



## **INTRODUCTION:**

### **DOING AND BEING DIGITAL: MEDIATED CHILDHOODS**

**Volume 8: Communication and Information Technologies Annual**

**Laura Robinson, Shelia R. Cotten, and Jeremy Schulz**

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# INTRODUCTION:

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Volume 8 of the *Communication and Information Technologies Annual, Doing and Being Digital: Mediated Childhoods*, brings together nine studies of mediated childhood and youth. The studies shed light on the emerging contours of young people's web engagements and social practices. More specifically, the volume contains research speaking to scholarship dealing with four key topics: digital differentiation, media use, social problems, and cyberbullying. In the first section, authors address timely topics about social inequalities arising from unequal web use among children and teens. In the following section, the contributions reveal decision making processes about negotiating mediated communication by college students in Finland and the United States. Subsequently, in section three, the research offers solutions to social problems created by online threats and ever expanding advertising targeting children. Finally, the volume closes with research on cyberbullying as a moral panic and upstanders who stand up to cyberbullies. Taken together, the contributions raise far-reaching questions about how childhood and young adulthood is mediated and shaped by digital experiences.

### Section I: Digital Differentiation

Introducing the section Digital Differentiation, "Stress 2.0: Social Media Overload among Swiss Teenagers" by Christoph Lutz, Giulia Ranzini, and Miriam Meckel introduces us to the concepts of technostress, as related to information overload. With survey data from almost 7,000 Swiss teenagers from different language groups, they probe the understudied phenomenon of new media overexposure among young people. Targeting the linkage between overexposure and stress, they find that older, male, and French-speaking teenagers are most at risk for social network site stress. The research has several implications for teenagers, parents, and teachers, among them: "teenagers should be made aware of the risks, but also the potentials that social media envisage. The options for creativity and self-expression are unlimited, and an education into how to use them could reduce the stress and potential for overexposure." Further, they contribute to our knowledge of social divides in teenagers' varying abilities to cope with social network induced stress, namely demands for constant status updates and potential of overexposure.

From social divides created by overload among Swiss teens, we cross the Atlantic to explore emergent use divides among middle school students in the United States in "Gradations of Disappearing Digital Divides Among Racially Diverse Middle School Students" by Shelia R. Cotten, Elizabeth L. Davison, Daniel B. Shank, and Brian W. Ward. Here the authors examine whether race remains a factor in Internet usage, among a group presumed to be digital natives - middle school students. They find that although Whites or European Americans traditionally had higher levels of Internet access and usage in the first decades of ICT adoption, this is no longer the case. Based on survey data from a diverse student sample from a mid-Atlantic school district, the authors show that African Americans and Asian/Pacific Islander students

were often more likely than White students to use the Internet and to use specific applications of the Internet; this holds true when accounting for a number of sociodemographic and background factors that are known to affect Internet usage. Their work indicates that issues of digital inequality are becoming more about how the Internet is used rather than mere access or ownership.

The section of Digital Differentiation closes with “Play to Pay?: Adolescent Video Game Play and STEM Choice” by Amanda J. Turner. Turner takes a novel approach to the study of gaming to uncover some unanticipated educational benefits accrued by college students who played video games during their adolescence. Previous research has sought to discover mechanisms to increase interest and ability in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields. Using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), Turner uses a nested series of logistic regression models to show that--compared to those who do not play video games in adolescence--teens who play video games are seventy percent more likely to major in a STEM field when they attend college. She goes beyond previous research on the short-term benefits of video game play, to add to our knowledge of gaming’s unexpected dividend as an entry point to STEM fields.

### **Section: Media Use**

We now turn to the first of two contributions on media use among college students. Carrie Anne Platt, Renee Bourdeaux, and Nancy DiTunnariello examine American college students’ communication practices in “Should I Text or Should I Call?: How College Students Navigate Mediated Connections with Family.” Based on in-depth interviews, their study investigates young adults’ decision making processes regarding familial communication. Here we see the influence of generational difference on the communication routines of American college students. In particular college students’ communication choices are circumscribed by their parents’ preferences, as well as the students’ temporal resources, emotional needs, and affiliative contexts. The authors extend media multiplexity theory by showing how young adults in the United States tailor their communication practices to the perceived needs of their communication partners. In addition, they draw attention to the continued importance of studying multiple communication channels in parallel.

From college students in the United States we return across the Atlantic to Europe to examine college students in Finland in “Media Choice and Identity Work: A Case Study of Information Communication Technology Use in a Peer Community” by Airi Lampinen, Vilma Lehtinen, and Coye Cheshire. Skillfully weaving together identity theories with their empirical evidence, they establish how Finnish college students construct their social identities through their media choices in counterintuitive ways. The authors explore the symbolic value of participation in an online community valorizing the use of “old fashioned” IRC. The authors explore how a relatively “old” interface technology acquires symbolic value as a marker of technical competence, thereby appealing to individuals wanting to signal their status as members of the initiated. In their words: “Our analysis also shows that as IT skills were used to define the community and create a symbolic boundary that distinguished it from other social groups, the intentional cues used for coding it, such as nicks and command-line jargon, served identity

work across the thin divide between online and offline communication.” Their study is a valuable reminder of the importance of studying “older” forms of digital communication technologies.

### **Section: Social Problems and Solutions**

In the following section on social problems, two contributions outline the challenges faced by young Internet users, as well as solutions to address them. The first contribution is “Promoting Online Safety Among Adolescents: Enhancing Coping Self-Efficacy and Protective Behaviors through Enactive Mastery” by Julia Crouse Waddell, Caitlin McLaughlin, Robert Larose, and Nora Rifon. Their work proposes strategies to enhance adolescent users’ abilities to protect themselves from online risks. Among the risks identified by the study are online fraud, identity theft, and covert threats such as phishing, spyware, and viruses. To address these risks, the authors conducted an intervention seeking to inform youth about these threats, heighten their awareness of their vulnerabilities, increase their self-protective self-efficacy, and increase their response efficacy. Drawing on Protection Motivation Theory, the authors advance solutions in the form of an enactive mastery training program.

Subsequently, we turn to a more subtle threat to young users: excessive advertising. In “Hey Kids, This Is Advertising”: Metaphors and Promotional Appeals in Online Advertisements for Children,” Debashis Aikat points to perils and promises of advertising metaphors. Making linkages between his study and previous research, Aikat reminds us that advertising metaphors have become a taken for granted element in children’s thinking and learning processes. According to Aikat, interactive media strategies targeting children are characterized by vibrant visual metaphors with the power to shape how children understand the world around them. In his words, “Children learn from advertising, which mirrors the society it serves. By intent and design, advertising seeks to influence its audience as a driving force for marketing, persuasion and information...advertisers are seeking to develop dominant metaphors that shape our perceptions and actions without our ever noticing them.” Aikat concludes by offering recommendations regarding curbing the negative effects of advertising, as well as harnessing advertising for positive social change.

### **Section: Cyberbullies and Upstanders**

Finally, the volume closes with the increasingly important topic of cyberbullying. In “Cyberbullying: The Social Construction of a Moral Panic,” Linda M. Waldron investigates how the media portrays the victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying. Employing content analysis, Waldron points to several trends in the coverage of cyberbullying and relates these trends to the criteria used to diagnose moral panics (consensus, concern, hostility, disproportionality, and volatility). Waldron’s analysis shows that the media tends to exaggerate the distinctiveness of cyberbullying as a new social problem distinct from traditional bullying, thus fueling moral panic. At the same, Waldron argues that the media downplays the commonalities between the two forms of bullying and offer over-simplistic and inadequate solutions. At the same time, while acknowledging its similarities with older forms of bullying, Waldron also shows how it diverges from traditional bullying. Namely, cyberbullying inherits the nonstop and ever-present character of social media, thereby extending its reach and its toxicity.

The volume closes with “Tweens, Cyberbullying, and Moral Reasoning: Separating the Upstanders from the Bystanders” by Erhardt Graeff. Based on in-depth interviews with middle school students in the United States, Graeff develops a typology to measure how students react to scenarios involving online bullying. Taking an inductive, data-driven approach, he asks tweens to react to two hypothetical scenarios of digital abuse. Their responses form the basis of Graeff’s identification of three types of upstander and five types of bystander, along with five thinking processes that led participants to react in those different ways. Most important, Graeff introduces the concept of what he calls “upstanders.” In his words: “Upstanders were more likely than bystanders to think through a scenario using high-order moral reasoning processes like disinterested perspective-taking. Moral reasoning, emotions, and contextual factors, as well as participant gender and home school district, all appeared to play a role in determining how participants responded to cyberbullying scenarios.” Graeff’s work has important implications for policy and approaches to digital ethics education.

In closing, the authors in this volume make valuable contributions to the rapidly growing body of work on youth and new media. Two contributions highlight how college students are adapting to digital communication opportunities. Lampinen, Lehtinen, and Cheshire reveal how youth may choose to employ older technologies as a means of identity work signaling prowess. Platt, Bourdeaux, and DiTunnariello emphasize young people’s adaptations to varying technology preferences associated with intergenerational gaps. Other chapters deepen our understanding of how youth today face intensified versions of longstanding problems, as well as confronting challenges distinctive to the digital age. Lutz, Ranzini, and Meckel show that while teens have long coped with the incessant demand for social contact, the omnipresence of social media heightens the stress associated with constant demands for identity work. Turner’s article discloses the unexpected payoffs of gaming as a leisure activity capable of stimulating interest in STEM careers. Showing both costs and benefits for different populations, Cotten, Davison, Shank, and Ward indicate the need to potentially re-evaluate our assumptions about the Internet as a vehicle of social reproduction. Across these pieces of research, the contributions highlight the reciprocal relationship between transformations in media technologies and changes in modes of behavior among youth.

In parallel, four other articles identify emergent social problems and offer solutions to them. Aikat turns our attention to the content of online advertising targeting children and how it may be used to enhance or detract from children’s well-being. Waddell, McLaughlin, Larose, and Rifon offer an intervention designed to mitigate high school students’ vulnerabilities to online threats. Waldron advances our understanding of the ways in which cyberbullying becomes sensationalized as a moral panic by the media outlets that simultaneously oversimplify needed solutions. Finally, Graeff offers fresh insights into the moral reasoning processes implicated in various responses to cyberbullying, particularly upstanders’ choice to confront and oppose cyberbullying.

Across the nine pieces, authors grapple with important questions about the promises and pitfalls of coming of age in an increasingly digitized world. We hope that Volume 8 of the

*Communication and Information Technologies Annual, Doing and Being Digital: Mediated Childhoods* will stimulate further scholarship on these timely issues.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Debashis 'Deb' Aikat for his template.