



EXPLORING HIGH MEDIA LITERACY
AMONG CHILDREN AND ADULTS
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

December 2023

www.magentaresearch.co.uk

HOW LESS MEDIA LITERATE BEHAVIOUR IS JUSTIFIED

This section is based on the findings from discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a method which analyses the language used, and how the words, phrasing and structure of the conversation work together to build a particular message or understanding. The focus is on the words, tone, body language and gestures which are all used to construct a particular version of an event or action. Discourse analysis is inherently interpretative, in that it interprets the language used and makes broader claims on the basis of this. This discourse analysis specifically focused on how participants justified any behaviours which could be deemed less media literate. Justifying or accounting for behaviour is a common discursive practice, whether providing an account for why an individual needs to go to the shop, or why a suspect has broken the law¹. The focus is not on an individual or their motivations, but rather on the language used. In this case, it aims to uncover how high media literacy might be evident even when talking about less media literate practices.

When participants described behaviour that could be considered as less media literate, there was often some awareness of this behaviour not being best practice or aligned with their normal behaviour.

For example, some participants laughed when describing their actions, and others indicated through their facial expressions (such as grimaces or wide eyes) that this was a behaviour which they recognised as potentially being problematic.

Moderator: 'Have you found other ways of watching the game?'

Participant: [looks away from screen] 'there are other ways, yes' [laughter throughout this]

Male, Social Media, 30-34 yrs, Northern Ireland

'I really wanted it so I didn't care.' [loud laughter]

Female, Online Gaming, 30-34 yrs, Wales

'I can't imagine I've changed any of the privacy settings since the day I set up my Facebook when I was 14.' [small laugh and wide eyes]

Female, Social Media, 25-29 yrs, Northern Ireland

When participants did talk about less media literate behaviour they had themselves demonstrated, they often perceived the behaviour as 'not that bad'.

Participants often believed that the outcome of their behaviour was inconsequential, or did not have any negative outcomes and as a result was not anything to be concerned about.

*'And to be fair, I have **never had any issues** with any of my privacy settings or my security.'*

Female, Social Media, 25-29 yrs, Northern Ireland

*'I **didn't lose any money** here.'*

Male, Social Media, 30-34 yrs, Northern Ireland

¹ [Antaki, C. \(1988\) Explaining and arguing: The social organisation of accounts](#)

I've got Google Drive, so I've got like files on there. Nothing, I've got nothing confidential.'
Female, Online Gaming, 30-34 yrs, Wales

Discourse case study: Justifying in-app purchases

William plays games online, and very rarely makes in-app purchases. When he discusses in-app purchases, he initially portrays other people within the game as being *credit card players*, suggesting that they do well in the game only because they spend a lot of money. He portrays a picture of a specific type of player, who spends a lot of money simply to do well on small parts of the game. He talks specifically about a larger sum of money, and minimising the effect of spending that much as it's *just for one* campaign.

'Some of them just, they spend a fortune. You know, there's been 40 or 50 quid and just for one campaign.'

This potentially implies that they may do this for multiple campaigns, demonstrating how much they are spending. When he then talks about his own in-app purchases he describes them quite differently.

*'I did spend a few quid. Like, you know, only two or three pounds because I was very, you know, been hit **very hard** in an attack. I hadn't got **anything**. I just wanted something, sort of seed corn, just so I can start growing again. So I spent three or four pounds and **that was it**. But as I say, that was just a drop in the ocean to some people.'*

In discussing his own purchases, he minimises the amount of money he spent *a few quid*. In the way he says *'that was it'* he portrays this event as a one-off, that he did not repeat. It was also in response to a particularly negative situation, which he describes as being hit *very hard*, and how he hadn't got *anything*. As such, he constructs the event as being so detrimental to his ability to play the game that he had to spend something. He then immediately compares this to other people's spending as being relatively limited.

Having constructed a particular type of player who regularly spend a lot of money to progress in the game, his own purchasing is talked about as minimal and only because of an extreme event.

After talking to scammers from an accommodation website through a personal e-mail rather than through the official app, which could be perceived as less media literate, one participant noted how he took steps to verify whether the listing was accurate.

'I reversed image searched some of the pictures.'
Male, Social Media, 30-34 yrs, Northern Ireland

Another participant explained how he sometimes downloaded files from a website he does not necessarily fully trust, but then makes clear how he *immediately* takes action which could be deemed more media literate.

*'And if I'm downloading anything on the Internet that's from a site that I'm not too familiar with, but I've decided to trust then I like download it and then **immediately** do a computer scan of that folder, like a virus scan.'*

Male, Search, 18-24 yrs, England

Related to this is how participants tended to believe they had done everything right, but still got scammed or got a virus. In other words, they presented themselves as being highly media literate, but the technology or scammers were simply more sophisticated.

*'I had the **ad blocker, antivirus malware detector**. Like I'd done it **100 times before**. I knew that there was going to be lots of pop ups, but like all the things I had would sort of like shut it all down*

and eventually I would find a stream that works. Obviously this one time it didn't work.'
Male, Social Media, 30-34 yrs, Northern Ireland

'I'm quite good with things on Facebook. I've had things go wrong with things before and I've just figured out how to rectify things, but my profile had, like, gone.'
Female, Online Gaming, 30-34 yrs, Wales

When participants justified less media literate behaviour, they often provided an account for how this behaviour was something that occurred when they were young.

The behaviour is now something they had grown out of and that they now have much better awareness. The construction of less media literate behaviours as 'childish' suggests that it comes from being naïve, innocent, and not having knowledge, rather than it being a conscious decision.

*'There's people in there that are not my family members because **back in school** that's what you did and you just add them.'*
Female, Social Media, 25-29 yrs, Northern Ireland

*'I was a bit silly **when I was younger**, I got into a chatroom and was just giving out my snapchat to random people.'*
Female, Online Gaming, 13-15 yrs, Scotland

Participants sometimes provided claims of expertise to support their behaviour, even if it is not necessarily the action of someone who is highly media literate. For example, in some instances participants would refer to their own experience online to justify their behaviour, such as the participant below who justifies not needing a virus checker by claiming expertise over his use of the internet.

*'Personally, I think I've got enough common, I wouldn't say common sense, but **I know what I'm doing enough** to not need one [a virus checker].'*
Male, Online Gaming, 18-24 yrs, England

In some cases, particularly younger people, the expertise they claimed is not their own but is instead related to a family member. In the example below, the 13 year old participant explained how he trusts a particular YouTuber because his dad watched him. In other words, to justify his trust in this particular account, he brought in his father's expertise, and his father is therefore someone who can verify accurate accounts.

*'This one guy I watch a lot is [a high-profile social media content creator]. He's got like a high follow account. He's actually been on the news before. And I've watched him on the news. He doesn't have the tick, but I do compare the stuff. And my dad does watch him as well. And my dad's been on the Internet **for quite a while** and it's kind of like his job basically the Internet.'*
Male, Search, 13-15 yrs, England

Another way that participants justified what could be deemed less media literate behaviour was by portraying what they do as being the same as what everyone else does.

Participants believed that if everyone else is doing it, then it cannot be too bad. For example, when searching and exploring websites, one male participant freely accepted cookies and justified this by saying that 'everybody' does this, so his behaviour is not anything against the norm.

*'I get the usual cookies that **we** all just say okay to. I could be signing away our life, our mortgages and our life savings but I think **everybody** these days just accepts cookies.'*
Male, Search, 45-49 yrs, Scotland

In some cases, the referral to other people's behaviour was more subtle and implicit. For example, one participant talked about her privacy settings on social media, and when she referred to accepting the terms and conditions, she used the third person or generic 'you', rather than the first person 'I', thereby implying that everyone does this.

*'**You** never read them anyway. **You** just accept them.'*
Female, Social Media, 25-29 yrs, Northern Ireland

Discourse analysis case study: Considering privacy and data

Amelia regularly uses Google Play to download games that she then plays in Mistplay, which is a play-to-earn platform. She thinks that Google Play likely has access to a lot of her data, including card details, personal photos, and spreadsheet documents, as it's linked to her general Google account. She feels that Google shouldn't be sharing her data with any other connected apps like Mistplay, but admits she isn't sure if this is the case or not, or what exactly is/isn't shared. When asked about this, in her answers she uses a number of practices to present herself as behaving in the same way as everyone else, and that this is a common behaviour, and as such potentially not worrying or concerning.

*'The honest answer is I have no idea. Erm I'd like to think no because I can't see why, you know, Google shouldn't be giving other apps that information, but the reality is I don't actually know what they do. I mean, **nobody** really reads the privacy notices, do they? **We all** just click accept and hope for the best.'*

In her initial answer Amelia explains how she does not know whether Google passes information on to other apps. In discussing her potentially less media literate behaviour, she uses language (*nobody, we all*) which suggests that this is behaviour that everybody engages in.

*'Well, you know, I mean nobody would use Google if they, you know if they kept getting their details stolen or security breaches and things like that, you know they are obviously a very reputable company erm. So **you** just got to kind of trust, really, that they that they're doing everything right, you know, I mean, if there was the data breach with Google, that would be pretty catastrophic, wouldn't it? You know, for **anyone** who's got, you know, even on iPhone you can have a Google account with your emails and or whatever and so, you know, we're talking about **millions and millions and millions of people**. Their data would be breached and you know **everyone** puts your personal stuff on your phone.'*

Amelia continues to construct her use of Google as being in line with other people's. She highlights how *millions, and millions, and millions* of people would be at risk, putting herself as just one in a large number of people who use Google in this way. Although she puts personal things on her phone, she constructs *everyone* else as doing this, so she is not unique in this. It is also noteworthy that when she talks about trusting Google she also uses the third person *you* rather than 'I', which would again suggest this is what others do. So in considering her privacy and data security, Amelia constructs herself as doing what everyone else does, and trusting effectively in the crowd and the number of people who use Google.

Finally, when we spoke to people about their use of search engines or about their choices regarding cookies specifically, we often saw them draw on a broader discourse of 'if you've got nothing to

hide, you've got nothing to fear'. By this, we mean that they drew on notions that tracking or spying on people's data was only a worry if you were doing something 'dodgy'.

'I'm not searching for anything dodgy. I'm not trying to do anything bad; therefore why do I care? Why do I care if Google is tracking the fact that I'm looking for a holiday in Italy.'
Male, Search, 45-49 yrs, Scotland

'I'm not a very materialistic person so I feel that my online profile that the data that they're collecting about me is quite bizarre. I don't think. I don't think there's anything that they can... The ads that I get, I don't even think. I think they just kinda go. 'We think you might like this???' So I think it's a bit of a struggle sometimes.'
Male, Search, 30-34 yrs, England

'I'm not particularly worried about it because I've got nothing particularly to be worried about, you know.'
Male, Online Gaming, 60-74 yrs, England

Summary

In summary, participants demonstrated a clear awareness of when they were potentially engaging in less media literate behaviours. The analysis demonstrates that even when discussing less media literate behaviour, accounts were provided which drew on the participants' knowledge of what it is to be highly media literate. For example, providing an account demonstrating the steps that have been taken to minimise harm from less media literate behaviours, showed how aware participants were of their actions online. In addition, there was clearly recognition that the technology was ever changing, and that even when taking necessary precautions people could still be caught out. Justifying behaviour through portraying it as normal or widespread is not unusual and has been found in other areas². However, participants did not use this justification in the case of seriously risky behaviour (e.g., we never saw this around downloading viruses or meeting up with people offline without telling anyone) but instead used this justification in relation to topics that were likely to have less serious implications. In acknowledging the potential risks, but perceiving them as affecting everyone, participants were in many ways demonstrating their high media literacy through the accounts they provided. Finally, the claim of youthful foolishness when engaging in less media literate behaviour seems to locate a lack of knowledge or understanding in the past. It highlighted that they could recognise why they behaved in certain ways in the past, and also their own process of becoming highly media literate. Overall, the discourse analysis shows that when describing highly media literate behaviour, these individuals use discursive resources which highlight their actual media literacy.

² Potter, J. (1996). Representing Reality: Discourse, rhetoric and social construction.

