



Book review

Understanding The Everyday Digital Lives of Children and Young People

Edited by H. Holmarsdottir, I. Seland, C. Hyggen, & M. Roth. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, 533 pp.

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Understanding The Everyday Digital Lives of Children and Young People is an exploration of the impact of technological transformations on children and young people, referred to as the Digital Generation. The book is based on the research outcomes of the DigiGen project funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program, in which all contributing authors have actively participated. The authors examine how technological advances affect various facets of children and young people's everyday lives within the four microsystems developed in Bronfenbrenner's socioecological model: family, leisure time, education, and civic participation. This is mainly researched from children and young people's own perspective through innovative quantitative and qualitative methods. The original qualitative data includes participants aged 5-18 years, from a range of seven European countries: Austria, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Norway, Romania, and the United Kingdom. The authors emphasize that the ability to engage with and adapt to digital technology is crucial for the future of young people.

The book is structured in three parts. The first part deals with how established theories and methods can be supplemented with new approaches to understand the increasingly pervasive role digital technology plays in young people's lives. The second part focuses on how children and young people balance opportunities and challenges related to technology, with a special focus on how digital media affects their agency and well-being. The third and final part discusses risk and vulnerability in the digital age, with the aim of



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exploring how to empower young people to become competent and responsible digital citizens. The book is written in an accessible and clear manner, with well-structured chapters that make it suitable for both beginners and experienced researchers or others interested in the topic.

The authors take a nuanced approach to technologies' impact on children and young people's everyday life, acknowledging that digital technology can both enable and constrain children's agency. Instead of a deterministic view, it explores how children actively shape their digital experiences and how technology is socially constructed. The author's approach and the use of Bronfenbrenner's model with its microsystems helps to give the reader an understanding of how children and young people live in a time where the digital and physical arenas increasingly merge, blurring the boundaries between them. As the authors highlight, social media plays an important role in young people's daily lives, and their use varies between home, school, leisure and community participation. In the book, they explore how young people engage with popular platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Discord, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram, Facebook, Reddit and YouTube. Social media serves multiple purposes for children and young people, including communicating with friends, sharing content, completing schoolwork, listening to music, watching videos, playing computer games, finding information, and organizing social and political activities. Additionally, digital communication platforms provide a space for self-expression, creativity, and entertainment, allowing young people to explore their identities, their own boundaries and the limits of others.

Compared to traditional societies where you had to meet others face to face to talk to each other, digital media have created new structures and communication patterns in the everyday lives of young people. At home, social media is used to communicate with family members who live further away, such as parents, grandparents or with siblings who have moved out, or with friends and teachers. Digital media is also used to do schoolwork at home. The young participants also told that digital media made it possible to collaborate with fellow students from home on their schoolwork. Some young people report using platforms like YouTube for self-learning and interest development. Digital media creates a balance between private life and social participation but can also lead to digital conflicts in the family, such as issues related to young people's screen time.

Digital activities are not limited to one arena but flow between home, school and leisure as a natural part of children and young people's everyday lives. Several chapters in the book shed light on how such digital activities can have positive ripple effects. For example, the chapter *Intersecting Knowledge on Young People's Well-Being and Use of Digital Technology Across Contexts: A Scoping Review Synthesis* by Seland shows that gaming can help strengthen English language skills, which in turn can improve school results. Gaming is also highlighted as an arena for community, good conversations and the development of digital, social and collaboration skills in several chapters of the book. Seland's chapter also sheds light on how

internet access at home correlates positively with school performance, especially among students with well-educated parents. For children from households of lower socioeconomic status (SES), the internet can contribute to social integration through communication with peers, while also developing social and collaborative skills. Digital skills learned in one context, such as school, can also be transferred to leisure activities and vice versa. Such skills can not only improve learning outcomes but also strengthen children's identity and autonomy. The authors thus highlight how the boundaries between school, leisure and home become more porous in a digital age, and how this opens new opportunities for the development of lifelong competences.

Participants from all countries in the study emphasized that digital communication with friends is a key part of their leisure activities and daily lives (from Rustad et al.'s chapter, p. 294). Data from the digital diaries reveal that children stay in touch with their peers through messaging or calling using a wide range of apps, including Snapchat, Messenger, WhatsApp, FaceTime, Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Apple Music, Amazon Prime, TikTok, Tellonym (specific to Austria), Discord, Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit. Overall, children and young people tend to prefer text-based messaging over voice or video calls. Young people use social media to create and maintain friendships, both with people they already know and new acquaintances. Gaming and social media are closely linked to young people's leisure time, especially through platforms such as Discord, Roblox, Minecraft, and Twitch (from Rustad et al.'s chapter, p. 287). The use of TikTok and Instagram for self-presentation and creative expression is also widespread but can also lead to pressure and insecurity about the body and appearance. Girls spend more time on social media than boys, which is related to the fact that they more often emphasize relational and social aspects and often meet just to chat. Boys, on the other hand, spend more time on gaming than girls in their spare time. For many, especially boys, social computer games serve as an arena for maintaining friendships and discussing common interests. This can be compared to physical meeting places, where boys gather to play board games or football, and at the same time get an opportunity to open up about other topics. Today, children build Minecraft structures with wooden blocks in kindergarten, pretend that the ground is lava inspired by Roblox, or run after each other like Super Mario in the forest (NOU 2024: 20, p. 37). The digital thus merges with children and young people's physical play, and therefore the distinction between analogue and digital games and play is not always as relevant for today's children and young people.

Through their research, the authors reveal that by actively participating in digital spaces, shaping their interactions, and managing their leisure-time use of digital devices and media, children can enhance their digital agency in multiple ways. Many young people report that they choose different platforms depending on who they communicate with. For example, Discord is used for larger conversation groups, while Instagram and TikTok are more personal and visual. By deliberately selecting whom to interact with and what activities to participate in, children create their own digital environments and exercise their agency.

Also, by consciously deciding what information to share, on which platforms, and with whom, they demonstrate an awareness of the social contexts they navigate online. However, parental rules and restrictions play a significant role in shaping the digital activities of children and young people.

When it comes to young people's participation in society, the book highlights that they use social media for political engagement, for example through activism on TikTok and Twitter (in Tiidenberg et al.'s chapter, p. 370-371). Youths use platforms to express opinions, organize protests, and share information on social issues. Some young people are concerned about surveillance, harassment and cyberbullying, which affects how and where they participate in digital debates.

Between 1994 and 2006, screen time among young people in Norway doubled, and increased to an average of four hours and three quarters of an hour daily (NOU 2024: 20, p. 39). Gradually, it became common for young people to have their own smartphone, and with the development of the 3G network, more and more people had access to the internet outside the home as well. As the book highlights, there are several studies that show that screen time among young people in Europe is still high and increasing, and that a large part of young people's waking time is spent in front of a screen. Figures from 2018 show that Norwegian children aged 9 to 16 spent more time online than the European average – 3.6 hours a day in Norway compared to 2.8 hours in Europe (NOU 2024: 20, p. 39). This may be related to the fact that Norway is one of the most leading countries in Europe in digitalization. Children and young people's increasing screen time and the consequences of this have been widely debated in several countries. Several chapters in the book write about how a lot of time spent on digital media, and especially platforms that are addictive (such as social media and computer games), can affect young people's sleep, ability to concentrate and poor mental health.

In my early researcher career, I have been particularly interested in how digital media affect human relationships. Therefore, I was very pleased that several chapters problematize this. The authors look at how technology can strengthen social relationships at a distance, but also how it can reduce the depth of relationships and contribute to a substitution of physical interaction with digital interaction. Today's digital age is changing humans' communication and interaction patterns. A phenomenological perspective, about how it feels and is experienced when young people's bodies interact with technology, could have been researched more and could have had an even greater focus in the book. Examples of questions the authors could have asked and delved more into could be if young people prefer to talk about certain topics or show emotions digitally instead of physically (or the other way around), and if so, which digital platforms are seen as most appropriate for this purpose? How do they perceive their physical and social selves in a digital world where we lose access to all the senses, facial expressions, body language, emotions, moods, and atmospheres in our interactions and experiences? With that being said, the chapters that use different

creative methods where they involve children and young people in the research have this perspective to a greater extent. As Symeonaki et al. write in their chapter *Investigating Patterns of Digital Socialisation During Leisure Through Multimodal Social Research*, about video game observation: "It provides researchers with ways to investigate nonverbal expressions of feelings, determine who interacts with whom, and seize how participants communicate with each other." (p. 128). It is also important to note that face-to-face conversations remain a valued form of communication for children and young people (from Rustad et al.'s chapter, p. 288). This is especially true for intimate discussions, as they perceive in-person interactions as offering a greater sense of privacy.

The authors highlight the importance of an open, curious and holistic approach to understanding how children and young people use and talk about digital media in their everyday lives. Methods that include children and young people as co-researchers and experts in varied ways are used, like online participant and non-participant observations like video game observations, digital communication diaries operated through smartphone applications, in-depth and semi-structured interviews both with children and young people alone and/or with their parents, focus group interviews and observations, and video and storytelling workshops. The authors in Symeonaki et al.'s chapter write that they experienced that the young people became more active in game observations than in interviews: "(...) children appeared to feel valued as experts in game sessions and demonstrated greater enthusiasm in sharing their insights and perspectives." (p. 136). However, the authors acknowledge an important awareness of using digital methods to involve children and young people more in research. They write that it is important that we do not assume that smart applications and different apps etc. are immediately and naturally captivating and stimulating for children and young people, who are very used to digital technology. The digital tools must be used by young people as beneficial means of expressing themselves.

These creative methods, which have been used with and by children and young people, are a strength of the research reported in the book because there is little research that is based on young people's own experiences. By involving children and young people in research, we can gain a deeper insight into their thoughts, experiences and needs, which provides valuable knowledge about how adults can support them in developing the necessary skills and resilience to risk, both online and offline. In addition, it is important to listen to children and young people about changes that are constantly taking place in our society, which affect young people's everyday lives, education and generally their future. Young people should be given an opportunity to influence their own lives and the society they live in, which the book is a contribution to.

Traditionally, research on children and young people in relation to digital technology has tended to focus on warnings and risks, such as excessive screen time, cyberbullying, and other challenges related to well-being. While these are important topics, the authors argue that we also need to place greater emphasis on helping

young people develop digital skills and competence to act responsibly online. School and education play an important role in teaching children and young people the necessary skills and digital competences needed to navigate in an increasingly digital world. In the chapter *Perspectives of Children and young People on Their Education as Preparation for Their Future in the Digital Age: In-depth Qualitative Study in Five European Countries*, Eickelmann et al. report on major differences in both the availability of and access to digital technologies in education across countries in Europe and across the different age groups (the children and youths in the study were between 9-16 years old). This affects children and young people's ability to be prepared to navigate and handle digital tools in an increasingly digital world when they enter the labour market in the future.

In the chapter *Talking about digital responsibility: children's and young people's voices*, Gudmundsdottir et al. shed light on how limited integration of digital tools in education can inhibit the development of digital competence and responsibility. In interviews with children and young people in three different countries (Norway, Estonia and Romania) about digital responsibility and critical use of digital media in education, the children from Romania answered, among other things, that they do not have conversations with the teachers about the ethical implications of copyright issues; they are simply forbidden to use devices and not given further explanations or options to engage with topics like ethical work, copyright, fair use or plagiarism. The authors point out that this type of restrictive practice is inexpedient, especially when digital platforms are already an integral part of young people's social, and leisure lives. In line with this, Roth et al., in their chapter *A Developmental View on Digital Vulnerability and Agency of Children Under 10 Years of Age*, discuss how for children aged 5–6, offline peer activities mattered more than digital ones, whereas for those aged 8–10, a lack of digital experience and being excluded from online play with friends became frustrating and created feelings of being uninvolved in the peer culture.

The National Assembly for Public Health in Norway (NOU 2024: 20, p.76) wants to regulate children and young people's screen use in a far more systematic way than is the case today. An important argument made in the book is that parents and adults can meet the children and young people in a way that makes them feel understood, while at the same time regulating screen time for the youth. By getting more acquainted with, being curious and interested in what the young people do on the screen, how they do it, who they talk to and why they are doing exactly that, you can gain knowledge and understanding of how best to set boundaries that are adapted to the digital activity the young person is doing. Otherwise, you can create an even greater distance between the young people and the adults, as a child aged 8-10 says in an interview in Roth et al.'s chapter: "Sometimes grandma comes and says: 'Why are you looking at this stupid video?' and right then she's shutting down the computer or taking away the phone. I tell her it's interesting to me, but she won't let me" (p. 185).

In the Norwegian Media Authority's study on children and young people's use of media from 2022 (Medietilsynet, 2022), it was found that 26 per cent of 9-18-year-olds have experienced someone being mean to them online, mobile or gaming one or more times in the past year. Wilhelmsen and Lafton, in the chapter *Discourses and Gender Divides in Children's Digital Everyday Lives*, describe how few young people talk to their parents, teachers or other adults about cyberbullying or other difficult experiences they have had online. Also, the study shows that girls talk to their parents to a greater extent than boys when they encounter negative events online. It is important that children and young people feel that they can share both positive and negative feelings that can arise using digital media with their parents. It is precisely for this reason, as the authors argue, that it is important that adults must try to create an open and curious dialogue with the young people about what they do on the various social and digital media rather than facing young people's digital everyday lives with only a negative gaze. Furthermore, Gudmundsdottir et al. highlight that cyberbullying and harassment were difficult topics to talk about for many young people. Several of the children and youths interviewed claimed that they did not "remember" episodes of bullying, and those who mentioned such incidents described situations that did not involve them personally. This suggests that sharing sensitive experiences may be a barrier for young people, which makes it important to organise research conversations in a way that creates a sense of security.

In conclusion, this book is a useful and important contribution to increasing our insight into children and young people's digital everyday lives today, as it goes beyond the technological determinism implicit in studies that repeatedly find small correlations between online activity and adolescent well-being. The book is also an important starting point for further research on children and young people and can especially be of inspiration regarding the use of various creative methods that involve children and young people in research, to bring out the young people's own perspectives, understandings, thoughts, feelings and practices.

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