



## My researcher journey

### Introducing Roxana Pomplun: The inspiration behind my PhD

Roxana Pomplun's journey into academia is one shaped by curiosity and an enduring desire to understand the digital world's impact on young lives.

Based in London, Roxana holds a PhD in Applied Health Research from the University of Kent, an MA in Digital Humanities from King's College London, and a BA (Hons) in Media and Communications from the University of Greenwich.

Her interest in social media's recommender algorithms (sophisticated systems that shape what we see online) began during her earlier studies and deepened as she explored their influence on both individuals and society. This fascination only grew stronger while working at an EdTech company, where she researched children and young people's mental health, focusing in particular on the relationship with digital platforms.

Determined to weave together her passion for technology and wellbeing, Roxana crafted a PhD proposal that sought to illuminate how these algorithms shape the experiences of younger adolescents. Through proactive networking, she connected with future supervisors whose expertise complemented her ambitions. Their partnership led to securing funding through the Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey and Sussex (ARC KSS), setting Roxana on a path to novel research: '*From Turbulence to balance: a theoretical understanding of younger adolescents' pathways to reflection and regulation on Algorithmically curated social media*' and, ultimately, the successful completion of her doctoral thesis in just over three years.

#### ***Tell us about the research. What did the research show?***

**Roxana:** In my research, I set out to gain a nuanced understanding of how early adolescents engage with social media platforms powered by recommender algorithms, such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts. The overall research design was informed by youth involvement, placing a strong emphasis on giving young people an active role throughout the research process. The data collection itself consisted of 38 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 19 participants aged 11 – 13. To encourage thoughtful and open discussion, I incorporated visual prompts - showing participants pictures related to social media - to spark conversation and help them reflect more deeply on their experiences. I then analysed the interview data using thematic analysis, a method that allowed me to identify recurring ideas and patterns across the participants' responses.

The main findings highlighted that content and features flow easily between platforms (Digital Ecosystem Fluidity); young people often become deeply immersed in using these platforms, losing track of time and experiencing a variety of emotions (Temporal Immersion); and some develop an awareness of how these algorithms influence them, prompting them to try to manage their use (Algorithmic Mindfulness). Most participants preferred TikTok for its tailored content but also acknowledged feeling fatigued, guilty, or loss of control after extended use, setting boundaries for themselves or relying on their parents for support. Pinterest, on the other hand, was seen more as a creative outlet rather than a source of endless scrolling. Overall, my study demonstrated that while young people are becoming increasingly aware of the impact social media may have on them, they still require guidance and support to navigate these digital environments in healthy and beneficial ways.

### *How would you describe your journey as a PhD student? The highs? The challenges?*

**Roxana:** What I loved most about my PhD journey was the variability of it – every year was different and while every stage, from background research, methodology development to recruitment, data collection, and finally, the write up, brought its ups and downs, the consistency in support I received from my supervisors, the academic environment and my friends and family were what kept me grounded and going.

My favourite part of the research was interviewing the young people, having fascinating conversations about social media with them, and taking in all they had to say about it – and they had to say a lot!

The ethics applications and preparing for the data collection were challenging at times, though. Given the young age of the participants, safeguarding and planning for a supportive and particularly thoughtful interviewing atmosphere required a lot of consideration and planning but at the same time, it prepared me as best as possible for the data collection itself as well as future research projects.

### *What advice would you give someone thinking about taking a PhD?*

**Roxana:** The most important thing is that you are passionate about your topic and if you are, it is an amazing opportunity. Another crucial aspect is the relationship with your supervisors – they will be there to guide you throughout the entire process and the more they take an interest in your topic, and you feel supported, the more all of this seems manageable. Similarly, it is so important that you have peers and colleagues that you can talk to and exchange ideas with, so you will not feel isolated in your work. Funding is also important, so if you can, make sure that you get the financial support that the project requires.

### *Now that you have graduated, what's next? What are your plans for the future?*

**Roxana:** I have now started working as a Child Safety Researcher at ActiveFence, where I can continue my aspiration for making the internet a safer place for children and young people.

[Listen to Roxana's Podcast Interview on Tooled Up Education](#) and [read the accompanying article](#).