

## **Social impact evaluations of digital youth work: tensions between vision and reality.**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This paper presents empirical research, which explores the ways digital youth workers perceive, and evaluate, the social impact of their work. There is currently a research gap with regard to the measurement of the social impact of digital youth work. Thus, the aims of this study are: (1) to contribute to the scholarly discussion on the social impact of youth digital participation, (2) to elicit, and analyse, youth workers' perceptions of the social impact evaluation of digital youth work, (3) and to propose recommendations for further research in this area.

**Method:** Twenty semi-structured interviews with digital youth workers in the United Kingdom were carried out in mid-2017. The interviews were based on themes drawn from a prior literature review exploring the areas of youth development, digital youth participation, social impact, and social impact evaluation.

**Analysis:** Research data analysis was guided by a 'grounded theory' methodological approach, and conducted using NVivo 10 software. Results show a clear alignment with the existing literature, in the areas of youth participation, and social impact assessment and evaluation. The analysis presented here focuses on three areas of tension between the study participants' vision, and the reality of the social impact evaluation of digital youth work: (1) Favouring positive stories of impact. (2) Chasing the impact proofs instead of examining the change, (3) Following an interactive youth project with an unengaging evaluation process.

**Conclusion:** Current (externally governed) evaluation practices, limit digital youth workers' abilities to critically examine and provide feedback on impact. Acknowledging that there is a need for further research in this area, this study propose three recommendations, primarily

aimed at digital youth work funding bodies: (1) Facilitating serendipitous interactions in digital youth work, (2) The further research required in order to provide digital youth workers with a set of tools - or guidance - in order to measure and understand the social impact of their work, (3) Adopting playful methods of evaluation in digital youth work.

**Keywords:** Digital Youth, Digital Youth Work, Youth Participation, Social Impact, Social Impact Assessment, Social Impact Evaluation

## 1. Introduction: Examining the social impact of digital youth work

Digital technologies are no longer considered as merely supplementary educational tools. Rather, they comprise a deeply embedded core element of youth work practices across Europe (Harvey, 2016). Digital media have been used to enhance communication, self-expression, and advocacy, within, and between, youth projects (Black et al., 2015). These participatory initiatives have provided adolescents with opportunities to claim their voice, and to co-create works which reflect their realities (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Heart 1992; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias & McLoughlin, 2006).

However, whilst numerous organisations have sought to implement digital technologies into their youth practices, these organisations also claim that measuring the social impact of digital youth work has become increasingly difficult (Wilson & Grant, 2017). There is, currently, only a limited understanding of how to measure the impact of youth digital participatory projects (Mackril & Ebsen, 2017). Both scholars (Mackril & Ebsen, 2017; Livingstone, Mascheroni & Staksrud, 2015), and youth practitioners (Wilson & Grant, 2017), have called for further research into social impact evaluations of the interactions between young people and digital technologies.

Whilst the area of youth digital participation has been extensively researched, information concerning the measurement of its social impact is still limited. Guha, *et al.* have supported this argument, claiming:

“[There is] a wealth of information about children’s technology and the design process to create it, there is a dearth of information regarding how the children who participate in these design processes may be affected by their participation.” (2010, p.198)

Livingstone, *et al.* have argued that it remains unknown if “online opportunities may (or may not) result in tangible benefits” (2015, p.14) to younger generations. In the context of the implementation of digital elements into youth social work, Mackril, and Ebsen, have stated that “there is still limited research on how to assess the impact of digital technologies” on youth work (2017, p.1). Meanwhile, Wilson and Grant have claimed that standard measurement tools may not be appropriate to fully analyse the impact of youth digital inclusion initiatives (2017, p.4). Additionally, Ho *et al.* have highlighted “a lack of literature that discusses, and evaluates, the impact of youth-led social change” (Ho et al., 2015, p.53).

Two emergent research themes are examined in this paper: (1) Social impact: definitions among digital youth workers, and (2) Social impact evaluation of digital youth projects: perceptions of practice among digital youth workers. This paper presents preliminary findings from a study exploring the ways in which social impact, and social impact evaluation

processes, are perceived by digital youth workers within the United Kingdom. Here, social impact is conceived as “all social and cultural consequences to human populations of any public or private actions that alter the ways in which people live, work, play, relate to another, organise to meet their needs, and generally cope as members of society” (Burdge & Vanclay, 1995, p.59).

## **2. Theoretical framework: Grounded Theory**

The aim of this study was to compare, and to contrast, social impact - and social impact evaluation - definitions, with youth workers’ perceptions of impact, and to co-create a novel definition, linking theoretical explanations with a practical understanding of social impact.

Digital youth workers’ perceptions, and experiences, of social impact assessments of their practices have not yet been extensively examined in the literature. Existing scholarly (Mackril & Ebsen, 2017; Mascheroni & Staksrud, 2015), and industrial (Wilson & Grant, 2017), reports emphasise the need for further research in this area. Therefore, to develop an understanding of this, as yet, poorly investigated phenomena, a Grounded Theory approach has been adopted as the guiding theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006). As Holloway suggests, “grounded theory is especially useful in situations where little is known about a topic or problem area, or where a new and exciting outlook is needed in familiar settings” (1997, p.80).

Whilst this study is primarily concerned with participants’ views of the topic, interview questions were guided by the results of a prior literature review focussing on the areas of Digital Youth Participation (Black et al. 2015; Buckingham, 2008; Ito *et al.* 2008; Livingstone, 2012; Subrahmanyam, *et al.* 2011;), Youth Participation (Checkoway & Gutiérrez 2006, Hart, 1992; Richards-Schuster & Pritzker, 2015), and Social Impact and Social Impact Evaluation (Cousin & Whitmore, 1998; Douthwaite et al. 2007; Dufour, 2015; Esteves *et al.*, 2012).

## **3. Methodology**

Qualitative data was collected from semi-structured interviews with digital youth practitioners based in the United Kingdom, in mid-2017. The purpose of the interviews was to elicit, and to understand, youth digital worker’s perceptions of their practices, and of the social impact evaluation methods used to measure its impact. Two key questions guided the structure of the interviews: How do youth digital workers define and measure the social impact of their work? And what are their attitudes towards social impact evaluations of digital youth work?

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for an extensive analysis of social impact assessment and its associated challenges. The key advantages of this method were the open-ended structure of interviews, and their ability to illuminate the interviewees’ point-of-view (Bryman 2016, p.467). The interviews took the form of in-depth individual conversations beginning with a general focus on the interviewee, their background, and their views on whether digital technologies have altered their youth practice. Interviews then focused more progressively towards an exploration of the methods the research participants use to evaluate their work, and their attitudes towards the social impact of evaluation practices.

### 3.1 Research themes explored

The following two themes are examined in this paper:

1. Social impact of digital youth work: perceptions and definitions.
2. Social impact evaluation of digital youth work: perceptions of the practice.

The table below illustrates the structure of the discussion, and analysis, of the research themes, as presented in section 4.

Table 1. Research themes and categories examined in section 4.

Themes		Categories identified in the data	Problematic areas identified
<b>Social impact: definitions among digital youth workers.</b>	<b>4.1</b>		
		<b>4.1.1</b> Positive vs negative social impact: discussion on digital youth workers understanding of social impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Emphasising the value of positive impact in digital youth work.</li> <li>● Questioning the value of negative social impact</li> </ul>
		<b>4.1.2</b> Perceptions of impact: individual, socio-political and regulated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individual change</li> <li>● Socio-political process</li> <li>● Regulated sets of data</li> </ul>
<b>Social impact evaluation of digital youth projects: perceptions of practice among digital youth workers.</b>	<b>4.2</b>		

		<b>4.2.1</b>	Social impact evaluation: impact expectations and definition, and the process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations and definition</li> <li>• Process</li> </ul>
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Source: Own Creation

### 3.2 Sampling characteristics: digital youth workers

Twenty digital youth workers, practicing in the United Kingdom, were selected as study participants. In line with Cohlmeier's (2014) definition of digital youth work - as traditional youth work practice including digital media, and technology - the following criteria for subject selection were applied:

- Practitioners working with young people (aged 16-25 years old) using digital technologies in participatory settings
- Practitioners based in the United Kingdom

The research participants were primarily recruited through advertisement at the Scottish Digital Youth Work Network meeting. The aim of the Scottish Digital Youth Work network is to connect those practitioners who use digital tools, and online spaces, in their work, with young people, and to exchange, and develop, good practice, both in Scotland, and internationally (YouthLink Scotland, 2017). The information about the study was also shared online, and via social media. Whilst the majority the interviews took place face-to-face, two were facilitated via Skype.

Nineteen of the research subjects were based in Scotland. Only one worked in England. In the course of data collection, gender distribution was as follows: 60% males, and 40% females. While all the interviewees were aged 25 years and older, nearly half (9) of the participants were aged between 35 and 44. Other age groups participating in the interview were as follows: six participants aged 25-34 yrs, four participants aged 35-44, and one in the 55 - 64 yrs bracket.

At the time of the study, most of the interviewees claimed to have had more than five years experience of working with young people, and of using digital technologies in their practice. As many as sixteen participants had five, or more, years of experience in the field, with eight claiming to have worked with youth and digital media for over 5 years. Eight of the digital youth workers involved in this study had over 10 years of experience of working with young people using digital technologies. Only four of the interviewed practitioners had begun to implement digital media into their youth engagement work within the last five years.

Table 2. Interviews participants: demographics and routes into digital youth work

Total	Number (%)
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<b>Gender</b>	
Female	8 (40%)
Male	12 (60%)
<b>Age</b>	
25-34	6 (30%)
35-44	9 (45%)
45-54	4 (20%)
55-64	1(5%)
<b>Years of experience of working with young people using digital technologies</b>	
0-5	4 (20%)
5-10	8 (40%)
10+	8 (40%)
<b>Professional background before entering digital youth work</b>	
Arts and Music	4 (20%)
Community Development	1 (5%)
Computing	2 (10%)
Education	2 (10%)
Media and Film	5 (25%)

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Youth Work	6 (30%)
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Source: Own Creation

With regard to the scale of the organisations represented by study subjects, as many as twelve defined themselves as ‘national’. Seven described their organisations as ‘local’ and only one as ‘international’. In terms of the number of young people involved in their activities, half of the organisations described themselves as ‘small-scale’, reaching between 0-50 young people.

Table 3. Interviews participants: organisation's profile

Total	Number (%)
<b>Youth engagement reach</b>	
Local	1 (5%)
National	12 (60%)
International	7(35%)
<b>Number of young people involved (number of young people)</b>	
0-50	10 (50%)
50-200	4 (20%)
200+	6 (30%)
10+	8 (40%)

Source: Own creation

Table 4. Participant’s subset data

<b>Personal profile</b>	<b>Organisation profile</b>
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Name	Age group	Gender		Years of experience	Professional background	Youth engagement reach	Number of young people involved
		M	F				
Alex	25-24	x		5-10	Media and Film	National	200+
Alison	35-44	x		0-5	Arts	Local	0-50
Andy	25-34	x		0-5	Computing	National	0-50
Blake	45-54	x		10+	Youth Work	National	200+
Carla	45-54		x	5-10	Youth Work	Local	50-200
Chris	35-44		x	5-10	Arts	National	50-200
Debbie	35-44	x		10+	Youth Work	National	200+
Gabriel	55-64	x		10+	Youth Work	Local	200+
Jamie	25-64	x		5-10	Media and Film	National	200+
Jo	45-54	x		10+	Media and Film	National	200+
Janek	45-55	x		5-10	Media and Film	National	200+
Karel	35-44	x		5-10	Computing	Local	50-200
Kyle	35-44		x	0-5	Youth Work	National	200+
Martin	25-34	x		5-10	Arts	Local	0-50
Marta	35-44		x	10+	Youth Work	International	200+
Max	35-44		x	10+	Education	National	200+
Rowan	25-34		x	5-10	Media and Film	National	50+200
Ryan	35-44		x	0-5	Arts	Local	50+200
Sam	35-44	x		5-10	Education	Local	0-50
Sandy	25-34		x	5-10	Community Development	National	200+

Source: Own Creation

#### 4. Analysis and results

Data, obtained from 20 semi-structured interviews with digital youth workers based in the United Kingdom, is examined in this section. Two preceding pilot interviews were successfully carried out, and these helped to shape the design of the remaining eighteen interviews. All data collected was coded in NVivo 10. The analysis of the data followed will be followed by a discussion of the research findings. Through thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), digital youth workers' attitudes towards the social impact evaluation approaches used in their practice are thus identified, described and analysed.

#### **4.1 Social impact: definitions among digital youth workers.**

##### **4.1.1 Positive vs negative social impact: digital youth workers understanding of social impact.**

In this study, 'social impact' is conceived as: "All social and cultural consequences to human populations of any public or private actions that alter the ways in which people live, work, play, relate to another, organise to meet their needs, and generally cope as members of society" (Burdge & Vanclay, 1995, p.59). This overly broad, but deliberately all-encompassing, definition provided a starting point in the research.

#### **Emphasising the value of positive impact in digital youth work.**

Study participants were invited to share their perceptions, and definitions, of the social impact of digital youth participatory initiatives. Their interpretations clearly highlight the fact that social impact is perceived as a positive phenomenon. Further, an ongoing narrative, focusing on empowerment, engagement and learning, emerged from all twenty conversations. Whilst discussing the importance of their work, many of digital youth workers also repeatedly referred to so-called "soft skills", such as confidence, and a sense of pride, as indicators of project success. Alex, for example, noted that "confidence is one that we quite often associate with the arts, and [being] confident to express yourself, and so on. So, I guess, for me, social impact is...those skills". Other respondents argued that participatory digital projects enhance social skills, and facilitate relationship-building. Reflecting on his experience of digital youth project facilitation, Chris claimed that: "I'll only see people for a few hours, and what's been really lovely to see is a combination of instant relationships, that happen through the fact that they all know Minecraft, and they get chatting really quickly".

Young people are no longer just passive information receivers. They are active 'participants, makers, doers' (Ito *et al.* 2013, p.6). Thus, the emergence of digital culture has provided young people with new tools to co-create, and to influence, youth projects. Study participants believed that these technological developments have had a mainly positive impact on social inclusion, and participation, amongst young people. Sam argued that digital media provide opportunities for equal dialogue, and enhanced collaboration with young participants: "digital lets us change the way we work with young people, but also changes the amount of influence (...) young people have over us".

Positive interpretations of social impact were highlighted by most digital youth workers, in order to illustrate the impact their work has on young people. However, despite the agreement that social impact is positive, some argued that there is a tendency to focus solely on positive results during the evaluation process. In addition, respondents outlined the

tendency to overemphasise, or even to fabricate, a project's positive impact evidence. Social impact evaluation was therefore described as difficult, since "fundlers want to see the positive outcome" (Chris). The validity of social impact evaluation data, was further questioned by another respondent, who insisted that the process is about "giving the funders what they want" (Carla). Further, respondents highlighted instances where attendance numbers were lower than projected and "the temptation is to try and push for the higher numbers" As Gabriel added: "if you build your evaluation around improved self-worth then there's at least an unconscious impulse to not record when a young person is disappearing down a hole".

This problematic relationship with the project funders, with regard to social impact evaluation, was consistently highlighted across all interviews. To successfully apply, receive, and justify, funding, youth workers are required to either propose set project outcomes, or adopt them from a funding body. This is often viewed as a technocratic, and overly controlling, approach to social impact analysis, and was repeatedly referred to as a source of frustration:

"You apply for some funding and that funding has certain things you have to achieve in it so you then tailor your project to meet those needs. You hope that it's about meeting the individual needs and being flexible to the young people that you end up working with but ultimately you have to then match the goals that you've said you would reach which is always a little bit frustrating." (Chris)

This continuing emphasis, on solely positive outcomes, placed pressure, not only on the workers, but on the young people themselves. Younger project participants are aware that their reassuring feedback is crucial to sustaining funding. Alex noted, for example, that: "By and large when you evaluate a project you've got to put the positives on it". Therefore, an unconscious bias can be perceived when examining participant's perspectives. The problem of over-reporting on positive project outcomes was further discussed, by Jamie:

"I think a lot of time young people would find it difficult to be negative when involved in evaluation of this nature. (...) So I guess there would be a trap there that someone seems to be empowered because you're excited, you think it's gone really well, they say 'Yeah it's great' and then they just go away and don't think about it".

Current funding criteria, and evaluation approaches, may also limit youth workers, and younger participants, abilities to critically reflect on their experience. Ongoing battles to sustain organisational income were defined as a key problem, and a stress factor, when assessing a project's successes, and failures. As a direct result, the anxieties associated with funding and evaluation may have a negative impact on the youth groups.

### **Questioning the value of negative social impact**

Study participants were prompted to reflect on the notion of negative impact. Here, most of the respondents admitted that impact can indeed be negative. Some study participants acknowledged these negatives, and challenges, in their practice. For example, Blake, Carla, and Debbie, were agreed that there is an issue with young people's "obsession with the latest technology". Gabriel's concern was to maintain the right balance between online, and offline, engagement with young participants. Digital technologies were also viewed as "an interrupting influence", which can limit those real (offline) human-human interactions, which are crucial to young people's self-development (Blake, Debbie).

Whilst acknowledging that digital media can lead to negative outcomes, the majority of respondents claimed this the negative social impact is not something that they are required - nor are keen to - report on. Whilst some of the more experienced digital youth workers felt comfortable discussing negative impacts, and associated these with organisational learning, other participants provided more sceptical accounts of the concept of negative impact. First, the digital youth practitioners claimed that, although negative impact does occur during their projects, it is not routinely documented, or analysed. This view was supported by Jamie, who asked: “Do we report on it? I think if people were honest, generally not, no”. Negative impacts of digital youth projects are therefore omitted, or not included, in the subsequent evaluation reports. The issue of negative impact avoidance, or exclusion, was further discussed by Jamie:

“I think people tend not to report things, rather than report the negative impacts. I think we’re always anxious about other funders. (...) I think especially working with vulnerable groups, there’s always the potential for negative impact, you could make things worse. I don’t know they were very good at capturing that”. In the view of the majority of the respondents, the negative impacts are not only underreported but undervalued by external funders.”

On the contrary, it is important to note that some of the more experienced youth workers (Blake and Gabriel) - with ten, or more, years of experience - emphasised the value of negative impact in their work. They believe that capturing and reporting negative impact is important for two reasons: reasons: 1) to facilitate organisational learning; 2) to provide constructive feedback to funders.

Open conversations about a project’s failures were characterised as vital elements of organisational learning and development. As Dave suggested: “I wouldn’t like to think that my services would have a negative impact on people, but if the feedback I get from young people says that my services need to improve, then I would rather hear that than not hear it”. Some respondents stated that examining and reporting on issues associated with a project's facilitation is an essential process in order to effectively co-work with the funders. For example, it was argued that evaluation could provide an opportunity to engage funders in conversations on how projects could be improved in the future:

“You could then have a negative impact if there’s been too long between maybe an introductory course and then something following it up. The kids can fall away, you know what I mean? Especially if there’s chaotic lifestyles. And then just if there’s things, just general. The report will say 'we done this, but it actually was a bit of a tight time scale. The kids thought this'. So you do report back on what would you change, and things like that” (Jo).

The over-emphasis of positive outcomes, whilst evaluating social impact, was also recognised as problematic by most respondents. The digital youth workers interviewed were agreed that more work is required in order to analyse, and report, failures, as well as a project’s shortcomings. As stated by Jamie:

“I think it would be a really important thing to address, because it would be very easy to over-gauge your success if you didn't account for that. Because I think a lot of

young people would say 'This has been fantastic, it's been a great experience' when inside they might not."

The possibility of reflecting on, and analysing, negative impact could also provide a learning opportunity for digital youth workers, and could lead to them "finding better and more creative ways of co-production" (Karen). Conversations with young people about what has worked, and what hasn't, could also lead to an increased sense of ownership among participants. Including young people's negative stories, as suggested by Kyle: "designing whatever the interventions are with the young people who are going to be the beneficiaries so that you make sure they're going to engage with it and feel ownership".

#### **4.1.2 Perceptions of impact: individual, socio-political and regulated.**

In their definition of social impact, study participants viewed impact in three distinguishable ways: 1) individual impact; 2) socio-political impact; 3) regulated data.

##### **Individual change**

Digital youth workers acknowledge the importance of young people's development, as a result of participation in digital and participatory initiatives. Centrally, the concept of transition to adulthood - and its associated challenges - were identified in most conversations. For example, Gabriel highlighted the importance of "improved self-knowledge, self-worth, social skills, understanding of their impact on themselves and others". Other participants talked about "transforming young people's lives" and providing them with "a meaning, a purpose that they didn't have before" (Jo). Certainly, in most cases, digital youth workers emphasised young people's overall well-being, as their primary concern when considering social impact. Most accounts also suggest that, through the facilitation of digital youth participatory projects, respondents aim to inspire, and positively influence, young people's lives and futures. These holistic visions of individuals' improved sense of self, and well-being, are at the centre of digital participatory youth work.

##### **Socio-political process**

Social impact was also examined, and referred to as a collective change. Kyle described this process as one of "multiple people having a positive change effected for them". Here, the notion of impact was described, not in the context of gains to society, but in terms of the collective experience of the process of change. On the community level, the process of collective "meaning making" is associated with a complementary positive change in the wider society. Most of the interviewed digital youth workers also mentioned an enhanced sense of inclusion, and shared decision making, as processes associated with social impact. This holistic, and empowering, vision of social impact as a journey was outlined by Blake, who highlighted the importance "of belonging, of being part of the decision making, of taking ownership of the process". In addition, participatory digital initiatives can create "a lot of pride within the community, it creates a kind of solidarity within the community, particularly if you're working with a community of young people" (Janek). This is especially the case, when digital projects lead to a creative output, such as a film or an exhibition. These engender a sense of creating both a lasting legacy, and a contribution to the wider society, which may enable "young people to then have an impact themselves socially" (Marta). This process, of young people gaining a collective voice, was highlighted by several respondents,

who stated that, by providing young people with opportunities to co-create, and to share their messages digitally, digital youth workers claimed to have a wider societal impact.

### **Social impact as sets of regulated data**

A further topic for discussion is the respondent's scepticism towards technocratic social impact measurement procedures. While many believed that achieving social impact is an important aspect of their youth practice, they also stated that their funder's criteria serve to limit their ability to explore the real social change they are co-implementing with young project participants. The frequent use of evaluation terminology such as "social impact outcomes", "stats" and "social impact KPIs", demonstrated that the "reported social impact" is often interpreted as a set of regulated data, both qualitative and quantitative. This emphasis on externally imposed social impact outcomes is problematic for the respondents. Kyle argued that social impact evaluation mechanisms, and administrative procedures, obstruct the process of examining the underlying value of social impact of digital youth work:

"When you're talking about the impact, how does somebody who is a funder understand what the impact is? They go back to a piece of paper, they go back to a statistical report. What is the value of a hundred young people doing something or one young person doing something? What is the value? We need to make an argument for it. "

All digital youth workers expressed their concerns over the validity of these sets of regulated social impact data. Indeed, it was argued that interpreting social impact as sets of data can have a directly negative effect on young people's participation. Chris acknowledged that building trust and relationships with young participants is central to his practice. However, there is no room for genuine reflection. Rather, he experienced pressure insofar as "funders want boxes need to be ticked". He further claimed that evaluation mechanisms may make it "hard to then respond, and reflect, and change a project to adapt to those [young] people". Technocratic assessment procedures not only have a negative impact on youth workers practice, but also on young participants. Kyle complained that young participants are often "over-evaluated". He continued by stating that: "You're 14 and you're from this community and that might give them some nice interesting graphs, but it actually is a load of shit if you're not given a good quality experience, and these young people are over evaluated, they are having to do this all the time".

## **4.2 Social impact evaluation of digital youth projects: perceptions of practice among digital youth workers.**

### **4.2.1 Social impact evaluation: impact expectations and definition, and the process.**

There are clear indications that participants in this study tended to emphasise the problematic aspects of their social impact evaluation practice. Through an analysis of all interviews, two key problem areas have emerged: 1) expectations and definition; 2) learning.

#### **Social impact: expectations and definition.**

Study participants repeatedly talked about the problems of funding criteria, and pre-set evaluation outcomes. As previously discussed, most respondents believed that a “ticking the box” approach to social impact evaluation, provides neither them, nor the young people with whom they work, with valid social impact indicators with which to gain any understanding. Alison went further, arguing that pre-defined indicators of social impact can interfere with the validity of the evaluation results:

“If we're imposing what they should get out of it then it's going to be hard to measure because at the end of it if we ask also our questions based upon what we think they should get out of it and they've got something else out of it, then they're just going to answer our questions”.

Whilst social impact was widely perceived as an essential element of a subject's youth practice, the confusion - with regard to whose interpretation of impact is being addressed in the final report - was a common theme in the interviews. Youth digital workers agreed that social impact can be achieved, both on an individual and a collective level, and that ensuring that social change occurs as a result of their initiatives is vital. However, while positive terms such as ‘empowerment’, ‘positive transition’, and ‘skills development’, can be identified in most conversations, it is clear that youth workers also experience a degree of frustration when attempting to define their project results.

Too often, organisations are forced to deliver “cookie cutter kind of programmes and make everyone fit into them” (Alison). Blake argues that funders are too detached from youth projects to be able to fully comprehend the project’s progress, and consequently, its social impact. In order to challenge the imposition of technocratic impact assessments, he posed the following questions:

“When you're talking about the impact, how does somebody who is a funder understand what the impact is? They go back to a piece of paper, they go back to a statistical report. What is the value of a hundred young people doing something or one young person doing something?”

The conflict of interests, between funders and workers, creates problems relating to inconsistent understandings, and perceptions, of what matters during the evaluation, both for youth practitioners, and young people. Janek admits that “it’s not very often that an obvious benefit or gain for the young person in being part of an evaluation. And I don’t think anybody’s really got that cracked yet. Because I think that’s probably the hardest bit of youth participation” (Janek). There is also a lack of understanding of what impact means in the context of digital youth work and that in “a lot of cases [only] the organisation knows what it is they're looking for” (Alex)

### **Social impact evaluation: the process**

Digital youth workers described social impact evaluation as a form of transformation, which they witness in the groups they work with. Alison claimed that, in her work, it is about “being able to see it [social impact] as opposed to evaluate it”. These notions of feeling, or sensing, social impact during youth digital participatory projects were highlighted by most of the participants. Due to the dynamic nature of this transformation, it was argued that the formal

process of impact assessment, where data is collected and shared, is an ineffective means of evaluation.

Social impact evaluation was also perceived as “boring”: the final - and least exciting - part of youth projects. Study participants complained about the use of traditional project feedback surveys: “So...because kids don’t want to fill out forms, workers don’t want to fill out forms with kids. So, you know, you think 'who are we really doing this for?’” (Carl). Whilst young participants enjoy the interactivity, and hands-on element, of digital projects, they struggle to focus when producing their written feedback. Evaluation processes were described critically, as “chasing young people up” (Sam). Whilst discussing the process of social impact evaluation of digital youth work, youth workers also indicated that external impact indicators can often prove redundant in the context of their projects. For instance, Alex argued that assessing things such as “the number of sandwiches provided” or “room temperature” does not provide essential data.

It is generally assumed that social impact assessment is a time-consuming process, and, for it to be facilitated effectively, more time needs to be allocated to assessment, both during the project, as well as after its completion. Rowan stated, for example, that: “If you are a tutor on your own and you meant to be just teaching digital media or performance, or whatever, you’re like oh that’s half of your workshop gone, you know”. The time-pressures, and under-staffed nature, of evaluation process for digital youth projects, was further discussed by Chris:

“I’m Project Co-Ordinator as well as running the workshops and I’m doing the evaluation. The people who commissioned me to do it are basically saying well you’re going to be there anyway so you might as well do all those things. I’m like yes but I can’t lead a workshop and take millions of photographs and spend twenty minutes signing people in and logging all their information and the data that you need and capturing their feedback and actually getting some valuable delivery out of it”.

Finally, participants interviewed for this study, asserted that social impact evaluation should be primarily perceived as a learning process. Most interviewees (15) agreed that the purpose of social impact assessment is to know if they provided a worthwhile experience for the participants, and to learn whether, and in what ways, their current digital youth practice needs to improve. Whilst, many define learning, and development, as key elements of the social impact evaluation process, it is also clear that (in reality) the process is rarely used as a learning experience, for both digital youth workers and young project participants. Blake believed that due to the funder’s outcome expectations, and tight deadlines, the evaluation process is frequently underused, at least in the context of organisational or youth learning. He said that “if I filled in a smiley face to a frowny face it normally goes somewhere and it gets correlated and I don’t ever hear back about it”.

## **5. Discussion on social impact evaluation of digital youth work: the tensions between vision and reality of social impact. Problems and recommendations.**

The results of the study support several emergent themes from within the literature (Checkoway & Richard-Schuster, 2008; Merli, 2010; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010; Sabo, 2007) and prior industry reports (Wilson & Grant, 2017) – relating to perceptions of the social impact of digital youth interventions. Three problems were identified in the way youth

workers envisage and experience social impact, and social impact evaluation. The discussion presented in this section examines these three problems, and proposes recommendations.

Table 5. Tensions between vision and reality of social impact. Problems and recommendations.

	<b>Problems identified</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>References to literature</b>
<b>1</b>	Favouring positive (and sometimes fabricated) stories of impact.	Encouraging serendipity in digital youth work.	Checkoway & Richard-Schuster, 2008; Merli, 2010; Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2010; Sabo, 2007;
<b>2</b>	Chasing the impact proofs instead of examining the change.	Further research required to provide digital youth workers with a set of tools or guidance to measure and understand the social impact of their work.	Checkoway & Richard-Schuster, 2008; Mackril & Ebsen, 2017; Mascheroni & Staksrud, 2015; Wilson & Grant, 2017
<b>3</b>	Following an interactive youth project with a ‘boring’ evaluation process.	Adopting playful methods of evaluation in digital youth work.	Adams & Garbutt 2008, Becker et al. 2003; Belfiore & Bennett, 2007; Burdge 2003; Esteves et al., 2012; Sabo, 2003; Sabo, 2007; Walker, 2007; Wilson & Grant, 2017

Source: Own Creation

### **Problem 1: Favouring positive (and fabricated) stories of impact.**

There is a clear contradiction between the way digital youth workers define, and report on, the notion of social impact. It is evident that study participants are passionate about their work, and aim to empower young people with their practice. They perceive social impact predominantly as an individual, and a socio-political process of transformation, or, in Dufour’s words: “increased public good” and a process “benefiting the community” (2015, p.2). It is believed that, through their participation in the digital world, young people can contribute to the “the health and growth of civic collective, jointly produced stories, and real world social change” (Ito *et al.*, 2013, p.48). According to study participants, digital technologies enhance their youth practice, and provide young project participants with opportunities to co-create, and amplify, their voices. This positive orientation towards young people’s relationships with digital technologies can also be found within the literature (Black *et al.*, 2015; Buckingham, 2008; Ito *et al.*, 2013; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016).

However, it is striking that these optimistic statements, describing the social impact of youth digital projects, were followed by more sceptical thoughts with regard to the participants’ perceptions of social impact and social impact evaluation. Study participants argued that negative impacts also occur during projects, but are rarely fed back into the evaluation documentation, primarily due to pre-agreed outcomes imposed by the funders. Therefore, whilst a majority of respondents, and some scholars, analyse social impact in the context of positive social change, it is vital to note that social impact may also be negative (Streatfield & Markless, 2009, p.134).

SIA scholars indicate that impact should be viewed holistically, and that all outcomes should be considered as a change engendered by a planned, or unplanned, intervention (Burdge, 2003; Vanclay, 2003). Self-criticism, and critical approaches, to data collection and analysis is therefore particularly encouraged in the context of the evaluation of youth development projects (Gawler, 2005).

“Opportunities are missed when serendipity is damped, and ignored, because it does not fit in the expected scheme. Personal and professional frustration result when well-laid plans prove ineffective (Rogers, 2008, p.30).

It is desirable – both in the view of the study participants, and scholars – to emphasise the importance of failure as a part of digital youth participatory, and creative, processes. Negative social impacts should be equally considered during the evaluation process, in order to holistically examine the concept of the social impact of digital youth work. Possible negative impacts of digital technologies on young people have been considered in the literature (Aiken, 2017; Buckingham, 2008; Herring, 2008; Livingstone *et al.*, 2015). For example, it was argued that the cyber world provides young people with “illusionary freedom and autonomy” (Herring, 2008, p.73), where adults manage, and capitalize on, young people’s digital participation. Elsewhere, issues - such as online privacy, peer-pressure, and self-representation - have been examined (Aiken, 2016; Livingstone, Mascheroni & Staksrud, 2015).

### **Recommendation 1: Encouraging serendipity in digital youth work.**

To understand the impact, and dynamic, of their work, digital youth practitioners should be provided with a degree of flexibility and freedom, when analysing the social impact of their work. Funding organisations ought to “move beyond narrowly conceived ideas of performance measurement and target setting” (Belfiore & Bennet, 2007, p.138). As Thomas and Percy-Smith argued, youth project workers should be encouraged, not merely to examine their “success and failure”, nor to ask “did a project ‘get participation right’”, but to think reflectively about the journey and the process (2010, p.32).

Most importantly, in order to fully understand the impact of digital youth work, it is essential not to “romanticize” the emancipating qualities of the digital world (Buckingham, 2008), but to encourage social impact evaluation as a truly critical process, encompassing positive, and negative, outcomes, as well as challenges. Particularly in the context of youth participation, people-centred, and collaborative, approaches to evaluation processes should be considered, in order to nurture creativity, serendipity and innovation (Checkoway & Richard-Schuster, 2008). Finally, it is imperative to avoid a “patronising attitude developed on the part of the evaluator, who will only measure what they would like to be there” (Merli, 2010, p.115). This could not only distort the representation of impact among the project organisers, but also alienate young participants from taking ownership of the project.

### **Problem 2: Chasing the impact proofs instead of learning.**

Evaluation of digital youth work projects is frequently affected by external deadlines, and administrative procedures. Whilst ensuring that “all boxes are ticked”, digital youth workers frequently struggle to gather, and produce, valid evaluation data. Externally imposed, and

technocratic, social impact assessment procedures put too much emphasis on setting specific social impact goals and objectives, instead of trying to understand the dynamic of the social change, as a collective and individual process (Adams & Garbutt 2008, Becker *et al.* 2003; Belfiore & Bennett, 2007; Burdge 2003; Esteves *et al.*, 2012). There is ongoing pressure to meet specific, deliverable project goals, and to work towards pre-conceived ideas of the outcomes of an intervention: outcomes, which not only impose “unstated goals and values”, but also ‘pre-empt the outcomes of debates’ (Lockie 2001, p. 281). ). As suggested by Belfiore & Bennet: “considerably more time and resources have been spent on looking for ‘proof’ on impacts than actually trying to understand them” (2007, p.137).

Finally, the element of learning (and a lack of it) as a part of social impact evaluation of digital youth work was identified as a problem during this study. There was a level of frustration among the respondents, relating to their inability to fully engage with the process: “If you are a tutor on your own and you meant to be just teaching digital media or performance or whatever, you’re like oh that’s half of your workshop gone, you know” (Rowan).

## **Recommendation 2: Further research required to provide digital youth workers with a set of tools or guidance to measure social impact of their work.**

Whilst, study participants are able to ‘witness’, ‘feel’, or ‘see’, social impact as a result of their work, their final accounts provide insights into only a small fraction of their work - in this study defined as “a set of regulated data”. Scholars agree that more research is needed to understand this impact, instead of simply trying to measure it (Belfiore & Bennet, 2007)

It is also vital to note, that the current evaluation methods of digital skills measurement (for example Just Economics, 2015; Van Deursen & Dijk, 2008) are not always suitable to examine participatory, and multimodal, digital youth initiatives (Wilson & Grant, 2017). Although creative, and participatory, tools are currently available, with which to measure youth development (Gawler, 2005), social impact (McCabe & Horsley, 2008; Sabo 2007), and digital skills (Just Economics, 2015), there is a need for further research, linking these to the aforementioned problematic areas, in order to provide digital youth practitioners with guidance, and a set of practical social impact assessment tools.

## **Problem 3: Following an interactive youth project with a ‘boring’ evaluation process.**

Social impact evaluations of digital youth work are normally considered as the final, and the least exciting part, of the project. Whilst digital youth workers acknowledged the importance of the evaluation process, they equally admit that this is normally the dullest part of the digital youth project. As Sabo suggested: “Evaluation has so many negative connotations that almost everyone has an evaluation horror story to tell” (2007, p.50).

The results of this study demonstrate that evaluation experiences are often associated with a degree of anxiety and frustration, both among digital youth workers and young people. Indeed, young people are too frequently “observed, measured, tested and enumerated” by external evaluators (Checkoway & Richard-Schuster, 2008, p. 2). Thus, the “over-evaluated” young participants may feel under-pressure to provide positive feedback.

### **Recommendation 3: Adopting playful methods of evaluation in digital youth work.**

Acknowledging that there is “no single tool or method that can capture the whole range of impacts or that can be applied by all” (Dufour, 2015, p.5), it is proposed that the traditional evaluation practices of youth development projects may be enhanced through the implementation of creative methods (Gawler, 2005; 2005; McCabe & Horsley, 2008; Sabo, 2003; Flores, 2007; Feinstein & O’Kane, 2008). Whilst digital youth projects are considered as ‘hands-on’, and participatory, experiences, methods such as storytelling, painting, photography, and the use of other media (McCabe & Horsley, 2008, p.1), could be appropriate in order to achieve a meaningful participation in the evaluation process. It is claimed that play, and creative methods, can encourage both adults, and youth, to become curious evaluators, and to help “level the playing field so that staff and youth can begin to see evaluation as something everyone can do” (2008, p.25).

The literature review of practical resources for youth evaluation reveals the richness of creative, and playful, social impact evaluation tools (McCabe & Horsley, 2008; Sabo, 2003; Flores, 2007; Feinstein & O’Kane, 2008). Ranging from video to illustration, participatory youth evaluation covers a wide range of artistic, and playful, tools. The implementation of play into evaluation enriches the experience and turns it into “an experience, which is enjoyable by all those participating in the process, rather than being something alien and imposed” (McCabe & Horsley, 2008, p.1). Likewise, in the context of digital youth engagement, “game-like learning” enhances youth’s participatory experience (Ito *et al.*, 2013). Play, and experimentation, are outlined as key elements of digital learning (Buckingham, 2008). Therefore digital play may not only enrich the form of group inquiry, but can also function as an empowerment tool (Black *et al.*, 2015, p.4).

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to examine social impact, and social impact evaluations, of digital youth work. Through the theoretical lens of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006), a qualitative study involving twenty semi-structured interviews digital youth workers was carried out.

Two research themes were examined in this paper: (1) Social impact: definitions among digital youth workers, (2) Social impact evaluation of digital youth projects: perceptions of practice among digital youth workers. The analysis presented here examined contradictions between how digital youth workers envision, ‘sense’ and ‘experience’ the social impact of their work, and how (in reality) social impact is evaluated and reported upon. This study highlighted three problems, and proposed future recommendations, as presented in Table 5.

Table 6. Research problems and recommendations defined in this study.

Problem	Recommendation
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Pawluczuk, Smith, Webster & Hall (2018). Social impact evaluations of digital youth work: tensions between vision and reality. Paper accepted for presentation at *Transmedia Literacy International Conference*, Barcelona, Spain, March 22-24, 2018.

Favouring positive (and sometimes fabricated) stories of impact.	Encouraging serendipity in digital youth work.
Chasing the impact proofs instead of examining the change.	Further research required to provide digital youth workers with a set of tools or guidance to measure and understand the social impact of their work.
Following an interactive youth project with a 'boring' evaluation process.	Adopting playful methods of evaluation in digital youth work.

Source: Own Creation

Whilst it is anticipated that this study will provide a unique, and important, contribution to the discussion on the social impact evaluation of digital youth work, it is also vital to acknowledge its limitations, particularly with regard to sample size and cultural context (United Kingdom, Scotland). Therefore, further research may be needed, in order to supplement this critical analysis of the social impact of digital youth work.

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