

4 Children's media engagement

Understanding how media experiences shape childhood is crucial for ensuring relevant education policies and practices. This chapter looks at three interrelated themes. The first section analyses the state of play in media education and the results of the Questionnaire (2022). The second section outlines current research on media effects and child emotional well-being. The final section draws on theoretical and empirical literature to understand how media engagement impacts children's identity formation, and the role of education in supporting the development of a coherent and stable sense of self. The chapter concludes that, although digital safety remains a cornerstone of media education, a balance with digital opportunity must be struck. Media education can - and should – be a participatory space. One where children contribute with their own lived experiences and discover benefits that are unique to childhood, while also being free to make mistakes.

Introduction

Media education is critical for empowering all citizens. Children's media¹ engagement is so pervasive in the 21st Century that it can no longer be considered an inconvenient variable in their development but a fundamental context in which each child learns about the world (Barr, 2019_[1]). The outcomes associated with this engagement are related to the type of activities, individual personalities, motivations and preferences (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020_[2]).

During much of the previous century, youth cultures in Western societies were articulated through engagement with mass media, such as music, film and television (Drotner, 2008_[3]). The move away from mass media towards social media means their engagement is now much more individualised, dynamic and ubiquitous (Valkenburg, 2022_[4]). Although the media environment has changed, public discourse around media engagement has remained squarely focused on the potential harms for both children and society at large. In many cases the prevalence of harms is exaggerated. *Moral panics* and concerns over the risks to children mask the social and cultural issues that underlie them (Buckingham and Strandgaard Jensen, 2012_[5]). For example, a focus on screen time over-simplifies media engagement into a single construct, which doesn't account for the dynamic nature of digital media experiences. This mattered less in an age of mass media, since it was relatively easy to know which television shows or radio people were consuming over long periods of time. Now however, each person's media ecosystem is unique, multi-modal and ephemeral, which renders screen time a misleading indicator of the impact of media engagement. Despite the problems with its use, screen time is still found in protectionist policy discourses. Scholars have noted a socio-cultural reluctance to accept any risk to children, which in fact serves to inhibit their ability to seize opportunities (Livingstone, 2013_[6]). *Moral panics* also routinely spark large investments in research, which some argue slows down development of the policy interventions necessary to ensure technologies become a benefit for society (Orben, 2020_[7]).

That being said, the emergence of a diverse new media landscape has undoubtedly increased the risks posed by phenomena such as cyberbullying, hate speech, and use and misuse of data. Some of the most harmful risks, such as child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) are accelerating in scale, severity and complexity (OECD, 2023_[8]). These risks have been categorised in the revised OECD Typology (OECD, 2021_[9]). Risk is a calculation based on probability and the likely consequences of harm (Livingstone, 2013_[6]). By contrast, harm is a distinct set of negative physical, emotional, psychological or social outcomes, whether measured objectively or subjectively (Livingstone, 2013_[6]). Risk does not always result in harm and, depending on the precise nature of the risk and whether an individual is properly equipped to respond to it, benefits can also be accrued. For example, a child who knows how and why to verify information in the digital environment can recognise and manage the risk posed by disinformation. As children learn from challenging or difficult experiences, recover from them and stay well, they develop resilience to future risks (Manning, 2021_[10]). There is a general need for more nuanced information about the effects of media engagement to strike the right balance in policy measures and teaching practices (Science Advice Initiative of Finland, 2021_[11]).

The chapter uses the framework put forward by Dahlgren and Hill (2020_[12]) who argue for an expanded definition of *media engagement* as including the subjective experience, driven predominantly by emotions (affect) with some rational elements. Engagement refers to behaviour motivated by shared social experiences and identity. It is not solely about consumption but also empowerment, providing a means through which an individual can participate in society, politics and culture. This brings into scope the trajectory of media engagement and everyday experiences, rather than narrowly focusing on outcomes. Children's media engagement facilitates access to various subjective experiences, many of which are driven by distinct cultures, beliefs and practices unique to childhood but often reflecting wider societal culture. Understanding *engagement* means taking into account how and why an individual selects different media sources, as well as which factors influence how this engagement is experienced.

Media education in OECD countries

Media education has attracted renewed attention in recent years as children are spending more time engaging with digital media. Harm prevention is an important and widely discussed media education policy priority. The 2018 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) found that on average only 47% of 15-year-olds are successfully able to distinguish fact from opinion (OECD, 2021_[13]). Research has shown that media education and awareness campaigns are the most common instruments used by European governments when responding to the risk posed by disinformation (De Blasio and Selva, 2021_[14]). This is a positive development, since incorporating media education into teaching and learning helps children to distinguish fact from opinion, assess the credibility of information sources, and detect biased or false information (McDougall et al., 2018_[15]; Suarez-Alvarez, 2021_[16]).

In addition to teaching children to manage risk in the digital environment, knowing how to navigate digital media content wisely can enhance children's exposure to new ideas and more diverse sources of information, helping them become aware of different views. It can also empower them with knowledge to make informed choices regarding their physical and emotional well-being and give them a space to discuss their thoughts and feelings with peers or professionals (Stoilova, Livingstone and Khazbak, 2021_[17]; Chassiakos et al., 2016_[18]). Navigation skills are recognised as a key component of reading in the digital environment, allowing an individual to locate, understand, evaluate and reflect on information across multiple sources. Yet, PISA found that, on average, over 70% of students in 70 countries and economies demonstrated limited or no navigation of digital texts (OECD, 2021_[13]).

Box 4.1. Digital spot the difference

Digital citizenship: being able to understand, exercise and enhance rights through ethical interactions and informed civic participation in both the digital and non-digital environments (Cortesi et al., 2020_[19]). The term often combines media literacy, respectful and responsible behaviour and digital safety (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019_[20]). Recent additions include computational thinking, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and identity formation (Cortesi et al., 2020_[19]).

Digital competence: being able to confidently, critically and responsibly engage with digital technologies for learning, work and participation in society. It includes information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, media literacy, digital content creation (including programming), safety (including digital well-being and competences related to cybersecurity), intellectual property related questions, problem solving and critical thinking (Vuorikari, Kluzer and Punie, 2022_[21]).

Digital literacy: being able to live and work in a society where digital technologies dominate communication and access to information (OECD, 2022_[22]). The number of digital literacy publications has increased rapidly between 2000 and 2020 (Audrin and Audrin, 2022_[23]). The field is evolving from a focus on technical skills towards cultural and critical thinking, emphasising empowerment through access to information, freedom of expression and participation (Nascimbeni and Vosloo, 2019_[24]).

Digital skills: being able to interact and collaborate through technologies, think critically about information sources and express oneself through content creation. Definitions emphasise that digital skills are about more than just possessing technical knowledge or competences but also being able to use digital technologies safely and having the capacity to tackle online risks (d'Haenens, 2022_[25]).

Empowering individuals through comprehensive media education goes beyond the scope of media literacy alone and requires the simultaneous combination of multiple "literacies", brought together under a clear framework (Jones-Jang, Mortensen and Liu, 2019_[26]). For example, media literacy is commonly used alongside information literacy² and both media and information literacy competencies are frequently

combined with digital literacy, digital skills, digital citizenship or digital competence definitions (Box 4.1). This chapter uses *media education* as an umbrella term for various policies and practices that aim to support children to be more resilient, seize opportunities and minimise the risk of harm from media engagement.

Several meta-analyses have investigated the impact of media education interventions. They generally find positive outcomes across diverse populations, age groups, settings, topics and countries (Jeong, Cho and Hwang, 2012^[27]; Vahedi, Sibalis and Sutherland, 2018^[28]; Xie, Gai and Zhou, 2019^[29]). Interventions can be equally effective across a spectrum of settings and are more likely to be successful when reinforced through multiple sessions with fewer components. However, research has found that media education interventions may have greater effects on skills and media content knowledge outcomes, compared to behaviour-relevant outcomes. There is also a lack of diversity in the delivery methods, media and contexts in which interventions are carried out. This includes less research on the effectiveness of using images, games, and newer social media platforms in interventions (Huguet et al., 2019^[30]; Edwards et al., 2021^[31]; Wuyckens, Landry and Fastrez, 2021^[32]).

Strategies and curricula

The Questionnaire (2022) asked ministries of education how media education features in their policies and practices. Ministries most commonly reported that media education was contained within broader strategies of curriculum/school reform and/or a broader digital strategy. The Council of Europe recommendations on media pluralism and transparency of media ownership specifically state that education systems should look to develop dedicated media literacy strategies (Council of Europe, 2018^[33]). However, only three ministries reported having a dedicated system-wide media literacy policy or strategy in the Questionnaire (2022). The most common examples provided in the survey responses were those in which media education features in a wider strategy for digital literacy and digital skills. Within this category, there are generally two sub-categories: **education-specific strategies** and **society-wide strategies**.

For example, in 2020, Luxembourg adopted a **general approach to digitalisation in education**, called *Simply Digital - future skills for strong children* ([einfach digital – Zukunftskompetenze fir staark Kanner](#)³). This approach is centred on the skills of critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration and coding, which guide the priorities of educational policy. In 2022, Luxembourg updated its [Media Compass](#)⁴. This forms the basis for media education at school and goes beyond just digital skills, promoting a holistic understanding of opportunities and risks in childhood as seen through different media. It emphasises, among other things, children’s health, well-being and care for the environment.

When it comes to society-wide strategies, in 2022 Denmark announced its [Digitisation Strategy 2022-2026](#)⁵ **which covers all Danish citizens**. In the strategy the government proposes to allocate DKK 200 million to introduce technology in primary and lower secondary education. The strategy is centred on nine “visions”. Vision nine “Danes prepared for a digital future” focuses most on media education themes. It takes a broader empowerment view of digital literacy and puts forward that all Danes must be able to use digital solutions and have the digital prerequisites to navigate safely and critically on social media in particular. It has a specific focus on the use of digital tools essential to professionalism among teachers, in particular in primary school.

Some systems have **multiple strategies touching on media education**. In Latvia for example, Media Literacy is mentioned in at least three strategies: the inter-ministerial [National Development plan of Latvia 2021-2027](#)⁶, [Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Active Society 2021-2027](#)⁷ from the Ministry of Culture and the [Digital Transformation Guidelines 2021-2027](#)⁸ from the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development.

Existing OECD data reveals that the extent to which media literacy content is found in curricula varies widely, from just 4% of media literacy competencies covered by the Portuguese curriculum, compared to

57% in Estonia. For digital literacy, the average coverage across all systems was higher, at 40% (OECD, 2021^[34]). Within decentralised systems there is often variation in how media literacy is integrated into curricula. For example, in Canada, the Questionnaire (2022) revealed that media literacy is incorporated across the provincial education systems in a variety of ways (Box 4.2).

Box 4.2. Media Literacy in the curriculum in Canadian provinces

Alberta: Social Studies is a mandatory element of the curriculum from ages 5 to 18. Media literacy is listed as a communication skills outcome of the social studies course and includes identification and comparison of information, detection of media bias, creating media and discussing different viewpoints.

Ontario: Media Literacy is well-established as a core competency of the English language curriculum in both primary and secondary school. The expectations in the language curriculum are organised into four strands: Oral Communication, Reading, Writing and Media Literacy.

Saskatchewan: The Policy Planning Guide for School Divisions and Schools to Implement Citizenship Education includes media education. Digital citizenship education is not intended to be a stand-alone unit, course or lesson. It includes digital literacy and elements of media and information literacy such as information searching, evaluating content collaborating in networks, organising information and using social media. This document does not provide a prescriptive policy but guides conversations and provides resources as teachers integrate citizenship into their teaching. It states that digital citizenship education is essential for all Saskatchewan students from age 5 to 18.

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

Certain aspects of media education are yet to be incorporated in some OECD countries. Despite having a long tradition of mass media education, digital literacy will only formally and explicitly become part of the new Dutch education curriculum in the coming years. Planning documents for this place media literacy conceptually as one of four skills within digital literacy, the others being basic information and communication technology (ICT) skills, Information Skills and Computational Thinking. The Dutch [Learning Plan Development Foundation](#)⁹ (SLO) is developing core objectives for digital literacy, in collaboration with teachers, subject didactics, schools and educational organisations. These core objectives are scheduled to be completed by 2024.

Actors and initiatives

There are a wide variety of actors delivering media education initiatives in respondent systems and some systems have a statutory actor with primary responsibility for co-ordinating the media literacy ecosystem. This is the case in the Flemish Community of Belgium, where actors including the ministry of education and individual schools have their own programmes and initiatives, but [Mediawijs](#)¹⁰ is the designated Knowledge Centre for Digital and Media Literacy in the system. Established in 2013, Mediawijs implements the Flemish media literacy policy through training and capacity building in schools, campaigns, projects, research (such as the [MediaNest Figures](#)¹¹), and advocacy work such as development of policy tools and white papers. In France, the Centre for Media and Information Education ([CLEMI](#)¹²) was established in 1983 and performs a similar function. In Finland, the National Audiovisual Institute ([KAVI](#)¹³) is the main public institution co-ordinating the delivery of Media Education. However, not all education systems have a statutory or dedicated co-ordination body (European Digital Media Observatory, n.d.^[35]).

Many of the actors involved in co-ordinating media education have education as part of a complementary media portfolio. In this instance, a network may exist to bring them together on the topic of education specifically. For example, the [Information and media literacy network Iceland](#)¹⁴ was created in 2022 as a

co-ordination network for future policy planning, intended to provide an overview of the current status of media literacy efforts. It aims to develop a comprehensive policy for Iceland in the field of information and media literacy. The network participants include the national Media Committee of Iceland, child, parent and family organisations, various libraries and universities, the national broadcaster, international organisations, and national, regional and local government bodies. Statutory bodies and networks are useful for co-ordinating system-wide capacity-building initiatives, such as Box 4.3.

Box 4.3. Scaling up expertise: the case of MediaCoach Programmes in Europe

MediaCoach is a programme which began in the [Netherlands](#)¹⁵ in 2008 and trains individuals to work mainly in schools, libraries and special youth care. Participants learn how to inspire and help colleagues to use digital media and/or to implement digital and/or media literacy policies in their organisation. They also act as a point of contact for questions about media literacy and digital literacy. More than 2 400 media coaches have been trained in the Netherlands and abroad and coaches must have refresher courses to keep their title.

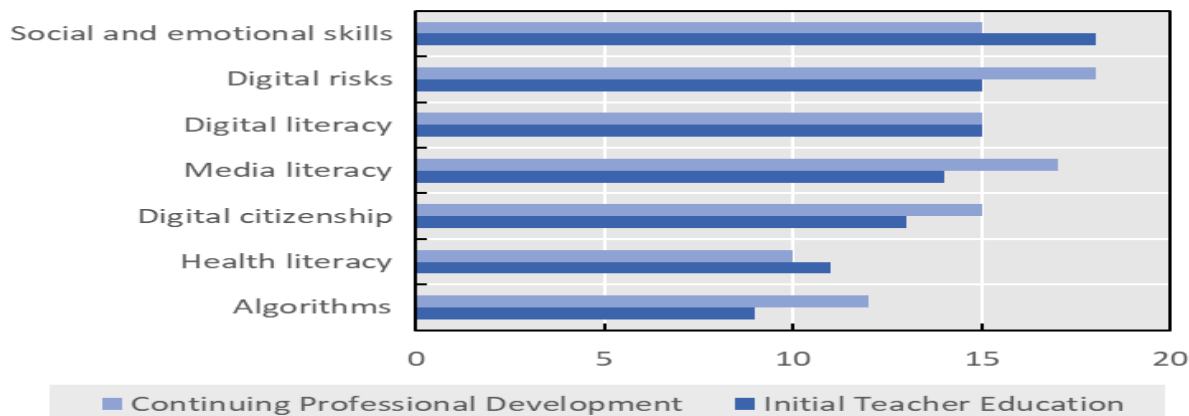
The programme has been replicated in the Flemish Community of Belgium, which offers several tailored trainings for education, youth work, local authorities and libraries. Between 2017 and 2020, the European Commission co-funded a scale-up project called [the European Media Coach Initiative](#)¹⁶. This project brought together key stakeholders in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Portugal and Romania to scale-up across regions and countries. The impact of the media coach training in each of these systems [varied widely](#)¹⁷, and included preparation of a full-scale media literacy training programme, general promotion of media literacy, creation of university courses and influencing political and public opinion regarding the importance of media education.

Although the evaluations that do exist generally find positive results, there is a clear need for more systematically applied methodologies that evaluate the effectiveness of media education interventions. Many media education actors are non-governmental organisations who bring highly relevant external expertise to school settings but often lack resources to be able to monitor and evaluate their initiatives beyond simple metrics such as the number of intervention participants, number of events, or post-intervention questionnaires. In order to overcome this challenge in the United Kingdom (UK), the UK Statutory Media Education body (Ofcom) published a [toolkit in 2023](#)¹⁸ to help guide evaluations of media literacy interventions.

Skills and capacity

Although the above initiatives are promising, it is not enough to add media education to strategies and curricula; practitioners require training to increase their knowledge and confidence in teaching complex media topics. The Questionnaire (2022) revealed that media literacy is included as part of initial teacher education (ITE) in around two-thirds of respondent systems, with coverage in continuing professional development (CPD) more widespread (Figure 4.1). Complementary and important aspects of contemporary media education are less frequently included. For example, ITE which includes the role of algorithms is covered by less than half of respondent systems. Yet, algorithm education should not be seen as an “optional extra” but an integral part of media education, alongside the classic media education topics (e.g. audiences, power structures, source analysis) (Hill, 2022^[36]).

Figure 4.1. Skills taught in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD)



Note: N = 22. Number indicates the number of respondent systems selecting a given item in a given form of teacher education in response to the question “Are the following issues embedded in teacher training, either in initial teacher education (ITE) or continuing professional development (CPD)?”

Source: Questionnaire (2022)

Despite the enhanced policy emphasis, there remains a distinct lack of data on how media education is incorporated into teacher preparation programmes in OECD countries. Although there is a plethora of approaches to professional development, there is also a relative paucity of literature pertaining to teacher education in media literacy instruction (Hobbs, 2017^[37]). The research that does exist finds that more attention needs to be paid to teacher education and professional development when it comes to supporting media education efforts (Gretter and Yadav, 2018^[38]; Botturi, 2019^[39]; Mateus, 2021^[40]). In many European countries, media education is often treated as a cross-curricular topic in teacher professional development, with little systematic attention to its contents, including the digital nature of contemporary media (Ranieri, Nardi and Fabbro, 2019^[41]). Media education is part of a broader challenge regarding teacher self-efficacy with digital topics. The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) revealed that, although the vast majority of teachers report high levels of self-efficacy when it comes to classroom management and instruction, almost one-third are less confident when it comes to supporting student learning through the use of digital technology (OECD, 2019^[42]).

Both pre-service and in-service teachers in various education systems have expressed a lack of confidence in highly relevant media education themes, such as the role of algorithms and data in social media, or contemporary forms of media production and participation (Erdem and Bahadir, 2018^[43]; Cherner and Curry, 2019^[44]; McNelly and Harvey, 2021^[45]). In the EU, Ranieri and colleagues (2017^[46]) found that the policy emphasis on media education had not yet resulted in sufficient levels of digital skills, and teacher training on digital education fails to meet their needs. The challenge also affects teacher educators, who are sometimes unsure about the extent to which different media education topics should be taught to pre-service teachers (Örtegren, 2022^[47]). Further work can be done to build the capacity of teacher educators and teacher training curricula to enable teachers to effectively embed media education into the classroom via pedagogies and lesson structures (Gretter and Yadav, 2018^[38]). This does not have to be through dedicated media education courses but could be integrated via existing teacher training curriculum and coursework (Meehan et al., 2015^[48]). Enhanced involvement of wider stakeholders, such as not-for-profits, is thought to raise the quality of implementation of media literacy education in teacher training (Ranieri, Nardi and Fabbro, 2019^[41]). These partnerships may also make teacher resources more relevant for use in the classroom (Hill, 2022^[36]).

Media engagement and emotional well-being

Although the study of media and children is not confined to any specific discipline, theory or methodology, well-being outcomes have been an area of common focus for *media effects* (Box 4.4) researchers (Bickham, Kavanaugh and Rich, 2016^[49]). The last decades saw huge numbers of children subscribing to social media platforms and a proliferation of research exploring social media use, yet longitudinal studies in particular remained scarce (Gottschalk, 2019^[50]). Some scholars now argue that the longitudinal studies conducted in the past few years have convincingly shown how using a wide range of media, both digital and non-digital, is not generally bad for children and there is no need for policy makers to encourage or discourage media use on the basis of well-being alone (Johannes et al., 2022^[51]). Although promising, this conclusion comes with important caveats.

Box 4.4. Media effects and emotional well-being

The term *media effects* is defined by Valkenburg, Peter and Walther (2016, p. 316^[52]) as “the deliberate and nondeliberate short-and long-term within-person changes in cognitions (including beliefs), emotions, attitudes, and behaviour that result from media use”. It has been recognised for many years that the *effects* of media use are multifactorial, dependent on the type of media, type of use, amount and extent of use and individual characteristics of the child or adolescent (Chassiakos et al., 2016^[18]). Individuals’ media practices often lead to concomitant effects in the form of harms and benefits, which impact overall well-being (Büchi, 2021^[53]). Stable psychological characteristics (for example levels of self-esteem) may moderate media effects (Verduyn, Gugushvili and Kross, 2021^[54]). Media effects may also be more ephemeral and dependent on in-the-moment factors (Griffioen et al., 2022^[55]). Valkenburg (2022^[4]) suggests three categories of effects for adolescents when it comes to emotional well-being:

- adolescents who mainly experience positive effects (i.e. *positive susceptibles*)
- adolescents who mainly experience negative effects (i.e. *negative susceptibles*)
- adolescents who are predominantly unaffected (i.e. *non-susceptibles*)

Research has found a curvilinear relationship between media use and well-being, where moderate engagement with a variety of digital media (for example, via computers or smartphones) is not harmful but well-being does suffer at the extremes of both high and low-intensity media use (Przybylski and Weinstein, 2017^[56]). Looking at social media specifically, at least three different studies have analysed the same multi-wave, large-scale and representative UK panel dataset of children aged 10 to 15 years (the UK Household Longitudinal Study) to understand the long-term well-being implications of social media use (Orben, Dienlin and Przybylski, 2019^[57]; Twigg, Duncan and Weich, 2020^[58]; Plackett, Sheringham and Dykxhoorn, 2022^[59]). The results indicate that social media use is generally not a strong predictor of life satisfaction in adolescents, although gender plays an underexplored role. This gender difference has also been found in other studies of different datasets. For example, Brooker, Kelly and Sacker (2018^[60]) found that increases in girls’ life satisfaction predict slightly lower social media use and increases in their social media use predict tenuous decreases in life satisfaction. Interestingly, the negative effect in this study was found to be a similar magnitude to the positive effect that a supportive family has on children’s life satisfaction. Media engagement does not happen in a vacuum and the wider environment of childhood moderates their experiences of media.

In addition to large-scale longitudinal studies, meta-analytic summaries have shown no strong linear link between the intensity of social media use and loneliness, self-esteem, life satisfaction, or self-reported depression (Appel, Marker and Gnambs, 2019^[61]). Most of the systematic reviews included in the umbrella review by Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens (2022^[62]), interpret the associations between social media use and mental health as weak or inconsistent. In Odgers and Jensen’s review (2020^[63]) of large-scale

preregistered studies, there was often a lack of sizable or practically meaningful associations between adolescents' digital technology usage and well-being. Yet, there remains much disagreement among scholars about the relationship between social media and emotional well-being, suggesting a heterogeneous and complex relationship that depends on multiple factors. Specific modalities of media engagement, including different forms, genres, styles and themes contain both affective and cognitive content which are thought to have different effects on children and adolescents.

We know that some children who engage with media do experience lower levels of emotional well-being. However, analyses generally find little evidence to suggest a causal relationship between the use of social media and mental health issues. Research has found a small but significant relationship between social media use and depression in adolescence and wider factors such as poor sleep are likely to act as mediators (Ivie et al., 2020^[64]). Poor sleep and online harassment have also been identified in UK longitudinal data of children as the most important routes from social media use to depressive symptoms. Kelly et al (2018^[65]) found that the route from social media use to depressive symptoms via poor sleep was relatively simple, whereas the role of online harassment was more complex, with multiple pathways through poor sleep, self-esteem and body image. Some scientific and professional organisations now suggest that adolescents should limit use of social media for social comparison, particularly around beauty- or appearance-related content because of concerning associations (American Psychological Association, 2023^[66]). For instance, representative data from Canada found that the frequency of social media use is significantly associated with prevalence of eating disorders in boys and girls (Kerr and Kingsbury, 2023^[67]). Media education intervention programmes focusing on body image in youth have been developed and show initial promise (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020^[2]). The complexity of moderating factors and generally inconsistent associations with emotional well-being mean that broad conclusions about the amount of screen time are not evidence based. Even researchers with different analyses regarding the magnitude of effect social media has on child well-being (e.g., (Twenge et al., 2022^[68]) and (Orben and Przybylski, 2019^[69])), find common ground in the view that the way a child uses different media platforms may matter more than overall screen time. Empowering children through media engagement requires supporting them to understand their subjective experiences and construct their own meanings from media.

Eudaimonic media experiences

Gaining more precise and actionable knowledge about children and media requires studying what forms of media engagement can enhance well-being for different individuals (Ito et al., 2020^[70]). Understanding what makes a positive media experience is a promising avenue of research. Media psychology scholarship has increasingly explored the concept of eudaimonic well-being (Box 4.5) to answer questions regarding positive media experiences. For example, why having other people to talk to when an individual is feeling lonely is reported to be the social media experience mostly related to *flourishing* in adolescents (Marciano and Viswanath, 2023^[71]).

Inspiring content

Eudaimonic well-being can be enhanced by media that provokes perceptions of the self as having purpose and meaning. It may also be enhanced by transcendent media experiences, focused on the journeys of others finding purpose and meaning. For simplicity, both formats can be thought of as “inspiring media.” Research on inspiring media tends to define it as content that demonstrates moral virtues or transformation, for example portraying an individual overcoming adversity through perseverance (Chang, 2022^[72]). The themes of these inspiring portrayals can include nature, love, beauty, art, kindness, encouragement, perseverance, gratitude and the overcoming of obstacles. These themes are very common in contemporary media landscapes, but they are not always easy to find or recognise. Research has shown the human proclivity to attend more to negative stories than to positive stories (Soroka, Fournier and Nir, 2019^[73]). False stories that provoke fear, disgust and surprise are far more successful in going viral in the digital environment compared to true stories (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018^[74]). Algorithms used

by digital media platforms often determine that provoking and polarising content results in higher levels of engagement and are more likely to promote it, especially to those who have engaged with it in the past (Valtonen et al., 2019^[75]). In order for children to engage purposefully and playfully, the digital environment, including algorithms, must be designed with their needs and rights in mind (5Rights, 2023^[76]).

Box 4.5. Euda-what?

Eudaimonia describes the feeling that the things an individual does in life are worthwhile (OECD, 2021^[77]). Someone experiencing eudaimonia may have self-perceptions of autonomy, competence and purpose (OECD, 2021^[77]). Eudaimonic well-being is based on the assumption that goal-orientated development of personal skills will lead to happiness by providing challenges and opportunities for growth (Casas and González-Carrasco, 2021^[78]). This personal growth can include greater self-esteem, resilience and self-awareness by learning from decisions, actions, and behaviours as part of a deliberate move towards self-realisation and fulfilment (Sharma-Brymer and Brymer, 2020^[79]). Eudaimonic well-being is often placed in contrast to hedonistic well-being, characterised by the maximisation of pleasure and minimisation of pain (Nelson-Coffey and Schmitt, 2022^[80]). *Flourishing* is related to the concept of eudaimonic well-being (OECD, 2021^[77]). It is arguably broader, and definitions in empirical studies often contain both hedonistic and eudaimonic well-being indicators (Sharma-Brymer and Brymer, 2020^[79]). A systematic review of the literature of adolescents aged 13-19, found no single definition of *flourishing* (Witten, Savahl and Adams, 2019^[81]). Measurements can include finding connectedness, civic participation, positive social comparison, authentic self-presentation and self-control (Rosič et al., 2022^[82]).

Although children's emotional well-being is a high priority for policy makers and practitioners, there remains a distinct lack of data collection from children and young adolescents on eudaimonia or how social media can influence *flourishing* in adolescence (Casas and González-Carrasco, 2021^[78]; Marciano and Viswanath, 2023^[71]). This appears to be a somewhat missed opportunity, since existing literature tentatively suggests that adolescents who are more frequently motivated to pursue eudaimonic well-being perform better across a range of domains, compared to adolescents who report less frequent eudaimonic motives (Gentzler et al., 2021^[83]).

Agentic engagement

Cultivating eudaimonic well-being does not mean only consuming positive media content (Oliver, 2022^[84]). If a media environment provides a safe space to understand negative content or experiences, these can still be beneficial for well-being (Raney et al., 2020^[85]). This environment is influenced both the technical affordances of media and how an individual uses it. Children engaging with social media should be encouraged to use platform functions that create opportunities for social support, online companionship, and emotional intimacy, which can promote healthy socialisation (American Psychological Association, 2023^[66]). Although there is the common perception that active media engagement (e.g. commenting, posting, messaging) is superior to passive engagement (e.g. scrolling, watching, reading), recent research suggests the picture is less convenient than that (Valkenburg, 2022^[86]; Griffioen et al., 2022^[55]). Active engagement features such as "like" buttons, may be less appropriate for some children. While passive social media use, such as recommended content and scrolling, can have benefits for some groups of adolescents in terms of entertainment, inspiration and relaxation (Winstone et al., 2022^[87]). Rather than the traditional active versus passive dichotomy, recent scholarly work has highlighted the relevance of *agentic* social media use.

The *intentionality* behind media engagement is crucial for ensuring there is purpose behind the user's relationship with media and assertion of control over specific elements of social media use, such as

curating content and refining algorithmic recommendations (Lee, Ellison and Hancock, 2023^[88]). Decisively engaging with media for a purpose results in agentic personalisation. Kucirkova (2021^[89]) posits five aspects that can tap into children's motivation, creativity and empowerment: autonomy, attachment, authenticity, aesthetics and authorship. The presence or absence of agency in these five aspects determines whether personalisation is bottom-up, led by users, or imposed top-down by providers or platforms. In the digital age, these 5As can be easily delivered through algorithmic personalisation systems. Without agentic personalisation, automation can turn authorship into consumption and autonomy into dependency (Kucirkova, 2021^[89]).

Agentic media use is inherently connected to the well-known concept of critical thinking. Critical thinking involves carefully evaluating and judging statements, ideas and theories relative to alternative explanations or solutions, to reach a competent, independent position that may require action (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019^[90]). Essentially, paying attention to whatever holds one's attention. Yet, the volume of low-quality information in the digital environment makes critical thinking highly inefficient when used alone. Thoughtfully and strategically allocating attention can increase the efficiency of critical thinking, in a process Kozyreva and colleagues call *critical ignoring* (2022^[91]).

Prosocial behaviour

Prosocial behaviour refers to actions intended to benefit others, such as sharing and co-operating, and can provoke a sense of eudaimonic well-being. It fosters, among other things, greater feelings of connectedness and heightened motivations to help others (Raney et al., 2020^[85]; Oliver, 2022^[84]). The role of prosocial behaviour in adolescents' positive development has gained greater attention in the scholarly literature since the 1990s (Brittian and Humphries, 2015^[92]). Adolescents who display high levels of prosocial behaviour report better educational outcomes and higher levels of emotional well-being (Armstrong-Carter and Telzer, 2021^[93]). Contextual factors affect levels of prosocial behaviour in children. For instance, a two-wave study of 16 893 children with an average age of 14 across more than 250 schools in Germany found that individuals' prosocial behaviour increased if they were surrounded by prosocial classmates (Busching and Krahé, 2020^[94]). Witnessing prosocial behaviour in the media can also encourage prosocial behaviour in daily life (Greitemeyer, 2022^[95]). One of the foundational meta-analyses on this topic, analysing 72 studies involving 17 134 children, adolescents, young adults and older adults, revealed that exposure to prosocial media was related to higher levels of prosocial behaviour and empathy, as well as lower levels of aggressive behaviour (Coyne et al., 2018^[96]). Yet, the prosocial effects of different media content are not assured and vary between individuals based on their attitudes and values (de Leeuw et al., 2022^[97]).

Many children already circulate prosocial media content, offer guidance to one another around difficult topics, and promote a sense of community around marginalised interests and identities (Ito et al., 2020^[70]). Dezuanni (2019^[98]) describes relationships between children, where they learn how to interact with, use and conduct themselves in different media communities, as *peer pedagogies*. Some children have mentors, older peers, siblings, or adults who can model and socialise prosocial behaviour, whereas other children may not (Armstrong-Carter and Telzer, 2021^[93]). This may partially explain why media role models are comparatively more important for certain children from less advantaged backgrounds (Orben, Dienlin and Przybylski, 2019^[57]; Paus-Hasebrink, Kulterer and Sinner, 2019^[99]).

Social and emotional skills underpin, and develop through, prosocial behaviour. Yet, they play an underexplored role in media effects. Digital media is a specific context where social and emotional learning can take place (Campos, 2023^[100]). This is one reason why it can have important implications for emotional well-being (Box 4.6). On a broader level, there is widespread recognition among policy makers that social and emotional skills are essential for students to be able to succeed at school, participate in society, protect their mental health and improve their labour market prospects (OECD, 2021^[101]). However, scholars have remarked on a lack of longitudinal studies analysing how social and emotional skills contribute to media

education outcomes (Tsortanidou, Daradoumis and Barberá-Gregori, 2020^[102]). When social and emotional skills are insufficiently incorporated into media education frameworks, there are implications for the ways in which children are taught, for example, how to have ethical conversations in the digital environment (Cortesi et al., 2020^[19]). This situation is made more precarious with how each topic is integrated into formal education. Although widely reported as being taught in OECD countries, schools mainly embed social and emotional education into existing practices. This means they are at risk of being abridged or skipped (OECD, 2023^[103]) in a similar way to cross-curricular media education.

Box 4.6. Too much of a good thing?

Positive emotions are generally considered more appropriate by adolescents than expressions of negative emotions across a variety of social media platforms (Waterloo et al., 2017^[104]). This positivity bias means children and adolescents strategically post self-related content which is highly selective, to present themselves in a positive light (Schreurs and Vandenbosch, 2020^[105]). The bias has also been found to apply to adolescents' private Direct Messages (DMs) (Verbeij et al., 2022^[106]).

The effects of the bias on well-being appear to be moderated by the emotional regulation skills of an individual. Emotional regulation (which includes concepts such as optimism) is a core social and emotional skill (Chernyshenko, Kankaraš and Drasgow, 2018^[107]). Those who are more media literate may use positively biased content as a source of inspiration, increasing emotional well-being. Less media literate individuals may simply attempt to control negative emotions, such as jealousy and envy, rendering it neutral. For the least media literate, the temptation for comparison may be too great and the media may negatively affect their emotional well-being (Schreurs and Vandenbosch, 2020^[105]). Adolescents who discuss this positivity bias with their parents show greater critical awareness (Schreurs and Vandenbosch, 2023^[108]).

Research limitations

Current evidence has several challenges. Firstly, most studies are correlational and cross-sectional and the direction of causality often cannot be inferred (Kelly et al., 2018^[65]; Appel, Marker and Gnambs, 2019^[61]). For example, it remains unclear whether some adolescents who struggle to pay attention are more attracted to media multitasking, or whether media multitasking has a negative impact on attention control over time (Baumgartner, 2022^[109]).

Secondly, although most adolescents do not experience short-term changes in well-being related to their social media use, small subsets of adolescents do (Beyens et al., 2020^[110]). This is symptomatic of the considerable heterogeneity in samples, as behaviours, platforms and emotional responses vary widely (van der Wal, Valkenburg and van Driel, 2022^[111]). Many scholars maintain that the true effects of social media reported in existing studies have probably been diluted across these highly heterogeneous samples of individuals (Beyens et al., 2020^[110]; Ivie et al., 2020^[64]; Valkenburg et al., 2022^[112]). Groups of individuals sharing similar psychological characteristics can show very different relationships between social media use and emotional well-being (Griffioen et al., 2022^[55]).

Lastly, some scholars argue that the field is dominated by work that is generally of low quality (Orben, 2020^[113]). There is a strong need to collect more fine-grained data with objective measures of different types of behaviour, as well as content and motivations for interacting with media (Johannes et al., 2022^[51]). Current measurements of media effects on well-being often do not take into account the specificities of media content or quality of interactions on social media (Valkenburg, Meier and Beyens, 2022^[62]). Furthermore, although there are by now more longitudinal studies on short and medium-term media effects, there is still a lack of longitudinal research exploring the associations between adolescents' social media use and long-term outcomes into adulthood (American Psychological Association, 2023^[66]).

Media engagement and identity formation

The search for identity starts in childhood, accelerates into adolescence and extends into adulthood (Klimstra and van Doeselaar, 2017^[114]). Around the age of three or four, children begin to develop a sense of personal history (Fivush, 2011^[115]) and start to attain insights into their own motivations and the motivations of others, attributing different traits to individuals (Calero et al., 2013^[116]). They also begin to imagine events that might take place in the future (Ferretti et al., 2017^[117]). These cognitive skills allow an individual to build a personal narrative throughout childhood and adolescence to explain who they are (McAdams, 2019^[118]). Early childhood is a period defined by a need to identify with, and conform rigidly to, social norms, where the desire for social acceptance often takes precedence over other psychological needs. In adolescence, it becomes more important to gain peer acceptance while also asserting personal agency, and media engagement provides an opportunity to do this (Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020^[119]). Expressions of identity (for example self-assigned labels) are integrated into an overarching life story over the course of adolescence. Even if these expressions are later dropped, they remain an important descriptor of who an individual has been (Bates, Hobman and Bell, 2019^[120]). Eventually, adolescents reflect on these experiences and integrate their values and beliefs with those of broader society.

Successfully navigating this balancing act has long been considered a basic psychological need and provides a sense of identity coherence (Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020^[119]). Experiencing a coherent identity is associated with lower anxiety, depression and aggression and higher levels of self-esteem, life satisfaction, supportive relationships and civic engagement, as well as academic and career success (Crocetti, 2017^[121]; Klimstra and van Doeselaar, 2017^[114]). The concept of *narrative identity* provides a framework which helps researchers to better understand this process of identity formation and has attracted significant empirical study over the past decade (Branje et al., 2021^[122]). It helps researchers to understand how individuals integrate their version of past experiences and imagined futures and find purpose, life story and a sense of place in the world (McAdams and McLean, 2013^[123]). Narrators who find redemptive meanings by overcoming adversity, and who construct life stories featuring themes of personal agency, tend to report higher levels of emotional well-being (McAdams and McLean, 2013^[123]; Adler et al., 2015^[124]).

Cultural participation is an important construct for narrative identity, as individuals borrow from ubiquitous *master narratives* found in their respective cultures (Manago et al., 2021^[125]). Culture refers to the core beliefs, conventions and practices associated with a given group of people (OECD, 2020^[126]). Participation in culture allows children to navigate childhood while also providing a framework for engaging with the adult world (Woodfall and Zezulkova, 2019^[127]). An individual can belong to numerous cultures, which intersect, giving them a unique cultural positioning. *Master narratives* refer to most widely shared images, metaphors and popular stories. One example of a *master narrative* is traditional gender roles, which persist despite being increasingly challenged by cultural shifts regarding gender and sexuality in recent decades (Barsigian et al., 2023^[128]). The right to participate in culture is enshrined in article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989^[129]). Communication tools and aesthetic expressions can be a powerful vehicle for the cultural participation envisaged in the UNCRC (Aspán, 2023^[130]), supporting or constraining identity development in different individuals (McLean et al., 2017^[131]).

In the previous age of mass media, those who used the most popular *master narratives* were often those in positions to influence media production, as well as positions of political and economic power (McLean et al., 2017^[131]). The rise of algorithmically-powered digital media has fragmented media audiences according to behavioural data, personalising media production and further diversifying people's experiences. This can be empowering for some children. For example, if an individual does not identify with a *master narrative*, the wider cultural access social media offers can empower adolescents to find *alternative narratives* which they feel fit them better (Bates, Hobman and Bell, 2019^[120]). In this case, finding an *alternative narrative* can be a positive and social experience if it empowers an individual to look for a group, community, or subculture where they feel they belong. For instance, research shows that if

adolescents questioning their gender or sexual identity can use media to access peers to provide support and share accurate health information with one another, this can enhance resilience to stress (American Psychological Association, 2023^[66]). Media are storytelling devices, rich with cultural and identity expressions. In the digital age, cultural expression takes place seamlessly across media through circulation of content, information and narratives and media engagement provides a wealth of stories through which adolescents can craft their own identity and positively impact emotional well-being (González-Martínez et al., 2019^[132]; Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020^[119]). As such, media provides both opportunities and risks to individuals searching for a stable personal narrative. An important part of identity development is finding belonging within a given group, which can foster a sense of empowerment (Syed and McLean, 2022^[133]).

Agency, influence and community

All human beings are born with agency. This agency is exercised when a person is driven to discover the kind of life they wish to build (for example, by making choices, setting goals or taking actions) and how they would like to feature in the lives of others (for example, what kind of friend, partner or caregiver they would like to be) (Kucirkova, 2021^[89]). This requires self-determination, a sense of belonging and openness to being vulnerable with others. It is exercised by showing up, being brave, forgoing comfort and investing in one's own worthiness (Kucirkova, 2021^[89]). When children have a sense of agency, they are more likely to engage in self-expression as they feel their thoughts and preferences are valued. Cultural norms, family expectations, and societal attitudes can influence how children perceive their ability to assert themselves and express their individuality. Fostering a child's sense of agency can empower them to express themselves more confidently. Providing opportunities for self-expression can contribute to the development of a child's sense of agency. Mid-adolescence is a period that prioritises the need for personal agency but adolescents who remain fixated on conforming, or do not develop coping strategies which provide a strong sense of agency, often get stuck in their identity development and emotional well-being can suffer (Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020^[119]).

Social media *influencers*¹⁹ have become important ambassadors of both master and alternative narratives. Since 2016 the global value of *influencer* marketing is estimated to have increased by 700% (Collini et al., 2022^[134]). Empirical data show that the more an *influencer* can strengthen a followers' sense of self in relation to their influencer community, for example through storytelling, the more effective the marketing is (Farivar and Wang, 2022^[135]). Finding one's place in a community can provide connectedness, belonging, and acceptance, and is a crucial component of narrative identity (Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020^[119]). Yet, the relationships children have with the *influencers* themselves are parasocial, non-reciprocal and one-way (Ballantine and Martin, 2005^[136]). Instead, two-way relationships more often occur between followers within a community that is actively cultivated by an influencer (Hoffner and Bond, 2022^[137]). *Influencers* are often young people themselves, making it easier for children to identify with them and feel represented, validated and motivated to engage (Scolari, 2018^[138]). Many *influencers* focus on creating content that portrays them in a high-status light (Marwick, 2015^[139]) and when adolescents create their own media content, they often do so by following some of the *influencers'* *strategies* (Masanet, Guerrero-Pico and Establés, 2019^[140]). This reproduction is the exercise of agency and can be empowering, even if the content is not original.

Box 4.7. World apart: Risks and opportunities for identity exploration in digital communities

Media, masculinity and “the manosphere”

The *manosphere* is a fragmented group of digital communities that use constructions of masculine identity, gender traits, critiques of feminism and victimisation storytelling to promote misogynist discourses (Han and Yin, 2022^[141]). The narratives within the manosphere can attract young boys into

strong antifeminist responses (Van Valkenburgh, 2019^[142]) which feed into contemporary conceptions of *toxic masculinity*, a term that lacks a coherent or consistent definition (Reeves, 2022^[143]). In their categorisation of these discourses in the digital environment, Han and Yin (2022^[141]) identified a number of different subcultures, one of which is *incels*.

Incel is a portmanteau of “involuntary celibates”, a group of people who feel the frustration of being unable to find a sentimental or sexual partner (Jaki et al., 2019^[144]). Although it is difficult to get an accurate estimation, evidence suggests that incels represent the youngest portion of the *manosphere*, with many under 18 and some as young as 12 years old (Woodward et al., 2021^[145]). *Incel* forums appear to provide short-term positive experiences for self-identified *incels* but can be destructive in the longer-term. Language on these forums is much more likely to be grossly negative, derogatory and violent against women, society or other users compared to more mainstream social media platforms (Pelzer et al., 2021^[146]). Although the incel community contains much violence and hatred, it is mostly concentrated on self-loathing (Sugiura, 2021^[147]). Research has found that most incels report a history of emotional problems and being bullied (Moskalenko et al., 2022^[148]). These lower levels of emotional well-being are associated with incels’ lower levels of social support and higher feelings of loneliness (Sparks, Zidenberg and Olver, 2023^[149]). This can be a vicious cycle, as research demonstrates that adolescents’ exposure to digital prejudice and hate predicts increases in anxiety and depressive symptoms (American Psychological Association, 2023^[66]).

Books, being and belonging

Concern over rates of literacy remains high on the policy agenda in many OECD countries. A wide range of influencers on social media, many of whom are adolescents or young adults, cultivate reading through dedicated book culture accounts (Flood, 2021^[150]). These accounts provide recommendations, allow exploration of experiences and emotional responses, generate community and identity and discuss, develop and promote writing (Merga, 2021^[151]). By searching for *#bookstagram*, *BookTube* or *#booktok* a child can access the reading corners of Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. *#booktok* alone has more 50 billion views worldwide and a significant impact on book sales (Reddan, 2022^[152]).

Accounts centred on reading culture seek to produce feelings of belonging and connection (Reddan, 2022^[152]). Accounts use images – known as *shelfies* (Instagram) and *selfies* (TikTok) - to position reading and book culture as desirable, social, cultured and pleasurable (Dezuanni et al., 2022^[153]). Typical activities on book culture media accounts include book cover reveals, book reviews, recommendations, critiques, pictures of *to-be-read* piles of books, *Hauls* showcasing books recently purchased and live reading events (Dezuanni et al., 2022^[153]; Perkins, 2017^[154]). *Book Tags/Challenges* are also used, providing creative prompts shared to the community to stimulate conversation (Perkins, 2017^[154]). These communities provide an opportunity for children to explore what it means to be “a reader” although the effect on actual reading behaviour warrants further research (Dezuanni et al., 2022^[153]).

More broadly, longitudinal research has found that *influencers* often serve as role models for disadvantaged children, more often boys; embodying success, wealth and upward social mobility (Orben, Dienlin and Przybylski, 2019^[57]; Paus-Hasebrink, Kulterer and Sinner, 2019^[99]). Social media is an important outlet for adolescents when it comes to coping with stress, as stigmatised individuals are able to find similar others and role models who provide support and guidance (Wolfers and Utz, 2022^[155]). Although all human beings have agency, the stakes for self-determination and self-expression are not the same for every child. For example, research has found that children in low-income communities may temper their digital self-expression to a greater extent than more advantaged children, in favour of adhering to social rules where there is the perception of greater penalties (including economic costs and the threat of physical harm) for not doing so (Way and Malvini Redden, 2020^[156]). Social media has obvious benefits

in the search for belonging and connection but it can equally lead children into difficulties as they try to explain why their sense of self deviates from the identity of their peers, families or mainstream celebrities.

Box 4.8. “Did you see their Finsta?”

Although expressing an ideal self is important across age groups, the importance of expressing an authentic self to peers increases during adolescence (Macek and Osecká, 1996_[157]). Media provides prompting and elaboration for this collaborative peer-led identity development. Some adolescent Instagram users maintain two profiles: a “real Instagram” or *Rinsta* and a “fake Instagram” or *Finsta*. A *Rinsta* is used for broad social interaction via an ideal, curated self. A *Finsta* is a safe space to express negative emotions and share unflattering pictures with close friends (Ellison, Pyle and Vitak, 2022_[158]). A *Finsta* often is often kept private (i.e. not publicly accessible) with fewer, but more intense, connections with peers (Huang and Vitak, 2022_[159]).

These spaces may provide relief from the pressure to be constantly self-marketing and presenting a coherent and palatable personal brand (Xiao et al., 2020_[160]). *Rinsta* satisfies the social pressures many children feel to look good and serious, *Finsta* satisfies the need to be genuine and playful (Kang and Wei, 2020_[161]). On *Rinsta*, people perceive their personality as less neurotic and extraverted. On *Finsta*, users see themselves as less agreeable and conscientious (Taber and Whittaker, 2020_[162]). Although popularity of *Finsta* appears to have piqued around 2018, more recent apps such as [BeReal](#)²⁰ have put authenticity and spontaneity at their core, giving users a randomly selected two-minute window every day to share a video. Balancing the need for agency and community is an essential part of identity formation. From a narrative perspective, a *Finsta* offers a way for a child to exercise their agency, but in a controlled environment. By contrast, a *Rinsta* gives access to the broader community values against which they can view their own evolving sense of self.

The increasingly professionalised and commercialised digital media environment raises the stakes for children to exercise their agency. Digital media are important communication tools for the social justice movements both in and out of the digital environment (Manago et al., 2021_[163]). However, recent surveys found that the vast majority of children’s social media feeds are dominated by competitive, expertly produced *influencer* content (Revealing Reality, 2023_[164]). This environment of professionalised perfection means public social interactions, such as liking, following and sharing content, carry significant risk of negative feedback. Most children remain passive consumers of digital media rather than active participants or content creators (Scolari, 2018_[138]; Rideout, et al., 2022_[165]; Ofcom, 2022_[166]). Although digital media are not the primary driver, and social comparison has its roots in so-called “success culture” more broadly (Burns and Gottschalk, 2020_[2]), the ubiquity of the media environment provides an efficient means through which this culture can be reinforced. Children have found creative ways of lowering the stakes of identity exploration in the digital media environment. For example, by creating what Wilson (2020_[167]) calls *digital campfires*. These are alternative social spaces co-created by young people interested in finding like-minded peers with shared values and goals. They are less public and exist on private messaging platforms, through shared experiences (e.g. multiplayer games) or through the creation of micro-communities. Crucially, *digital campfires* are built through agency, not automation. Consequently, they may have more promising outcomes for young people’s identity development and empowerment (Granic, Morita and Scholten, 2020_[168]).

The role of education

School is among the most important contexts where identity formation unfolds. However, little is known about how school environments can support children in this key developmental task (Abbasi, 2016_[169]). Existing research suggests that practitioners are often unaware of the ways in which their practices may

impact identity development (Verhoeven, Poorthuis and Volman, 2018_[170]). This gap has important ramifications. Research shows that adolescents belonging to ethnic minority groups often need to consider and reconsider different identity alternatives to a greater extent than ethnic majority adolescents (Crocetti, 2017_[121]). Offering adolescents at risk of marginalisation the opportunity to critically assess societal inequalities can support identity development and enhance resilience (Verhoeven, Poorthuis and Volman, 2018_[170]). Exploring aspects of identity around marginalisation requires a safe school environment (Bates, Hobman and Bell, 2019_[120]). Cultivating an atmosphere where adolescents feel respected, appreciated and secure enough to make mistakes, for example by having teachers share their own doubts and mistakes, can reassure students (Verhoeven, Poorthuis and Volman, 2018_[170]). Identity formation interventions often take place in extracurricular activities. However, the formal school curriculum may also provide opportunities (e.g. (Pinkard et al., 2017_[171])). Initiatives that mix informal and formal learning may be especially effective in encouraging students to engage with identity processes as they support the development of complimentary relationships with peers and teachers (Meerts-Brandsma, Melton and Sibthorp, 2023_[172]).

When it comes to scope, Verhoeven, Poorthuis and Volman's (2018_[170]) review categorises identity development approaches into *broad, deep and reflective*. *Broad* educational initiatives provide adolescents with the opportunity to adopt new interests, identify talents, and to try out new identity positions using on-site and hands-on activities. *Deep* learning experiences support adolescents in further exploring and specifying existing identity positions, using expert role models from the community who can help adolescents to challenge stereotypes that may otherwise inhibit identity exploration. *Reflective* learning experiences help adolescents explore existing self-understandings and determine a comfortable balance between societal norms and individual aspirations of who they want to become. The role of educators in fostering connections between educational practices and the world outside school is a common theme across the literature (Abbasi, 2016_[169]). This can make learning more meaningful by providing space for, and valuing, adolescents' out-of-school knowledge and experiences in class to come together.

Many media education resources already include competencies related to identity formation. For example, the [Digital Citizenship Curriculum](#)²¹ of CommonSense Media in the United States, which includes activities intended to help teachers guide students to reflect on the most important parts of their personal identity, consider how to best reflect this in the digital environment and discuss the benefits and drawbacks of having multiple digital identities. Yet, media education in practice often still lacks a rigorous examination of issues related to representations of different personal identities with students (Share, Mamikonyan and Lopez, 2019_[173]). Critical engagement with questions of identity in education practice has historically been limited to, for example, questioning who owns and makes editorial decisions in relation to mass media (Cannon, Connolly and Parry, 2020_[174]). This is because the knowledge base that supports media education is informed mainly by mass media research and the conceptual frameworks used are often far away from children's everyday media experiences (Dezuanni, 2020_[175]).

Education systems have a crucial role in teaching children about digital safety. However, opportunities for empowerment do not automatically emerge from enhanced safety. Furthermore, overprotection can actually undermine empowerment. Media engagement is not simply a rational calculation of risks versus rewards; it is driven by emotions and, for most children, it is an essential arena for their development. Education must consider how key developmental needs in childhood, such as the search for stable and coherent identity development, anchored in a sense of community, quality relationships and agency, affect their media engagement. Simply providing a child with knowledge about digital hate speech will not necessarily mean they make a rational assessment about participating in harmful digital communities. Similarly, equipping a child with the skills to detect disinformation will not necessarily stop them from sharing information they know to be false. The perceived utility of the digital environment might not be found in the accuracy of the information it contains but rather in the opportunities it provides for the key developmental tasks of childhood. Media education must safely take these factors into consideration by incentivising children to bring their everyday experiences of media into the classroom.

Children's media engagement – Reflection tool

Screentime is not a meaningful indicator of the effects of media engagement on well-being, as it does not consider who is engaging and what they are engaging with.

Media education needs an enhanced focus on fostering learning about how different media can positively affect well-being, for example by supporting identity development, the exercise of agency and prosocial behaviour.

Some children who engage with media do experience lower levels of emotional well-being.

Much research now suggests that some adolescents should limit use of social media for social comparison, particularly around beauty- or appearance-related content.

Current media education interventions positively impact children's knowledge and skills but have more limited effects on actual media behaviours.

Learning about digital risks can support positive decision making in the digital environment. Yet, media engagement as a behaviour is often irrational and based on emotions. Knowledge and skills are not enough.

Bringing in children's lived media experiences and including the motivations which lie at the core of their engagement behaviours is crucial.

Social and emotional skills are essential for media education but risk being sidelined.

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of social and emotional skills, there is a lack understanding of how they are actually being taught in schools and how they can contribute to media education.

There is need for more fine-grained data with objective measures of different behaviours.

Most studies are correlational and cross sectional and the direction of association and causality often cannot be inferred.

The true effects of media have probably been diluted across heterogeneous samples of individuals that differ in their susceptibility to media effects.

There is a distinct lack of data on how teacher preparation programmes incorporate media education into teacher training.

Although the majority of systems report media education is covered by initial teacher education and continuing professional development, there are scarce examples of how this is actually implemented.

Studies have shown that both pre-service and in-service teachers in various education systems have expressed a lack of confidence in media education themes.

Media education often still focuses on traditional concepts of mass-media audiences, narratives and power structures and neglects individual lived experiences.

School is already a key space where identity formation takes place, and media education should empower children in this journey.

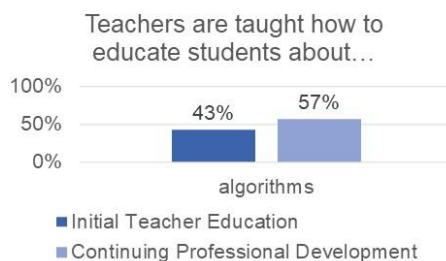
Yet, there remains a lack of robust research on the best ways to instigate self-reflective classroom interventions that bring in children's everyday media experiences and rich cultural knowledge to discuss what this means for their identity and participation in society.

Reflecting on Media Engagement

DATA & TRENDS



Algorithms dominate children's media experiences and most children remain passive consumers of media. Yet, many teachers are not taught how to educate students about the role these algorithms play.



EMPOWERMENT

Opportunities

Critical engagement with media narratives can encourage the development of a sense of purpose, personal agency, inspiration and prosocial behaviour. This is likely to positively impact well-being and requires a broad media education composed of both technical and non-technical competences.

Challenges

Integrating algorithm education into teacher training so teachers can support students.

Empowering schools to support key developmental tasks, such as identity formation.

Bringing children's rich cultural knowledge of media into the classroom.

What can governments do?

- ❑ Further attention should be paid to **system-wide coordination, teacher education** and working with actors to **evaluate and scale up** media education mechanisms, even though the **strategic policy landscape** of media education is well-developed in many education systems.
- ❑ Media education should **expand its scope** to more comprehensively include **positive, agentic and prosocial** use of media to promote well-being in children.
- ❑ Media education can empower children in identity formation by moving beyond traditional media and communications concepts focused on mass media and **provide greater scope for exploration, self-reflection and individual storytelling** that personalised media offers.
- ❑ Governments must ensure collaboration across sectors and lower the stakes **for children to exercise their agency in the digital environment by encouraging authentic community building and digital play among peers**. It is widely recognised that policy makers have a duty to promote child safety by design in the digital environment. However, they can also promote **opportunity by design**.

Why not start a learning conversation about children's media education?

Tina is a Senior Analyst in her Education Ministry's Policy Research and Analysis Team. Her unit operates as an internal knowledge broker, working across the Ministry to develop the evidence base in education by offering analytical support and identifying policy and practice-relevant studies. The Deputy Secretary General of the Ministry recently announced that they will update the teacher training framework to strengthen newly trained teachers' media education competence and pedagogical skills. The context is highly politicised and Tina wishes to deepen the understanding of the evidence base for media education in the Ministry to support decision making.

She recently read about *Learning Conversations*, a collaborative process that has helped education practitioners to engage with knowledge in a high-quality way. She wants to explore the benefits of this process in a policy context. Following the examples outlined in (Brown and Poortman, 2023^[176]) she brings together a small group of ministerial advisers, municipal policy makers and policy and implementation administrators, as well as researchers from two universities in her system and relevant stakeholders from allied professions such as health and social care. Tina assumes the crucial role of facilitator and structures the learning conversations in four workshops, lasting four hours each, over the course of one year. Each workshop mixes the steps below, going back and forth where required to fine-tune ideas and take account of evolving contexts:

1. Establishing a baseline
 - What pre-existing assumptions do participants have about children's media engagement and what does the research evidence say?
 - What research evidence exists on successes and challenges in improving teacher training in media education?
 - What change in student outcomes (and thus teaching practice) is required in our context?
2. Co-creating solutions
 - How can we break down the themes of the evidence base into focused, relevant and measurable policy goals to guide further activities and ensure we can evaluate their success?
 - For each policy goal, what can we find out about the root cause of challenges and the factors that can help achieve the goal?
 - Where are the knowledge gaps and what still needs to be learnt to achieve the goals?
3. Approaching implementation
 - Who needs to be involved and can positively influence factors that help achieve the goals?
 - How might we secure the engagement of these stakeholders and what are their motivations?
 - What activities and resources are needed and when?
4. Reflections and *ex-ante* evaluation of process and outcomes.
 - What have learning conversation participants learnt together and as individuals?
 - How can we meaningfully involve a diverse range of students in the next steps?
 - What barriers might prevent the policy goals being achieved and how might we adapt the goals?

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Notes

¹ The methods of communication used to store and deliver information

² Information literacy emphasises the skills needed to find, validate and deploy information but does not explicitly focus on media messages (Leaning, 2019^[177]). It focuses specifically on information provided through digital sources, rather than building the skills to use digital technologies (Jones-Jang, Mortensen and Liu, 2019^[26]).

³ See: <https://men.public.lu/fr/actualites/communiqués-conference-presse/2020/02/06-einfach-digital.html> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

⁴ See: <https://www.edumedia.lu/> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

⁵ See: <https://en.digst.dk/media/27861/national-strategy-for-digitalisation-together-in-the-digital-development.pdf> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

⁶ See: https://www.pkc.gov.lv/sites/default/files/inline-files/Summary_Latvian%20National%20Development%20Plan%202021-2027_final_pdf.pdf (accessed on 06 May 2024).

⁷ See: <https://www.km.gov.lv/en/media/32853/download?attachment> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

⁸ See: https://www.varam.gov.lv/en/article/latvian-digital-transformation-guidelines-2021-2027-accellation-digital-capacities-future-society-and-economy?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F (accessed on 06 May 2024).

⁹ See: <https://www.slo.nl/thema/meer/actualisatie-kerndoelen-examenprogramma/#:~:text=De%20landelijk%20vastgelegde%20kerndoelen%20en,toekomst%2C%20moeten%20deze%20worden%20geactualiseerd.> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

¹⁰ See: <https://www.mediawijs.be/> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

¹¹ See: <https://www.medianest.be/> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

¹² See: <https://www.clemi.fr/> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

¹³ See: <https://kavi.fi/en/> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

¹⁴ See: <https://fjolmidlanefnd.is/2022/01/24/tengslanet-um-upplysinga-og-midlalaesi-a-islandi/> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

¹⁵ See: <https://www.nomc.nl/> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

¹⁶ See: <https://mediacoacheurope.com/project> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

¹⁷ See: <https://mediacoacheurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/European-MediaCoach-Initiative-Methodology-and-Results.pdf> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

¹⁸ See: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/approach/evaluate/toolkit> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

¹⁹ The term *influencer* denotes a monetisable status and a potential career that is created as a result of digital celebrity and intentionally aims to sustain attention (Abidin, 2020_[178]). The term *celebrity* simply represents the quality of visibility. *Influencers* are a broad group, containing mainstream celebrities, as well as *micro-celebrities*. *Micro-celebrity* is a term that indicates small-scale or narrowly focused visibility, which is often ephemeral.

²⁰ See : <https://bereal.com/en/> (accessed on 06 May 2024).

²¹ See : <https://www.common sense.org/education/digital-citizenship/curriculum?topic=digital-footprint--identity> (accessed on 06 May 2024).



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