stop at any time. Focus group participants were paid for their time.



Stage 3: Analysing what we found

The recordings were transcribed automatically. Some interview transcripts were then reviewed by the peer researcher who led the interview.

Each of us read transcripts and highlighted the quotes we thought were most important. In the next session, the highlighted quotes were printed and cut out, and we arranged them into groups of quotes that said similar things. This gave us 72 sub-themes, 36 from the interviews and 36 from the focus groups. At an analysis day in July 2026, we sorted the sub-themes into larger themes and named them, first for each set of data and then for both together. We compared what young people and the SDDS team said, looked at where they agreed and disagreed, and agreed the main findings. Our themes became the chapters of this report, and most of us wrote an introduction to one of them.

We also counted how often young people and the SDDS team used certain words, and measured the tone young people used when they talked about different institutions. These counts leave out what facilitators said and count each transcript only once. Some of the figures in this report are based on them, and they are there to support the quotes, not to replace them.

Every quote in this report has been checked against the transcripts. We have taken out repeated words, marked cuts with “...” and added words in [square brackets] where a quote would not make sense without them. Young people’s quotes are not linked to the group they came from, so that no one can be identified.



Our generation and the ones after us are growing up in a digital world where data is being produced all the time. Social media, search engines, apps and games constantly collect information about the young people we say we are trying to 'protect'. We often think of data collection as something that makes our daily lives more convenient and comfortable. Algorithms can predict what we want before we know it ourselves, and this can lead young people to overlook how much power their data holds.

One young person summed up why they distrust tech companies in a few words: *"Because we're the guinea pigs."* Later in the same session, they described their attitude to data collection: *"It's the fact that we just have to. And the thing is that because we just have to, we're forced into it."* This shows how limited and helpless we can feel as young people about the way our data is collected, used and interpreted. We should be asking: who benefits from the information we produce? Big tech companies hold huge amounts of information about their users, which lets them build detailed profiles based on what people do in their apps. Our data is valuable because it can be used to analyse us on a vast scale and to make money. As one young person put it: *"basically, you're the product of Instagram."*

AI systems also process huge amounts of information every day, which raises concerns about data leaks and exploitation. It also raises questions about what companies know about young people, while we have little idea how exposed we are.

So the problem explored in this chapter is about more than data collection itself. It is about making sure young people can take part in an online world without being exposed to manipulation and risk from companies and organisations that 'use' their data for their own gain. It is also about what we cannot see. The evidence that could hold these companies to account is missing, and the end of this chapter explains why.

Lara, peer researcher

1.1 Exploited by design

The young people in the focus groups did not see their relationship with tech companies as neutral. They felt that young people are both more valuable to these companies and more vulnerable to them. They thought their data was richer than older people's, their habits easier to exploit and their spending easier to influence.

As one participant put it, *"I think it's taking advantage of more... young people interact with it more."* Another said that *"everything I've seen is always starting to target the young people, the future generations"* and that *"there's way more information on them because they're interacting with it the most."* She saw older people as less worth targeting: *"Gen X and Boomer are ignored in... most tactics and... campaigns because... they're not the ones that are like impulsively buying."* This is how the groups saw it. Older adults are also heavily targeted online, but the perception still matters.

The young people we spoke to named the companies they felt did this: Instagram and Google above all, then TikTok, Spotify, WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat and Apple, with Instagram mentioned more than any other service across the six groups. The companies named most are the ones young people use most in their social lives.

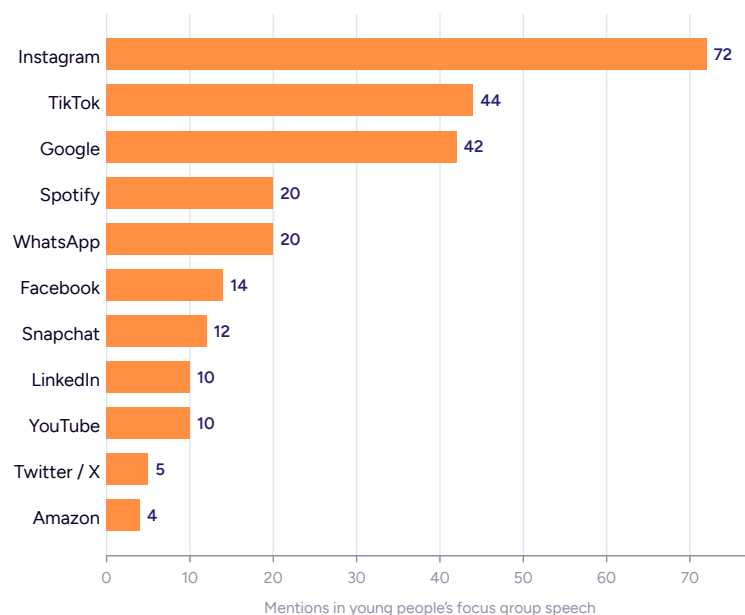


Figure 1. The platforms and companies young people named, counted across all six focus groups.

Young people described this as manipulation aimed at people's weak spots, rather than convenience. One participant, drawing on what she had studied, described apps exploiting moments of desperation, *"for Uber... they use a common tactic of like if your phone is about to die, they'll spike the prices"*, and platforms that *"have a profile of how you would act and what times to reach out to you and take advantage of you."* Much of this comes from recommendation algorithms, the systems that track what you do and decide what you see next. Participants described feeds designed to hold their attention and steer it. The co-investigators described the same systems as designed to be addictive and manipulative.

"It's no longer about convenience. It's literally more about manipulation."

YOUNG PERSON

"The algorithms will just keep pushing stuff at them and shaping and changing their lives in ways they don't understand."

CO-INVESTIGATOR

The interviews say much the same as the focus groups here. *"Social media use makes you easy to manipulate. It sways you to opinions you might not necessarily otherwise hold,"* said one co-investigator, and another talked about control: *"What the algorithms want is... they don't want us to be in control. They want us to just feel compelled."*

"They rely on the fact that we don't know how much they know about us. So they take advantage on that."

YOUNG PERSON

"They forget that they're dealing with humans... They're like, numbers, numbers."

YOUNG PERSON

When the young people we spoke to explained what drives this, they named profit. They saw the manipulation as part of how these companies make money: *"I find that part, the marketing bit, that doesn't sit right with me because it's choosing profit rather than the well-being of the person,"* said one participant. One co-investigator put it more bluntly: *"You are one person against a trillion dollar corporation or a set of trillion dollar corporations that want to farm you for your brain and your money and your mental health maybe."*

Young people understand that free apps are paid for with data. *"They take that kind of stuff in order to make platforms free. So that's the price of it being free,"* said one participant. Another explained how it works: *"The reason they're free to use is because we're clicking the thing that says, okay, yeah, use my data... but that's the payment."* The same participant talked about the culture this creates: *"Collection of our data, the culture around that has become so transactional."* As one young person put it:

"Basically, you're the product of Instagram."

YOUNG PERSON

1.2 Locked in

Young people also feel locked in. Using a platform does not mean they trust it. For the young people we spoke to, it often means there is nowhere else to go. *“Because we just have to, we’re forced into it. Like, I can’t access half of my friends without Facebook,”* said one participant, who stayed on a platform despite knowing about its data scandals, because leaving would mean losing touch with people. Peer pressure makes leaving harder still: *“There’s so much peer pressure. Everyone around me was like... why don’t you have TikTok?... You have no other choice”*. Asked what made them distrust these companies, the first participant said: *“Because we’re the guinea pigs.”* Even where there is a choice, it is not much of one: *“you can say no, but you can’t have the app at all. So it’s like a social task of like, okay, I need, let’s say, LinkedIn to find a job, or I need Instagram to like keep up with friends and stuff... if I decide not to be part of it because they’re using my data, then I’m excluded completely.”*

Sometimes this is built into the phone itself. Participants described companies building their services into every part of their devices, so that opting out is not possible. The clearest example in the groups was Google, with an AI assistant that comes on the phone and cannot be removed, and AI answers added to every search.

“It automatically has Gemini AI on it. I cannot uninstall it or disable it. It’s automatically there, I have no choice whatsoever.”

YOUNG PERSON

The same participant said this went beyond one product: *“a lot of companies are sort of forcing things on us, that are collecting data from us and we have no choice in it.”* When one company runs your search engine, maps, email and phone operating system, any new feature it adds appears across all of them at once. Refusing it would mean leaving all of those services, rather than a single app.

1.3 AI: the newest worry

AI came up as a separate worry, mostly from young people. They raised it seven times as often as the co-investigators did, and their worries went beyond any one use of AI. The first is the one described above: AI being built into their lives and using their data, without them ever really choosing it. *“They’re being forced to use it and forced to rely on it because it’s being embedded to all these systems against our consent,”* said one participant, pointing to Google, *“where it automatically gives you an AI overview on everything.”*

The second is about what happens to their data once AI systems have it. One participant said that if donated data were handed to a big AI company’s tools, it would no longer feel private: *“If it’s like a big AI company trying to do everything... then no, because then the whole purpose of me sharing it to you is no longer private.”*

1.4 The missing evidence

The last part of the problem was raised mostly by the co-investigators. They said the lack of evidence about young people and social media is holding back change. Research in this area mostly relies on asking people to remember and report their own behaviour. This does not work well here, because people cannot accurately remember how much time or money they spend: *"It's not what you remember watching, it's what you actually watched on YouTube and when you watched it,"* said one co-investigator. *"You ask people to estimate how much time they've done on this or how much money they've spent, and people are really awful at answering those questions accurately,"* said another.

"It turns out that this just doesn't correlate with how long they've actually spent on TikTok because people can't self-report it."

CO-INVESTIGATOR

One reason the evidence is poor is that the companies control access to it. They stop researchers getting the data that would show what platforms are doing, with *"big gaming companies being quite behind closed doors"*.

"Those companies are hoarding that data and not giving it to research, just because they don't want us to prove that they're damaging society."

CO-INVESTIGATOR

There is also a problem with who gets studied. Studies often miss the young people most affected: *"if we do research and it's only representing the 18 to 21 year olds at the University of York, we failed"*, and *"they aren't representative, they'll give the wrong answers fundamentally and they'll actually be very bad data sets for scientists"*. The groups most often missed include vulnerable young people, those in digital poverty, and those facing language and cultural barriers.

"You just rely on people who are interested and want to help with the research project. And you might be missing massive swathes of the population."

CO-INVESTIGATOR

One co-investigator pointed out the difficulty for researchers: the groups they most want data from are the least likely to donate, or to be in a position to.

"I'm interested in young people who are vulnerable, mental health issues and those are disadvantaged, but the chances are... those might be the very groups that won't agree to donate data."

CO-INVESTIGATOR

This means the gaps in the data are biggest for the young people the research most needs to understand. They are the ones with the least reason, time or trust to volunteer. Reaching them through community organisations they already trust is the main recruitment challenge for SDDS.

In the team's view, good evidence needs accurate data about what individual people actually do, detailed enough to be useful and drawn from all kinds of young people. They see donation as the only way to get this at scale.

"We either lack the evidence to make sensible decisions and policies or worse, we get distorted... misleading evidence from big tech."

CO-INVESTIGATOR

As Figure 2 shows, words such as evidence, policy, self-report and representative were used many times more often by the team than by young people, and "representative" never appears in young people's speech at all. But some young people described the same problem in their own words. One pointed out that the people who choose to take part in research are not always the ones who most need to be heard: *"It's not people who like, stay in their houses and are on the phone or like people who are, the hidden sense of, it's like all these people who feel like, oh, like my views don't matter anyways... There's not the people you're going to be reaching."*

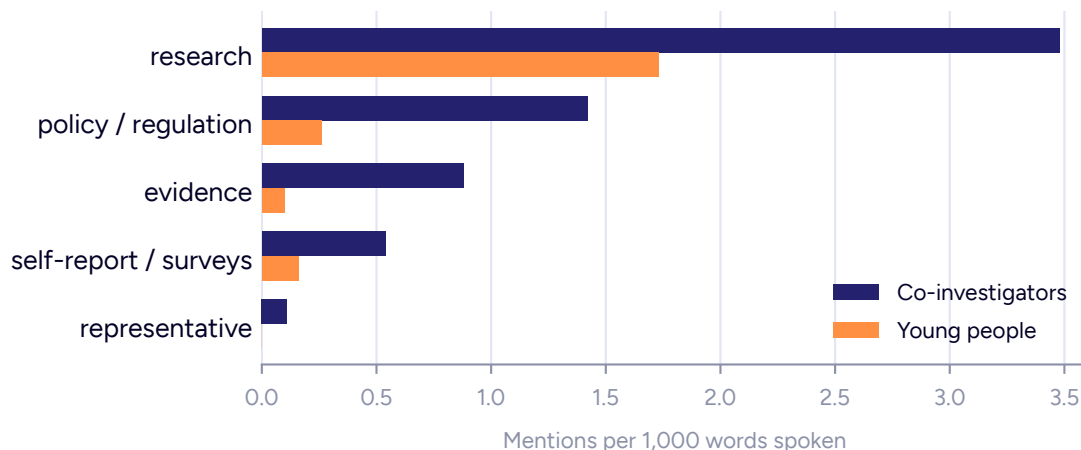


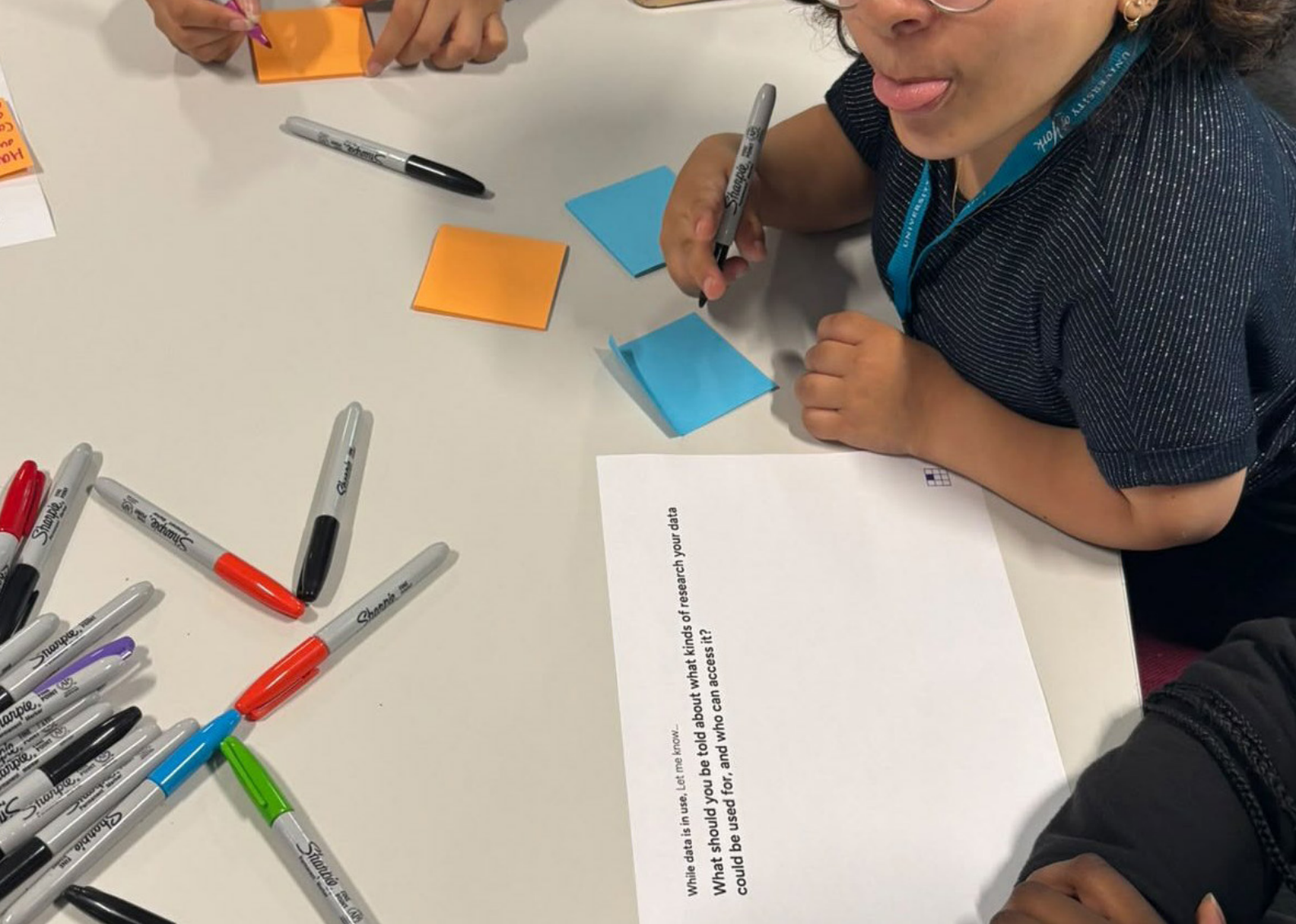
Figure 2. How often each group used research and policy words, per 1,000 words spoken.

The interviews are clear about what this means for the rules young people live under. Co-investigators said regulation is years behind. Decisions like the proposed under-16 social media ban do not have a proper evidence base, and the rules cannot keep up with the technology. Some young people made the same criticism. Participants in one group, discussing the ban, wanted the question properly studied rather than decided on assumptions.

"To get an accurate picture of how people under the age of 16 are interacting with social media... this is the only way I can conceive of actually getting that."

YOUNG PERSON, ON THE BAN DEBATE

So the research team and young people end up making the same point: rules about young people are being made without good evidence, while the data that could show what is happening stays with the companies.



CHAPTER 2

Attitudes to data and ownership

Young people see benefits in sharing data, but draw firm lines around search history, private messages and location. Most have accepted that their data is not really theirs, because saying no is not an option.

One of the things that surprised me about the research we did was how many young people were resigned to the fact that their data was being harvested, used and sold.

I co-led focus groups with young people about attitudes to data and ownership. I expected them to be more worried about their privacy. What surprised me was how little they felt we could do about it. Many participants felt that, although their data should belong to them, it was always going to end up in the hands of big tech. As one participant put it, *"I think it should belong to me, but I think it will belong to the company."* This shows that young people do not think it is fair that they do not own their data, but they feel powerless against big tech companies.

Our findings show there is a problem with how young people consent to their data being stored, used and sold. If we feel powerless, can we really consent to our data being processed? We have grown up in a world where data collection is normal, but that does not mean we have properly consented to it or fully understand what it means.

One moment that stood out for me was when we discussed search histories. Some participants had assumed their search history stayed on their own device. Asked what had surprised them, one said: *"My search history... What about that was private? I thought that was just on my phone."* At the end of the session, they came back to it: *"The worst thing is my search history. I didn't know that they could go through your search history."* This shows how little young people can see of what happens to their data behind the scenes, which again raises the issue of consent.

These concerns go beyond individual privacy. They connect to the wider issue of digital sovereignty, which means who controls the technology and data a country depends on. Governments and companies have become more and more dependent on a small number of tech companies, most of them based in the US. This has raised concerns, especially as the US has moved further to the right. The EU has been investing in European tech companies to build alternatives to US big tech. For me, this shows that the importance of controlling data is being recognised, and action is being taken at an international level. But there is still a lot of work to do, especially for young people.

If there is one thing to remember from this chapter, it is that we as young people have not properly consented to our data being collected, used and sold. Data collection is now part of daily life, and we still care about our privacy, but we do not have the power to protect it. Some participants felt strongly about keeping their information away from both companies and governments. As one young person put it, *"I would say no matter, even if the king itself was funding or whatever was funding, no offense, my [data] ain't going anywhere."*

Aspen, peer researcher

2.1 It is not all bad

The young people we spoke to also saw benefits in sharing data, including convenience, connection and safety. *"I like it when it's used to make your life more convenient,"* said one participant. Sharing your location with friends was seen as useful rather than intrusive: *"You can see when... my friends are [active] so I can... speak to them. So that's a good positive thing I guess."* Sharing everyday things could also be fun: *"It's kind of just an easy way of bragging about it without having to post on Instagram"* (a participant, on Snap Map). Some also just liked being able to switch off: *"Sometimes there's balance, but it's mostly for turning my brain off."*

Some participants also saw a good side to the recommendation systems that felt manipulative in other conversations. Feeds can pick up your interests before you notice them yourself, and participants could see the appeal as well as the risk.

"Google has told me that I'm into basketball... I'll probably enjoy it in like a year's time, possibly."

YOUNG PERSON

Another participant talked about the algorithm on a sibling's feed: *"It can be something that she's clearly not interested in... but it's still feeding her [feed] as well."* One explained how it works: *"They have a collection of... words that they think that you would search for... based on interest... and predicting."* These participants understand how the systems work and can weigh up the good and the bad. That makes their concerns elsewhere in this report more convincing.

2.2 Data young people do not want to share

In focus groups we asked how young people feel about sharing different kinds of data about them. It became clear that *"data"* means many different things to them. The young people we spoke to know which types of data they are comfortable sharing and which they are not. Talking about *"your data"* as one thing misses the differences that matter most to them.

For one participant, the biggest shock was search history. They had assumed it was private and were unsettled to learn it was not. Others were less worried, and some said they would share their search history as long as their name was not attached to it.

"The worst thing is my search history. I didn't know that they could go through your search history."

YOUNG PERSON

"You're telling me my search histories are not private?"

YOUNG PERSON

Search history feels different because it records the questions you would never ask out loud: *"There is sensitivity to my search history because sometimes you just search, not thinking that anyone else is going to see it."* One participant gave an example:

"Me randomly search[ing]... does this mean I have, I don't know, cancer or something like that?" The same may apply to AI chatbots, which people can use to ask personal questions they would not ask anywhere else. Many people also think search can be made private. Browsers offer "private" modes like Chrome's Incognito, but these mainly hide your activity from other people using the same device. They do not hide it from the companies involved. The transcripts show how easily this could have been missed. Young people said "search history" many times, but no co-investigator used the phrase in any of the thirteen interviews.

Some participants also drew firm lines around private chats and messages, photos, medical records, exact location and passwords. *"WhatsApp has... actual personal content because it's conversations,"* said one participant. *"Medical records... Yeah. Me too... Location,"* said three participants in one exchange. Location felt the most invasive, because it shows where you physically are. These young people know that much of this data is already collected about them every day. The question for them is what they would knowingly hand over, and to whom.

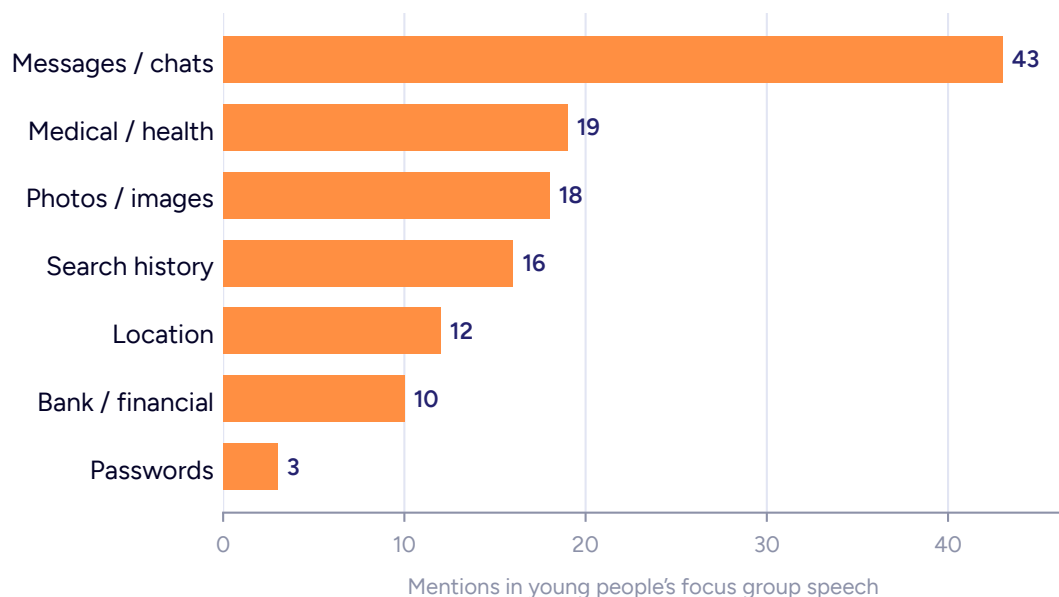


Figure 3. The sensitive data types in numbers: how often young people raised each one. The counts show how often something came up, not how strongly it was refused. Passwords barely came up because nobody needed to argue about them.

"Why are they so obsessed with knowing our exact location? That kind of freaks me out a little bit."

YOUNG PERSON

"I think there's a security risk, that people can see when you're at the house."

YOUNG PERSON

The two datasets also differ in what "data" first brings to mind. When young people gave examples, they talked about content: search history, messages, photos, location.

The co-investigators talked far more about behavioural records: watch histories, session lengths, spending logs, the data that platforms collect automatically. The two sides can use the same word and mean different things. Material aimed at young people should name the kinds of data it means, rather than relying on the word “data” alone.

2.3 Challenges to ownership

Asked whether they own their data, the young people we spoke to gave mixed answers. Some felt a sense of ownership *“because it is me, it’s something that I’m doing”*, but most felt ownership was split between the person who creates the data and the company that keeps it: *“Yes, I own the ownership of doing the action, but they probably log in the times...”* said one participant. Others were more doubtful: *“I think it should belong to me, but I think it will belong to the company,”* while another said: *“The more I use my phone, the more I’ve realized it’s actually someone else’s... how can I say that belongs to me when the minute I’m accessing, I’m using the Internet, it’s gone. It’s out there.”*

“We’re kind of just reaching a point where you’ve just got to accept that companies have everything on you.”

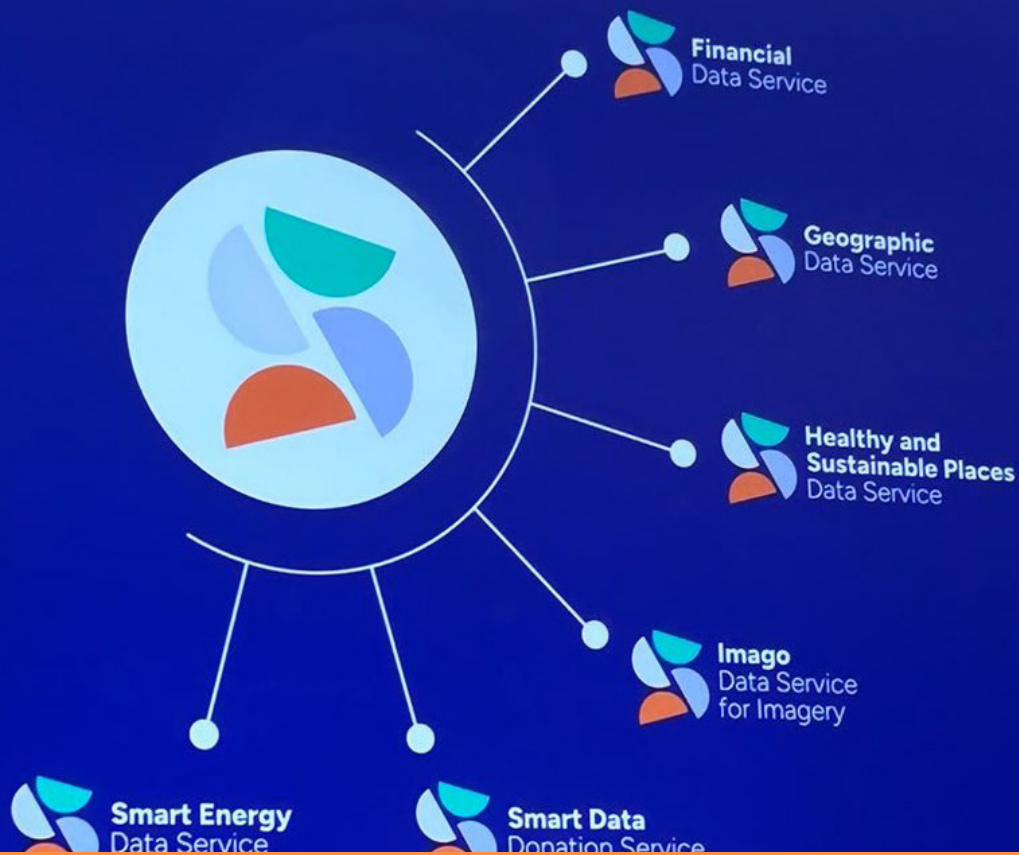
YOUNG PERSON

Most had accepted this because they felt they had no choice, which is different from agreeing with it. You can opt out of some parts of the system but not all of it, and taking part in social life means giving up data.

“In order to be present in current society, you have to pay the tax of, like, here, all your data is mine now.”

YOUNG PERSON

Where young people did feel ownership, it was about choice: deciding what to share, being able to take it back, and knowing when its use would end.



CHAPTER 3

The Smart Data Donation Service

SDDS is a university-led service that lets young people donate their platform data for research. Young people welcomed it, with conditions, and a few would not donate under any circumstances.

There's a line from the interviews for this chapter that I kept going back to. One co-investigator put it like this: *"You are currently in a very one-sided fight... And SDDS is one part of the resistance."* It's an unusual thing for a university project to say about itself, because these projects don't usually talk as if they're up against someone. But after working on this chapter, I think it's accurate. Most of us, me included, have felt some version of that one-sided fight, whether it's scrolling past a privacy policy we never read or accepting cookies just to get onto a site.

Here's the short version of SDDS. The research team wanted to understand what young people do on platforms like YouTube and other social media. Big tech companies hold this data, but they have little reason to open it up to researchers, especially for research that might show their products cause harm. So the researchers built a way around them, using the fact that people have a legal right to a copy of their data and can choose to donate it. This chapter explains why this gap in the data matters for evidence and policy, and where the project still falls short.

The part I keep coming back to is the evidence problem, because it matters far beyond universities. Policy is often based on research that relies on self-reporting, which means people saying what they remember doing online. Memory isn't reliable enough for that. On top of this, the young people whose experiences would tell us the most are usually the hardest to reach, so the evidence is weakest where it is needed most.

If you only take one thing from this chapter, make it this: many decisions about young people and technology are being made without good evidence. SDDS is trying to provide better evidence. It hasn't got everything sorted yet, and this chapter is open about that.

Pravit, peer researcher

3.1 What SDDS is

The Smart Data Donation Service (SDDS) is a university-led research project. It is building a service that lets people collect the data that platforms hold about them, using their legal right to a copy of it, and choose to donate it, safely and on their own terms, to research that serves the public. Donation is voluntary: donors decide what to share and can pull out. The team also plans to let donors see their own data in future. The service is run by university researchers, funded in part by government research funding, and designed together with young people, including the peer researchers who wrote this report.

3.2 Origins of SDDS

The co-investigators saw SDDS as a way of giving some power back to the public, away from the companies that hold the data: *“the SDDS is one way that we can try and redress this state of the world,”* said one co-investigator. Another made a point that came up in several interviews: *“everyone is already donating their data... but they’re donating it to these mega corporations whose only interest is... making money... and there is no counterweight to this.”* In this view, people already give their data away all the time, and SDDS offers a way to give it to public research instead. The same co-investigator, quoting new guidance from Sweden, said: *“what’s been happening over the last 10 years is an enormous social experiment that was unregulated and no one asked for.”*

Several of the team said the service came about because their research had been blocked. One co-investigator’s account explains how SDDS started. Their research field was loot boxes, the gambling-like rewards sold inside video games: *“I’ve done so much research on loot boxes... I am the most published researcher, the most cited researcher on loot boxes in the world, I think still.”* Policymakers kept asking whether spending on loot boxes leads young people towards gambling, or whether gambling-prone people simply buy more loot boxes, and nobody had the data to answer.

“I kept going to these select committees and things and everyone would always ask me the same questions. And I just say like, look, we don’t have the data to answer these questions. You need real behavioural data, real spending data. You need it longitudinally.”

CO-INVESTIGATOR

“I stopped publishing because I didn’t have the right data, so I couldn’t create anything useful,” they went on. *“My publications would have just helped my career because I get more citations... but like the citations wouldn’t actually [mean] anything in terms of changing the world. I became very frustrated and at that point I started looking for other ways to find data.”* Working with industry ran into conflicts of interest, so: *“I spent years wandering around trying to figure out how to do this and it eventually became the SDDS. That’s it. But the SDDS is supposed to help all the researchers. Like my niche topic was loot boxes... This is the same if you care about short form content and TikTok. This is the same if you care about like all sorts of things.”*

Asked why the focus is on young people, the same co-investigator talked about power: *“young people are especially important because they’re often unheard in conversations because they lack power”, and “it’s really hard to get these messages across and get things translated into policy when the people with the power are totally distinct from the people who may or may not be being harmed by a phenomenon.”*

Some of the team hope for more than a single project. One co-investigator described data as a resource that should be shared by everyone: *“Data should be made a Commons if possible”, and hoped to “let 1000 flowers bloom in research when it comes to telemetry data”.*

The team see independence from industry as important to SDDS, though they come from different research traditions. One co-investigator explained: *“I come from a more of a public health perspective where... you don’t accept funding from... the industries involved with the things that you’re investigating... whereas when you apply that across to different disciplines like video games researchers. They have been, they haven’t had the same kind of thought process around. Well, if I if I accept money from the video games industry, what does that mean for the research that I’m doing?”*

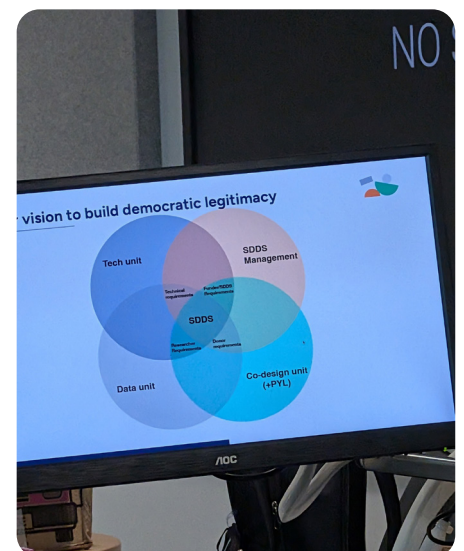
Another raised a different risk. If large numbers of data donation requests create too much work for companies, the rules could change to protect them from that burden, and companies might end up sharing less: *“Companies find it’s easier to just be more restrictive in the kind of data that we collect, rather than following through with data donation.”*

3.3 How young people responded to SDDS

In focus groups, young people were given a simple explanation of what SDDS is and then asked for their reactions. Overall, young people were interested, but with conditions. For some, what mattered most was simply that SDDS exists. Standing up to the platforms on your own feels hopeless, so knowing someone was trying mattered to them.

“What will stick with me is that you actually exist. So at least now I know that there is people out there... trying to do something.”

YOUNG PERSON



Young people also wanted SDDS to be well known and easy to find, which they linked to being trustworthy: *“Making sure it’s well known. Like everybody knows about it.”*

Others saw SDDS as filling a gap: *“because they’re using it wrongly, there needs to be someone like you guys who are trying to try and pave that road”.* Not everyone was convinced, though. Some found SDDS hard to follow at first: *“I was confused. That was*

the only word that I had been in my brain." One participant, invited by the facilitator to be as critical as they liked, felt the research was too small to make a difference: *"Well, I think it is stupid. It's so narrow. Your research is so narrowed down..."* Comparing SDDS with companies like Google and Facebook, they added: *"you're literally an ant [against an] elephant... But there's no alternative. No, there's no alternative."* Even this criticism came back to the same point: there is nothing else like it.

Some participants who were willing to donate had not thought about it much. They saw their own data as harmless: *"there's literally... nothing on there... I don't see how it is going to be of any use to anything"*, and *"I really... don't care if people can see that I Googled how long does it take to get to London."* This shows a misunderstanding about what researchers want. These participants assumed their data would only matter if it contained something harmful or embarrassing. In fact, large studies need ordinary data, because patterns only show up across thousands of ordinary days. Another participant disagreed, saying it is hard to judge for yourself what is harmless: *"there could be one little thing that's just missed... but could easily impact you."* This matters for how SDDS explains itself. Donors who think there is *"nothing on there"* need to understand that ordinary data becomes useful when lots of people share it, so they know what they are giving and what it can do.

One participant explained why donating can feel harder than everyday data collection. Everyday collection does not feel like a decision: *"I'm not consciously giving it over, my dat[a]... it's not there in my mind all the time."* Donating is different: *"you are consciously... walking up [to] someone... giving them your data... it's still the consciousness of it."* Donating means doing on purpose what normally happens without people noticing. This explains how someone can hand data to platforms every day without thinking about it and still hesitate when SDDS asks. That hesitation makes sense, because SDDS is asking for exactly that kind of conscious choice.

Another group raised the opposite risk. Discussing a scenario about a 16-year-old being asked to share their data, one participant said many young people would agree without thinking: *"I think as a 16 year old, you wouldn't question anyone, just do it"*, because using apps has got people used to agreeing to things.

A small number of participants would not donate under any circumstances. No explanation, funder or safeguard would change their answer. For them it was a matter of principle: *"It's privacy, you know?"*

"Even if the king itself was funding... no offense, my [data] ain't going anywhere. It ain't going anywhere."

YOUNG PERSON

One participant said: *"not a single chance. You [wouldn't] be able to persuade me to deliberately give my data to someone with me consciously knowing."* Even this refusal is about the act of consciously choosing to give data away.



CHAPTER 4

Trust, transparency and consent

Young people trust universities more than government, and companies least. Real consent has to be informed, active and ongoing, and it is strongest when young people help design the service.

This chapter is about trust, and what it really means to say yes. As peer researchers, trust and consent came first for us too. In every focus group and interview, we made sure each participant, whatever their background, knew their rights before we began.

Consent is a word that gets used a lot in research, often without much thought about what it means in practice. We don't think consent should simply depend on age, as if under-18s can't understand it. The bigger problem is that consent online has become so long and complicated that nobody reads every line, so most people are not sure what they have actually agreed to. The young people we spoke to said the same thing. They were unsure what would happen to their data, and what they could do if they changed their mind. One participant summed it up: "I think they purposely make them really long so that you won't do it."

What interested me most was how closely consent is tied to trust. Not one young person we spoke to trusted big tech companies. When we asked about SDDS, their trust came with conditions. Most said they would only trust the researchers if they were named and their plans were clear from the start. This matches my own experience. I have worked with many groups where staff and organisations went quiet afterwards. I was rarely told what difference my voice had made, and even less about how my confidentiality was protected or whether I could fully withdraw. That left me unsure about how anonymity and trust are really handled, and the same worry came up again and again in this chapter.

The chapter also looks at withdrawal, which is where young people and the research team disagree most. Young people expect to be able to take their data back completely, while the team says that is not always possible. I believe this chapter shows that young people need to trust where their data is going before they will feel confident sharing it, and that big tech companies and SDDS both need to work with young people to be more open.

Yash, peer researcher

4.1 Trust and transparency

Young people in the focus groups kept coming back to trust and transparency. Asked whether they trust big tech, most said no. In one group, asked whether they trust big tech companies to use their data responsibly, two participants answered “No.” and “Never.” Asked again a few minutes later whether they trust big tech companies, another said: *“That’s a big no.”* One participant in another group was more neutral, saying they did not *“fundamentally trust or distrust”* tech companies. Others were blunt: *“No consideration of well-being of no one”*.

“They’re not transparent. They don’t tell you what they’re collecting, they don’t tell you why.”

YOUNG PERSON

Most trusted universities more than government, and companies least, and their reasons came down to motive. Universities are seen as wanting knowledge and bound by rules: *“They’re bound by ethics codes”*. *“A university... comes from a place of research and wanting to... progress. Government, what is the intention?”*. But this trust was not automatic. Asked to compare universities and government, one participant concluded: *“I guess the answer is kind of like neither, like you have to really look into it and like be selective”*. Companies were trusted least because they were assumed to be after money. As soon as data seemed to be for sale, trust fell away: *“If I hear like it’s being sold for profit... I don’t see that as honest,”* said one participant, *“I almost find that kind of manipulative.”* More than anything else, it was the sense that someone was making money from people’s data that lost their trust.

“I’m more comfortable with a university or... researchers using my information rather than the government in itself.”

YOUNG PERSON

“If I’m giving it to the government... it likely just kind of disappears off into the void.”

YOUNG PERSON

Some young people thought data given to government could disappear, or be used to spy on them. This matters for SDDS, because much of the trust it starts with comes from being a university project.

When young people first heard about SDDS, they asked without prompting what would be collected, who would see it and whether they could pull out. Most of all, they wanted to know what the research was for. The fact that SDDS exists and is visible got their attention. To keep it, young people said SDDS needs to be open about who it is and who funds it, and to show donors what their donation led to.

In one group, participants were told that the project is partly funded by government and asked whether that helps. For one participant it made things worse: *“you’re funded by the government to take people’s data back... that’s implying that the government is paying to collect our data”*, and no written guarantee would change that: *“no matter how many written contracts [and] documents [say] that the government will have no*

access to it... I wouldn't give it to the government." For them, it felt like "too much of a conscious invasion of my privacy". Another participant in the same group saw it the other way. For them, government funding together with a university made SDDS feel more official: "Because it's a government [and] university organisation, like it's more official. So it's kind of more trustworthy in a sense". Being honest about funding may cost SDDS some trust with some donors and win it with others. SDDS needs a clear explanation of the government's arm's-length role ready, because the question will keep coming up.

The same order shows up in the tone of what young people said. The project measured the emotional tone of every sentence from young people that mentioned each type of institution. Talk about universities and researchers was noticeably warmer than talk about government or companies, which were very similar to each other. This matches the order young people gave when asked directly (Figure 4). It measures tone rather than trust, so it supports the quotes rather than replacing them.

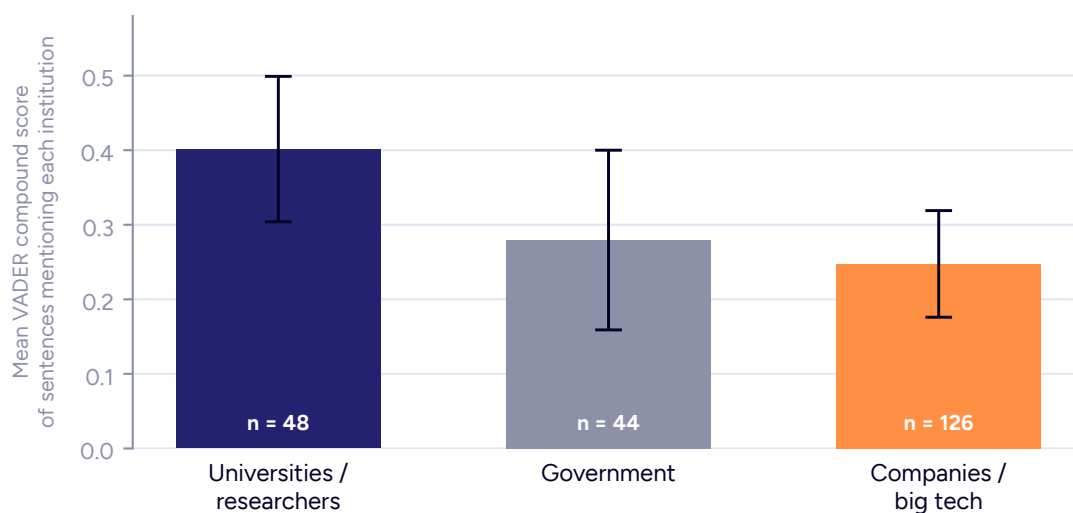


Figure 4. How warmly young people spoke when each institution came up. Higher bars mean warmer talk. This measures tone, not trust directly.

Young people's questions about transparency went as far as funders, partners and which countries data goes to. Asked whether knowing who funds a project would make a difference, one participant said: "Yeah, definitely. But you don't always know who's funding it". Participants asked where companies are based and how the rules work across borders, and pointed out that layers of organisations can hide who is responsible: "There's so many layers to it". One participant said this applied to universities too:

"And then with unis, like a lot of them have like links with like, I don't know, I can just, from what I know, like arms companies and so on. So you never know with them... You just need to know. Who you give in the data to?"
YOUNG PERSON

The co-investigators were not all equally cautious about anonymisation. Some were open about its limits: "it's very difficult to fully de-identify data, particularly if it's free

text.” Others were more confident that data *“won’t be traceable back to an individual”*. Several saw trust as essential, because without it nobody will donate.

On security, the team’s answers were concrete: trusted research environments, *“locked rooms, locked systems,”* clean rooms, special keys and certification. Young people’s questions were just as specific: *“I’d also want to know... about... how long they want it, intend to keep the data for... just general safeguards”*. Some were reassured that data would be anonymised, but others doubted it could fully protect them. One worried about their search history being linked back to them: *“I look myself up on the internet sometimes. If that was in my search history and it was sent off to wherever you could clearly link it back to me...”*

“I think in theory it sounds great, but then once it’s actually administered, the potential it could have just concerns me because we never really know. And unfortunately, there are hackers...”

YOUNG PERSON

“How they are going to make this really secure and safe and not just something that preys on the most vulnerable?”

YOUNG PERSON

The environment also came up in the interviews, where it was one of the questions asked, probably because of the public debate about the electricity used by AI data centres. Views in the team differed on how big SDDS’s impact would be. Some expected it to be small, but one co-investigator said the planned use of AI to process donated data could have *“huge implications, not necessarily about the volume of data that we are storing, but about the processing that occurs over it”*. There is no formal policy yet: *“I don’t think we do have a formal policy on it actually”*, although SDDS does fall under the University of York’s sustainability policies. *“Can we calculate the potential environmental cost of our data storage activities and... how could we offset... that?”* A short written statement would answer the question before donors ask it.

“Before it occurs, we need to have a philosophy in place that sits with the values that we as an organization claim to hold.”

CO-INVESTIGATOR, ON AI

4.2 Consent and anonymity

Young people and co-investigators agree that the consent young people give to tech companies today does not work. This is about how platforms handle consent, not about SDDS, which had not yet asked anyone for data when young people designed this research. But it is the only kind of consent most young people have known, so it is what SDDS will be compared with. Most said they do not read the terms. *"I only know one person, and it's my aunt who's a lawyer, and she even gave up on that". "I feel tempted to read them and then end up giving up".*

"I think they purposely make them really long so that you won't do it."

YOUNG PERSON

The co-investigators said the same. Ticking a box, or clicking through something you do not understand, is not real consent. *"People just go click, click, click, yes... and they don't necessarily really know what they're consenting to."* One co-investigator said the answer was to make consent *"something you actually understand,"* using videos, plain language and better formats than long blocks of text. The team also wants to check whether people really understand what they are agreeing to. One co-investigator suggested showing people the whole process before they start, followed by a short quiz: *"can you give people a quick quiz to be like, do you know that is this going to happen or is that going to happen".* Another described testing whether a three-minute video helped adults in a related study understand what would happen to their data, and said the team plans to do this *"on a much more rigorous level for youth populations as well."* One co-investigator also argued that researchers should never take access to people's data for granted: *"I really strongly believe having access to someone else's data is a privilege. It's not a right."*

"Only one person on that round table ever checked things like their cookie settings."

CO-INVESTIGATOR

For the young people we spoke to, real consent needs to be informed, active and ongoing. Informed means you understand the aim, the uses and the risks before you agree. Active means you make a real decision rather than accepting a default. Ongoing means you can take it back, and it runs out and has to be renewed rather than lasting forever. This includes being able to pull out. When one group was asked whether they would want to be able to delete their data or pull out after signing up, most said yes. One participant first questioned whether this was possible with anonymised data, and agreed once it was explained how it could work. Young people also wanted a guarantee that their data would eventually be destroyed: *"I want some guarantee that it would be destroyed at some point down the line".* The co-investigators did not all agree on how pulling out would work. Some said donors could withdraw at any point, while others said

data could not be removed once it had gone into finished analyses, or could still be used after someone withdrew.

“Once it’s mixed in, it can’t be taken out.”

CO-INVESTIGATOR

Being honest about this matters. What young people said suggests they will accept a limit that is explained openly much more readily than a promise that is later broken.

One group raised another point without being asked: people should be able to consent to how their data is used, as well as to what is shared. The same person might be happy to share for one purpose but not another: *“I’d be okay with certain data being used for like health or psychology research and things like that. But there’s other uses from big companies that I would not want my data used for.”* The same participant wanted to know about *“any data collaborations”* before agreeing. Control means choosing what your data is used for, as well as what you share.

Young people were most firmly against political uses. They would refuse to let their data be used to push agendas they oppose, with *“very hard boundaries”* around data used *“to fit in a certain political agenda.”*

“If it’s like kind of like, something like I was saying as well, if you’re saying like anti-migrants or anything like that, and you’re trying to push that forward, then obviously I wouldn’t be a part of it.”

YOUNG PERSON

The co-investigators disagreed with each other about age. Asked for a minimum age for donating data, answers ran from 10 to 18, though 16 came up most often: *“Most 10 to 12 year olds would be able to do that, but that isn’t true of everybody”. “I kind of want to say 14... But I don’t really have a strong rationale for why I think that”. “My gut instinct would be 16”. “The safe age is 18 because at that point we can say they’re adults, but... I think that actually excludes a lot of people who shouldn’t be excluded from this process.” “This is where I go to experts myself and I’d be guided by the experts”.* Several said what matters most is whether someone can understand, remember and weigh up the information, rather than their exact age, while others pointed to the legal age of 16.

“There’s probably plenty of people at 17 or even 18 who actually might not be in as good a place to consent... [as] someone at 15 is.”

CO-INVESTIGATOR

Consent for under-18s is an unsolved problem. Needing a parent’s permission could put at risk, or shut out, the young people the research most needs to hear from, and one co-investigator pointed out that it is hard to do at scale: *“you can do it on a smaller scale. But you can’t do it on a massive scale when you’re looking at thousands of people.”* Several co-investigators admitted they did not have an answer. SDDS should treat this as an open question and work it out with young people and ethics experts.

4.3 Data exposure and getting into trouble

For some young people, the government and other official systems already hold a lot of information about them. One participant described how much the government already knows about her, from personal details to checks for jobs, and said: *“I don’t love it... So they know quite a bit about me.”* This is one participant’s experience, not a general finding. But it shows that young people think about what different organisations already know about them when deciding who to trust. Community organisations working with young people will need specific answers about who can access data, rather than general reassurance.

Another worry is about getting into trouble. One question from the focus groups was not answered anywhere in the interviews. Donated data will sometimes show a young person breaking a rule: an account made under an age limit, use of a platform after a ban, a workaround to reach something blocked. In one group, a participant asked directly:

“If they’re giving [data] to you that says they’re still using social media after the ban, what’s going to happen with that?... People will want to know what that interaction is.”

YOUNG PERSON

One co-investigator pointed out how easily age checks can be got round, talking about the recent age checks on adult content in the UK: *“Kids almost see it as a barrier to overcome... you could just get a free VPN online... all it takes is like 5 minutes of googling,”* so rule-breaking may not be rare. If SDDS reaches a wide range of young people, some of the data it holds will show rule-breaking, and young people will want to know whether that is safe before they donate. If SDDS says nothing, young people are likely to see donating as risky. SDDS should decide its answer, publish it and keep repeating it before the first donation is made.

4.4 Co-design and involvement as transparency

Designing the service with young people also builds trust and transparency. When young people can see that other young people are involved in decisions, it helps with the worries described in this chapter. Peer researchers can also take the service to people it would not otherwise reach, and explain it in their own words. The team itself should look like its donors: *“I definitely think it should be a really diverse team.”*

The co-investigators were open about their own limits here. They know that adults often guess wrong about young people: *“Most of the quote unquote adults making the decisions are often just not there. It’s not part of their world. It’s not part of their lived experience.”*

“Based on assumptions that are made by like 40 to 50 year old people in universities. That are completely wrong.”

CO-INVESTIGATOR

“Asking young people rather than [k]ind of assuming what... we think is best.”

CO-INVESTIGATOR

One co-investigator admitted that the SDDS Peer Research Group had been underused: “We’ve sort of incredibly underused the peer research people, but it’s just because we’ve been scrambling to get the basics in place,” and challenged the peer researchers to hold the team to account: “If you don’t see me, then you guys need to start kicking off because... we’ll be failing on our... side of the bargain.” What the team wants instead is “the young people[s] voice embedded throughout the work in a... way that’s not just tokenistic”. The team wants peer researchers to act as a link between university research and young people’s lives.

“You as peer researchers are the way that I can try and translate my dreams into reality.”

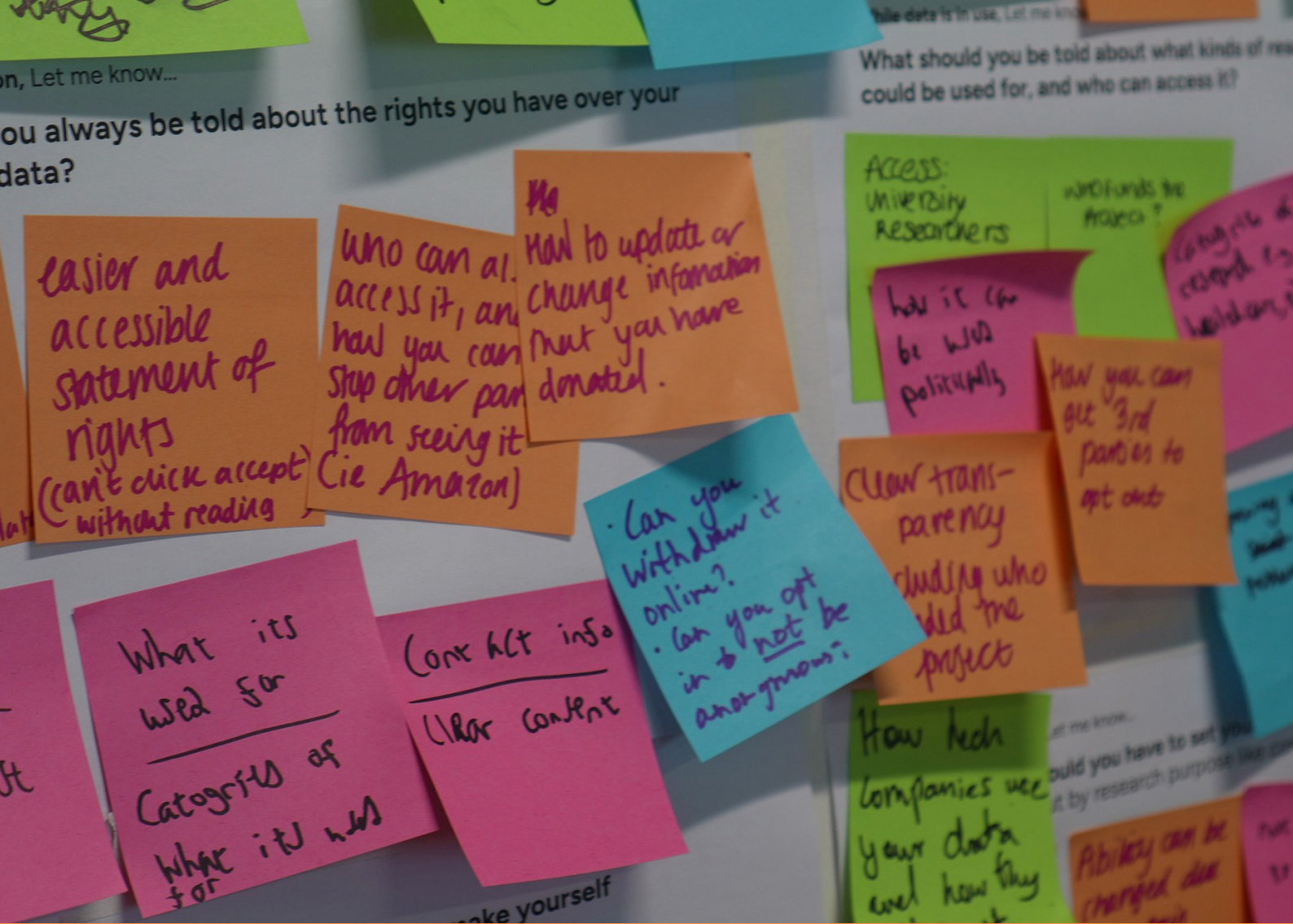
CO-INVESTIGATOR

“I think we need you very much as an interface between us, these sort of stuffy researchers, and the people who we actually need to reach.”

CO-INVESTIGATOR

Some co-investigators also see involvement as a route into research. One talked about hosting peer researchers for internships: “We’d like to actually host some of you guys for things like internships. Get you in the university, get you working directly in the project,” and another imagined training sessions open to anyone: “Kind of coding sessions... come along and we’ll show you how you actually analyse this.”

The young people in the focus groups had their own ideas about what should be researched: cyberbullying on stories and Snapchat, algorithm pipelines that “drive people down... planting the seeds over literally half a decade sometimes”, how political messages work on Instagram, and, when given a list of options, “how misinformation spreads”. The team had its own list, including gambling, loot boxes and in-game spending, eating disorders, the manosphere, and child influencers. On child influencers, one co-investigator pointed out that “they’re not regulated in the same way, say, child actors are”. The two lists overlap but are not the same. Both focus on how platforms exploit young people. Young people put more weight on misinformation and political messaging, and the team on gambling and health-related harms, though each side raised some of the other’s concerns. Publishing both lists, and letting donors choose which questions their data goes towards, would help each side understand the other’s priorities. Treating young people as co-investigators, rather than only consulting them, makes it more likely their questions get studied.



CHAPTER 5

Reasons to donate

Young people donate for a cause they believe in, once they know the aim. Money helps some but never replaces purpose, and going quiet after a donation is the worst thing SDDS could do.

5

This chapter is about motivation: what makes a young person say yes to donating their data, and what needs to happen after they do. We start with purpose, because people need to believe in what they are contributing to before anything else matters. Then we look at money, which plays a part, but not in the way you might expect. We also spend time on feedback, because what happens after someone donates matters just as much as what convinces them to donate in the first place.

Two things stuck with me. First, money and purpose do different jobs, and when purpose is missing, payment does not fill the gap. One participant talked about having doubts about a paid study because nobody had told them what it was for: *“Even though the money was there, it was quite quick money... I just didn’t know what it was about.”* You might assume payment would be enough of an incentive, but this showed me that money alone was not enough.

The second thing caught me off guard. Offering payment for data could attract people who are struggling financially, because they cannot afford to turn the money down, rather than because they want to donate. One participant said: *“What wouldn’t you do? [For] 20, 30 quid, especially people that are more vulnerable... because they’re struggling financially.”* This is something SDDS cannot brush past, and it needs serious thought.

Finally, the worst thing SDDS can do after someone donates is go quiet. People want to know what happened to their data, how they contributed and whether it made a difference. If SDDS gets feedback right, it becomes part of the reason people trust it enough to donate again. The chapter ends by bringing all of this together in the five gates that every decision to donate goes through.

Ohemaa, peer researcher

5.1 A bigger cause, and knowing the aim first

Young people said they would donate because they believe in the cause and want to shift power away from the tech companies that dominate their lives. Without being prompted, some described donating as volunteering.

“The only way you can get people to draw more in data and people volunteering... giving you[r] data is by something that people believe is for a bigger cause.”

YOUNG PERSON

If they care about the topic, they are more willing to take part: *“If it’s something that I’m really passionate, then I wouldn’t mind... spend my time talking about it”*. For some, donating is also a way to be heard: *“If you just want to share views for a good cause, obviously yes, I’d be a part of it”*, and to choose your causes: *“I think it also is about what you like to support”*. Some were also drawn by what SDDS stands against. One participant explained that data ends up with a few powerful companies who can outbid everyone else, and that *“if like different parties and neutral parties have it, it gives an opportunity to even things out”*. SDDS could offer a way to do that.

Across the groups, young people said they would need to know the purpose before donating. For most, money did not make up for not knowing it. *“I would need to know a bit of the research aims and what’s the purpose of it”*, and *“For me it would be like the aim, like what’s the aim?... and what’s going to come with it”*. It does not need to be long: *“It could be short, it can be a one-pager. But then it’s like, okay, seems legit”*. Several people in one group listed what they would want to know: *“I would want to know that it’s effective. - What will it be used for? - What’s the outcome? - Ethical standards.”*

“As long as I know the intent... it’s used for something that I believe in and something that I resonate with.”

YOUNG PERSON

“Even though the money was there, it was quite quick money... I just didn’t know what it was about.”

YOUNG PERSON, ON A PAID STUDY

Not everyone who would donate was motivated by belief in the cause. One participant reasoned that because her data is taken anyway, she might as well donate it: *“I’m already doing that. So I might as well just do it with my own, like, awareness... at least with this, it gives you autonomy in a way, even though you’re giving your data.”* Others said something similar. One said that because their data has *“been looked up by kind of everyone, I wouldn’t really be that bothered about volunteering it if it’s for the public good.”* This suggests some people may donate for a different reason: to get some control back. They are giving data away anyway, and SDDS at least lets them do it knowingly.

As Chapter 4 describes, young people had their own ideas for research, from cyberbullying and algorithm pipelines to misinformation and better evidence for the

age debate. Focus groups often started discussing, without being prompted, what they would research using social media data. For these young people, purpose means knowing that donated data will be used to study the questions they care about.

Donating data is sometimes compared to donating blood: you choose to give it, it costs you nothing, and it helps others. When this comparison was put to one focus group, it got a mixed response. One participant said blood donation is harmless because blood, once given, cannot come back to hurt you, *“what harm is going to come from?”*, but that data is different: *“there’s a bit of a difference, I guess, in theoretical potential harm.”* Asked whether they would be more worried about a stranger holding a bag of their blood or every piece of data on their phone, the first answer was one word: *“Data.”* Others said a stranger with their blood would worry them too, because it *“has my DNA”*. The group also joked that blood cannot be taken back, *“Give me my blood back... just put it back inside me, please”*. Being able to take a donation back is exactly what young people want from data donation. Young people do want to help others, as the talk of volunteering shows. But their reasons for donating often had more to do with activism and power than with helping others directly.

The transcripts show the same thing. *“Donation”* is mostly the research team’s word. Co-investigators used it nearly five times as often as young people, who talked much more about money, payment and purpose. Young people do not yet use the project’s main word for itself. Recruitment that focuses on what young people said motivates them, such as causes they believe in and clear incentives, is likely to work better than recruitment built around the idea of giving.

5.2 Money, and its limits

Money makes motivation more complicated. Payment helps some young people take part in research but worries others, who see buying data as taking advantage of people who have the least. Participants worried that paying for data creates *“a whole new [pool] of people just buying data and selling it on... especially people that are more vulnerable,”* and asked whether any amount could be fair: *“Is 25 pounds comparable to real data being in the hands of the wrong person?”*

“What wouldn’t you do [for] 20, 30 quid, especially people that are more vulnerable... because they’re struggling financially.”

YOUNG PERSON

At the same time, nobody said payment is always wrong. For some, money is a nice extra rather than the reason: *“If there’s something else attached to it, I will do it, but it’s not necessarily the deciding factor. But it helps.”* Others were more direct: *“an incentive makes it better”*, and one participant said she would not take part in a study on a topic that did not interest her without being paid: *“if I’m not that really interested in the topic, I wouldn’t do it for free.”* But payment did not replace knowing the purpose. The participant who had doubts about a paid study said this was because she did not know what it was about. When payment was offered without a clear aim, it made people suspicious.

5.3 Feedback to young people from SDDS

What young people want back is an ongoing relationship.

They want to hear about results and impact, and for SDDS to stay in touch rather than disappear. *"I'd like to know it's made a difference or that somebody's looking".*

"Show us [what] happens and what they have done with it."

YOUNG PERSON

"Keeping in contact as well will be quite nice instead of just being left like, oh, just give your data and then that's it... is another number."

YOUNG PERSON



Feedback would also make people more likely to donate again: *"good things are coming out of it, then people are going to be wanting to do [it] again".* Here the blood donation comparison did work. What young people liked about it was the feedback: knowing where a donation went and what it did. One participant described wanting exactly that for data, *"[with] blood donation... you know that it's going to someone who needs" it,* and a co-investigator used the same example.

"Whenever you donate blood, you get an SMS and it says your blood was transported to Liverpool Hospital, and then you know that you saved a life there."

CO-INVESTIGATOR

Many young people and co-investigators liked another idea, which the team hopes to offer in future: letting donors see their own data. Young people said this would make research much more engaging than a long report: *"The 300 page research paper, unlikely I will read it".* Not everyone wanted it, though. One participant said simply: *"I don't wanna see that."*

"If you present it to me in a gamifiable way, then of course I'll interact with it. So I think that could be revolutionary for research."

YOUNG PERSON

Young people were specific about how this should be done. It should not judge people: *"Hopefully they didn't embarrass me and be like, you suck at math".* It should take into account that seeing your own data could make some people feel worse: *"I think it would set me into a spiral, but I... see the value of something interactive and digestible."* One participant's rule for sharing insights was simple: *"Know your audience, I guess".* It should also feel human. More generally, young people asked researchers to treat their views with *"respect and nuance"* rather than being dismissive, *"Maybe not to be dismissive, I think... this kind of... 'oh, it's not that deep'"*, and said a rude or careless

question would make them stop taking part: *"If the questions are rude, I would not finish it".* The co-investigators thought seeing your own data could be helpful in itself: *"Sometimes that information back is just that step to how you want to live your life".* *"Maybe this will naturally lead people to be a little bit more surprised and a little bit more angry. And a little bit more willing to take charge".*

"Feedback is an intervention, isn't it? So that in itself might help young people make healthier choices about their digital usage."

CO-INVESTIGATOR

5.4 What else would help: control, and keeping it human

Control mattered a great deal. Asked whether it would help to donate only certain parts of their data, one participant said: *"That would work... I would do it."* Donors need to stay in control throughout: *"There should be a level... [of] sensitivity to the questions... you're not forced to share... you can opt out anytime",* and *"I'm the one in charge of how much I would like to share."* Asked what assurance would be enough, one participant said: *"if I could stand over someone's shoulder whilst they look through the entirety of my data".* SDDS cannot offer that, but the secure research rooms the team describes come close, because donors would know exactly who can see their data and why. The more clearly SDDS can show this, the easier the decision is likely to be.

Young people had mixed views on using AI to analyse donated data. Some doubted it is good enough, because it misses sarcasm, symbols and context in everyday talk. *"If you're going to use AI, be mindful of... human speech - it doesn't necessarily know how to decode it,"* warned one participant, adding that AI *"doesn't understand the nuance of how... people speak and like the sarcasm or like the meaning of it."* Another raised an ethical question:

"Are you wanting to do a very ethical project - then should you be using AI?"

YOUNG PERSON

Some also worried about care. The young people we spoke to said they can tell whether something was made by a person or a machine, and that it matters to them: *"If the thing's actually... made by a person... and it shows that it was done with care, then I'll probably enjoy it."* When it came to feedback, one participant said they did not want it to be too polished: *"I'd like it to be easily digestible... but I don't want it... wrapped up in a nice bow".* Even so, several were open to AI playing a small part, as long as people stay in charge. The participant who raised the ethical question said: *"you probably have quite a lot of data to go through. Probably quite nice to have some AI help with it. So I kind of see the like both sides to it."*

"I think AI is fine to a certain degree... but in the end, the analysis would be human. So I don't mind that."

YOUNG PERSON

In summary, the young people we spoke to would donate to a cause they believe in, if they know the aim in advance, trust the organisation asking, and hear back from it after they donate.

5.5 The five gates of donation

Across the focus groups, young people made the decision about donating in a similar way. They worked through a series of questions, one after another, which we call gates. Each one has to be answered well before the next one matters. If any gate fails, the answer is no, however good the answers to the others might be. The order below is the order the questions tended to come up in the groups. Purpose usually came first, though for some, safety came before it: *“is security first and then what is used for”*. Give-back was usually the last thing asked about, once everything else was settled.

- 1** Gate one is purpose, which usually comes first: *“As long as I know the intent”*, and the participant who doubted a paid study because *“I just didn’t know what it was about”* (section 5.1).
- 2** Gate two is trust: who is asking, and who funds them, with the university identity as the strongest pass and hidden funders as a fail (Chapter 4).
- 3** Gate three is safety: anonymity, security and how long data is kept. Vague answers make people worry. This gate also includes what happens if donated data shows rule-breaking (section 4.3).
- 4** Gate four is control: choosing item by item, opting out any time, and being able to pull out. Being asked to share everything or nothing means no (Chapters 2 and 4).
- 5** Gate five is give-back: results, impact and sight of your own data. If SDDS goes quiet after a donation, donors will not come back (section 5.3).



Purpose always comes first. Every gate has to be passed. Money never substitutes for a gate.

In orange: what a failed gate sounds like.

Figure 5. The five gates. A model built from the focus group evidence across Chapters 1 to 6. The sequence reflects how the questions typically came up in the groups.

A few other points stand out. First, money did not make up for a failed gate. Payment encouraged some people, but only once the other gates had been passed, and

payment offered instead of a clear purpose made people suspicious. Second, the gates explain why the same young person could sound keen and then refuse in the same conversation, for example keen on the purpose but put off by a lack of control. Third, the gates match what made young people feel more or less positive about SDDS. They felt more positive when SDDS was university-led, visible, focused on causes they care about, and treated them as partners. They felt less positive when they did not know who funded the work, when SDDS seemed close to government, when payment was the main selling point, when they had no say in what their data would be used to research, and when promises sounded too good to be true.

The words young people used about values point the same way. Across everything young people said, the most common were aim and purpose, safety, choice, anonymity and clarity, which closely match the gates. Words like “respect” and “diversity” rarely appear, even though young people clearly asked for respect and diversity when they described how SDDS should treat them (Figure 6).

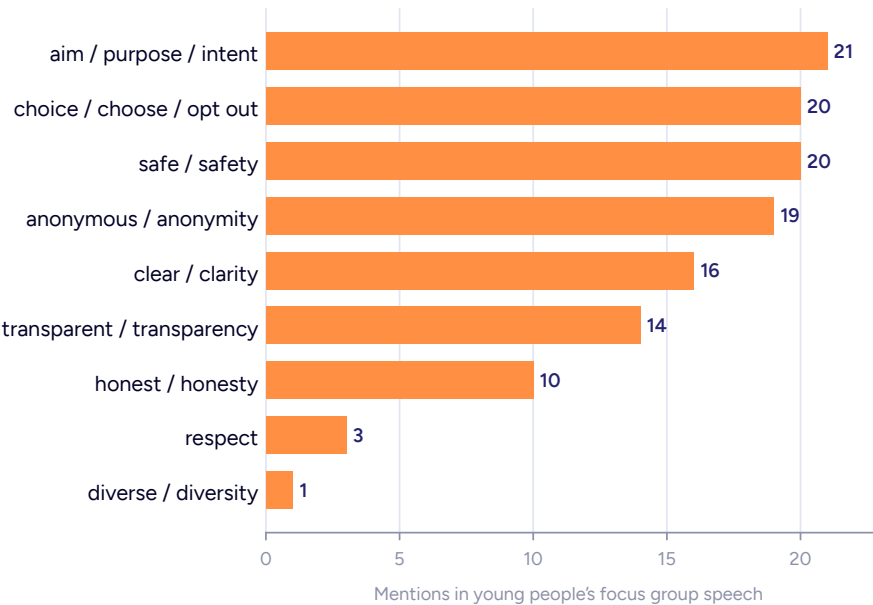


Figure 6. Value words in young people's speech, counted across all six focus groups. Low counts do not mean low importance. “Respect” and “diversity” were expressed through concrete asks rather than repeated words.



CHAPTER 6

Building data literacy as a continuing process

Knowledge about data varies a lot, even within one group. Data literacy is built over time, through real examples like seeing your own data, not through a leaflet.

6

One moment that stayed with me was when a young person said, *"I probably would say I know 30% of what really goes on."* It was a simple line, but it reflected something I heard a lot. Young people know there are gaps in their knowledge, but they are also clear that they will not learn from adults who they feel misunderstand their digital lives. One participant described a comment older people often make: *"if you like just get off your phone and everything will be solved."* Comments like this shut down trust straight away. It reminded me that data literacy is about credibility and respect as well as information.

This chapter shows that data literacy can't be delivered as a leaflet when someone donates. It needs to be a continuing process that starts before young people are ever asked to donate anything. We look at how uneven knowledge is, even within one group, and how the team talks about literacy while young people talk more about ownership. Young people were clear that they do not want scary messages or vague warnings. They asked for education that is practical, built into the research and based on real examples. One co-investigator put it plainly: *"Before we even get anywhere near the idea of donating data, let's just learn about data."* This chapter also looks at teaching through schools, especially PSHE lessons at the start of secondary school, when habits and assumptions are still forming.

One idea I kept coming back to is the difference in language. The team talks about literacy, while young people talk about ownership. A programme built only around literacy could miss the anger and frustration young people feel about ownership. Another quote that stayed with me came from one of the co-investigators: *"To gain control you have to know that you've lost control."* It shows the emotional side of this topic. Young people don't need teaching that scares them. They need the chance to see their own data, understand what it shows and build confidence from there. Seeing your search history laid out, which some described as a shock, is the kind of practical experience that actually teaches data literacy.

If there is one thing I want you to take from this chapter, it is that data literacy is built over time, through real examples and respectful teaching. Young people learn best when they are shown their own data, treated as partners and taught early enough to shape their digital lives rather than just react to them.

Angel, peer researcher

6.1 Gaps in knowledge, and what they cost

Young people's knowledge and confidence varied a lot, even within the same group.

Some participants were confident with technical ideas, while others said they click through terms and conditions without reading them: *"There's partially like a literacy thing to it... you're just saying click it, click accept because it's annoying"*. Even the most engaged rated their own understanding low: *"I probably would say I know 30% of what really goes on"*.

There is also a gap between generations. Young people felt that adults misjudge their digital lives, even though adults spend a lot of time online themselves: *"Older people... have... a really... actual flourishing digital life. But it's not through... Instagram, it's through... WhatsApp"*.

"Most older people love to make this comment: if you like, just get off your phone and everything will be solved."

YOUNG PERSON

These gaps have effects that appear throughout this report: terms nobody reads, consent that does not mean much, people giving up on owning their data, and companies that benefit because, as one participant put it, *"they rely on the fact that we don't know how much they know about us."*

Even the experts are unsure about who owns data. Asked who owns data donated to SDDS, the co-investigators gave a range of answers. Several said SDDS or the university controls the data while donors keep rights over it, while others said the donor owns it: *"Ultimately, you as the data donor still own it and all we do is take a copy of it"*. *"My gut would be to say... ultimately SDDS owns the data once we've collected it because we're responsible for it"*. *"So I guess we own it, I think... But you still have rights over it as the donor"*. *"I feel like it's the individual[']s data, but they're kind of... giving up... for kind of safe safekeeping"*. If the research team disagrees, donors cannot be expected to know the answer. SDDS should explain that the question is complicated rather than pretend there is a simple answer.

6.2 Teaching data literacy

When the young people we spoke to talked about learning, they did not just mean a lesson about data sharing. They linked data literacy to other things that make the online world hard to deal with: misinformation and fake news (also on their research list), scams, and understanding what is collected and what it shows about you. For them, SDDS should do more than collect data and produce evidence. They felt it should also educate people, raise awareness, challenge assumptions and give people more power.

One participant connected education directly to safety, saying that knowing about data meant that *"when it's used for like scamming people and stuff, I can at least know that I am educated and aware of how to deal with that kind of stuff and know what it is."*

Young people wanted the research to come with explanations people can actually use. *"Maybe an infographic or some easier way of communication about what data is"*. *"I*

think there should be more education about the kind of data that you're giving social media and about social media use in general".

"It would be better [if]... research was also accompanied by education and awareness."

YOUNG PERSON

The co-investigators talked about teaching young people about data through schools and PSHE-style lessons. *"One of the people we're talking to is the PSHE Association who kind of do lesson plans for PSHE lessons". "Imagine if that lesson plan that we write... got used across 50% of schools in Britain".* But one co-investigator warned that donating in a classroom is different from donating at home: *"there's a difference between sitting at home and logging into my own computer and donating something versus sitting at school with like other people in a classroom. And like... how do you make sure the environment means that someone's got full choice?"*

"Before we even get anywhere near the idea of donating data, let's just learn about data."

CO-INVESTIGATOR

They wanted this to be fair, reaching *"schools, colleges in areas where there's a higher diversity, say from an ethnic or social and academic point of view"*. Outside schools, they talked about toolkits, working with trusted partners, and keeping track of who is missing from the donors: *"We'll monitor those data sets and we'll identify... the gaps",* and *"We'll be asking for what we call demographic descriptions of who the people are who are donating data"*.

The focus groups also suggest a good place to start. When trying to explain why their feeds seem to know so much, some participants suggested that phones listen to them: *"They can be listening to you, but also it could be like they could be feeding stuff,"* said one participant, before getting closer to how it really works: *"predictive like tracking... to build that picture up."* In practice, platforms rarely need to listen, because they can predict a lot from behaviour. Seeing their own data could help donors understand this, and show them how much their behaviour reveals about them.

This fits one of the strongest ideas in the interviews: that seeing your own data is the best way to learn about it. *"By just practically toying around with interactive visualisations of the data set collected of you, you have sort of a first hand experience". "not seeing yourself as... just a user of a platform, but that you are yourself... kind of a data set". "If people come away knowing even that the data exists in the first place and that it has value, that alone is I think really important"*.



"As soon as you learn a little bit about it, actually, it just gives you a lot more power."

CO-INVESTIGATOR

Seen this way, data literacy is something SDDS can build at every stage: through lessons before donating, plain-language consent when donating, and personal insights and feedback afterwards. Over time, this could help a generation of young people see their own data and understand its value. One co-investigator described the wider aim: *"Data should be made a Commons if possible"*. Another pointed out that research ethics often thinks about risk more than about *"the public benefit that can be gained from analysing that data"*.

"Give us your data so we can help to increase control that we all have over our online lives through research."

CO-INVESTIGATOR

What happens next

We have presented our findings to the SDDS team. Our findings are now helping the team think about how to respond to the recommendations in this report.

This was the first year of the SDDS Peer Research Group. A second group of peer researchers will join SDDS for 2026–27. We will hand over our work to them, and they will look at how they can support SDDS to put the recommendations in this report into practice.

The young people who took part in the focus groups will hear about these findings through the youth organisations that hosted their groups. Each organisation will receive a short plain English summary and a link to this report, so that participants can see what their words became.



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