YOUNG PEOPLE,
PRIVACY AND TRUST IN GHANA

The Africa Digital Rights Hub (ADRH) is a not-for-profit "think and action tank" that promotes Pan-African research and capacity building on digital rights. Interested in the impact of digital technology on people living in the continent, the Hub brings together academic researchers, stakeholders, policy makers, regional and international bodies to address digital rights issues in Africa.

Plato House, 06 Torgbor Link, Accra, Ghana
Digital Address: GA-0149129
info@africadigitalrightshub.org
+233 (302) 909482

FOREWORD

PROF. JUSTICE S. K. DATE-BAH

Retired Supreme Court Judge of Ghana,
and Chair of Africa Digital Rights Hub

"Technology" and "young people" are words which are important for the future of Ghana and indeed of all other countries. The future of technology inevitably involves digitisation and digitalisation, which in some spheres carry risks to privacy. This is why the research conducted by ADRH and reported on in this volume is so important. The Ghanaian research was part of an international research effort under which comparable national research was done in Antigua and Barbuda, Australia and Slovenia. The Ghanaian research studied a focus group of 21 young people aged between 13 and 17 years who are resident in Accra. The data from this group was supplemented by a study of 101 additional young people resident in other parts of the country.

The study demonstrates the importance of ensuring the digital privacy of children in Ghana. To achieve this, there is the need for increased awareness of children's privacy and how to protect it. Accordingly, policymakers and public officials need to engage more with children on issues of online privacy. A collaborative approach should be adopted under which all relevant government agencies and key stakeholders collaborate to ensure increased privacy protection for children in Ghana.

To facilitate the attainment of this goal, children should be engaged more on issues of privacy. Policymakers and decisionmakers should find solutions to the concerns of young people about their online privacy in school settings. The Ministry of Education, in particular, should explore how to secure better protection for young people's privacy in the classroom.

An assurance of privacy will generate more trust among younger people. Trust in products related to digital technologies will lead to greater use of them. This is likely to lead to greater efficiencies and higher productivity which many of them enable. Protection of young people's privacy is thus arguably an important spoke in the wheel of progress that is facilitated by digital technologies. The young people involved in the workshops, conducted under this study, wanted their concerns communicated to a wide range of decision-makers, including lawmakers, the Minister of Education, Minister of Information, Minister of Communications and Digitisation, the Regulators and industry players on the global stage, such as Meta and Google. It is my prayer that they all hear the young people's cry.

FOREWORD

DAVID & STACY, 14 YEARS OLD

We are of the strong belief that online privacy is of significant value. We believe that this leads to peace, which is defined by the UN as dignity and wellbeing for all. And today, some media companies act contrary to this, leading to a violation of SDG 16, which is peace, justice and strong institutions.

When there's a violation of peace, there are usually a lot of issues. People don't feel assured that their information online won't leak. And this leads to a lot of issues. Sometimes when this information leaks, there is even cases such as suicide, depression, all of this could come about as a result of this information leaking.

A lot of young people in Ghana want to have privacy online, because online privacy is very important. And for many people such as myself, we find safety and comfort in the internet. We get to express ourselves, and be ourselves on the internet. And so nobody wants to feel unsafe or anxious knowing that their lives could easily get ruined for the fact that they are online. So for these reasons, young people in Ghana want more privacy online.

So we the youth of Africa, and based in Ghana, therefore, wish to use reports like this, seminars and opportunities to raise our voices to ensure revisiting of policies to ensure for better privacy online.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ghanaian children's lives are increasingly digital, and the impact of the digital world is all around them. But this digital world relentlessly collects, collates and analyzes data about them. We spoke to 21 young people aged 13-17 years old in Accra, and surveyed 101 more around the country, to discover what they think about privacy and trust in this digital context.

We found that they have nuanced understandings about privacy, and feel that privacy is contextual, relational and that achieving privacy realizes fairness.

However, young people are not sure if their privacy was respected in the digital world, and expressed ambivalent feelings about trusting that their privacy was respected, and in the companies that collected and used their data.

Instead, they wanted changes to the digital world to ensure that they have more control over their personal information, more transparency about when it is being used, stronger security protecting their information and less data collection, sharing and sale in the first instance. Specifically, they wanted policy makers and technologists to embrace the following principles:

1. Improve transparency and meaningful consent around data collection and use

2. Process data in ways that are in young people's best interests or "doing no harm" with it

3. Provide young users with more control or ownership of their data

4. Prevent excessive sharing or selling of young people's data

5. End targeted advertising to young people

6. Strong data security for young people's data

7. Collect less data about young people in the first place

8. Delete young people's data when it is not needed

These principles can help inform and strengthen debates about privacy laws and policies within Ghana. Specifically they call for us to:

• Increase awareness and enforcement of childrens' privacy protection in Ghana.

• Engage with more children on these issues

• Reflection on what this means for young people's online privacy in school settings. Particularly, the Ministry for Education should explore how young people's privacy can be better protected in the classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

Ghanaian children's lives are increasingly digital—from online classroom activities to connected toys to digital games to social media—the impact of the digital world is all around them.

This digital world relentlessly collects, collates and analyzes data about the children who use their products, from their phone ID numbers, to GPS location to the contents of their emails. This means that children growing up in Ghana today create a data footprint that would have been unimaginable even a decade ago, children and young people are defined as 'datafied' from birth.[1]

This situation has implications for young people's privacy. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child[2] and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child,[3] children have the right to be free from arbitrary interference with their privacy. Extensive data footprints may be a risk to their privacy. Children and young people also have the right to be heard on matters that affect them.[4]

This research set out with a simple aim, to explore what children and young people think about their online privacy, if they trust the technology that collects their data and what, if anything, they want done to improve their privacy online.

This research involved workshops and surveys with young people exploring their perspectives. These were held in November 2022 and February 2023, supported by the Internet Society Foundation. Similar workshops and surveys were held in Antigua & Barbuda, Australia and Slovenia. This report explores the findings from this research in Ghana, and expands on what this might mean for privacy policy.

The aim is to contribute to an already thriving discussion about the need for better privacy protections in Ghana and across Africa, and to hold space for children and young people in these discussions. We hope that their perspectives and experiences spur on an even greater focus in creating a digital world that children can grow up in safely and privately.

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[1] Veronica Barassi (2020) Child | Data | Citizen MIT Press, London

[2] Article 16 UN General Assembly (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child General Assembly resolution 44/25

[3] Article 10 African Union Ordinary Assembly (1990) African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

[4] Article 12 in the UN General Assembly (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child General Assembly resolution 44/25 and when it comes to their right to be heard in administrative issues such as the development of privacy policies, Article 4 African Union Ordinary Assembly (1990) African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

YOUNG PEOPLE, TRUST AND PRIVACY

Globally, children and young people under 18 years old make up a third of the world's online users, and they use a range of digital technologies and services.

Virtually all of these services—from EdTech products, to smart phones, to popular apps like Instagram and Whatsapp—collect a trove of personal information about young people. The best available estimate of how many data points have been collected about each and every child by their 13th birthday is 72 million data points.[5]

Young Ghanians are no exception to this global trend. In our workshop, we asked young people what their favorite apps and digital services were, and many data hungry products were noted; from Google search, to Youtube, to Facebook, to Whatsapp, to BeReal, to Instagram, to Tiktok, to SnapChat to Fifa video games. Each of these products collect, store and use different personal data, from precise location details, the contents of their phone's address books, who they interact with, when they go to bed, tracking their actions and behaviors with cookies and pixels and building profiles about what they like and dislike. These profiles are deeply personal, often identifiable, and filled with sensitive information. Our workshops unpacked what young people thought about this, exploring what they believed privacy in a digital age looked like and how they'd like it improved.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research involved a focus group with 21 young people aged 13-17 years old in Accra. The young people were recruited from schools across Accra, including state schools and private schools. They undertook guided activities, from group work to brainstorms to post-it note activities to explore what online privacy meant to them, if they trusted their privacy was respected online and what privacy protections they wanted. This was supplemented by a survey of 101 additional young people shared through schools across the country.

Comparable workshops and surveys were held with young people in Antigua & Barbuda, Australia and Slovenia as part of an international research effort.

More about the research can be found at https://trustech4kids.github.io/

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[5] In New Economics Foundation (2020) iSpy https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/i-Spy__NEF.pdf

WHAT DOES PRIVACY ONLINE MEAN FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

The young people in this research had a nuanced and contextual understanding about privacy online. Three key aspects of online privacy emerged in the workshop.

Privacy is "when young people can keep their information privately, without sharing with any one"

1. Privacy as protecting information, in a contextual way that is appropriate to the nature of the information.

The young people spoke about privacy as a concept involving the protection of 'personal information' that may be routinely exposed online. This included everything from names to phone numbers to religions to school or hometown details. However some personal information was more delicate than others, and they felt this deserved more privacy. This included information about family relationships and family matters, bank details, relationships status, phone numbers and email details.

2. Privacy as 'relational', and different personal information is appropriate for different people to see

Privacy was also described in a relational fashion, and the young people spoke about some types of personal information, including the delicate types of information, being more appropriate for some audiences than others. For example, the group talked about how passwords might be okay for their parents and carers to see (although a lot of young people said nobody should see their passwords), but that when it came to content posted online, only best friends and online friends should see that. See figure 1 for a list of some of the types of information young people talked about, and who they described as appropriate to see. What was also interesting to note is that we asked if online game companies should be able to see any of these types of information, as an example of a commercial actor, and with the exception of bank account details,[6] they all said no.

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[6] In New Economics Foundation (2020) iSpy https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/i-Spy__NEF.pdf

EXAMPLES OF PERSONAL INFORMATION THE GROUP TALKED ABOUT	EXAMPLES OF WHO THEY FELT WAS APPROPRIATE TO SEE THIS INFORMATION
A personal photograph	Best friends, mom, dad and carers, online friends or anyone surfing the internet
Email details	Mom, dad or carers only
Online social media handles	Online friends or best friends
Passwords	Nobody or mom, dad or carers
Mobile phone numbers	Mom, dad or carers and online friends
Names of people you don't like	Best friends or (unusually) someone you cannot trust
"Naughty" things you have done	Best friends or nobody
Bank account details	Mom, dad or carers only
Content you have posted online (like Facebook status updates, or Instagram pics or TikTok videos)	Best friends or online friends

Figure 1: Types of personal information the group felt were appropriate to be seen by different people

3. Privacy as a right, connected to autonomy and fairness

Young people talked about privacy as an expectation or a right, for example they stated that "young people should have the right to keep certain information to themselves away from others". They felt this right or expectation was not always realized—saying for example, "we must use our internet wisely and to have the right not to be exploited"— but that it was part of their set of rights in both a digital age and their right to be safe and secure. For example they talked about privacy as part of young people's "right(s) in the digital environment and to be safe".

The idea of privacy as part of freedom and autonomy came up frequently. They talk about privacy being realized when:

- "when young people can make their own decisions concerning what he/she wants to be out there about his/herself to others"

- "when young people can make their own decisions whether to or not share any information about them"

- when young people can "decide what their data should be used for and how it should be used"

- "when young people can keep their personal detail secret in the digital world and help them to control the data"

- Having autonomy and control over your data was seen as an act of fairness, describing privacy as achieved "when young people can take their personal information and use it in ways that are fair or just"

Combining these three factors together, we get a definition of online privacy that looks something like:

Privacy is the right to protect personal information. This depends on the type of information and the people involved, and keeps things fair.

DO YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL THEIR PRIVACY IS RESPECTED ONLINE?

We unpacked if young people felt private—if they trusted that their sensitive personal information was handled carefully—in both the workshops and the surveys.

In the survey, we found that the majority of respondents did not know if they trusted that their privacy was respected online or not (see figure 2).
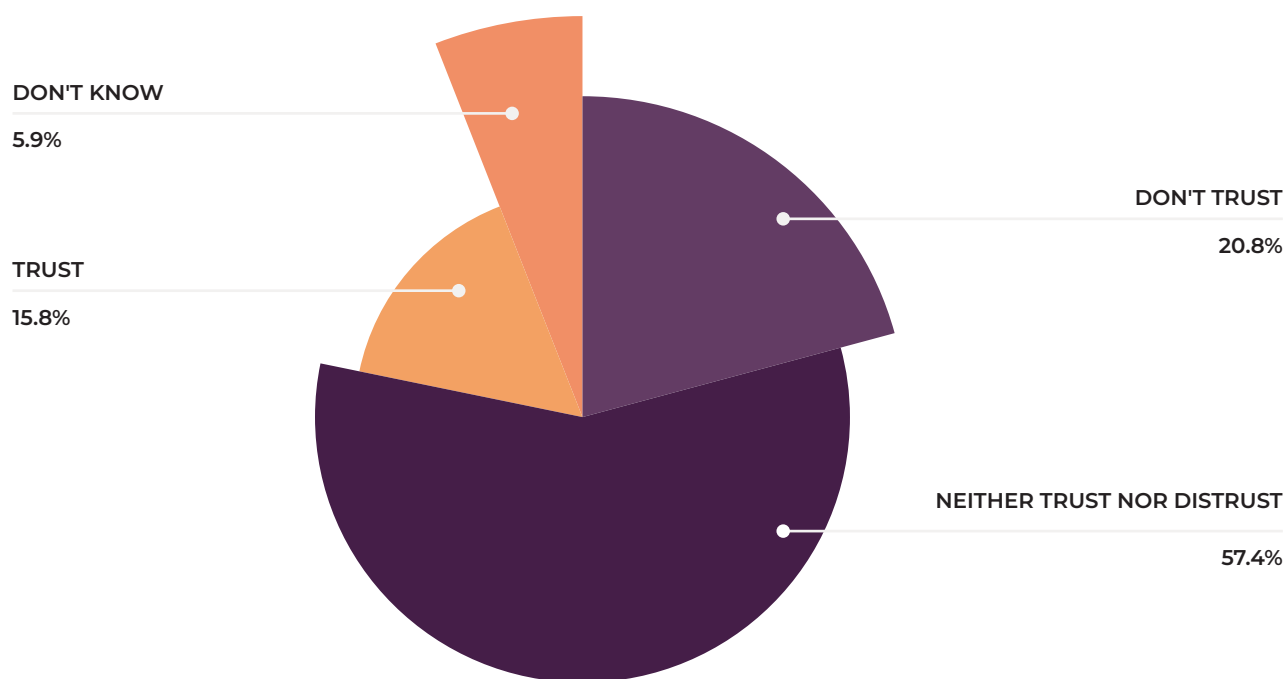
DON'T KNOW

5.9%

TRUST

15.8%

DON'T TRUST

20.8%

NEITHER TRUST NOR DISTRUST

57.4%

Figure 2: If young people trusted that their privacy was respected online (n=101)

We asked young people why they felt that way, and found a range of reasons that all suggests a healthy ambivalence to trusting digital technologies. Young people talked about control and security engendering trust, but risks of data misuse and privacy breaches as creating mistrust. For example:

• "I trust this way because it is what we use in our everyday life and I also do not trust it because it is easy for hackers to access your personal information"

• "It is safe and unsafe at the same time"

• "I trust nor distrust them because they have access to my information but at the same time it's secure"

• "I can't trust them I don't know what information about me they're collecting but I don't distrust them because I feel like there is some privacy"

• "I trust them because they keep my data safe, and I mostly have control over it. But, I don't trust them because of the way they gather my data and somethings sell it to companies like Google or Facebook to push ads to me"

• "From my point of view I feel I neither trust nor distrust them because there are certain times you can trust some certain sites and at the same time distrust them, some sites like YouTube allows you to share your information and other stuff so if you don't want your information to get out I feel like you should just keep it to yourself."

• "I don't trust them because I hear stories of how some of these apps use their information for things that they are not aware of. But generally I trust them a little"

• "Because they have the data, it can either be stolen or sold. If the company is trustworthy, they may not"

Other young people described why they don't trust them, with fears of surveillance and fears of data breaches most frequently described:

• "I generally do not trust them. I believe that these apps never forget and are always tracking you. I am of the view that these same apps you may trust would constantly monitor you or could leak out your information or private chats or vital, delicate details."

• "I don´t trust them because some information can get leaked or into the wrong hands"

• "I feel that my information could be extracted and that I could be spied on"

Others described why they did trust them, with company's reputation and previous security records being described as factors that have earned trust:

• "Since there hasn't really been any reports on these sites spreading users information, I don't really have any problem"

• "I trust them because if they were to leak any of my information, I would have the right to sue them for releasing private information, I believe no company would like to be sued or have a bad name. I also think that is the bond between the company and the user,so i don't think they would let out any personal information of their user"

• "I trust them sometimes because they have good antivirus systems and they do not give out my information and their privacy policies are good"

In the workshops too these themes were repeated. Young people spoke about factors that decreased trust, such as fears of data breaches, surveillance and data misuse (especially for advertising) being high on their priorities. Some factors increased trust, such as strong security, providing a good service and personal experience with platforms encouraging trust.

WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO FEEL PRIVATE ONLINE?

We asked at both the survey and workshops what young people thought the "rules should be online" so that they would feel more private.

We asked our survey respondents to identify their top 'principle' that would improve their trust in products when it came to their privacy. Nearly half of the young people identified control as the most important principle (48%) and more than a quarter (28%) identified transparency as the most important principle to improve trust that their privacy was respected (see figure 3).

WHAT, IF ANYTHING, WOULD MAKE YOU TRUST DIGITAL PRODUCTS MORE WITH YOUR PRIVACY? N=101

	If products offered you more control about what information they could collect, and what they could do with it	30%
Control	If products only used your information in ways that I had signed up for, and not for other purposes	18%
Transparency	If products were more clear what personal information they are collecting and what they do with it	28%
Rights	If products agreed to respect your rights in general	11%
Sale & sharing	If products did not sell your information	2%
Advertising	If products did not target you with personalized ads	1%
Support	If products offered easy ways to complain or fix a problem if something goes wrong	5%
All	All of the above	4%

Figure 3: Survey responses asking young people to pick their top priority when it came to trusting that their privacy would be respected (n=101).

We asked young people in the survey if they had other ideas for what might be important, and a number of other principles emerged:

Security

- "The websites that save my information should have a strong anti-virus system and it should not send my information to a third party and it should also use my information the way I instruct it to"

- "Getting absolute assurance and facts behind to prove that my information is safe with them"

- "If every account had a very difficult firewall"

Data minimisation and ending tracking

- "If the personal information collected about me is related to what I signed up for or if the questions being asked are not so personal"

- "I think it would be best if people below the ages of 18 would not be tracked or monitored in the sense of their information and that whatever they did was secured and encrypted"

- "I would feel safer if apps did not collect our information"

Stopping the sale/sharing of data

- "If digital products did not sell our information"

- "If the website assures me that my information entered would be private and not shared with anyone"

- "If they do not share it"

Control and transparency appeared here too, reinforcing their importance.

Control

- "If I had more access and control to my information"

- "If the creators of digital products allow me to have control over what information they can collect and what they would do with it and if they are more clear on what information they would collect and what they would do with it"

- "The fact that we could control our own data collected by these companies"

Transparency

- "If they told me why they would need my information and if i didn't have to tell them every information about myself"

- "Knowing what information about me that they are collecting"

- "If the sites tell us exactly what information they are collecting"

In the workshops we asked young people to come up with a list of "dos and don'ts", or rules that they felt would help them feel more private online. Embracing the principles of co-design,[7] the list of "dos and don'ts" they developed involved prompts from the survey and from the workshops in other countries. The group collated their ideas for "dos and don'ts" into a set of nine key principles to improve their safety online. In order of priority, this includes:

1. Improving transparency and meaningful consent around data collection and use

2. Processing data in ways that are in young people's best interests or "doing no harm" with it

3. Providing young users with more control or ownership of their data

4. Preventing excessive sharing or selling of young people's data

5. Ending targeted advertising to young people

6. Stronger data security for young people's data

7. Collecting less data about young people in the first place

8. Deleting young people's data when it is not needed

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[7] See for example, Rhys Bevan Jones, Paul Stallard, Sharifah Agha, Simon Rice, Aliza Werner-Seidler, Karolina Stasiak, Jason Kahn, Sharon Simpson, Mario Alvarez-Jimenez, Frances Rice, Rhiannon Evans, Sally Merry (2020) 'Practitioner review: Co-design of digital mental health technologies with children and young people'. J Child Psychol Psychiatry. 2020 61(8):928-940. doi: 10.1111/jcpp.13258

CALL TO ACTION

The young people involved in the workshops wanted to communicate their list of privacy principles to a range of decision makers, to ensure their voices were heard. These included:

- Law makers

- Minister of Education

- Minister of Information

- Minister of Communications & Digitisation

- Regulators

- Industry players (globally, Meta, Google, etc.)

The young people have written to these decision-makers, and we have sent them this research as well.

Beyond this, the principles these young people have developed can help inform and strengthen debates about privacy laws and policies within Ghana. Specifically:

- Increasing awareness and enforcement of childrens' privacy protection in Ghana.

- The need to engage with more children on these issues.

- That we reflect on what this means for young people's online privacy in school settings. Particularly, the Ministry for Education should explore how young people's privacy can be better protected in the classroom.

However, children's privacy online is everybody's business and we urge everyone to reflect on the key messages young people have shared with us, and to consider how they might be able to advance children's right to privacy in the online world.