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Riesmeyer, Claudia; Zillich, Arne Freya; Naab, Thorsten

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Editorial

Editorial: Digital Child- and Adulthood—Risks, Opportunities, and Challenges

Claudia Riesmeyer^{1,*}, Arne Freya Zillich², and Thorsten Naab³

¹ Department of Media and Communication, LMU Munich, Germany

² Digital Media Culture, Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF, Germany

³ German Youth Institute, Germany

* Corresponding author (riesmeyer@ifkw.lmu.de)

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Abstract

This thematic issue discusses risks, opportunities, and challenges of digital child- and adulthood based on different theoretical and methodological perspectives. It focuses on three topics: First, the challenges children and adolescents face in developing skills for dealing with promotional content are highlighted. Second, several contributions discuss the actions of parents and instructors and their function as role models for children and adolescents. They outline the tension between the consequences of intensive media use by children and adolescents and a responsible approach to digital media as often demanded by parents and teachers. Finally, the last contribution gives an insight into how the political socialization of adolescents can manifest itself in the digital space. The multi-methodological, multi-perspective, and multi-theoretical contributions of this thematic issue illustrate the intergenerational relevance of digital child- and adulthood.

Keywords

adolescents; advertising; childhood; digital media usage; media education; media effects; media literacy; media socialization

Issue

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1. Introduction

Today, childhood and adolescence are essentially characterized by digital media. This is reflected in the symptomatic increase in the availability of digital media in family homes and in usage time (Smahel et al., 2020). Digital media use is also firmly embedded in the everyday practices of children’s families, peers, and educational institutions. This mediatization has a significant impact on how children construct their reality (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2019). Against this background, it is not surprising that the development of skills for the literate use of digital media has become a critical socialization and educational goal. Thus, parents (Chen & Shi, 2019) and

educational institutions (Chalkiadaki, 2018) are responsible for guiding the growth of children and adolescents in a world shaped by digital media. Concern arises from the fact that children and adolescents actively and passively leave traces in the digital world that are followed not only by family and friends, but also by companies (Holloway, 2019), activists (Boulianne et al., 2020), politicians (Marquart et al., 2020), and scientists (Mascheroni, 2018).

This thematic issue discusses the risks, opportunities, and challenges that digitalization poses during childhood and adolescence. It focuses on three topics: First, some articles highlight the challenges children and adolescents face in developing skills for dealing with

promotional content. Second, several contributions discuss the actions of parents and educational instructors as role models of safe digital media practices. These articles outline the tension between the consequences of intensive media use by children and adolescents and a responsible approach to digital media as often demanded by parents and teachers. Third, a final contribution provides insight into how the political socialization of adolescents can manifest in the digital space.

2. Digital Media Challenges the Skills of Children and Adolescents

The challenges that children and adolescents face when using digital media are exemplified by the way they deal with digital advertising. Because advertising contributes significantly to the financing of content and providers, it is a quasi-ubiquitous component of digital media offerings. At the same time, it puts the media literacy of children and adolescents to the test daily (van Reijmersdal & Rozendaal, 2020). In this context, the contribution of Beatriz Feijoo and Charo Sádaba (2022) reveals that adolescents recognize the persuasive intent of advertising based on three levels of processing: the liking of the advertisement; the affinity for the advertised product; and the ability to contrast the arguments with comments, forums, or opinions of influencers. However, this strategy uncovers only the persuasive intent of standardized formats. Digital advertising formats that mix entertainment and social content with advertising messages are still successfully disguised.

Accordingly, Delia Cristina Balaban, Meda Mucundorfeanu, and Larisa Ioana Mureşan (2022) address the importance of understandable and easily identifiable cues of promotional intent in social media influencers (SMI) content. Their study shows that adolescents who understand the economic model behind SMI advertising react positively toward the SMI and willingly spread online information about the promoted brand. At the same time, although ad disclosure made in the adolescents' native language improved ad recognition, such knowledge did not result in more sophisticated defense mechanisms, such as the critical evaluation of ads.

Sanne Holvoet, Steffi De Jans, Ralf De Wolf, Liselot Hudders, and Laura Herrewijn (2022) reinforce the basic argument that children and adolescents have limited knowledge about the underlying financing mechanisms of digital advertising. Focusing on the commercial collection of user data and the subsequent personalization of advertising, they show that adolescents hold certain folk theories about how and why their personal information is being collected for commercial purposes. These folk theories often form the basis for adolescents' recognition and everyday exposure to advertising messages. The study, however, illustrates that adolescents' efforts are not always effective.

3. Parents and Educators Have Untapped Support Potentials

Parents and educators play an important supporting role in the development of media literacy. They help shape the framework and conditions and act as role models for children's meaningful media use. They also often act as gatekeepers to interventions and research on media literacy. Robin Nabi and Lara Wolfers (2022) assess how the media diet of children and their parents relates to children's emotional intelligence. The results suggest that children's digital media use is less significant for emotional skill development than previously assumed. The authors argue that both parental media use and children's use behavior are significant factors in the development of emotional intelligence.

Niamh Ní Bhroin, Thuy Dinh, Kira Thiel, Claudia Lampert, Elisabeth Staksrud, and Kjartan Ólafsson (2022) discuss the critical role of parents regarding the practice of sharenting. They illustrate that parental media action is not a simple cause-and-effect relationship between knowledge and behavior. Rather, when deciding whether or not to digitally publish information about their children, parents often weigh the benefits against the potential risks. Counterintuitively, parents with higher levels of digital skills and those who actively mediate their children's internet use are more likely to engage in sharenting. To understand these complex relationships, the authors call for further research examining sharenting and potential implications on the right to privacy of children and adolescents in a differentiated way.

Malin Fecke, Ada Fehr, Daniela Schlütz, and Arne Freya Zillich (2022) illustrate the ethical challenges researchers face when conducting research with pupils. Using the topic of pupils' group communication via instant messaging as an example, the authors identify hierarchical power structures within multiple levels of gatekeeping. Furthermore, they report on educators' rationales for denying access based on ethical considerations regarding pupils' instant messaging group communication.

4. Narrative Media Content Provides Space for the Development of Media Literacy

Specific interventions to promote media literacy are often developed and used in the context of institutional education. The contribution by Lauren Levitt (2022) examines whether existing media content—in this case, a fan forum and a wiki for the film *Divergent*—has the potential to provide adolescents with a space to discuss and share political issues with peers. Since this does not conclusively raise political consciousness, the author emphasizes that the potential of such formats can only be realized through the fundamental teaching of democratic values and political discussion skills within the framework of institutional education settings.

5. Conclusion

The contributions to this thematic issue highlight not only the current field of research on digital child- and adulthood, but also reveal certain fundamental perspectives. On the one hand, the multi-methodological, multi-perspective, and multi-theoretical contributions show the overarching risks, opportunities, and challenges of digital child- and adulthood and their intergenerational relevance. On the other hand, they illustrate the need for the use of a variety of approaches to illuminate the reality of growing up in a world shaped by digital media. The three contributions on advertising, as well as the contribution on the EU Kids Online survey, show that children, adolescents, and parents need to be supported in their development of media literacy. However, as suggested by the contributions of Holvoet et al. (2022) and Nabi and Wolfers (2022), interventions seem to be only one component of everyday rationalization. Thus, normatively demanded behavior is subject to cost–benefit trade-offs, and knowledge mediated by interventions encounters existing folk theories and discussion spaces that are closed from a subjective perspective. Finally, Fecke et al.'s (2022) contribution suggests that research on children, adolescents, and digital media should address not only the substantive topic-related but also methodological challenges.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Claudia Riesmeyer (PhD) is a postdoctoral researcher at LMU Munich, Department of Media and Communication, Germany. Her research focuses on media literacy, media socialization, norms and values, political communication, children and adolescents, and qualitative methods. With her team, she analyses the negotiation of social and personal norms of visual self-presentation on Instagram and Snapchat among adolescents and proximal and distal reference groups.



Arne Freya Zillich (PhD) is a postdoctoral researcher at Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF, Germany. She leads the research project Research Ethics in Communication and Media Studies funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) as well as the research project Norms of Visual Self-Presentation for Adolescents' Identity Performance funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Her research interests include users' norms on social media platforms, digital child and adulthood, research ethics, and methods of media reception.



Thorsten Naab (PhD) is a research consultant at the German Youth Institute. His research focuses on media use and media education in early childhood, child survey methods, and issues related to growing up with digital media.