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## **A SOCIODIGITAL APPROACH TO INVESTIGATING YOUTH, TEACHERS' AND PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SMARTPHONE BANNING IN ENGLAND**

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Smartphone bans or pledges signed by parents/carers to delay giving phones to young people are gaining international traction. For example, a smartphone ban in elementary and high schools in Brazil began in February 2025, with Education Minister Camilo Santana saying the devices should 'only be used in class for pedagogical purposes and with a teacher's guidance'. The policy is reported to have widespread support from parents and young people (CNN, 13 January 2025). In the UK, large secondary school trusts are phasing out smartphone use during the school day to 'minimise disruption and improve behaviour in classrooms' (BBC, 14 September 2024). In addition, parents at 20% of schools have signed the Smartphone Free Childhood campaign's pledge to 'stand up for healthier, happier childhoods' by withholding smartphones until their children are at least 14 (The Guardian, 26 September 2024). A similar popular scheme in the US – Wait Until 8<sup>th</sup> – also encourages parents to 'protect the elementary and middle years from the distractions and dangers of a smartphone' (Wait Until 8<sup>th</sup> website).

Bans and pledges are usually based on arguments that smartphones are addictive, distractive, unhealthy and contribute to worsening educational outcomes. Proponents of bans argue they will lead to the reclamation of childhood and better chances of young people growing into productive and balanced adults. Psychological research, which focuses on the unhealthy *impact* or *effects* of media *on* people work through developmental accounts of children progressing into adults (Horowitz, 2009). In this sense, a productive and plausible response from sociology, media and cultural studies is to situate bans and pledges within longer histories of concerns and moral panics about new technologies and their impacts on society. For instance, Mark McKenna's (2020) work on the moral panic surrounding 'video nasties' in Britain in the early 1980s argues that mainstream media reporting framed a new genre of horror films that could

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be viewed on the new technology of home video as an 'external threat' (2020: 2) devised by a 'thoroughly corrupt' industry (2020: 4). In a similar vein, Susanna Paasonen (2021) challenges dominant and totalising discourses of digital media resulting in a 'distracted present', arguing that they function through the 'allure of nostalgia', which constructs a mystical 'golden past' as a point of comparison (see also Paasonen 2020). Long-established work that has challenged the hypodermic needle model or media effects approach is also helpful here in arguing against the one way impact of social media, without considering relationality and the negotiation and 'produsage' of technology (e.g. Gauntlett 1998; Bruns, 2006; Coleman 2009; Ringrose, 2010).

As a relatively new phenomenon, little existing research exists on the practical and experiential repercussions of bans. However, extant research on which we build shows that abstinence approaches do not work in relation to mitigating other potentially risky activities, including underage sex or drug and alcohol use. Rather, such bans may well deter young people from seeking help when something goes wrong (Pippen 2024). The associated attitude from parents and teachers that using smartphones and accessing social media is only harmful and addictive tends to erode children's rights (Livingstone and Third 2017). As a result, young people may have fewer avenues to seek support when they experience online risk and harm. Research also shows that it is more vulnerable, low achieving and poorer socioeconomic status young people who already negatively experience online harms (Bohnert and Gracia 2023) and can find digital connectivity important in building belonging and self-care practices (Wilson 2015). Governance of fast-moving tech is also complex (Van Dijck 2020), especially when the diverse identities and vulnerabilities of users is recognised (Oudshoorn et al 2004). Such arguments have been forcefully made in the open letter published by the Australian Child Rights Taskforce, signed by international academics and civil society organisations in relation to the social media ban for under-16 year olds (8 October 2024).

In this paper, we offer a preliminary analysis of our qualitative, multi-pronged study which seeks to better understand 'on the ground' experiences of the banning policies and tighter regulation of smartphones as they are rolled out in England. Working collaboratively with an educational charity, a media centre and a secondary school, our research explores the views of multiple actors and considers the varied contexts in which smartphone banning matters. The methodology involves conducting online surveys with teachers, students and parents to gauge issues of concern and worry and follow up individual and group interviewing. Ethnographic and observational field work in a school setting is also drawn upon to understand how banning works in practice and in situ. Co-creation workshops in after-school clubs at a media centre foreground young people's perspectives, including identifying when and where smartphones become sites of intergenerational negotiation, tension and pleasure outside of school. Across these different elements of the research, we attend to questions of power, diversity and marginalisation, including in relation to gender, sexuality, race, class and dis/abilities, in order to track whether and how experiences of smartphone banning are differentiated, and if so, with what implications. The research also has an advocacy component to apply the learning from our project into the co-creation of policy guidance and critical digital literacy around smartphones giving priority to children's rights.

In our analysis, we advance a sociodigital and postdigital conceptualisation of human-smartphone relations. Sociodigital approaches see the social and digital as increasingly and inextricably entangled (Halford and Southerton 2024). This approach has also been called postdigital to account for how there is no outside of the human-technology relation in our current context (Haraway, 1988; Evans and Ringrose, 2025). This is important for thinking about how proponents of banning phone for a smartphone free childhood in ways that reject contemporary tech saturated lifeworlds and set up or harden binaries between the digital and the social, adults and children. We argue that banning smartphones doesn't cut the user off from digital mediation, but rather puts them in different relationships to these contexts. We critically analyse the qualities of these new relationalities. For instance, the surveys ask questions about the feelings generated by the bans and what happens when young people gain access to their devices after time when use is constrained. The co-productive workshops prompt responses around how rules around phone use are affectively and practically navigated and made sense of.

We demonstrate how smartphones and people are engaged in complicated and processual human and more than human-media relations through which certain environments, experiences and feelings are composed and modulated, and we explore how removing or restricting the device for certain periods shapes these intra-actions (Barad 2007). Overall, we explore the various actors and agencies through which phone banning discourses and policies are being put into practice and the material and affective experiences of the agents involved, namely young people, teachers and parents (Ringrose et al., 2018). We conclude by offering some tentative recommendations for supportive structures in educational environments that are attentive to these sociodigital complexities, and which can help young people and adults navigate the phone bans and the new relationalities around devices these set in play.

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