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Editorial

Digital Media and Younger Audiences

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Abstract

The active digital engagement of children and teens from a very early age makes them the most prolific digital users and online content creators. Simultaneously, this high level of digital exposure enhances their vulnerability to online risks and the potential for them to encounter harmful online content. This dynamic has profound implications for all dimensions and stakeholders within the digital ecosystem. This thematic issue presents a comprehensive review of the significant advantages, critical risks, and challenges arising from the extensive online engagement of children and adolescents. This body of research provides valuable insights and identifies future research avenues related to emotional well-being, identity development, perceptions of social success and self-esteem, as well as examining the critical aspects concerning digital literacy and the regulatory frameworks governing digital content providers.

Keywords

adolescents; children; digital literacy; digital media; digital vulnerabilities; influencers; online content; self-regulation; video-sharing platforms

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Digital Media and Younger Audiences: Communication Targeted at Children and Adolescents” edited by Olga Kolotouchkina (Complutense University of Madrid), Celia Rangel (Complutense University of Madrid), and Patricia Núñez Gómez (Complutense University of Madrid).

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1. Introduction

Within the complex digital ecosystem, children and adolescents emerge as the most active and prolific actors in both the consumption and production of digital content. Their online experiences pervade most aspects of their lives due to the growing number and variety of digital tools at their disposal, coupled with the extensive array of entertainment and educational content available on digital media and video-sharing platforms (Smahel et al., 2020). While the age at which children first engage with digital technologies has been decreasing, with the first exposure occurring as early as before the age of two (Chaudron et al., 2018), the amount of time they spend online has escalated (Burns & Gottschalk, 2019). In the US, there has been a notable surge in screen time among children and adolescents, resulting in a daily average increase of approximately 17%. Teenagers, on average, now spend approximately 8.5 hours per day engaged

with screens, while younger children allocate around 5.5 hours to screen-based activities (Common Sense, 2022). YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are among the top video-sharing platforms where minors consume the most hours of content (Ofcom, 2023).

Digital media and video-sharing platforms have enabled new codes of communication between brands and younger audiences through innovative formats and highly engaging content (Jones & Glynn, 2019; Núñez Gómez et al., 2020). The emergence of influencers marked a turning point in transmitting the closeness and empathy so desired by children and adolescents in digital environments (Tur-Viñes et al., 2018). However, the performance of child celebrities and their online content also raises concerns on account of controversial practices that take advantage of the credulity of children who cannot yet distinguish between commercial, informative, or entertaining content. Such naivety also exposes them to additional risks that may harm their

moral, physical, and mental development (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021).

Given technology's relentless growth and the evolving landscape of online actors and platforms, an effective and adaptable regulatory framework is needed to safeguard minors' rights while at the same time enabling their growth in the digital ecosystem (European Commission, 2022). Important initiatives such as China's endeavours to restrict internet access for minors (McCarthy, 2023) and Europe's concerted efforts to bolster online safeguards for minors substantiate this commitment. Additionally, it is essential to promote self-regulation within specific sectors and among companies to swiftly respond to the critical challenges posed by the digital ecosystem (Rangel, 2022).

2. Overview of the Thematic Issue

The studies selected for this thematic issue provide an in-depth analysis of the best practices, complexities, and remaining challenges of the digital communication ecosystem, whose main protagonists are children and adolescents. The research included in this issue offers empirical and conceptual perspectives on the critical role of digital media and social platforms in the lives of children and teenagers through the lens of the new digital economy, digital literacy, digital divide, emotional well-being, and identity formation. The broad geographical context of the 10 selected articles focuses their research on Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America; they reveal the common concerns that need to be addressed to safeguard minor's rights in the digital realm and to ensure transparency, diversity, and equality as fundamental principles of digital communication targeted at children and adolescents.

2.1. Digital Entertainment and Digital Well-Being

Digital media and social platforms have enabled the most innovative formats of highly engaging entertainment content for younger audiences. Music, humour, games, and sports are among the most popular digital topics (Ofcom, 2023). Four articles in this thematic issue focus their research on key actors, emotional motivations, and consumption patterns of digital entertainment aimed at children and adolescents.

Radu M. Meza, Andreea-Alina Mogoş, and George Prundaru (2023) investigate the phenomenon of TikTok-famous content creators as new icons of popular culture and idols for children and adolescents. Through a comprehensive analysis of video content and hashtags used by TikTok's top celebrities, the authors reveal their engaging discursive practices, dominated by humour and nonverbal content, and identify key performative profile categories.

Lina Li, Yubin Li, Jing Wu, and Hao Gao (2023) focus their study on the consumption of digital music by adolescents in China. Through qualitative research, the authors

explore the important role of digital music in addressing emotional needs and shaping young people's identities. Research findings offer a comprehensive analysis of the main behavioural patterns and motivations behind the digital music consumption of Chinese adolescents.

Jaana Serres (2023) critically examines the enthusiasm of Nigerian teenagers for digital platforms perceived as enablers of exclusive access to online visibility and popularity in Lagos' entertainment industry. Through ethnographic research with young street dancers and musicians in Lagos, the author raises concerns about the legal and economic vulnerability of young digital creators moved by aspirational imaginaries of economic survival and social success. The moral boundaries of the digital economy and corporate sponsorship practices that actively involve Nigerian children and teenagers in their commercial flows are also addressed in this insightful article.

In another study, Julia Szambolics, Sonia Maloş, and Delia Cristina Balaban (2023) investigate how teenagers use augmented reality (AR) filters on social platforms, with a special focus on the impact of AR on the emotional well-being of this age group. The role of AR filters in the process of socialisation with peers and their influence on teenagers' perception of authenticity, self-esteem, and self-acceptance are emphasised in this qualitative study.

2.2. Digital Literacy and Digital Media Consumption

While children and adolescents are usually seen as digital natives with easy access to digital devices and high operational skills (Prensky, 2001), the lack of transparency and unethical practices of some players within the digital realm make minors' digital literacy a critical priority. The study by Sophie C. Boerman, Eva A. van Reijmersdal, and Esther Rozendaal (2023) addresses the importance of children's and adolescents' advertising literacy in digital environments and explores the ways in which it can be activated and enhanced. An online experiment tests the effectiveness of an awareness campaign in improving minors' recognition of online video advertising. The authors argue that ensuring transparency and safety in digital environments for minors is a collective priority for regulators, educators, and content creators.

The research of Huan Chen and Zixue Tai (2023) assesses adolescents' access to smartphones in rural and urban China through the lens of the digital divide. The authors systematise multidimensional disparities in adolescent smartphone use along the geographic factor of rural–urban distribution in China, with specific attention to a range of relevant digital skills, competence needs, as well as positive and negative outcomes. Research results reveal that rural–suburban–urban location, gender, and age are key variables moderating the digital divide of smartphone use among Chinese adolescents.

Dejan Jontes, Tanja Oblak Črnič, and Breda Luthar (2023) examine the concepts of liveness and visibility as underlying principles of the pervasive digital media

culture and digital media engagement of adolescents. Research results categorise digital media users based on their media consumption and motivations in the context of the polymedia environment and the increasing fragmentation of devices, platforms, and content options.

Blandína Šramová and Jiří Pavelka (2023) focus their research on the educational context, exploring key values and outcomes of the use of digital media and mobile applications by generation Alpha in primary and secondary schools. Based on a qualitative research method, the authors shed light on the educators' expectations of digital technologies, highlighting the relevance of the deficiency and growth needs of children and adolescents. Furthermore, research results systematise generation Alpha's key motivations for using specific mobile applications.

2.3. Regulation and Self-Regulation of Video-Sharing Platforms

Ensuring a safe and transparent digital experience for children and adolescents is a shared responsibility of all the actors involved in the digital ecosystem. The role of the video-sharing platform is especially important due to their high popularity among younger audiences. Valerie Verdoodt, Eva Lievens, and Argyro Chatzinikolaou (2023) investigate the EU legislative framework regulating video-sharing platforms. These platforms have become the most popular digital media among children on account of their entertainment content. The authors undertake a comprehensive review of the latest legislative instruments to study their role in safeguarding children's rights and well-being and protecting them from harmful content on video-sharing platforms. Transparency obligations and responsibilities of video-sharing platforms as data controllers of children's personal data and their reliance on AI and machine learning algorithms are also discussed.

In addition, the article by Miguel Ángel Nicolás-Ojeda and Esther Martínez-Pastor (2023) examines collaborations between popular child YouTubers and food and toy brands, focusing on advertising content displayed in their videos. Research results show that young influencers often fail to comply with advertising regulations, leading to covert brand promotion, the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, and the promotion of unhealthy eating habits. The authors raise concerns about the effectiveness of current regulations and self-regulation of video-sharing platforms.

3. Conclusion

The research featured in this thematic issue, focused on children and adolescents in the digital landscape, offers a comprehensive review of the significant advantages, critical risks, and challenges associated with the extensive online engagement of young individuals. Employing a diverse range of research methodologies, the authors in

this thematic issue have undertaken a multidisciplinary approach to delve into minors' digital participation, fostering the knowledge of how the digital environment is experienced and consumed by this important age group. This body of research provides valuable insights and identifies future research avenues related to emotional well-being, identity development, perceptions of social success and self-esteem, as well as critical aspects of digital literacy and specific competencies.

The active digital engagement of children and teens from a very early age makes them the most prolific digital users and online content creators. This dynamic has profound implications, particularly for commercial brands but most importantly for educators, regulators, and policymakers. The online vulnerability and potential exposure to harmful content necessitates focused attention. Hence, all stakeholders within the digital ecosystem must make fostering a collaborative, responsible, and committed approach towards issues such as transparency, privacy protection, and equality in online content targeted at minors a foundational principle.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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