



**Institute of Education**

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# **Tik-‘X’-ing the Assessment Box: A Qualitative Exploration of Students’ Educational Assessment Experiences on TikTok and X (Twitter)**

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I, Kanayochukwu Phoebe Dike-Oduah, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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## Abstract

Young people actively share their experiences of high-stakes educational assessment on popular social media sites, Twitter/X and TikTok. At the time of writing (January 2024), TikTok videos with the hashtag #GCSE were viewed 7.2 billion times and 4.3 billion times for #alevels, indicating that digital representations of high-stakes assessments are reaching a vast audience.

Based on two qualitative data sources, this thesis examines students' complex and diverse responses to high-stakes educational assessments on social media. The first data source, social media data (researcher-sourced and participant-sourced), was analysed to explore how students' educational assessment experiences were represented in a sample of 53 TikTok videos and 29 Tweets. The second data source consisted of four semi-structured focus group interviews, during which students were shown a sample of social media data. The aim was to explore how students discussed the social media data and constructed meanings. The social media data and their discussions were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Eight themes were identified, showing that students disclosed positive and negative responses to educational assessments. The findings suggested that students had empathy with the online dialogues and connections in the comments section of social media posts. Notably, students used social media to recreate their exam experiences using visual imagery with links to humour and popular culture, aptly discussed as the "unexpected faces of assessment". Ambivalent views of exam boards were apparent, and participants confirmed that social media was a tool for students to reify and construct their academic goals and critically engage with assessment structures and processes. The findings supported the development of an emerging theoretical approach, the Social Media Assessment Framework (SMAF), which tentatively bridges social, psychological, and assessment theories with digital research frameworks, offering an initial lens for understanding students' assessment experiences on social media. The implications of these findings for teachers, schools, and exam boards are discussed and foreground the need for further research in this area to understand and respond to the growing influence of social media on students' experiences of high-stakes assessment.

## Impact Statement

This research is timely. The line between the online and offline world is blurred as students navigate and share high-stakes assessment experiences through social media. My research has the potential to influence both policy and practice to better understand and support students during high-stakes assessment periods.

I have already begun disseminating this research across multiple professional platforms, including presenting at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Conference in 2024, UCL's Educational Assessment Group, Ethics Seminars, and AQA Exam Board Research Group, already bridging research and practice. I aim to share this research through academic publications, teacher continuing professional development (CPD) sessions, and even sharing on social media platforms. Doing so will ensure the findings reach both scholarly and practitioner audiences, with the desire to encourage critical conversations about how social media reveals students' assessment experiences.

The Social Media Assessment Framework (SMAF), which I developed in this thesis, offers an exploratory and novel methodological approach that bridges social psychology, digital communication, and assessment concepts. I hope this framework will stimulate research that views digital platforms not just as peripheral communication tools but also as central spaces where educational experiences are constructed and negotiated.

For educational policymakers, this research highlights how important it is for students to be digitally literate and the need to adapt assessment practices to better support students. I anticipate that the findings will encourage a more empathetic approach to the challenges students face during exams as expressed on social media.

These findings could also be used for future studies on digital student experiences across different social media platforms and educational contexts. Potential research directions include comparative studies examining how students in various countries and educational settings use social media during high-stakes assessments.



Practically, I aim to support teachers' professional development by developing tools and strategies to understand and support students' digital experiences more effectively.

Considering how students process assessment challenges online and how online interactions affect their academic identities; I would like to develop social media digital literacy and assessment literacy programs that equip students with the skills to navigate online spaces critically and thoughtfully during high-stakes assessment periods.

Academically, the research has the potential to influence:

- Educational research methodologies
- Curriculum development in digital and assessment literacy
- Digital Theoretical understandings of student experiences with high-stakes assessments

I hope to stimulate critical discussions about the intersection of technology, education, and student experience. By moving beyond traditional perspectives on assessment and student engagement and simplistic narratives of risk and opportunity about the internet, the research offers a nuanced understanding of digital platforms as meaning-making spaces, a coping mechanism and a support network for students during high-stakes examination seasons.

Finally, the thesis aspires to amplify students' voices. Through listening to and learning from students' narratives of their assessment journeys, I have become more explicit in discussing with students about how their online experiences can shape their perspectives on high-stakes assessment and academic identities. I am more aware of how my actions as a teacher, researcher and examiner influence students' assessment narratives. I hope this research will contribute to more student-centred approaches in education, recognising the complexity and creativity of how young people make sense of their assessment experiences.

# Reflective Statement

## Introduction

As a Black British woman of Nigerian heritage, my doctoral journey began in 2009, when the 16-year-old me dared to dream of becoming a doctor. My mum always called me "Doctor Kanayo," and that nickname was her way of showing me that she believed in my potential, despite the barriers of growing up in a lone-parent household, limited cultural capital, and the intersection of race and gender.

My South London upbringing taught me that determination could challenge every statistical expectation. What started as a family nickname with every Nigerian parent's dream of having a (medical) doctor, lawyer, or engineer as a child became a personal mission to prove that my identity was not a limitation but a source of strength. A month before starting my doctorate, a rare disease with a one-in-three mortality rate tried to rewrite my story (BBC News, 2021). Stevens-Johnson syndrome tested my resilience, but my ambition and long-cultivated determination pushed me forward, even attending my EdD induction day in hospital bandages.

As Head of Psychology and Director of Social Sciences, I noticed the gaps in how students and teachers understood educational assessment. My master's research at UCL revealed how assessment, accountability, and media intersect in ways that were rarely discussed or researched (Dike-Oduah, 2018). The EdD became a platform for me to expose those hidden narratives and add knowledge and diverse methodologies to educational assessment research. The EdD was not just another qualification but also an opportunity to develop a more confident academic voice and overcome academic vulnerabilities, including impostor syndrome.

Through personal experience and academic enquiry, this reflective statement captures my journey as a teacher-researcher who challenged traditional views of educational assessment.

## Foundations of Professionalism

The Foundations of Professionalism (FoP) module was transformative and refined my understanding of professional identity. As the youngest member of a cohort of experienced practitioners, despite holding a distinction-graded Master's thesis and multiple teaching awards, I grappled with impostor syndrome. I felt out of place in this new academic community. A pivotal moment occurred when two Black women, Dr. Tracy Allen and Dr. Christine Callender, shared their experiences of professionalism, race, and leadership. Their visibility in this academic space and stories of leadership reassured my academic self that I was where I belonged.

Drawing on Sockett's (1993) theoretical framework on the morality of teaching and Brookfield's (1998) reflective lenses, I critically examined the multiple dimensions of professional practice. The module exposed the tensions between democratic professionalism and the increasingly managerial approaches dominating educational systems. Ball's (2003, 2004) work became particularly influential. In a FoP assignment, I analysed the tension between my role as a department head pursuing departmental performance targets and the human context behind student achievement. Ball's (2003) work on the perils of performativity exposed a stark reality: Influenced by neoliberal educational frameworks and contrary to my stance on the purpose of education, I had unconsciously reduced students to quantitative data to achieve my 100% A-E pass rate.

The literature on distributed leadership, particularly Harris' (2004; 2014), provided a refreshing and affirming lens. I recognised myself in the literature as a leader from an "uncommon place", embodying leadership through expertise rather than years of experience. Becoming a deputy head of sixth form after only two years of teaching exemplified my rapid career progression.

More than an academic exercise, this module was a process of professional self-discovery. It challenged my preconceptions about what it meant to be a teaching professional and provided a layered understanding of professional identity.

## Research Training Programs

UCL's Research Training Programs developed my research skills. I carefully selected courses that would give me the confidence and acumen to develop innovative research methodologies that would become central to my doctoral research and reframe how students' educational experiences are understood.

The Online Research Methods course was beneficial. Led by experts in digital research methodologies, the course challenged traditional research paradigms by critically examining social media platform representation, asking questions such as what voices are amplified and which remain silent. I was also introduced to digital ethnography, also called Netnography (Kozinets, 2010) and the nuanced interactions between online and offline contexts, which informed my research approach.

The Forum on Emerging Ethical Issues, facilitated by Professor Michael Reiss, provided a critical space for exploring complex research dilemmas, especially concerning social media research. I learned to approach educational research in contextually sensitive ways and with integrity. In addition, I understood the challenges of researching digital platforms, including social media. Discussions within the course prompted me to develop a collaborative approach to data collection and analysis, which mitigated the ethical challenges around power relations in my student-focused research.

The Qualitative Analysis courses on interviewing and thematic analysis equipped me with analytical skills, especially as my institution-focused study was the first time that I solely used a qualitative research paradigm. Workshops on storytelling, academic writing, and overcoming impostor syndrome developed my confidence and prepared me with the communication skills to present my work to different audiences. The Basic Statistics for Research course refreshed my quantitative skills from my undergraduate experience at the University of Surrey and was a nice throwback to using SPSS to enhance the rigour of my research methodology. The Attitudinal, Behavioural and Emotional Response to Tweets on Assessment Scale (ABERTAS) (Dike-Oduah, 2021), developed through this training experience, exemplified my growth. The innovative

measurement tool bridged quantitative and qualitative methodologies and reflected my pragmatic epistemological stance throughout my research. Finally, the Women in Research masterclasses were particularly impactful, emphasising the importance of creativity, collaboration, resilience and assertiveness or what I called 'not being afraid to take up space' as a woman in academia.

### Research Journey

My research journey started with my Master's in Educational Assessment. For my master's thesis, I did a content analysis of students' tweets about examinations, which is when I identified a gap in understanding of how students use social media to talk about their assessment experiences (Dike-Oduah, 2018). An unexpected viral TikTok video with my students was a significant moment in my research journey as it demonstrated the intersection of education and digital communication. This moment inspired my research to press into a critical contemporary challenge: understanding how students use social media platforms like Twitter and TikTok to process, share, and negotiate their experiences with high-stakes educational assessments.

The Methods of Enquiry (MOE) modules heavily influenced my research approach. In MOE1, I wrote a research proposal for a small-scale study investigating how students respond to assessment-related social media discourse. MOE2 was where the aims set out in the proposal (MOE1) were actioned. I developed the ABERTAS to assess students' attitudinal, behavioural, and emotional responses to assessment-related tweets. Memorable feedback on this small-scale study was when my tutors commented on the extensive consideration of my epistemological stance in both MOE assignments, as evidenced by the many words I wrote in this section. It revealed my eagerness to share all I had learned in my first year of the EdD. Spoiler alert: Not much has changed, as I still enjoy explaining epistemology, as you will find in Chapter 5.

My Institution-Focused Study (IFS) thesis (Dike-Oduah, 2022) was built on the methodological approach I took in my small-scale study in MOE2. Focusing on students' experiences of educational assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic, I employed a

novel research design that used Twitter posts as artefacts to guide semi-structured interviews. By asking students to interpret tweets about assessment, I created a research space that was both innovative and student-centred. The research design also creatively implemented a bespoke online focus group methodology adapted for the context of pandemic research, which applied what I had learned in the Research Training Programs about adaptable, creative and resilient research in the face of disruption.

My final thesis expanded on these methodological innovations, including using TikTok as a data source. I also developed the Social Media Assessment Framework (SMAF), which bridged social psychology, digital communication, and assessment concepts and offered a novel approach to understanding students' assessment experiences. As well as developing a framework that was bespoke to my work, throughout my research journey, I drew upon theoretical frameworks from multiple perspectives, including Sockett's (1993, 2008) Model of professional identity, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1974), Global Kids Online Research Framework (Livingstone, Mascheroni & Staksrud 2015) and assessment theories (Black, 1998; Messick, 1993; Nisbet & Shaw, 2020; Putwain, 2008a; Richardson, 2022; Stobart, 2008). These frameworks allowed me to move beyond descriptive research and to take a different perspective when examining how students navigated assessment during unprecedented times.

The research contributions were significant. I provided insights into student experiences during COVID-19 assessment disruptions, developed an innovative methodological approach to social media research, and highlighted the role of digital platforms in student voice and professional discourse. Perhaps most importantly, this research journey was a process of professional self-discovery. I learned to challenge existing research paradigms, develop a critical, reflexive approach to educational research, and articulate the 'human-digital' dimension of educational assessment.

## Professional Development

The EdD programme provided the optimal environment that allowed me to simultaneously be a practitioner and a researcher, bridging the gap between classroom experience and academic inquiry. As a multi-professional teacher, researcher, and examiner, I experienced a continuous process challenging traditional boundaries, including positioning students as co-researchers and demonstrating that social media is not a peripheral communication tool but a central space where educational experiences are formed, shared, and understood.

Critical reflection emerged as the cornerstone of my professional development. Through the EdD, I developed a sophisticated approach to reflexivity, learning to interrogate my professional autobiography and understand how personal experiences shape professional identity and practice (Amott, 2018). The tensions I experienced between democratic professionalism and increasingly managerial educational systems became a source of critical insight rather than frustration because I could see my experiences in the literature, and this was a strange comfort of being able to say, "This study explains what has been going on in my classroom". In short, I felt seen, and the complex negotiations of my professional identity as a teacher suddenly felt normalised.

Where I once approached research with uncertainty, I now confidently navigate complex methodologies. The ability to design innovative research tools like ABERTAS and develop tailored methodologies for digital student-centred research represents a significant shift in my professional capabilities.

Looking forward, my research on social media and educational assessment positions me to:

- Develop contemporary and innovative approaches to investigating student experiences
- Advocate for student-centred educational approaches and use student voice to challenge reductive assessment practices.

- Continue to develop innovative research methodologies.

Finally, interactions with my supervisors strengthened my professional and academic development. I learned to prepare detailed meeting agendas, record meetings for later reflection, keep my research log updated and tap into each supervisor's unique expertise. Crucially, I became more comfortable asking for help and being vulnerable about my academic and personal needs. I was always met with unwavering support, instilling confidence in my ability to collaborate in academic settings.

## Conclusion

This doctorate began in the most unexpected circumstances, yet it became the foundation of my research resilience and taught me that academic growth often comes from our most challenging experiences. The systemic challenges I confronted in my health journey, which encouraged me to use my experience to advocate for greater diversity in the medical curriculum and call out systemic health inequalities, now mirror my research approach. I have critically examined assessment structures, advocated for marginalised perspectives, and created spaces for unheard narratives through contemporary methodologies. Committed to bridging research, policy, and practice, the methodological innovations and theoretical insights developed will continue to inform my professional approach, supporting more student-centred, empathetic educational practices.

I continue to call myself 'Doctor Kanayo' – not just as a future title but as an embodiment of my identity, research, and commitment to challenging systemic barriers in education. The 16-year-old who once dreamed of becoming a doctor would be proud of the academic achievement and, more significantly, the transformative journey that has expanded my understanding of educational assessment, research, and human experience.



## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to everyone who supported me on this journey.

To my supervisors, my doctoral godmothers, Professor Mary Richardson and Dr. Mary Fargher, thank you for your brilliant expertise, constant encouragement, and kind, compassionate supervision. I am especially thankful for your patience with my numerous drafts and meetings, as well as your critical questioning and feedback, which enabled me to develop this novel research to an academic, publishable standard.

To all the students who willingly participated in my research, whose discussions and comments in face-to-face settings and online contributions on TikTok and X/Twitter were crucial in supporting my critical approach in this study, I extend my gratitude for your openness and time. I hope that this study will allow students going through assessments to feel 'seen' by the educational stakeholders who they often think don't get it. This is for them.

To my queen mother, who instilled in me an unwavering value for education but, most importantly, the love of God. This doctoral thesis is a product of your prayers, love, and support. Thank you for always being there and reminding me that I could achieve anything.

To my husband, my siblings, my father, my wider family, and friends who believed in me and supported me with love, prayers, patience, and sweet treats when I needed them, and who indulged in my ramblings about my research and doctoral studies. I love you, and I am grateful for all of you.

I completed this doctorate while recovering from Stevens-Johnson syndrome, getting engaged, planning a Big Nigerian Wedding, getting married, completing my NPQH, being an ECT Mentor, changing schools and roles, and going through two miscarriages. As a Christian, I give all thanks and praise to God, who kept and strengthened me through it all. Blessed be the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In response to my mum's nickname for me, I started calling myself "Doctor Kanayo" in year 12, encouraged by three scriptures: Romans 4:17, "God calls into being what does not yet exist"; Proverbs 18:21, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue", and James 2:17, "faith without works is dead". I put my faith to work and started this doctorate in 2019 after my faith was tested through ill health. I enrolled in bandages, and now I am finishing in the most prestigious robe at the world's number one university for education, UCL (University College London), Institute of Education.

Finally, I thank the 16-year-old Kanayo who said she would become a doctor, and a doctor she has become.

## Table of contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Impact Statement .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Reflective Statement .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Introduction .....	6
Foundations of Professionalism .....	7
Research Training Programs.....	8
Research Journey .....	9
Professional Development.....	11
Conclusion .....	12
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Table of contents .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>List of Figures .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>List of Tables.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Definitions and Glossary .....</b>	<b>22</b>
1.1. Students.....	22
1.2. Types of Educational Assessment .....	22
1.3. Social Media Networks: TikTok and Twitter .....	23
Glossary of Terms and Colloquialisms .....	24
<b>Chapter 2: Introduction .....</b>	<b>26</b>
2.1. Context of The Research .....	26
2.2. Problem Statement and Research Rationale.....	28
2.3. Personal Rationale and Professional Context.....	31
2.4. Research Questions .....	32
2.5. The Structure of The Thesis .....	33
<b>Chapter 3: Literature Review .....</b>	<b>35</b>
3.1. Introduction.....	35
3.2. High-Stakes Assessment in Educational Systems.....	36
3.2.1. Historical Context and Evolution of Standardised High-Stakes Assessments in England.....	36

3.2.2.	Critical Perspectives on High-Stakes Assessment.....	37
3.2.3.	Emotional Processing and Social Media Discourse .....	38
3.2.4.	Assessment Dysmorphia: Psychological Impact of High-Stakes Testing ....	39
3.3.	Social Media Use Among Adolescents .....	40
3.3.1.	Types of Social Media and Adolescent Usage.....	41
3.3.2.	Social Media as an Educational Tool.....	42
3.3.3.	The EU Kids Online Framework and Adolescent Social Media Use.....	43
3.3.4.	Critical Perspectives on Social Media and Educational Assessment .....	45
3.4.	Connections between High-Stakes Assessment and Social Media Discourse ..	46
3.5.	Social Identity Theory, Online Communities and Assessment Discourse .....	49
3.6.	Student Voice and Agency in Assessment.....	51
3.7.	Student Disengagement as Critical Engagement in High-Stakes Assessments	53
3.8.	Conclusion .....	54
<b>Chapter 4:</b>	<b>Methodology .....</b>	<b>56</b>
4.1.	Introduction.....	56
4.2.	Ontological and Epistemological Considerations (constructivism and interpretivism) .....	57
4.2.1.	Ontological Conditions .....	57
4.2.2.	Epistemological Conditions.....	59
4.3.	Qualitative Methodology .....	61
4.3.1.	Naturalistic Enquiry .....	62
4.3.2.	Considering Various Styles of Ethnography.....	63
4.3.3.	Multimodal Qualitative Research Design (Mixed Methods) .....	65
4.4.	Approaches to Analysis .....	68
4.4.1.	Theoretical Assumptions of Reflexive Thematic Analysis .....	69
4.5.	Data collection.....	74
4.5.1.	Phase 1: Researcher-Sourced Social Media Data Collection Method .....	74
4.5.2.	Phase 2: Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews .....	80
4.5.2.1.	Participant Recruitment .....	83
4.5.2.2.	Participants .....	85

4.5.3. Phase 3: Student-Sourced Social Media Data Collection .....	87
4.6. Ethical considerations .....	89
4.6.1. Informed Consent.....	90
4.6.2. Power Relationships.....	91
4.6.3. Sensitive Topics.....	92
4.6.4. Confidentiality and Anonymity: Focus Groups.....	93
4.6.5. Confidentiality and Anonymity: Social Media Data.....	93
4.6.6. Positionality in Ethical Considerations.....	94
4.6.7. Data protection and storage .....	95
4.6.8. Dissemination and Use of Findings.....	95
4.6.9. Safeguarding and Gatekeeping.....	96
4.7. Outline of Step-by-Step Procedure for Phases 2 and 3 (including Pilot Study)	97
4.8. Data Analysis .....	99
Phase 1: Data Familiarisation .....	100
Phase 2: Systematic Data Coding .....	102
Phase 3: Developing Initial Themes. ....	104
Phase 4: Reviewing The Themes.....	108
Phase 5: Refining and Defining Themes.....	110
Phase 6: Writing The Report. ....	113
4.8.1. Reflexivity Statement.....	113
4.8.2. Ensuring The Quality of The Data.....	114
Credibility .....	115
Transferability .....	115
Dependability .....	116
Confirmability.....	116
4.9. Conclusion .....	117
<b>Chapter 5: Findings .....</b>	<b>118</b>
5.1. Theme 1: Emotions.....	118
5.2. Theme 2: External Influences.....	123
5.3. Theme 3: Engagement.....	125

5.4.	Theme 4: Exam Responses.....	130
5.5.	Theme 5: Influences .....	140
5.6.	Theme 6: Visual Representations.....	151
5.7.	Theme 7: Academic Goals .....	160
5.8.	Theme 8: Dialogues.....	167
5.9.	Conclusion .....	174
<b>Chapter 6: Discussion .....</b>		<b>176</b>
6.1.	Introduction.....	176
6.2.	RQ1: What are students' experiences of educational assessment as shared on social media?.....	176
6.2.1.	Negative Emotions: “Worst day of my life” .....	177
6.2.2.	Positive Emotions: “All the hard work paid off.” .....	178
6.2.3.	Challenging Categorisations of students' experiences .....	179
6.2.4.	Responses .....	180
6.3.	RQ2: What do students disclose? .....	186
6.3.1.	Key Influences.....	186
6.3.2.	Representations .....	189
6.3.3.	Goals .....	192
6.4.	RQ3: What are the interchanges between students in the comments sections of TikTok and Twitter? .....	194
6.4.1.	Social Identity Theory – The power of “we” .....	194
6.4.2.	Individual or Collective Experiences.....	196
6.4.3.	‘We’ is not always inclusive on social media .....	197
6.4.4.	Emotional Contagion Theory .....	199
6.5.	The Social Media Assessment Framework (SMAF): Synthesising Social Media, Assessment, and Students’ Identities.....	201
6.5.1.	Social Media Assessment Framework Table Overview.....	203
6.5.2.	Social Media Assessment Framework In Action.....	205
6.6.	Summary: Discussion of Findings .....	207
6.7.	Strengths.....	208
6.8.	Limitations.....	209

6.9. Implications of my research in a professional context as a professional doctorate .....	211
6.9.1. Implications for Schools .....	211
6.9.2. Implications for Exam Boards .....	213
6.10. Implications for the Social Media Assessment Framework .....	215
6.11. Implications for Researchers and Recommendations for Future Research..	217
<b>Chapter 7: Conclusion.....</b>	<b>219</b>
7.1. Key findings .....	219
7.2. Methodological Innovations.....	219
7.3. Theoretical Bridging and Future Horizons .....	220
7.4. Dissemination and Professional Impact.....	220
7.5. Final Reflective Insights .....	221
<b>References .....</b>	<b>222</b>
<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>261</b>
Appendix A – Livingstone et al (2015) - 12 Recommendations for future research...	261
Appendix B – Social Media Data .....	263
Appendix B2 – Example of Raw Twitter/X Data from Brand24 .....	264
Appendix C – Participant Details .....	266
Appendix D – Microsoft Form for Participants' Social Media Submissions .....	269
Appendix E - Ethics Form .....	272
Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form .....	272
Section 1 – Project details .....	272
Section 2 - Research methods summary (tick all that apply) .....	273
Section 3 – Research Participants (tick all that apply) .....	277
Section 4 - Security-sensitive material (only complete if applicable) .....	277
Section 5 – Systematic reviews of research (only complete if applicable) – N/A ...	278
Section 6 - Secondary data analysis (only complete if applicable) .....	278
Section 7 – Data Storage and Security.....	279
Section 8 – Ethical Issues .....	281
Section 9 – Attachments.....	286

Section 10 – Declaration .....	287
Notes and references .....	287
Departmental Use .....	327
Appendix F – Information Sheet and Consent Form .....	329
Appendix G – Internet Safety Training Materials .....	334
Appendix H – Focus Group Interview Guides .....	337
Introduction .....	337
Exploring Experiences:.....	339
Opinions and Behaviours:.....	341
Presentation of Tweets and TikTok Videos .....	344
Participant-Sourced Content:.....	347
Conclusion: .....	348
Appendix I – Photos/Scans of Pilot Focus Group Participants’ handwritten recommendations .....	350
Appendix J - Example of focus group transcript with researcher notes. Comments /Researcher notes on Focus Group 3 Transcript.....	352
Appendix K - 60 Codes – Phase 2 of RTA .....	371

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Screenshot and QR Code of KDO's TikTok Video on 12-mark essays in GCSE Sociology .....	26
Figure 3: Operational Planning Framework for this study's mixed methods design based on Cohen et al. (2017, p. 177) .....	66
Figure 4: Social Media data (FG2/FG3/FG4-RS-189) .....	71
Figure 5: Summary of Data Collection Phases .....	74
Figure 6: No. of views associated with the hashtags #GCSE and #Alevels.....	75
Figure 7: Example of TikTok Video with labels for metadata.....	77
Figure 8: Example of Twitter Post with labels for metadata .....	79
Figure 9: Participant's call to submit social media data in Phase 3 .....	88
Figure 10: Social Media Ethical Framework based on Townsend and Wallace (2017)...	90
Figure 11: Positionality Questions and examples as presented in BERA 2024, .....	95
Figure 12: Multimodal Qualitative Data Analysis Process and Themes Organised by the Research Questions.....	100
Figure 13: Initial Coding in Phase 2 (Link to HTML diagram) .....	103
Figure 14 Photo of initial codes organised by the three research questions (Phase 3)	104
Figure 15: Example of coding matrix in phase 3 of RTA .....	106
Figure 16: Creating Initial Themes in Phase 3 .....	107
Figure 17: Diagram of 9 Initial Themes (Phase 3) .....	108
Figure 18: Diagram showing the reviewed initial themes (Phase 4).....	110
Figure 19: Thematic Network of themes (results) .....	111
Figure 20: Social Media data FG3-FG4-197.....	119
Figure 21: Social media data: (FG2-FG4-RS-188).....	121
Figure 22: Social Media Data: PS-ZO-31.....	122
Figure 23: Social Media Data (FG3-FG4-RS-196).....	124
Figure 24: Social Media Data - FG3-PS-CO-38.....	129
Figure 25: Social Media Data FG2-RS-190 .....	131
Figure 26: Social Media Data (FG-PS-JB-101) .....	133
Figure 27: Social Media Content (FG2-RS-190).....	134
Figure 28: Comments Under social media content (FG2-RS-190).....	134
Figure 29: Social Media Data PS-EM-152 .....	136
Figure 30: Social Media Data PS-MI-33.....	138
Figure 31: Social media data FG3-PS-AL-136.....	141
Figure 32: Social Media Data FG4-PS-ML-36.....	142
Figure 33: Social Media Data PS-EN-121 .....	143
Figure 34: Social Media Data FG2/FG3/FG4-PS-TK-90 .....	144
Figure 35: Social Media Data FG2-RS-191 .....	146
Figure 36: Social Media data FG3-RS-193.....	148



Figure 37: Social Media Data FG3-PS-MR-10.....	149
Figure 38: Social Media Data PS-SM-29 .....	152
Figure 39: Social Media Data FG3-PS-JB-165.....	153
Figure 40: Social Media Data FG1/FG2-RS-184 and Psychology Exam Question.....	154
Figure 41: Social Media Data PS-IB-53.....	157
Figure 42: Social Media Data PS-GB-14.....	158
Figure 43: Social Media Data PS-OS-32.....	159
Figure 44: Social Media Data PS-RE-93 .....	160
Figure 45: Social Media data PS-BB-16.....	161
Figure 46: Comments on Social Media Post PS-BB-16 .....	163
Figure 47: Social Media Data FG3/FG4 - RS - 198.....	165
Figure 48: Social Media Data PS-SM-67 .....	169
Figure 49: Comments (part 2) under Social Media Data FG2-RS-190.....	170
Figure 50: Social Media Data FG1-RS-182 .....	171
Figure 51: Comments on Social Media data FG3-PS-JB-98 .....	173
Figure 52: Social Media Data PS-ML-158 .....	174
Figure 52: Social Media Assessment Framework Diagram .....	202
Figure 53: Test Item in Psychology A Level Paper 1 - June 2018 .....	214

## List of Tables

Table 2: Summary of Research Methods .....	57
Table 3: Number of posts for each hashtag and % of visual data.....	78
Table 4: Demographic Profile of the schools represented in the study. ....	84
Table 5: Participant numbers, including gender split for each focus group.....	86
Table 6: Summary of TikTok and Twitter data sourced by participants and the researcher. ....	89
Table 7: Social Media Data Matrix for the codes 'Humour' and 'Popular Culture'. ....	109
Table 8: Defining each theme (phase 5 of RTA).....	111
Table 8: Social Media Assessment Framework Table Summary .....	204

## Chapter 1: Definitions and Glossary

### 1.1. Students

- **A-Level Students:** Post-16 students (typically aged 16-18) studying Level 3 qualifications in the UK, such as A-Levels and BTECs, typically as preparation for tertiary education or training (apprenticeships).
- **GCSE Students:** Students aged 14-16 (typically in years 10 and 11) studying for General Certificate of Secondary Education qualifications. As a key qualification in the UK secondary education system, there is a government expectation that all students leave secondary education with a minimum of a grade 4 in English and maths; otherwise, they need to continue to study these subjects as part of their post-16 education (DfE, 2023).

### 1.2. Types of Educational Assessment

- **High-Stakes Assessment:** Examinations that have significant consequences for students' future educational and career opportunities.
- **Summative Assessment:** End-of-course or end-of-unit assessments that evaluate student learning. These are typically through standardised tests such as GCSEs and A Levels, though they can also be in-school mock, pre-public exams or end-of-year exams.
- **Standardised Testing:** This is when the same tests are designed, administered, and marked invariably to measure student performance against a standardised mark scheme. For example, all GCSE Maths students will complete their maths exams on the same day at the same time across England. In addition, exam boards will standardise their assessments to ensure that a Grade 5 in a Pearson GCSE Maths paper is equivalent to a Grade 5 in an AQA GCSE Maths paper.
- **Formative Assessment:** This includes assessment activities such as in-class end-of-unit tests, end-of-year (mock) exams and quizzes. They are responsive, as the information gained is used to make decisions about the next steps in learning (Black, 1993; Black & Wiliam, 2012).

### 1.3. Social Media Networks: TikTok and Twitter

- **TikTok:** Social media platform primarily for video sharing and, more recently, photos. TikTok content is referred to as 'posts'.
- **Twitter/X:** Social media platform for microblogging and, more recently, videos, photos, and gifs. It rebranded from 'Twitter' to 'X' in 2023. The platform was known as Twitter at the start of this research and during data collection. Therefore, references to 'Twitter' reflect the platform's name during the research period. Twitter/X content is referred to as 'tweets'.

## Glossary of Terms and Colloquialisms

When quoting students' social media posts and participants' focus group contributions, I have kept the students' colloquial language to ensure that I retain their unique voices and respectfully honour their contributions. Instead of repeatedly using “(sic)”, the table below provides definitions for acronyms, abbreviations, and colloquial language used by participants.

Acronym/Colloquial Term	Meaning/Expansion
A-Level	Advanced Level
'atp'	At This Point
Btw	By the way
BTEC	Business & Technology Education Council
'bc'	Because
Covid	Covid-19
English Lit	English Literature
FG	Focus Group
'fr'	For real
GCE	GCE General Certificate of Education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GIF	Graphic Interchange Format
GOAT	Greatest of all time
'Idk'	I don't know
IFS	Institution Focused Study
'litch'	Literally
POV	Point of view
PS	Participant-sourced
RS	Researcher-sourced
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis

'u'	You
'uv'	You've / you have
'ur'	your
'wth'	What the hell/heck

## Chapter 2: Introduction

### 2. Introduction and Rationale

#### 2.1. Context of The Research

In March 2023, during my regular Year 10 sociology lesson, a novel proposal emerged:

**“Miss! Make a TikTok, and we’ll remember everything about structuring a 12-mark essay.”**

As a GCSE and A-Level Social Sciences teacher, I am used to repeating guidance on how to structure essays, and cognisant of my research focus on the intersection of social media and assessment, their request intrigued me. Succumbing to their suggestion, we created a one-minute and fifteen-second TikTok video with the camera focused on me while the entire class lent their voices, mindful of maintaining the boundaries of safeguarding. To my surprise, the video received over 518,000 views, 67,000 likes, 1000 comments, and nearly 9000 saves (See Figure 1). The magnitude of these metrics bewildered me. Returning to school the next day, I had transformed from an ordinary classroom teacher to a “TikTok famous” teacher (according to my students) and what Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin (2023, p. 2) called the ‘micro-celebrification’ of teachers on TikTok.

Further impact was seen in the comments section. Statements like “Why can’t my year 10s get this,” and “If only I had a teacher like you” indicated gaps in traditional teaching approaches. Others, like “Thank you for teaching as we preach it; we call this righteous revision”, demonstrated how the content resonated with some viewers. Trainee



teachers appeared to find it valuable, saying, “As a struggling PGCE student, this is what I needed to see today to inspire me to carry on”. Similarly, parents shared how the video helped their children prepare for assessments; one said, “Thank you for this. I showed it to my daughter, who had her mock sociology test, and she said it really helped”. More students said, “I learned more in this TikTok than in class”, and “Miss, we need more sociology videos, please, I need tuition”. The video was not just an educational tool; it served as the focal point for discussions around pedagogy, assessment, and the role of social media in education.

This moment of autoethnography, where I found myself immersed in the very context I had been researching since my Masters in 2018 (Dike-Oduah, 2018) confirmed the further relevance of my research. I went on to create seven additional TikTok videos with the same sociology class (<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZNeEsGqtt/>), making the cumulative TikTok video views above 1.5 million (1,676,200). Emboldened by this new teacher-content-creator role, I expanded my TikTok content to cover A-level psychology. I created a video on the research methods topic of normal and skewed distributions, using relatable real-world examples of “grade boundaries,” which garnered 113,600 views. I was inspired to create this video in response to the many questions that my Year 13 students had about grade boundaries following Ofqual’s announcement about ‘grade protection’ (Ofqual, 2023b; Ofqual & Saxon, 2022). Grade protection meant that grading and marking of exams returned to pre-pandemic standards. However, because the 2023 cohort had a disrupted education journey, examiners were to be ‘slightly lenient when setting grade boundaries’ (Ofqual, 2023b, para. 12).

Comments about this TikTok post revealed students’ anxieties and misconceptions about assessment. For example, comments such as, “So basically, it’s all rigged, and we should just give up,” and “exam boards don’t want you to get good scores” suggested a lack of trust that assessment practices were conducted fairly. Other comments, such as “I have an exam on research methods soon, and this was the easiest I’ve understood distributions”, prompted me to ask critical questions:

1. What made my TikTok video “easier” for students to understand beyond traditional methods such as in-school teachers, textbooks and worksheets?
2. What motivates students to turn to social media for clarity about assessments?
3. How does social media shape their understanding and responses to high-stakes assessments?

These questions indicated a research gap for me. My experience as a teacher, assessor and early career researcher has convinced me that assessment is experienced by ‘all’ but understood by ‘few’. It is a universal experience yet often poorly understood by students and other educational stakeholders. As the literature review in Chapter 3 will show, social media is intertwined with students' daily lives, and these platforms reflect and shape how assessment is understood, discussed, and experienced. Platforms like TikTok and Twitter see students as both creators and consumers. This dual role creates spaces where their diverse assessment experiences are ‘narrated’ (created) and observed (consumed) in ways that warrant deeper exploration in research.

This introduction sets the stage for my research, which aims to understand how students express their experiences with high-stakes assessments on social media. By investigating the intersection between assessment and social media, this study aims to contribute to the academic literature and inform professional practice to improve how we support students within the context of high-stakes assessment in England with GCSEs and A Levels.

## 2.2. Problem Statement and Research Rationale

This study is not just about filling a research gap. It pioneers a novel way to understand students' educational assessment experiences. While students' experiences with high-stakes assessments are evident in the literature, and the role of social media in education is growing in research, the intersection of these two fields remains underexplored.



Existing research is unclear about the intersection between assessment and social media use. Alonzo, Zin Oo, Wijarwadi and Hannigan's (2022) systematic literature review identifies that assessment has been underexplored compared to other educational uses of social media. Previous social media and education reviews hardly referenced assessment practices or processes (Otchie & Pedaste, 2020; Zachos, Paraskevopoulou-Kollia & Anagnostopoulos, 2018). Furthermore, no existing conceptual framework has been designed to examine how students use social media to articulate, process and share their experiences of high-stakes assessment. This void in the literature limits understanding of how social media can shape discourse around educational assessment. High-stakes assessments such as GCSEs and A Levels in England are significant for students as these outcomes affect their future endeavours. Most traditional research methods are often limited in capturing students' real-time lived experiences through these examination seasons. In contrast, social media provides a raw, unprompted view into students' thoughts, feelings and interactions, making social media have the potential to be a valuable yet underused research tool. This study aims to address this methodological gap and extend the methodological boundaries of existing work by advocating for the use of social media, specifically TikTok and Twitter, as sites for research. This research explores how students engage with high-stakes assessment in the digital world by including TikTok, a platform that is significantly shaping youth culture and educational discourse (Dezuanni, 2021; Ofcom, 2022; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2023).

Inspired by Scauso's (2020) perspective that studying 'people' and 'things' requires a holistic approach, this study argues that students (the 'people') and social media platforms (the 'things') interact in ways that shape the meaning and experience of assessment. Social media platforms are an extension of students' identities and emotional and cultural practices (Boyd, 2014; Granic, Maritu & Scholten, 2020). Recent research by Soh, Cruz, Meca and Havari (2025) on adolescents found that social media activities can foster adaptive identity processes. Based on my observations, I argue that

platforms like TikTok and Twitter are active environments where students co-construct their assessment experiences and identities by publicly sharing their frustrations, joys and anxieties with peers, teachers and even exam boards. This demonstrates how social media allows students to navigate their assessment realities while contributing to collective narratives about assessment.

Existing studies of social media in education have focused on Facebook and Twitter, and these platforms have seen a decline in usage among adolescents (Ofcom, 2023). TikTok, a dominant platform among young people in England (Ofcom, 2022), remains under-researched in educational contexts. The present study addresses this gap by prioritising the investigation of TikTok as a site for student expression and interaction about high-stakes assessments. Secondly, while social media has been used as a pedagogical tool, its potential as a research tool is still developing in the literature. The accessibility, immediacy and sometimes queried authenticity of social media data offer a new creative way to capture students' lived experiences. Yet, practical and ethical complexities have deterred researchers from fully engaging with these platforms. This study addresses the ethical considerations needed for social media research and offers participant-centred and reflexive solutions to overcome ethical barriers.

Finally, this research highlights the problem of not having a theoretical or conceptual framework to analyse the interaction between high-stakes assessment and social media. The proposed Social Media Assessment Framework (SMAF), discussed in Chapter 6, addresses this gap by offering an integrated lens to examine students' interactions on social media about high-stakes assessments. SMAF provided a means for me to connect theory with empirical findings on how digital spaces reflect and shape students' assessment experiences. This enabled me to understand my research findings not just from observing students' assessment discourse on social media in isolation, but with a coherent theoretical understanding of the intersection between social media and assessment.

This research contributes to the developing body of knowledge on the interaction between digital technologies and education by problematising the current literature landscape in this area and addressing these gaps. It also advances methodological approaches by positioning social media as a critical site for educational research.

### 2.3. Personal Rationale and Professional Context

The rationale for this study is rooted in my multi-professional identity as a middle-leader teacher, researcher and examiner. My experiences across these roles provide me with first-hand knowledge of the pressures faced by teachers and students within the context of England's high-stakes assessment system. My daily interactions with students preparing for A Levels and GCSEs provide me with layered insights into the emotional and structural aspects of assessment. By structural, I mean the challenges that school leaders face when making decisions about off-rolling underperforming students, gamification through teaching to the test, and the marketisation of education, which sees high-stakes assessment used as an accountability measure for schools and teachers. Beyond these structural challenges, I also witnessed the emotional toll on students, including anxiety, pressure, and fear of failure. My experiences, both online and offline, have shaped my understanding of the challenges students face. And so, I am interested in how teachers can use social media beyond teaching to understand and manage students' assessment experiences.

My role as an examiner for an exam board in England broadened my professional views on assessment. I have a greater understanding of the technical aspects of awarding through my active involvement in the marking, moderation and standardisation process. This dual identity, as both a teacher supporting my students' learning and an examiner participating in the awarding process, makes me well-suited to engage with the tensions between students' lived experiences and the assessment structures.

This research, part of a thread of studies that began with my Master's in Educational Assessment in 2018 and continued throughout my EdD, is not just an academic pursuit. This research directly responds to the changes and practical challenges I encounter in

my various roles. Investigating the connection between social media and high-stakes assessment will help develop contemporary and practically relevant frameworks and methodologies. I hope this study will provide teachers, exam boards, and researchers with a more holistic understanding of how students in the digital age experience assessment.

#### 2.4. Research Questions

This study sets out to understand the digital storytelling of assessment experiences as shared by and understood by A-level students. The research questions are detailed below (EDI – Experience, Disclosure, Interchanges):

**Research Question 1: What are students' EXPERIENCES of high-stakes assessments, as shared on the social media platforms TikTok and Twitter?**

This question focuses on students' assessment experiences while acknowledging the role of social media in revealing those experiences. I want to see how students' assessment experiences manifest on social media and explore the richness and diversity of how students share their experiences.

**Research Question 2: What do students DISCLOSE about assessment on social media platforms?**

This question explores the content students share, discovering the types of information they reveal about their assessments. It seeks to identify the specific details and strategies students share on these platforms.

**Research Question 3: What are the INTERCHANGES between students in the comments sections of TikTok and Twitter?**

This question examines what students say to each other about high-stakes assessments on TikTok and Twitter comments sections. It aims to understand the nature of student communication by examining how they respond to each other's shared assessment experiences.

The following sections examine each theoretical component in detail before presenting the integrated SMAF framework, which synthesises these perspectives to create a new

analytical tool for understanding the intersection of social media and assessment experiences.

## 2.5. The Structure of The Thesis

Chapter 3 (Literature Review) explores previous research surrounding social media use among students and high-stakes assessments. However, research on the intersection between high-stakes assessment and social media conducted on A-level students in England is limited, and this is the area of empirical knowledge to which this study seeks to contribute. Also, the literature review discusses using student voice to inform research (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004) and considering students as experts in their experiences.

Chapter 4 (Methodology) explains the study's structure as a constructivist-interpretivist and frames the multi-modal qualitative research design, which used social media and semi-structured focus group interviews for data collection. Data analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2019, 2021b) Reflexive Thematic Analysis process and organised using NVivo software.

Chapter 5 presents the findings, which outline eight key themes supported by rich qualitative data from social media posts and focus group interviews. Visual data and QR codes are included to ensure that the essence of the findings is portrayed. The findings show the various ways students experience and engage with high-stakes assessments.

Chapter 6 (Discussion) contextualises the findings by drawing upon existing literature to interpret the key themes and explore their implications for future educational research, practice, and policy. It also presents the exploratory creation of a new theoretical framework, called the Social Media Assessment Framework (SMAF), which emerged from the research findings. The connection between Social Identity Theory and Richardson's (2022) concept of Assessment Dysmorphia is considered alongside Livingstone, Mascheroni and Staksrud's (2015) Framework for researching children's online risks and opportunities in Europe.

Chapter 7 (Conclusion) synthesises the key findings and considers the impact of the study professionally and academically. It reflects on the research process and proposes future research directions to extend the study of the interaction between students' experiences of high-stakes assessment as shared on social media.

This introduction has presented the motivation for the research and situates the study within a broader context. Definitions of concepts and elements related to social media and assessment have been provided. Chapter 3 will explore some of the published literature on high-stakes assessment, social media and student voice.

## Chapter 3: Literature Review

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter explains the relevance of social media in educational contexts, particularly its influence on student voice and high-stakes assessment. Anchored in the literature on student engagement, digital literacy, and social support, the pressures associated with high-stakes assessment create a demand for understanding how students communicate and find support, especially at a time when social media is a core facet of adolescents' lives.

Previous research in the thread of this professional doctorate shows that social media is a place where students engage in critical discourse about assessment, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses based on their lived experiences (Dike-Oduah, 2018, 2021, 2022). As social media platforms are increasingly seen as places for exchanging knowledge, building community and even informal education (Tang & Hew, 2017), this study is further motivated by existing evidence that online platforms can contribute to a shared experience among students and professionals (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013, 2016).

Research focusing on the interplay between high-stakes assessment and social media is very limited. Therefore, I draw upon and synthesise literature from three relevant domains: high-stakes assessment, social media and student voice.

This literature review explores three main research areas:

1. Students' perceptions and experiences of high-stakes assessment.
2. The role of social media in educational settings.
3. The concept of 'student voice' and how social media platforms have become significant channels for students to express their educational experiences.

Finally, through critical analysis of existing literature, this review will highlight the research gaps and will develop propositions that frame the research questions guiding this study.

### 3.2. High-Stakes Assessment in Educational Systems

High-stakes assessments, including GCSEs and A-levels in England (the focus of this study), are the upper echelon of summative assessment. Defined as exams or assessments that carry significant consequences, such as determining students' progression to further education, higher education or school league tables, reputation and accountability, high-stakes assessments are positioned as necessary measures of academic success and school progress (Supovitz, 2009). However, research by Hagopian (2014) and Au (2022) suggests that high-stakes assessment contributes to educational inequality, stress, and narrowing of the curriculum (Berliner, 2011). French, Ashton and Mulder's (2024) qualitative review of the benefits and limitations of high-stakes assessments in the higher education context finds that their limitations far outweigh their strengths. Namely, the tests lack real-world relevance, and the profound risks of widening inequalities among marginalised groups of students surpass the fleeting benefits of increased student motivation.

#### 3.2.1. Historical Context and Evolution of Standardised High-Stakes Assessments in England

High-stakes assessments, in the form of national tests, have a long history in English education (Brooks, 2008; Gillard, 2018; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). However, there has been more public discussion of their consequences in recent decades. High-stakes testing gained political traction as a tool for accountability (Hanushek et al., 2018; Hargreaves, 2009), with a focus on quantifiable outcomes (Figlio & Loeb, 2011). The National Curriculum reforms, initiated by the Conservative Thatcher government in 1986 and 1988, fundamentally changed educational practices. Specifically, the introduction of school league tables based on high-stakes testing performance fundamentally changed how schools approached teaching and learning.



While high-stakes assessments were intended to ensure accountability and raise educational standards, critics such as Ravitch in Hagopian (2014) and Koretz (2017) argue that the system prioritises test preparation over authentic learning experiences and negatively impacts student and teacher wellbeing. For example, students experienced increased test anxiety, while teachers were overwhelmed by the pressure to 'teach to the test'.

### 3.2.2. Critical Perspectives on High-Stakes Assessment

High-stakes assessments like GCSEs, A-levels and BTECs shape students' academic trajectories in England, with long-term implications for further education and employment (Machin, McNally and Ruiz-Valenzuela., 2020). High-stakes tests also have implications for wider society, such as increasing the attainment gap between groups of students, particularly in low-income areas where funding and overall reputation depend on students' performance on such exams (Berliner, 2011). Thus, a cycle of inequality persists as low-income students are often materially and culturally (capital) deprived, which leads to poor outcomes, which leads to a poor reputation for the school, less pupil intake and less funding to supplement the needs of these students.

A recent article by Meadows, Yu, Baird and Broadfoot (2025) argues that high-stakes assessment is a tool for regulation and control over what happens in schools, with a significant impact on the behaviours and perceptions of teachers and students. Ball (2003) stresses that the pressures to perform and contribute to the overall performance of the whole institution often fall on the individual classroom teacher, head of department and school leader. Berliner (2011) found that high-stakes testing tends to narrow the curriculum, as teachers are pressured to "teach to the test," which limits students' exposure to a broad and balanced curriculum (Chapman, 2010). Tomlinson (2000) proposed that teachers experienced the brunt of high-stakes assessments being used for accountability formalised by performance management reviews and performance pay progression. Ball (2003) described these as performative

accountability, a system where a teacher's work productivity is reduced to measurable performance indicators such as students' grades rather than the quality of their teaching or relationships with students.

A consequence of high accountability is demonstrated in research about student stress. Putwain (2008b, 2008a) found that high-stakes exams can lead to test anxiety among students. This confirms Brown and Woods (2022) systematic literature review on research on students' views and experiences of GCSEs in the last 30 years. They found that the intense pressure associated with GCSE exams leads to low self-esteem and test anxiety and can alienate underperforming students from the learning process.

### 3.2.3. Emotional Processing and Social Media Discourse

While some research has explored the structural impacts of high-stakes assessments, as well as students' views and experiences (Brown & Woods, 2022), less attention has been given to how students emotionally process and communicate their experiences in response to these exams, particularly within digital contexts such as social media. This study directly addresses this gap by exploring students' social media narratives to understand the complex emotional dimensions of high-stakes assessment that traditional research has previously overlooked.

While Barrance and Elwood's (2018) mixed-method qualitative exploration of students in Northern Ireland and Wales' perceptions of GCSEs reveals that fairness and relatedness are important factors in mediating young people's experiences of GCSEs; they relied on more traditional research methods, such as questionnaires and focus groups. This limited their study to the students who directly participated in the research and ignored the fact that students' perceptions of high-stakes assessments are increasingly voiced on social media platforms, where students more candidly share their assessment experiences (Dike-Oduah, 2018, 2022).

Previous studies have highlighted students' use of social media to share their exam experience, such as Hu's (2012) research on how American students used Twitter to

share their sentiments about their mid-term exams. A BBC article (2015) reported how thousands of students in England took to Twitter to vent their anger and frustration at Edexcel's challenging GCSE maths question. Yet, internationally, there is very little empirical research that examines how students' online expressions contribute to our understanding of students' experiences of high-stakes assessments, including their mental health and test anxiety. This gap presents an opportunity to extend research into the psychological effects of high-stakes examinations through digital expressions on social media. This study addresses this gap by exploring students' digital discourse to reveal high-stakes assessment's complex, often unaddressed emotional dimensions that traditional self-report methods have previously overlooked.

#### 3.2.4. Assessment Dysmorphia: Psychological Impact of High-Stakes Testing

Beyond the structural critiques of high-stakes assessment, it is also crucial to consider the psychological effects on students. Richardson's (2022) concept of Assessment Dysmorphia offers a valuable lens for understanding these effects.

Assessment dysmorphia is a critical theoretical proposition that highlights the psychological distortions that are present in high-stakes testing cultures. Based on the psychological cognitive phenomenon of body dysmorphia, Richardson (2022) describes students experiencing assessment dysmorphia as characterised by:

1. Obsessive worrying about test results.
2. A binary all-or-nothing self-evaluation of seeing oneself as a success or failure, predicated solely on academic grades.
3. A narrow definition of achievement that limits success to gaining the highest grades.
4. A deterministic belief that test results ultimately determine future life chances.

Richardson relevantly posits that the ways assessment dysmorphia feeds into discourses such as the news and social media are critical. Social media enables educational stakeholders to 'create, share and preserve assessment discourses'

(Richardson, 2022, p. 80). These digital discourses reflect and potentially reinforce the narrow, deterministic, performance-driven narratives characterising assessment dysmorphia. Thus, social media becomes a powerful mechanism for perpetuating assessment dysmorphia and restrictive educational identities, but is yet to be studied in this way. Social media platforms can intensify self-comparison and curation, potentially exacerbating anxiety and distorted self-representations around assessment. Assessment dysmorphia gains new dimensions when applied to social media, which is what the present study aims to do.

The psychological layer of understanding students' discourse on high-stakes assessments on social media offers a holistic approach beyond social-institutional factors alone, which is a strength. There may be a risk of over diagnosing or pathologising 'normal' experiences, such as nervousness about results and experiencing fear ahead of an exam. This is demonstrated by Oxford University Press' (OUP) (2022) research, which found that among 8,000 children from across 85 schools in the UK, 'anxiety' was the word of the year in 2021. While it is concerning that anxiety was the number one word, it was not surprising given that children had endured a global pandemic full of extraordinary restrictions and changes to their lives. Helen Freedman points out that OUP's research emphasises the crucial role language plays for children in self-expression, learning and well-being and how important it is that investment is made to support children's language development at home, in school, and, as this study highlights, on social media.

### 3.3. Social Media Use Among Adolescents

Social media has become a significant aspect of adolescent life. As Granic, Morita and Scholten (2020) posit, digital "screens" are no longer simply entertainment devices; instead, adolescents live in a hybrid reality that blurs digital spaces with offline contexts. Boyd (2010) describes social media as 'networked publics' where adolescents navigate identity through online interactions and presentations. Platforms like TikTok

and Twitter enable adolescents to present different facets of themselves as the boundaries between digital and physical identities are often fluid. They selectively highlight aspects of their lives by sharing stories about academic successes or failures, hobbies, and social issues. This digital self-presentation allows adolescents to experiment with identity in a relatively unconstrained environment compared to offline interactions, enabling them to negotiate who they are and who they want to be (Boyd, 2014).

Some research reveals that young people use social media to explore their identities, build relationships, and express emotions (Vermeulen et al., 2018). Davis's (2013) survey of Bermudan adolescents found that online peer communication positively affected self-concept clarity, whereas online identity exploration had a negative effect. Awan and Gauntlett's (2013) qualitative study across ten schools in England furthered understanding of young people's online practices, showing how they used online spaces to connect with others, negotiated by convenience, authenticity, and openness.

### 3.3.1. Types of Social Media and Adolescent Usage

The Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH, 2017) reported that 91% of 16-24 year olds use the internet for social networking. Adolescents use a range of social media platforms, from image-based apps like short-form video platforms like TikTok to microblogging sites like Twitter. A recent Ofcom (2023) report indicates that almost all children aged 3 to 17 (96%) watch videos on video-sharing sites and apps. TikTok (42%) and Snapchat (36%) have gained popularity among 16-24-year-olds over the last year, overtaking Instagram (31%) and Twitter (6%) as the social media platforms they use most often. While social media platforms offer both consumption (viewing content) and creation (producing and sharing content) opportunities, Ofcom's (2023) report shows that social media is not all that social, as children are much less likely to post their content (32%) than to watch others (96%).

The RSPH (2017) shared that social media can improve young people's access to expert health information. Additionally, social media users reported being more

emotionally supported by their network and took comfort in seeing others' experiences. However, social media was described as more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol, and social media use is linked with increased rates of anxiety, depression and poor sleep.

### 3.3.2. Social Media as an Educational Tool

Dennen, Choi, and Word's (2020) review found that the dominant research themes in the area of social media, teenagers and the school context were studies that focused on social media as a teaching and learning tool. Social media platforms have quickly become a staple for many teachers, students, and researchers interested in discovering and sharing online resources on any subject, topic, and event (Kumar & Gruzdz, 2019). From educational blogs and video-sharing platforms like TikTok and YouTube, social media platforms allow users to comment, ask questions, discuss and learn through this connective deliberative process. Kumar and Nanda (2024) observed that learning practices have evolved over the last few decades from traditional classrooms to online learning, distance learning and other hybrid types. This may be because today's students are more comfortable with digital technologies, making convenience and availability essential factors in their learning.

Beyond formal schooling, informal learning plays a crucial role in students' education, encompassing activities from after-school clubs to learning at home and now social media (Latchem, 2014). This type of learning is embedded in people's everyday lives. It is unavoidable and often spontaneous; critically, it is not directed by the school or institution. Latchem (2014) suggests that social media is a significant educational resource for adolescents, enabling them to actively participate in knowledge exchange and collaborative problem-solving.

The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted social media's potential for educational practices. Syahara, Indahsari and Susanti's (2021) content analysis of TikTok showed how social media was a critical educational tool when schools in England and worldwide closed. Students turned to social media not only for social connection but also for

educational continuity. Teachers also used social media to mitigate the effects of disrupted schooling by offering access to study materials and virtual classes to make education more accessible and engaging in the absence of traditional methods. This consequently created a rise in educational content creators such as PE teacher Joe Wicks (BBC, 2021) who delivered virtual PE lessons during lockdown, and science technician Emmanuel Wallace, also known as Big Manny, who helped students with remote learning by sharing engaging videos of science experiments (BBC Teach, 2024; Khan, 2023). Recent research by Jerasa (2023), Dezuanni (2021), Prindle, Orchanian, Venkataraman, Nuckolls (2024) highlight the rise of dedicated feeds like “StudyTok”, “BookTok”, and the “STEM feed” on social media, where students share tips, resources, and motivation, indicating the evolving direction of social media as an educational tool.

Ofcom’s (2024) findings show a significant shift in media consumption with 93% of young people aged 16-24 increasingly turning to social media and video-sharing platforms over watching live TV (48%). This accords with Greenhow, Lewin and Willet’s (2021, 2023) research about UK and USA teachers' digital pedagogical practices. They support teachers using social media to reach young people, arguing that it meets students where they are. Klaiif and Salha (2021) called teachers' use of short videos, ‘nano-learning’. Nano-learning is when curriculum content is condensed into small units to achieve a single learning objective. Platforms like TikTok, which allow users to record short videos, support nano-learning, as educators in Prindle et al. (2024) said, are more engaging and take the form of ‘edutainment’.

### 3.3.3. The EU Kids Online Framework and Adolescent Social Media Use

Having explored the various ways in which adolescents use social media, it is important to consider the broader context of their online experiences. The EU Kids Online project (Livingstone, Mascheroni & Staksrud, 2015, 2018) provides a framework for exploring how children and adolescents navigate the digital landscape. Their study of 25,000 children across 33 European countries investigated the complex interactions between

technology, personal development, social contexts and the risks. The researchers created a holistic framework that:

- challenged the reductionist risk versus opportunity binary approach to categorising internet use among children.
- Recognised children and adolescents as active participants and not just passive consumers.
- Appreciated that online experiences are context-dependent and multi-layered.

Their findings emphasised that digital skills become fundamental life skills as children's online experiences are critical to personal development. They also illuminated that children's online interactions are more nuanced than adults may think. Challenging the common misconception that children are passive victims of the internet, the framework argues that not all risks necessarily lead to harm. Children and young people are not victims of the internet; their digital experiences are meaningful, and coping with the challenges of the online world is a form of learning.

A valuable element of the framework is its recognition that one's digital experience is shaped by social-level influences, such as parents, friends, teachers, and community, as well as country-level factors, including digital technology provision, technology in national education systems, societal attitudes towards technology, and government policies regarding internet usage. The latter is pertinent to the present zeitgeist at the time of writing, whereby countries like Australia, according to Reuters (Kaye & Menon, 2024) have implemented plans for social policies to ban social media for those under 16. France and some U.S. states have passed laws restricting children's access to social media without parental permission. This illustrates the nuanced and fluid nature of the digital world for young people, highlighting the importance of considering context when researching social media narratives about high-stakes assessments.

Livingstone (2015, pp. 14–15) proposed 12 recommendations for future research (See Appendix A), three of which align strongly with the present study. Recommendation 1



focused on identity, and my study directly explores students' construction of digital identities and how they represent themselves through the assessment experiences they share online.

Recommendation 7 addresses agency, which aligns with this study's focus on how students actively use social media and create meaning around assessment experiences, challenging traditional perspectives about online research. I aim to recognise students as active creators of digital narratives about assessment. I am not labelling students as passive victims of the internet or high-stakes assessment; instead, they are active meaning-makers. In addition, I aim to explore the diverse and rich contextual nature of students' online interactions, rather than focusing solely on "good" or "bad" experiences.

Recommendation 9 acknowledges that this framework was developed for 9–16-year-olds and is limited in its application outside this age range. The present research aims to understand the digital experiences of 16-19-year-old A-level students. By applying the framework to this age group, it will extend the understanding of students' online experiences and enable the exploration of high-stakes assessment experiences through a digital lens.

#### 3.3.4. Critical Perspectives on Social Media and Educational Assessment

The use of social media for teaching and learning suggests its potential for evaluating these areas, including assessment processes. One example of this potential is in an American study by Hu (2012), where students used Twitter to review and evaluate their midterm assessments in real-time. However, this study's context cannot be wholly applied to the UK, as the focus on midterm assessments differs significantly from the high-stakes nature of GCSEs and A-levels. Dike-Oduah's (2018, 2022) studies on students in England's use of Twitter to discuss their high-stakes assessment experiences overcomes the criticism around Hu's (2012) participant sample. However, given Twitter's declining popularity among adolescents (Ofcom, 2022) I argue that

further research is needed on contemporary and popular platforms like TikTok to understand how social media currently shapes UK adolescents' perceptions of high-stakes assessments.

Despite social media empowering adolescents to create identities and express themselves, there are significant concerns over its adverse impact on students' mental health and academic performance. Research finds that though TikTok and Twitter can facilitate peer support, they can also amplify stressors associated with demands for validation and success (Davis, 2013; Gardner & Davis, 2013; RSPH, 2017). The emotional processing of high-stakes assessments on platforms like TikTok and Twitter remains under-researched. Unlike traditional methods, social media offers an ecologically valid means of studying students' experiences as they naturally unfold, capturing real-time, unprompted reactions (Andreotta et al., 2019; Gauntlett & Awan, 2011). Research has shown (Dike-Oduah, 2018, 2022; Hu, 2012) that adolescents frequently discuss GCSE and A Level exams on social media, sharing experiences, resources, and coping strategies, yet few studies examine how this discourse reflects their attitudes toward assessment or how the comments shared on social media are not merely self-expressions but also reflections of the societal and educational expectations that adolescents encounter in England's high-stakes testing system. Existing research shows that students discuss exams online, yet there is a research gap in going further and critically identifying the connections between social media data and the broader societal structures that shape high-stakes assessment processes in England. This study addresses this gap by investigating these connections to understand how social media discourse may reflect and reinforce societal expectations about assessment.

### 3.4. Connections between High-Stakes Assessment and Social Media Discourse

The changing landscape of educational assessment may influence discussions on these platforms. For example, Dike-Oduah's (2018) content analysis of educational assessment tweets finds themes that coalesced around test anxiety, critical reviews of

exam boards and community searching. Four years later, Dike-Oduah's (2022) interpretive phenomenological analysis of students' discourse of assessment-related tweets revealed themes of fairness, justice and teacher-student relationships, a reflection of the COVID-19 context in which the research took place, whereby teacher-assessed grades replaced standardised exams (Ofqual, 2020, 2021). While these examples of changes in social media, public health, and assessment are not exhaustive, they demonstrate the need for ongoing research in this fluid and ever-evolving area.

Social media platforms like TikTok and Twitter have transformed the way students in England share their experiences with high-stakes assessments. These platforms give adolescents an alternative to mainstream media for sharing anxiety, stress, and triumphs following exams. Unlike more static forms of student expression, such as cross-sectional surveys or interviews, social media enables real-time reactions (Andreotta et al., 2019), capturing the immediacy and rawness of emotions surrounding exams. This ability to "speak back" to the education system in public digital spaces represents what Shirky (2010) describes as a shift in how technology has transformed consumers into collaborators, allowing users to control the narrative about their experiences.

Social media is an online archive that allows students to publicly document, recall, and store experiences that might be forgotten or overlooked. Using social media in this way reflects a resistance to the systematic erasure of specific histories and narratives within traditional academic settings. Boyd (2014) discusses social media as a space where marginalised voices can reclaim their narratives, which is especially relevant in a high-stakes assessment environment that some students feel is overly standardised and impersonal (Barrance, 2019).

The impact of social media on students' perceptions of assessment is multilayered. Positive, in the aspect of offering emotional support—described as essential for adolescents facing anxiety by Lau, Srinakaran, Aalfs, Zhao, and Palermo (2024). TikTok and Twitter content may help normalise feelings about exams, such as anxiety or frustration, by providing a space for shared experiences. However, they can also have

negative consequences due to increased academic comparisons and expectations within online communities.

On Twitter, students engage in real-time commentary during examination periods, using hashtags such as #GCSEs and #ALEvels to create temporal communities around shared experiences. Dike-Oduah (2018) found that students' Twitter posts reveal their immediate emotional responses to exam processes and structures, such as test items, scheduling, exam hall activity and more. With its audio-visual format, TikTok enables more nuanced expression through features like "day in the life" videos during revision periods, examination preparation routines, and emotional reactions to results. Students use platform-specific features such as duets and stitches to create dialogic responses to others' assessment experiences, forming what Boyd (2014) terms "networked publics" around educational experiences.

A critical aspect of the connection between high-stakes assessment and social media where students share their experiences online, is the democratisation of narrative control. Historically, discussions about high-stakes assessment in England have been dominated by institutional voices such as schools, examination boards, assessment regulators and traditional media. However, social media has disrupted this dynamic, enabling students to become producers and consumers of content related to their assessment experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified this shift with students from disadvantaged backgrounds using social media to protest against algorithmically downgraded grades, challenging biased narratives about their attainment (BBC News, 2020a; Dike-Oduah, 2022; Sky News, 2020). This digital activism (Hayes et al., 2024) shows how social media was used as a tool for equity by amplifying diverse student voices in ways that traditional settings do not always achieve.

Significant research gaps remain in our understanding of the connection between social media and high-stakes assessment. Existing literature does not adequately address:

1. The content students produce about assessment experiences on social media.
2. Students' interactions with social media content about high-stakes assessments.
3. Students' roles as producers and consumers of social media assessment narratives.
4. The influence of social media discussions on perceptions of assessment.

The methodological challenges of studying this connection, such as ethical considerations and the fluidity of social media content, can strain efforts to address the gaps identified above. As Peraica in Hayes et al. (2024, p. 23) aptly puts it, “Old fashioned academia is too slow for the demands of contemporary life...You can publish on TikTok”. In other words, traditional methods like surveys or interviews fail to capture social media discourse's multimodal and dynamic nature, particularly on rapidly evolving platforms like TikTok. This study aimed to close the methodological research gap by developing an innovative methodology that centred students as active participants in data collection and analysis and combined traditional qualitative approaches with digital content analysis.

### 3.5. Social Identity Theory, Online Communities and Assessment Discourse

The connections between high-stakes assessment and social media discourse are not simply individual expressions of opinion; they are also shaped by group dynamics. Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner's (1979) helps us understand how these group dynamics shape students' assessment narratives.

SIT posits that an individual's identity is shaped by their membership in social groups. There is a distinction between personal identity (unique characteristics) and social identity (the group-based self), and an acknowledgement that social identity can shape one's personal identity. SIT suggests that people categorise themselves (us) and others (them) into in-groups and out-groups, respectively. Identification occurs when

individuals align their behaviour and values with the group to boost their self-esteem and belonging.

SIT provided a lens to understand how students' academic identities were constructed, negotiated, and conveyed in relation to social media discourse about high-stakes assessments. Wigfield and Eccles (2002) work on the identities, expectancies for success and achievement of adolescents identified that students form identities linked to their grades and their social groups (i.e. class, race, gender, setting and streaming levels in school). As a result, students form ingroups and outgroups based on their achievement. As students gradually improve at understanding and integrating the assessment feedback they receive and engage in more social comparison with their peers, they become more tied to their self-assessments of success.

It is my observation that during exam season, GCSE and A-Level students 'belong' to a cohort, a group of students going through the same experience of standardised, high-stakes testing. During this time, students who belong to these exam cohorts and use social media platforms such as TikTok and Twitter may find themselves navigating the pressures of group membership, according to Luthar, Suh, Ebbert, and Kumar (2020). For example, high grades may be an in-group norm among certain peers. This may influence students to share their achievements or struggles in ways that conform to group norms and expectations, consequently shaping their academic identity. This group normativity interaction is further compounded by social media, where features and algorithms exist to validate individuals through views, likes and comments. Social media also facilitates quick social comparison where students compare their academic performance to peers and rapidly establish in-groups and out-groups based on shared experiences.

Social identity theory helps explain the interaction between students' personal and group assessment identities, how collective expectations are conveyed, and how social media affects students' digital presentations and negotiations of their assessment identities. However, while SIT illuminates these group dynamics, it does not fully address

the nuances of how these processes play out specifically within the context of high-stakes assessment discourse on social media, particularly on contemporary platforms like TikTok.

### 3.6. Student Voice and Agency in Assessment

Over the last few decades, research has championed students' voices to encourage 'in-school' reforms. Students are active players in the education system (Rudduck, 2007) and Levin (2000, p. 158) argues that "Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can improve our approach to classroom and school processes". Fielding's (2004) student voice framework proposes that student voice offers the dialogic alternative of speaking 'with' students rather than speaking 'for' students without understanding their perspectives and experiences. Hall (2017) extends this by arguing the importance of involving students in discussions about how their voices are heard and for what purpose.

Student voice has been used to capture students' perspectives on high-stakes assessments and inform more equitable and effective testing practices. Ahmed and Pollitt (2007) interviewed 14 students to understand their reactions to contextualised maths test items. One participant said in response to misinterpreting a scenario-based math problem, "I just got really muddled up" (ibid 2007, p. 211). Fox and Cheng (2007) used focus group interviews with test-takers in Canada to investigate their experiences. Students' accounts revealed the nuanced interplay between assessment design and linguistic or cultural factors, especially for students who spoke English as an additional language (EAL). These findings show how qualitative research can highlight issues related to construct representation and test item design. By understanding students' experiences, assessment developers can review their designs to minimise assessment issues such as construct-irrelevant variance. Construct-irrelevant variance refers to a systematic error (rather than a random error) that is introduced into the assessment

data by variables unrelated to the construct being measured (Downing & Haladyna, 2004; Messick, 1993).

Despite growing appreciation for the importance of student voice, Holquist, Mitra, Conner and Wright (2023) argue that many students feel they do not have many opportunities to contribute to decision-making in their classrooms and schools. I posit that this may be due to student voice typically taking an ‘insider approach’ whereby student voice requires a ‘teacher-student’ partnership (Sussman, 2015; Zeldin et al., 2017). In England’s high-stakes assessment context, any test-taker-to-test-designer partnership is fraught due to significant reforms and disruptions. Students are often excluded from meaningful decision-making about assessments, and so student voice is not capitalised in this area of education.

Holquist et al. (2023) suggest that student voice work can also take an “outsider approach” through critiquing structures and systemic bias. Sometimes described as “activism” (Rosen & Conner, 2016), this strand of critique might occur at the classroom level through teacher instruction on critical thinking (Conner, 2022). At the school level, students may form a student council to raise issues with school practices and policies and demand a change from school leaders (Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018; Mitra, 2007, 2018)

Social media platforms have broadened student voice, enabling student feedback and critique to go beyond traditional feedback methods, such as interviews and surveys. Student voice through social media allows students to critique and challenge systemic inequities independently of institutional frameworks (Nguyen, 2019). In the context of high-stakes assessment, platforms like TikTok and Twitter empower students to bypass traditional gatekeepers by documenting their experiences and advocating for change directly towards examination boards and policymakers, effectively connecting with those who shape educational practices (Dike-Oduah, 2018, 2022). Students ensure that their criticism reaches stakeholders by tagging institutions, using trending hashtags (Watson, 2020), or creating viral campaigns. Nguyen (2019) and Hockaday (2020) demonstrated



how these digital spaces became essential for articulating grievances and counter-narratives, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where teacher-assessed grades and other reforms prompted widespread student protest online. This redefines traditional power dynamics in student voice and highlights how expressions of student voice on social media can inform and influence structural processes of policymaking and assessment design.

Championing students' voices through traditional post-test interviews or digital platforms creates opportunities for more equitable and meaningful assessment practices. As social media platforms offer a new expression of student voice, teachers, policymakers and researchers must adapt to listen to what students say about high-stakes assessments and *how* they say it (Hall, 2017).

### 3.7. Student Disengagement as Critical Engagement in High-Stakes Assessments

Student disengagement is often framed negatively and interpreted as apathy or avoidance. McCarthy (2022) reconceptualised disengagement as a form of criticality, where students critiqued the education systems they are part of, including high-stakes assessments. Social media platforms such as TikTok and Twitter have become key spaces for these critiques, enabling students to share their thoughts beyond conventional educational settings and methods.

On social media, disengagement may manifest in memes, satirical videos, and complaints, which may be considered disinterest. However, McCarthy (2022) argues that what looks like disengagement masks complicated forms of resistance and critique regarding school structures and processes. Exploring how pupils felt bereft when the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in exam cancellations, McCarthy (2022) recast their responses as indicative of a deeper involvement with systems of assessment. Similarly, Dike-Oduah's (2018, 2022) findings document students' use of social media and physical protests to question the legitimacy of high-stakes assessments while still participating in them. Recent reforms, such as the shift to numerical GCSE grading and

changes in A-level structures, have prompted new forms of critique, yet students are still taking these exams. Szenes and Tilakaratna (2024) call this "critical compliance", whereby students simultaneously engage with and critically question assessment systems. This duality shows the complex relationship between resistance and compliance (Thornberg, 2008) and warrants further research.

Brown and Woods (2022, p. 53) emphasise that while students' perspectives are rarely sought in structured settings like schools (Woods et al., 2019), they may be "much more available in an unstructured form through social media and online platforms. Social media is a megaphone amplifying students' critical disengagement in a communal space where they can validate and share their assessment experiences through creative posts. Social media transforms student disengagement into a form of active participatory resistance and demands attention from researchers and policymakers.

### 3.8. Conclusion

The literature review explored the connection between high-stakes assessment and students' digital expressions of their experiences. Previous studies show the benefits of student voice in assessment (Ahmed & Pollitt, 2007; Fox & Cheng, 2007; Putwain, 2011). There is also evidence of the positive impact of using digital tools in education (Kumar & Gruzd, 2019; Kumar & Nanda, 2024; Prindle et al., 2024). However, we still don't fully understand how these two things come together in English secondary schools and sixth forms.

Muller-Block and Kranz (2015) posit that the literature review aims to identify research gaps that will form the basis of any investigation. Based on my review, three key research gaps emerged:

1. Despite the growing use of digital platforms for communication, self-expression and education, the connection between high-stakes assessments and social media discourse remains underexplored.

2. Group social media narratives may shape students' assessment perceptions and identities. Studying these collective narratives is crucial for understanding how digital spaces create and reinforce beliefs about high-stakes testing.
3. Traditional research methods struggle to capture the rich, unfiltered perspectives students share through social media platforms. Students' use of platforms like TikTok and Twitter to spontaneously share their feedback in real-time can arguably provide a richer, unfiltered perspective that traditional research methods cannot. A 30-second TikTok video can reveal more about testing pressures than a 30-minute interview, highlighting the need for novel methodologies to capture and analyse students' 'digital' voice about assessment.

My research aims to address these gaps and contribute to this new field of research by examining how students use TikTok and Twitter to share their assessment experiences.

The next chapter outlines the theoretical framework that underpins the investigation, providing a lens through which to analyse and discuss students' digital narratives about high-stakes assessments.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

### 4. Methodology

#### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter described the methodologies employed to answer the research questions:

1. What are students' experiences of educational assessment, as shared through the social media platforms TikTok and Twitter?
2. What do students disclose?
3. What are the interchanges between students in the comments sections?

This chapter outlines the study's epistemological and ontological underpinnings. It then sets out the three-phase multimodal qualitative research design, encompassing social media data collection (Phase 1), focus group interviews (Phase 2), and participant-sourced social media data (Phase 3). The chapter details the methods used for data collection and analysis, including ethical considerations, which considerations specific to social media research were addressed, and pilot testing. The chapter concludes by outlining the methodological approaches undertaken to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, addressing key issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Guided by the research questions, I chose a multimodal design to comprehensively explore students' high-stakes assessment experiences across two rich, distinct social media platforms: TikTok and Twitter. The qualitative research design involved social media data collection, focus group interviews, and participant-contributed social media data, allowing for a triangulated approach.

I used three data sources: TikTok videos (visual and text), Twitter posts (visual and text), and semi-structured focus group interviews. These data were analysed and synthesised using reflexive thematic analysis (Section. 4.4). The data type and their respective data collection periods are summarised in Table 1 below.

<b>Data Type</b>	<b>Data Collection Period</b>
TikTok video analysis (visual and text)	July – October 2023
Twitter posts analysis (text and video)	July – October 2023
Semi-structured Focus group interviews	Focus group 1: 20 July 2023
	Focus group 2: 20 July 2023
	Focus group 3: 6 September 2023
	Focus group 4: 8 September 2023
Reflexive Thematic Analysis	October – June 2024

*Table 1: Summary of Research Methods*

The next section outlines the ontological and epistemological considerations for the study, considering the research questions.

## 4.2. Ontological and Epistemological Considerations (constructivism and interpretivism)

It is argued that education research cannot be conducted in a theoretical vacuum (Blaikie & Priest, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2023). With this in mind, I set out the ontological and epistemological conditions that shape our understanding of students' assessment experiences on social media.

### 4.2.1. Ontological Conditions

Ontology is about the nature of reality and what actually exists to be 'researched' (Grix, 2018). This study assumed that students' experiences of high-stakes assessment, as shared through TikTok and Twitter, were socially constructed. Within this constructivist stance, there is no objective reality. Students' educational assessment-related experiences, discourses, and interactions are not fixed. Instead, reality is shaped by social interactions, language, symbols, and shared meanings. In this sense, reality is co-created through students' passive (onlooker or observer) and active (commenting, reposting, and liking) interactions and engagement on these platforms. Magoon (1977, p. 652) states that knowledge is complex and contextual with a "set of referents and

meanings”. This implied that the meanings students generated from their engagement with social media and assessment were not universal but were contingent on the individual’s interpretation within their social and cultural context.

Students’ educational assessment experiences on TikTok and Twitter are intricately linked to the dynamic nature of social media. Changes in character limits (X Developer, 2023), multimedia features (TikTok, 2023; X Blog, 2022), and platform names (i.e. Twitter to X) (Stokel-Walker, 2023) illustrate the evolving landscape. The shift in assessment discourse concerning social media is exemplified by the thread of Dike-Oduah’s (2018, 2021, 2022) studies, showing evolving themes over time (See Section 3.4). This study acknowledged the fluid digital and assessment environment, and these fluid contexts justified a constructivist stance to investigate the ever-changing, subjective realities shaping student experiences.

Constructivism is determined and influenced by who the researcher is, characterised by their assumptions, experiences, prejudices, age, gender and also by the theoretical assumptions embodied in their research traditions (Walt, 2020, p. 65). My positionality as a teacher-researcher inherently influenced the research perspective. My background as a Black British African woman, psychology graduate and social media user (discussed in Section 2.1) provides a unique lens for interpreting digital educational experiences, acknowledging that researcher identity and experiences are valid and meaningful components of the research process, from the genesis of pursuing this research idea to data collection, analysis, and dissemination.

Interpretivism, closely associated with constructivism (Chen, Shek & Bu., 2011; Walt, 2020) rejects the traditional positivist approaches. This enables researchers to immerse themselves within a culture to attain what the anthropologist Geertz (1973) called “thick description.” Doing so allows the researcher to describe the culture in detail without seeking to make nomothetic laws or generalisations about behaviour.

In the context of social media and educational assessment discourse, where communication is often symbolic and dynamic, interpretivism enabled me to explore and interpret the diverse meanings associated with content shared on platforms like TikTok and Twitter. Interpretivism argues that reality lies within multiple sources, which inclines the researcher to listen to many voices (Scauso, 2020; Walt, 2020). This research draws on multiple sources, including social media discourse, participant discourse, and the researchers' interpretations. Interpretivists argue that there is a third interpretation process, whereby each reader of a study actively creates their unique interpretation of a text, sign, or symbol (Barrett, 2009, p. 155). This ontological feature of interpretivism is central to the present study, as readers of this thesis, whether academic or members of the general public, are not passive consumers but active participants who bring their own interpretations to the research data (Tarnas, 2010), particularly as I included QR codes and visual images, which are open to multiple interpretations.

#### 4.2.2. Epistemological Conditions

Epistemology is about how knowledge is acquired (Cohen, Manion and Morrison., 2017). Grix (2018, p. 57) describes epistemology as the middle ground between ontology, 'what can be researched,' and methodology, 'how to acquire it.'

Consistent with a constructivist-interpretivist epistemological paradigm, my research assumed that knowledge about students' experiences of educational assessment as shared on social media is actively constructed, context-dependent and subjective (Mack, 2010; Walt, 2020). Numerous variables affected students' educational assessment experiences as shared on social media, such as their level of study, school history, teachers, exam boards, social media usage, political and public health contexts and more, so it was impossible to determine an objective absolute truth about their collective experiences.

Constructivists and interpretivists advocate for an immersive, participatory understanding that directly researches students' experiences with high-stakes

assessment (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Simply put, the epistemological assumption of the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm was that knowledge:

- Is gained inductively through personal experience to create a theory (Mack, 2010).
- Cannot be reduced to simple interpretations or stimulus-response causal interactions.
- Is contextually and individually interpreted.

Walt's (2020, p. 60) inspection of how researchers discussed constructivism-interpretivism in their publications identified common issues and misconceptions. The issue that resonated with me was the authors' failure to acknowledge and explain the theoretical roots of constructivism-interpretivism.

The philosophy of hermeneutics heavily influences the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. Traditional hermeneutics refers to the interpretation of written texts, particularly around religion (i.e. Biblical scriptures). Contemporary or modern hermeneutics comprises the interpretation of language, whether written or verbal (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018) and everything else within the interpretation process, such as assumptions, contexts and semiotics (understanding signs and symbols) (Mambrol, 2016).

Rockmore (1990, p. 131) states that “epistemology is a form of hermeneutics”. In other words, interpretation is part of the way we acquire knowledge. Hermeneutics guided me towards qualitative methodological approaches that would help interpret the narratives about students' educational assessment experiences online, especially the interpretation of ‘signs and symbols’ through the visual content shared online (videos, pictures, memes and emojis).

Ricoeur's (1981) theory of interpretation encourages researchers to consider the contexts that preceded the “knowledge” under scrutiny. This study carefully considered how exam boards, social media usage, and political contexts influenced the



understanding and interpretation of students' assessment experiences as shared on social media.

In summary, I addressed the research questions for this study using the paradigmatic frameworks of constructivism and interpretivism. I believe that students' high-stakes assessment experiences, as shared on social media, are co-created, subjective, and context-dependent. The next section explains how my ontological and epistemological stance led me to employ a qualitative methodology.

### 4.3. Qualitative Methodology

This study examines students' high-stakes assessment experiences on TikTok and Twitter through a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. Acknowledging that reality is not fixed but is shaped by individual experiences and co-constructed through interactions with social media and one another, the study employed a qualitative approach to capture the exploratory, diverse, and contextual nature of students' assessment experiences.

The complexity of investigating social media-mediated assessment experiences meant that it was appropriate for this study to use what Cohen et al., (2017, p. 285) described as a 'hybrid strategy' that draws upon different methodologies rather than a single methodological approach.

Qualitative research provided the methodological framework necessary to capture the complexity and depth of students' experiences with educational assessment on social media platforms. Hammersley (2013, p. 12) defines qualitative research as a type of social inquiry that uses verbal rather than numerical approaches through a flexible research design and relatively unstructured data to study naturally occurring cases in detail.

This study primarily analyses language-based data, and the dynamic nature of social media conversations, including the use of visual images and videos on TikTok and Twitter posts, necessitated a qualitative approach to capture the richness of the data, which would not have been achieved using quantitative approaches. For example, understanding a TikTok video on educational assessment through quantitative approaches, such as counting views, likes, comments, shares, hashtags, and video length alone, would not capture the depth and complexity inherent in the content (Parker, Saundage and Lee, 2011).

A distinguishing feature of qualitative naturalistic approaches compared to positivist quantitative approaches is the reluctance to enter the hypothetic deductive paradigm and test pre-formulated hypotheses. Instead, qualitative research is inductive, value-bound and emergent because there is a recognition that the researcher's values, experience and position influence the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Qualitative research, aligned with constructivism and interpretivism, regards people as active participants in constructing the meanings of situations and interpreting their world (McKenna, Myers & Newman, 2017). Central to this research is how qualitative research champions participants' voices and honours their multiple realities and interpretations regarding educational assessment in the context of social media (Marwick, 2014). In summary, a qualitative approach suited the exploratory and context-dependent nature of the research questions. It provided a holistic understanding of students' educational assessment experiences and recognised the layered ways that students interpret and share their academic journeys on social media. The following section explores the type of qualitative enquiry that I used in this study.

#### 4.3.1. Naturalistic Enquiry

In naturalistic enquiry, emphasis is placed on conducting research in “natural, uncontrived, real-world settings” (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 289) because context is central to meaning construction.

Of the range of naturalistic approaches available, interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology aligned best with the present study as it acknowledged that the life worlds of the researcher and the participants cannot be separated from each other (Heidegger, 1988). This was pertinent to the present study as students' educational assessment experiences are inextricably linked to their teachers. Hence, the objective rigour demanded by the descriptive (transcendental) phenomenological approach, which says that researchers should suspend their beliefs and focus solely on the participant's experience of the phenomenon (Lopez & Willis, 2004), was incompatible with the research aims because, as a teacher, I was inevitably part of the phenomenon under scrutiny. I sought to explore students' experiences of educational assessment via TikTok and Twitter as they were 'really like', establish meanings through explanation, and develop inductive theories through the dialogic relationships between the teacher-researcher (me) and the researched (student-participants) without denying my worldview and professional identity; therefore, an interpretive phenomenological approach that permitted this subjectivity was used to guide the research process.

#### 4.3.2. Considering Various Styles of Ethnography

Some aspects of the present research align with descriptions of an ethnographic and autoethnographic study, including:

- My position as an A-level teacher and examiner makes me part of students' educational assessment lifeworld.
- My personal experience and connection with the participants (students) as a teacher and through my active participation in social media discourse on educational assessment (see section 2.1).

However, while drawing inspiration from ethnography, this study does not fully adopt a complete anthropological investigative approach.

Ethnographic research involves navigating the tension between insider and outsider perspectives (Hammersley, 2006, p. 11) and the inherent distinctions between teacher

and student roles, as well as the differences in their perspectives on educational assessment, made it impractical to adopt an entirely ethnographic methodology. As a teacher, I could not fully immerse myself in students' life worlds or authentically replicate their experiences, such as navigating the pressures of social media and assessments as an A-Level student.

Similarly, while acknowledging the autoethnographic elements, a full autoethnographic approach (Poulos, 2021) did not complement the research aims, as it prioritises the researcher's experience over the students'. As Delamont (2009) argues, autoethnography increases the risk of research lacking theoretical rigour as well as nullifying the duty of social scientists to go out and gather data rather than obsessing about ourselves.

Social media is a socially constructed virtual space (Marshall & Rossman, 2014, p. 31) characterised by real people, cultures, communities, and complex interactions. The research questions made social media a central aspect of this study, and I considered Kozinets' (2010) 'netnography' as a potential methodology. In netnography, as in traditional ethnography, the researcher is a participant or non-participant observer immersed in the virtual environment, tasked with keeping detailed field notes (Hine, 2000). Because netnography works with virtual people through social media profiles (e.g. avatars, usernames, memes, etc.), a limitation is that the researcher cannot be sure of authenticity (validity) and of other features of face-to-face ethnography. For example, in netnography, I could not be certain that a social media post on educational assessment had indeed been created and shared by an A-level student or an educational stakeholder. Hallet and Barber (2014) argue that virtual ethnography in the context of education can illuminate the experiences of 'real people' by focusing on the data they contribute online rather than examining their virtual identities. However, this approach raises questions about whether netnography is fully ethnographic or merely about selectively shared data online about specific topics by people with shared interests. Hence, Evans (2010) challenges whether netnography leans more towards

being an extended online survey for further discussions and sharing opinions than 'ethnography', defined as a faithful reproduction of a cultural setting (Walford, 2009).

Webster and da Silva (2013) and Hallett and Barber (2014) argue that an authentic ethnography might require researchers to study participants online and offline, recognising that the online world is integral to their 'real' daily lives. Evans (2011, 2015) posits that contemporary individuals integrate their virtual and physical experiences to create a unified and coherent 'Self'. Following this perspective, the present research reflected an "ethnographically styled" approach (Connelly et al., 2013, p. 56) by employing participatory methods to link with ethnography's ethos. This included involving participants in the social media data collection and conducting focus group interviews within a school setting. By blending online (social media data collection) and offline interactions (focus groups) in the same physical space (school), the study added depth to its ethnographically styled observation of students' experiences of educational assessment as shared on social media. With multiple methodological objectives in mind, the selection of appropriate methods aimed to fulfil the ontological and epistemological conditions outlined in Section 4.2. These choices will be explained in the next section.

#### 4.3.3. Multimodal Qualitative Research Design (Mixed Methods)

A mixed-methods approach was used to investigate students' educational assessment experiences on social media. Mixed methods in the context of the present research refers to combining multiple research methods and data sources (e.g., focus group interviews and social media, respectively) to answer the research questions (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 49).

Denzin and Lincoln (2017) emphasise using triangulation to deepen understanding in mixed-methods approaches. Convinced that employing various methods in a single qualitative study was a strategic choice to enhance rigour, breadth and complexity in the inquiry process, I applied Cohen's (2017, p. 177) operational planning framework for

mixed methods to my study. Figure 2 below shows how I adapted the framework for this study and carefully considered the kind of data required, from whom it would be acquired, and the methods I intended to employ in the gathering process.

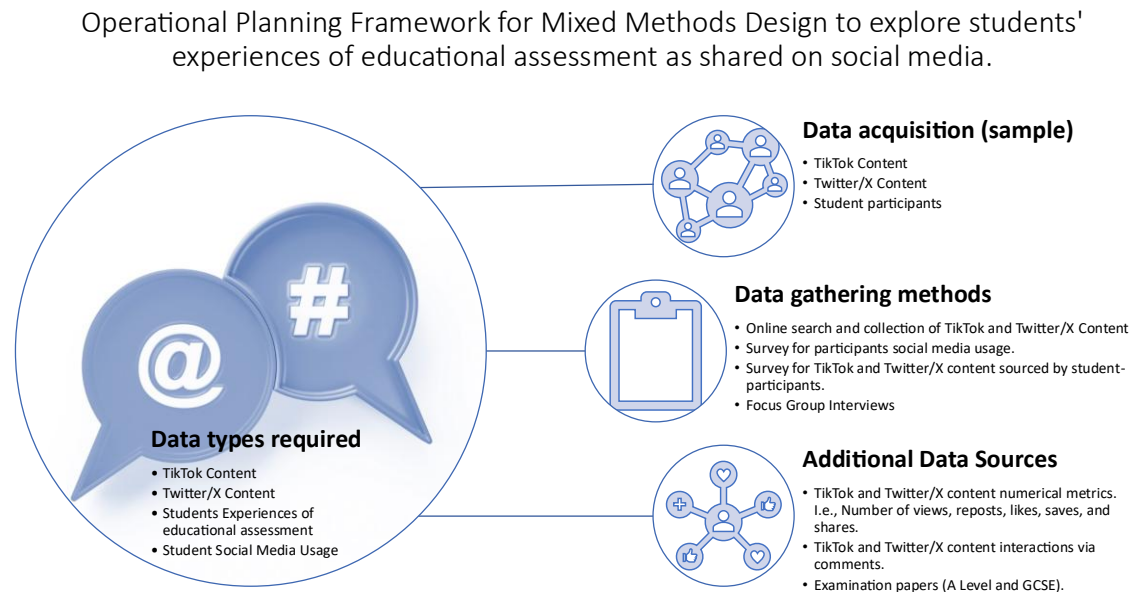


Figure 2: Operational Planning Framework for this study's mixed methods design based on Cohen et al. (2017, p. 177)

The operational planning framework helped shape the methodological structure of the research. It allowed me to integrate diverse data sources and methods to investigate students' experiences of educational assessment across social media. The framework confirmed that it was necessary to embrace a methodologically eclectic design for several reasons:

1. **The Diverse Nature of TikTok and Twitter Content:** Social media platforms contain a variety of content, including text, images, videos, and user interactions through comments, likes and reposts (sharing). An eclectic approach enabled me to capture the diverse content effectively by using research methods that could analyse different types of content, such as text analysis for written/verbal content

and visual analysis for images and videos under the umbrella of reflexive thematic analysis (discussed in Section 4.4).

2. **The Complexity of Student Experiences:** Educational assessment experiences are multilayered and nuanced. Using a range of methods, such as focus group interviews and researcher-sourced and participant-sourced social media data collection, helped to capture the rich, multidimensional nature of students' digital experiences.
3. **The Subjective Nature of Experiences:** Students' experiences of high-stakes assessment and social media are subjective. An interpretive-constructivist and methodologically eclectic design helped capture the diverse interpretations and meanings students assigned to their assessment experiences on social media.
4. **Triangulation Strategy:** Using multiple methods and data sources to study a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) added depth and contributed to the concurrent validity of qualitative research, according to Denscombe (2014). Cross-verifying findings from different sources, such as comparing participants' comments in focus group interviews with the content of TikTok and Twitter posts, increased the confirmability and credibility of the study's claims about students' experiences with educational assessment. Triangulation is particularly important when dealing with social media data, where multiple perspectives may exist, and challenges around verifying the authenticity of social media content are present (Hallett & Barber, 2014).

The research design is multimodal, integrating the following different modes (types) of qualitative data to answer the research questions: TikTok content, Twitter content, and focus group interview transcripts.

Two research methods were used to collect the data: social media data harvesting and focus group interviews, during which participants actively contributed social media content.

Fundamentally, this research selected methods centred on the participants whose lifeworld and meaningful actions (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) were under investigation. The study embraced an interpretive-constructivist methodology and positioned students as co-researchers. Participants were active meaning-makers who collaboratively collected and interpreted the data. This participatory approach enriched the research and ensured a more authentic understanding of students' digital assessment experiences. However, a challenge was navigating power dynamics (see Section 4.6.2) and ensuring that participants felt empowered throughout the research process.

#### 4.4. Approaches to Analysis

There are many methodological approaches to analysing qualitative data, such as coding reliability, codebook and reflexive thematic approaches.

Coding reliability approaches are generally underpinned by a positivist paradigm, which seeks to establish accuracy, inter-coder reliability, and objectivity when coding data. This practice did not align with the research's exploratory aims or epistemological stance, which sought to capture nuanced, contextual experiences.

Codebook approaches take a more structured approach to coding through a codebook or coding criteria. Smith and Firth (2011) argued that codebook approaches reflected a pragmatic compromise of some qualitative research values.

As the sole researcher, I adopted a flexible approach to data analysis. I wanted to stay close to the multimodal data while managing the vast amount to analyse, so I used aspects of the codebook approach but did not create codes too early. Instead, I constructed and refined the codes and themes through an iterative process of engaging with the data and capturing the recurrent patterns and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2021a).

I chose the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2021a) because it directly aligned with the study's interpretivist and constructivist approach. RTA acknowledges that the researcher's position and



contribution are indispensable and central to the analysis process, viewing their subjectivity as a valuable resource rather than a limitation.

Braun and Clarke use the term 'reflexive', which I first encountered during my PGCE and understood to mean reflecting on one's practice while 'doing' the practice as opposed to 'after' said practice. Reflexivity, in the context of RTA, involves drawing upon the researcher's identity, personal experiences and existing knowledge and transparently exploring how they shape their interpretation of the research 'during' the research. This feature of RTA aligned with the epistemological conditions (See Section 4.2.2) guiding my study as I aimed to authentically capture students' accounts of their experiences while also recognising the reflexive influence of my interpretations as the teacher-researcher.

In the next section, as recommended in Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflections on RTA, I will outline the theoretical assumptions of the RTA that were used in my study.

#### 4.4.1. Theoretical Assumptions of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2022) recommendation to consider the theoretical dimensions. This study took a multifaceted theoretical approach, integrating constructionist, critical and inductive theoretical positions.

##### *Constructionist*

The constructionist perspective views reality as socially constructed and emphasises how students' educational assessment experiences were created through their digital social interactions.

##### *Critical*

This study took a critical perspective by considering the broader societal influences on students' experiences of high-stakes assessments on social media. While acknowledging students' subjective experiences, I focused on group patterns and shared experiences across the focus group interviews and social media data rather than individual experiences.

### *Inductive Analysis*

I took an inductive approach to data analysis. I allowed codes and themes to emerge from the data while ensuring that the research questions remained a central guide throughout the analytical process, drawing on my previous research experience in this field (Dike-Oduah, 2018, 2021, 2022).

### *Semantic and Latent Coding*

I used semantic coding for text-based data that was explicit in its intended meaning and latent coding for text-based (and visual) data that contained symbolic or metaphorical language that required deeper interpretation. The following example provides the rationale behind this dual coding approach when analysing multimodal qualitative data to understand students' social media assessment experiences.

In a Twitter post (FG3-197), one student said they felt like they were "going to throw hands" when faced with a difficult exam. A purely semantic approach would interpret the phrase as the student literally throwing their hands up. The latent approach revealed the colloquial connotations of this phrase, and I discovered that "throw hands" was a slang term referring to physical fighting, typically involving punches. With this fuller context, I can assume that "going to" indicated future intent and "throw hands" captured the students' extreme frustration to the point where they might want to resort to violence (throwing punches). It is a hyperbolic expression, not meant to be taken literally. So, the student is not saying they want to punch the exam, but rather that the test is causing so much stress and frustration that they feel like lashing out somehow.

Other examples of latent analysis were observed during focus group interviews, where I invited students to unpack the contextual meanings of specific phrases, particularly when words were used in an uncommon context.

The analysis of an assessment-related tweet that used the word 'zesty' to describe an exam board (see Figure 3) illustrated the need for semantic and latent coding. The tweet reads: "How AQA felt after sprinkling in some maths and physics in the GCSE biology

exam”, accompanied by an image of Drake, a Canadian hip-hop artist. A reply to the tweet said, “AQA were zesty for that”.



### Focus Group 3 - Social media content 1 – Twitter – Researcher sourced



Figure 3: Social Media data (FG2/FG3/FG4-RS-189)

Semantically, ‘zesty’ is a word used to describe having a strong, pleasant taste, characterised by energy and vigour (Oxford Dictionary, 2023). So, one may assume that describing an exam board as ‘zesty’ is a positive characterisation. However, the broader context and the input of students’ interpretations provided a contrary view.

The tweet communicates the author’s observation that there was an ‘unexpected’ reference to other subjects in a biology exam. My knowledge of educational assessment allowed me to make a judgment that this is not typically a positive experience for students. The tweet lends itself to the assessment concept of construct-irrelevance, which is when a test includes content that is unrelated to the construct being measured (Reeves & Marbach-Ad, 2016). Including math and physics questions in a biology exam suggested that material unrelated to the intended construct (biology knowledge) was tested. This could potentially confuse or disadvantage students who are not as strong in

those other subjects. Despite my relative expertise in educational assessment, I still could not completely understand why the word ‘zesty’ was used, so I called upon my co-researchers, the student participants, to support with interpreting the text:

KDO: It (the tweet) says AQA were zesty. What does it mean to be zesty?

Stu 3: It means you’re gay.

KDO: Why would they describe an exam board as being homosexual?

Stu 5: It’s just like being disrespectful, you know, when people used to be like, “Ah, that’s so gay”. That’s what they’re saying AQA is.

KDO: Okay, so zesty is a term of disrespect in this context.

Stu 6: I thought it meant that they’re like switching teams, that they are putting other subjects in the biology paper.

KDO: Ohh. Switching teams. So, moving from being heterosexual to homosexual?

Students' interpretations went beyond the dictionary definition. Tapping into students' expertise by taking a latent approach to the data allowed me to understand that the word “zesty” in this context was, in fact, a negative characterisation of the AQA exam board. I would not have been able to understand this and capture their reality accurately if I did not trust the students as experts in their own lives and experiences.

The tweet included cultural references via an image of Drake, the hip-hop entertainer, and this required semantic and latent analysis. Drake is a famous artist, and one could assume that the tweet's author included his image to gain traction and appear relevant. However, I could not rely on my assumptions and sought the help of my co-researchers again to understand the significance, especially with the nature of the image. Excerpts of the explanations provided by Students in focus group 2 are below:

EM: It's showing Drake in a very relaxed and playful manner, and they're showing that AQA does not care about anything except themselves.

BB: I think that the image can create a deeper meaning. For example, the wink emphasises that AQA have been playful and cheeky [laughs], and that him sipping a drink in such a relaxed manner further implies that AQA are...violating.

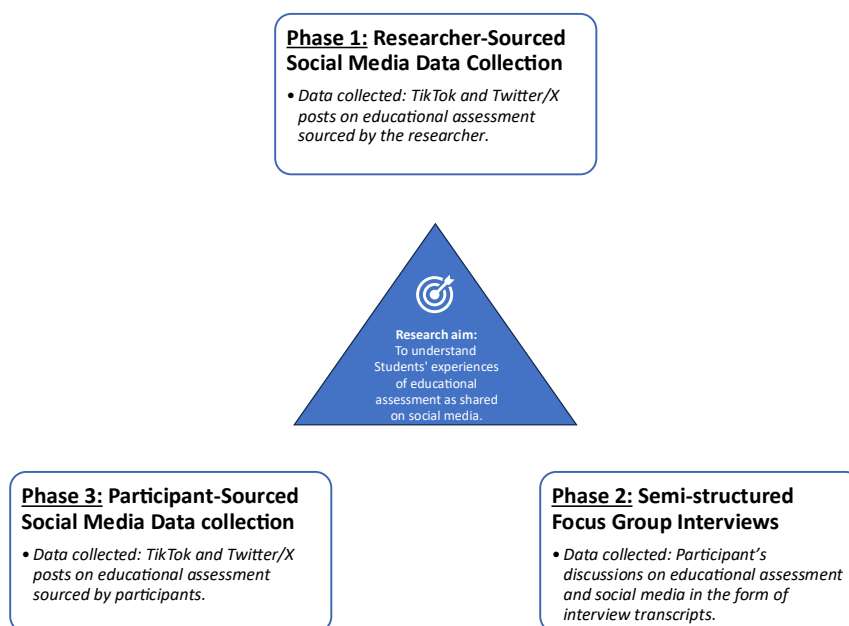
IB: I feel like people use like celebrities because...it's good for like the younger generation...kind of adds a humorous part to it as well when they're seeing the celebrities do something like funny. And then also...it helps them to get their point across

These comments went far beyond what I could have interpreted alone in my teacher-researcher role. By trusting students as experts in their own linguistic and cultural experiences and combining semantic and latent analysis, I developed a multi-layered analytical approach to gain the best understanding of the social media data.

In summary, I have justified my theoretical position, which combined constructionist, critical and inductive approaches to analyse the semantic and latent aspects of students' experiences and interactions with educational assessment on social media platforms. The following section explains how I employed the six phases of RTA proposed by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2021b).

## 4.5. Data collection

The three-phase design is illustrated in Figure 4 below, and each phase is described in subsequent sections. While the diagram uses a triangular shape, the data collection process was linear, with each phase building upon the previous one. The triangle is used to show the triangulation of the data sources.



N.B. The data collection process was linear. The triangle symbolises the triangulation process between all three data sources.

Figure 4: Summary of Data Collection Phases

### 4.5.1. Phase 1: Researcher-Sourced Social Media Data Collection Method

Phase one of data collection involved collecting social media content from TikTok and Twitter, and an outline of the selection process for each social media platform is provided in the subsections below.

#### *TikTok data collection*

It was my first time incorporating TikTok data in educational assessment and social media research, so I used Fialloss, Fialloss and Figueroa's (2021) study as a methodological guide. I set the boundaries of the data by using the hashtags #GCSE

and #Alevel (and pluralised variations of these hashtags, i.e. #GCSEs) for a manual search using the TikTok search bar on the desktop site (<https://www.tiktok.com/>). I strategically chose these hashtags to meet the research aims, focusing on the high-stakes assessment discourse about GCSE and A-level examinations on social media. An example of the hashtag search results is displayed in Figure 5 below.

At the time of writing (January 2024), the hashtags #GCSE and #Alevels demonstrated significant engagement, with 7.2 billion and 4.3 billion views respectively on TikTok (2024a, 2024b). While it is unclear how many videos there are in the ‘population’, this data highlights TikTok’s extensive reach in educational discourse.

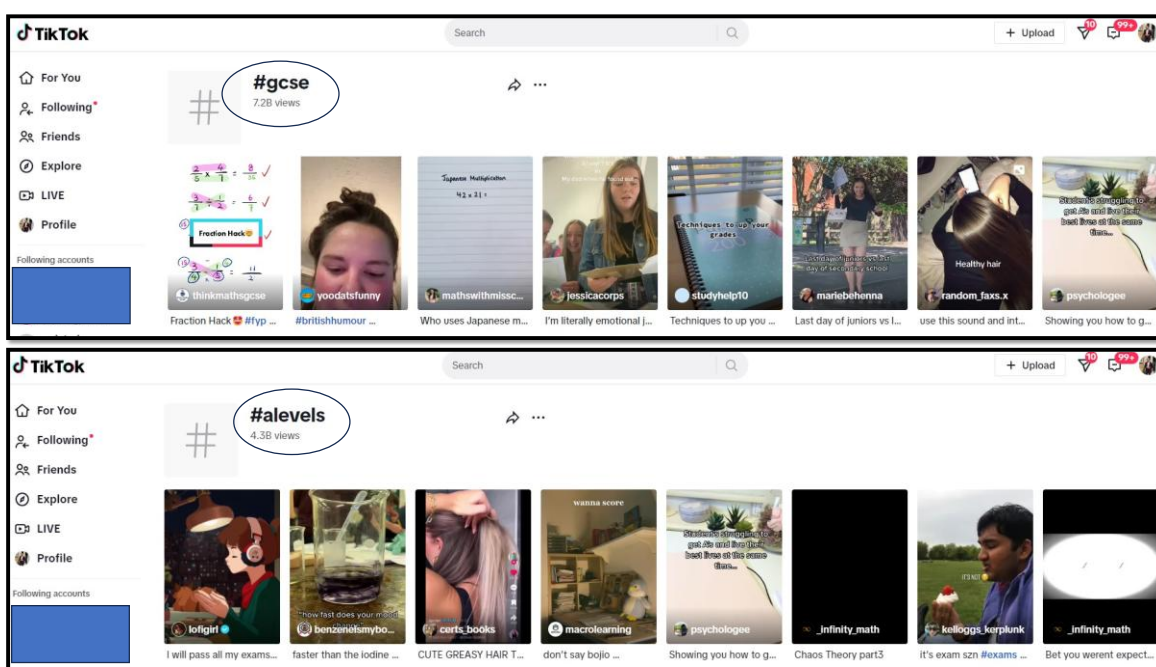


Figure 5: No. of views associated with the hashtags #GCSE and #Alevels.

I reviewed the results systematically to check that posts met the criteria of being about educational assessment. This was a necessary step as often some posts were unrelated to educational assessment but used the hashtags #gcse or #alevels, perhaps to gain views, likes and shares. I also considered that popularity and TikTok’s algorithm strategies may have played a role in displaying the results, as ‘hashtag searches first

show the most popular videos' (Fiallos et al., 2021, p. 173). As I used my account to conduct the search, there was a possibility that there may have been a bespoke algorithm tailored for my usage; therefore, specific TikTok videos would have been shown to me that may not be shown to another user. I tried to circumvent this by avoiding accessing content through my personalised "For You" page and instead accessed content through hashtags' (Huebner, 2022, p. 1441). In addition, my inherent biases, positionality, and role as a teacher may have influenced the selection process, so in line with interpretive phenomenology (Walt, 2020), I remained mindful of my subjective influence when selecting TikTok videos. The challenges around subjectivity emphasise why Phase 3 (discussed in Section 4.5.3) was necessary, where I incorporated students sourcing social media data in the research design so that my views or selection did not dominate the final social media data set.

I limited the final sample of researcher-sourced TikTok videos to six. The decision to keep the quantity modest compared to Fiallos et al.'s (2021) computer-assisted analysis of 1495 TikTok videos and Hubener's codebook content analysis of 20 TikTok videos was driven by the aim to prioritise depth over quantity. I also anticipated participants' contributions to TikTok videos in Phase 3. Acknowledging the richness of TikTok videos (Schellewald, 2021), my in-depth qualitative approach, coupled with the study's exploratory nature, required effective management of the data analysis workload because of the responsibility I held as the sole researcher. Notably, Fiallos et al. (2021) used a computer video indexer for quantitative analysis of their TikTok videos, and Hubener used a codebook, but I had no intention of using those methods of analysis. My analysis was to be detailed and rich, so a smaller sample of TikTok videos was justified.

The six selected TikTok videos were chosen based on their potential to generate meaningful focus group discussions. The pilot study's first focus group evaluated the suitability of the TikTok videos. I used participants' direct feedback and engagement to indicate whether adjustments were required for the final set of TikTok videos. I also considered whether the video content aligned with the research questions and aimed to



have a selection of videos that captured a broad spectrum of experiences and opinions (i.e. positive and negative sentiments, GCSE and A-Level focused).

I used Microsoft Excel to record the metadata for each TikTok video, including URL link, video caption, text-on-video, number of likes, views, shares, saves, comments, length of video, audio description and hashtags used. An example of one of the TikTok videos included in the study is shown in Figure 6 below, along with details to illustrate the metadata. The time frame for the six TikTok posts ranged from April 2023 to August 2023. A complete list of the TikTok data is in [Appendix B](#).

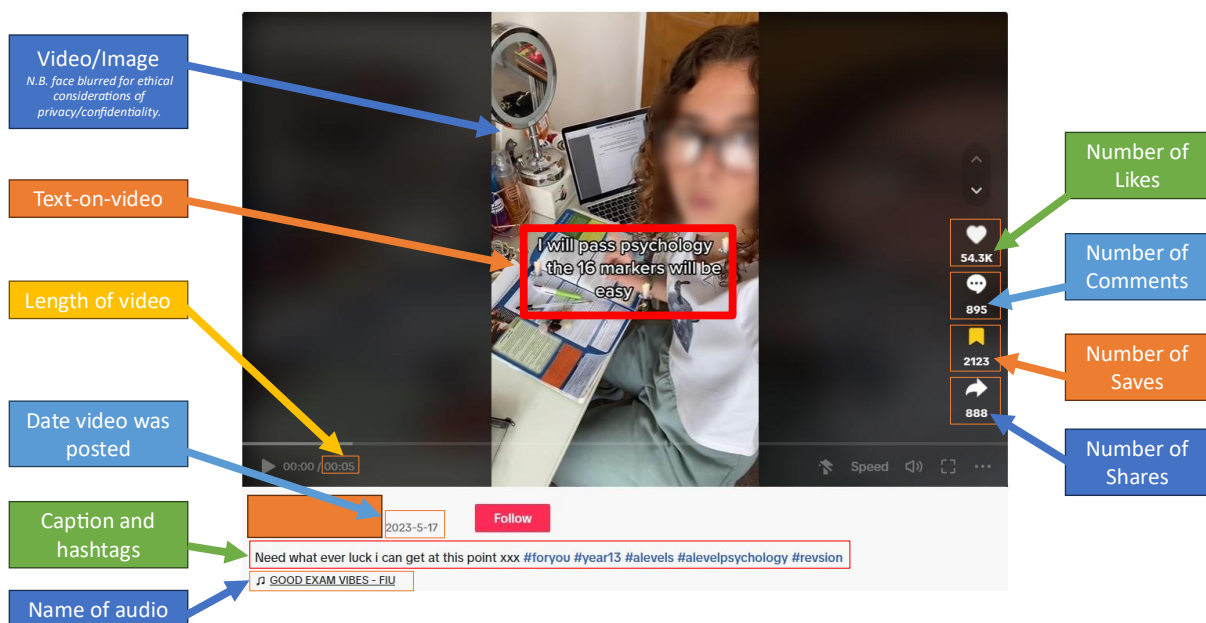


Figure 6: Example of TikTok Video with labels for metadata.

### Twitter data collection

Collecting Twitter data drew upon my prior experience, using similar methods from my master's thesis (Dike-Oduah, 2018), the EdD Methods of Enquiry small-scale study (2021), and the EdD institution-focused study thesis (2022). I collected high-stakes assessment-related Twitter posts to support answering the research questions about students' assessment experiences as discussed on social media.

I downloaded Twitter posts from May to August 2023 with hashtags #GCSEs2023 and #Alevels2023 using Brand24 (2023), a social media analytics tool (see Appendix B for a sample of the raw data). These dates coincided with the UK examination season, capturing sentiments during May/June and the GCSE and A Level results days in August.

Table 2 below shows the number of posts indexed by Brand24 on June 14, 2023. The data includes the percentage of posts featuring visual content (photo, animation, or video). Compared to my previous content analysis (Dike-Oduah, 2018) of 1036 educational assessment tweets, where 31% of the tweets contained a photo or video, the present study recognised a substantial increase in visual content, with 66% of tweets under #Alevels2023 and a remarkable 84% for #GCSEs2023 containing visual elements.

*Table 2: Number of posts for each hashtag and % of visual data*

<b>Hashtag</b>	<b>Number of posts</b>	<b>Percentage of posts with a photo, animation (GIF), or video</b>
#GCSEs2023	2080	84% (1749)
#Alevels2023	2077	66% (1389)

Figure 7 shows an example of a tweet, along with the key metadata of a tweet post.

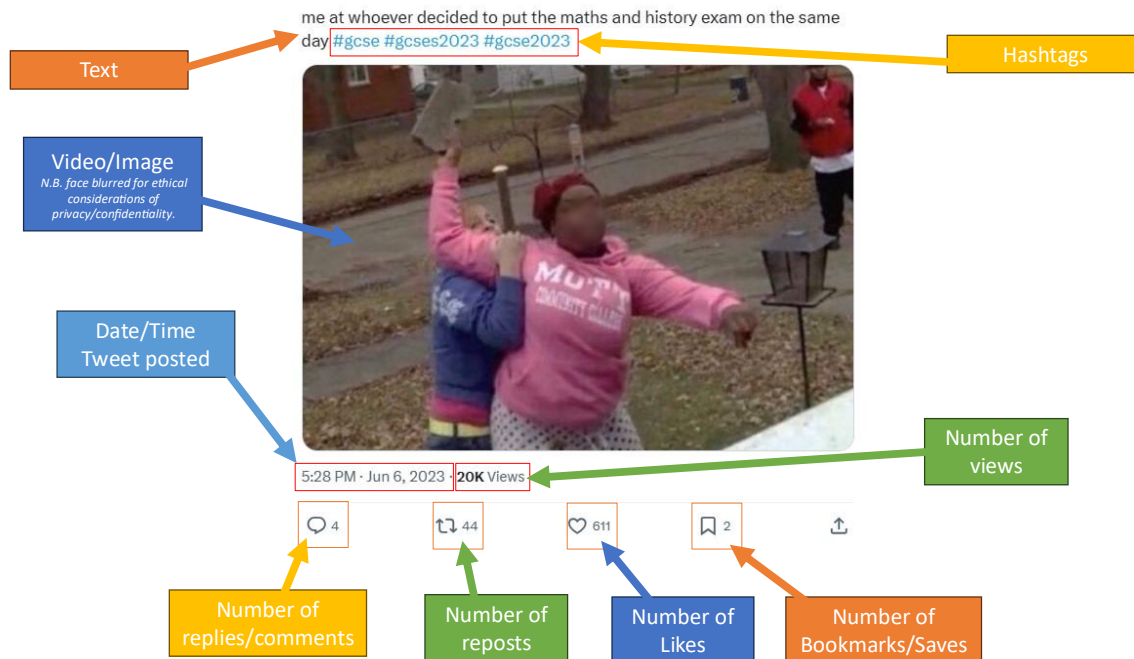


Figure 7: Example of Twitter Post with labels for metadata.

Qualitatively driven, this study went beyond text analysis, acknowledging the significance of visual data in the discourse about students' educational assessment experiences. The visual element of the Twitter data confirmed my decision to be selective about the number of tweets that I included as part of the social media data analysis and for the focus group discussions.

I exported the data from Brand24 as an Excel document. I screened the Twitter posts to ensure they were relevant to the research aims and highlighted posts that I believed would encourage meaningful discussions in the focus group interviews, of which their suitability was tested in the pilot focus group, as I did with the TikTok data. I used Twitter's search tool to ensure that I did not overlook what the platform directly produced.

Anticipating the contribution of more Twitter data from participants as part of the research design in Phase 3, I desired to give more space for the analysis and interpretation of their contributions, so I manually selected 10 tweets as the researcher-

sourced Twitter data, which served as artefacts to stimulate discussions in focus groups. Positivist researchers may argue that it is 'unrepresentative' to select only 10 tweets from thousands and makes the research lack generalisability (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 215). The qualitative paradigm in this study meant that I did not seek to make generalisations. Instead, I took an exploratory approach to understanding this relatively new and complex phenomenon.

As with the TikTok data, a limitation of the Twitter data collection process was that specific tweets may not have surfaced through Brand24's indexing and Twitter's search-limiting algorithm (X/Twitter Help Centre, 2024). My selection of tweets may have been prone to bias, as there were undoubtedly tweets that were more evocative to me based on my position as a teacher-researcher. Nevertheless, subjectivity is not shunned in constructivist phenomenological research, but researchers are encouraged to be transparent and reflective about their research decisions and subjectivities in the research process (Heidegger, 1988; Van Manen, 2016).

#### 4.5.2. Phase 2: Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

McGrath, Palmgren and Liljedahl (2019, p. 1002) argue that interviews are a 'dynamic tool' which enables qualitative researchers to explore 'individuals' subjective experiences and attitudes, accessing aspects of reality that might otherwise have remained unknown. Focus group interviews, as advocated by my undergraduate lecturer, the late Dr. Lynne Millward (2006), enable a deeper understanding by using group interactions for qualitative data collection.

Social media is indeed 'social', so I selected a research method to complement the 'social' and 'interactive' aspects of my research on students' experiences of educational assessment shared on social media. I conducted semi-structured focus-group interviews to capture the collective meaning-making of assessment experiences through social media interactions (Robinson, 2023). Unlike individual interviews, focus groups created a conducive environment for participants to engage in group discussions, fostering interactions that often yielded rich elaborative data as they responded to and developed

each other's comments in the group (Breen, 2006; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Millward, 2006). Education researchers Walls and Hall (2018) successfully used focus group interviews to generate rich discussions among student participants, reinforcing their suitability for the present study.

Lobe, Livingstone, Olafsson and Simões' (2008) review of studies about young people and new media posited that focus groups were best when the research considered young people's accounts of reality and how they negotiated these accounts with others, which complemented the constructivist stance. Focus groups enabled me to explore the convergence and divergence of views among students, providing a holistic understanding of their experiences with educational assessment as shared on social media.

The focus-group setting created a space where participants could spontaneously raise unanticipated issues and provide information beyond my existing knowledge. Influenced by Bragg's (2007) and Fielding's work (2010) on the exciting potential of student voice, focus groups allowed me to cover topics that were not initially planned or expected (Bragg & Fielding, 2005); this was particularly advantageous given the exploratory and novel nature of the present study.

Adler, Salanterä, and Zumstein-Shaha's (2019) literature review on conducting focus group interviews with children and youths highlighted the potential for interactions within the focus group to be constrained by individuals dominating the discussion. Additionally, due to the group setting, young people might have been more reluctant to discuss sensitive issues, such as online 'risks,' compared to individual interviews (Liamputtong, 2011). To address these limitations, I took measures during the recruitment phase, selecting students who already had established relationships (i.e., from the same school, year group, and A-level course).

During interviews, I actively probed and encouraged discussions to go deeper into emerging sensitive issues. However, given the focus on collective meaning-making in

young people's assessment and social media experiences, my study did not extensively examine individual media experiences. Although exploring individual differences is crucial, it was not within the scope of my research. Nevertheless, constructivism allowed me to acknowledge the individual contribution of each participant while recognising 'intersubjectivity' (Sartre & Moran, 1984). While I did not study students individually, under constructivism, I could appreciate that individual students' personal knowledge was constructed from their experience and interactions with other student participants in the focus group, their families, peers, schools, teachers, and social media.

#### *Assessment-related TikTok videos and Tweets as the Focal Stimuli*

In market research, focus groups are often used to discuss products, whereas social science researchers predominantly rely on pure discussion of interview questions. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008) suggest a middle ground of using stimulus materials such as stories and pictures as a cue for discussion. In this study, stimulus materials were TikTok and Twitter posts. Some were pre-selected by the researcher and others were selected by participants in Phase 3 of the research design.

I incorporated stimulus materials in the focus group for three reasons:

- 1) To support participants in expressing their experiences and understanding of ideas about educational assessment, which encouraged their active engagement in discussions.
- 2) To explore students' experiences of educational assessment as shared on social media in a way that allowed for different perspectives to be heard and shaped through their interactions with others. Including participant-sourced social media data and researcher-sourced data as stimuli allowed common ideas to flow between focus groups and avoided making the discussions too repetitive.
- 3) To align with participatory research principles. Bergold and Thomas (2012) and Nind and Vinha (2016) found that the inclusion of creative stimuli like metaphors and poems made the focus group 'feel alive' because the stimuli were the things that the participants thought were important. In the same way, I sought to

empower participant voices and afford them agency in shaping the discussion through their selection of social media content.

The inclusion of focal stimuli in the focus groups aligns with constructivism. For example, if Student A completes an assessment, shares their experiences, and then speaks to Student B, who shares their own experiences, constructivists would say that Student B's experience now shapes Student A's experience and vice versa.

Now add the presence of social media – Student A completes an exam and has a personal concept of their experience, and then they go onto TikTok or Twitter and view the experiences of other students online; now Student A's experience of educational assessment may be influenced by their interactions online. Therefore, asking students about their educational assessment experience using social media data as stimulus material in the focus groups broadens the scope of their expressions and fulfils the research aims.

#### 4.5.2.1. Participant Recruitment

Phases 2 and 3 of the study were conducted on post-16 students from an Outer London Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), comprised of eight schools. Four academies within the trust are primary schools, and four are secondary schools, with three that have sixth forms for post-16 education. To provide the context of the population from which the participant sample was drawn, demographic details as sourced from the Department for Education (DfE UK, 2023) of the three secondary schools with a sixth form are provided in Table 3 below, and pseudonyms are used in place of each school's real name.

	<b>Copperfield High School</b>	<b>Green Park Academy</b>	<b>Raven High School</b>
<b>No of students (2023)</b>	1393	1190	1433
<b>No. of students in sixth form (2023)</b>	232	124	299
<b>Gender of entry</b>	Mixed Co-educational	Mixed Co-educational	Mixed Co-educational
<b>Admissions policy</b>	Non-selective	Non-selective	Non-selective

<b>Free school meals eligibility (% of the whole school)</b>	18%	25%	27%
<b>Top 3 Popular A-Level Subjects</b>	Business Studies (27%) Sociology (21%) Psychology (19%)	Data on post-16 is not available for this school because it had no students who completed post-16 studies in 2022, as it is a 'new' school that opened in 2017.	Psychology (15%) Business Studies (13%) Sociology (8%)
<b>Average A Level Grade in 2021</b>	C		B
<b>Student Destinations after A Level: Staying in education</b>	68%		57%
<b>Student Destinations after A Level: Students entering apprenticeships</b>	2%		5%
<b>Student Destinations after A Level: Students entering employment</b>	15%		23%
<b>Student Destinations after A Level: Students not in education or employment for at least two terms after study</b>	11%		10%

*Table 3: Demographic Profile of the schools represented in the study.*

The participant sample was obtained using a combination of opportunity and volunteer sampling. As a Head of Faculty in an Outer London academy school, I had access to the target group of post-16 students in my institution and across the three other secondary schools and sixth forms within the trust. Despite having the opportunity and access as an employee of a school within the MAT, I was accountable to the CEO. I sought permission before approaching any schools or student participants for my research.



Volunteer sampling was employed by using the MAT's virtual learning and information sharing platforms, Microsoft Teams and Microsoft SharePoint, to request students' participation in the study. Prospective participants then emailed the primary researcher, who responded with detailed information about the study's aims, requirements and potential focus group interview dates, along with an electronic consent form. Participants' consent forms were screened, and to meet the criteria for participation, they had to be a current year 12 or year 13 student in 2023. Participants were contacted and invited to participate in one of four face-to-face focus group interviews based on their availability.

Fifty-four students completed the electronic consent form, and 34 responded to follow-up communication about the focus group interviews.

#### 4.5.2.2. Participants

The study included 34 participants. All participants were in Year 12 (lower 6<sup>th</sup>) as Cobley, Jim, Joseph, and Nick (2009) argue that there could be relative age effects on the nature of students' school experiences, which, when applied to this study, suggests that there could be age effects on the essence of students' educational assessment experiences via social media. Therefore, homogeneity was achieved.

However, it must be noted that despite all student participants being in year 12, two students were 18 years old due to repeating their year 12 studies; 16 students were 17 years old, and 16 were 16 years old. The mean age was 16.6 years.

The participants' self-reported social media usage indicated TikTok as the most popular platform, with 94.1% of participants reporting its use, followed closely by Snapchat (91.2%) and Instagram (88.2%). WhatsApp was used by 50% of the participants, while Twitter and YouTube were used by 41.2% and 32.4%, respectively. Facebook had the lowest reported usage, with only 11.8% of participants indicating they used the platform. For a detailed breakdown of individual participant data, please refer to Appendix C.

Each focus group consisted of 8 to 9 participants. This was consistent with Adler et al.'s (2019) recommendations of a maximum of 10. Table 4 below shows the participant numbers for each focus group by gender. Purposive sampling methods were used to ensure that each group was homogeneous in terms of their year of study, and this was done to minimise the potential impact that the 'year group' variable could have had.

<b>Focus group No.</b>	<b>Total Number of Participants per Group</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Length of focus group interview (hh:mm:ss)</b>
<b>1</b>	8	1	7	00:38:54
<b>2</b>	9	8	1	00:59:10
<b>3</b>	9	4	5	01:06:56
<b>4</b>	8	3	5	00:58:56
<b>Total</b>	34	16	18	

*Table 4: Participant numbers, including gender split for each focus group.*

While homogeneity was achieved in the year group, a reasonable overall balance was seen in the gender split among participants, with 16 males and 18 females. However, this gender balance was not seen in the individual focus groups, with focus group 1 heavily skewed towards female representation and focus group 2 skewed towards males due to participant availability. Regardless of the gender imbalance, all focus groups fulfilled the research aims and generated rich qualitative data. The final sample comprised participants who represented a diverse range of Level 3 post-16 courses and had experienced the phenomenon of high-stakes assessment and social media discourse, fulfilling the research aims.

Glaser and Strauss' (1999) concept of 'saturation' informed my decision to carry out four focus groups, with one being a pilot study. Saturation is 'the point in data collection when all important issues are exhausted from data, and no additional insights are identified, and data begin to repeat so that further data collection is considered redundant, signifying that an adequate sample size is reached' (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022,

p. 2). I used Malterud, Siersma and Guassora's (2016) information power approach to review the transcripts after each focus group interview. By the fourth focus group, there were no new markedly different or significant meanings that were qualitatively different from what I had already identified. So, I deduced that I had sufficient information power because of the quality of dialogue in the focus group interviews and the specificity of the sample.

Hennink and Kaiser's (2022) systematic review found that studies with relatively homogenous study samples (I used a homogenous sample of year 12 A-Level students) reached saturation within 4 to 8 focus group discussions and captured the breadth of issues, which further confirmed my decision to have four focus groups. The decision to stop data collection based on theoretical saturation did not necessarily mean that there was no potential for new understandings to be constructed through further data engagement; however, given the limited scope of this doctoral thesis, I had a responsibility to effectively manage the data that participants graciously gave me through their participation in my research. My epistemological stance of constructivism meant that I did not seek to *discover* themes; I sought to construct meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 15). This suggests that if the same data set was approached with different research questions, it could produce new meanings. To this end, I did not seek a mass amount of data and could work with what I had to fulfil the exploratory research aims.

#### 4.5.3. Phase 3: Student-Sourced Social Media Data Collection

A distinctive feature of the study was the collection of social media data by students during the focus group interviews. After discussing the presented researcher-sourced TikTok videos and Twitter posts from Phase 1, participants were shown the slide in Figure 8, which invited them to scan a QR code and took them to complete a Microsoft form where they could submit at least four social media content.

The feedback from participants in the pilot study (focus group 1) led me to adapt this aspect to allow participants in subsequent focus groups the option to submit up to 7

pieces of social media data, as participants in focus group 1 said that they would have liked to have submitted more and felt that they could have done so within the allotted timeframe (see Appendix D for the Social Media Data Participant Submission Form). The criteria for the social media data were shared with the students in that they needed to be either from TikTok or Twitter, related to educational assessment (i.e. GCSEs and A Levels) and accessible on a public profile. The form provided guidance on how to share the links of TikTok and Twitter posts and required participants to provide a brief written narrative as to why they selected and submitted each social media data.

#### Participant-Sourced Educational Assessment Content

- Invite participants to share an educational assessment-related Tweet/X post or TikTok video that they sourced and find interesting. (Using the Microsoft forms link – QR code to the right)
- Allow participants to describe the content and explain why it caught their attention.
- Encourage other participants to respond, share their perspectives, and engage in a discussion about the presented content.



<https://forms.office.com/e/nGgyC25Zmj>

*Figure 8: Participant's call to submit social media data in Phase 3*

Participants collectively submitted 180 social media posts. I cleaned the data by removing non-TikTok and Twitter data; for example, some participants submitted content from Instagram and YouTube. I also removed duplicate submissions, as some participants had submitted the same social media content. Some social media content became unavailable after the focus group interviews (i.e., the content creator had either

removed the content or made their account private); this meant that I could not analyse those videos. After cleaning the data, the total participant-sourced social media content was 66: 47 TikTok videos and 19 Twitter posts.

A summary of all the final social media data included in the study is in Table 5 below. The complete data is in Appendix B.

*Table 5: Summary of TikTok and Twitter data sourced by participants and the researcher.*

	<b>Researcher-Sourced</b>	<b>Participant-Sourced</b>	<b>Totals</b>
<b>TikTok</b>	6	47	<b>53</b>
<b>Twitter</b>	10	19	<b>29</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Focus Group no.</b>	<b>Number of participant-sourced TikTok and Twitter data included in the final analysis.</b>		
<b>1</b>	15		
<b>2</b>	13		
<b>3</b>	19		
<b>4</b>	19		
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>		

#### 4.6. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by University College London's Institute of Education Ethics Committee in July 2023. (See the approved ethics application form in Appendix D.) The research was conducted with the principles of 'beneficence' whereby the sole researcher acted in the best interest of their participants and protection from harm (Allan & Love, 2010).

This section addresses emerging ethical considerations specific to social media research (Williams, Burnap & Sloan, 2020) and common ethical issues such as power relations and safeguarding, given my role as a teacher-researcher. Drawing on my experience from previous social media research at UCL during my MA and EdD studies (Dike-Oduah, 2018, 2021, 2022), I used Townsend and Wallace's (2017, p. 197) social media ethical framework as a crucial guide. This framework, presented in Figure 9, ensured that the inclusion of social media data adhered to ethical guidelines set out by BERA (2018, 2024). Committed to ethical research practices, I consulted this framework during the considerations of legal, privacy, and dissemination aspects of my work.

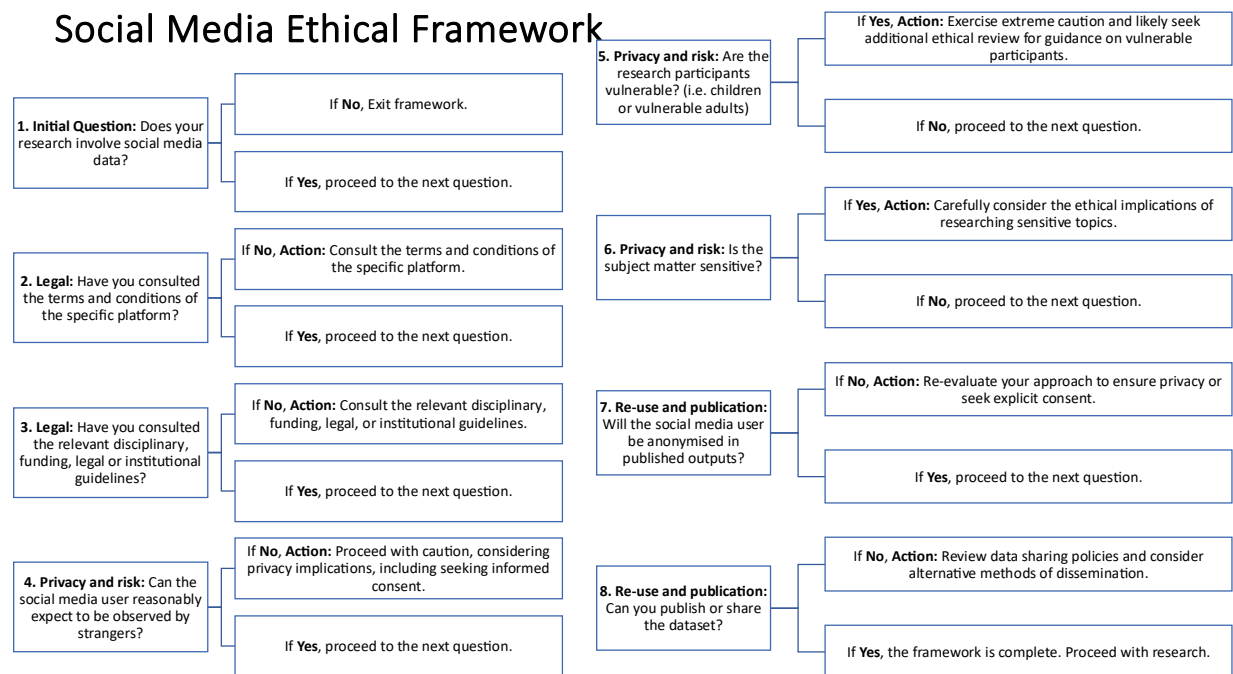


Figure 9: Social Media Ethical Framework based on Townsend and Wallace (2017)

#### 4.6.1. Informed Consent

I provided participants with an information sheet and consent form (See Appendix F). These documents explained the purpose of the study, how it would be conducted, and what was required of participants, as well as provided assurances of confidentiality and

their right to withdraw. Only after obtaining informed consent were participants allowed to participate in Phase 2 (focus group interviews) and 3 (participant social media data collection) of the study (BERA, 2018).

Twitter and TikTok content were publicly accessible as per their respective privacy policies (TikTok, 2021; Twitter, 2021) and users agreed to the public nature of these platforms, so I did not 'need' to get informed consent to use the social media data gathered in Phases 1 and 3 of the study. Social media users in Golder, Scantlebury and Christmas (2019, p. 10) were positive about their social media data being used for research purposes. However, approval was contingent on the 'potential benefit of the research and that individuals were protected from harm'. I considered that the content might be sensitive and determined an ethical way of working with the data by anonymising the social media data used in the study through 'redacting any identifying features' (i.e. usernames and user images/avatars) (Townsend & Wallace, 2017, p. 203). This ensured the creators' anonymity and afforded a level of consideration that they did not post their social media content for the purpose of the present research.

#### 4.6.2. Power Relationships

Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessach (2009) described power relations in qualitative research as the imbalanced dynamics between participants and researchers, which could emerge due to existing roles, hierarchies, or relationships among participants, potentially influencing interactions and responses. I grappled with power imbalances within my study, particularly given that a subset of student participants belonged to my class, establishing a pre-existing teacher-student relationship. Even those acquired through snowball sampling, not directly under my instruction, might have perceived a hierarchical dynamic due to the teacher-student context.

I implemented measures to address these power imbalances, such as advising participants of their right to withdraw their participation without facing any adverse consequences. Aware of the risk of response bias, I centred participants as the experts of their high-stakes assessment experiences and social media and emphasised that their

unique perspectives were valued. For example, I often shared my lack of knowledge about the unique colloquial language used on social media. I invited students to 'teach' me (See Section 4.4.1 under Semantic and Latent), which I believe helped to overcome the issue of power relations and fostered transparency and collaboration. I offered participants the opportunity to read the focus group transcriptions if they desired, clarifying their comments and actively engaging in the research process. These deliberate strategies were used to uphold ethical standards, encourage a sense of agency among participants, and improve the overall quality and authenticity of the collected data.

#### 4.6.3. Sensitive Topics

Sensitive topics in research encompass areas that have the potential to evoke strong emotional responses or discomfort among participants (Liamputtong, 2011). High-stakes assessments were naturally a sensitive topic for the student participants in my study. The TikTok videos and Tweets/X posts presented during the focus group interviews had the potential to elicit anxious feelings in students due to the high-stakes nature of GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and A-Level assessments (Wren & Benson, 2004).

To address these sensitivities, I reminded students to pause focus group discussions if they felt the need, and I reassured them of their right to withdraw from the study at any point. Following the interviews, a debriefing session was conducted, directing students to relevant organisations that could provide support for test anxiety, such as the school counsellor, Childline, PAPYRUS, and Samaritans.

Recognising the significance of online safety, especially for young adult participants, I conducted training sessions on safe internet use before the focus group interviews and Phase 3 participant social media data collection. The training materials included in Appendix G covered essential aspects of internet safety. Additionally, before starting the study, participants were guided to a dedicated website on 'safer internet use' (Safer



Internet Centre, 2022) to proactively ensure that participants were well-informed about maintaining their safety on social media platforms.

#### 4.6.4. Confidentiality and Anonymity: Focus Groups

Despite Malone's (2003) suggestion that the anonymity and confidentiality of participants were myths in small-scale qualitative research, to ensure that no individual or institution could be identified in the final thesis, I anonymised participants and institutions included in the study using pseudonyms.

I managed confidentiality within focus group settings by asking participants to commit to collective responsibility for respecting the privacy of group discussions and ensuring that the information shared within the focus group remained within the group.

#### 4.6.5. Confidentiality and Anonymity: Social Media Data

The Twitter and TikTok content used in this study were publicly accessible. To ensure the content creators' anonymity and privacy, I redacted identifying features, such as the usernames and user images or avatars associated with each Twitter and TikTok post. I took this approach to safeguard the confidentiality of the social media data contributors.

Specific attention was directed towards the ethical considerations surrounding visual content on TikTok. As TikTok is a visual platform, and there was an increase in visual images being used on Twitter (Twitter, 2013), it was crucial to prevent the identification of content creators through any images or screenshots used in the research. I employed a blurring technique on the visual content to address this concern and obscure any identifying features. This technique involved applying a blur effect to specific areas or elements within the images or screenshots that could potentially reveal the content creators' identity. The blurring technique, a widely accepted method in visual research studies on platforms like TikTok (Fiallos et al., 2021; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2023), ensured that privacy and anonymity were upheld while allowing for the inclusion of visual content in the analysis and reporting of findings. See Figure 6 and Figure 7 in

Section 4.5.1 for examples of how I applied the blurring technique to the TikTok and Twitter content to disseminate the research findings.

#### 4.6.6. Positionality in Ethical Considerations

Positionality refers to how my background, experiences, and worldview shape the research process and interpretation of data (England, 1994). As a former A-level student who actively used social media, reflecting on my positionality was a crucial ethical consideration. I used prompts from Smith (2012) to interrogate my personal connection to the research topic by asking: Why am I researching this? What biases or assumptions am I bringing into the study?

Reflecting on my past social media posts as a GCSE/A-Level student, such as sharing maths homework or celebrating academic achievements (see Figure 10), allowed me to consider the influence of my experiences on my research approach. This reflexivity helped me remain aware of the potential for bias. It ensured that I approached the research questions, data collection, analysis and dissemination with greater sensitivity toward the diverse experiences of students. This reflexive approach ultimately strengthened the transparency and ethical grounding of the research.

# Positionality as part of ethical considerations for Social Media Research

- Why are you researching this area? What are your intentions?
- What worldview are you bringing to the research question, data collection and analysis?
- Have you experienced or been an active participant in the area that you are researching?

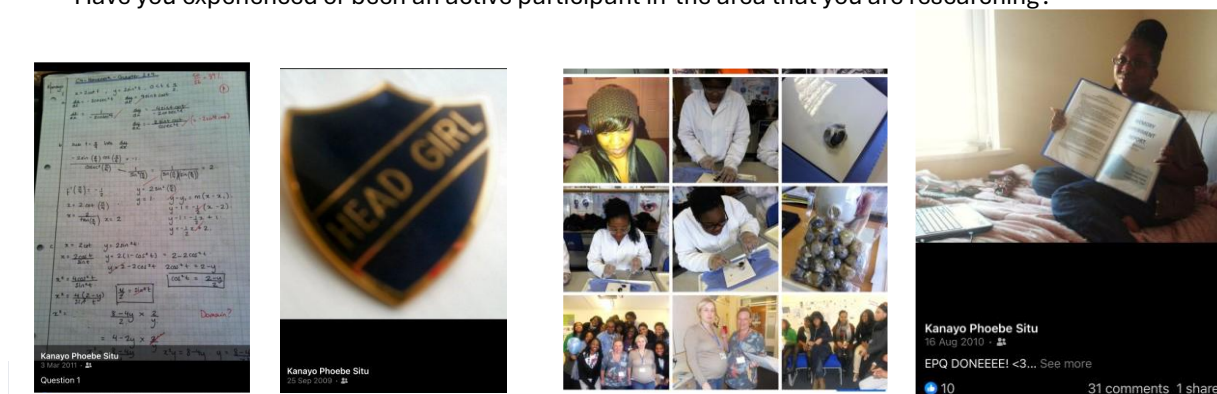


Figure 10: Positionality Questions and examples as presented in BERA 2024

## 4.6.7. Data protection and storage

The accessibility and storage of digital data are sensitive (Dowling & Brown, 2009). To restrict access to the data to authorised individuals who abide by the recommended data protection and confidentiality guidelines, I maintained exclusive control over the data through my password-protected Microsoft 365 UCL account, which included access to MS Teams and MS Forms. The data was stored on my password-protected desktop and an encrypted external hard drive for backup purposes.

To ensure participants understood the measures taken to protect their data, I included information about UCL's Data Protection Privacy Policy in the participant information sheet (See Appendix F).

## 4.6.8. Dissemination and Use of Findings

The outcome of this study, a 45,000-word doctoral thesis, was shared with my supervisors and department at UCL. The dissemination of findings was limited to

academic purposes, assuring the responsible use of the research outcomes to advance knowledge within this niche and growing field.

The ethical commitment to writing and disseminating findings guided me to maintain authenticity in representing participants' language from the interviews. Furthermore, recognising the cross-sectional nature of my research and the potential evolution of participants' views over time, I approached reporting with sensitivity to the future selves of the participants (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2020).

#### 4.6.9. Safeguarding and Gatekeeping

This study involved participants aged 16-18, who were directly approached, and further contact was made with their schools within the MAT for informational purposes. As a teacher-researcher, navigating the dual roles of a professional teacher and ethical researcher introduced an added layer of ethical considerations, particularly concerning safeguarding. Adhering to the guidance provided by the NSPCC (2023) on conducting research with children and young adults, I established a protocol for handling safeguarding disclosures.

If a participant made a safeguarding disclosure indicating potential psychological or physical harm, I committed to following the school's safeguarding procedures. I would have referred the participant and details of the disclosure to the designated safeguarding lead. It is important to note that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in such instances. This safeguarding measure aligns with the BERA (2018, 2024) guidelines and received support from the UCL IOE ethics committee. To be clear, no safeguarding disclosures were reported in the present study.

The following section outlines the procedure taken with participants for phases 2 and 3 of the study.

#### 4.7. Outline of Step-by-Step Procedure for Phases 2 and 3 (including Pilot Study)

This section provides a step-by-step outline of the procedure for the focus group interviews (phase 2) and collecting participant-sourced social media data (Phase 3). I also discuss how the pilot study with Focus Group 1 shaped the procedure for subsequent focus groups.

Participants gathered in the designated classroom or sixth-form common room. A projector was set up for better visibility. At the start of the focus groups, I introduced myself, expressed gratitude for their willingness to participate, and reiterated the research aims. Participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of their involvement, emphasising their right to withdraw or abstain from answering any uncomfortable questions (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Accentuating their role as co-researchers, participants were encouraged to interpret assessment-related tweets, share personal narratives, and submit social media data from TikTok and Twitter. It was stressed that all opinions were valid, which created an environment without right or wrong responses.

A protocol was established to manage behaviour during the focus group:

- Adherence to the internet safety training
- Respectful interactions (i.e. no mocking or rudeness towards others' opinions)
- Full attention during the focus group interview
- Devices are put away until needed in Phase 3.

Once participants completed the consent form and fully understood the focus group procedures and their rights, I advised them that the focus group would be recorded and started the focus group discussion.

The focus group interview guides (see Appendix H) with lists of semi-structured questions and focal stimuli (assessment-related social media content) were used to structure the group discussions (Millward, 2006).

The pilot study conducted with focus group 1 played a pivotal role in refining the questions posed to participants. In this session, I distributed A3 sheets of paper to participants, asking them to suggest questions for consideration in future focus groups (See Appendix I). A recurring theme in their suggestions highlighted the importance of addressing the comments section under TikTok videos and the replies section for Twitter posts. This valuable feedback helped me develop ad hoc questions during subsequent focus groups. It led me to intentionally showcase the comments sections of most social media content to promote further discussions. The understanding gained from this feedback played a crucial role in shaping research question 3, "What are the interchanges between students in the comments sections of TikTok and Twitter?" and this undoubtedly confirmed Malmqvist, Hellberg, Möllås, Rose and Shevlin's (2019) stance on the significance of pilot studies in qualitative research.

There were four focus groups, and each group had an interview guide with slight variations based on the different participant-sourced social media content submitted. A summary of the focus group guides is as follows:

**1. General Questions:**

- Inquired about opinions and behaviours toward social media.
- Encouraged discussions about educational assessment on social media and the motivations behind it.

**2. Presentation of Researcher-Sourced Content:**

- Displayed social media content on the projector.
- Played TikTok videos, read tweets and invited open-ended discussions.
- Used probing questions to encourage elaboration.

**3. Participant-Sourced Content:**

- Invited participants to share educational assessment-related tweets or TikTok videos.
- Reviewed Microsoft Forms submissions and selected content to display.
- Facilitated open-ended discussions about the participant-sourced content.

#### **4. Conclusion:**

- Invited participants to share any additional thoughts.
- Debriefed participants by reiterating their confidentiality and right to withdraw.
- Expressed gratitude for their time and participation.

Video recordings of projected materials (PowerPoint presentation and social media content) and audio recordings of each focus group were retained for accurate transcription. No visuals of participants were used; only their voices were recorded, which is one of my recommendations for research of this nature as a way of safeguarding participants and offering further confidentiality. After debriefing and expressing gratitude, the focus group interviews concluded, and recordings were saved for further analysis.

The next section will explore how the rich data obtained from social media and focus group interviews were analysed to address the research questions focused on providing a new understanding of students' experiences with high-stakes assessment in the contemporary social media world.

#### **4.8. Data Analysis**

This section presents how I analysed the focus group and social media data using Braun and Clarke's (2021a, 2021b) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) model. I describe how I applied the six-stage process for conducting RTA with examples from my research to produce 8 themes across the data (See Figure 11). I took an iterative approach

described by Terry and Hayfield (2021) as repeatedly moving back and forth between the phases of RTA to establish rigour in the analysis process.

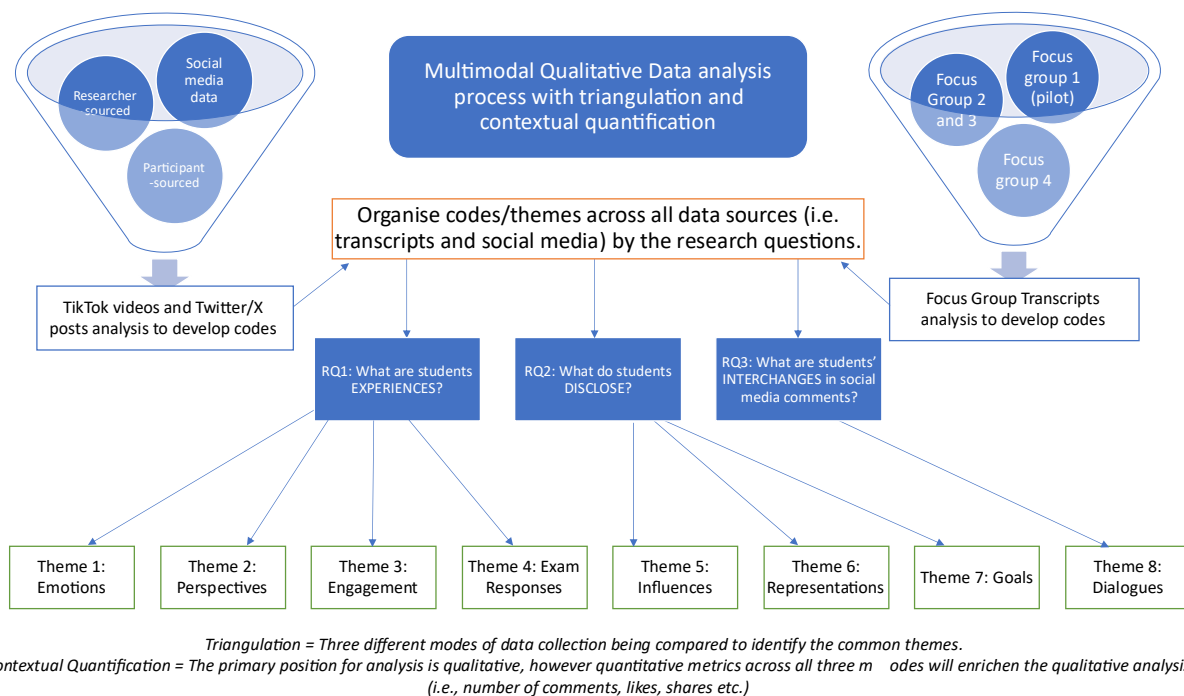


Figure 11: Multimodal Qualitative Data Analysis Process and Themes Organised by the Research Questions

## Phase 1: Data Familiarisation

### *Focus group data*

Familiarisation started with the transcription process. All focus group interviews were recorded on Microsoft Teams and transmitted to Microsoft Stream. This ensured that the focus group interviews could be watched again, along with the social media data, and provided access to the Microsoft Stream auto-transcription feature. I exported the transcript for each focus group into a Word document. I reviewed the recordings while making changes to the text to ensure that the transcriptions reflected the following:

- Verbatim utterances without grammatical corrections



- Inclusion of colloquial slang terms.
- Punctuation was not added to the transcripts.
- Paralinguistic features such as laughing or unanimous responses were identified.
- Text was changed to ensure anonymity, such as participant names and names of schools, and these were replaced with the unique participant identifier, e.g. CA or Stu1 and pseudonyms, e.g. 'Canton High School.'

After transcription, the transcripts were read more than once, and I made researcher notes and highlights with annotations by adding comments using Microsoft Word. See Appendix J for an example of my research notes on the transcripts.

### *Social Media Data*

All social media content was read and viewed twice to establish familiarity. A detailed record of each TikTok post and Tweet was maintained using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (See Appendix B). This included transcription of audio content and a description of visual elements. Additionally, metadata such as likes, comments, shares, saves, video length, captions, and hashtags were recorded. Researcher notes and initial observations of potential codes were documented within NVivo.

An indexing system was developed to track the origin and context of each data point, enabling precise referencing throughout the analysis. I labelled each social media data using the format "FG4-PS-BO-40," which indicated that the social media data item was shown in focus group 4 (FG4) and was participant-sourced (PS), followed by the participant identifier pseudo-initials (BO) and lastly the ID number of the social media data item (40).

Similarly, some social media data were shown in multiple focus groups and labelled accordingly. For example, "FG1/FG3-RS-181" indicates the social media data was shown in focus groups one and three, was researcher-sourced (RS), and has a numerical ID of 181.

Some social media data were not shown in any focus group but were submitted by participants during the activity in phase 3 of the research design. The labels for these data followed a consistent pattern as in the previous two examples. For example, “PS-CA-44” indicates that the social media item was participant-sourced, CA is the pseudo-participant identifier, and 44 is the social media numerical ID.

## Phase 2: Systematic Data Coding

I used NVivo to organise and simultaneously analyse the three data sets: focus group transcripts, researcher-sourced social media data, and participant-sourced social media data. This allowed me to facilitate connections and comparisons between the data sources seamlessly.

Through iterative engagement with the data, I developed an initial coding framework comprising 60 codes and subcodes. The research questions and my knowledge of preexisting themes informed these initial codes. While guided by the research questions, the coding process remained open to organic themes directly from the data. Figure 12 below are the codes from the initial round of coding. The codes with checkboxes in the figure were developed inductively by engaging with the meanings in the social media data and focus group transcripts. The codes without checkboxes were influenced by the research questions.

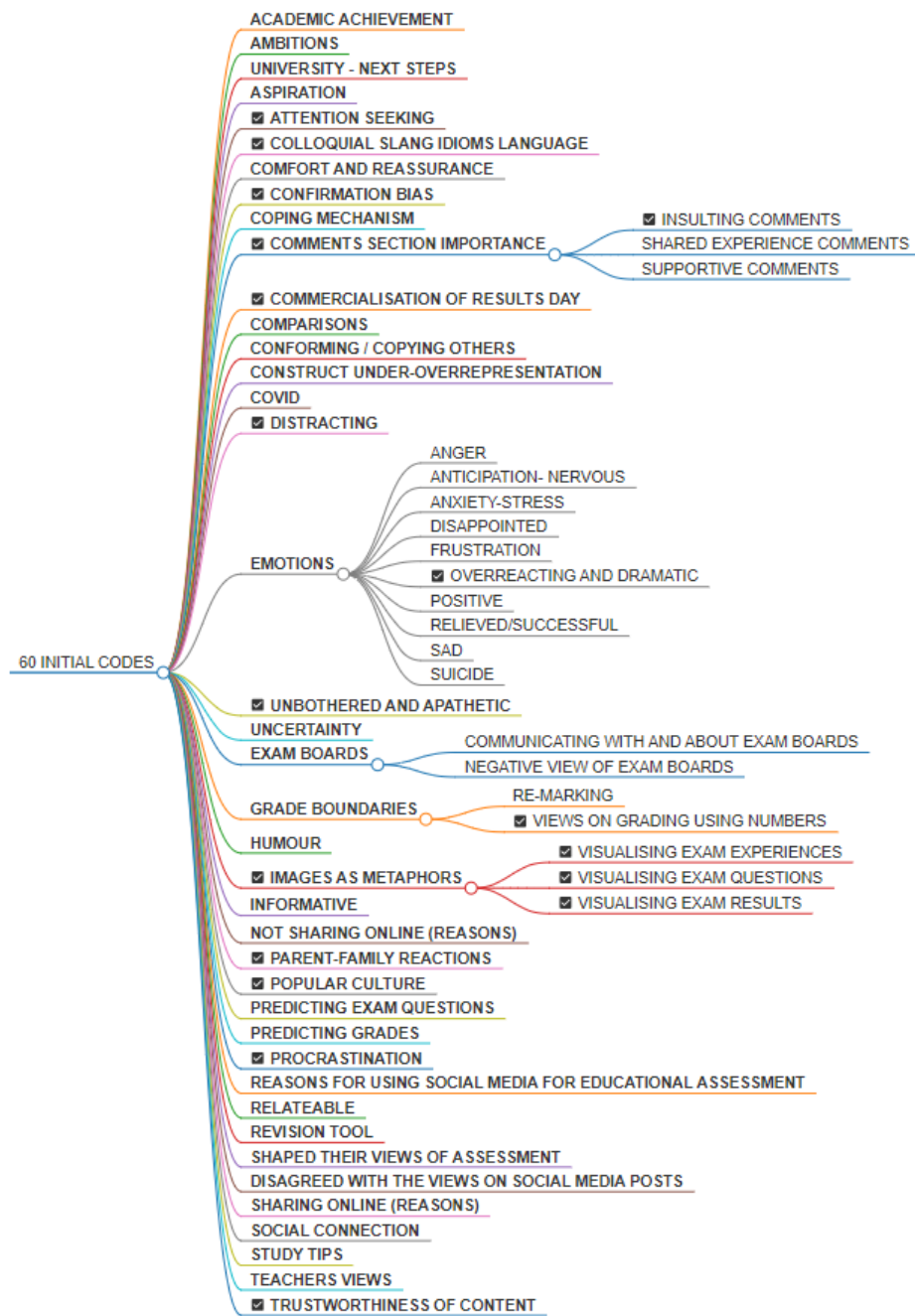


Figure 12: Initial Coding in Phase 2 ([Link to HTML diagram](#))

I used NVivo's word search function as a supplementary tool to identify potential codes. For example, based on previous research and literature on students' experiences with testing and assessment (Putwain, 2008a), I pre-empted that students would talk about

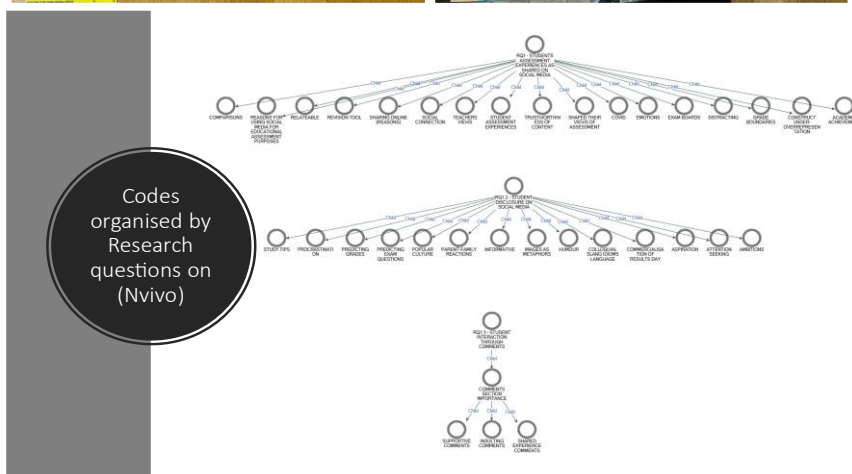
“anxiety,” “stress,” or “disappointment.” However, manual-researcher interpretation was essential to applying codes accurately and meaningfully, as without using those exact words, a student in focus group 3 referred to missing the next grade as “a kick in the teeth.” This carried a sentiment of disappointment and was coded accordingly. This shows that research-led human coding with some interpretation was needed in this initial phase.

### Phase 3: Developing Initial Themes.

I printed all 60 codes and organised them into three categories to reflect the research questions. Figure 13 displays a photo of the final part of the organising process alongside an NVivo diagram. I invite readers to scan QR Code 1 below to watch a video

Phase 3: Organising the codes by the research questions (see video).

[Microsoft Stream - Organising the codes by RQs -flipped around.MP4](#)



QR Code 1: Watch the video process of Phase 3 organising the codes by Research Question

Figure 13 Photo of initial codes organised by the three research questions (Phase 3)

of the organising process.

I reviewed codes to check if they were too broad or too narrow. NVivo provided a list of all the codes and the number of references attributed to each code (See Appendix K). The following codes, Emotions, Images as metaphors, Humour, Popular culture and Comments all had over 100 references, indicating their significance in the data and confirming that they were likely initial themes.

It was necessary to include subthemes for these initial themes as the data within them were not homogenous. For example, data under the theme 'emotions' ranged from positive to negative. The data under 'images as metaphors' differed in context, as some images related to specific exam questions, while others were linked to exam hall experiences.

I used NVivo to create a coding matrix (See Figure 14) that indicated the presence of each code across my five data sources: the four focus group interview transcripts and the combined social media dataset of participant-sourced and researcher-sourced content. This matrix helped me identify the most common codes across my data sources as a second step in merging narrow codes and developing themes.

# Phase 3 Generating Themes: *An example of a coding matrix across 5 data sources to show commonality across the data sets.*

	A : FOCUS GROUP 1 - PILOT - TRANSCRIPT	B : FOCUS GROUP 2 - TRANSCRIPT	C : FOCUS GROUP 3 - TRANSCRIPT	D : FOCUS GROUP 4 - TRANSCRIPT	E : SOCIAL MEDIA DATA
1 : COMPARISONS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2 : COMFORT AND REASSURANCE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3 : COMMENTS SECTION IMPORTANCE	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
4 : HUMOUR	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
5 : RELATEABLE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
6 : CONSTRUCT UNDER-OVERREPRESENTATION	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
7 : PARENT-FAMILY REACTIONS	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
8 : TEACHERS VIEWS	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
9 : POPULAR CULTURE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
10 : IMAGES AS METAPHORS	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
11 : EXAM BOARDS	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
12 : COLLOQUIAL SLANG IDIOMS LANGUAGE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
13 : RQ1 - STUDENTS ASSESSMENT EXPERIENCES AS SHARED ON SOCIAL MEDIA	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
14 : SHARING ONLINE (REASONS)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
15 : INFORMATIVE	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
16 : TRUSTWORTHINESS OF CONTENT	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
17 : REVISION TOOL	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
18 : EMOTIONS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
19 : PREDICTING GRADES	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
20 : GRADE BOUNDARIES	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
21 : ATTENTION SEEKING	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
22 : REASONS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT PURPOSES	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
23 : DISTRACTING	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
24 : PREDICTING EXAM QUESTIONS	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
25 : CONFORMING COPYING OTHERS	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
26 : SHAPED THEIR VIEWS OF ASSESSMENT	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
27 : COMMERCIALISATION OF RESULTS DAY	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
28 : COVID	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
29 : SOCIAL CONNECTION	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
30 : ASPIRATION	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
31 : PROCRASTINATING	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
32 : NOT SHARING ONLINE (REASONS)	No	No	Yes	No	No
33 : STUDY TIPS	No	No	No	No	Yes
34 : AMBITIONS	No	No	No	No	Yes
35 : ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT	No	No	No	No	Yes
36 : COPING MECHANISM	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
37 : CONFIRMATION BIAS	No	Yes	No	No	No
38 : SHARED EXPERIENCE COMMENTS	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
39 : SUPPORTIVE COMMENTS	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
40 : INSULTING COMMENTS	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
41 : VISUALISING EXAM EXPERIENCES	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
42 : VISUALISING EXAM QUESTIONS	No	No	No	No	Yes
43 : VISUALISING EXAM RESULTS	No	No	No	No	Yes
44 : NEGATIVE VIEW OF EXAM BOARDS	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
45 : COMMUNICATING WITH AND ABOUT EXAM BOARDS	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
46 : ANXIETY-STRESS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
47 : DISAPPOINTED	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
48 : SAD	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
49 : ANGER - FRUSTRATION	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
50 : RELIEVED SUCCESSFUL	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
51 : UNBOOTHERED AND APATHETIC	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
52 : OVERREACTING AND DRAMATIC	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
53 : SUICIDE	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
54 : ANTICIPATION- NERVOUS	No	No	No	No	Yes
55 : POSITIVE	No	No	No	No	Yes
56 : UNCERTAINTY	No	No	No	No	Yes
57 : RE-MARKING	No	No	No	No	Yes
58 : VIEWS ON GRADING USING NUMBERS	No	No	No	Yes	No
59 : DISAGREED WITH THE VIEWS IN SOCIAL MEDIA POST	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
60 : UNIVERSITY - NEXT STEPS	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Figure 14: Example of coding matrix in phase 3 of RTA.

Codes that only appeared in one of the five data sources and had limited references attributed to them were revisited and merged into other codes. For example, 'ambition' and 'academic achievement' were only coded in the social media data, so these codes were not referenced in any of the four focus groups. These codes were considered similar to the codes 'aspirations' and 'university-next steps', which were featured in the focus group and social media data. I merged the above codes into one theme, 'Academic Goals'.

I followed the same process to develop initial themes by checking whether there was an overlap in specific codes and clustering the codes based on shared meanings, as emphasised by Braun and Clarke (2021a). Scan QR Code 2 in Figure 15 below to watch a screen-recording video walk-through of the process.

## Phase 3: Creating Initial Themes Walk-Through Screen Recording – Scan the QR Code to watch

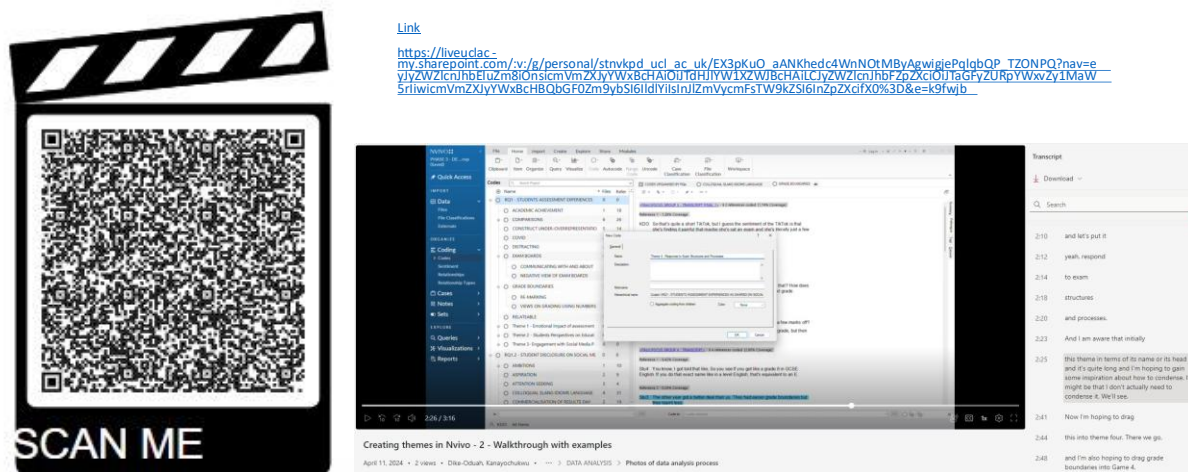


Figure 15: Creating Initial Themes in Phase 3

QR Code 2: Watch screen-recording of Phase 3

At the end of phase 3, I had 9 initial themes (See Figure 16) with clusters of relevant codes under each theme.

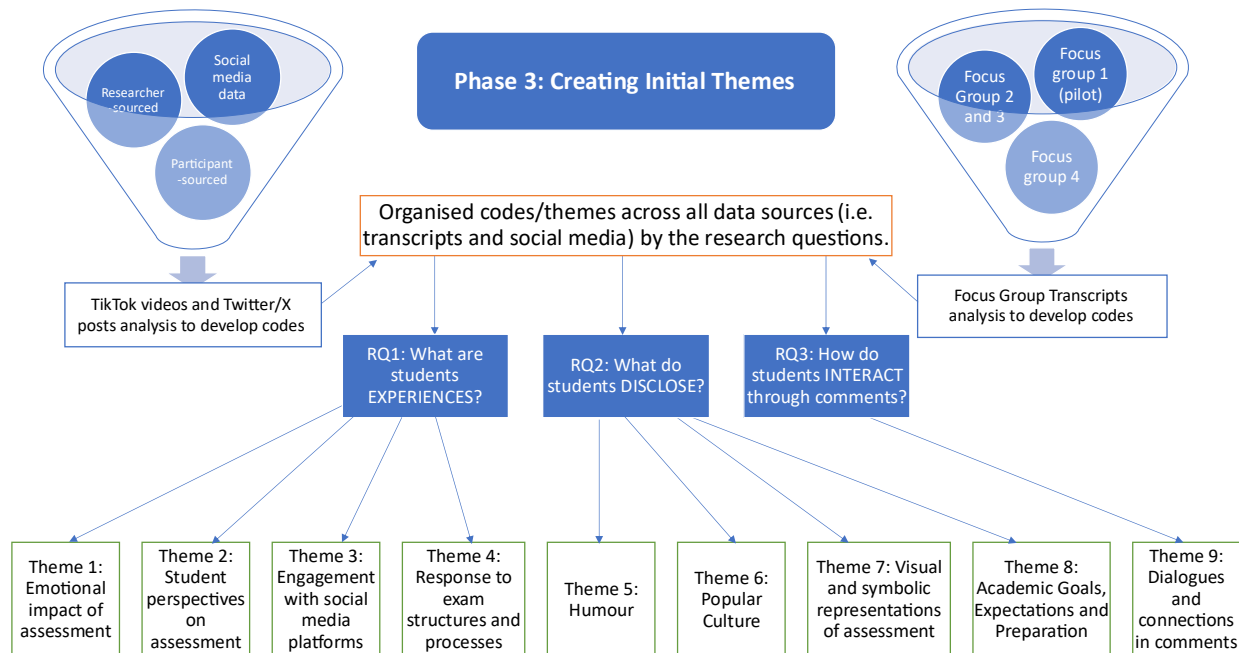


Figure 16: Diagram of 9 Initial Themes (Phase 3)

#### Phase 4: Reviewing The Themes.

I revisited the themes to check that they accurately described participants' meanings in the data and were not simply topic summaries. I also revisited the cluster of codes under each theme to develop further subthemes based on overlapping sentiments.

At the end of Phase 3, I initially proposed 'humour' and 'popular culture' as standalone themes due to their high number of individual references. In this phase, I reviewed my memos on the data and noticed that humorous social media data often referenced popular culture and vice versa. To evaluate my memos, I ran a Matrix query to compare how the codes of humour and popular culture were applied across the data. The results of the matrix query in Table 6 below showed that both humour and popular culture were coded in 23 (out of 82) individual social media data cases.



Table 6: Social Media Data Matrix for the codes 'Humour' and 'Popular Culture'.

	NO. OF DATA REFERENCES	
	HUMOUR	POPULAR CULTURE
OVERALL REFERENCES (FOCUS GROUP AND SOCIAL MEDIA)	127	105
NVIVO SOCIAL MEDIA DATA	100	82
FG1-FG2-RS-184	4	4
FG1-PS-IM-5	5	1
FG1-RS-183	1	2
FG2/FG3/FG4-PS-TK-90	8	8
FG2/FG3/FG4-RS-189	5	7
FG2-RS-191	4	5
FG3/FG4/RS-192	4	6
FG3/FG4-RS-194	3	4
FG3-PS-AL-136	5	3
FG3-PS-CO-163	3	5
FG3-PS-CO-38	5	1
FG3-PS-JB-98	4	3
FG3-PS-ZH-137	1	1
FG3-RS-193	4	4
FG4-PS-BO-40	3	5
FG4-PS-JO-119	3	3
PS-CA-3	4	4
PS-EM-112	3	2
PS-EO-30	3	3
PS-GB-14	4	4
PS-IB-53	1	3
PS-TK-8	1	3
PS-YA-11	3	3

I decided that these two themes were connected and could be better redeveloped as subthemes under a new theme, “socio-cultural influences.” This also allowed me to retain some interesting codes that would have been discarded, such as ‘colloquial slang’ and ‘commercialisation of results day’, as their data references aligned with the sentiments of socio-cultural norms and language, which could be captured under this new theme heading.

I reviewed the theme ‘emotions’ and created two subthemes: ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ emotions about assessment experience. I categorised and combined the emotion-related codes under those subthemes. For example, I combined the codes anger, frustration, disappointment, anticipation-nervousness, suicide, overreacting-dramatic, uncertainty, and anxiety-stress under the ‘negative emotions’ subtheme. The code unbothered/apathetic was scrapped as there was insufficient meaningful data.

At the end of Phase 4, I had 8 themes and more precise subthemes reflecting the previous cluster of codes (Figure 17).

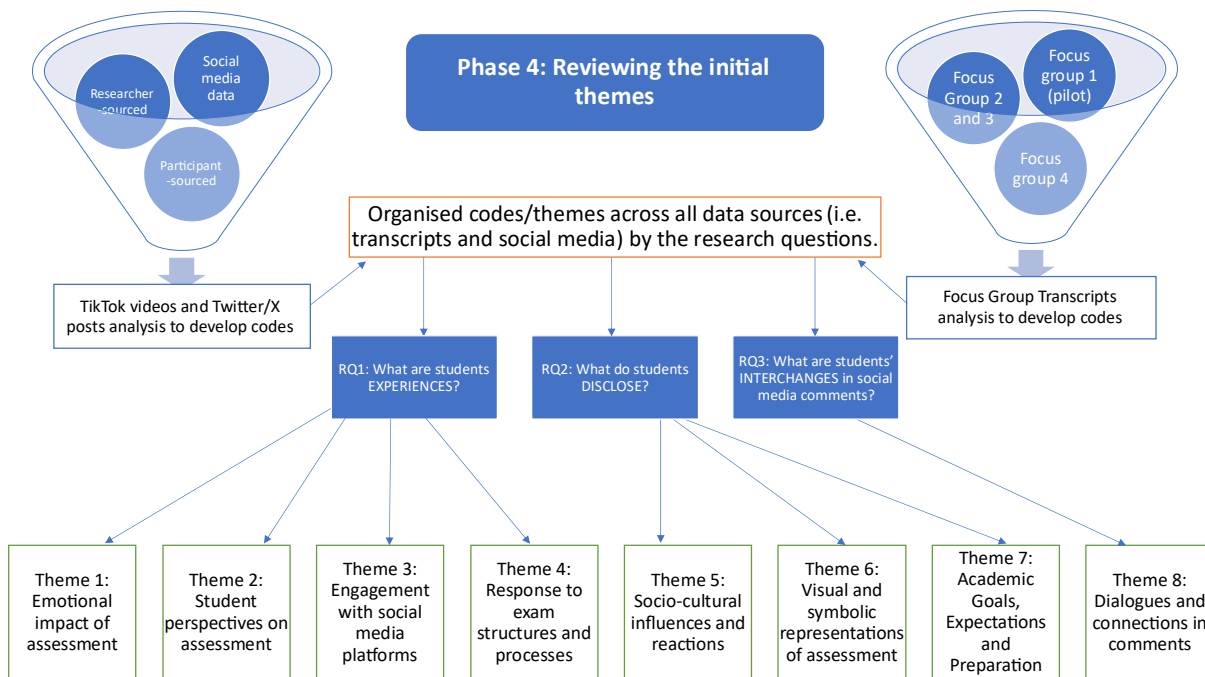


Figure 17: Diagram showing the reviewed initial themes (Phase 4)

### Phase 5: Refining and Defining Themes.

I initially organised the themes by the research questions to ensure I stayed close to the research aims. However, this approach demonstrated where themes and research questions were connected. For example, theme 1, 'Emotional impact of assessment', provided valuable answers to research question 1 about students' experiences *and* research question 2 about their disclosures. I decided that restricting the application of this theme to research question 1 alone would have been reductionist and outside of the research's epistemological aims.

As the themes could not be compartmentalised into discrete research questions, I embraced Attride-Stirling's (2001) recommendation to create the final thematic network used to visually represent the relationships between themes (See Figure 18) without being bound strictly to the research questions.

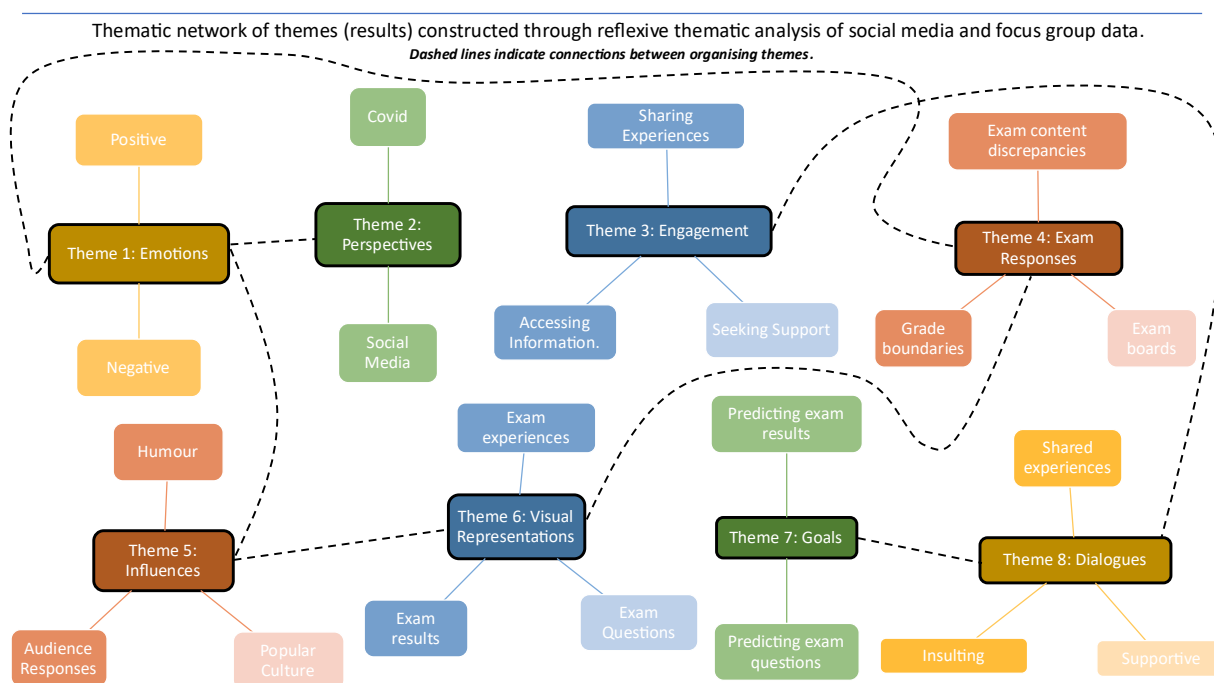


Figure 18: Thematic Network of themes (results)

As part of the iterative analysis process, I kept note of the expanding definitions of the themes and attempted to capture their essence by naming them. The initial names for each theme and their definitions, and the final name are in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Defining each theme (phase 5 of RTA)

Initial theme name	Final theme name	Definition of theme
1. Emotional Impact of Assessment	Emotions	Students' emotional responses to high-stakes assessments range from anxiety, frustration, relief and joy.
2. External Influences on Student Assessment Experiences	Perspectives	External factors beyond the school environment that shape assessment experiences, including

		media, family pressures, and societal events.
3. Engagement With Social Media Platforms	Engagement	How students use social media platforms to share, support and navigate high-stakes assessment experiences.
4. Response to Exam Structures and Processes,	Exam Response	Students' critical reactions to the design and structure of exams, including perceptions of fairness and whether tests reflect learning.
5. Socio-Cultural Influences and Reactions,	Influences	The role of social and cultural factors in shaping students' assessment experiences, including family expectations, peer pressure, and popular culture.
6. Visual And Symbolic Representations of Assessment,	Visual Representations	Students creative use of visual and symbolic language, including memes, images, and videos, on social media to express their assessment experiences.
7. Academic Goals,	Goals	Students' academic

Expectations and Preparation,		aspirations and how these are influenced by and shared on social media, including goal setting, prediction, and sharing study strategies.
8. Dialogues And Connections in Comments.	Dialogue	Student interactions within social media comment sections: connecting, supporting, and challenging each other through shared assessment experiences.

#### Phase 6: Writing The Report.

Excerpts from the focus group transcripts and social media data were used to represent the themes constructed via RTA alongside references to relevant literature. The report style was unique for this study due to the visual nature of the data. To ensure that the reader is fully immersed in the thematic analysis process and the meaning of the themes is well conveyed, the reader is invited to participate as a co-researcher by scanning QR codes to watch the social media data.

##### 4.8.1. Reflexivity Statement

Reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity as integral to the analytical process. Moravcsik's (2014) recommends greater transparency in qualitative research; therefore, because of RTA's emphasis on the researcher's role in shaping

interpretations, I have used this section to outline my personal qualities, context, and experience, which will support readers as they engage with and evaluate this study.

I am a Black British woman with Nigerian heritage, and I am in my early 30s. I have taught in secondary schools and sixth forms for ten years, primarily in London. My roles in education have spanned from my current role as Director of Social Sciences to Deputy Head of Sixth Form, Lead Practitioner, Psychology tutor, and Careers assistant. I am an AQA Psychology A Level examiner. I am an active social media user and use platforms similar to those of the participants in the study, such as Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube. I am keenly interested in social media educational assessment, having completed my master's in educational assessment and observed assessment theory play out online. This interest continued to peak, especially when, as described in the introduction (Section 2.1), I was encouraged by my students to register for a TikTok account and share education-related content.

Through reflective supervision and discussions with peers and students, I critically examined my potential research biases. I recognised a tendency to focus on negative experiences, likely influenced by prevalent media narratives about exam stress and previous research on test anxiety (Putwain, 2008a; Wren & Benson, 2004).

Developmental feedback on my master's thesis (Dike-Oduah, 2018) highlighted the need to explore positive educational assessment experiences, which had been overshadowed in my previous work. Consequently, I approached this research with a commitment to challenge my initial assumptions and sought a more nuanced, diverse range of perspectives. This approach was strengthened by positioning participants as co-researchers and letting them guide the discussions and source social media data.

#### 4.8.2. Ensuring The Quality of The Data

This study presents the qualitative data from participants' discussions in semi-structured focus group interviews and the social media data. Drawing on Lincoln and Guba (1985) and more recently, Ahmed (2024) the present study prioritised trustworthiness through four key components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

## **Credibility**

Credibility refers to how accurately a study's findings reflect participants' realities. I developed credibility through prolonged engagement with the research topic since 2018 (Dike-Oduah, 2018, 2021, 2022). I immersed myself in participants' online spaces (described in 2.1) and studied their activities. Triangulation was another way in which I ensured credibility (Nowell et al., 2017). This involved integrating data from multiple sources to corroborate the findings and reduce the influence of potential bias from a single data source. I collected data from two separate methodologies, focus groups and social media, which enabled me to see whether there were similarities and identify patterns in the data. Aware of potential biases regarding social media data (i.e. algorithms and personal preference), I bracketed those biases by ensuring participants also sourced the social media data. This step, as well as having four focus group sessions, bolstered the benefits of 'triangulation as verification' (Tobin & Begley, 2004) and increased confidence that the findings accurately reflected participants' realities.

## **Transferability**

Transferability is the extent to which the research findings can be applied to different contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). By providing rich, detailed information about the research context, including methods, participants, and sampling, the study enables readers to consider whether the findings apply to other known settings.

Thick descriptions are another way Guba and Lincoln (1994) recommend to achieve transferability. Using 'thick descriptions', the research situated the study through detailed explanations of historical and structural factors surrounding high-stakes assessment, student voice, and social media. Thick descriptions were not limited to the literature review. I provided detailed contextual information in the findings and discussion chapters, including explanations of the significance of popular culture references, as well as additional details such as actual exam questions and definitions of colloquial terms. These efforts contribute to the study's transferability, providing the

reader with sufficient information to assess how the findings may be applied to similar settings beyond this specific research context.

### **Dependability**

Dependability is the degree to which the research process is well documented to allow other researchers to evaluate the methodology and, if desired, replicate the study to establish reliability (Ahmed, 2024; Tobin & Begley, 2004). The present study demonstrated dependability through the detailed documentation of the theoretical underpinnings, research procedures and transparent sharing of the decisions made throughout the study. I took it a step further by inviting the reader to visually observe the data analysis process through the inclusion of visual diagrams, photos and videos (via QR codes).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the impartiality of the research findings, ensuring that they are based on the data, rather than the researcher's interpretations. I strived to achieve confirmability by documenting the data analysis process through researcher memos on NVivo and Microsoft Excel, using videos and images to illustrate the process and providing a narrative so that it was clear how my interpretations of the data were derived from the data.

I regularly sought feedback from my supervisors and peers by presenting my data analysis process at seminars, thesis workshops and conferences. Engaging with colleagues in this way validated my interpretations and minimised researcher bias by exposing me to alternative perspectives.

The most valuable way I achieved confirmability in this study was by inviting participants to be my co-researchers. Involving participants in interpreting the social media data ensured their perspectives and experiences were accurately represented. There are numerous examples of participants validating or correcting my interpretation, and this form of member-checking enhanced the confirmability of the research.



Finally, Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest that confirmability is achieved when a study has credibility, transferability, and dependability, all of which have been exemplified in this study, as explained above.

#### 4.9. Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological framework for investigating students' experiences of high-stakes assessment as shared on TikTok and Twitter. Guided by a constructivist-interpretivist epistemological approach, the research developed a three-phase multimodal qualitative design that integrated social media data collection, semi-structured focus group interviews, and participant-sourced content. The study captured connections between students, assessment, and social media platforms by triangulating data from multiple sources.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process, with particular attention paid to the unique challenges posed by social media research. I explored these ethical dimensions and detailed the measures taken to ensure ethical conduct, respect and sensitivity toward participants and social media content creators.

The pilot study helped me refine the research methodology and sharpen the initial research questions. Drawing from my previous research experiences and the literature review, the methodology chapter provided a solid foundation that supported subsequent data analysis and interpretation.

The following chapter presents the findings from applying this methodology, offering evidence of the relationship between students, assessment, and social media.

## Chapter 5: Findings

### 5. Findings

The previous chapter described the methodological approaches used to examine students' experiences of educational assessment as shared on social media. This chapter presents the eight key themes that were constructed from the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of social media data and focus group transcripts.

Students used social media to process, visually recreate, and collectively negotiate assessment experiences. The themes show how students' diverse experiences with high-stakes assessments were dynamically created and shared on social media rather than being limited to classroom settings. Each subsequent section examines each theme and grounds the findings with examples from the data.

The themes are:

1. Emotions
2. Perspectives
3. Engagements
4. Exam Response
5. Influences
6. Representations
7. Goals
8. Dialogues

#### 5.1. Theme 1: Emotions

This theme captured the emotional impact of assessment on students, as revealed in social media posts and focus group discussions. Students expressed various emotions, from stress and anxiety to relief and accomplishment. The findings of this theme are presented under two broad categories of emotions: Negative and Positive.

### 5.1.1. Negative Emotions and Challenges

Social media data exemplified the challenges students faced during exam season.

Tweet FG3-FG4-RS-197 (Figure 19) includes a meme photo of a woman holding a brick who looked ready to attack someone and is being restrained by another woman. The picture portrayed the frustration of dealing with multiple exams on the same day as the caption read: "Me at whoever decided to put the maths and history exam on the same day #gcse #gcses2023 #gcse2023".



Figure 19: Social Media data FG3-FG4-197

Students in focus groups 3 and 4 echoed similar frustrations and used the social media post as a memory aid to recall their own experiences:

"Yeah, like when I had three exams in one day, I couldn't revise for every single one. I had to *sacrifice* one of them". (Stu7-FG3)

“It was very stressful and very relatable because many students take maths and history, and I feel like it’s just so stressful because you have so little time to move from one subject to the next”. (Stu6-FG3)

“Oh, my goodness. The worst day of my life...when it was Maths and History on the same day...you know, this was the only day out of all the exams that I cried in that morning”. (Stu5-FG4)

These quotes demonstrated the stress and limited preparation time students experienced when faced with a demanding exam timetable.

Social media data also revealed the negative mental health impact of high-stakes assessments. One tweet (FG2-FG4-RS-188) showed the emotional intensity:

"@AQA, I feel like killing myself after that physics. Idk what uv done but u completely changed everything for a yr group worst affected by covid and yr group which has never sat a public exam. If it carries on like this, sooner or later, someone will kill themselves. #physicsalevel"

**Focus Group 4 - Social media content 10 – Twitter – Researcher sourced**



Figure 20: Social media data: (FG2-FG4-RS-188)

While the exam board encouraged seeking help in their response (Figure 20), participants' responses were nuanced:

"It's Twitter, and people are overdramatic all the time. So, it's more of a jokey, jokey type thing". (FE-FG2)

Others agreed:

"I personally feel like they are overreacting. I think...he or she just didn't revise...so they've gone and said, yeah, I'm going to kill myself. Because that's probably the highest level of stress." (BB-FG2)

"What's the point of stressing, like that's not going to do anything?". (Stu2-FG4)

These contrasting responses to what looked like a significant cry for help referencing suicide appeared to demonstrate that students were cautious about what other students shared on social media when it came to extreme emotions. In fact, a socially sensitive

post on suicide was described as “jokey”, and so peer attitudes to emotional expression online revealed a dismissive approach to mental health discourse.

### 5.1.2. Positive Emotions and Achievements

While assessments could be a source of stress and anxiety, social media was also used to share students' positive experiences. A TikTok video (PS-ZO-31) of a young lady dancing with her GCSE results in her hand exemplified this (Figure 21).

## Social Media Data: PS-ZO-31

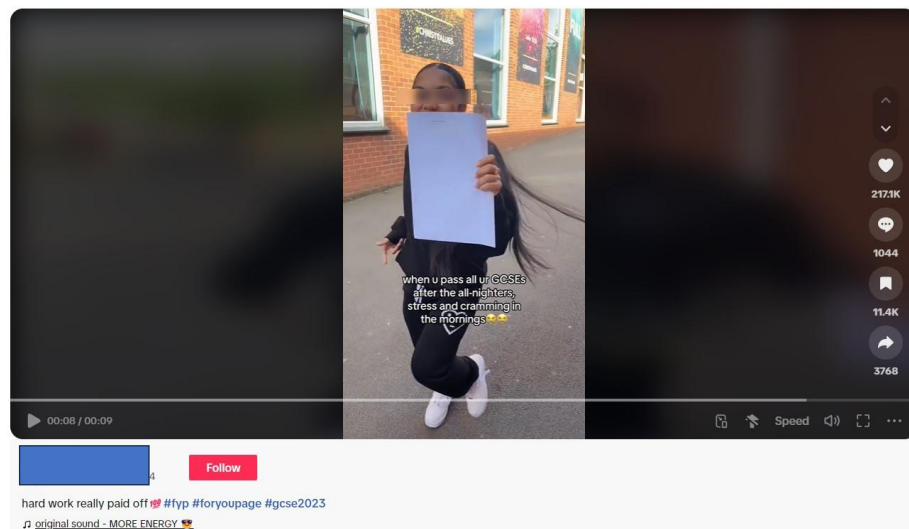


Figure 21: Social Media Data: PS-ZO-31

The text on the video reads, "When u pass all ur GCSEs after the all-nighters, stress, and cramming in the mornings 🥳🥳," with the caption “hard work really paid off 🥳 #fyp #foryoupage #gcse2023.”

This post acknowledged the hard work of preparing for exams and expressed the relief and accomplishment of receiving positive results. The choice of upbeat music with the lyrics "more passion, more passion, more energy" reinforced the celebratory nature.

Focus group participants resonated with these experiences and said they felt “accomplished and relieved” (Stu6-FG3) after completing their exams. Participant Stu5 in FG4 described their final GCSE Maths paper as a “blessing,” indicating positive emotions of gratitude during high-stakes assessments.

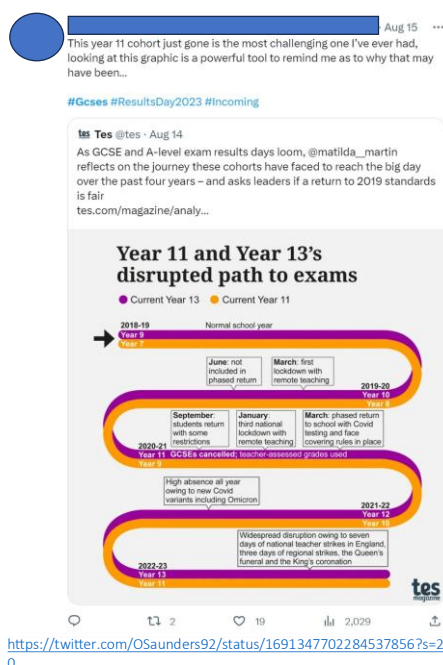
Overall, theme 1 demonstrated the emotional complexity of assessment experiences shared on social media.

## 5.2. Theme 2: External Influences

This theme explored how external factors beyond the immediate school environment shape students’ experiences of assessments.

### 5.2.1. *Covid as an external influence*

While the focus was on students’ experiences, social media allows anyone to comment on their observations of students’ experiences and provide insights into the external factors influencing student assessment experiences. A teacher’s tweet (FG3-FG4-RS-196) acknowledged the disruptions faced by the Year 11 2023 cohort using an infographic from Times Educational Supplement (TES) illustrating school closures and teacher strikes (Figure 14).



## Focus Group 4 – Twitter Researcher sourced

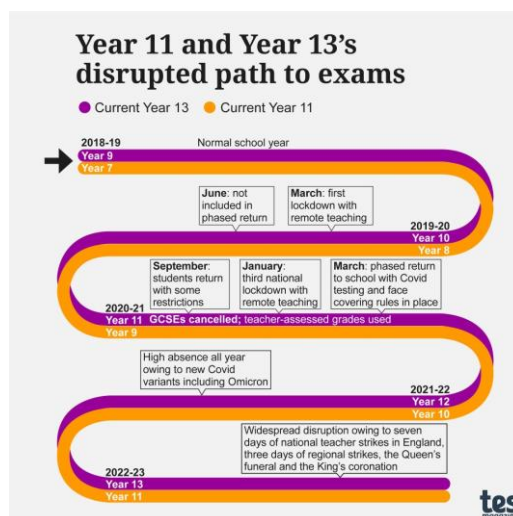


Figure 22: Social Media Data (FG3-FG4-RS-196)

Focus group participants articulated concerns about the disruption caused by external events:

"When I did my GCSEs, they weren't GCSEs, they were just tests that we had to do." (SF-FG1)

SF's reference to just having 'tests' refers to the cancellation of exams due to the COVID-19 pandemic. SF did not experience formal GCSE exams.

The tweet shared in Theme 1 (Figure 20, page 121) reinforced concerns about fairness due to COVID-19 disruptions. Further social media comments captured the perceived inequity:

"Absolutely not fair. They didn't have a continuous standard path to these exams, yet they are being set against a cohort who did". (FG3-FG4-RS-196):

### 5.2.2. Social media as an external influence

Beyond COVID, social media emerged as a significant external influence on students' assessment experiences.



Students described how online discussion could undermine personal confidence and create pressure to conform to online opinions about exam difficulty:

"I feel like sometimes it makes me overthink... if I found the paper easy, but someone else found it difficult, I think to myself like, oh, maybe I didn't answer the questions correctly." (JN-FG1)

This illustrated how seeing others share that they found an exam difficult on social media could lead students to doubt their performance despite initially feeling that they had done well.

Some students candidly admitted to conforming to the majority opinion:

"...I would just lie through my teeth and agree with the majority [laughs]. Because it's easier than arguing my own point." (EM-FG2)

A TikTok video, PS-ZO-153, further exemplifies the external influence of social media and post-exam discussions. The video reenacted a scenario when a pupil left an exam hall and overheard discussions about answers to a specific exam question. The student wrote the number 0.5 and then heard 0.05 being discussed by others, which surprised and frustrated the pupil. The video included an audible reaction from the creator, who uttered expletives.

Comments on the video PS-ZO-153:

"Suddenly, my results don't seem that bad."

"I thought the test was easy till I saw the smart kid struggling."

Demonstrate how students' perceptions of exam experience can quickly shift due to post-exam discussions held on social media.

### 5.3. Theme 3: Engagement

This theme represents how students used social media platforms to share assessment experiences, seek comfort, compare themselves to others, and as a revision tool.

### *5.3.1. Sharing and Seeking Reassurance*

Students used social media to share assessment experiences and to find comfort in relatable situations.

One student described:

"There are always questions that are harder, and you're unsure if you got it right or not, so you want to check with your friends." (SC-FG1)

Revealing how social media was an instant source of validation, particularly after difficult exams. Another student shared:

"Oh, so I did bad in an exam. When I search it up, and everyone else did bad, it makes me feel better." (SR-FG2)

However, the comfort could be fleeting. I probed further and asked focus group participants how they would feel if they had a bad experience, but overheard people discussing how good the exam paper was.

A student responded by describing her digital coping mechanism, which was to

"Pree until like someone else has done bad." (MM-FG2)

'Pree' - a colloquial term that means 'look'. MM inferred that after an exam, she would continue to scroll through social media until she saw someone who had shared that they had "done bad". The act of searching for similar negative experiences could have represented a way of managing her test anxiety and normalising her assessment experiences.

While sharing was common, some students opted out. I explored this by asking why students did not share results; their responses indicated both a lack of interest and a sense of modesty, as these students explained:

"Because I didn't really care". (Stu2-FG3)

"I think there's a bit of modesty about it, in my opinion. I feel like if somebody didn't do so well and they like actually like kind of put the effort in, but they just weren't as lucky. I think it's a bit...It's sometimes a bit of a kick in the teeth for other people. So, I feel you've got to be modest about it." (Stu3-FG3)

### *5.3.2. Relatability*

An NVivo word query of the focus group and social media data revealed frequent use of "relatable" and its derivatives. It was the 11<sup>th</sup> most common word across the data sets and highlighted the importance of 'relatability' in student engagement with social media during high-stakes assessments.

Students described the value of sharing relatable experiences:

TK-FG2 explained, "It's just really relatable. Like when you see people that thought the same thing that you thought, it's just relatable. It puts you at ease."

IM-FG2 elaborated, "I think it's just because it's relatable, and you feel like, you know, you can laugh with other people about the same thing."

These comments and social media data might suggest that 'relatability' could be a strategy for managing assessment-related stress. Social media was the tool that enabled students to transform individual anxiety into a shared, normalised experience.

### *5.3.3. Social media as a revision tool*

Social media was used as a platform to share and discover revision techniques. Students used hashtags like "#psychology" and "#alevelsociology" to discover revision content. Examples included a TikTok video shared by a participant (PS-CL-7) that provided a step-by-step guide for tackling 30-mark sociology exam questions. Another

participant shared a TikTok video (FG1-PS-SC-126) focused on achieving high marks on 16-mark essays in psychology.

Focus group discussions emphasised the appeal of using social media as a revision tool:

“I struggle a lot with my 16 markers, and I feel like a lot of other people can relate, so having someone go through it with you, even though you have like teachers, having someone go through it with you is helpful”. (SF-FG1)

The accessibility of peer-generated TikTok content was important:

“We all relate to it, and we are all like kind of like the same age, so it’s dumbed down a bit for us as well”. (JN-FG1)

There were instances where students directly requested subject-specific advice in response to TikTok videos:

“Give some advice on maths and science, please” (PS-AL-27)

This demonstrated that part of students' educational assessment experience included using social media platforms like TikTok to find videos that offered tips and strategies for their academic success.

Students' responses were nuanced when asked to choose between TikTok content from a teacher vs. a student. One student explicitly preferred peer perspectives:

“For me personally, a student...because I relate more to them” (JN-FG1)

However, this preference was challenged by concerns about content reliability. Offering a critical perspective, one student said:

I just feel like if it's another student sharing information, I'm not sure if I can trust it. I don't want to learn this whole technique from another student in case it doesn't work in the actual exam; I'd rather learn from my teacher. (SC-FG1)

This student acknowledges the risks of unreliable information from students. The tensions between relatability and academic credibility informed their preference for learning from experts (teachers), even on social media.

Some students voiced concerns about prioritising entertainment over accurate revision strategies on social media. A humorous yet illustrative example was the TikTok video FG3-PS-CO-38 (Figure 23, page 129) of a young lady waiting for her exam results while stressing about writing about "The Grinch" instead of "A Christmas Carol" in their GCSE English exam. While it offered entertainment value, it lacked concrete revision strategies and showed how social media might increase exposure to misinformation around assessments.

## Social Media Content 21 – TikTok – FG3 – Participant Sourced

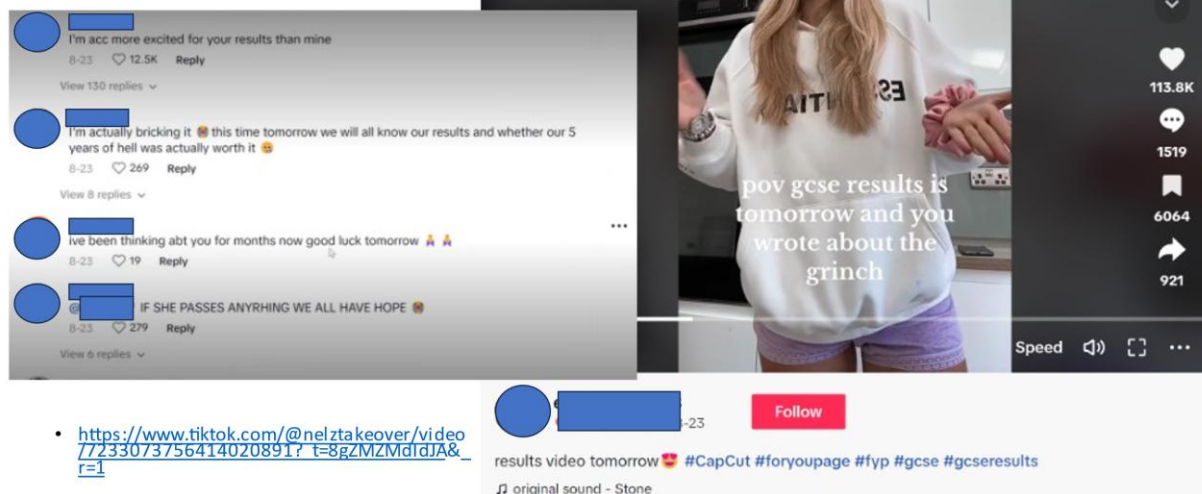


Figure 23: Social Media Data - FG3-PS-CO-38

To understand why students would film themselves confessing to making such an error in their GCSE exam, I asked them about the post in Figure 23 above.

STU1-FG3 explained, "It was to make light of the situation, so she doesn't cry".

The comments under the TikTok video, "I'm actually more excited for your results than mine" and "I've been thinking about you for months now. Good luck tomorrow", showed how social media could potentially provide an emotional support network.

These findings showed that during exam season, social media served as a space where students could vulnerably share their mistakes, normalise test anxiety, offer emotional support, and create temporary communities around shared experiences.

#### 5.4. Theme 4: Exam Responses

This theme explored students' critical perceptions of examination structures and processes. Social media data and focus group discussions showed that core to students' assessment experiences were their awareness, direct reference, and perceptions of structures such as examination boards and processes such as grade boundaries and assessment design/content.

##### 5.4.1. *Exam Content Discrepancies/Construct underrepresentation.*

Students aired frustration with perceived incongruency between what they learned and what the exams tested. A student lamented in a comment under TikTok video FG2-RS-190:

"I was annoyed it [reference to statistical testing] didn't come up in paper one."  
(Figure 24)

## Focus Group 2 – Social media content 5 – TikTok Comments section – Researcher sourced (continued – 38:44)

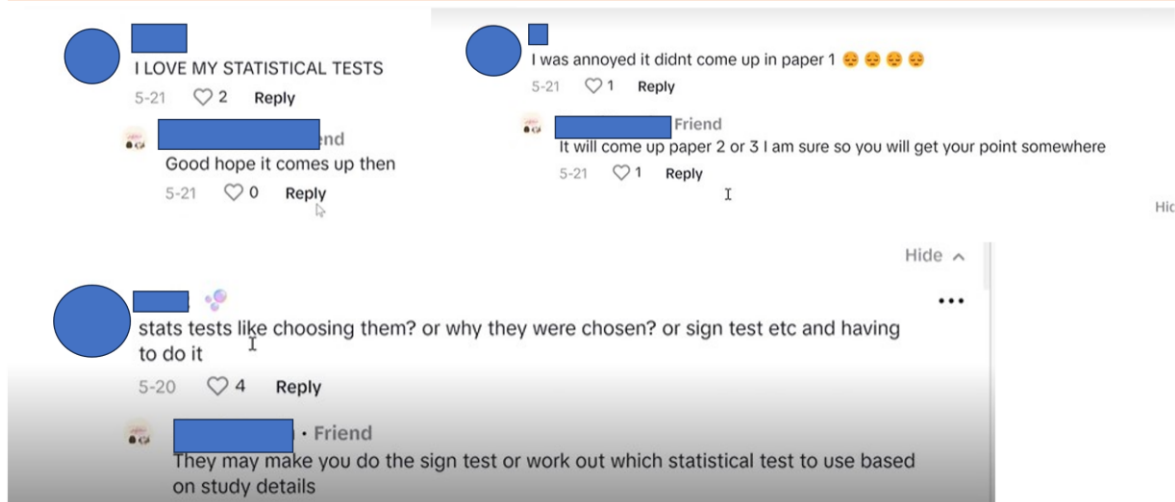


Figure 24: Social Media Data FG2-RS-190

Focus group participants voiced shared frustrations about the unpredictability of exam content. Probing into their experiences revealed a layered perspective:

Especially like when you've revised. Like it might be something you were struggling with, and then you've revised hard for it, thinking it's going to come up in the paper and then after all that revision...it doesn't come up, and you may have like not revised something else as much as you should have and that comes up in the paper so that can be annoying. (IB-FG2)

Another participant called it "devastating" (MM-FG2), summing up the emotional impact. Discussions then turned to students' perceived discrepancies between what they learnt in class and what they were tested on in the exam. A GCSE History student's experience brought this into focus:

Stu5-FG3: For me, my history paper 2, it just had some questions that we didn't learn about.

KDO: So, did you feel like the teacher didn't teach you the content that came up in the exam?

Stu5-FG3: No. It was just slightly related to what we were taught but not the main topics, so no one really had any deep knowledge of it. So, when it's a 16 marker, you need to write two pages...

The chasm between expected and actual exam content, especially when exam questions focused on minor details within broader topics, was evidenced in another student's comment:

Stu9-FG3: I mean, the things that were in paper 3 were on the course, but it was just like a small point of it. So, they just really fleshed it out on paper.

This experience of students feeling unprepared when the exam heavily focused on minor details within a broader topic was further evidenced by a TikTok video (FG-PS-JB-101) submitted by a participant. It said, "Edexcel making the Germany history paper three to include the most irrelevant topics ever." This suggests a disconnect between what the students had learned and what the exam had tested.



## Social Media Content 18 – TikTok – FG3 – Participant Sourced

- [https://www.tiktok.com/@notsure\\_19/video/7244975040935005467?r=1&t=8gZKFu8tyNM](https://www.tiktok.com/@notsure_19/video/7244975040935005467?r=1&t=8gZKFu8tyNM)

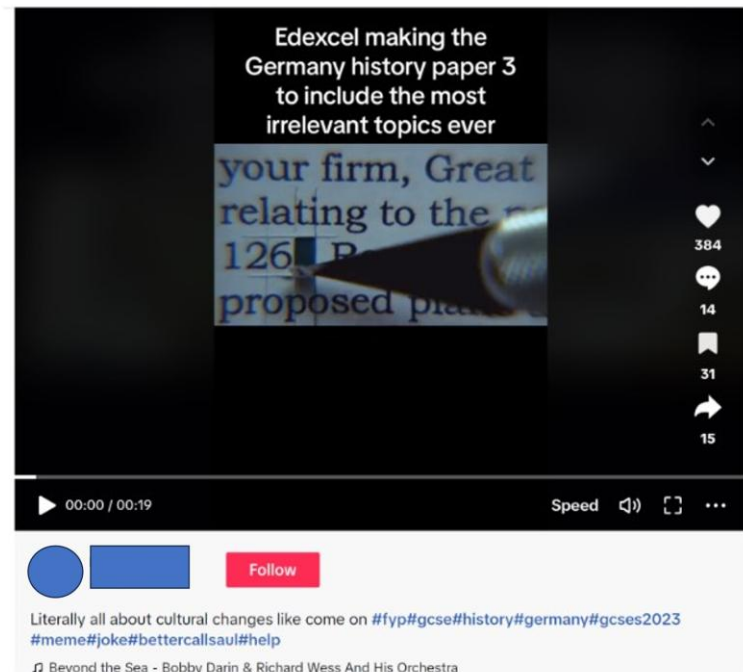
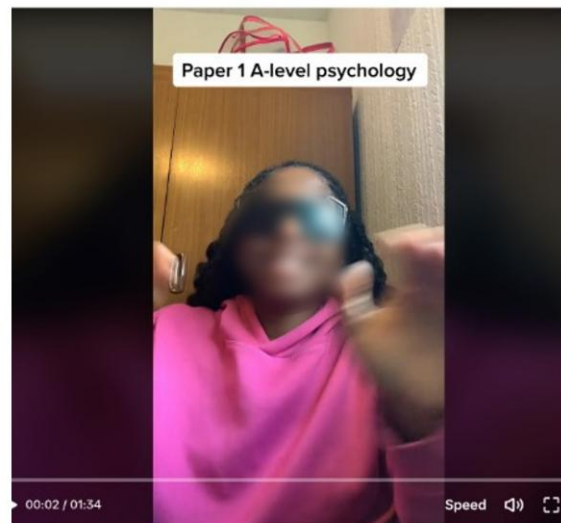


Figure 25: Social Media Data (FG-PS-JB-101)

Some social media posts used humour to express surprise about the exam content. As discussed in the methodology chapter (Section 4.4.1), one tweet featured Drake, a singer (Figure 3) and including this was a humorous way for students to conceptualise the AQA exam board based on the unexpected content.

Social media posts also highlighted the emotional toll of underrepresented or irrelevant content. In TikTok video FG2-RS-190 (Figure 26), a psychology student wearing sunglasses filmed herself ranting about her experiences following the AQA A-level Psychology Paper One exam. The video centred around her reaction to the unexpected presence of three 16-mark essay questions, which she called a "hat trick."

## Focus Group 2 – Social media content 4 – TikTok – Researcher sourced



[\(99+\)#aqalevelpsychology2023 #alevels2023 #sixthform | psychology paper 1 | TikTok](#)

N.B. Face blurred to protect identity as part of ethical considerations

Figure 26: Social Media Content (FG2-RS-190)

## Focus Group 2 – Social media content 4 – TikTok Comments section – Researcher sourced

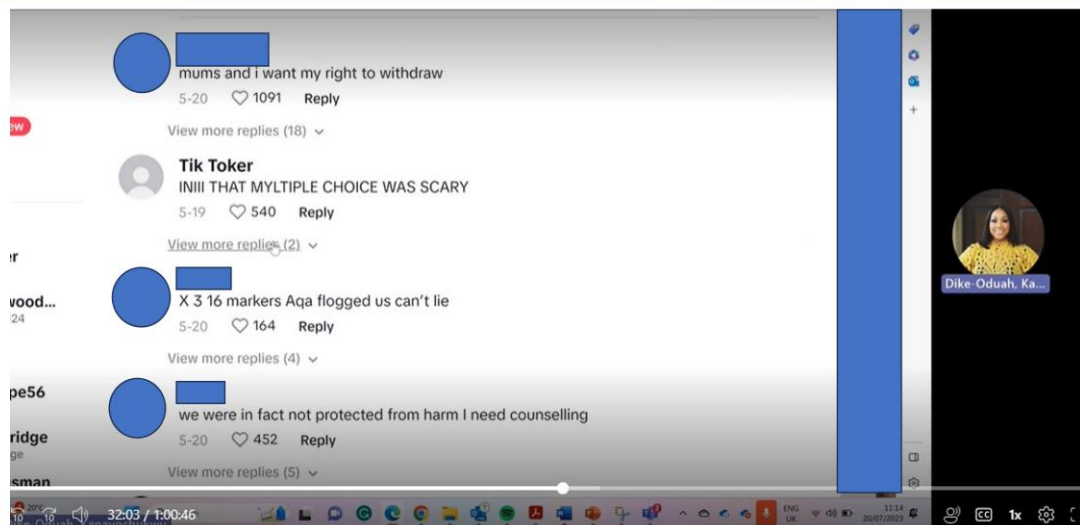


Figure 27: Comments Under social media content (FG2-RS-190)

TikTok users commented on the post (See Figure 27) and used their knowledge of ethical issues in research to show their agreement jovially.

These examples show how social media provided a critical platform for students to articulate and collectively interrogate the exam processes and structures that had made them feel academically vulnerable.

#### *5.4.2. Exam boards*

Students often directed their frustrations at exam boards,

“AQA flogged us, can't lie”. FG2-RS-190 (Figure 27)

In Focus Group 2, I asked about this notion of being punished, and all participants agreed they had felt like this.

Such a unanimous response suggested that this characterisation of exam boards as flogging and punishing was a common view of exam boards among students.

Other social media posts blamed exam boards for the difficulty or unexpected content of exams. Comments like "They ate my chances away of hitting a 7+" (FG2-FG3-FG4-RS-189) were interpreted as:

“They (the exam board) basically took away their chances of getting higher grades”. (IB-FG2)

The caption of a participant-sourced TikTok video (PS-4) read:

“I hope AQA haven't done us dirty... but knowing AQA, they defo have #fyp  
#alevel #examseason #alevelexams #alevels2023 #alevelpsychology  
#psychologypaper1 #alevels.”

The caption expressed hope that the AQA exam board had not made the exam too challenging, but suggested scepticism due to AQA's reputation for difficult exams.

Another post said, “Edexcel always violating” (PS-AI-34). These comments showed that some students felt the exam boards deliberately made exams difficult or unfair to prevent them from getting a higher grade.

Some social media posts depicted exam boards as entities that deserved physical retaliation. For example, TikTok video PS-SM-29 reshared a scene from a movie in which one woman slaps another. The text-on-video suggested that those visuals represented "beating the [expletive] out of whoever chose the Macbeth question." This was yet another example of social media data where violent imagery was used to portray students' views of examination boards.

While predominantly negative, some positive perspectives of exam boards were present in the data. One student used Twitter to praise exam boards, saying:

“Shoutout to whoever made that AQA higher maths paper #gcse2023” and included an image of the pop singer Justin Bieber (see Figure 28)



Figure 28: Social Media Data PS-EM-152

Other Twitter users agreed and replied: “Omg, it was the best maths paper ever” and “quite scrumptious”. This was not the first time that students had used words typically used to describe foods or flavours to describe their exam experience (see Figure 3).” Contrasting the appreciation of this math paper was a comment that read, “I failed. “This reflected students' diverse range of experiences and perceptions during exams.

#### *5.4.3. Grade Boundaries.*

The focus groups and social media data revealed that grade boundaries were a significant source of student stress.

The perceived unpredictability of grade boundaries was highlighted in a TikTok video (PS-MI-33) showing an exercise class where several people enthusiastically jumped on mini trampolines with upbeat music playing in the background. The text on the video stated, "How the GCSE grade boundaries be looking this year", and the caption said, "One minute it's like they're gonna be through the roof and the next they're down at the core of the freaking earth mate 🤪" providing a visual depiction of how students conceptualised the up-and-down nature of grade boundaries.

## Social Media Data PS-MI-33



Figure 29: Social Media Data PS-MI-33

The comments under the video (See Figure 29) communicated increasing anxiety and uncertainties about assessment outcomes as results day drew near. Students admitted to worrying incessantly about grade boundaries and regularly checking them, while other comments queried students who worried about grade boundaries.

Students used social media to express disappointment and frustration when they missed achieving a higher grade by a small margin. TikTok post PS-CO-107 highlighted this with the caption:

"When you look at the grade boundaries, and you see how close you were to the next grade".

The TikTok video featured a young lady reacting to the grade boundaries and realising how close she was to achieving a higher grade. The audio transcript set the tone for the frustration conveyed in the video:

"I am all for a little joke, I am all for getting a little bit agitated...that is taking the

f\*\*ing p\*ss."

Comments such as "One mark off a 9 in English" and "2 marks off a 9 in maths and 3 marks in English lit 🤔🤔" echoed the frustration shown in the video and how viewers used the platform to share their experiences of narrowly missing higher grades.

Two comments showed how some students sought a resolution:

"I'm two marks off an A for my art, sent it back for an appeal. Me and my art teacher are both hoping I get the A."

"I'm litch getting maths remarked and photography bc I was robbed, I tell you"  
(FG3-PS-AL-161)

These reflected a proactive approach, where the student intended to take steps to potentially change their grade outcome through an appeal process because they felt slighted by the exam board.

Students in the focus groups shared similar thoughts on grade boundaries and said, "Being one or two marks off a grade is the biggest pain ever" (FG3-PS-AL-161) and described it as a "kick in the teeth" (Stu2-FG3). I probed participants on this topic and asked how they felt knowing they were just a few marks off the next grade.

One student responded pragmatically:

"Well, I wasn't really bothered about it because I still had a good grade, but then an 8 always looks better than a 7". (Stu2-FG4)

Another shared:

"In sociology, I got a grade 5 this year, but if I used 2019 grade boundaries, I would have got a 7" ...It's annoying because certain jobs will think that it is bad (referencing her Grade 5), but it's just because of the year that you took it".  
(Stu5-FG4)

The fairness of grade boundaries between exam cohorts was emphasised when Stu3-FG4 stated:

“The other year got a better deal than us. They had easier grade boundaries, but they learnt less”.

Here, we see perceptions of inequity. Students believed they were at a greater disadvantage compared to pupils who took exams with *easier* boundaries in previous cohorts. Stu5-FG4’s comment about future career prospects showed that grade boundaries were more than statistical tools. For students, grade boundaries were the gatekeeping mechanism that had implications for their future success.

## 5.5. Theme 5: Influences

This theme examines how online discussions about high-stakes assessment served as spaces where students drew on socio-cultural influences, such as humour, popular culture, and parental expectations, to process their experiences.

### 5.5.1. Humour

Students used humour, particularly memes, to share their high-stakes assessment experiences. Stu2-FG4 described a meme as:

“Something funny and relatable in connection to, like, a situation that might be serious, but it just like Lightens the mood”.

Football-themed TikTok video FG3-PS-AL-136 (Figure 30) illustrated the use of memes to react to GCSE results. The video showed various clips of footballers alongside subject-specific results.



## Social Media Content 19 – TikTok – FG3 – Participant Sourced

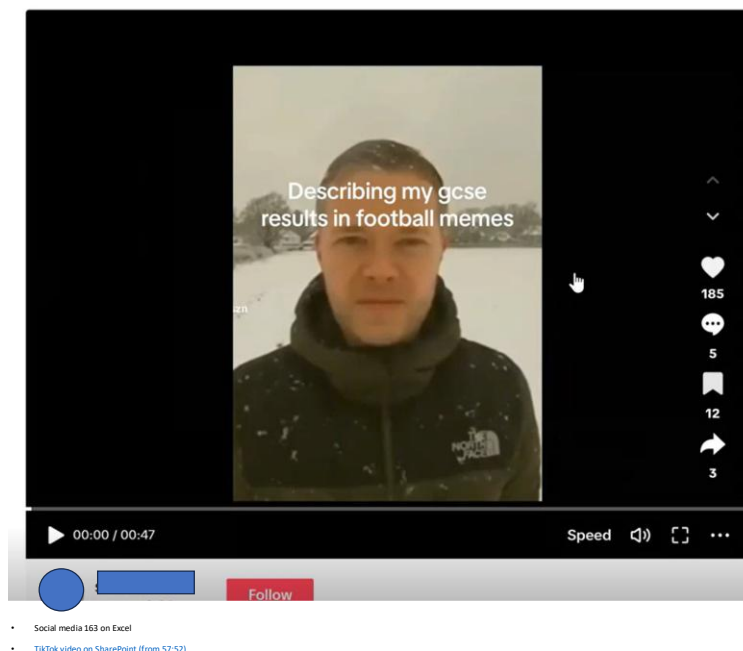


Figure 30: Social media data FG3-PS-AL-136

In the video (scan QR Code 3 to watch), a clip of Steven Gerrard was used to present a grade 9 in History and was humorously labelled as "because I am the GOAT" Indicating a celebratory tone for achieving the

highest grade possible in History.

The students' grade 8 and 5 in English Language and Literature, respectively, were presented with a clip of Jose Mourinho saying, "You cannot put pressure on me, no chance".

Intrigued by the use of memes to share exam results, I asked students to explain the meaning behind one of them:

KDO: OK, there was one meme that confused me...one where they put their finger on their lip and said, "Shh," ...And the student got a grade 5 in maths. Why would they use that particular element of the clip?



QR Code 3: Watch Social  
Media Data FG3-PS-AL-  
136

Stu6-FG3: It's because the teacher didn't believe that they were going to get a grade 5, so now that they've got a Grade 5, the meme is kind of shushing the teacher.

KDO: Right. Gotcha. So, if I predicted a student a Grade C and all of a sudden, they got an A\*, they could use this meme in response to me and say, "Shush". Wow, you guys have taught me something.

Mememes were used to communicate exam results and illustrate exam experiences and perceptions of examiners reading their work.

Tweet FG4-PS-ML-36 from an account called "GCSE Memes 2023" said, "the examiner reading 'which creates more jobs and builds the economy' for the 20th time in my geography exam #gcse2023" and was accompanied by an image of a man looking at his phone with a blank expression (Figure 31). This tweet suggested that students may have thought that repetitive stock phrases might lead to boredom for the examiner.



Figure 31: Social Media Data FG4-PS-ML-36

Intrigued by the name of the account “@GCSEMememes2023”, I asked students why and who would create a social media account dedicated to GCSE memes. They all believed a student made the account, and Stu5-FG4 added:

“They’re probably the class clown, and they’re probably not very smart, so this is all they do. Instead of revising, they look for memes after school”.

Stu5’s remarks were contrasted by social media data PS-EN-121 (Figure 32) which showed that searching for GCSE memes after exams was a sought-after activity for some students:

“Me on my way to check Twitter every day after each GCSE exam paper, knowing the Twitter memes are gonna be great #gcses2023 #gcse2023 #gcse.”



Figure 32: Social Media Data PS-EN-121

The post included an image of Squidward, a fictional character from the USA cartoon series *SpongeBob Square Pants*, running, implying that the student eagerly searched for post-exam discussions through memes on social media.

Other students agreed with this post-exam activity and commented (see Figure 32) to show their excitement and belonging to the online community of GCSE students on Twitter. This suggested that online interaction and memes on Twitter were a significant and positive aspect of the GCSE exam experience.

Dark humour was another type of humour that students used to communicate their exam experiences. A student shared tweet FG2/FG3/FG4-PS-TK-90 (Figure 33) that said, “Me walking into the physics paper 2 exam knowing that the sounds of my parents beating me are going to be longitudinal waves #gcse2022 #gcse #gcsephysics”. The tweet included a photo of NFL commentator Shannon Sharpe smiling with his hands open wide.

Focus group 2 – Social  
media content 7 –Twitter -  
participant sourced (TK)

[https://twitter.com/sogojeva\\_zia/status/1539549709286735877?s=21](https://twitter.com/sogojeva_zia/status/1539549709286735877?s=21)



Figure 33: Social Media Data FG2/FG3/FG4-PS-TK-90

The tweet described the students’ mindset as they approach their GCSE Physics exam with the anticipation that the sounds of their parents beating them would be akin to longitudinal waves, referencing a physics concept. One participant explained:

It's funny because longitudinal waves are part of physics, so that must be the only thing they know. (Stu5-FG4)

While humorous, the tweet hinted at the influence of parental expectations and how students conceptualise and use social media to communicate the pressures associated with academic performance.

### *5.5.2. Popular Culture*

Students incorporated elements of mainstream culture into their discourse of assessment experiences. This included using memes, celebrity references, and other culturally relevant symbols to share emotions, attitudes, and perspectives related to assessment.

The image/meme of Shannon Sharpe (Figure 33) was seen in four social media data (PS-TK-8, FG2/FG3/FG4-PS-TK-90, FG3-RS-193, FG3/FG4-RS-194), and students said this about the meme:

“This is a very iconic video from a guy. What's his name like, something Sharpe? I don't know where the meme comes from, but it's just funny”. [sings] \*I'll be popping bottles\*. (BB-FG2)

“It's always a picture of him in a suit”. (IB-FG2)

The TikTok video (FG2-RS-191) also incorporated popular culture by using the words "no, no, no, no, no" from Usher's (a hip-hop artist) hit song "You Got It Bad." The video started with a screenshot of the A-level psychology specification for paper 2 on inferential statistics. The text overlay read, "When students realise paper two is going to probably be full of statistics." The choice of this specific part of the song aligns with the collective sentiment of students expressing reluctance or disapproval of the statistical content in their upcoming exam.

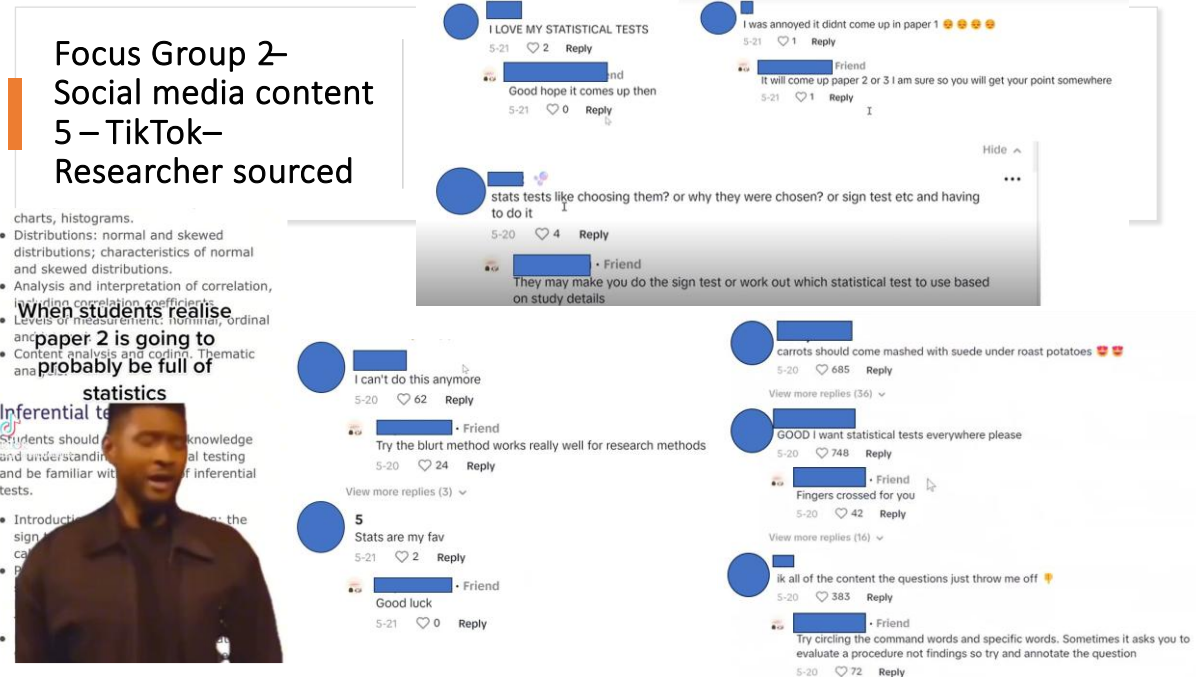


Figure 34: Social Media Data FG2-RS-191

Using popular culture in the form of a well-known artist and song added an entertaining, appealing and relatable layer to the educational assessment content. This was echoed by participants when I asked why students use celebrities who have nothing to do with GCSE and A Levels:

“I feel like people use like celebrities because it makes it...it's good for like the younger generation because people will like they see the celebrities, they know them. So, they're like...that adds a humorous part to it as well when they're seeing the celebrities do something, like funny. And then also...it still helps them to get their point across...and adds a sense of humour to it”. (IB-FG2)

These data examples showed that students incorporated a range of popular figures, celebrities, and trending memes about their assessment experience into their social media content to make it more relatable and engaging.

### 5.5.3. Audience Reactions

The subtheme, audience reactions, captured how family, friends and public viewers respond to students' assessment experiences as shared online.

When discussing tweet FG2-FG4-RS-188 (Figure 19, page 119) shared in theme 1, participants revealed that parental expectations may have motivated the student to tweet passionately about their negative exam experiences and the risk of suicide directly to an exam board. They explained:

“I feel like it’s a bit dramatic but not that dramatic because obviously if you like feel like, oh, I didn’t do as well, even though you revised and you’ve done everything that you possibly can, and you haven’t done as well, it’s demoralising so you might feel like oh, I’m a failure I’ve disappointed my Parents, my teachers. And I can’t go to uni, stuff like that. It’s a lot to take on, so you might actually feel this passionate because you might feel like you know you want to end it.” (TK-FG2)

“There are some cases with highly demanding parents and stuff like that that students like rely on their grades to kind of impress their parents. And if they don’t get that grade, then they’re stressing, and they’ve got other issues”. (MM-FG2)

Another tweet, FG3-RS-193 (Figure 35) directly spoke to how parental reactions and opinions influenced students to share their assessment experiences on social media. The tweet included another meme/photo of Shannon Sharpe, and the caption said:

“POV: me showing my results to my parents after months of them telling me off for not doing any revision #GCSE #GCSEResults.”





### Social Media Content 3 - Focus Group 3 - Twitter - Researcher sourced

*Figure 35: Social Media data FG3-RS-193*

The tweet presents a point-of-view (POV) scenario where the individual shows their exam results to their parents after enduring months of being scolded for insufficient revision. When I asked why students tweeted this, participants responded by referring to the dynamics between students and their parents during the exam period:

“I feel like because a lot of people did better than they expected to. And then when you have parents who have high expectations for you, but they feel like you're not meeting them, it's just funny when you can prove them wrong”. (Stu2-FG3)

The students' unexpected success was a form of defiance, and including popular culture through the accompanying image of Shannon Sharpe added a humorous and relatable touch to the tweet as one student said:

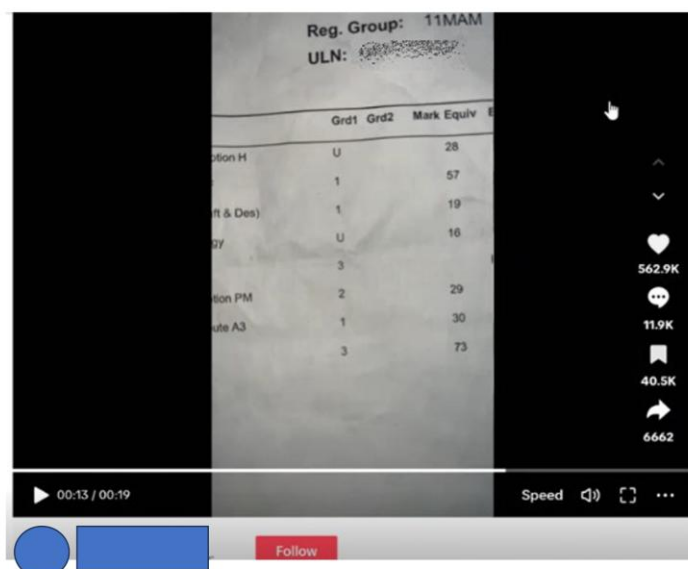
“It's funny, and people will relate to it, and it might make them feel better about their results”. (Stu5-FG3)



Some students filmed their parents' reactions to their exam results and posted it online. The text on the TikTok video FG3-PS-MR-10 (Figure 36) said, "My mum's reaction to my GCSE results 🤦." This set the context for the video, which started by showing a GCSE results slip with grades ranging from Grade U to Grade 3, which are low grades. Then, it transitioned to a selfie angle of a young man's face. The audio featured his upset mother, who said, "Disgraceful. How have you not even passed your exams, Tyrone (pseudonym)? What is wrong with you, man? What kind of job will you do with this...dustbin cleaner, road sweeper?"

The caption of the TikTok post says, "She's onto me. I guess I'm off the map for the next 40 years #fyp #trending #viral #xyzbca #gcse #incogwhydee."

## Social Media Content 15 – TikTok – FG3 – Participant Sourced



- [TikTok video \(recording from 49:28\)](#)

Figure 36: Social Media Data FG3-PS-MR-10

I asked participants in the focus group interview why this student recorded their mother's reaction to their GCSE results and posted it online. They explained that there were several motivators for posting this kind of post-exam results content online, such as:

“For views, for attention and entertainment. I guess some people can think it's funny what his mum is saying in the background”. (Stu6-FG3)

“I think that, like, deep down, he is actually ashamed of himself, like he's posted it to try and make himself feel better”. (Stu5-FG3)

The social media data showed reactions to students' exam results further afield from family. For example, one student posted (PS-AL-27) her top GCSE results and received comments from the verified account of Cambridge University: “This is lovely, great work Tumi (pseudonym). Many congratulations and best wishes for the future” and Krispy Kreme UK Verified Account saying, “celebrations are in order”.

Other reactions included the role of friends and reference to the popular restaurant chain, Nando's. Tweet PS-AI-27 said:

“Me and my friends tomorrow when we flopped almost all our GCSE subjects, but it's okay bc free Nando's #gcse #gcse2023 #GCSEResults #academicweapon”.

Nandos is known for commercialising exam results day in England by offering students a 'free' or 'discounted' Nandos order when they present their GCSE results at participating restaurants.

The tweet included a video of people dancing, which conveyed the celebratory tone of the message, suggesting that they were ready to enjoy themselves regardless of their exam results.

Other references to Nando's and GCSE results day include TikTok video PS-KW-180 with the caption “We eating good on results day #gcse #gcse2023 #lance #black #fyp #results #pourtoi #uk #resultsdsy2023 #resultsdaycountdown #alevels #gcses #maths #school #alevels2023 #resultsday #nandos”. The video was of a boy eating a Nando's meal, and the text on the video said, "POV: You have collected your free food from Nando's on results day."

A comment on the post, "They are probably gonna deny me after seeing my results", injects humour by suggesting a playful doubt about whether Nando's would deny the free food based on their results.

## 5.6. Theme 6: Visual Representations

Theme 6 highlights how students used visuals, such as memes, images, and videos, to creatively express their experience with high-stakes assessments. Prior themes contained examples of how images were used to communicate students' experiences, but this theme is the first to focus specifically on the role of images in communicating those experiences.

Images of hip-hop artists, football managers, people exercising on trampolines, and people dancing and fighting were used to share students' assessment experiences in ways that text-based communication could not achieve. This theme examined how students visualise exam experiences, questions and results on social media.

### 5.6.1. *Visualising exam experiences*

Students transformed exam moments into relatable digital narratives. TikTok Video PS-SM-29 (Figure 37) was a compilation of shorter video clip memes that captured exam hall dynamics. In one part of the video, a man walked rapidly, like a catwalk strut. The text on the video humorously suggested that he represented "invigilators walking in the loudest heels ever recorded," alluding to the noises made by exam invigilators wearing loud shoes during the exams.

## Social Media PS-SM-29

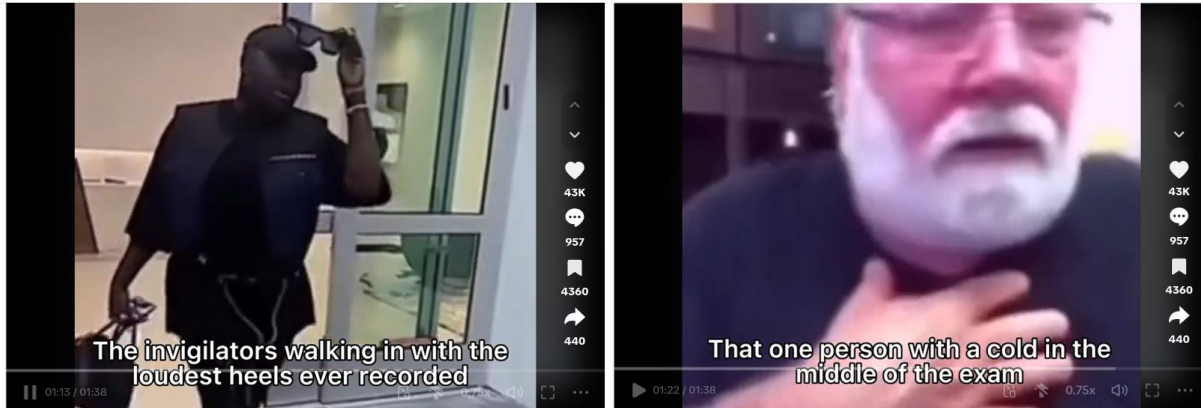


Figure 37: Social Media Data PS-SM-29

The video transitioned to the scene of an elderly man coughing, and the text suggested that he represented "that one person with a cold in the middle of the exam."

Comments under the video confirmed the relatability and commonality of these experiences, where the silence was disrupted in an exam hall, as viewers said:

"During my economics paper, the invigilator's phone started playing Dancing Queen".

"There was someone coughing in my computer science exam, and it echoed".

Students' challenges during GCSE language listening exams were similarly portrayed. In TikTok video FG3-PS-JB-165 (See Figure 38 and scan QR Code 4 to watch), a young man sat at his desk and simulated his experience of taking a GCSE language listening exam. He listened to an audio prompt instructing him to choose



QR Code 4: FG3-PS-JB-165

the best answer from options A, B, or C. Gradually, sounds of chimes and inaudible voices created a confusing soundscape. The young man displayed exasperation by putting his hand on his face, indicating the stress and difficulty associated with listening exams.

## Social Media Content 20 – TikTok – FG3 – Participant Sourced

- <https://www.tiktok.com/@nelztakeover/video/7233073756414020891? t=8gZMZMdlJA& r=1>

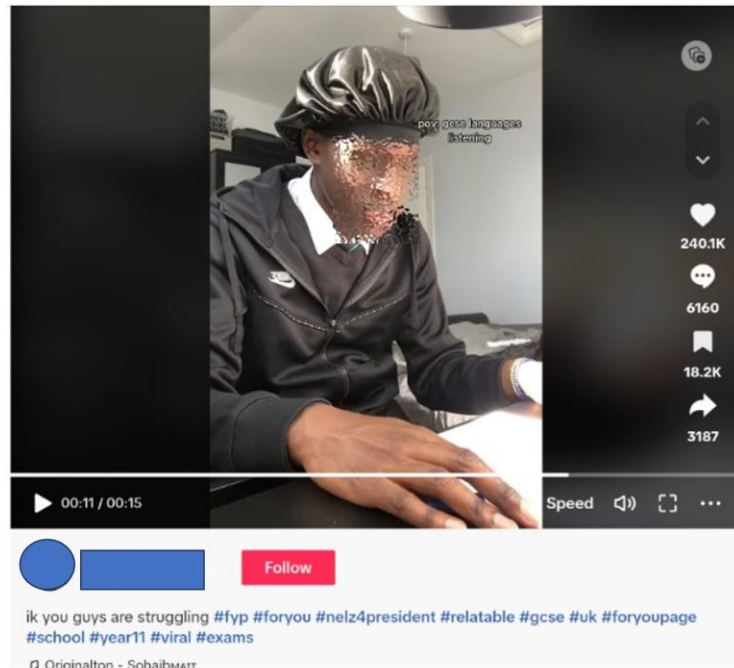


Figure 38: Social Media Data FG3-PS-JB-165

One participant explained the video, saying:

"In language exams, when you're listening to the audio, the words kind of blur together, and you hear everything that you shouldn't be hearing". (Stu3-FG3)

Social media comments in response to the video echoed struggles with specific language listening exams, saying:

"Spanish listening is the death of me."

"French listening is just a guessing game atp."

A comment about A-level language listening exams presented a contrasting experience:

"At a level, we get to play the tracks ourselves however many times we want  
(within the 2h 30 exam time limit for listening + reading) 🍷 🍷"


This highlighted the difference in the exam format at a higher academic level, where students had more control over playing tracks multiple times within the time limit.

### 5.6.2. Visualising exam questions

Students creatively interpreted exam questions through memes and references to pop culture. For instance, TikTok video FG1/FG2-RS-184 visualised an exam question in the AQA A Level Psychology exam (See Figure 39 and scan QR Code 5 to watch). The video featured Ronnie Coleman, a hench bodybuilder, walking around, going to the gym, lifting weights and eating food. The text on the video says, "Dave from Psychology Paper 1 going to the gym for the third time in a day ". The video is related to a test item in the psychology A Level exam, shown in Figure 39 below. The humour lay in the exaggerated image (Ronnie Coleman) to represent Dave's obsession with the gym (as described in the exam question).



QR Code 5: Watch FG1/FG2-RS-184



**Social media content 4 – TikTok –  
Researcher sourced  
FG1/FG2-RS-184**

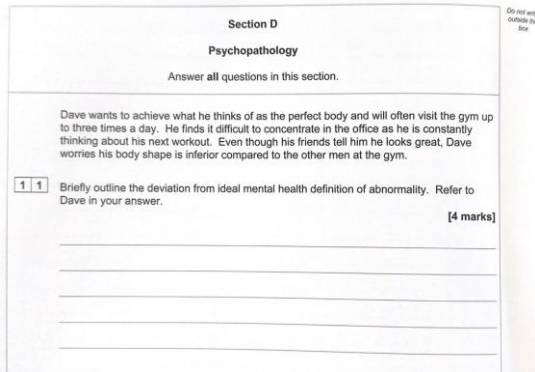


Figure 39: Social Media Data FG1/FG2-RS-184 and Psychology Exam Question

Another TikTok video (PS-MI-19) showed a man breakdancing in a police uniform, referencing a question about a hyena in a GCSE English Language paper, which humorously depicted the hyena's reaction in the story. The same question was visualised in tweet PS-BO-106, which said, " the hyena after running around in circles for ten minutes trying to intimidate Pi only to get slagged off because of his hairline and spots #gcses2023" and had an image of a grown man with tears streaming down his face.



Another video, FG3-PS-ZH-137, visualised the same AQA GCSE English Language exam question by showing a man frustrated with his haircut, removing his hat and pointing to his hairline. The text on the video said, "POV: the hyena deepening his hairline."

I asked participants in focus group 3 what the visuals meant in relation to the GCSE English language exam question. They responded:

"It's just a clip about his hair. It relates because it's like students are bringing the exam question to life". (Stu3-FG3)

“Bringing the exam question to life” was precisely what students did as part of sharing their exam experiences online in meaningful, creative and humorous ways.

### *5.6.3. Visualising exam results*

Students also shared their post-exam experiences in visually engaging ways. We saw in theme 4 (Figure 29) of how students used visuals of an exercise trampoline class to depict the fluctuation in grade boundaries. Theme 5 included students' use of football memes to share their exam results (Figure 30, page 141).

Another video used memes to share their GCSE results visually. Video PS-IB-53 began with the text "reacting to my GCSE results with Memes," setting the tone for visuals linked to specific GCSE results:

Chemistry (Grade 8): A man sipping a drink and expressing satisfaction.

English Language (Grade 7): A snippet of Nigel Farage's quote, "You all laughed at me, well I have to say you are not laughing now, are you? (Figure 40)"

This added humour to the result and suggested that they were underestimated. The caption, which mentioned the students' English set ("Set 8 English btw 🤔 🤔") confirms this, adding context that they were in a low attainment set for this subject.

Math (Grade 7) and Geography (Grade 7): Represented by a celebratory interview of Ronaldo, the footballer, in Spanish.



## Social media data PS-IB-53

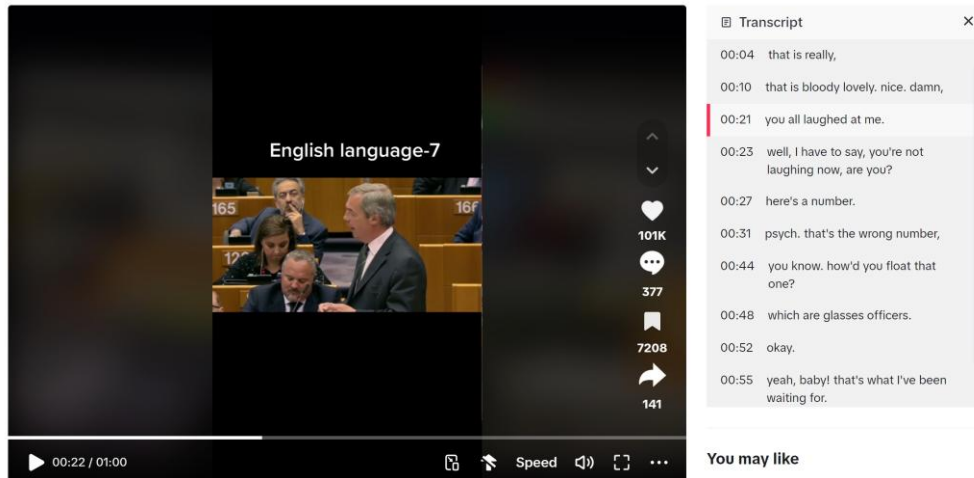


Figure 40: Social Media Data PS-IB-53

In contrast, the TikTok video PS-GB-14 did not use additional images to visualise student results. Instead, the video presented a sequence of black male students, and for each student, there was an accompanying text which is suggestive of their post-GCSE experiences and allowed the viewer to create an image or perception based on the text (Figure 41).

## Social Media Data - PS-GB-14

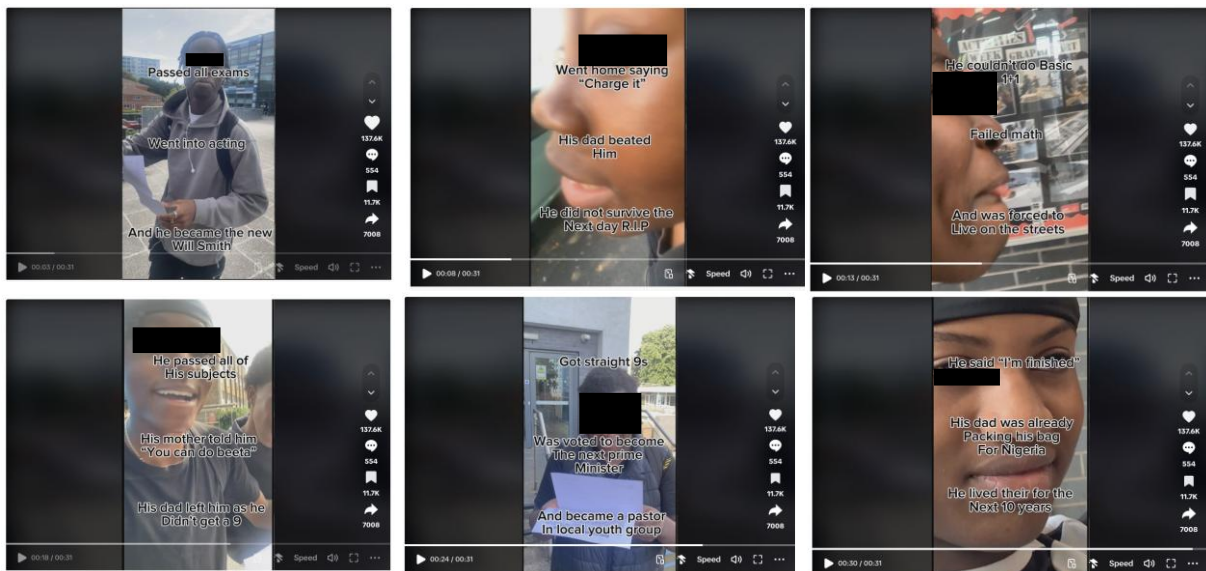


Figure 41: Social Media Data PS-GB-14

The narratives shared in the video show how students conceptualised potentially diverse outcomes and experiences based on their GCSE results. Examples relate to family expectations, academic pressure, and the various paths that can open after GCSEs, including positive and challenging ones. Some stories depicted severe consequences such as extreme parental disappointment, punishment, and academic failure leading to poverty. Other narratives showed positive and transformational post-GCSE outcomes, such as how achieving top grades encourages ambitious career and leadership opportunities.

Students visualised their experiences leading up to results day in video PS-OS-32 (Figure 42), which used the character Stewie from the TV show *Family Guy* lying down on a bed, looking distressed and crying.

## Social media data PS-OS-32

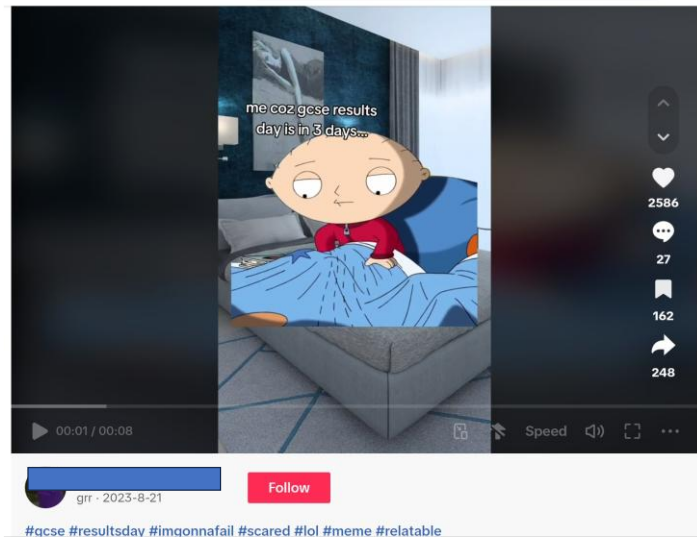


Figure 42: Social Media Data PS-OS-32

The animated character was often known for his wit and sarcasm, but he appeared vulnerable and anxious in this context. The audio features Stewie saying, "I should get some sleep..." followed by whimpering and crying. The visual and audio expressed the stress associated with GCSE results.

The nervous anticipation of results was sometimes depicted with violent suicidal images. For example, tweet PS-RE-93 (Figure 43) said, "I get my results in 2 hours #GCSE #gcse2023 #gcsememes #ResultsDay2023," accompanied by a video of a man screaming and holding a gun to his head. This shows the intensity of emotions and emphasises the psychological impact on students during the waiting period.



Figure 43: Social Media Data PS-RE-93

## 5.7. Theme 7: Academic Goals

Theme 7 shows how students used social media to reify their academic goals and aspirations by sharing successes, predicting exam questions and exam grades and sharing study tips.

### 5.7.1. Academic Goals/Aspirations

Social media posts directly connected exam performance to future opportunities. The caption on the TikTok video PS-MM-13 stated:

"Doing well in your GCSEs opens up more paths and avenues you can take in life, so it makes sense to put in effort to at least pass them... There is a strong correlation between income and your level of education, so don't let social media convince you otherwise".

Focus group participants highlighted their anxieties about academic achievement and future opportunities:

“Even though you revised, and you've done everything that you possibly can, and you haven't done as well, it's demoralising, so you might feel like, oh, I'm a failure. I've disappointed my parents and my teachers, and I can't go to uni” (TK-FG2)

Social media was used to celebrate academic success. The caption on TikTok video PS-BB-16 (Figure 44) used terms like "academic weapon" and hashtags #all9s to express pride in achievement.

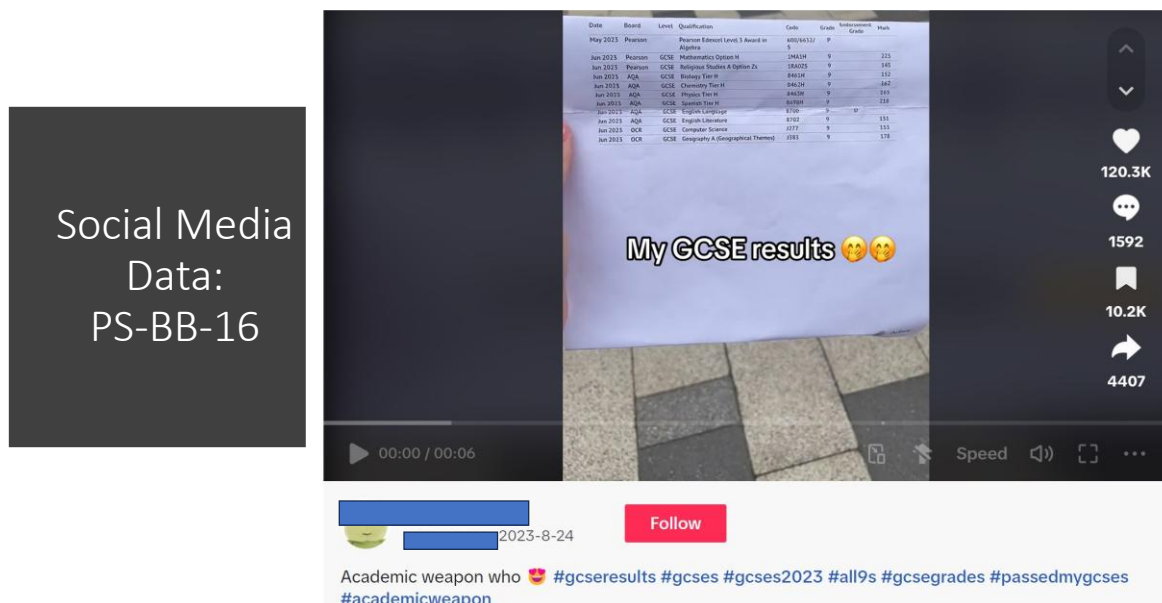


Figure 44: Social Media data PS-BB-16

The video displayed a GCSE results paper where all the grades for each subject were grade 9, which is the highest grade achievable. The text overlaid on the video says, "my GCSE results 🤩🤩". The emoji blushing face with hand over mouth indicated a sense of joy and shock, which translated to surprise at their achievement in this context.

Another video (PS-ZO-31) used celebratory music and text that acknowledged the stress of studying but ends with relief with the caption:

"When u pass all ur GCSEs after the all-nighters, stress, and cramming in the mornings."

In addition to sharing exam success stories, students used social media to share tips on how to succeed in exams. This complemented theme 3 and how students used social media as a revision tool to achieve their academic goals (theme 7). Comments on video PS-BB-16 (See Figure 45) exemplified this, with users requesting exam tips based on the creator's success. Some explicitly asked for the creator's study materials and tips to achieve similar academic success, to which the creator responded with practical advice for achieving their academic goals. Other commenters did not ask for advice. Instead, they prayerfully look forward to achieving similar results.

"This is gonna be me, Amen" and "This is gonna be me in seven years" (PS-AL-27)

These comments showed how students used social media content to shape and refine their academic pursuits.

## Social Media Data: PS-BB-16

### *Comments on the post*

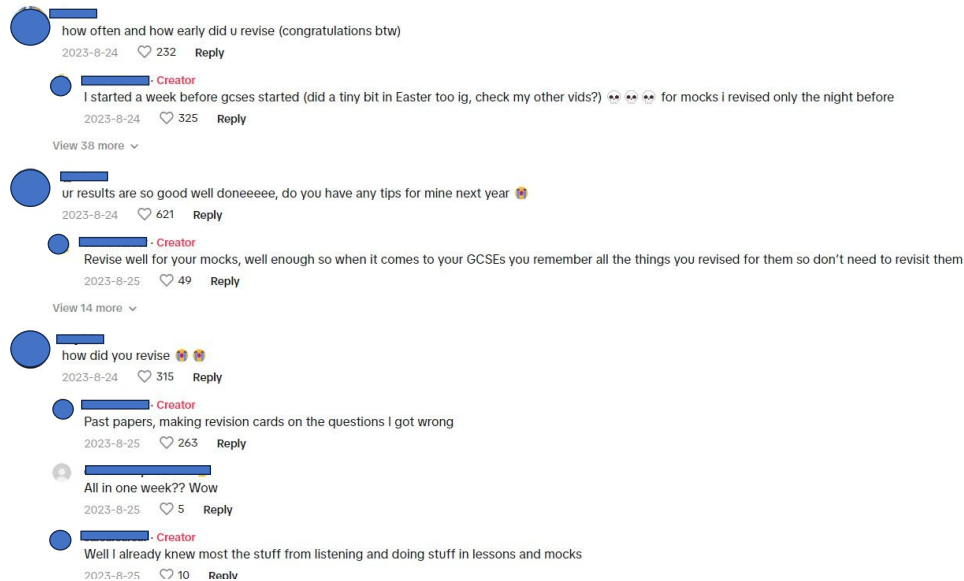


Figure 45: Comments on Social Media Post PS-BB-16

### 5.7.2. Predicting exam questions

Social media allowed students to predict exam questions and speculate about exam outcomes.

TikTok video PS-SF-4 captured the anxiety around potential exam content. In the video, a young lady rolled her eyes in frustration or exasperation in response to the content of the upcoming psychology exam paper. The text in the video suggested that she was worried about specific psychology concepts like "institutionalisation" and "Bowlby's theory of attachment", potentially showing up on the exam. The video's caption says:

"I hope AQA haven't done us dirty... but knowing AQA, they defo have #fyp  
#alevel #examseason #alevelexams #alevels2023 #alevelpsychology  
#psychologypaper1 #alevels."

The mention of the AQA exam board in the caption highlighted the reputation it may have for challenging questions.

Students actively used social media to seek predictions about exam questions. In focus group discussions, students revealed their strategic approach:

MM-FG2: I've seen a paper that has been leaked, though, and it's been correct.

When probed about using TikTok for exam predictions, the response was unanimous:

KDO: Do you go on TikTok to find predictions for future exam papers?

All: Yeah.

KU-FG2: We do it with the questions.

MM-FG2 explained their rationale directly:

“Because it's actually useful information there”.

This exchange showed students' deliberate approach to using social media as an informal resource for exam preparation.

### *5.7.3. Predicting exam results*

In addition to predicting exam questions, social media platforms enabled students to speculate about their exam results.

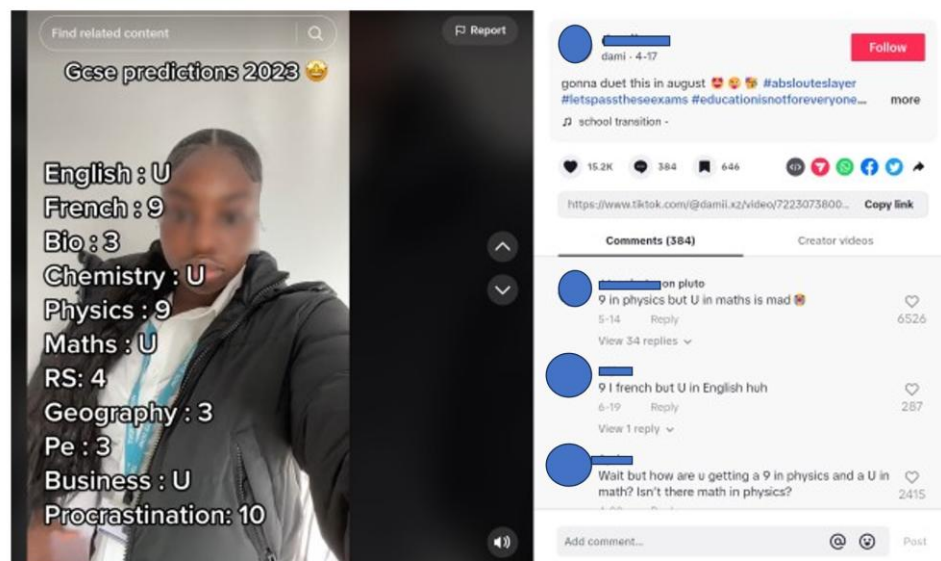
TikTok video PS-MA-21 demonstrated this practice, with a GCSE student creating grade predictions immediately after exams. The video begins by showing a young lady's GCSE predictions, which she made on the 26th of June 2023, after the exam series. She 'duets' her video, a TikTok feature that allows two videos to be shown side by side. In the second part of the video, she reveals her actual grades (August 2023) compared to her predictions. Notably, she exceeded her prediction in mathematics by achieving a grade 7 instead of the predicted grade 6. However, her combined science and English language grades were one grade lower than her predictions.



Another video (FG3/FG4-RS-198) featured an uncanny set of predictions (see Figure 46): “English U, French 9, Biology 3, Chemistry U, Physics 9, Maths U, RS 4, Geography 3, PE 3, Business U, Procrastination 10.”

The caption implied that these predictions would later be compared with their actual results, saying: “gonna duet this in August 🤔🤔🤔 #abslouteslayer #lets passthese exams #educationisnotforeveryone #leavemealone #Idontwanttotalkaboutit.”

Focus  
Group 3 –  
TikTok –  
Researcher  
Sourced



- <https://www.tiktok.com/@damii.xz/video/7223073800240385286?q=%23GCSE2023&t=1694074106544>

Figure 46: Social Media Data FG3/FG4 - RS - 198

Fascinated, I asked focus group participants whether they thought these predicted grades were from a teacher. They revealed complex perspectives on teachers and predicted grades, saying:

“It’s her predicting her score... it’s definitely not her teachers because teachers can’t predict students a U” (Stu5-FG3)

Intrigued by this student's assumption about teachers not being allowed to predict U grades, I probed and clarified that teachers could predict U grades. The student explained:

“My history teacher said he can't predict anyone a U” (Stu5-FG3).

This discussion on predicted grades revealed an inconsistent or divergent understanding of what predicted grades were allowed and the source of such information.

I probed further to flesh out their understanding of the formation of predicted grades and whether they thought it was appropriate for teachers to predict students a higher grade if they had not shown that they could access the content at a higher grade.

Students responded at one end, considering the realism of predicted grades:

“You have to get them ready for the result. I don't believe you should get their hopes up”. (Stu3-FG3)

Stu1-FG3 offered a more optimistic view:

“The thing is, during exam season, normally, people revise more. So, they do get higher than what they might have been predicted, but you never know”.

The comments under the social media post (Figure 46) of exam predictions playfully questioned the logic behind the student's self-determined predicted grades, especially the apparent disparity between a grade 9 in physics and a U in maths:

“Wait, but how are u getting a 9 in physics and a U in math? Isn't there math in physics?”

“9 in physics, but U in maths is mad 🤔”

“These are more bipolar than my music taste 🤩🤩”

Students in focus group 4 echoed the same bewilderment:

“A U in maths but a 9 in physics makes no sense”. (Stu1-FG4)

“How is she not passing maths, but she’s passing physics” (Stu3-FG4)

Stu4-FG4 explained the disparity:

“She just wants clout to become a meme and for the comments to call her dumb”.

I asked the students whether they would have shared their GCSE predictions online. One student openly shared that she had done so as part of following a TikTok trend. When asked about whether her predictions were what they genuinely thought they were going to achieve, they admitted:

“I put them down a bit in case” (Stu1-FG4)

Stu1-FG4’s revelation suggested that students’ grade predictions might have been a coping strategy to manage the uncertainty and stress of waiting for results.

## 5.8. Theme 8: Dialogues

The final theme, ‘Dialogues’, showed how social media comments created a space for students to share experiences, provide support, challenge and connect with others around educational assessment. While comments under social media posts were discussed throughout the preceding themes, creating a standalone theme about comments in response to participants’ recommendations as co-researchers was important.

Participants emphasised the importance of ‘comment sections’ in the pilot group:

“They (comments) are 10 times better” (SC-FG1)

BB-FG2 articulated a provocative perspective:

"There are some videos that I watch, and I don't even watch the video. I just go on the comment section. The comment section is very important. It's like 90% of the video."

EM-FG2 highlighted the comment sections' representative value:

"The comment section will not just show one person's view. It will show multiple people's views and how many people agree with that certain person."

The participants' unanimous agreement on the critical role of comment sections suggested they were central to students' digital communication experiences and likely significant for online assessment discourse.

#### *5.8.1. Shared Experience Comments*

Students used social media comments to connect and validate their assessment-related experiences. The TikTok and Twitter data showed examples of how the comments section was used to create collective narratives about exam experiences. For example, in response to TikTok video FG3-RS-199, where a student shared their exam results, two comments said:

"OMG, I GOT A 7 IN HISTORY, TOO"

"BRO, same for history. I thought I was going to get a 3 fr I'm not even joking. I cried in the exam and everything."

These exchanges expressed shared experience and emotional intensity during the history exam, creating a sense of solidarity among students with similar results and experiences.

Comments also shared universal occurrences during exams. For example, Tweet PS-SM-67 (Figure 47) humorously uses a cat photo. It describes the relatable situation of a student in a GCSE exam pretending not to have made a noise after dropping a ruler. The caption said: 'Me sitting at my desk during a GCSE exam acting like I haven't just dropped a ruler, and the sound filled the silent hall #gcse2023.'



## Social Media data PS-SM-67

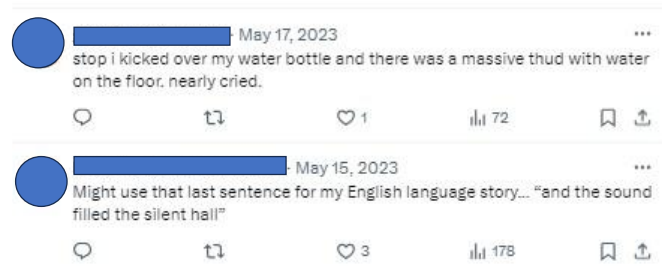


Figure 47: Social Media Data PS-SM-67

Responses showed creative and empathetic connections:

"Might use that last sentence for my English language story... 'and the sound filled the silent hall.'"

"Stop! I kicked over my water bottle, and there was a massive thud with water on the floor. nearly cried."

Social media users also sought shared experiences. Typical queries were made, such as one comment under TikTok video FG2-RS-190 (Figure 48):

"Did anyone else not finish the questions??? There was like no time? Wth"

## Focus Group 2 – Social media content 4 – TikTok Comments section – Researcher sourced (34:36)

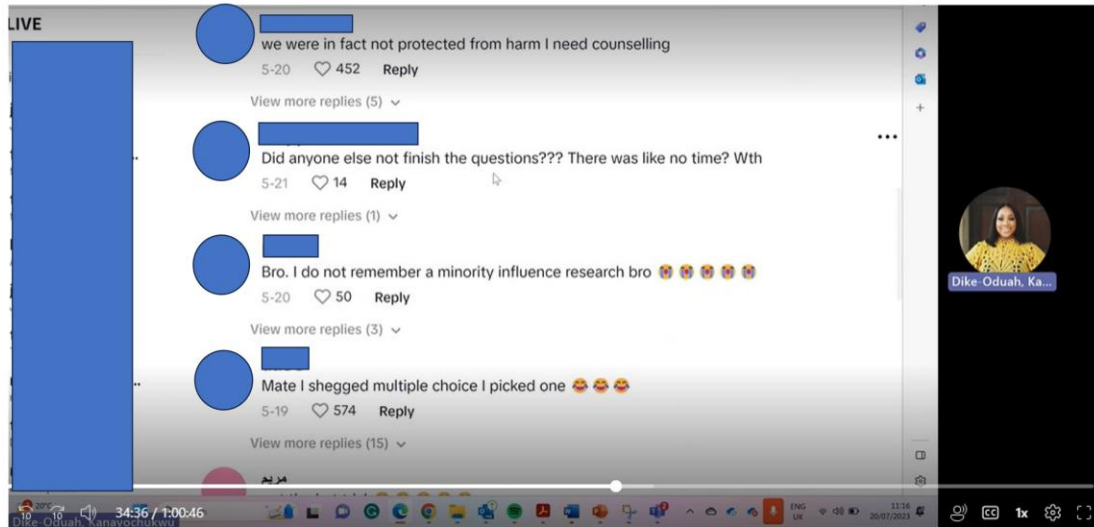


Figure 48: Comments (part 2) under Social Media Data FG2-RS-190

I asked participants for their perspectives on why students would leave comments like this. They explained that it was “So people can relate” (CL-FG2) and for “some validation” (BB-FG2). This suggested that during exam season, students used comments to seek common or shared experiences to validate their own experiences and gain comfort.

### 5.8.2. Supportive comments

The social media data offered examples of comments coded as ‘supportive’. These comments demonstrated the positive potential of social media for students navigating high-stakes assessments.

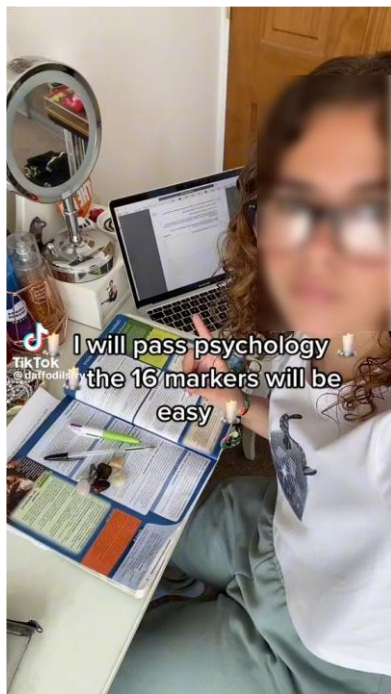
Some comments congratulated exam successes:

“Very well done on your results. All the best in whatever you do next” (PS-BB-16)

"Well done to all those who sat their GCSEs this year ❤️" (PS-IB-15)

"These are the types of results that are worth flexing" (FG3-PS-CO-163)

Supportive comments included motivational, well-wishing support. TikTok video FG1-RS-182 (Figure 49) features a young lady at a desk with a psychology textbook open. She mimed over an audio clip with a positive affirmation, saying, "I will pass all my exams; I know what's going on". The text on the video says, "I will pass psychology. The 16 markers will be easy".



"I will pass all my exams"

**Social media content 2  
– TikTok example –  
researcher sourced.  
FG1-RS-182**

[https://www.tiktok.com/@daffodilsrry/video/7234070403239382298?\\_r=1&\\_t=8e8qu6ns2EE](https://www.tiktok.com/@daffodilsrry/video/7234070403239382298?_r=1&_t=8e8qu6ns2EE)

Figure 49: Social Media Data FG1-RS-182

The video caption "Need whatever luck I can get at this point #foryou #year13 #alevels #alevelpsychology #revision" indicated a sense of desperation with the student expressing a need for luck for their psychology exam.

Comments on the video were a collective mix of encouragement and shared experiences.

"Good luck, lol, last year's paper was a nightmare with three 16 markers just on paper 1 😊"

Specific prayers and wishes regarding the content of potential 16-mark essay questions demonstrate the shared anticipation, mutual support and concern for particular topics. Examples include:

"I will pass psychology paper 1 WITH FLYING COLOURS, and so will everyone else. We will all slay, and all the 16 markers will literally write themselves."

"I NEED a 16 marker on the types of long-term memory, Asch's study, learning theory, or explaining phobias 🤔 🤔 🤔 "

"Praying for 16 markers on Zimbardo and types of LTM 🙏 "

"Praying it's not the role of father or Schaffer Emerson 🙏 🙏 🙏 "

Overall, the positive audio clip and the caption reflected a theme of seeking encouragement and positive vibes from the audience, to which this audience did not disappoint. Providing evidence of the potential supportive nature of online communities during the exam period.

### *5.8.3. Insulting comments*

While predominantly supportive, some comments were identified for the subtheme, "insulting comments." These comments were often demeaning and showed the negative aspects of students' online experiences around educational assessment.

Comments like "Why you opening GCSE results when you look like a mum in there (sic) late 20s" on TikTok post FG3-PS-JB-98 (Figure 50) targets appearance over academic achievement, and can be seen as intended to be hurtful.



## Social Media Content 21 – TikTok – FG3 – Participant Sourced (contd. With comments.)

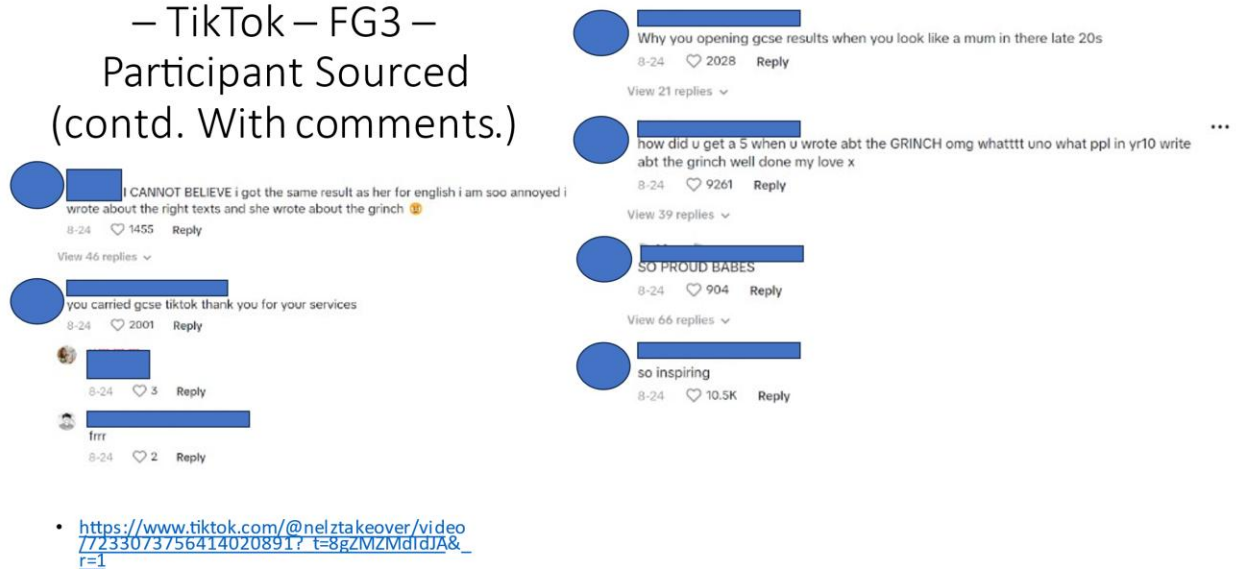


Figure 50: Comments on Social Media data FG3-PS-JB-98

Another comment on video PS-JN-2 uses a dismissive and potentially insulting tone, commenting:

"Five years of nonsense, big man ting".

In the video, a student shared their GCSE exam result with a family member, and the comment likely refers to the student's five years of education as 'nonsense', leading to their poor attainment.

Another direct insult:

"You need sleep, dumba\*s" (PS-ML-158).

This comment responded to a tweet (See Figure 51) with the caption, "Me at 2 am watching FreeScienceLessons #gcse2023". The tweet included a photo of the cartoon character SpongeBob from the television series SpongeBob SquarePants, crying while holding an iPhone, presumably watching the 'free science lessons'.

## Social Media Data PS-ML-158

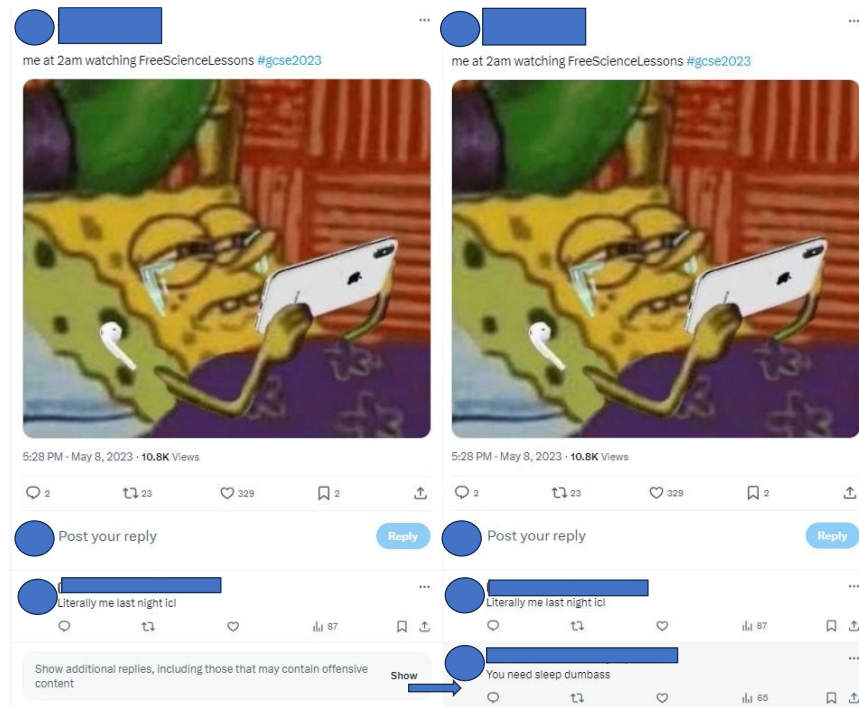


Figure 51: Social Media Data PS-ML-158

While the comment may suggest concern for the author's well-being by advising them to get some sleep, the word "dumba\*s" is a derogatory term that could be considered hurtful, especially when discussing academic performance. Moreover, the social media platform, X, concealed the comment requiring users to actively click to show additional replies, which they labelled "may contain offensive content" (See Figure 51), confirming the negative tone.

It is important to note that only 3% of all the comments data were coded as 'insulting'. This suggests that they represented a minimal aspect of students' online interactions about high-stakes assessments. However, their presence highlights the potential for both supportive and challenging interactions.

### 5.9. Conclusion

This chapter has presented eight key themes that were constructed via the reflexive thematic analysis of students' social media discourse and focus group interviews, illuminating the multilayered ways in which students experience and engage with high-

stakes assessment in social media spaces. These themes highlight the emotional intensity, critical perspectives, and creative expressions that characterise students' online narratives.

In the next chapter, I will revisit the theoretical concepts that guide this study and draw on the literature on assessment, student voice, and social media to discuss the findings (themes). I will discuss how these findings can be practically applied and the potential directions for future research.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

### 6. Discussion

#### 6.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings on students' high-stakes assessment experiences shared through social media. The research reveals five key insights that challenge traditional narratives about educational assessment:

1. How digital platforms have become spaces for emotional processing.
2. The emergence of new forms of student voice and critical disengagement
3. Methodological innovations in educational research using social media data, including an exploratory theoretical framework for understanding digital educational assessment experiences.
4. The complex power dynamics within assessment structures
5. The formation of assessment identities online.

Overall, the research shows that students are not passive recipients of assessment but active meaning-makers who use platforms like TikTok and Twitter to process, critique, and reimagine their academic journeys.

Each research question will be discussed in relation to existing theories and literature, highlighting the study's contributions to our understanding of students' experiences. The chapter also critically examines the study's strengths and limitations, proposes future research directions, and offers recommendations for educational stakeholders.

#### 6.2. RQ1: What are students' experiences of educational assessment as shared on social media?

Students in this study use social media to articulate, process, and make sense of their high-stakes assessment experiences. Themes 1 (Emotions) and 4 (Exam Responses)

directly answer the first research question. These themes jointly demonstrate how students use social media narratives to expose assessment as an emotional and critically engaged process. Through memes, videos, and comments, students' interactions make them active interpreters of their exam experiences. Students' experiences oscillate between raw vulnerability and celebratory achievement, all while they create collective narratives that challenge and sometimes complement traditional understanding of students' assessment experiences.

#### 6.2.1. Negative Emotions: "Worst day of my life"

The findings on exam stress (page 119) mirror Putwain's (2008b) research on test anxiety in secondary school GCSE students. Putwain found that high-stakes exams increased stress and negatively affected students' academic performance and well-being. Putwain and Symes (2012) found similar results for the adverse effects of test anxiety on assessment experience after surveying A-level psychology students, which complements the present study's participant sample. Understanding how test anxiety presents itself in students' outcomes and survey data is one thing. This study takes it a step further and illuminates how test anxiety is played out on social media.

Extreme emotional expressions, such as the tweet referencing suicidal thoughts after a difficult physics exam (page 120) emphasise existing concerns about the mental health implications of high-stakes testing. The intense pressure to perform well, especially in the UK context with school league tables (Putwain, 2009), coupled with the fear of failure (Putwain & Symes, 2012), can invoke emotional distress, especially when coupled with social media use, as investigated by Luthar et al. (2020). Yeo's (2021) concept of 'distress disclosure' is relevant because it shows how young people use social media to make their untellable stories 'tellable' by articulating challenging academic experiences online.

My findings indicate that students, teachers, and parents need greater awareness and sensitivity when interpreting emotionally charged assessment-related social media posts. The focus group participants' dismissal of some extreme emotions as "jokey"

(page 122) may reflect a broader societal tendency to downplay or trivialise mental health issues, particularly in online spaces. This finding dispels any assumption that all expressions of distress on social media are taken seriously by peers/young people, as Yeo's (2021) findings implied that it was parents and older people who trivialised online mental health disclosures.

#### 6.2.2. Positive Emotions: "All the hard work paid off."

Students' celebratory posts on social media (page 122) reflect Hans Selye's (1974) concept of 'eustress' or 'good stress'. He claimed that this type of stress can motivate individuals to achieve their goals, and the data shows how exam success generated motivational interactions between students online. Putwain and Symes's (2012) research shows how students' achievement goals mediate the relationship between test anxiety and performance. Recent studies by Greenhow and Lewin (2021) suggest that during global emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, online platforms, including social media, transformed students' motivation from an individual pursuit to a collective experience, where peer interactions and shared achievement narratives create new pathways for academic encouragement.

Theme 7 (Goals) captures students' positive experiences on social media. Students used assessment experiences shared on social media to reify their academic goals and monitor their progress (page 162). My findings partially contradict research that has shown the pitfalls of comparisons on social media, such as comparisons leading to rule-breaking behaviour (Luthar et al., 2020), negative self-concepts (Popat & Tarrant, 2023; Webber, 2017) and less emotional support (Shensa et al., 2016). Instead, the social media data shows how students used online comparisons as motivation and to set performance-oriented goals (page 160). These findings broadly support the work of Anderson and Peart (2016, p. 207) where students described the importance of peer support during high-stakes examinations, saying, "Everyone wants to study, so they're all tryin' to help you get the same grade they wanna get or even higher". Similar

sentiments are shared in the present study, where students use social media to encourage each other to reach their academic goals (page 171).

The emotions captured in Theme 1 are consistent with those in Pekrun et al. (2002) emotional framework, which found that students experience joy, relief, hope, surprise, and anger throughout the assessment process. Surprise and anger are pertinent in students' experiences of educational assessment, evident in Theme 4 (Responses).

### 6.2.3. Challenging Categorisations of students' experiences

The previous sections highlight the contradictory, often complex emotions and experiences students share online. To fully appreciate the complexity, it is important to critique the simplistic categorisation of students' digital interactions as inherently negative or positive, risky or beneficial. The EU Kids Online Research Framework (Livingstone et al., 2015, 2018) cautions against this reductive grouping and encourages researchers to take a nuanced perspective of children's digital engagement.

For example, a binary perspective might categorise social media data where students reference exam-related distress (pages 119-120) as either a risk because they included dangerous disclosures of mental health challenges. Or an opportunity because posting about their exam stress could provide a moment for potential support and connection with others. In reality, their tweets were simultaneously a cry for help and a form of emotional release. Students in the focus groups echoed this complexity as some viewed the exam stress tweets as “overdramatic” and comedic performance. In contrast, others empathised with the emotional distress and identified with its use as a tool to criticise exam boards.

Applying the framework to the data suggests that students' experiences of assessment as shared on social media are not simply good or bad. Their experiences are contextual and actively co-constructed through their use of and observation of assessment-related discourse on social media.

#### 6.2.4. Responses

Students criticise aspects of the exam system, from grade boundaries to exam content. Frustrated by what they perceived as narrow grade boundaries and unexpected material in the exams, they demonstrated their awareness of inequities in standardised assessments through discussions online and in the focus group (Theme 4, page 130). Their critical discourse concurs with Barrance (2019) and Barrance and Elwood (2018), who identified students' growing awareness and dissatisfaction with the structures that govern their academic experiences.

##### ***‘Grade boundaries move like trampolines.’***

In the literature review (page 38), I underlined the issue of assessment fairness, a theme powerfully reflected in students' social media discourse and focus group discussions. Social media posts echoed issues of fairness about the remnants of COVID-19 experiences (page 123) and fluctuations in grade boundaries (page 137).

The metaphorical description "Grade boundaries move like trampolines" captures students' perceptions of the unpredictability of high-stakes assessment.

Students' mixed understanding of grade boundaries in the present study accords with Barrance and Elwood's (2018) qualitative study. They found that students were confused about the grade ranges available for different GCSE exam tiers (i.e. foundation and higher). It is concerning that my findings show students' misconceptions about the purpose of adjusting grade boundaries, not just a lack of awareness. Richardson (2024) explains that these misconceptions are perhaps not helped by politicians interfering with exams (Watt, 2012) and the media (Burnett, 2012) frequently reporting that exams are getting 'easier'. Students in Elwood (2012, 2013) protested that their experiences were far from easy. However, some students in the present study fell into the cycle of describing other cohorts' experiences as 'easy' due to misunderstanding grade boundaries, saying, "The other year got a better deal than us. They had easier grade boundaries, but they learnt less (Stu3-FG4)".



The surprise, anger, anxiety and frustration that students experience about grade boundaries indicate the high-stakes attached to exam outcomes. The perceived unpredictability of grade boundaries, as illustrated in social media posts, can be explained by the concept of "assessment-related uncertainty," which has been shown to exacerbate student stress and anxiety (Cassady et al., 2024; Putwain, 2008b). The perception that grade boundaries are arbitrary or unfair leads to helplessness and disappointment for many students who describe falling short of higher grades by a single mark as a "kick in the teeth" (page 139). This brings into question students' perceptions of the fairness and transparency of assessment processes (Broadfoot, 2007; Gipps & Stobart, 2009; Nisbet & Shaw, 2020). One social media comment cut through the confusion: "Grade boundaries aren't published till after results day". These findings expose the problem, which is that students do not know how their grades are determined, and this uncertainty breeds anxiety. Perhaps educational institutions need to develop straightforward, accessible explanations of grade boundaries, which can help students better understand the assessment process and reduce their anxiety (See Section 6.9.1 for further recommendations).

### ***Exam Content Discrepancies***

This study supports the findings from my institution focused doctoral thesis, where participants described standardised tests as 'missing out whole topics.' (Dike-Oduah, 2022, p. 64). In theme 4 (page 130), students echoed similar frustrations. They used social media to lament unexpected or 'oversampled' topics in their assessments, resulting in a mismatch between what was taught and what was tested.

Focus group discussions evidenced this, as students noted that on a GCSE History exam, minor points on the specification received disproportionate coverage, which allegedly contradicted their classroom learning (page 131). These findings corroborate Messick's (1993, 1994) concept of "construct underrepresentation", which Downing and Haladyna (2004, p. 329) describe as when the 'test item content does not match the

examination specifications so that some content areas are oversampled while others are under-sampled’.

Shepard (1993) argues that assessments should accurately reflect the curriculum to provide a fair measure of student learning. While exams are designed to objectively assess student learning and not intentionally disadvantage students, the present findings reveal a complex reality. When exams fail to cover the content students have learned adequately, students feel unprepared and disadvantaged, and the test may result in an unfair or inaccurate assessment of a student’s competence, which undermines the validity of the assessment. One student’s raw reflections in a TikTok video illustrated the emotional strain of construct underrepresentation in their psychology A Level exam, saying, “we were, in fact, not protected from harm” (Figure 27, page 134).

Unique to this research is the humorous and sarcastic tones often used by students on social media to discuss these discrepancies. In addition, students’ use of visual images to represent what construct underrepresentation looked like (page 133, Figure 25) suggests that social media is a coping mechanism that allows them to share and manage their frustration and disappointment in a socially acceptable way. Billig’s (2005) research reveals the significance of humour in social settings. For students navigating the high-stakes assessment, jokes and memes become a shared language and transform individual anxiety into a collective experience of resilience.

These findings problematise the assumption of curriculum consistency and the idea of curriculum as exam specifications. Many schools shape their post-14 curricula by exam specifications (Barrance & Elwood, 2018), and one might assume that this promotes consistency across schools. However, my findings suggest that similar to Chapman (2010, p. 51), students are coached by their teachers to achieve more marks by focusing on some sections of the curriculum more than others, rather than encouraging students’ independence and originality of thought. This narrowing of curriculum delivery for exam purposes is what Stobart (2008) describes as ‘gaming’ strategies. Luke, Woods and Weir (2013, p. 19) agree that official exam specifications do not ‘necessarily

reflect what is taught or learned in classrooms' and vice versa, which students echo in their social media posts.

The findings extend Barrance and Elwood's (2018) research on the implications of exam discrepancies on students' opinions of how fair assessments are. However, unique to my study and findings is how students share their feelings of disadvantage on social media directly to exam boards (page 120). This represents a shift in students' engagement with assessment processes from passive criticism to active digital discourse.

### ***Critical Perceptions of Exam Boards***

As shared on social media, students' experiences of high-stakes assessments depict exam boards as hostile entities. The idea that exam boards are "villains" who are "flogging", "punishing", and "violating" students and "enjoy making students suffer" (pages 135-136) reflects a perception of the assessment system as adversarial, which can erode trust in the education system and contribute to a sense of disempowerment among students. This depiction is consistent with Kohn's (2000) critique of standardised testing in the USA context. Kohn (2000) and later Hagopian (2014) argue that high-stakes exams are often seen as punitive measures rather than supportive tools for learning. Exams, flawed or not, determine who gets rewarded or punished, who gets into their first-choice university and who does not meet the entry requirements for any university course. Counsell and Wright (2018) says that this creates a climate of fear, which, in turn, generates anger and resentment.

My findings reveal a power dynamic between exam boards and students, as students express their annoyance with exam boards' timetabling decision to put big GCSE exams such as Maths and History on the same day (page 119). Students have no autonomy regarding exam scheduling, and one could argue that the scheduling issues they experience are a form of construct irrelevance (Downing & Haladyna, 2004; Messick, 1993). In other words, students were measured on their competence in GCSE Maths and History and their ability to cope with two big exams on the same day. These findings

challenge the notion of exams as accurate, neutral measures of ability and instead highlight the power dynamics at play in the assessment process (Shumake & Wendler, 2017). The implications for this kind of construct-irrelevance were shared by students who, in focus groups (page 119), said, “When I had three exams in one day, I couldn't revise for every single one. I had to like sacrifice one of them” (Stu7-FG3). Students also described such scheduling of multiple exams on the same day as the “worst day” of their lives and shared that they “cried in the morning” of those exams (Stu5-FG4).

Based on the above, policy and practice could be different if exam boards view students as the experts on their assessment experiences. There may be a need to invite students into the decision-making process regarding exam timetabling and to provide further support in preparing students for sitting multiple exams in one day. Doing so may minimise the impact of construct irrelevance on students' assessment competencies and acknowledge students as key stakeholders whose perspectives shape assessment practices.

This complements Freire's (1970, p. 81) concept of critical pedagogy, whereby students are ‘no longer docile listeners’ but are now ‘critical co-investigators in dialogue’ with exam boards, their teachers and each other. I argue that Freire would be delighted to see how social media empowers students to question and challenge oppressive structures within the education system. Students do not just use social media to challenge, but they use it to bring about change, as Dike-Oduah (2022, p. 87) observed in her study of how students used social media to organise and challenge the teacher-assessed grades versus calculated grades debacle under the backdrop of COVID-19 (Satariano, 2020). Their protest eventually led to the government conceding and allowing teacher-assessed grades to be used over algorithm-generated grades, which students felt reflected inequities within education, such as the stark difference between the algorithm-generated grades of state versus private schools and schools in poorer versus affluent areas (BBC News, 2020b). These findings and the literature suggest a need to reimagine assessment processes and structures by centring students'

experiences and acknowledging their expertise in understanding educational assessment.

### *Revisiting Criticality and Disengagement in Student Reactions to High-Stakes Assessments*

The findings reveal that students use social media to express their thoughts about assessments, which is deeply entwined with their critical engagement. This echoes McCarthy's (2022) reframing of disengagement as a form of criticality discussed earlier in the Literature Review chapter (page 53). Social media provides students with a platform to voice their dissatisfaction, fears, and critiques about high-stakes assessments, and the findings show how students critically engage with the assessment system when their experiences are incongruent with their expectations.

The findings in theme 4 (page 130) demonstrate how perceived unfairness in assessment provokes students to critically reflect publicly on social media. A TikTok video with the caption "I can't believe all that stress for nothing – the exams were a joke" (page 138) exemplifies this. What appears dismissive on the surface may represent a genuine frustration about the exam's perceived irrelevance and a broader critique of academic structures prioritising high-stakes assessment.

Social media allows students to express their critical disengagement in ways that traditional educational settings may not encourage. The Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) aspect of the Social Media and Assessment Framework described in the theoretical framework chapter (page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**) illustrates the power of students' collective digital responses to assessment. Students' individual experiences amalgamate with others' experiences when shared online. The collective challenge and questioning of the validity and equity of exam systems demands consideration from exam boards, schools and policymakers to address. Engaging with students' perspectives could contribute to more equitable and supportive assessment practices if these educational stakeholders genuinely acknowledge students' perspectives.

### 6.3. RQ2: What do students disclose?

Research Question 2 aimed to explore the content students share and identify the types of information they reveal about their assessment experiences. Students' disclosures range from unfiltered exam stress and moments of academic triumph to sophisticated critiques of assessment structures and sharing revision techniques and exam preparation tips. This study finds that external factors such as popular culture, humour, and audience reactions influence students' disclosure of their high-stakes assessment experiences on social media (Theme 5). These disclosures are often shared in creative and visual ways (Theme 6), offering knowledge that both complements and, at times, challenges existing theories and research on assessment and students' experiences. The key findings of RQ2 are examined in more detail below, integrating qualitative data from social media and focus group interviews.

#### 6.3.1. Key Influences

This study found that external factors such as popular culture, humour, and audience reactions influenced students' disclosure of their high-stakes assessment experiences on social media (Theme 5, page 140). Three key influences are identified in the data:

- COVID-19 disruptions created academic uncertainty.
- Parental expectations significantly shaped students' digital disclosures
- Peer dynamics drove students' online sharing behaviours.

External influences shape how students interpret and share their assessment experiences, with factors like COVID-19 disruptions, parental expectations, and peer dynamics driving their sharing behaviours. To further understand how students navigate these stressors, the following section will explore Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model (1984).

#### ***Transactional Model***

Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model (1984), later augmented by Folkman (2011), provides an understanding of how students cope with stress. This model argues that, firstly, stress comes from how an individual assesses a situation and decides if it is

stressful. Secondly, the individuals' perception of their resources and ability to cope with the stress.

The data shows students strategically using social media as a resource to manage exam stress. One student explained, "Oh, so I did bad in an exam. When I search it up, and everyone else did bad, it makes me feel better"(page 126). The student initially appraises the exam as a source of stress due to poor performance. Applying the transactional model, the students' secondary appraisal of the situation is seen by using social media to seek out others who also performed poorly. The student uses a problem-focused coping strategy to minimise the significance of their failure. This strategy helps the student reframe the stressor as less threatening when others share similar experiences.

My findings also illustrate how students use humour as an emotion-focused coping strategy within the framework of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional model of stress and coping. For instance, in one tweet (page 144), a student initially appraises the upcoming physics exam as a highly stressful event and anticipates poor performance. By employing dark humour and joking about their parents' physical reaction to their expected failure as "longitudinal waves," a term from their physics specification, the student reinterprets the stressful situation from a source of dread into a shared experience that can be laughed about online.

### ***Assessment Dysmorphia***

In addition to reframing the stressor as explained by the transactional model, focus group discussions reveal how students feel pressured to conform to online opinions about exam difficulty. Students openly shared that they would "lie through their teeth" (page 125, EM-FG2") if they found the paper easy, but others on social media found it challenging. The fear of being an outlier leads to self-doubt and a distorted perception of their performance. Others say that when their perception of an exam does not match the prevailing sentiment on social media, it makes them doubt their performance and potentially distorts their perceptions of assessment difficulty. This suggests that social

media may act as a filter and contour students' assessment experiences to the point that they no longer recognise their reality.

These findings are explained by Richardson's (2022, p. 70) concept of 'Assessment Dysmorphia'. Like body dysmorphia affects individuals' perceptions of their physical appearance, social media affects students' perceptions of their assessment performance. As students compare their individual performance against the collective stories shared on social media, social media's group narratives may distort students' perceptions of their own academic performance.

TikTok comments in this study, such as "Praying for 16 markers on Zimbardo and types of LTM 🙏" and "Praying it's not the role of father or Schaffer Emerson 🙏🙏🙏," (page 172) provide another contemporary lens to examine Assessment Dysmorphia. I was struck by how similar these digital 'prayers' are to Richardson's (2022) vivid example of a student writing to Santa Claus about exam success. Students' core assessment anxieties persist, even as the ways they express them evolve with technology.

### ***Social Cognitive Theory***

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory provides another framework for understanding how students' behaviours, thoughts, and feelings are influenced by observing others, particularly within the context of social media. This theory helped me understand how students learn from one another on social media and how they are influenced by what they see and hear. This was particularly helpful in addressing my research questions about what students disclose and how they interact with one another.

Bandura and Jeffrey (1973) describe the processes involved in learning from observation as attentional, retention, vicarious reinforcement (motivational), motor reproduction, and direct reinforcement. Students pay attention to the dominant narratives about assessment experiences on social media, observing which types of posts are 'rewarded' through likes, views, reposts, saves, and high comment



engagement. They retain this information in their memory and are vicariously reinforced to seek similar rewards. When the opportunity arises, they recall what they previously observed on social media and use their available resources to reproduce similar behaviours. This leads to direct rewards for their actions. Participants in focus groups explained that the rewards for posting assessment-related content were for “clout” (page 167, Stu4-FG4) and “views, attention, and entertainment” (Stu6-FG3).

At the intersection of assessment dysmorphia and Social Cognitive Theory, students admit that they will downplay their success or even pretend to struggle if the dominant and most rewarded social media narrative portrays the exam as particularly difficult (page 125). This behaviour illustrates how social modelling on social media can influence and sometimes distort students’ private perceptions of their abilities.

When social media distorts students’ views of their performance, it becomes harder for teachers to address and correct misconceptions about the assessment content or difficulty. This distortion may hinder students’ academic growth and learning outcomes. Therefore, like Richardson (2022, p. 114) posits, schools should promote open discussions about the limitations of tests, acknowledging the reality that individuals are not perfect and cannot excel at everything. Schools and parents must also teach students how to critically engage with social media content.

### 6.3.2. Representations

#### ***Unexpected Faces of Assessment***

My findings reveal students’ creative use of visual storytelling to disclose layered assessment experiences (Theme 6, page 151). Social media allows students to transform traditional assessment narratives of test anxiety, post-exam debriefs, and exam success into creative, multimodal artefacts. Students use memes, videos, and innovative images to present their experiences. Unexpectedly, celebrities like Ronaldo, Drake, and Usher (page 145), as well as politicians like Nigel Farage (page 156) and sports personalities Shannon Sharpe and Ronnie Coleman (page 154), were vehicles for

students to create relatable content about high-stakes assessments that resonated with peers.

The visual representation of exam questions, as detailed in Theme 6, adds another dimension to understanding how students process and express their assessment experiences. It was particularly striking how students memorised the exam question and creatively used videos, memes, and images to recall and share it on social media (page 154). This again suggests that students are not passive actors in assessment but actively engage in meaning-making through visual media.

The focus on visual representation also supports Freedman's (2003) concept of "visual culture" in education, where students' engagement with visual media is integral to their learning and expression. The findings suggest that visual culture, as facilitated by social media, allows students to externalise their internal experiences, making them more tangible and relatable to others. The inclusion of visuals is yet another example of how students make their untellable stories tellable (Yeo, 2021).

In his chapter "The Power of Showing," Tuovinen (2022) argues that 'visual' does not just mean 'representation'. His observation is relevant to the present research because visuals (like memes, images, or videos) are not simply representations of students' thoughts. Instead, they are emblems of meaning-making and subject to vast interpretations by those observing. The historical context of visual data in this field of research is pertinent, as my first study found that 31% of the 1,036 assessment-related tweets in the content analysis included an image or a GIF (Dike-Oduah, 2018, p. 58). Six years later, 98% of the social media data in the present study consists of an image, GIF, or video. This shows the rapid increase of visual content on social media over time and confirms that the present research paid attention to this crucial element of students' assessment experiences as shared on social media.

Henry (2012) also critiques the use of the word 'visual' and argues that we wrongly assume that making things visible is a natural and homogenous process for all people.

He also contends that visuals are complex products of consciousness that can vary widely in meaning depending on who is viewing them. When applied to the present study, my findings show that students' interpretation of the same visual content varies significantly. For example, in focus groups, meme critiquing an exam board (page 72) was interpreted differently by different students - some saw playful indifference, and others saw a systemic violation from the exam board. This supports Henry's (2012) idea that the interpretation of visual artefacts is unique to the observer and should be recognised accordingly.

### ***Multimodal Disclosures***

Every theme in the research incorporated visual content. Theories of multimodal literacy (Kress, 2010; Mills, 2015; Mills & Unsworth, 2017; Serafini, 2015) help to understand how students combine different modes of media, such as visual, textual, and auditory, to disclose their assessment experiences and create complex narratives about their academic experiences.

A simple text about exam frustration transforms when accompanied by an image of a woman holding a brick, ready to attack an exam board (Figure 19, page 119), or when exam papers are described as "scrumptious" (page 137), adding a passionate, colourful layer to their expression. Similarly, a photo of a student's low exam results might stir sympathy. However, a video capturing their mother's reaction to those results (page 149, Figure 36) deepens the emotional impact and provides a fuller picture of the consequences of these assessments.

Tversky and Kahneman's (1981) Framing theory can explain students' choice of communication strategies. Students use food-related language and eccentric imagery to favourably frame their assessment experiences. For example, describing an exam board as "zesty" (page 70) might represent a coping mechanism that reframes negative experiences into more manageable narratives and may help students cope with the stress and anxiety associated with assessments.

The concept of a "Life blog" by Kress (2010, p. 192) describes as a 'multimodal representation of a user's activity with a device.' In the context of my research, social media functions as a multimodal diary, transforming students' assessment experiences into visual artefacts. These artefacts are not just records; they are, as LeJeune (1999, p. 202) notes, a way for individuals to leave a 'trace of their existence in the world.' These visual and textual artefacts are also reusable, as each piece from a "life blog" can be reposted, edited, and shared across different users' devices.

The ability to transfer these personal "life blogs" to others demonstrates how social media allows students to reclaim the narratives about their assessment experiences. The notion of "reclaiming the narrative" resonates with Brown and Millar's (2019) work on student empowerment. By sharing their raw, multimodal representations of their assessment experiences, Macapugay and Nakamura (2024, p. 5) argue that such storytelling is an empowering mechanism for students to "challenge dominant narratives" (i.e. national media outlets) and replace them with counternarratives" (i.e. their true perspectives).

### 6.3.3. Goals

Students use social media as collaborative learning spaces to:

- Share revision techniques.
- Set performance-oriented goals.
- Seek peer validation and support.
- Monitor academic progress.

Their disclosures (page 160) show how they use videos, comments and hashtags like "#sociology" and "#alevelsociology" to discover and share subject-specific revision resources (page 127) in pursuit of their academic goals.

Peer-generated revision content is considered a desired resource. Students seek and share revision techniques, exam preparation strategies, and academic advice with remarkable intentionality. One student captured this approach:

"I feel like I struggle a lot with my 16 markers, and I feel like a lot of other people can relate, so having someone go through it with you is helpful" (page 127).

Students directly request and share academic advice, with comments like "Give some advice on maths and science, please", demonstrating their proactive approach to goal achievement. TikTok videos provided step-by-step guides for tackling exam questions, such as strategies for 30-mark sociology essays or techniques for high-marking 16-mark psychology essays.

These findings challenge existing research on digital interactions. Unlike studies suggesting that social media comparisons lead to negative outcomes (Luthar et al., 2020; Popat & Tarrant, 2023), the data shows that students use online platforms as collaborative motivational spaces. These findings broadly support the work of Anderson and Peart (2016, p. 207) where students described the importance of peer support during high-stakes examinations, saying, "Everyone wants to study, so they're all tryin' to help you get the same grade they wanna get or even higher'. Similar sentiments were shared in this study, where students encouraged each other to reach their goals on social media (page 171).

Webber's (2017) concerns about social media's negative impact on self-concept are partially disrupted. Instead of destructive comparison, students create supportive digital environments that transform potential anxiety into mutual academic encouragement (page 170).

Interestingly, students' goal-oriented disclosures go beyond individual achievement. They create collaborative learning goals, saying, "I will pass psychology paper 1 WITH FLYING COLOURS, and so will everyone else" (page 172), as well as crowd-sourced revision strategies, exam predictions, and academic advice. This suggests a shift from competitive to cooperative academic engagement when students use social media to discuss assessments.

#### 6.4. RQ3: What are the interchanges between students in the comments sections of TikTok and Twitter?

The comments sections on TikTok and Twitter contain rich information on how students interact with each other regarding educational assessments. Through Theme 3 (engagement) and Theme 8 (Dialogues), this study found that students use social media comments to:

- Create supportive networks.
- Challenge institutional narratives.
- Negotiate collective academic experiences.

##### 6.4.1. Social Identity Theory – The power of “we”

The findings in Theme 8, dialogues, can be explained by Tajfel (1974) and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory. Social Identity Theory posits that belonging to a group gives the individual a sense of belonging, identity and pride. In the context of social media, platforms like TikTok enable students to form digital peer groups where shared experiences, such as exam results, foster a collective identity. For example, the comments under a TikTok video where students share their exam results include expressions of shared relief (page 168). Students validate each other's experiences and reinforce their collective identity as part of a shared academic journey.

Additional comments (page 172) *such as* "I will pass psychology paper 1 WITH FLYING COLOURS, and so will everyone else. We will all slay, and all the 16 markers will literally write themselves," and "We were, in fact, not protected from harm," reflects a strong sense of collective identity and mutual support among students and can be understood through the lens of Social Identity Theory. The use of inclusive language ("we will all slay") emphasises group solidarity and the shared goal of success, which helps to strengthen the group's social identity. In this context, "slay" is informal empowering slang that means 'to excel' or 'perform exceptionally well' at something. This collective optimism through affirmations like "all the 16 markers will literally write themselves" boosts group morale and, according to focus group discussions, helps to reduce

anxiety. According to social identity theory, such expressions reinforce in-group cohesion, where the students see themselves as part of a supportive, high-achieving community as they perceive their success and struggles as interconnected with the group.

Students use social media comments to seek reassurance, share their experiences, and compare their performance (page 125, Theme 3). For instance, students in this study communicated how, after doing poorly in an exam, they felt better seeing that others on social media had similar experiences:

*"Oh, so I did bad in an exam. When I search it up, and everyone else did bad, it makes me feel better (SR-FG2)."*

Similarly, Dredge et al. (2014) highlights the role of online platforms in encouraging social connections, which can alleviate feelings of isolation, particularly during stressful periods like exams.

Interestingly, as discussed in RQ2, when students' individual experiences are misaligned with the group experience, my findings show that students use social media platforms to either conform to the group norm or change their perceptions and attitudes to fit it.

Focus group interviews extended this view and showed that students engage in confirmation bias (Klayman, 1995).

Confirmation bias is the tendency to seek out or interpret new information in a way that supports one's existing beliefs. Students used social media comments to see whether others shared their specific exam experiences to hold on to their favoured hypotheses about exam difficulty and receive validation. One student mentioned continuing to "pree until like someone else has done bad" (MM-FG2), indicating that they continue to selectively search ('pree') social media posts until they find a post that aligns with their own experiences. Others commented, "Did anyone else not finish the question? There was like no time" (FG2-RS-190), again seeking confirmation of their hypothesis that there was insufficient time to answer the question. Peruzzi (2019) supports these

findings and found that online users were prone to selecting information that confirmed their worldview, which created polarised groups around shared narratives. This confirms how social media interactions shape group identity and brings into question the risk of echo chambers and misinformation, especially if students do not regard, value, or attend to dissenting information on assessment.

Contrastingly, Brown and Ellison (2021, p. 169) found that students in their study would 'not ask public questions about how their friends were performing academically' or if they were happy with their university experiences; instead, they felt constrained by offline social norms, which pushed low-income students to use private channels of communication such as direct messages on social media and text messaging within their network. This is perhaps not dissimilar to face-to-face settings, as people are generally more likely to ask sensitive questions privately. However, it is argued that this self-presentational norm limits the potential for students to take advantage of the efficient features of public online communication and limits the ability for other students to see and benefit from their questions.

#### 6.4.2. Individual or Collective Experiences

My findings show that students' individual assessment experiences are continuously negotiated through collective social media discourse. Students shape their personal narratives to reflect group sentiments (page 125), blurring the distinction between individual and collective experiences.

Burr's (2015) social constructionist perspective explains that individual experiences are not isolated but inherently intertwined with group interactions. This complicates the idea of students having "authentic" individual assessment experiences in these digital contexts and raises key questions for future research, particularly the challenge of isolating individual assessment experiences from the collective views posted online.

The findings from this research reflect Foucault's (1977 cited in Phillips, 2023) assertion that individuals cannot exist without an existing social network. Individuals are



constructed through their interactions within existing social structures, and social media serves as a contemporary extension of these social structures, where students are introduced to a context rich in language, norms (i.e., hashtags), customs, and social relations that shape their identities and approaches to assessment. In this study, how students negotiate and express their identities about assessment on platforms like TikTok and Twitter can be examples of how our sense of self, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts emerge through interactions with others. Gergen's (1985) idea that individuals are a network of various voices from the past and present is relevant. The collective experiences and sentiments shared online become part of the 'voices' influencing how students perceive themselves and their assessment experiences.

#### 6.4.3. 'We' is not always inclusive on social media.

Social constructionism criticises how socially constructed realities, such as those formed within online communities, may favour certain groups or interests over others. For example, the norms and standards often reflected and reinforced on social media platforms about high-stakes assessments may inadvertently benefit students from privileged backgrounds. Students with access to smartphones and social media accounts can easily engage with and contribute to online study groups, access shared materials, and participate to help them prepare for their exams. However, students who do not have access to these technologies are excluded from these digital spaces, which can put them at a disadvantage (Schradie, 2012).

My study observed this when students shared exam tips and experiences on platforms like TikTok (page 127). Ultimately, those unable to access these platforms due to a lack of technological resources miss out on these peer-to-peer learning opportunities. In addition, even if they had access to smartphones, TikTok videos that emphasise "top tips" for acing exams might rely on study techniques or materials more accessible to wealthier students, such as expensive textbooks or private tutors. This can create an implicit standard that disadvantages students who lack access to the same resources, thereby perpetuating existing educational inequalities. Brown, Wohn and Ellison (2016)

observed this in their research, which found that while low-income, first-generation prospective university students could access a wide variety of information about universities online, the utility of the information was limited as they struggled to make sense of the material.

More recently, Ragnedda, Ruiu and Addeo (2022), and Brown and Ellison's (2021) findings suggest that low-income students are burdened with determining how to effectively use social media for academic information sharing. This exclusion reinforces the social construction of educational success in a way that benefits those with more resources while disadvantaging students from less privileged backgrounds who cannot fully participate in or benefit from these online educational communities.

Social constructionism, therefore, offers a valuable critique of my research. It helps to understand how students' collective experiences of high-stakes assessment on social media might reflect and reinforce specific group identities or narratives that may not fully represent every individual's actual experience. Future social media-centred research should think critically about whose experiences and perspectives are being amplified and whose might be overlooked or distorted.

Lybeck, Koiranen, and Koivula's (2024, p. 1161) digital inequality study refers to the Bourdieu-inspired concept of digital capital, which is characterised by one's access to devices and social networks to engage with digital technology. They posit that digital capital is synonymous with other forms of capital. For example, digital capital reflects cultural capital regarding the specific skills and knowledge one can gain and social capital regarding the link to social networks. When determining how social media is used for sharing assessment experiences, those with greater digital capital, including access to technology and well-established social networks, are more likely to participate effectively in these online conversations. This further reinforces previous studies which show how digital capital functions as both cultural and social capital, where students' ability to share and engage with academic content on social media is mediated by their

access to these digital resources and understanding of the information provided (Brown et al., 2016; Brown & Ellison, 2021).

According to Ofsted's (2024) School Inspection Handbook, schools in England are mandated to contribute to children's cultural capital by providing the essential knowledge that students need to be educated, creative and successful citizens. The discussion of the intersection of digital capital and social media use highlights the need for greater institutional support in digital spaces to create supportive, inclusive online environments, especially for students from underrepresented or low-income backgrounds. This study's findings include examples of how universities (page 150) and exam boards (page 121) use social media to engage with students, which is a positive development. However, Brown and Ellison's (2021) findings suggest that a more tailored approach to information sharing online is necessary for students from all backgrounds to benefit from digital engagement fully. Brown (2021, p. 178) recommends that one way to address these disparities is to "develop institutional resources" that are directly accessible and specifically targeted toward disadvantaged students and underrepresented groups. In practice, this means that educational stakeholders will use social media and other digital mediums to offer tailored practical resources such as exam guidance, peer mentoring, and mental health support through familiar platforms like TikTok, ensuring that students from all backgrounds can benefit from digital engagement.

#### 6.4.4. Emotional Contagion Theory

My analysis of the focus group transcripts and social media data finds that social media acts as both a mirror and a window to student emotions. While humans do not have USB sticks lodged in their brains, digital screens for eyes, electric wires for limbs and hashtags for our mouths, it is argued that social media has become an 'extension of self', allowing users to navigate a digital environment that mirrors and expands their offline realities.

Social media assessment-related content reflects students' anxieties, successes, and failures while shaping how these experiences are interpreted and shared. Emotional contagion theory explains this as emotions spreading from one person to another. Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (1993) suggest that people tend to unconsciously mimic the emotional expressions, postures, and tones of others, which in turn leads them to experience similar emotions. Herrando and Constantinides's (2021) recent systematic review discusses how this process can occur in face-to-face interactions and online settings, where shared content evokes contagious emotional responses.

The TikTok and Twitter comments analysed in this study reveal how emotions like relief, anxiety, and joy are collectively experienced and amplified (page 168). These shared moments create a feedback loop of emotional reinforcement, where students see their feelings reflected in others and feel validated.

Wakefield and Wakefield's (2018) social media experiment on emotional contagion found that people felt greater anxiety after reading negative product reviews or customer experiences. Similarly, Pera (2018) looked at the psychological consequences of Facebook use and found that positive news on Facebook brings about contentment through emotional contagion, whereas negative news causes discomfort. Pera (2018) argues that the contagion effect is more powerful when the news is associated with a strong tie, such as a shared identity between the reader and the author. The latter is reminiscent of social identity theory. This study explains why students who see themselves as having a shared identity (i.e., being A Level or GCSE students) attach more semantic meanings to social media posts by people within their in-group.

Students preferred online educational content from their peers (in-group) rather than from teachers (out-group). Relatability (page 127) trumps traditional notions of authoritative sources (McGrew et al., 2018), creating an interesting tension between accessibility and reliability. While students recognised the potential risks of relying on peer-generated content, saying:

*"I don't want to learn this whole technique from another student in case it doesn't work in the actual exam" (SG-FG1).*

The immediate emotional connection and relatability often outweighed concerns about accuracy. Given the lack of formal gatekeepers and the diversity of content and authors on social media, it is difficult to determine credibility online (Hajli et al., 2015). This highlights a gap in the existing literature regarding how students balance the emotional appeal of relatable online content with the need for reliable information. These implications echo Boyd's (2014, p. 180) and Brown and Ellison's (2021) reminder that educators are essential in 'helping youth navigate information-rich online environments'.

The present study also uncovers the dark side of emotional contagion. Negative comments, though less frequent in the findings, can spread quickly and significantly impact the emotional atmosphere of an online space (Wakefield & Wakefield, 2018). Although only 3.4% of comments were coded as 'insulting,' their impact cannot be overlooked. For example, one insulting comment on TikTok video FG3-PS-JB-98, targets a student's appearance rather than academic achievement: *"Why you opening GCSE results when you look like a mum in there (sic) late 20s"*. This finding indicates the dual nature of emotional contagion in online environments, where supportive and harmful emotions can be amplified.

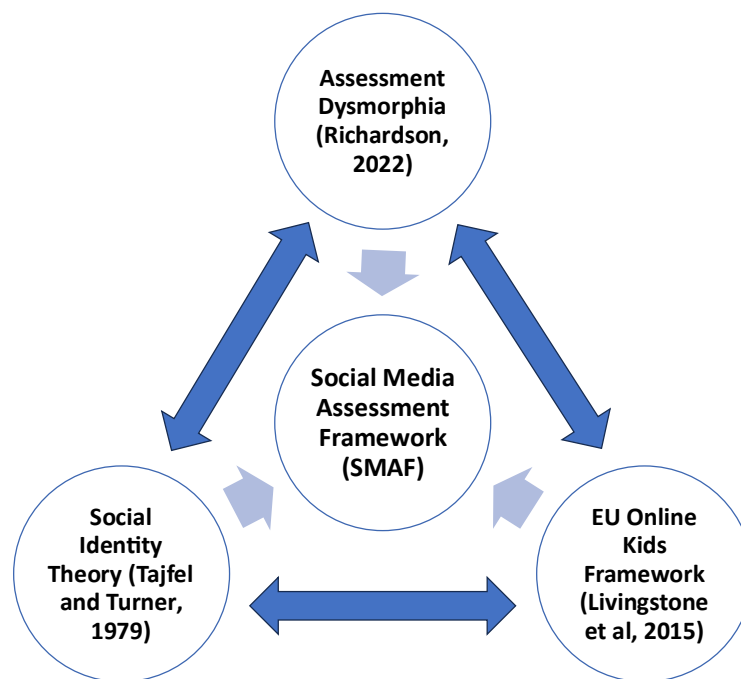
## 6.5. The Social Media Assessment Framework (SMAF):

### Synthesising Social Media, Assessment, and Students' Identities

At the heart of my work is the attempt to construct something new that bridges the two distinct worlds of assessment and social media. As highlighted in the literature review (Chapter 3), a critical gap exists in understanding how students engage with educational assessment discourse on social media platforms. While existing studies (see Cagas, 2022; Khlaif & Salha, 2021; Tang & Hew, 2017) explore general educational uses of social media, and separate concepts and theories exist to understand social media behaviour and students' assessment experiences, no integrated theoretical framework currently specifically explains how students engage with educational assessment

through social media platforms. This theoretical gap, coupled with the research findings, revealed a clear need for a new framework to capture the complex intersection between students' social media behaviours and assessment experiences.

The exploratory Social Media Assessment Framework (SMAF), which I developed from the findings of this study, addresses this gap by integrating three key theoretical perspectives previously presented in the literature review: Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979); the psychologically grounded concept of Assessment Dysmorphia (Richardson, 2022); and the EU Kids Online Research Framework (Livingstone, Mascheroni, Staksrud, 2015, 2018). When thoughtfully connected (See Figure 52 below), these concepts and theories provided a new and developing lens to examine the research questions and understand students' assessment experiences as shared on social media.



*Figure 52: Social Media Assessment Framework Diagram*

The EU Online Kids framework situates the research and, consequently, the framework within the online world. It provides a foundation for online research studies that involve

children and adolescents. Social Identity Theory, when considered in isolation, suggests that group membership provides a sense of identity, pride, and belonging. However, research has yet to acknowledge that, as students navigate GCSE and A-Levels together online, their social identity is also unfolding in digital spaces, hence the connection with the EU Online Kids Framework and assessment more generally.

Assessment Dysmorphia is extended when connected to Social Identity Theory and the EU Online Kids Framework. I use the example of how, when one takes a photo or selfie on social media, one can add a filter to change and distort the way they look. In the same way, when students take a test and then go onto social media (EU Online Kids Framework) to engage with assessment-related content, especially content from their in-groups and out-groups (Social Identity Theory), there is a chance that their engagement online can act as a filter to distort their assessment experiences. (See section 6.4.2). The synthesis of these three theories helped to establish an understanding of students' assessment identities in the online world, which has not been done before.

#### 6.5.1. Social Media Assessment Framework Table Overview

Table 8 below briefly outlines each contributing theoretical perspective to the Social Media and Assessment Framework. I signpost their section in the Literature Review Chapter, briefly explain their relevance to the research, and critically consider the strengths and limitations of each contributing theory.

Table 8: Social Media Assessment Framework Table Summary

<b>Theoretical Perspective</b>	<b>Brief Explanation and relevance to the research</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Limitations and how SMAF overcomes</b>
<b>Social Identity Theory (Section 3.5)</b>	<p>Explores how group membership influences one's identity and behaviour in social settings.</p> <p>Reveals how students navigate group membership and their academic identity in social media spaces where peer dynamics and self-presentation are intensified. Analyses how group norms can shape students' narratives of high-stakes assessment.</p>	Highlights group dynamics when analysing TikTok and Twitter.	<p>May overlook individual differences and private reflections or perspectives.</p> <p>The SMAF recognises that, as students navigate GCSE and A Levels together online, their individual identities are also unfolding in digital spaces. This connection is made possible through the EU Kids Online Framework.</p>
<b>Assessment Dysmorphia (Section 3.2.4)</b>	<p>Describes distorted perceptions of the purpose of testing, academic performance, and its psychological impacts, which are intensified in digital spaces.</p> <p>Shows how social media intensifies comparison and self-representation and amplifies anxiety related to assessments. Highlights how social media distorts perceptions of academic performance.</p>	Offers a novel perspective linking psychological distortions and social media's role in test anxiety.	<p>Limited research evidence in the context of social media. May risk pathologising expected/typical (i.e. exam stress) adolescent behaviours, especially in academic testing contexts.</p> <p>The SMAF extends Assessment Dysmorphia by connecting it to Social Identity Theory and the EU Kids Online Framework, recognising that when students engage with assessment-related content on social media, especially from their in-groups, their online engagement can act as a filter to distort their assessment experiences.</p>
<b>The EU Kids Online Research Framework (Section 3.3.3)</b>	<p>Investigates how children and adolescents engage with digital environments, focusing on agency and digital ecology.</p> <p>Provides a holistic understanding of students' interactions in digital spaces and analyses multi-level mediators (i.e. social-level, country-level) that shape assessment narratives.</p>	Provides a comprehensive, international framework for studying children's digital engagement, highlighting the importance of agency and context.	<p>The framework has limited application, as it was not originally designed to explain assessment-related discourse online or for the digital behaviours of older students (i.e., students above 16 years old).</p> <p>The SMAF helps to overcome these limitations by situating the research and, consequently, the framework within the field of high-stakes assessment for adolescents, which has not been done before.</p>



### 6.5.2. Social Media Assessment Framework In Action

The value of SMAF is in its ability to make sense of the multifaceted experiences of students navigating high-stakes assessment as shared on social media. This section will showcase the framework in action, using specific examples from the findings to demonstrate how the SMAF is integrated together, how it emerged from the data, and how it effectively explains the complex assessment-social media dynamics at play.

#### ***Memes, Anxiety and Social Connection***

The findings show students using humour (Theme 5) and memes (Theme 6) to cope with exam stress while seeking validation in comments (Theme 8). One example is seen in Figure 33 on page 144, where a student shared a meme about the sounds of their parents beating them being longitudinal waves, a physics concept, after a challenging exam. The Social Media Assessment Framework (SMAF) provides a lens to understand these findings. Social Identity Theory explains that students create and share content that resonates with their in-group (fellow GCSE and A-Level students), reinforcing their shared identity as test-takers. However, this humour can also be understood through Assessment Dysmorphia, as it may be a way to downplay the anxiety associated with exams, potentially distorting students' perceptions of the high-stakes nature of the assessment. While the EU Kids Online Research Framework highlights students actively using social media to cope with stress and seek support, showcasing their agency in navigating the online environment, it also reminds us to consider the potential risks, such as the normalisation of violence or the downplaying of parental pressure.

#### ***Collective Complaint: "AQA Flogged Us"***

Students' experiences with high-stakes assessments went beyond the exam hall, as they openly shared their critical dialogues about assessment structures and processes on social media (Themes 4). As evidenced by the comment "AQA flogged us" (Figure 27, page 134) on a TikTok video, students used social media to voice their frustrations with exam boards and perceived unfairness in the assessment system. The Social Media Assessment Framework (SMAF) helps to break down the dynamics at play in these online critiques. Social Identity Theory suggests that by expressing their shared

grievances, students create a sense of solidarity and fortify their identity as members of a group that feels victimised by the outgroup (exam boards). Assessment Dysmorphia illuminates these sentiments, as the perception that exam boards are deliberately making exams difficult can lead to a distorted view of the assessment process and students' own abilities, which can lead to feelings of helplessness and disempowerment. The EU Kids Online Research Framework provides another dimension by highlighting students' agency in using social media to challenge the system. However, it also brings to the fore the potential risks of online engagement, such as exposure to misinformation or the spread of negativity in the comment sections.

### ***Decoding Students' Emotional Responses to Assessment***

As discussed in section 6.2, students share a wide range of emotions about high-stakes assessment, from celebratory joy to extreme distress (Theme 1). However, the dialogues in response to these expressions are complex and varied (Theme 8). For example, a tweet (Figure 20, page 121) where a student expressed suicidal thoughts after a challenging exam elicited responses ranging from genuine concern to dismissive jokes. When SMAF is applied, a layered interpretation of students' emotional assessment dialogues is seen. Social Identity Theory emphasises the impact of group norms on emotional expression, with some students potentially downplaying or dismissing extreme emotions to maintain in-group cohesion. This can also manifest as students feigning emotions and actively seeking social media assessment-related content that confirms their experience, no matter how unique, to affirm their in-group identity (see section 5.3.1). The latter is evidence of Social Identity Theory's assumption that students will seek out information that reinforces their existing assessment schemas and will disregard information that is inconsistent with their understanding of assessment to maintain their in-group identity. The EU Kids Online Research Framework suggests that students' responses to emotionally charged assessment content on social media may pose a risk to their wellbeing, given the trivialisation of mental health concerns. At the same time, the framework acknowledges the potential for support and connection online during stressful high-stakes assessment periods. Finally, Assessment

Dysmorphia would explain these shared intense emotions about assessment as a result of the immense pressure to perform well, as though one's assessment outcomes determine the rest of one's life. This distortion about the purpose and consequences of assessment can make it difficult for students to empathise with those who express feelings of failure or hopelessness.

These examples demonstrate how assessment, social, psychological, and online factors converge to shape students' assessment experiences as shared on social media. The implications for the application of SMAF are discussed in Section 6.10.

## 6.6. Summary: Discussion of Findings

Social media is a dynamic place where students actively negotiate and make sense of their high-stakes assessment experiences. Students use platforms like TikTok and Twitter to demonstrate their agency, provide and receive support, and construct assessment experiences.

This study examines the benefits and risks of digital interactions in the context of high-stakes assessments. While social media platforms provide incredible opportunities for collaboration, collective learning, emotional support, and humour, they also carry the risk of masking digital inequality and promoting potential psychological distortions around assessment, in other words, amplifying assessment dysmorphia. The Social Media Assessment Framework provides a valuable tool for understanding these complex dynamics, highlighting the interplay of social, psychological, and online factors that shape students' experiences. Critically, my findings encourage educational stakeholders to respond and recognise that social media is becoming a space where students' assessment experiences are formed, shared, and understood.

In the remaining sections of the discussion chapter, I explore the strengths and limitations of this research, discuss broader implications for educational practice, and provide recommendations for future research.

## 6.7. Strengths

A significant strength of this study is that it is the first of its kind to explore the connection between students' educational assessment experiences and social media platforms like TikTok and Twitter. By addressing this under-researched area, the study breaks new ground in understanding how students engage with high-stakes assessments in digital spaces. This novel contribution offers a fresh understanding of how social media is a forum for students to disclose, discuss, and navigate their assessment experiences.

Another key strength is the triangulation between the focus group data, participant-sourced and researcher-sourced social media data. Combining these three data sources increases the richness and depth of the findings and increases confidence in the validity of the research. By capturing the complexity of students' experiences from multiple perspectives, I could see how each theme was present in each data source. Initially, I was concerned about giving unequal attention to one data source. Still, through reflection and supervisory feedback, I recognised that the balance was appropriate, especially as different themes lent themselves more naturally to particular sources (i.e. theme 8 (dialogues) was dominated by participant-sourced social media data). This triangulated approach strengthens the trustworthiness of the data and the conclusions drawn from it.

The study's contemporary relevance is a strength. This study has never been more critical as social media is increasingly interlinked with students' academic experiences. It contributes to the growing literature on how social media and other digital platforms influence academic engagement. The tailored methodology, which included investigating social media data alongside focus group interviews with adolescents, adds a novel dimension to existing research practices. Furthermore, my contribution to the BERA 2024 conference, where I discussed the ethical considerations surrounding social media research using this study as a central example, highlights the methodological rigour and ethical reflexivity embedded in the study.

Students' role as co-researchers in data collection and interpretation is a considerable strength. Their active participation helped shape my understanding of their social media and assessment experiences in ways that could not have been achieved independently. Additionally, although the study is qualitative, the careful documentation of the methodology offers great potential for replication. Other researchers can reanalyse the data and find similar or divergent themes. This contributes to the replicability of the research findings.

## 6.8. Limitations

The data collected in this study is incredibly rich but also vast, which presents challenges for an in-depth analysis within the scope of this thesis. There is potential for a more detailed analysis of the video and picture data collected from social media platforms, which could provide a deeper understanding of students' experiences of high-stakes assessment as shared through social media. In the future, using Artificial Intelligence technologies, such as Microsoft Azure, to assist in video data analysis could improve the efficiency and depth of video analysis. However, the human side of research and analysis is necessary to maintain.

Additionally, while the study identified eight core themes, it is reductionist to claim that these eight themes fully encapsulate the data. The breadth of the content shared by students on TikTok and Twitter means that more themes could have been created, providing a more nuanced understanding of students' assessment experiences. Reducing the number of themes inevitably left some parts of the data underexplored, but it was necessary for manageability in line with Braun and Clarke's (2021b) recommendations around saturation (Nelson, 2017; Saunders et al., 2018) and theme creation in Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Another limitation is that I was the sole researcher coding the data. While I involved students as co-researchers to aid in the interpretation process and consulted with my supervisors and peers as critical friends, having multiple coders could offer a more reliable and objective analysis. Though reliability and objectivity are tenets of positivist

methodology, which are outside of qualitative research paradigms, using multiple coders would not seek to achieve a consensus but rather embrace the complexity and multiple interpretations of qualitative data for a broader range of assumptions to be explored (Byrne, 2022).

The participant sample was drawn from students within the same multi-academy trust, consisting of Outer London schools. The small-scale and opportunity sampling method limits the generalisability of the findings beyond this particular context (Dowling & Brown, 2009). All students were in Year 12, studying A Levels or BTECs, which means that their experiences may not reflect those of students in other year groups, studying other qualifications, or in different cultural settings.

This study, led by a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, honoured the multiple realities and interpretations regarding educational assessment in the context of social media (Marwick, 2014) within the constraints of this project. However, a limitation is that the focus group methodology may have minimised the presence of individual students' unique realities and group consensus views may have dominated the data. Future research might focus on individual students' realities instead of group-constructed ones. This will promote a richer understanding of the significance of visual data when interpreting students' assessment experiences on social media.

The scope of this study was also limited by its focus on just two social media platforms, Twitter and TikTok. Although these platforms are popular among students, the findings may not be generalisable to other social media platforms or closed online environments, such as private groups or direct messaging.

The final limitation relates to the constructivist-interpretivist epistemological and ontological beliefs underpinning the research methodology. If knowledge is constructed through activities within social contexts, as this study assumes, the nature of that knowledge evolves through engagement and interpretation of experiences. Students' assessment experiences, as shared on social media, shift and transform with each exam

season and platform update. Consequently, the current study's findings are 'cross-sectional' and may only capture a specific moment in time, which is valuable for understanding now but is not a permanent blueprint of student experiences and may have limited relevance to future contexts.

In addition, ethical considerations meant that only publicly available social media posts were analysed, closed groups and private messages. The quotidian fluid nature of social media means that data may have been deleted or privatised, potentially concealing important posts. Moreover, Richardson (2022) highlights that students who comment on social media may not represent the entire population of those engaging with assessment, even if trends emerge during testing cycles. These temporal, ethical and general limitations of social media data limit the generalisability of the data, and conclusions must be treated with caution.

## 6.9. Implications of my research in a professional context as a professional doctorate

My professional context spans schools, research, and exam boards. I am a middle leader in a secondary school and sixth form, an early career researcher, and an experienced examiner for an examination board. The implications of this study span these three areas and are presented accordingly.

### 6.9.1. Implications for Schools

Schools use digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams, SIMS, Seneca, Google Classroom, Show My Homework, Sparx Maths, CPOMS and many more for administration, monitoring, behaviour, homework setting and collection, communication, safeguarding and dissemination. Schools also use social media to share news about their schools, but how well do schools pay attention to the news students share about their educational experiences on social media? While many schools focus on the educational benefits of digital tools, few actively engage with the digital narratives students share about their schooling experiences on platforms like TikTok and Twitter.

Given the findings that show how these platforms have become a form of extended reality where students collectively interpret and reshape their assessment experiences, schools must begin to pay closer attention to these narratives, as understanding what students share online could provide school leaders and teachers with a greater understanding of their perceptions of assessments and emotional well-being.

The findings discussed here support the need for schools to consider investing in systems or training for staff to monitor students' social media narratives during high-stakes assessment periods. This, of course, will have drawbacks, such as concerns around safeguarding, teacher workload and digital labour. However, my research and professional role as a teacher found that engaging in these social media deep dives into students' online assessment discourse has been valuable in identifying the following:

- Concerns about specific items on an exam.
- Positive highlights about exam experiences.
- Issues like assessment dysmorphia, where online group norms skew students' perceptions of assessments.
- Mental health concerns around test anxiety and potential self-harm.

At the same time, schools must remain committed to ensuring that students' cultural capital is developed through digital capital and acknowledge the impact of digital exclusion on students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Addressing this practically may include schools ensuring that all students have access to digital platforms and the skills to navigate them effectively.

It is not just about what students say online about their assessment experiences. It is about how we prepare students for what is shared online, i.e. post-event discussion. The findings demonstrate the importance of strengthening both digital and assessment literacy among students. As social media becomes integral to students' lives, schools should include social media literacy in their PSHE curriculum. Educating students on how to critically engage with social media content, particularly during high-stakes



assessment periods, should help them better navigate the pressures of online conformity and identity construction. Additionally, incorporating assessment literacy training into the curriculum or providing resources that help students understand the purpose and design of assessments can empower students to navigate online discussions responsibly and dispel common misconceptions about exams, which the findings showed (Theme 4) often dominate online discourse.

By considering these implications, schools demonstrate their commitment to safeguarding the mental and emotional well-being of their students in an increasingly digital world.

#### 6.9.2. Implications for Exam Boards

These findings have implications for exam boards, particularly with respect to how social media data is used as a qualitative source of information on students' high-stakes assessment experiences. The AQA exam board emailed me on 11th September 2024, wanting to recruit students for their “student advisory group” (AQA, 2024). This is a great opportunity to capture students' views on assessment, though it is limited to teachers actually sharing the email with students. If AQA's researchers were to do a deep dive into social media during the examination season or do a simple search query to see what is being said, this might yield more diverse perspectives that are not filtered by the demands or contrived nature of ‘formal’ comments in a formal or controlled setting. Doing this may also reduce the issue of power relations and self-silencing due to a power imbalance between students and the exam boards.

In addition, when the exam boards see the creative ways in which students in the present research brought exam questions to life with visual and often comedic reenactments of exam questions, a key implication is the potential for exam item writers to be creative when designing scenario-based questions. This is not so that the question ends up ‘trending’ or going viral on social media. Instead, it taps into an area of cognition by making exam questions memorable and engaging. Meaningful test items may reduce the likelihood of construct irrelevance factors marring students'

performance. I am reminded of how students complained on social media about an AQA A Level Psychology test item discussed in Dike-Oduah (2018, p. 68). This question required students to explain the process of minority influence, a topic in the psychology specification, to the ‘psychology teacher’ in the stem (See Figure 53 ).

Jenny is a psychology teacher who works with six other teachers in the department. Jenny believes strongly that homework should not be graded as it distracts students from reading verbal feedback on their work. She would like her colleagues to stop grading work. The other members of the department do not agree but have told Jenny they are willing to have a meeting about it.

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Using your knowledge of minority influence, explain how Jenny might be able to persuade the rest of the department to accept her view.

[6 marks]

Figure 53: Test Item in Psychology A Level Paper 1 - June 2018

One student tweeted saying:

*If Jenny is a psychology teacher, why should I have to explain minority influence to her? #AQAPsychology*

The test item did not make sense to the student, and with good reason. Why would a psychology teacher need to be told about ‘minority influence’? Surely, psychology teachers should already know how commitment, consistency, and flexibility contribute to successful minority influence. Perhaps this question would have been well regarded by students if one word had been changed from ‘psychology’ teacher to ‘geography’ teacher, or any other subject that is considered distinct from psychology. Test items for high-stakes examinations are carefully audited before they are released per Ofqual’s (2023a, Section D3) requirements for regulated qualifications, however, this test item and others in my findings highlight the need for the test item reviewing process to be evaluated. The content and language expertise that item writers bring may need to be supplemented by a responsive editorial review by learners to ensure the suitability and

relevance of the test item. Considering the findings, exam boards should consider using, in part, the social media content shared by students concerning poor test items to review their test-item construction process. This demonstrates how influential students' social media posts about their assessment experiences could be in shaping educational processes and structures.

#### 6.10. Implications for the Social Media Assessment Framework

The development and application of the Social Media Assessment Framework (SMAF) is a significant contribution to a very new field. SMAF opens directions for future research while positioning social media data as a methodological tool and lens for investigating students' experiences. This study demonstrates that more research is needed on how education researchers can embrace social media as a data source to capture students' lived experiences in creative, rich, and dynamic ways (Greenhow & Lewin, 2021).

SMAF's strengths in challenging binary categorisations about students' online experiences and centring students (social media users) as meaning-making experts in their own lives emphasise the importance of methodological flexibility and innovations when studying digital educational spaces. Future studies should adopt collaborative methodologies that position students as co-researchers to acknowledge their agency. Combined with mixed-methods techniques that integrate social media content analysis with traditional educational research methods, this approach could capture the visible manifestations and underlying motivations of students' assessment-related social media activity (Andreotta et al., 2019; Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

Beyond its methodological implications as outlined above, SMAF can be developed and used to extend further research into understanding the complex interplay of social, psychological and online factors that shape students' experiences of high-stakes assessment. Future research in this contemporary and growing field can leverage the SMAF to:

- Empower mental health researchers to explore the relationship between social media engagement patterns and test anxiety (Akram, 2018; Wakefield &

Wakefield, 2018), particularly focusing on assessment dysmorphia and how the disparity between lived experiences and social media presentations affects students' academic self-concept over time.

- Inform digital and assessment literacy interventions, as the Global Kids Online and Assessment Dysmorphia elements of the SMAF highlight the need for more digital and assessment literacy research. The SMAF could be used to develop and evaluate digital and assessment literacy programs that equip students with the skills to navigate online spaces critically and thoughtfully during high-stakes assessment periods.
- Conduct research on more social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, to gain a comprehensive, cross-comparative picture of students' online assessment discourse.

The recommendations above are relevant to policymakers and practitioners.

Policymakers can create more informed policies related to digital literacy, assessment literacy and online safety, which can then inform curriculum development, particularly for exam year groups, equipping students with the skills to navigate online spaces effectively during exam periods. Practitioners (i.e., teachers, schools, and exam boards) can use the SMAF to better understand and decode students' online expressions related to assessments, including their emotions, perceptions, and challenges. As seen in the findings, social media can expose students to myths surrounding assessment (i.e. grade boundaries), and when engaged with, exam boards and teachers can dispel these myths through simple infographics, assemblies, and other means. In schools, students already have a sense of assessment identity through processes like setting and streaming, which have formed in-groups and out-groups (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). Similarly, the SMAF revealed that students often viewed exam boards as the 'out-group' and tended to perceive them unfavourably, with concerns about unfairness and feelings that exam boards wanted them to fail. Exam boards can use the revelations from SMAF to rebrand themselves as being on the side of test-takers, wanting them to succeed and

being transparent about their processes. Doing so may soften the divide between the ingroup (students) and outgroup (exam boards) and likely help to reduce students' experiences of assessment dysmorphia.

#### 6.11. Implications for Researchers and Recommendations for Future Research

Although the present research demonstrates the value of ascertaining students' views and perspectives through focus group interviews, the findings also highlight the unique value of other data collection methods, such as social media. Traditionally, the use of social media data in academic research is viewed as trivial or unreliable due to concerns about the quality, validity and reliability of online discourse (Golder et al., 2019; Reda & Zellou, 2023; Srivastava & Mishra, 2023). Despite the limitations of social media data, this study demonstrates that platforms like Twitter and TikTok can serve as powerful complementary data sources, offering insight into students' experiences with educational assessment.

One implication for researchers is the potential to incorporate social media as a regular methodological tool in educational studies. The rich and diverse data gathered suggest that social media engagement can provide information that other methods, such as interviews or questionnaires, may not capture as successfully. Social media data should not completely replace traditional methods. Researchers may benefit from employing social media as an additional tool to enhance the breadth and depth of their findings, especially when the research involves students for whom social media is an integral part of their lives and identities.

Considering this study's limitations, future research should explore varied sampling techniques and in-depth data analysis methods, especially for visual data. Extending the study to platforms beyond TikTok and Twitter, such as Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat, which are popular among adolescents (Ofcom, 2022) could capture a greater scope of students' online discourse on their experiences with high-stakes assessments.

While this study focused on students who actively use social media to discuss assessments, it is also important to investigate why some students do not share their experiences online. For instance, the code “reasons for not sharing online” was developed during data analysis and could serve as a starting point for future research to understand non-participation in social media discussions around assessment. This will address the limitation of creating only eight themes for a vast amount of data.

Considering participant sampling, future research should seek participants from diverse backgrounds. This will explain how assessment-related social media discourse and engagement may vary across demographic and economic subgroups. (Brown et al., 2016; Brown & Ellison, 2021; Lybeck, Koiranen & Koivula, 2024).

Finally, future research should prioritise collaborative projects that unite multiple educational stakeholders. The collaboration between students, teachers and education researchers could inform the development of evidence-based guidelines for healthy social media use during high-stakes assessment periods and lead to well-informed interventions and policies that are sensitive to students' needs. As Lybeck et al. (2024) encourages, this should include an intentional focus on how schools and educational stakeholder leaders can address digital inequalities in academic social media participation.

In the following conclusion chapter, I will synthesise this study's key findings, implications, and reflections and outline my final thoughts on dissemination and future research directions.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

### 7. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore students' experiences of high-stakes educational assessment as shared on social media platforms, specifically TikTok and Twitter/X. The findings revealed that students used social media to process, critically appraise and negotiate their assessment experiences.

#### 7.1. Key findings

Students' visual representations of high-stakes assessment experiences were a significant finding. Social media data revealed how students transformed ordinary exam moments into rich, layered stories by using memes, videos, images, and metaphors. Exam questions became a comedic re-enactment. Exam stress and perceptions of exam boards were conveyed through colourful, nuanced language and imagery. Therein, students demonstrated their ability to make sense of educational assessment on their own terms and in unique ways. Students were 'assessment activists' who did not passively consume assessment narratives; instead, they actively reframed and reclaimed narratives about their high-stakes assessment experiences. The study also showed how these online narratives shaped students' perceptions of assessment.

#### 7.2. Methodological Innovations

The methodological approach I explained in Chapter 4 was deliberately unique to the research questions (Section 2.4). This was not a standard application of existing methods, but a bespoke design tailored to the specific challenges of capturing the vast, layered qualitative data present in social media posts and focus group interviews. My methodological choices were informed by a commitment to a research design that prioritised student voice and digital agency in both data collection and interpretation.

Enabled by a constructivist-interpretivist stance, I viewed students as experts in their own experiences, not just data points to be analysed. A significant methodological decision which challenged traditional research power relations was to position

participants as co-researchers. The most exciting part of doing this was the collaborative work on Research Question 3, which focused on analysing social media comments. Students' expertise, as demonstrated by explaining colloquialisms and prompting me to pay attention to the comments section in social media data, transformed what could have been a basic analysis into a credible and authentic exploration of how students experience and discuss educational assessment.

### 7.3. Theoretical Bridging and Future Horizons

Continuous research is necessary as social media and assessment practices continue to evolve. The creation of the Social Media Assessment Framework (Section 6.5) supports future research by providing an exploratory and promising lens for understanding students' high-stakes assessment narratives and identities as shared on social media. Researchers can apply the SMAF's unique synthesis of assessment dysmorphia, social identity theory, and the EU Global Kids online framework to upcoming studies and social media datasets in this field.

The findings in this study are not definitive conclusions about students' high-stakes assessment experiences as shared on social media. Instead, this study raises new questions and scope for future research as discussed in Section 6.11.

### 7.4. Dissemination and Professional Impact

The research findings extend beyond this thesis, with multiple opportunities for broader academic and professional impact already embraced.

I presented the study's methodological innovations at the 2024 British Educational Research Association (BERA) Conference. This sparked dialogues about student voice, digital methodologies and social media research ethics. I translated my research findings into potential practical interventions when I presented the earlier thread of this work to the AQA Exam Board Research Group, bridging the gap between structural processes and student perspectives. Finally, presenting my work to the Institute of Education's Educational Assessment Group provided invaluable feedback from critical



friends who challenged and refined my academic voice, research skills, and, ultimately, the contributions of this study.

I am committed to contributing to the literature on students' digital experiences and educational assessment by publishing these findings in peer-reviewed journals. Looking ahead, I would like to approach social media platforms to see how my findings on students' mental health and test anxiety may complement education and well-being initiatives.

### 7.5. Final Reflective Insights

As a teacher, researcher, examiner, and social media user, I sit in the tension between students' social assessment narratives and the governing structures of high-stakes assessments. This study is at the start of a fast-changing field where technology, education, social identity, psychology and well-being intersect in ways we are only beginning to understand.

Collecting data from TikTok and Twitter provided partial knowledge to answer the research questions. However, this study is not limited to TikTok and Twitter; it also involves students in the phenomenon of educational assessment. Studying TikTok and Twitter alone is like studying the 'object' without acknowledging the 'user' and the context of the object and does not fully address the research aims. Therefore, to answer the research questions more thoroughly, I decided to learn more about students' assessment experiences by getting them to talk about TikTok, Twitter, and assessment via focus group interviews.

In this research, I listened to students and watched as they made sense of and navigated their high-stakes assessment experiences online. The creativity, resilience, and critical engagement demonstrated throughout their participation in this thesis serve as a reminder that students are not passive recipients of high-stakes assessments. Students are active meaning-makers who will continue to reform our understanding of social media, assessment, and identity.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A – Livingstone et al (2015) - 12 Recommendations for future research.

### EU Kids Online



ask, what difference does it make to their overall wellbeing if children also (or increasingly) engage in particular ways with the internet?

#### Questions for future research

Researchers like to conclude that 'more research is needed', and indeed it is. Reflecting on our past decade of qualitative and quantitative research, we propose the following questions as a priority. We frame them in terms of the main elements and relations among those in our revised model. Of course this list is far from comprehensive, and we invite researchers to debate these, identify more or better questions if they wish, and to help us take this agenda forward theoretically and empirically.

1. In relation to children's *identity and resources*, beyond the obvious demographic variables, which factors make a difference to the outcomes of internet use? There is too little research on ethnicity, sexuality, culture, fandom or other subgroups, and too little that examines variations in terms of resilience, vulnerability, expertise, experience or motivations (for a thorough review of this growing literature, see Vandoninck, 2015).
2. Access to the internet, which may itself be considered a right and the lack of which is increasingly problematic, represents a fast-changing phenomenon. As the pervasiveness of mobile devices to access the internet makes the integration of online activities into children's everyday life practices ever more seamless, research must not only track the nature of access but also inquire into the new opportunities or risks that it may facilitate.
3. In calling for a multidimensional analysis of children's *digital skills and literacies*, we urge not only more research on the nature of these skills and literacies, but also more research evaluating their mediating role in relation to children's wellbeing, along with more research on the ways in which skills can be developed. Such research can draw on the insights of media literacy and media education research as well as that of information literacy and allied fields (for a recent review, see Livingstone et al., 2013; for developments in measuring digital skills, see van Deursen, Helsper and Eynon, 2015).
4. Our conception of the '*ladder of opportunities*' has been empirical – the least practised activities were seen meaningfully at the top, since they seem particularly interactive, creative or civic in nature. But we lack a theory-led account of what to expect at the top (or bottom) of the ladder, possibly differentiated by circumstance. Nor is it yet well understood how online opportunities may (or may not) result in tangible benefits to children.
5. Most of *the risks* examined thus far have concerned potential harm to children's safety, but attention is now rightly focused also on the risks to their personal data – yet which commercial risks linked to data collection and profiling, personalised and location-sensitive marketing, etc. are now being discussed, little empirical research is available yet. This raises the question as to what *other kinds of risks* should be researched, and our qualitative research with children sketched a host of concerns from children (Smahel and Wright, 2014), including privacy issues and online reputation management, the misuse of personal data (Haddon and Vincent (2014), and potentially problematic situations arising from the convergence of peer pressure in relation to practices of self-presentation ('selfies') and sociotechnical affordances (new apps, mobile devices, etc.; see Mascheroni, Vincent and Jimenez, 2015).
6. This raises some specific questions about the interplay between children's digital practices and the *proprietary policies* and mechanisms developed by private companies that own digital platforms. For the areas of risk that are not regulated by government legislation, these are largely managed through self-regulation (see, for example, Lievens, Dumortier and Ryan, 2006; Lievens, 2007, 2010; McLaughlin, 2013) and privatised governance (see, for example, DeNardis, 2014) in ways that, while they become part of the normalised digital ecology, may affect the nature and scope of risks and harms that children experience. Whether these operate in the interests of children, how the actions of industry and regulators on the one hand, and families on the other, shape each other, and what improvements should be called for, merits further research.

7. It also invites further research on children's desire to experiment and even transgress boundaries (c.f. 'risky online opportunities'; Livingstone, Ólafsson and Staksrud, 2013; see also Livingstone, 2014a; boyd, 2014). Too much research positions children as recipients of online risks or opportunities rather than understanding their *role as agents* in the digital age. Yet it is only by understanding children's agency that we will understand how children learn to cope and become resilient when engaging with the internet (although see Vandoninck, d'Haenens and Segers, 2012; Coleman and Hagell, 2007; Colombo and Fortunati, 2011; and on vulnerability, see Schoon, 2006; Livingstone and Palmer, 2012).
8. EU Kids Online made considerable progress in defining, measuring and understanding *how parents mediate* their children's internet use (Garmendia et al., 2012; Dürager and Sonck, 2014), how children perceive parental mediations (Haddon, 2015), and how parental perceptions of online risks influence and shape children's own perceptions and concerns (Mascheroni, Jorge and Farrugia, 2014). But how is parental mediation changing as parental skills develop over time? And can we extend a similar depth of analysis to understanding *the role of other socialising agents* in children's lives?
9. Children are socialised to digital media at a *very young age*. Indeed, the touch screen interface means that children can access smartphones and tablets relatively independently at an earlier age than for technologies such as laptops (Chaudron, 2015). The model discussed in this report was developed for 9- to 16-year-olds, so how does it apply for younger children? (Or even for adults?)
10. *Sociotechnological innovations* in smart/wearable/ubiquitous everyday devices (as captured by the notion of 'the internet of things') raises particularly intense challenges for research on children's lives, both the potential benefits, which have barely been scoped, and the potential harms, where moral panics are already shaping parental (and researchers') imaginations.
11. Having refocused the model on children's wellbeing and rights, research should now develop a richer analysis of both. The many debates over both concepts in studies of childhood and social/public policy are only now recognising the potential of the internet to contribute to, even to reconfigure the pathways to wellbeing. By focusing on *wellbeing*, research can begin to open up new questions about the beneficial outcomes (at both individual and collective level) of young people's engagement with the internet – for example, in terms of sociality or identity, formal and informal learning, social and democratic participation, health and sexual information, creativity and coding. This, in turn, positions risk of harm primarily as an impediment to wellbeing, along with the risk of not having internet access (in light of the 'participation gap'; Hargittai and Walejko, 2008; see also Jenkins, 2009).
12. Finally, by emphasising the relations between online and offline inclusion and the broader (beneficial and negative) outcomes of internet use by children, the revised framework also brings to the forefront the question of *children's rights* in the digital age and how to balance protection and autonomy: the right to *protection* from the variety of risks that a child may encounter on the internet, through specific policies aimed at regulation, awareness-raising and the empowerment of children by fostering their skills and resilience as well as through legal protection; the right to the *provision* of educational technology, access to positive online content and efforts to promote children's digital skills, in an equitable way; the right to *participation*, that is, the inclusion of children in all societal processes, including in matters of education, research and governance of ICTs (Livingstone and Bulger, 2014).<sup>13</sup> In this lies the recognition that there are also new issues relating to rights (and indeed, responsibilities) that come with online participation, such as issues of privacy and data protection, and the right to protection against all forms of online abuse.

## Appendix B – Social Media Data

Link to Excel Spreadsheet with Coded Social Media Data: [SOCIAL MEDIA DATA](#)

Due to the table size, I could not paste the entire Social Media data here. Please use the link above to access it.

See a portion of the table below.

ID	Social Media Content Link	Researcher-Sourced or Participant-Sourced	Participant name	Focus Group	TikTok	No of Likes	No of Comments	No of Shares / Reposts / Quotes	No of Saves (TikTok) / Bookmarks (Twitter/X)	Length of video	Caption (TikTok) / Text	Hashtags	Visual (Video, Image, Text on Video) Description	Audio description (with transcription where possible or if necessary)	Caption / Comments analysis
PS-CL-1	<a href="https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGJVBLRXT/">https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGJVBLRXT/</a>	Participant-Sourced	C L	1	TikTok	2920	34	62	187	5 seconds	i can't read minds but i can explain why you do what you do 🤖 #CapCut #psych #psychology #alevel #alevels #aqapsychology #exams #alevelpsych #exams #aqapsychology #ocrpsychology #eduqapsychology #fyp #foryoupage #alevel2023 #alevels2023 #alevelpsychology	#CapCut #psych #psychology #alevel #alevels #aqapsych #exams #aqapsychology #ocrpsychology #eduqapsychology #fyp #foryoupage #alevel2023 #alevels2023 #alevelpsychology	The video consists of a guy talking on a podcast or audio recording. The text on the video says, "Me, a psychology student, psychologically analyzing my friends since I'm 'technically' qualified to do so." This text emphasizes the humorous aspect of the video. The person claims to be qualified to analyze their friends' behavior due to their psychology studies, but it's likely intended as a playful exaggeration.	Podcast clip says, "You know I'm not judging you, but I'm just saying everybody else is gonna." This audio is likely included for its humor and the irony of the situation, given that the person in the video is about to discuss analyzing their friends.	The caption sets the context and tone for the video. It starts with "i can't read minds but i can explain why you do what you do 🤖," indicating a humorous take on their psychological knowledge. They use various relevant hashtags to connect with the audience and potentially reach those interested in psychology, educational exams, or A-levels.
PS-JN-2	<a href="https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGJVBrWme/">https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGJVBrWme/</a>	Participant-Sourced	J N	1	TikTok	140200	1752	1113	11100	2 mins	This is tooooooo jokes 🤖🤖🤖🤖🤖🤖🤖🤖🤖🤖🤖🤖 @amz.co.uk #fyp #viral #foryoupage #results #gcse2022	#fyp #viral #foryoupage #results #gcse2022	The video features a young man talking on the phone with a family member, presumably his mother. He is reading out his exam results to her and explaining what his grades are. The video features a young man talking on a podcast or audio recording. The text on the video says, "Me, a psychology student, psychologically analyzing my friends since I'm 'technically' qualified to do so." This text emphasizes the humorous aspect of the video. The person claims to be qualified to analyze their friends' behavior due to their psychology studies, but it's likely intended as a playful exaggeration.	Original audio	The caption indicates that the video is humorous, with a series of laughing emojis and skull emojis. It also tags the user @amz.co.uk. The hashtags used suggest that the
PS-CA-3	<a href="https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGJVBrYmk/">https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGJVBrYmk/</a>	Participant-Sourced	C A	1	TikTok	2112	274	83	114	13 seconds	aqa was feeling real silly @suals #aqaalevelpsychology #alevelpsychology #summer2023 #alevelpsychologypaper3 #fyp	#aqaalevelpsychology #alevelpsychology #summer2023 #alevelpsychologypaper3 #fyp	The TikTok video described features a scene in a classroom with a voice-over audio clip from Beyoncé's song "Resentment."	The audio in the background is a voice-over from Beyoncé's song "Resentment," with the lyrics: "So what are you gonna say in my funeral now that you've killed me, here lies the body of the love of my life"	The caption humorously suggests that the AQA exam board, which conducts A-level psychology exams, "was feeling real silly." It also includes relevant hashtags like #aqaalevelpsychology, #alevelpsychology, #summer2023, #alevelpsychologypaper3, and #fyp.
PS-FF-4	<a href="https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGJVBrYmk/">https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGJVBrYmk/</a>	Participant-Sourced	J F	1	TikTok	1608	205	103	203	4 seconds	i hope aqa haven done us dirty... but knowing aqa they defo have #fyp #alevel #exameason #alevelexams #alevels2023 #alevelpsychology #psychologypaper1 #alevels	#fyp (For You Page) #alevel #exameason #alevelexams #alevels2023 #alevelpsychology #psychologypaper1 #alevels	Video Content: The video features two students in a classroom who fall down. Video Content: The video shows a young lady rolling her eyes in apparent frustration or exasperation. Her reaction seems to be a playful and exaggerated response to the content of the upcoming exam paper.	Audio: The audio features a voiceover by Molly Erin Smith saying, "Oh my sweet Jesus, What is that?" This audio is likely used for comedic effect and to express surprise or frustration.	The caption expresses hope that the AQA exam board hasn't made the exam too challenging. It suggests skepticism about AQA's reputation for difficult exams, using the hashtag #fyp (For You Page) and other related hashtags like #alevel, #exameason, #alevelexams, #alevels2023, #alevelpsychology, and #psychologypaper1.

## Appendix B2 – Example of Raw Twitter/X Data from Brand24

<b>Tweet Id</b>	<b>Text</b>	<b>Screen Name</b>	<b>Favourites</b>	<b>Retweets</b>	<b>Tweet Type</b>	<b>URLs</b>	<b>Hashtags</b>
1666169614248681472	FINISHED MY A-LEVELS MWOHAHAHAHAHAHA #alevelfilm #alevelmedia #alevelpsychology #asbiology	tashfoale	1	1	Tweet		4
1665990632563785729	RT @1Mubz: My hand is covered in blisters after sitting econ paper 3 and psychology paper 3 and I still ran out of time 🤖 #alevels2023 #ALevelPsychology #ALevelEconomics	KeayRufus	0	0	Retweet		3
1665967000600952834	RT @AFCGeniusV2: No 16 marker on forensics AQA niced us again 🤖 🐾 #alevels2023 #ALevelPsychology <a href="https://t.co/4qrTSV8CXj">https://t.co/4qrTSV8CXj</a>	Byron_T_RF	0	0	Retweet	<a href="https://video.twimg.com/ext_tw_video/1665740711406274071/14062740711406274071.mp4">https://video.twimg.com/ext_tw_video/1665740711406274071/14062740711406274071.mp4</a>	2
1665851654703312898	My hand is covered in blisters after sitting econ paper 3 and psychology paper 3 and I still ran out of time 🤖 #alevels2023 #ALevelPsychology #ALevelEconomics	1Mubz	9	1	Tweet		3

1665803216892641281	#ALevelPsychology guess who had no clue what cognitive distortions were, thats 12 marks gone:') bullshitted my way through that, FUCK the forensics section	WavesMilky	6	0	Tweet		1
1665802389339742208	RT @yveqis: "outline and evaluate levels of explanation" #alevels2023 #ALevelPsychology <a href="https://t.co/WxbaBxpZgb">https://t.co/WxbaBxpZgb</a>	NineDivinesXO	0	0	Retweet	<a href="https://twitter.com/Fin_SimpsOn/status/1665802389339742208">https://twitter.com/Fin_SimpsOn/status/1665802389339742208</a>	2
1665801860463067136	I see #ALevelPsychology hasn't changed and is still an absolute bastard.  Sat mine in 1998, scraped a C.	Rusty_Ricker	3	0	Tweet		1

### Appendix C – Participant Details

Participant ID	Focus Group No.	Age	Gender	TikTok	Twitter	Snapchat	Facebook	Instagram	WhatsApp	YouTube
SC-FG1	1	17	Male	X		X		X	X	
CL-FG1	1	17	Female	X		X	X	X	X	
JN-FG1	1	17	Female	X	X	X		X	X	
SF-FG1	1	18	Female	X	X			X		
CA-FG1	1	17	Female	X	X			X	X	
RM-FG1	1	17	Female	X		X		X	X	
IM-FG1	1	17	Female	X		X		X		
EN-FG1	1	17	Female	X	X	X		X		
TK-FG2	2	17	Female	X	X	X		X		
CL-FG2	2	18	Male	X		X		X	X	
FE-FG2	2	17	Male	X	X	X		X	X	
BB-FG2	2	17	Male	X		X		X		
KW-FG2	2	17	Male	X	X	X		X		
IB-FG2	2	17	Male	X	X	X	X	X	X	

Participant ID	Focus Group No.	Age	Gender	TikTok	Twitter	Snapchat	Facebook	Instagram	WhatsApp	YouTube
MR-FG2	2	17	Male	X	X	X		X		
EM-FG2	2	17	Male	X		X	X	X	X	
BS/Stu7-FG3	3	16	Female	X		X				X
JB/Stu9-FG3	3	16	Male	X		X		X		X
GB/Stu6-FG3	3	16	Female			X				X
YA/Stu3-FG3	3	16	Male	X		X		X		X
MM-Stu7-FG4	4	16	Female	X		X		X		X
ML/Stu5-FG3	3	16	Female	X		X		X	X	X
MA/STU1-FG3	3	16	Male	X		X			X	X
AR-Stu4-FG4	4	16	Female	X	X	X		X	X	X
MM/Stu4-FG3	3	16	Female	X		X				
AL-Stu2-FG4	4	16	Male	X	X	X		X	X	X
CS/Stu8-FG3	3	16	Female	X		X		X		
ZO-FG2	2	17	Male	X	X	X		X		X
OS-Stu1-FG4	4	16	Female	X		X		X	X	X

Participant ID	Focus Group No.	Age	Gender	TikTok	Twitter	Snapchat	Facebook	Instagram	WhatsApp	YouTube
EO-Stu6-FG4	4	16	Female	X		X		X		X
RP/Stu2-FG3	3	17	Female	X	X	X		X		
AC-Stu5-FG4	4	16	Female	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
SM/Stu3-FG4	4	16	Male	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
JA/Stu8-FG4	4	16	Male	X	X	X		X	X	X
<b>Average Percentage Use</b>				<b>TikTok</b>	<b>Twitter</b>	<b>Snapchat</b>	<b>Facebook</b>	<b>Instagram</b>	<b>WhatsApp</b>	<b>YouTube</b>
				<b>94.1%</b>	<b>41.2%</b>	<b>91.2%</b>	<b>11.8%</b>	<b>88.2%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>32.4%</b>



## Appendix D – Microsoft Form for Participants' Social Media Submissions

Link to form: <https://forms.office.com/e/nGgyC25Zmj>

### Social Media Content Submission

#### **Step-by-Step Guide to Sharing the URL Link of a TikTok Post:**

Sharing the URL link of a TikTok post allows you to share a specific TikTok video with others, either on social media platforms, messaging apps, or via email. Here's how to do it:

1. **Open TikTok App:** Launch the TikTok app on your mobile device.
2. **Find the Video:** Browse through your TikTok feed or use the search function to find the video you want to share.
3. **Tap on the Share Icon:** When you've found the video, tap on the "Share" icon (it looks like an arrow pointing to the right). This icon is usually located on the right side of the screen, below the video.
4. **Select "Copy Link":** After tapping the Share icon, you'll see various sharing options. Choose "Copy Link." This action will copy the URL link of the TikTok post to your device's clipboard.
5. **Share the Link:** Now, you can paste the copied URL link into the desired field below.

#### **Step-by-Step Guide to Sharing the URL Link of a Twitter Post:**

Sharing the URL link of a specific Twitter post allows you to share tweets with others, enabling them to view the tweet directly. Here's how to do it:

1. **Open Twitter App or Website:** Launch the Twitter app on your mobile device or access Twitter through your web browser.
2. **Find the Tweet:** Navigate to the tweet that you want to share.

3.  
**Tap on the Share Icon:** On the tweet, you'll see a "Share" icon (it looks like an arrow pointing upwards). Tap on this icon to access the sharing options.
4.  
**Select "Copy link to Tweet":** Once you tap the Share icon, a menu will appear with sharing options. Choose "Copy link to Tweet." The link to the specific tweet will be copied to your device's clipboard.
5.  
**Share the Link:** Now, you can paste the copied URL link into the desired field below.

#### 2.Social Media Content 1

Explore your Twitter and/or TikTok platforms and **Paste the URL link** of the Twitter OR TikTok educational assessment related social media content in the box below.

***"Educational Assessment" in this study's context refers to high-stakes examinations such as GCSEs, A-Levels and BTEC qualifications.***

#### 3.Social Media Content 2

Explore your Twitter and/or TikTok platforms and **Paste the URL link** of the Twitter OR TikTok educational assessment related social media content in the box below.

***"Educational Assessment" in this study's context refers to high-stakes examinations such as GCSEs, A-Levels and BTEC qualifications.***

#### 4.Social Media Content 3

Explore your Twitter and/or TikTok platforms and **Paste the URL link** of the Twitter OR TikTok educational assessment related social media content in the box below.

***"Educational Assessment" in this study's context refers to high-stakes examinations such as GCSEs, A-Levels and BTEC qualifications.***

#### 5.Social Media Content 4

Explore your Twitter and/or TikTok platforms and **Paste the URL link** of the Twitter OR TikTok educational assessment related social media content in the box below.

***"Educational Assessment" in this study's context refers to high-stakes examinations such as GCSEs, A-Levels and BTEC qualifications.***

6. For any of the social media data you submitted, briefly explain the process you used to select that data and why you chose that social media data? How does it link to educational assessment for you?

If possible, re-paste the URL link of the social media content that your answer relates to.

7. Would you like to submit more "educational-assessment related" social media content?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

## Appendix E - Ethics Form

### Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form

Anyone conducting research under the auspices of the Institute of Education (staff, students or visitors) where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants, is required to gain ethical approval before starting. This includes preliminary and pilot studies. Please answer all relevant questions in simple terms that can be understood by a lay person and note that your form may be returned if incomplete.

#### **Registering your study with the UCL Data Protection Officer as part of the UCL Research Ethics Review Process**

If you are proposing to collect personal data i.e. data from which a living individual can be identified **you must be registered with the UCL Data Protection Office before you submit your ethics application for review.** To do this, email the complete ethics form to the [UCL Data Protection Office](#). Once your registration number is received, add it to the form\* and submit it to your supervisor for approval. If the Data Protection Office advises you to make changes to the way in which you propose to collect and store the data this should be reflected in your ethics application form.

***Please note that the completion of the [UCL GDPR online training](#) is mandatory for all PhD students.***

#### Section 1 – Project details

- a. Project title: [Exploring Student Perspectives on Educational Assessment Discourse on Social Media Platforms](#)
- b. Student name and ID number (e.g. ABC12345678): [Kanayochukwu Phoebe Dike- Oduah, DIK15141984](#)
- c. **\*UCL Data Protection Registration Number:** [Z6364106/2023/07/52](#)
  - a. Date Issued: [13/07/2023](#)
- d. Supervisor/Personal Tutor: [Professor Dr Mary Richardson](#)
- e. Department: [Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment](#)
- f. Course category (Tick one):

PhD	<input type="checkbox"/>
EdD	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
DEdPsy	<input type="checkbox"/>
- g. **If applicable**, state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed.
- h. Intended research start date: [August 2023](#)
- i. Intended research end date: [December 2024](#)

- j. Country fieldwork will be conducted in: [United Kingdom](#)
- k. If research to be conducted abroad please check the [Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(FCO\)](#) and submit a completed travel risk assessment form (see guidelines). If the FCO advice is against travel this will be required before ethical approval can be granted: [UCL travel advice webpage](#)
- l. Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?

Yes ☐

External Committee Name:

Date of Approval:

No ☒ **go to Section 2**

***If yes:***

- Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.
- Proceed to Section 10 Attachments.

**Note:** Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC). In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.

**Section 2 - Research methods summary (tick all that apply)**

- ☐ Interviews
- ☒ Focus Groups
- ☐ Questionnaires
- ☐ Action Research
- ☒ Observation (Autoethnography and Netnography)
- ☐ Literature Review
- ☐ Controlled trial/other intervention study
- ☐ Use of personal records
- ☐ Systematic review – **if only method used go to Section 5**
- ☒ Secondary data analysis – **if secondary analysis used go to Section 6**
- ☐ Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups
- ☐ Other, give details:

Please provide an overview of the project, focusing on your methodology. This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection (including justifications for methods chosen and description of topics/questions to be asked), reporting and dissemination. Please focus on your methodology; the theory, policy, or literary background of your work can be provided in an attached document (i.e. a full research proposal or case for support document). *Minimum 150 words required.*

**Research Purpose:** This doctoral research study aims to investigate the discussions surrounding educational assessment on social media platforms, specifically TikTok and Twitter, with a particular focus on the narratives and discourses created by secondary and sixth-form students as key stakeholders in education.

By utilising a mixed methods approach, including content analysis, focus group interviews, and autoethnography, I seek to provide a comprehensive understanding of how students engage with and perceive educational assessment on social media.

**Main Research Questions:**

The research questions that will guide this study are:

1. How do students discuss educational assessment topics on TikTok and Twitter?
2. What do students disclose, and how do they interact with their own or others TikTok and Twitter comments or videos about educational assessment?
3. How does the discourse on educational assessment compare between social media (Twitter and TikTok) and offline settings?
4. What motivates students to use social media (Twitter and TikTok) to discuss educational assessment?
5. What impact does using TikTok and Twitter to discuss educational assessment have on students' perceptions of and engagement with assessment?
  - a. What are the unique opportunities and challenges of using TikTok and Twitter to discuss educational assessment as perceived by students?
6. How does engaging with and creating social media discourse about educational assessment impact the personal experiences and perspectives of the researcher as a teacher and examiner, as explored through the lens of autoethnography/auto-netnography?
  - a. Through the researcher's experience of social media discourses on educational assessment, what insights can be gained about the broader social and cultural contexts of educational assessment, and how do these

insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural analysis and interpretation of educational assessment practices?

**Research Design:** The research design incorporates a mixed methods approach, combining content analysis, focus group interviews, and autoethnography. This design allows for a comprehensive exploration of the research questions, capturing both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of assessment and social media.

**Participants and Sampling:** The participants in this study will be secondary and sixth-form students aged 15 to 19 who actively use social media platforms, specifically TikTok and Twitter.

For this study, a triage of opportunity, snowball, and volunteer sampling methods will be employed to recruit the student sample of participants. As a teacher and researcher, I have access to student groups within my school/sixth form, which provides an opportunity to conveniently recruit participants. This form of opportunity sampling allows for the inclusion of students who are readily available and accessible for participation in the study.

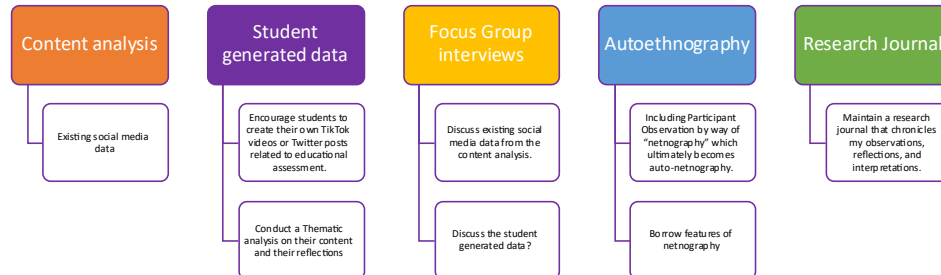
In addition to the opportunity sampling approach, snowball sampling will be used to extend the reach of the study. Through my connections with colleagues (in other schools) and students, I can leverage their networks to identify potential participants who may be interested in taking part in the research. Snowball sampling relies on referrals and recommendations, which allows me to access participants who may not be initially known or accessible through the opportunity sampling method.

Furthermore, volunteer sampling will be employed by reaching out to students who actively engage with educational assessment content on social media platforms. By using social media as a recruitment tool, I will target individuals who have a demonstrated interest in the topic and are willing to volunteer their participation in the study.

By combining these three sampling methods, the study aims to achieve a diverse and representative sample of students who actively use social media platforms for discussions related to educational assessment. This approach increases the likelihood of capturing a range of perspectives, experiences, and behaviours, enhancing the richness and validity of the research findings.

**Data Collection:**

## Mixed Methods Data Collection Overview



1. **Content Analysis:** A systematic analysis of educational assessment-related content on TikTok and Twitter will be conducted. This will involve collecting publicly available posts, comments, and videos, which will be analysed to identify themes (thematic analysis aspect), discourses, and patterns (quantification aspect) in students' discussions.
2. **Focus Group Interviews:** Online Focus group interviews will be conducted to delve deeper into students' experiences, opinions, and behaviours regarding educational assessment on social media platforms. A semi-structured interview guide will be used to facilitate open discussions on relevant topics, such as motivations, perceptions, impact, and challenges around educational assessment-related content on social media. Participants will be presented with social media content as artefacts during the focus group to aid discussions and may also be asked to share their own sourced social media content related to educational assessment (to be confirmed after a pilot focus group interview).
3. **Autoethnography:** My experiences as a teacher who actively uses TikTok and Twitter to discuss educational assessment will be documented through autoethnographic methods. This will involve participant observation, reflection, and the analysis of personal narratives to gain insights into the cultural aspects of educational assessment discourse.

**Reporting and Dissemination:** The findings of this research will be reported in a comprehensive 45,000-word thesis that adheres to academic standards. The thesis will include a detailed description of the research design, data collection methods, analysis techniques, and findings. The research will be disseminated through conference



presentations, academic publications (hopefully!), and potentially through engagement with educational institutions and policymakers to inform assessment practices.

**Ethical Considerations:** Ethical guidelines and protocols will be strictly followed throughout the research process. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, ensuring their privacy and confidentiality. Safeguarding measures will be implemented to ensure the well-being and safety of the participants, particularly when engaging with social media platforms. *More details on the ethical considerations for this study are in Section 8 below.*

### Section 3 – Research Participants (tick all that apply)

- ☐ Early years/pre-school
- ☐ Ages 5-11
- ☒ Ages 12-16
- ☒ Young people aged 17-18
- ☐ Adults please specify below
- ☐ Unknown – specify below
- ☐ No participants

Enter text

**Note:** Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully, as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC).

### Section 4 - Security-sensitive material (only complete if applicable)

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.

- a. Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?  
Yes\* ☐ No ☒
- b. Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?  
Yes\* ☐ No ☒
- c. Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?  
Yes\* ☐ No ☒

\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

Section 5 – Systematic reviews of research (only complete if applicable) – N/A

- a. Will you be collecting any new data from participants?

Yes\* ☐ No ☐

- b. Will you be analysing any secondary data?

Yes\* ☐ No ☐

\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

*If your methods do not involve engagement with participants (e.g. systematic review, literature review) **and** if you have answered **No** to both questions, please go to **Section 8 Attachments**.*

Section 6 - Secondary data analysis (only complete if applicable)

- a. Name of dataset/s: Public Tweets and TikTok content in the public domain, under specified hashtags, between August 2022 to August 2024

- b. Owner of dataset/s: Twitter (X Corp) and TikTok (Byte Dance)

- c. Are the data in the public domain?

Yes ☒ No ☐

**If no**, do you have the owner's permission/license?

Yes ☐ No\* ☐

- d. Are the data special category personal data (i.e. personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation)?

Yes\* ☐ No ☒

- e. Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?

Yes ☒ No\* ☐

- f. **If no**, was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?

Yes ☐ No\* ☐

- g. **If no**, was data collected prior to ethics approval process?

Yes ☐ No\* ☐

\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

If secondary analysis is only method used **and** no answers with asterisks are ticked, go to **Section 9 Attachments**.

## Section 7 – Data Storage and Security

**Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.**

- a. Data subjects - Who will the data be collected from?  
Student Participants (Focus Group Interviews)  
Social Media Data in the Public Domain  
Primary researcher (autoethnography)
- b. What data will be collected? Please provide details of the type of personal data to be collected  
Focus group interview data – students perspectives on educational assessment through the lens of
- Is the data anonymised?** Yes ☒ No\* ☐
- Do you plan to anonymise the data? Yes\* ☒ No ☐
- Do you plan to use individual level data? Yes\* ☐ No ☒
- Do you plan to pseudonymise the data? Yes\* ☒ No ☐

\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

- c. **Disclosure** – Who will the results of your project be disclosed to?
- EdD Supervisors – Professor Dr Mary Richardson and Dr Mary Fargher
  - EdD Examiners as chosen by my principal supervisor, Professor Dr Mary Richardson
  - Participants of the study on request
  - Dissemination via academic conferences and seminars
  - Dissemination via academic journals

**Disclosure** – Will personal data be disclosed as part of your project?

No

- d. Data storage – Please provide details on how and where the data will be stored i.e. UCL network, encrypted USB stick\*\*, encrypted laptop\*\* etc.  
Data will be stored in an electronic format on a Password protected hard drive (Laptop) and an External 2TB encrypted USB Hard Drive.

*\*\* Advanced Encryption Standard 256-bit encryption which has been made a security standard within the NHS*

- e. **Data Safe Haven (Identifiable Data Handling Solution)** – Will the personal identifiable data collected and processed as part of this research be stored in the UCL Data Safe Haven (mainly used by SLMS divisions, institutes and departments)?

Yes ☒ No ☐

- f. How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format?

Data will be stored in an electronic format and will be kept for a minimum of 10 years following UCL's Data Policy (UCL, 2018, p. 4).

Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area? (If yes, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with GDPR and state what these arrangements are)

No

Will data be archived for use by other researchers? (If yes, please provide details.)

No

- g. If personal data is used as part of your project, describe what measures you have in place to ensure that the data is only used for the research purpose e.g. pseudonymisation and short retention period of data'.

- All personal data collected from participants, such as names and contact information, will be pseudonymised. This means that identifiable information will be replaced with unique identifiers or pseudonyms to prevent the direct identification of individuals.
- Though Twitter and TikTok users are aware that their posts and comments are in the public domain (non-private accounts), I will anonymise all the tweets to be used in my study and redact identifying features. This is a way of acknowledging the fact that the social media users were unable to provide me with 'informed consent' and affording them a level of privacy. Therefore, the username, user image/avatar associated with each Tweet/TikTok will be redacted to ensure the authors' anonymity.
- In this research project, specific attention will be given to the ethical considerations surrounding the use of visual content on TikTok. As TikTok is a visual platform, it is crucial to ensure that any images or screenshots used in the

research do not reveal the identity of the content creators. This is done to protect their privacy and confidentiality. To address this, a blurring technique will be employed to obscure any identifying features or information in the visual content. This technique involves applying a blur effect to specific areas or elements within the images or screenshots that could potentially reveal the content creator's identity. By blurring these elements, such as usernames, profile pictures, or other identifying details, the privacy and anonymity of the content creators are upheld. The blurring technique is a commonly used method in visual research studies on platforms like TikTok (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2023), where participant consent and privacy are of utmost importance. It allows for the inclusion of visual content in the analysis and reporting of findings while ensuring the protection of the content creators' identities.

*\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

## Section 8 – Ethical Issues

Please state clearly the ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research and how will they be addressed.

**All** issues that may apply should be addressed. Some examples are given below, further information can be found in the guidelines. *Minimum 150 words required.*

- Methods
- Sampling
- Recruitment
- Gatekeepers
- Informed consent
- Potentially vulnerable participants
- Safeguarding/child protection
- Sensitive topics
- International research
- Risks to participants and/or researchers
- Confidentiality/Anonymity
- Disclosures/limits to confidentiality
- Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)
- Reporting
- Dissemination and use of findings

## Informed consent

The approach email and consent form will clarify how participants are being asked to contribute and how the results will be used. Participants will be asked to indicate their agreement to participate via a consent form and will only be permitted to take part in the research after providing informed consent. Participants will be assured of their **right to withdraw** from the study at any time, with a written reminder in the consent form and a verbal reminder provided at the start of the focus group interviews.

### **Power relationships**

A proportion of the student participants will be my own students whom I teach and for the students who I do not directly teach but come into contact with through snowball sampling, may still interact with me based on their schema of the hierarchical status of teacher and student. This foregrounds the common issue of unequal power relations. However, I must emphasise that my use of a student population is essential because these students are central to addressing the research questions which directly relate to them in the context of the research questions.

To overcome the ethical issues related to researching students. I will ensure that participants do not feel coerced to participate and that they are aware they may choose not to do so, with no adverse consequences. I am also mindful that participants may feel they must provide 'correct answers' or answers they believe I want to hear. I will assure participants in my enquiry of the value of their perspectives. I will consider sharing my transcriptions with participants to clarify their comments and include them in the research process.

### **Sensitive Topics**

High-stakes assessments are naturally a sensitive topic for all stakeholders involved, namely students. As students will be the primary focus, I will be cognisant of how some tweets presented to students may incite anxious feelings etc. Students will be reminded throughout the interview to pause when needed and will be reassured of their right to withdraw. A follow up debrief statement will be provided – pointing students to the appropriate organisations that are able to help with student anxiety (e.g. School counsellor, Childline, PAPYRUS, Samaritans)

I will provide training on using the internet safely prior to the focus group interviews and student-led data collection. In addition, the young adult participant group will be directed to the following website focused on 'safer internet use' before and after the study. This is to ensure that they are aware of how to keep themselves safe on social media sites, even in a research context: [Social media guides | Safer Internet Centre](#).

### **Confidentiality/Anonymity/ Disclosures/limits to confidentiality**

It is my responsibility to anonymise all the data so that as far as possible no individual or institution will be recognisable in my final report. I will use pseudonyms when referring to participants and institutions when transcribing the interviews – so that no participant is identifiable by name.

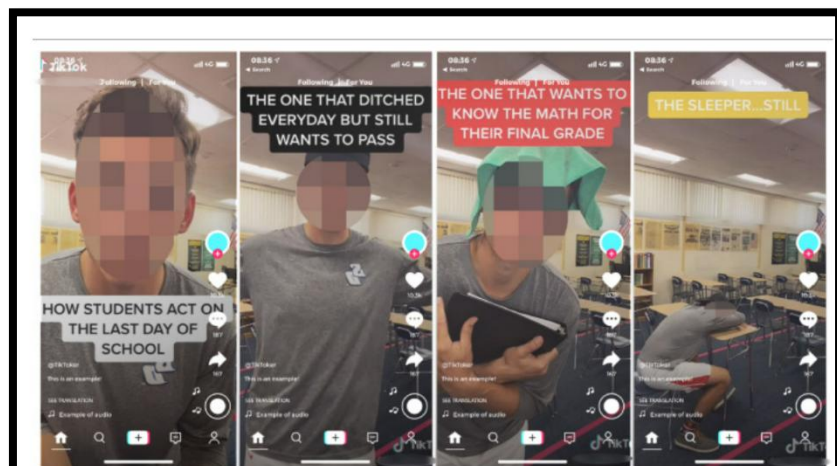
One limit to maintaining confidentiality within focus group research is that participants will have to be made aware that anything they share during the group interview is not confidential from other members in the same group. To manage this limitation, participants will be encouraged to ensure that our focus group discussions respectfully remain within the group.

Though Twitter and TikTok users are aware that their posts and comments are in the public domain (non-private accounts), I will anonymise all the tweets to be used in my study and redact and identifying features. This is a way of acknowledging the fact that the social media users were unable to provide me with 'informed consent' and affording them a level of privacy. Therefore, the username, user image/avatar associated with each Tweet/TikTok will be redacted to ensure the authors' anonymity.

In this research project, specific attention will be given to the ethical considerations surrounding the use of visual content on TikTok. As TikTok is a visual platform, it is crucial to ensure that any images or screenshots used in the research do not reveal the identity of the content creators. This is done to protect their privacy and confidentiality. To address this, a blurring technique will be employed to obscure any identifying features or information in the visual content. This technique involves applying a blur effect to specific areas or elements within the images or screenshots that could potentially reveal the content creator's identity. By blurring these elements, such as usernames, profile pictures, or other identifying details, the privacy and anonymity of the content creators are upheld. The blurring technique is a commonly used method in visual research studies on platforms like TikTok (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2023), where participant consent and privacy are of utmost importance (See example to right). It allows for the inclusion of visual content in the analysis and reporting of findings while ensuring the protection of the content creators' identities.

## Data protection

In relation to the storage of



[Download : Download high-res image \(877KB\)](#)

[Download : Download full-size image](#)

Fig.4. "teacher\_8" (L–R) 4.1: post objective; 4.2: first ditched student example; 4.3: second advanced student example; 4.4: sleeper student example. Screenshot by authors.



the data, I am the only person who will have access to the data via my Microsoft 365 UCL account (for MS Teams and MS Forms), my password-protected laptop and an encrypted external hard drive. I have also included UCL's Data Protection Privacy Policy in the participant information sheet.

## Use of previous Tweets, TikTok and social media data

Under Twitter's privacy policy, all users are aware and agreed to the public nature of Twitter. Therefore, no informed consent will be sought after to use previous tweets from August 2022 – August 2024 (*Excerpt from Twitter's privacy policy: 'Twitter is public and Tweets are immediately viewable and searchable by anyone around the world. We give you non-public ways to communicate on Twitter too, through protected Tweets and Direct Messages. You can also use Twitter under a pseudonym if you prefer not to use your name'.* <https://twitter.com/en/privacy>). (Twitter, 2021)

Similarly, TikTok's privacy policy makes users with public accounts aware that their content is in the public domain; accessible by all. Therefore, no informed consent will be sought after for the use of TikTok content from August 2022-August 2024. (*Excerpt from TikTok's Privacy Policy: Please note that if your profile is public, your content will be visible to anyone on the Platform and may also be accessed or shared by your friends and followers as well as third parties such as search engines, content aggregators and news sites. You can change who can see a video each time you upload a video. Alternatively, you can change your profile to default private by changing your*

*settings to 'Private Account' in "Manage my account" settings.)* (TikTok, 2020)

In previous social media research conducted during my MA at UCL and in the Methods of Enquiry module and my Institution Focused Study Thesis as part of my EdD at UCL, I consulted Townsend & Wallace (2017, p. 197) social media ethical framework (See right)

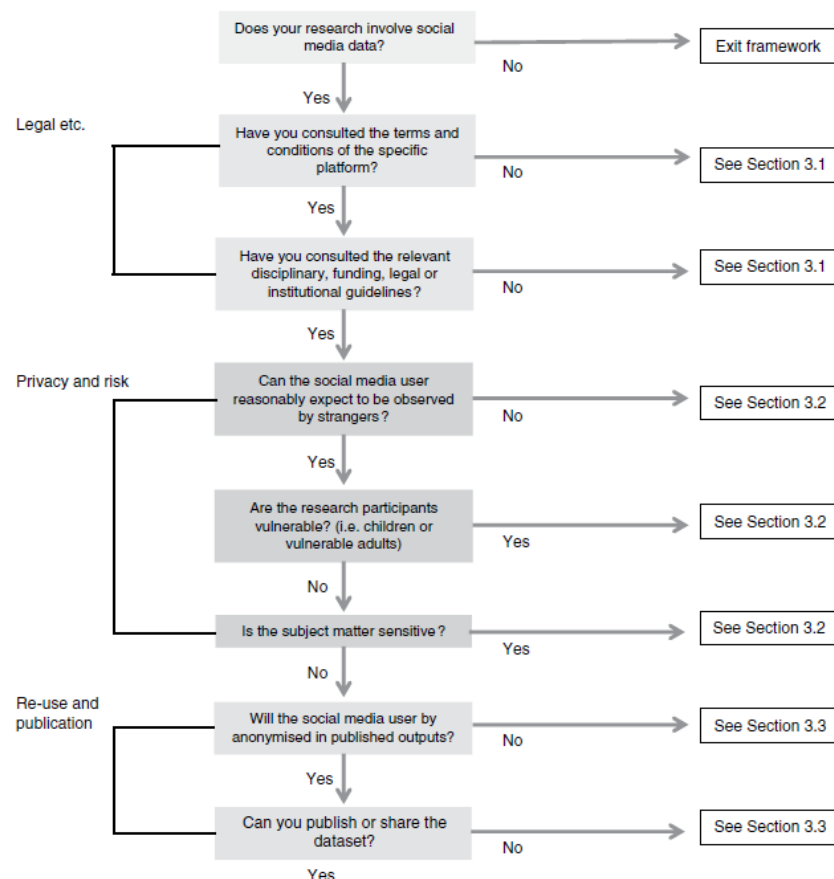


Fig. 1. Social Media Ethics Framework.



concerning the use of social media data in research.

This framework (see below) has been a critical guide for ensuring that the social media data included in my research fulfils the ethical guidelines set out by BERA (2018). I will consult this framework when considering the legal, privacy and publication of my work.

### **Dissemination and use of findings**

The outcome of this study will be a 45,000-word doctoral thesis as the final part of my EdD programme. The thesis will be shared with my supervisors, department at UCL and available on request to the participants involved. These finding will be shared strictly for academic purposes and the furtherance of knowledge in this niche field. The ethical layer to writing and dissemination encourages me to remain authentic to the language used by participants in the interviews. In addition, I will be sensitive to the future selves of my participants, as I recognise that my research is cross-sectional and that my participants are allowed to change/evolve their views and so an ethical approach will be cognisant of this in my reporting (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2020).

### **Safeguarding and Gatekeeping**

As this study concerns the student participants aged 16-19, they will be approached primarily, with a follow-up contact (for information purposes) with their parents/carers and schools. As a dual-professional, teacher-research my professional responsibility as a teacher and ethical researcher adds an additional layer of ethical considerations around safeguarding. Therefore, following guidance from NSPCC (NSPCC, 2023) regarding conducting research with children and young adults; should a participant make a safeguarding disclosure that suggests they are at risk of harm, whether psychological or physical, I will follow safeguarding procedures and refer the participant to the designated safeguarding lead. It is in this instance whereby confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. This safeguarding measure is consistent with the BERA (2018) guidelines and is supported by the UCL, IOE ethics committee.

### **Ethical Consideration for Autoethnography**

In the autoethnographic part of this research, several ethical considerations will be made to ensure the safeguarding of myself as the sole researcher throughout the research process. These considerations involve protecting my well-being, privacy, and maintaining ethical boundaries. Firstly, self-care and emotional well-being will be prioritised as I will engage regularly in reflective practice and seek support from my supervisors when needed. Secondly, my personal data and private information will be handled with utmost confidentiality. Any personal details shared in the autoethnography will be handled sensitively and will only be included with my full conviction for its inclusion. Lastly, ethical boundaries will be maintained by critically reflecting on my

positionality and potential biases, and by acknowledging and managing any potential conflicts of interest. These ethical considerations aim to create a safe and respectful research environment and to ensure that my personal well-being and ethical standards are upheld throughout the autoethnographic process.

Please confirm that the processing of the data is not likely to cause substantial damage or distress to an individual

Yes ☒

#### Section 9 – Attachments.

*Please attach your information sheets and consent forms to your ethics application before requesting a Data Protection number from the UCL Data Protection office. Note that they will be unable to issue you the Data Protection number until all such documentation is received*

- a. Information sheets, consent forms and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research (List attachments below)

Yes ☐ No ☐

- Information Sheet and Consent Form
- Research Proposal
- Risk Assessment
- Internet Safety PowerPoint Slides
- Draft focus group interview schedule.

- b. Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee Yes ☐
- c. The proposal ('case for support') for the project Yes ☒
- d. Full risk assessment Yes ☒

## Section 10 – Declaration

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge the information in this form is correct and that this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of this project.

I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.

Yes ☒ No ☐

I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.

Yes ☒ No ☐

### **I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:**

The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Name **Kanayochukwu Phoebe Dike-Oduah**

Date **13<sup>th</sup> July 2023**

**Please submit your completed ethics forms to your supervisor for review.**

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### **Professional code of ethics**

You should read and understand relevant ethics guidelines, for example:

[British Psychological Society](#) (2018) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*

Or

[British Educational Research Association](#) (2018) *Ethical Guidelines*

Or

[British Sociological Association](#) (2017) *Statement of Ethical Practice*

Please see the respective websites for these or later versions; direct links to the latest versions are available on the [Institute of Education Research Ethics website](#).

### **Disclosure and Barring Service checks**

If you are planning to carry out research in regulated Education environments such as Schools, or if your research will bring you into contact with children and young people (under the age of 18), you will need to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) CHECK, before you start. The DBS was previously known as the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). If you do not already hold a current DBS check, and have not registered with the DBS update service, you will need to obtain one through at IOE.

Ensure that you apply for the DBS check in plenty of time as will take around 4 weeks, though can take longer depending on the circumstances.

### **Further references**

Robson, Colin (2011). *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers* (3rd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

This text has a helpful section on ethical considerations.

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

This text has useful suggestions if you are conducting research with children and young people.

Wiles, R. (2013) *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?* Bloomsbury.

A useful and short text covering areas including informed consent, approaches to research ethics including examples of ethical dilemmas.

### **Departmental Use**

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, the supervisor must refer the application to the Research Development Administrator via email so that it can be submitted to the IOE Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A departmental research ethics coordinator or representative can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the REC. If unsure please refer to the guidelines explaining when to refer the ethics application to the IOE Research Ethics Committee, posted on the committee's website.

Student name: Kanayochukwu Phoebe Dike-Oduah

Student department: Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment

Course: Doctorate in Education (EdD)

Project Title: Exploring Student Perspectives on Educational Assessment Discourse on Social Media Platforms

### **Reviewer 1**

Supervisor/first reviewer name: Mary Richardson

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

No

Supervisor/first reviewer signature: M Richardson, via email

Date: 9/8/23

## Reviewer 2

Second reviewer name: Jacek Brant

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

No. This is a well-considered ethics application.

Second reviewer signature: J. Brant (by email)

Date: 9/8/23

## Decision on behalf of reviewers

Approved ☒

Approved subject to the following additional measures ☐

Not approved for the reasons given below ☐

Referred to the REC for review ☐

Points to be noted by other reviewers and in report to REC:

Comments from reviewers for the applicant:

***Once it is approved by both reviewers, students should submit their ethics application form to the Centre for Doctoral Education team: [IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk).***

Appendix F – Information  
Sheet and Consent Form

**Link to Microsoft Form: [Social Media and Educational Assessment Research](#)**

**Social Media and Educational Assessment Research (Scan QR Code for Digital Form)**

Details about the study:

Thank you for considering participating in this research study. Before you decide whether to take part, you need to understand the purpose, procedures, and potential implications of the study. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. If you have any questions or concerns, please ask the researcher or the principal research supervisor.



Researcher: Kanayo Situ Dike-Oduah

Researcher Email: [kanayo.dike-oduah.15@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:kanayo.dike-oduah.15@ucl.ac.uk)

Principal Research Supervisor: Professor Dr Mary Richardson

Principal Research Supervisor Email: [mary.richardson@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:mary.richardson@ucl.ac.uk)

**1. Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this research study is to explore the discussions, opinions, and behaviours of secondary and sixth-form students regarding educational assessment on social media platforms, specifically TikTok and Twitter. The study aims to understand how students engage with and perceive educational assessment on these platforms and the potential impact of social media on their assessment experiences. This study is being conducted as part of a doctoral thesis at UCL, Institute of Education and builds upon previous research in this niche field where assessment and social media converge.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Provide your consent by signing this form.
2. Engage in a focus group interview, which will be conducted in a group setting. The interview will last approximately 1 hour and will be audio-recorded for accurate transcription.

3. Share your experiences, opinions, and behaviours related to educational assessment on social media platforms during the focus group interview. The researcher will guide the discussion by asking open-ended questions.
  4. You may be asked to source relevant social media content (posts, comments, videos) related to educational assessment on TikTok and Twitter to discuss during the focus group interview.
  5. You may also have the option to create social media content (posts, videos) specifically for the purpose of the research, expressing your perspectives on educational assessment.
  6. All participants must receive training on internet safety and responsible social media use to ensure their safety and privacy while sourcing and creating content.
  7. Safeguarding measures will be in place to protect the participants' well-being throughout the study.
- ☐ Yes, I understand the purpose of the study and what would be required of me if I participate

**2. Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Your participation in this study will be kept strictly confidential. All data collected during the research, including your personal information, will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Your identity will be protected, and pseudonyms will be used in reporting the study's findings to ensure anonymity. Only the researcher will have access to the data, and all digital files will be password-protected.

Please note that if you divulge that they or others are at risk of significant harm or if the researcher observes or receives evidence of incidents likely to cause serious harm, the researcher has a duty to take steps to protect the participants. It is in this case that confidentiality cannot be upheld.

**Data Protection:** The personal data collected during the study will be securely stored and used solely for research purposes. Your personal information will be stored separately from the research data to maintain confidentiality. The research data will be stored securely and retained for a specified period, after which it will be securely destroyed. Please read UCL's DATA PROTECTION PRIVACY POLICY NOTICE:

The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk)

This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found in our 'general' privacy notice:

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices.

The lawful basis that will be used to process your personal data is: 'public task'.

Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data you provide, we will undertake this and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk)

- ☐ Yes, I understand the data protection, confidentiality and anonymity for participants in this study

**3.Benefits and Risks:** Participating in this study may provide an opportunity for you to express your perspectives and contribute to understanding the experiences of students regarding educational assessment on social media platforms. However, as with any research study, there may be minimal risks associated with discussing personal opinions and experiences.

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason and without any negative consequences. Your decision to participate or decline will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or the institution.

**Research Ethics:** This research study has received ethical approval from the UCL Institute of Education Ethics Committee. The study will be conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines and regulations, including the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines, to ensure the protection of participants' rights and welfare.

- ☐ Yes, I understand the benefits and risks of my voluntary participation in this study

## **Consent to Participate**

By signing this consent form (selecting the box to agree to participate and providing your full name as a signature), you acknowledge that you have read and understood the information provided and freely consent to participate in the study. You also acknowledge that you will receive training on internet safety and responsible social media use and that safeguarding measures are in place to protect your well-being.

4.Full Name

5.Consent Agreement

- ☐ Yes, I agree to take part in the above research.

6.Email Address

Please provide your email address so that the researcher can contact you to arrange a focus group interview.

## **Participant Details**

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate. Please support the demographic data collection for this study by providing responses to the questions below. Remember that all data will be anonymised and kept confidential for the purpose of this study.

7.How old are you?

- ☐ 16  
☐ 17  
☐ 18  
☐ 19

8.What is your gender?

- ☐ Woman  
☐ Man  
☐ Prefer not to say

9.Select all the social media platforms that you use generally.

- ☐ TikTok  
☐ Twitter  
☐ Snapchat  
☐ Facebook  
☐ Instagram  
☐ WhatsApp



- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ None

10. Have you used social media platforms to discuss or engage with educational assessment related content?

In this study, the term "educational assessment" is used to define high-stakes assessments such as GCSEs, A-Levels, BTECs.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure

# **Internet Safety Training for Social Media Platforms**

## **Information Sheet**

Welcome to the Internet Safety Training for Social Media Platforms! This training aims to provide guidance on using the internet, Twitter, and TikTok safely, with a focus on research participation. It is essential to prioritise online safety and practice responsible use of social media platforms. Here's a summary of the key topics covered in this training:

### **1. Online Safety Basics:**

- Online safety refers to taking precautions to protect personal information, privacy, and well-being while using the internet.
- Be cautious and responsible when engaging with social media platforms.

### **2. Social Media Platforms:**

- Twitter and TikTok are popular social media platforms discussed in this training.

### **3. Privacy Settings:**

- Keep your personal social media accounts private.
- Adjust privacy settings on Twitter and TikTok to control who can see your posts and personal information.
- Regularly review and update your privacy settings.

### **4. Sharing Personal Information:**

- Sharing personal information online can pose risks.
- Avoid sharing sensitive information on social media platforms like your full name, address, phone number, or school name.

- Exercise caution when interacting with others online.

#### 5. Recognizing and Reporting Inappropriate Content:

- Inappropriate or triggering content may be encountered on social media platforms.
- Learn how to report offensive or harmful content on Twitter and TikTok.
- Report any content that makes you feel uncomfortable or upset.

#### 6. Interacting with Others:

- Be mindful of the people you engage with on social media.
- Avoid interacting with strangers or sharing personal information with unknown users.
- Only engage in conversations with trusted individuals you know personally.

#### 7. Cyberbullying and Online Harassment:

- Cyberbullying and online harassment are defined and discussed.
- Understand the potential risks and consequences of engaging in such behaviour.
- Be respectful and kind online and report any instances of cyberbullying or harassment.

#### 8. Digital Well-being:

- Maintain a healthy balance between online and offline activities.
- Take breaks from social media and prioritise your mental well-being.
- Manage screen time and establish healthy online habits.

Remember, the safety measures and guidelines discussed in this training are crucial for safely using the internet, Twitter, and TikTok. If you have any further questions or concerns, don't hesitate to contact the researcher or the provided support resources.

Thank you for your engagement and stay safe online!

## Focus Group Interview Guide: Exploring Student Experiences, Opinions, and Behaviours Regarding Educational Assessment on Social Media Platforms

### Introduction

1. **Welcome and introductions:** Begin by welcoming the participants and introducing myself as the researcher. Explain the purpose of the focus group and its importance for understanding their experiences, opinions, and behaviours regarding educational assessment on social media platforms.
2. **Purpose and confidentiality:** Clarify that the discussion will be confidential and that their identities will be protected. Explain that the purpose of the focus group is to gather their insights and perspectives, which will contribute to improving our understanding of educational assessment discourse on social media.
3. **Icebreaker questions:** To set a comfortable and engaging atmosphere:
  - Use Mentimeter for participants to rate how they are feeling on a scale of 1 to 5.
  - "Can you share a memorable experience or interaction you've had on social media generally"?
  - "Can you share a memorable experience or interaction you've had on social media related to education?"



1

## Consent Form

- Link:  
<https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=oiVH5ipW0yTySEKEdmIwsUBNOt2j2xKuEiqX48jPJJURERWTEROUDE3QIY5OUUpESzJMRU9ONIIKUC4u>

Social Media and Educational  
Assessment Research

2

## Welcome and introductions:

1. Purpose of the focus group and its importance for understanding their experiences, opinions, and behaviours regarding educational assessment on social media platforms.
2. **Purpose and confidentiality:** Clarify that the discussion will be confidential and that their identities will be protected. Explain that the purpose of the focus group is to gather their insights and perspectives, which will contribute to improving our understanding of educational assessment discourse on social media.



3



4

## Exploring Experiences:

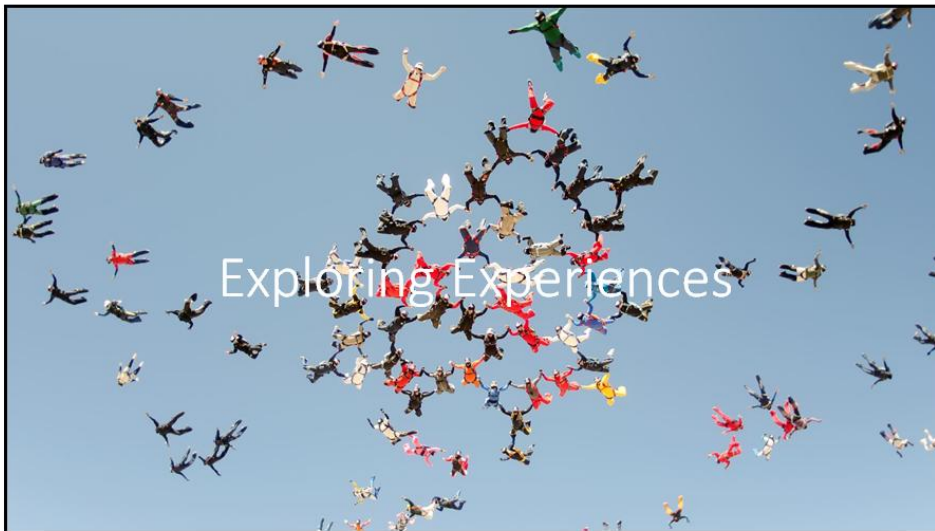
4. **Social media platforms:** Discuss the specific social media platforms they use, such as TikTok and Twitter. Ask about their frequency of use and the reasons behind their choice of platforms.
5. **Educational assessment content:** Probe into their experiences with educational assessment content on social media, asking questions like:
  - "What types of educational assessment-related content do you come across on social media?"

- "How do you engage with such content? Do you like, share, or comment on posts? Why or why not?"
6. **Influences and impact:** Explore how their interactions with educational assessment content on social media influence their thoughts, behaviours, and perceptions. Ask questions like:
- "How does the educational assessment content on social media platforms affect your understanding of assessments?"
  - "Have you ever changed your opinions or behaviours related to assessment as a result of something you saw or read on social media? Can you share an example?"





5



6

#### Opinions and Behaviours:

**7. Engagement with discussions:** Inquire about their participation in discussions about educational assessment on social media, including their motivation and the factors that drive their involvement. Some questions may include:

- "Do you actively participate in discussions about educational assessment on social media? Why or why not?"
- "What motivates you to engage in these discussions? Is it the desire to share your perspective, learn from others, or something else?"

8. **Discourse analysis:** Encourage participants to reflect on the nature and quality of educational assessment discourse on social media platforms. Ask questions like:
  - "How would you describe the overall tone and style of discussions about educational assessment on social media?"
  - "Do you find these discussions helpful, informative, or accurate? Why or why not?"
9. **Peer influence and social validation:** Discuss the role of peer influence and social validation in shaping their opinions and behaviours related to educational assessment on social media. Prompt with questions like:
  - "Do you feel pressure to conform to certain viewpoints or opinions about assessment on social media? Why or why not?"
  - "How do the opinions and comments of others on social media platforms influence your own beliefs and attitudes toward educational assessment?"

## Exploring Experiences



### Social media platforms

Discuss the specific social media platforms they use, such as TikTok and Twitter. Ask about their frequency of use and the reasons behind their choice of platforms.



### Educational assessment content:

Probe into their experiences with educational assessment content on social media, asking questions like:

"What types of educational assessment-related content do you come across on social media?"

"How do you engage with such content? Do you like, share, or comment on posts? Why or why not?"



### Influences and impact:

Explore how their interactions with educational assessment content on social media influence their thoughts, behaviours, and perceptions. Ask questions like:

"How does the educational assessment content on social media platforms affect your understanding of assessments?"

"Have you ever changed your opinions or behaviours related to assessment as a result of something you saw or read on social media? Can you share an example?"

7



8

## Engagement with discussions:

- Inquire about their participation in discussions about educational assessment on social media, including their motivation and the factors that drive their involvement. Some questions may include:
- "Do you actively participate in discussions about educational assessment on social media? Why or why not?"
- "What motivates you to engage in these discussions? Is it the desire to share your perspective, learn from others, or something else?"



9

## Discourse analysis

Encourage participants to reflect on the nature and quality of educational assessment discourse on social media platforms. Ask questions like:

- "How would you describe the overall tone and style of discussions about educational assessment on social media?"
- "Do you find these discussions helpful, informative, or accurate? Why or why not?"



10

## Presentation of Tweets and TikTok Videos

10. Display and describe the first tweet related to educational assessment.

- Ask participants for their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives on the content of the tweet. What stands out to them? Do they agree or disagree with the points made? Why?
- Repeat this process with the remaining tweets (approx. 10 in total), allowing ample time for discussion and participant input.

11. Display and describe the first TikTok video related to educational assessment.

- Ask participants for their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives on the content of the video. What messages or themes do they identify? How does it relate to their own experiences with assessment? Encourage discussion and personal reflections.
- Repeat this process with the remaining TikTok videos (approx. 10 in total), providing opportunities for participants to share their insights and engage in dialogue.

## Peer influence and social validation:

Discuss the role of peer influence and social validation in shaping their opinions and behaviours related to educational assessment on social media. Prompt with questions like:

- "Do you feel pressure to conform to certain viewpoints or opinions about assessment on social media? Why or why not?"
- "How do the opinions and comments of others on social media platforms influence your own beliefs and attitudes toward educational assessment?"



11

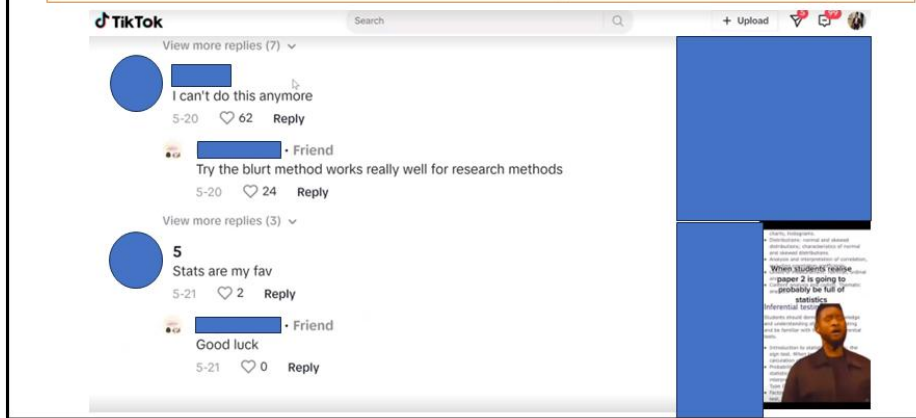
## Presentation of Tweets and TikTok Videos



12

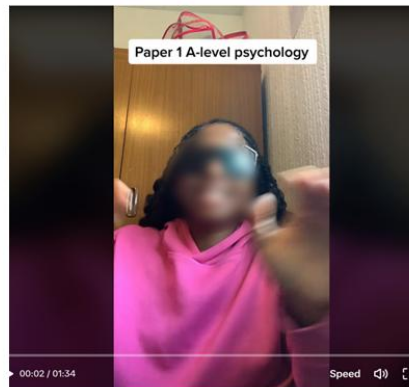


## Focus Group 2 – Social media content 5 – TikTok Comments section – Researcher sourced (continued – 38:37)



22

## Focus Group 2 – Social media content 4 – TikTok – Researcher sourced



[\(99+\)#aqalevelpsychology2023 #alevels2023 #sixthform psychology paper 1 | TikTok](#)

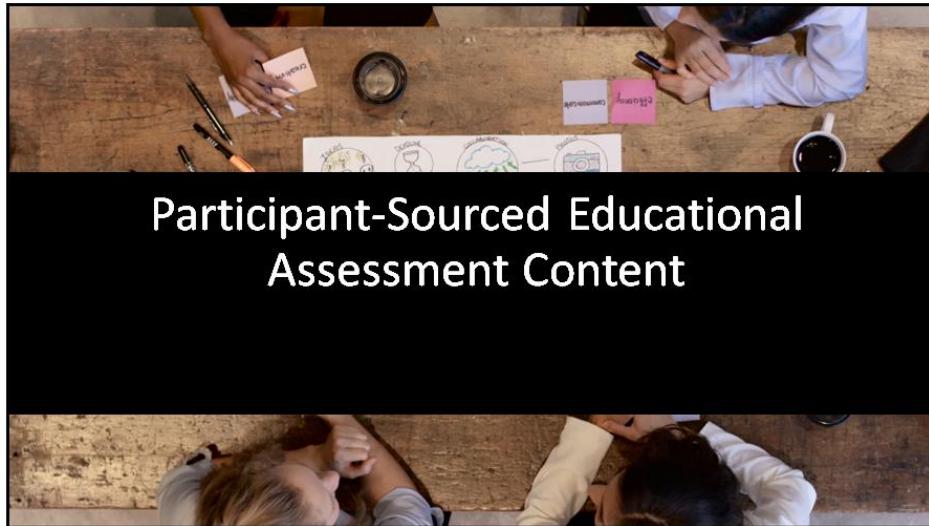
N.B. Face blurred to protect identity as part of ethical considerations

24

### Participant-Sourced Content:

#### 12. Participant-Sourced Educational Assessment Content

- Invite participants to share an educational assessment-related tweet or TikTok video that they sourced and find interesting.
- Allow each participant to briefly describe the content and explain why it caught their attention.
- Encourage other participants to respond, share their perspectives, and engage in a discussion about the presented content.




33

**Participant-Sourced Educational Assessment Content**

- Invite participants to share an educational assessment-related tweet or TikTok video that they sourced and find interesting. (Using the Microsoft forms link – QR code to right)

Social Media Content Submission  
For Focus Group Discussion



<https://forms.office.com/e/nGgyC25Zmj>

34

### Conclusion:

13. **Final thoughts:** Give participants an opportunity to share any additional thoughts, concerns, or experiences related to educational assessment on social media platforms.
14. **Appreciation and closing:** Thank the participants for their valuable insights and contribution to the discussion. Reiterate the confidentiality of their responses, their right to withdraw, and express appreciation for their time and willingness to participate.





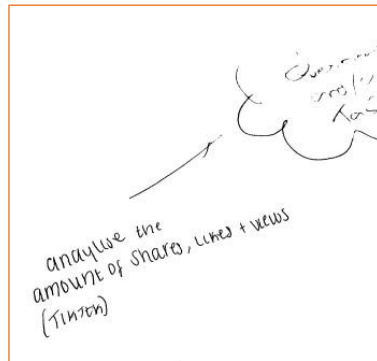
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## Conclusion

**Final thoughts:** Give participants an opportunity to share any additional thoughts, concerns, or experiences related to educational assessment on social media platforms.

**Appreciation and closing:** Thank the participants for their valuable insights and contribution to the discussion. Reiterate the confidentiality of their responses, their right to withdraw, and express appreciation for their time and willingness to participate.

## Appendix I – Photos/Scans of Pilot Focus Group Participants' handwritten recommendations



Bring in social media content that they've used relating to educational achievement.

Eg.  
TikToks  
tweets.

Look at interactions eg.  
views, likes, saves  
and comments under TikToks. reposts

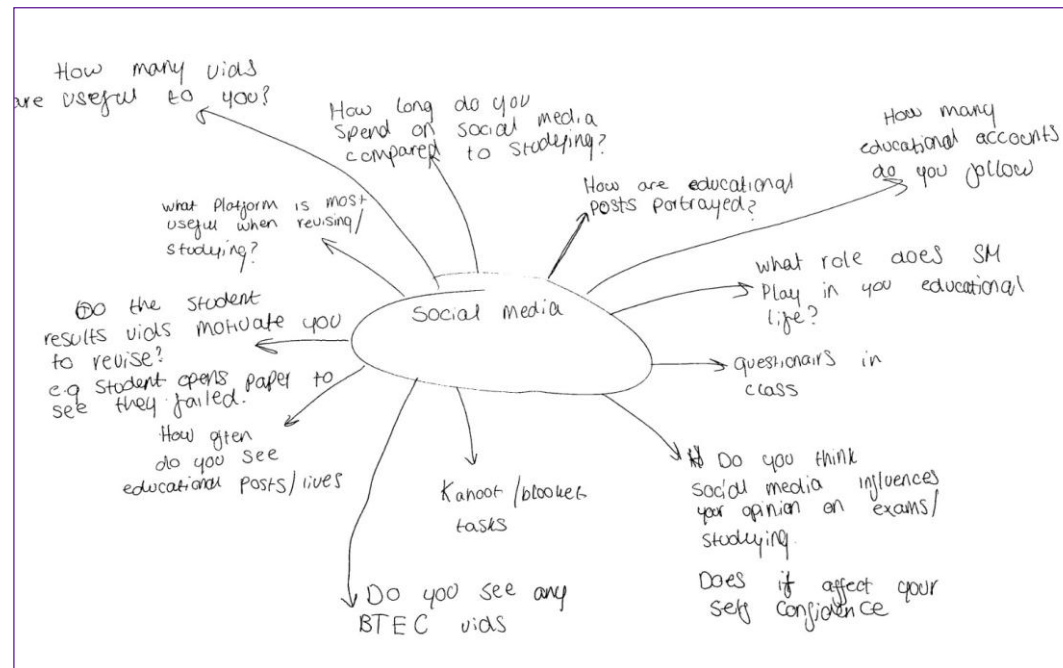
TikTok ~~algorithm~~ algorithm changes depending on current interests and similar videos

- Do you think the way you use social media positively or negatively impacts exam results?
- What social media platforms support you before exams?
- Do you trust educational content you see on TikTok?

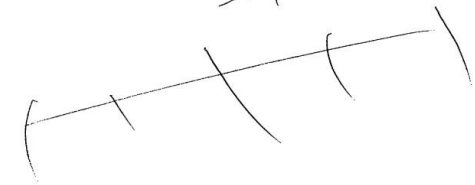
### POSSIBLE QUESTIONS/TASKS

- Bring in content from social media platforms of your choice about educational assessments
- "Have you ever gone on social media platforms for help predicting assessment content?"
- "Have you ever gone on social media platforms to voice your opinions on assessments?"
- "Do you use social media for educational purposes?"

to what extent does social media affect your confidence after an exam?

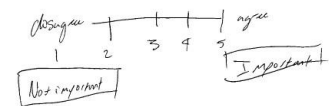


ARE Exams Important?



- analysing evidence-
- amount of shares & reports
  - contents
  - views

How often does social media present for influence of exams



How likely are you to use tiktok to prepare for an exam



Appendix J - Example of focus group transcript with researcher notes. Comments /Researcher notes on Focus Group 3 Transcript

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
7	5	<p>KDO: So this one has clearly made you all laugh. This was shared on the 23rd of August, so your results day. And it says GCSE, hashtag GCSE results day tomorrow. Every year 11 Right now you've got crying emoji Times 3 and all the hashtags are hashtag GCSE 2023 and this image looks like a baby. And it says Wallahi, I'm finished.</p> <p>Stu5: Do you know who that is?</p> <p>KDO: Do I do I know. Who it is?</p> <p>Stu5: Yeah?</p> <p>KDO: No, who is it?</p> <p>Stu 5: Hasbulla</p> <p>KDO: Who's that?</p> <p>Stu5: He's an MMA fighter</p>	<p>I loved the fact that participants felt comfortable and confident enough to ask me questions. This was another example of the students' cultural discussions/language/communication methods are incredibly nuanced and unique to them. They have used an image of a man with a growth/development disorder to share their assessment experiences.</p>
8	5	<p>Stu9: He's actually 20</p> <p>KDO: 20! [shocked tone] Oh my gosh. So they've put here "wallahi I'm finished, man". Why do you think they've used this particular image? Like, are there any thoughts, why have they used this image?</p>	<p>Students use these seemingly unrelated images or memes because the said celebrity or person is trending and for the humour factor/purpose</p>

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		<p>Stu5: It makes it funny</p> <p>Stu9: He's trending, like everyone knows about him</p> <p>KDO: Oh so, Is it common for, if like a celebrity or a popular figure, is trending on social media. Is it common to for that person to then be used as a meme for things that are seemingly unrelated? Because, he's probably got nothing to do with GCSE's. Isn't it?</p>	
9	10	<p>KDO: So why do you think this student has tweeted this? Anyone hands up wanting to share why? Why has this student tweeted this? What is the image signifying? Do they feel good about their results? Would you go on to Twitter and write something like this? [unidentifiable response of yes to the last question].</p> <p>KDO: Some of you are saying "yes". Why? Why would You go onto Twitter?</p> <p>Stu5: Because it's Funny, because it's funny and people will relate To it and might make them feel better about their results.</p> <p>KDO: So people relate to it, and it might make them feel better? Yeah. OK, well, what about you. Why would you go on Twitter and share something?</p> <p>Stu2: Um, I feel like because a lot of people did better than</p>	Parental opinions about students attainment etc matter to students and they use social media to communicate this in a jovial way.

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		they expected to. And then when you have parents, who have high expectations for you But they feel like you're not meeting them, It's just funny when you Can prove them wrong.	
10	6	<p>Stu5: I swear that's Shannon Sharpe</p> <p>KDO: Shannon Sharpe, OK,</p> <p>Stu5: An NFL player or something</p> <p>KDO: OK, alright. So it says me walking into the physics paper two exam knowing that the sounds of my parents beating me are going to be longitudinal waves. [participants laugh]. Hashtag GCSE 2022, GCSE, GCSE physics. And it's the same Shannon Sharpe that they're using, but what I'm interested in, is in the play on words here. The sound of the parents beating them is going to be longitudinal waves. They're linking it to physics, isn't it?</p> <p>Stu5: Yeah, they are linking it to the topic.</p> <p>KDO: To the topic. So if you saw this Tweet, let's say you've just finished the the physics exam, you've decided to go onto Twitter and you saw this Tweet, how would it make you feel?</p>	Again - another example of using celebrities or main stream media content to communicate about their assessment experiences. Because truly - what does Shannon Sharpe have to do with an AQA GCSE Physics exam on face value.
11	1	KDO: The same and better. Any other thoughts? Any other thoughts? Would it make anyone feel sad?	Linking back to individual test items seen on assessments/exams

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		<p>Stu5: No</p> <p>KDO: No, it wouldn't make you feel sad. Why do you think they've done this play on words, "the sounds of your parent beating you...longitudinal waves?"</p> <p>Stu9: It relates back to something in the test and its still fresh in your memory, so you can remember it.</p> <p>KDO: OK, so it's still fresh in your memory. They can remember the fact that maybe longitudinal waves was a question on that test. Now why have they used Shannon Sharpe in this same position? Does anyone know?</p>	
15	17	<p>Stu3: You revise for two things the night before, and then you're going to have to disregard one a little bit.</p> <p>KDO: Yeah. So you feel like your revision has to be somewhat divided, but one subject is maybe losing up.</p> <p>Stu7: Yeah, like when I had three exams in one day, I couldn't revise for every single one I had to like Sacrifice one of them.</p> <p>KDO: So did you ever feel like this person on the screen? Yeah. Ready to throw hands?</p> <p>Stu7: Yes, Yes [passionately]</p> <p>Stu2: I feel like especially with this tweet because maths and</p>	The difficulty of having multiple exams in one day and the realities for students' assessment experiences.

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		<p>history are so content heavy and everyone's like procrastinating or got exams. Like What was the point of putting them in the same day when it could have been easier for us all?</p> <p>KDO: Yeah. So they should spread it out.</p> <p>Stu6: I was going to say that it was very stressful and very relatable because many students take maths and history, and a feel like its just so stressful because you have so little time to just move from on subject to the next.</p>	
16	3	<p>KDO: and he's narrating You know, his experience during the exam. Are there any things that he shared on that TikTok that you guys Can relate to?</p> <p>Stu1: I found the question like really easy because it was just like a generic question. It's open. It wasn't anything specific.</p> <p>KDO: Would you say that you can relate to that cause there were some questions that you found easy.</p>	Finding questions easy and categorising them as being "generic". Could this mean that the test item was a weak discriminator or a strong one?
17	7	<p>so it says GCSE predictions 2023. English U, French 9, biology 3, chemistry U Physics 9, maths U, RS 4, geography 3, PE 3, business U, procrastination 10. What I'm so like and and this genuinely is fascinates me. When I was in school and we got our predicted grade Back then, we didn't even have TikTok and it's not to say that I'm old, but we did have</p>	Moderator sharing her own experience - and can link this to the IPA methodology which encourages the researcher to share their lens/experiences



Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		platforms that we could share content on, but we rarely ever shared, you know, on Twitter what our predictions were. Why has she done this like?	
17	14	<p>It's her predicting her score.</p> <p>KDO: So its her predicting her score as to what she would get in her exams OK.</p> <p>Stu1: That why she said she is going to duet it in August to compare.</p> <p>KDO: to her actual results? So it's not her teachers predicting it, you don't think?</p> <p>Stu5: Yeah it's definitely not her teachers because teachers can't predict students a U.</p> <p>KDO: Oh you don't think teachers can predict U grades.</p> <p>Stu5: They're not allowed.</p> <p>KDO: Who told you teachers aren't allowed to predict U's?</p> <p>Stu5: Oh, they can? [shocked]</p> <p>KDO: Yeah, 100%.</p> <p>Stu5: My history teacher said he can't predict anyone a U.</p> <p>KDO: Really? Maybe he's thinking like a person or oath not</p>	<p>Interesting views about predictions and whether teachers are allowed to predict U grades. Also the comparison between predicted grades and actual grades - you can link this to the literature around predicted grades and how maybe because teachers tend to be amiss when it come to predictions, that now a TikTok trend has been made of it!</p>

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		<p>to predict anyone a U, but certainly if a student is failing. let's say in every single assessment a student Has got a U, Can you ever predict them higher? Have they shown you that they're capable. Like, what are your thoughts like should you be able to predict students a higher grade even if they haven't shown you that they can access content at a higher grade?</p> <p>Stu3: You have to get them ready for like the result. I don't believe you should get their hopes up.</p> <p>Stu1: The thing is during exam season Normally people revise more. So they do get higher than what they might have been predicted, but you never know.</p>	
18	11	<p>And one of my students said to me, miss, even before I watch a TikTok video, I look at the comments, is that similar for some of you? Yeah. Now the comments were quite interesting. this one says "9 in physics but U in maths is mad". So obviously that students own predictions of themselves It's not really. It's not very consistent if you're getting a 9 in physics, how can you be getting a U In maths? So you're right in saying that maybe they were a bit jokey with it.</p> <p>And again similar comments. "Wait, but how are you getting a 9 in physics and a U in maths? Isn't there maths in physics".</p>	Again the inconsistency of teacher predictions is seriously played out here in the comments section. Could this be a mockery of the who predictions process within the culture of assessment as students see it?

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		And they've got lots of likes on that one?	
20	12	<p>So, again like this is this is excessive use. I might not even use the word excessive, but this is a use of memes to illustrate how they're feeling about their results. Is that something that you would do or you wouldn't do? And tell me why that might be the case. In fact, did any of you share your results online? No. Stu5, you did?</p> <p>Stu5: Yeah.</p> <p>KDO: And you did [to Stu6]. Why did you share it online?</p> <p>Stu5: I just like saw other people did it, so I did it as well.</p> <p>KDO: So you felt like you were going to conform to what other people were doing. Do you Feel pressured to conform.</p> <p>Stu5: No, not really.</p> <p>KDO: no. but did you want to do it?</p> <p>Stu5: Yeah.</p>	The motivator for sharing results online is linked to conformity - doing what everyone else is doing, but there is also a denial that this is the case from the same student. They believe that they exercised their free will but could there have been social-environmental pressures to conform?
20	4	<p>KDO: What about you, you said you shared it?</p> <p>Stu1: Yeah, it was just much better than what I thought they would be so I just put them on my stories.</p> <p>KDO: So because they were better than what you thought.</p>	Another motivation for sharing results online is the fact that they are proud of their outcomes or if they exceeded their own expectations. This student said even if they didn't have positive results in their eyes, that

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		<p>[Stu1:Yeah]. You shared them on your story. Yeah. Is that Snapchat or Instagram?</p> <p>Stu1: Snapchat.</p> <p>KDO: Is that like, public or is it personal?</p> <p>Stu1: Public</p> <p>KDO: Oh its a public one. OK. If, for example, and well done on the GCSE results that you're proud of. If for example, they weren't As good which you have shared it?</p> <p>Stu1: Yeah, probably.</p> <p>KDO: Probably would have shared it. You sure You Would have shared it?</p> <p>Stu1: Yeah.</p>	they would still share the result on their public social media platform.
20	17	<p>KDO: OK. Some more for. I mean the majority of you said that you didn't share your exam results on any social media platform. I'm interested to find out why. Why didn't you share your results?</p> <p>Stu2: Because I didn't really care. I just...I don't know.</p> <p>KDO: You didn't care for people seeing what you Got?</p> <p>Stu2: yeah</p>	A variety of reasons as to why students chose NOT to share their results on social media. Some out of modesty, some out of concern for how others may feel and some trying to circumvent the consequences of comparison

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		<p>Stu3: I think there is bit modesty about it in my opinion. I feel like if somebody didn't do so well and they like actually like kind of put the effort in, but they weren't, they just weren't as lucky. I think its a bit...It's sometimes a bit of a kick in the teeth for other people. So I feel you've got to be modest about it.</p> <p>KDO: Hmm. So being modest about sharing your own results because you don't know how other people might perceive it, yeah. I hear that any other thoughts? Any? Other comments?</p> <p>Stu1: We just saw that it influences people compare themselves. I guess to you and others, which is never good.</p>	
22	2	<p>KDO: OK, anyone like really take in A level content? I'll come to you and then you. And then anyone at the back?</p> <p>Stu1: I was confused because some people are saying that they went from like an A* to like a D or something and they blamed the exam boards but at that point, I don't even think it is the exam boards fault, so it kind of made me laugh.</p> <p>KDO: Yeah, they were like, really high grade boundaries for the A levels. So that's interesting that maybe someone was predicted an A* and then got a D.</p> <p>Stu6: It made me feel a bit nervous to like, actually pick the subject, but then I actually prepared me to revise from the</p>	Impact of seeing A Level assessment related content on social media as GCSE students at the time. Some said it was confusing, some said it made them feel nervous but also gave them tips. Link to literature about learning from our peers experiences?

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		start.	
25	9	<p>KDO: So that's quite a short TikTok, but I guess the sentiment of the TikTok is that she's finding it painful that maybe she's sat an exam and she's literally just a few marks off the next grade. Have any of you experienced that?</p> <p>Stu3: Yeah, so many times</p> <p>KDO: In what subjects?</p> <p>Stu3: History, English language and drama.</p> <p>KDO: Ohh my gosh. Was that in your official GCSEs?</p> <p>Stu3: Yeah, yeah.</p> <p>KDO: In the official ones? Wow, So what are you doing to like remedy that? How does it make you feel knowing that you're just a Few marks off the next grade.</p> <p>Stu2: It's a kick in the teeth</p> <p>KDO: A kick in the teeth.</p>	"A kick in the teeth" is how one student described the pain of being a few marks off the next grade. Link to literature about injustice in education.
26	8	#GCSEmemes	Pick up on the fact that there is a hashtag dedicated to GCSE memes. Clearly define what a meme is and its significance in the online culture and what this means for the way assessment experiences are discussed

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
			online.
26	10	<p>Stu7: It's in World War 2</p> <p>KDO: So does exam season literally feel like a war for some of you? [participants nod in agreement]. Yeah, some of you are nodding your head.</p> <p>Stu6: At some points.</p> <p>KDO: You said That at some point it feels like a war. So when you reach towards the end you you feel what?</p> <p>Stu6: Accomplished and a sense of relief.</p>	Of the many images/visual representations of students assessment experiences as shared on social media - a clip from world war 2 feature. Demonstrating the battle that many students experience during the exam period.
28	14	<p>KDO: Why do you think this young person has recorded their mother's reaction to their GCSE results and then posted it online? Why do we think that is happening?</p> <p>Stu6: For views, for attention and for entertainment. I guess some people can think its funny what is mum is saying in the background.</p> <p>KDO: Do you guys find what is Mum saying, Funny?</p> <p>All: Yeah.</p> <p>Stu5: I think that like deep down, he is actually ashamed of himself, like he's posted it to try and make himself feel better.</p>	<p>The theme of parents comes up again - might link to the longitudinal waves content discussed in this and other focus groups.</p> <p>Also - the idea that students may post content for attention and to reduce any negative feelings.</p>

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		KDO: That's an interesting perspective. So deep down he's ashamed, but actually he's putting it out there to make himself feel better, to get the views and perhaps his mum's response is somewhat entertaining. His mum says something like what job are you going to? You know road sweeper, dustbin man. All I can do is sigh. Ohh God, I'm looking at the results and it's quite painful.	
29	13	<p>KDO: So apologies for the language. Now what I'm trying to understand here because remember I'm a psychology and sociology teacher. So I don't teach GCSE English or GCSE maths. The caption says, POV, which you guys have taught me is point of view the hyena deeping his hairline. What exactly is this referring to?</p> <p>Stu3: On the English language paper 1, it was talking about a hyena and it just kept on, the author kept on insulting the hyena because its an ugly animal.</p> <p>KDO: Ohh so it's like based on the question that came up in that English language exam. A student has created a TikTok With relation to that. And because everyone did English language. If you've seen this TikTok, how does it Make you feel?</p>	Social media content based on specific test items again - so this is a theme. There is also a level of gatekeeping in that, only those who completed the exam will understand the references made here. This further establishes the closed yet public nature of this community of students that use social media to discuss their assessment experiences. Link to literature about ingroup and outgroup. Also emic research as there a some things that I could not understand as an outsider.
29	16	KDO: Now, this video that is being linked to the question about the hyena in an GCSE English language exam. What	Another discussion around how test items are visualised and then conveyed in social media



Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		<p>relation does it have to this guy here?</p> <p>Stu3: It's just a clip about his hair. It relates because it's like students are bringing the exam question to life.</p> <p>KDO: They're using some sort of visual imagery to illustrate the exam question.</p>	posts.
31	6	<p>KDO: So that's very interesting. Seems like it's a compilation of different football memes, to again illustrate their GCSE results. Now I'm watching the video. We haven't seen the person who's posted the video they've just used like celebrities and memes and things like that. I'm a little bit skeptical as to whether they actually Got those results? You know when people share their results online, if it's not the actual paper, if it's in like a meme format like this, how confident are you that those results they're sharing are valid like their actual results?</p> <p>Stu9: There's no point of them lying because its online.</p> <p>KDO: But can we identify the person?</p> <p>Stu5: That doesn't matter though. It's just what they've posted</p> <p>KDO: So it's just more for entertainment. It doesn't have. To be true.</p>	<p>The theme of using unrelated visuals to share exam results/experiences - in this case, we saw Jose Mourinho and Steven Gerrard feature.</p> <p>Theme of the validity or trustworthiness of social media content about educational assessment. Students emphasised that it does not have to be about their "true" experiences; it may simply be about entertainment.</p> <p>There may be something to be said about the seriousness of high-stakes assessments being tempered by "entertaining" TikTok and Twitter content.</p>

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		<p>Stu5: Yeah.</p> <p>KDO: OK</p> <p>Stu8: Yeah. I feel like a lot of People that watch that video don't really care about the results. It's more the funny side of it.</p> <p>KDO: OK. It's really good to get your perspective. Cause for me As a teacher watching, I'm thinking, OK, did they get a Grade 9 in sociology, how impressive. But maybe they didn't. They've actually just put it together for entertainment purposes. and I can then when I finish transcribing my research. I can let other teachers know, hey, don't be too swayed by what you see on TikTok. It may not be true. It could literally just be for entertainment.</p>	
32	13	<p>KDO: All right. I'm trying to understand the video. Can somebody help me?</p> <p>Stu5: For me, my history paper 2, it just had some questions that we didn't learn about.</p> <p>KDO: In your like Actual GCSE?</p> <p>Stu5: Yeah, in the actual GCSE.</p> <p>KDO: So did you feel like the teacher didn't teach you the content that came up in the exam?</p>	<p>Theme/Literature around construct overrepresentation and underrepresentation. How fair is it for exam boards, to overemphasise "smaller" parts of the specification content? There is a sense of bewilderment, injustice and confusion experienced by students in the GCSE Edexcel exam and is linked to the visual about "unnecessary" content being given priority or much more space than the specification</p>

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
		<p>Stu5: No. It was just like it was Slightly related to what we were taught about, but not the main topics, so no one really had any like deep knowledge of it. So when it's a 16 marker you need to write like 2 pages...</p> <p>KDO: And you didn't feel like you were equipped enough to answer?</p> <p>Stu5: I just didn't know much stuff.</p> <p>KDO: So it seemed like in the exam they've added additional content that wasn't on the original curriculum.</p> <p>Stu5: Sort of.</p> <p>KDO: OK, that's interesting.</p> <p>Stu9: In paper 3 It's like they were more focused on like, kind of like unnecessary parts of Germany and irrelevant parts.</p> <p>KDO: OK, so things that weren't emphasized on like the whole course?</p> <p>Stu9: I mean the things that were in paper 3 were on the course, but it was just Like a small point of it. So they just real fleshed it out on the paper.</p> <p>KDO: So like it was asking a big question on a very small topic area in the whole specification</p>	<p>content which students may have considered more important. The interesting thing here is that they have not said that they didn't learn the content - they said that it was a small feature of the specification and therefore emphasis was not given to it as part of their learning or revision.</p>

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
35	16	<p>Stu5: They didn't they didn't understand at all. The speaking one is when the teacher is in front of you and then you have like a one-on-one conversation and you get graded on it.</p> <p>KDO: Ohh, but they didn't understand what the teacher was saying.</p> <p>Stu3: Yeah, unless that was a listening exam. If it was listening, then that's when you just listen to someone speak and then you have to write Down the answers.</p> <p>KDO: OK. Thank you.</p> <p>Stu2: I think it's because in like language exams, when you're listening to the audio, the words kind of just blur together And you hear Everything that you shouldn't be hearing, so that's probably why they put that sound in the back.</p>	Students also share their assessment experiences with NEA (non-exam assessments) online, such as the English listening exam.
38	1	Comment Section on Follow up video for Social Media Content 21 – FG3	The comments section reignites the theme of injustice - i.e. the comment about her getting the same grade as this young lady who supposedly wrote about the grinch in her English exam. This may be one of the unintended effects or consequences of sharing exam results online - the comparison which naturally occurs may fuel a sense of injustice. Ultimately, we will not know whether

Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
			<p>this TikTok-er is telling the truth unless we see her actual exam paper.</p> <p>Also the rude comments that can be present on social media.</p> <p>Finally the part about her carrying GCSE Tiktok. Almost like a mini celebrity - she provided the entertainment for the 2023 exam series and is being recognised for it as that comment has over 2000 likes.</p>

38	3	<p>KDO: Comments. “Why are you opening GCSE results when you look like a Mum in their late 20s”. Wow. “how did you get a 5 when you wrote About the Grinch”. “You did so well”. “Someone said this is the girl who wrote about the Grinch and her GCSE. Well done. So inspiring”.</p> <p>Are you inspired when people share their results online? [some participants shake their head in agreement and disagreement].</p>	<p>The comments section reignites the theme of injustice - i.e. the comment about her getting the same grade as this young lady who supposedly wrote about the grinch in her English exam. This may be one of the unintended effects or consequences of sharing exam results online - the comparison which naturally occurs may fuel a sense of injustice. Ultimately, we will not know whether this TikTok-er is telling the truth unless we</p>
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Page	Line	Comment scope	Comment text
			<p>see her actual exam paper.</p> <p>Finally the part about her carrying GCSE Tiktok. Almost like a mini celebrity - she provided the entertainment for the 2023 exam series and is being recognised for it as that comment has over 2000 likes.</p>
38	3	<p>KDO: Comments. “Why are you opening GCSE results when you look like a Mum in their late 20s”. Wow. “how did you get a 5 when you wrote About the Grinch”. “You did so well”. “Someone said this is the girl who wrote about the Grinch and her GCSE. Well done. So inspiring”.</p> <p>Are you inspired when people share their results online? [some participants shake their head in agreement and disagreement].</p>	Also, the rude comments that can be present on social media.

Appendix K - 60 Codes – Phase 2 of RTA

Name	Files	References
<b>ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>AMBITIONS</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>UNIVERSITY - NEXT STEPS</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ASPIRATION</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>ATTENTION SEEKING</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>COLLOQUIAL SLANG IDIOMS LANGUAGE</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>COMFORT AND REASSURANCE</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>CONFIRMATION BIAS</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>COPING MECHANISM</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>COMMENTS SECTION IMPORTANCE</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>INSULTING COMMENTS</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>SHARED EXPERIENCE COMMENTS</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>SUPPORTIVE COMMENTS</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>COMMERCIALISATION OF RESULTS DAY</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>19</b>

Name	Files	References
<b>COMPARISONS</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>CONFORMING COPYING OTHERS</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>CONSTRUCT UNDER- OVERREPRESENTATION</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>COVID</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>DISTRACTING</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>EMOTIONS</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>ANGER - FRUSTRATION</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>ANTICIPATION- NERVOUS</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>ANXIETY-STRESS</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>DISAPPOINTED</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>OVERREACTING AND DRAMATIC</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>POSITIVE</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>RELIEVED SUCCESSFUL</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>SAD</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>SUICIDE</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>



Name	Files	References
<b>UNBOTHERED AND APATHETIC</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>UNCERTAINTY</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>EXAM BOARDS</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>COMMUNICATING WITH AND ABOUT EXAM BOARDS</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>NEGATIVE VIEW OF EXAM BOARDS</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>GRADE BOUNDARIES</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>RE-MARKING</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>VIEWS ON GRADING USING NUMBERS</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>HUMOUR</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>IMAGES AS METAPHORS</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>VISUALISING EXAM EXPERIENCES</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>VISUALISING EXAM QUESTIONS</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>VISUALISING EXAM RESULTS</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>49</b>

Name	Files	References
<b>INFORMATIVE</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>NOT SHARING ONLINE (REASONS)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>PARENT-FAMILY REACTIONS</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>POPULAR CULTURE</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>PREDICTING EXAM QUESTIONS</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>PREDICTING GRADES</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>PROCRASTINATION</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>REASONS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT PURPOSES</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>RELATEABLE</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>REVISION TOOL</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>RQ1 - STUDENTS ASSESSMENT EXPERIENCES AS SHARED ON SOCIAL MEDIA</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>SHAPED THEIR VIEWS OF ASSESSMENT</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>DISAGREED WITH THE VIEWS</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>

Name	Files	References
<b>IN SOCIAL MEDIA POST</b>		
<b>SHARING ONLINE (REASONS)</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>SOCIAL CONNECTION</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>STUDY TIPS</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>TEACHERS VIEWS</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>TRUSTWORTHINESS OF CONTENT</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>