VISUAL REVIEW | Vol. 18, No. 8, 2026 | ISSN 2695-9631

International Visual Culture Review / Revista Internacional de Cultura Visual

https://doi.org/10.62161/revvisual.v18.6481

CHILDREN'S DIGITAL IDENTITY IN VISUAL ENVIRONMENTS

Representations, affectivity, and performativity on TikTok, YouTube Kids, and gaming platforms

MARIO GRANDE DE PRADO
mgrap@unileon.es
ROBERTO BAELO ÁLVAREZ
rbaea@unileon.es
DANIELA COLORADO OROZCO
dcolo@unileon.es
Universidad de León, España

KEYWORDS

Visual Identity
Digital Childhood
Social Media
Media Literacy
Digital Platforms
Digital Literacy

ABSTRACT

Children's digital identity is not a transferable individual trait, but rather a subjectivity produced differentially by platform-specific visual and algorithmic regimes. Through visual analysis of 232 pieces of children's content on TikTok, YouTube Kids, and Roblox, divergent configurations of corporeality, performativity, affectivity, and agency are identified. The findings show that platforms do not mediate pre-existing childhoods but rather govern the conditions of children's visibility and recognition. The construct of the visual child subject is proposed to conceptualize digital childhood as constitutively mediated, fragmented, and algorithmically governed.

Received: 12/ 07 / 2026
Accepted: 30/ 10 / 2026

1. Introduction

The construction of childhood identity has undergone a substantial transformation in recent decades, shifting from developing mainly in face-to-face and analogue spaces to unfolding in environments deeply mediated by digital technologies (Mascheroni et al., 2020; Livingstone, 2021). This shift involves not only the incorporation of new tools, but also a reconfiguration of the spaces where children interact, represent themselves, and recognise themselves as social subjects. Visual platforms such as TikTok, YouTube Kids, and games with customisable avatars have established themselves as cultural spaces where contemporary children practise forms of self-representation, emotional expression, and identity construction daily.

Access to these platforms is occurring at increasingly younger ages: European studies have already shown that, around 2020, a significant proportion of children aged 9 to 11 were using social media daily (Smahel et al., 2020; Rose & Middling, 2025). In an ecosystem dominated by visual languages, visual literacy is shifting from being a complementary skill to becoming a core capacity for social participation and self-configuration (Schwarz, 2025). The socialisation of children and adolescents increasingly takes place in digital environments (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Tan, 2021), characterised by algorithmic mediation, permanent recording, and potentially public reach. These features transform children's self-expression: when representing themselves, minors do so with the awareness, even if implicit, that their images are persistent, traceable, and visible to multiple audiences (Boyd, 2014). This condition reconfigures the psychological, social, and cultural processes involved in identity construction (Soh, 2024).

1.1. Theoretical framework: digital identity, performativity, visual grammar, and research gaps

Recent literature has established digital identity as a relevant field of study. Research in the sociology of childhood, developmental psychology, and digital communication has shown that minors construct specifically digital identity narratives, sometimes in tension and sometimes in complementarity with their offline identities (Livingstone, 2021; Mascheroni et al., 2021). On platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, they manage multiple accounts, experiment with different versions of themselves, and use these spaces as laboratories for identity exploration (Bolaños et al., 2024).

Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) has been adapted to the analysis of digital identities, emphasising that gender is the effect of a stylised repetition of acts and not the expression of an inner essence. This framework is useful for understanding how individuals, including minors, perform versions of themselves in digital environments that often diverge from those they activate in face-to-face contexts (Boyd, 2014). Digital performativity is based on image control, content curation, and editing, giving users a degree of agency over their representation that differs qualitatively from face-to-face interaction (McGill, 2022).

In parallel, the multimodal analysis and visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) offer robust tools for examining how images communicate meaning through structures analogous to verbal language. In the case of childhood, this visual grammar is crucial given that children are exposed from an early age to sophisticated visual representations on digital platforms, while their ability to analyse them critically remains limited, highlighting a gap between exposure and critical competence (Chaudhary & Singh, 2024).

On an emotional level, evidence suggests that social media has an ambivalent impact on children's emotional well-being. On the one hand, it provides spaces for personal expression, relationship building, reinforcement of group identities, and the search for belonging, especially among those who have less support in their immediate environment (Livingstone, 2019). On the other hand, continuous exposure to social ideals, pressure for validation through popularity indicators, and the dynamics of social comparison are associated with anxiety, low self-esteem, and feelings of exclusion (Boyd, 2014; Livingstone, 2025). Recent studies emphasise that the

quality of interactions, rather than the total time spent online, is decisive for children's emotional experience (Livingstone, 2025).

Despite the increase in studies on children's digital identity, key gaps remain: a focus on generalist networks (Instagram, TikTok) and adolescents, with little systematic comparison of visual ecosystems differentiated by architecture and participation (Allué, 2024): TikTok (viral dynamics, short formats), YouTube Kids (curated environment, limited interactivity) and avatar games (experimental representation distanced from the physical body). Quantitative studies with limited samples or verbal qualitative analyses predominate, with few triangulating systematic content analysis, visual grammar, and reflective thematic analysis on non-verbal visual corpora (Krippendorff, 2018; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, there is a lack of situated analysis of Spanish-speaking cultural productions that incorporate specific local references.

This research responds by filling these gaps with empirical evidence on self-representation, performativity, and affectivity in children's visual contexts, proposing a triangulated methodology that is rare in Spanish American literature. It provides input for early media literacy and public policies that recognise children's agency without pathologizing their digital participation, positioning minors as active producers of meaning in contemporary visual spaces (Ministry of Equality & Secretariat of State for Children and Adolescents, 2025).

2. Objectives

The overall purpose of this study is to analyse the construction of children's digital identities in three different visual ecosystems, TikTok, YouTube Kids, and gaming platforms with customisable avatars, examining patterns of self-representation, performativity, affectivity, and discourses on childhood in Spanish-language content aimed at minors.

Specifically, the research seeks to:

SO1. Characterise patterns of visual self-representation in the three ecosystems, identifying visible markers of identity and their divergences/convergences between platforms.

SO2. Analyse performativity and affectivity in visual content, examining how minors act out versions of themselves and negotiate emotions through digital visual languages.

SO3. Examine discourses on childhood crystallised in the materials, identifying narratives, aspirations, modelled values, and their relationship with dominant conceptions of childhood.

SO4. Conceptualise the "child visual subject" as a product of the triangulation between self-representation, performativity, and discourse in algorithmically mediated visual spaces.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-interpretative approach focused on the systematic analysis of visual representations of childhood in three digital ecosystems. The research is not an experimental study with human subjects who are minors, but rather a thematic analysis of public cultural-digital artefacts (Krippendorff, 2018), following a qualitative visual research paradigm that recognises how images and digital media construct meanings about childhood identity, performativity, and affectivity (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Buckingham, 2011).

The research implements a triangulation of three complementary methodologies: systematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns in visual variables (Krippendorff, 2018); visual grammar to examine how composition, modality, and gaze direction encode meanings about power, vulnerability, and childhood agency (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020); and flexible thematic analysis to synthesise emerging patterns and integrate theoretical frameworks during coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This triangulation allows us to simultaneously capture the systematic dimension of distributed patterns and the interpretative dimension of discourses on childhood circulating on digital platforms.

3.1. Operationalisation of Analytical Dimensions

The analysis is organised around three operational dimensions—self-representation, performativity, and affectivity—that emerge from the interaction between the above theoretical frameworks. Each dimension was operationalised through a two-level coding protocol, allowing for the simultaneous capture of descriptive qualitative richness and systematised thematic synthesis (Table 1)[1].

Table 1. Operationalisation of analytical dimensions in two levels of coding

Analytical Dimension	Level 1: Primary Qualitative Coding	Level 2: Systematised Thematic Synthesis
Identity	Type of bodily representation (natural, hybrid, avatar); visible characteristics of gender, ethnicity, age, class; inductive discourses on identity construction; analysis of filters/editing as layers of mediation.	Type of Representation, Degree of Mediation, Mode of Identity, Identity Stability, Identity Base.
Performativity	Detailed description of actions, roles, gestures, interactions; typology of performance (theatrical, playful, imitative, every day, heroic); identification of scripting vs. spontaneity; analysis of intergenerational power (Corsaro, 1992; Butler, 1990).	Type Performativity, Degree Scripting, Adult Role, Child Agency, Power Relationship.
Affectivity	Emotional valence (positive, negative, mixed); intensity of affective expression; colour palette; visual atmosphere; strategies of emotivity or vulnerability; analysis of music/sound as an affective component.	Emotional Valencia, Emotional Intensity, Dominant Discourse.

Source(s): Own work, 2026.

In Level 1, each element of the corpus was described in detail using descriptive variables that preserve context and nuances (narrative description, type of bodily representation, observed performativity, affective valence, and inductive discourses on childhood emerging from the analysis). At Level 2, these qualitative analyses were systematically recoded using thematic variables that facilitate comparative analysis between platforms (type of representation, degree of technological mediation, identity stability, child agency, degree of scripting, mode of performativity, power relations, affective valence and intensity, dominant discourse). This two-level structure allows subsequent researchers to verify interpretations by consulting Level 1 descriptions without access to original content, ensuring traceability and analytical reproducibility.

3.2. Corpus and Differentiated Sampling by Platform

The total corpus comprises 232 visual elements distributed across three media ecosystems, with differentiated sampling strategies to adjust to the architecture of each platform and capture relatively stable patterns rather than ephemeral phenomena.

The complete corpus, together with the Level 1 analytical descriptions and the Level 2 thematic variable matrix used for systematic recoding, is deposited in open access in Zenodo, ensuring

[1] Level 1 preserves contextual complexity and allows for inductive discursive analysis, integrating theoretical frameworks at the time of coding. Level 2 transforms rich narrative descriptions into comparable thematic variables, facilitating distributional analysis without losing qualitative grounding. Each Level 2 assignment is justifiable with Level 1 evidence. Operationalisation follows Braun & Clarke's (2006) protocol phases 1-5 (familiarisation, initial coding, thematic search, review, theme definition).

analytical traceability and replicability of the study, available at: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18449290

TikTok (n=112): The most widely circulated videos published between January and December 2025, identified using Exolyt (TikTok trend analysis platform), were analysed. Up to 50 videos were evaluated in the ranking of the most viewed in each of nine relevant hashtags on childhood and family dynamics, generating an initial pool of 396 reels. Applying theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a maximum of 18 videos per hashtag were selected that met the following criteria: ≥10 million views (indicator of mass relevance), predominantly Spanish language, presence of minors as main subjects of action, and explicit thematic relationship with at least one analytical dimension. Final corpus: 112 videos (inclusion rate 28%), excluding adult-centric nostalgic content, non-original clips, non-living representations (Reborn dolls), animation, AI-generated content, and older adolescents (13+) as protagonists.

YouTube Kids (n=60): The three channels with the highest number of subscribers in the "Made for Kids" category were selected: Vlad and Niki, Kids Diana Show, and Like Nastya, identified using Social Blade. Although these channels are not Spanish-speaking in origin, their coverage in Spanish-speaking contexts is massive: each video reaches >100 million views, includes professionally dubbed versions in Spanish, and illustrates transnational dynamics of child consumption where Spanish-speaking minors access imaginaries produced from the commercial logic of the Global North. The 20 most-viewed videos from each channel (n=60 total) were analysed, ensuring access to content of maximum relevance. The predominantly animated channel Cocomelon was excluded to maintain the focus on real children acting on screen.

Roblox (n=60): Items from the official Marketplace were analysed in four aesthetic categories: full bodies, clothing, accessories, and expression animations, selected according to maximum preference criteria (all-time "likes") (n = 15 per category). Given that the Marketplace is not regionally segmented, this strategy allows us to observe processes of transnational standardisation of connected childhood and the appropriation, by Spanish-speaking minors, of aesthetic imaginaries produced mainly in the Global North.

All materials had to meet cross-cutting inclusion criteria: public and accessible content, clear visual presence of minors or avatars representing them as main subjects, access to a Spanish version or maximum Spanish-speaking distribution, explicit and non-ironic thematic relationship with at least one analytical dimension. Materials were excluded where childhood was a discursive theme without visual representation, compilations of old products without current characters acting as subjects, and exclusively adult content using children's spaces as a metaphor.

3.3. Qualitative Analysis Protocol and Theoretical Integration

Following initial coding (Level 1, n = 232), a four-step analysis protocol inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflective thematic analysis was implemented. Each item was described following a standard structure: scene identification (participants, context), systematic visual analysis based on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) visual grammar, examination of composition, colour, lighting, gaze direction, and technological mediation, analysis of action and performativity from Butler (1990), and evaluation of platform-user mediation (Buckingham, 2011).

During the drafting of the descriptions, inductive codes emerged on discourses of childhood ("childhood as entertainment," "vulnerable child in need of care," "digitally native childhood," "normalisation of mild violence," "commodified childhood," "resilient/empowered childhood"). These codes were articulated with theoretical frameworks incorporated from the coding phase: Corsaro (1992) for power negotiation and peer culture, Butler (1990) for iterative performativity, and James & Prout (2015) for child agency, ensuring that theory guided the identification of patterns from the outset. After coding approximately 20% of the corpus (n = 46), a cross-sectional review was conducted, confirming the stability of the codes, their mutual exclusivity, and consistency in the application of the theoretical frameworks, as well as their descriptive sufficiency for subsequent thematic recoding.

3.4. Systematic Recoding and Distributional Analysis

Once the descriptive analysis was complete, systematic recoding was carried out using a standardised synthesis protocol. Each item was assigned a value in each of the Level 2 thematic variables, derived directly from the Level 1 descriptions, so that every decision could be justified with textual evidence. For variables with categorical scales (e.g., Low/Medium/High; Asymmetrical/Negotiated/Dominant), operational criteria were defined and applied to the entire corpus. In the case of child agency, for example, a distinction was made between: Low (the child carries out orders without modifying them and appears passive), Medium (actively participates within adult parameters, introducing minor variations), and High (redefines the situation, transgresses or establishes their own terms to which the adult adapts). This systematisation made it possible to calculate frequency distributions by platform and identify differential patterns.

3.5. Reliability validation and ethical considerations

The reliability of qualitative coding was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha, an inter-coder agreement coefficient that controls for randomness and applies to different levels of measurement and numbers of coders (Krippendorff, 2018). A stratified validation sample (n = 46, 20% of the corpus) was selected with proportional representation by platform (TikTok n = 22, YouTube n = 13, Roblox n = 11), and two theoretically critical variables were coded independently: Child Agency and Power Relationship. The results showed excellent agreement: Child Agency (α = 0.912, agreement = 91%) and Power Relationship (α = 0.875, agreement = 89%), both above the threshold of 0.80 usually considered acceptable in qualitative studies with complex coding. Disagreements, concentrated in borderline cases (especially in the distinction between medium and high agency), were resolved through consensual review and refinement of the operational definitions prior to analysis of the entire corpus.

All the content analysed was public, accessed without interaction with minors, and the study complies with current regulatory frameworks on data protection and child privacy, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European context and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) in the US context.

The study does, however, have several limitations. Inter-coder reliability using Krippendorff's alpha was calculated for only two of the 15 thematic variables, chosen for their theoretical centrality; the remaining variables were coded exclusively by the principal investigator, which is particularly relevant in the case of affectivity variables, which are more susceptible to interpretative subjectivity. On YouTube, the deliberate exclusion of predominantly animated content (such as Cocomelon) focuses the analysis on the self-representation of real minors but limits the possibility of drawing conclusions about fictional representations of childhood. On Roblox, the selection using "all-time favourites" captures enduring aesthetic imaginaries rather than specific trends in 2025, which restricts inferences about contemporary childhood and is more suitable for interpreting processes of symbolic standardisation. Finally, the study analyses public visual representations rather than children's experiences, psychological impacts or preferences; its findings refer to how platforms construct and visualise certain childhood subjects, not how these are experienced or appropriated by children in their everyday lives.

4. Results

The analysis of 232 visual elements distributed across three platforms reveals fundamentally different configurations around how children present themselves physically to digital audiences. Far from there being a single way of "appearing" childlike on the internet, we identified three physical regimes that operate according to specific logics per platform, responding to different technical architectures and dissimilar visual economies.

4.1. Children's Visual Self-Representation: Patterns of Bodily Mediation

The first analytical axis observed in Table 2 examines how children choose or are placed in positions of visual representation and what degree of technological mediation characterises each representation (SO1).

Table 2. Type of bodily representation

Type of Representation	n Total	% Total	TikTok (n=112)	%	YouTube (n=60)	%	Roblox (n=60)	%
Natural Physical Body	138	59.48	109	97.32	29	48.33%	0	0
Hybrid Representation	34	14.66%	3	2.68	31	51.67%	0	0
Pure Avatar (3D)	60	25.86%	0	0	0	0	60	100
Total	232	100	112	100%	60	100	60	100

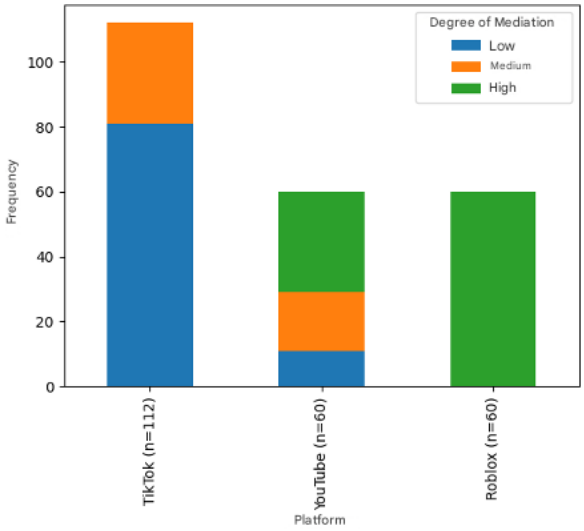
Source(s): Own work, 2026.

The distribution reveals three alternative models of childhood corporeality that operate according to platform-specific logics. TikTok privileges bodily self-representation "as such," with minors filmed in real contexts, without formal mediation of visual effects, consolidating a model of immediate bodily presence. In contrast, YouTube Kids adopts a strategy of visual hybridisation: 51.6% of content incorporates physical bodies in highly edited environments, with the application of filters, colour effects, cinematic framing, and superimposed text that adds interpretative layers to the body image. Roblox, for its part, eliminates real body representation, replacing it with algorithmically generated 3D avatars that operate as dehumanised graphic abstractions.

Complementary to the body type analysis, in Figure 1, we examine how much formal technological mediation marks each representation[2]. "Low" mediation corresponds to mobile recording without formal editing (typical TikTok); "medium" mediation includes editing with smooth transitions, added music, integrated sound effects; "high" mediation reflects multi-process production (professional recording, multi-layer editing, colour grading, chroma key, or, in Roblox, full algorithmic rendering).

[2] The figure shows the absolute frequency of observations by level of mediation (low, medium, high) across all platforms. Sample sizes differ by platform (TikTok n = 112; YouTube n = 60; Roblox n = 60); therefore, comparisons should be interpreted in terms of distribution patterns rather than proportional equivalence.

Figure 1. Degree of technological mediation



Source(s): Own work, 2026

The data show a clear correlation: platforms that maintain real body representation (TikTok, YouTube) diverge significantly in their degree of mediation. TikTok concentrates on low-mediation content, operating a "direct capture" aesthetic that favours the illusion of immediacy: the viewer "sees the child without intermediaries". Examples such as T3 (child giving the middle finger in the shower), T5 (child dancing with adults in a square), or T9 (girl and doll at Ash Wednesday mass) maintain simple framing, natural or available light, without sophisticated post-editing. Mediation exists, but it is hidden; it is the platform architecture (video length, aspect ratio, recommendation algorithm) rather than explicit visual intervention.

YouTube Kids reverses that balance with a higher percentage of content featuring high technological mediation. The 60 videos from the three YouTube channels analysed show how children are constantly surrounded by effects: speed lines accompanying actions, transitions that blur the boundaries between scenes, intensified colours, music that anticipates emotions. Y1 (building a house with ice cream) shows multiple frames, changes in perspective, and superimposed text that guides the narration, all of which reveal a professional production team working behind the scenes. Significantly, this high level of mediation coincides with a search for "entertainment quality": the child is not respected as an authority over their own image but is integrated into an audiovisual product where each frame is optimised for maximum emotional and visual impact.

Roblox, by architectural definition, operates with maximum mediation (100%): there is no real body, only rendered code. However, the mediation experience for the child user is paradoxical: although technologically everything is processed, the child feels that they are playing without mediation, that their avatar responds directly to their inputs without visible intermediaries. The screen offers the illusion of "direct control," even though every movement is being transformed by a real-time graphics engine. This illusion of non-mediation is, paradoxically, the highest level of technological mediation.

During the Level 1 qualitative analysis, repetitive patterns emerged regarding how children's identity is narratively constructed, regardless of the type of bodily representation. These codes respond specifically to SO3 (discourses on childhood).

This reveals a platform-specific discursive ecosystem. TikTok concentrates narratives of entertainment, transgression, and vulnerability, configuring childhood as a paradoxical space where the child is simultaneously a generator of laughter, an agent of comic resistance, and occasionally a subject of moralised compassion. YouTube privileges talented and normative childhood, emphasising aspiration and conformity to structure. Roblox shows a more balanced distribution, although with additional emphasis on avatars as figures of power (albeit sparsely coded in explicit discursive terms).

4.2. Performativity and Affectivity: Performance, Emotion, and Power Relations

Performativity, understood not as "false acting" but as the production of identity through repeated acts (Butler, 1990), constitutes the second analytical axis of the study. Complementarily, we explore the affective dimension: what emotions are constructed, intensified, or modulated on each platform, and how those emotions are articulated with power relations between adults and children. The analysis reveals that the three platforms not only show children who are physically different, but also make them act in radically different ways, producing divergent emotional economies and configurations of agency.

The qualitative analysis identified four types of performativity that recur in the corpus[3], each with specific internal logics and platform-differentiated distributions, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of types of performativity by ecosystem

Type of performativity	TikTok (n=112) n	TikTok (%)	YouTube Kids (n=60) n	YouTube Kids (%)	Roblox (n=60) n	Roblox (%)	Total (n=232) n	Total (%)
Performing arts	28	25.0	20	33.3	0	0	48	20.7
Recreational	13	11.6%	14	23.3%	0	0	27	11.6
Imitative	21	18.8	14	23.3	0	0	35	15.1%
Daily	50	44.6	12	20.0	0	0	62	26.7
Default avatar behaviour	0	0	0	0	60	100	60	25.9
Total	112	100	60	100%	60	100	232	100

Source(s): Own work, 2026.

Performative acting refers to formal performances in which the child explicitly positions themselves as the performer of a show directed at an audience. The child "knows they are being watched" and organises their body, voice, and gestures according to that recognition. In T1, the girl named "Chicharrón" in front of the circus audience exemplifies this mode: she stands in front of the microphone, responding to the clown-host, playing the role of a "winning player" with an upright posture and looking at the audience. On YouTube, Y22 shows children performing rehearsed choreography with specific costumes, planned transitions, and moments of "posing for the camera" that evidence professional scripting. Scenic performativity predominates on YouTube (20/60) over TikTok (28/112), suggesting that professional production intensifies the formalisation of the performative act.

Playful performativity describes performances where play, not spectacle, organises the action. The child does not perform "to be seen" but "to play," even if that playful activity is captured and distributed. In T11, the nephews chasing their aunt with banknotes are not acting for the camera: they are playing, competing, running. The camera records but does not direct. On YouTube, playful performativity takes on a paradoxical character: Y1 and Y4 show children "playing" at building ice cream houses or chasing objects, but the game is completely scripted, with predetermined action times, rehearsed dialogues, and planned narrative resolutions. It is a performed game, not a

[3] The percentages in each cell represent the percentage of that type of performativity within each platform (not of the overall total). The totals in the last row add up to 100% within each platform. The categories Scenic, Playful, Imitative, and Everyday apply only to TikTok and YouTube Kids (where there is human performance). Roblox does not feature these categories by architectural definition: avatar behaviours are predetermined by code, not iterative human performativity according to Butler (1990).

captured game. This mode is the most frequent on YouTube (51.85%), where commercial children's entertainment is typically structured as a "playful adventure" in which children star under adult direction.

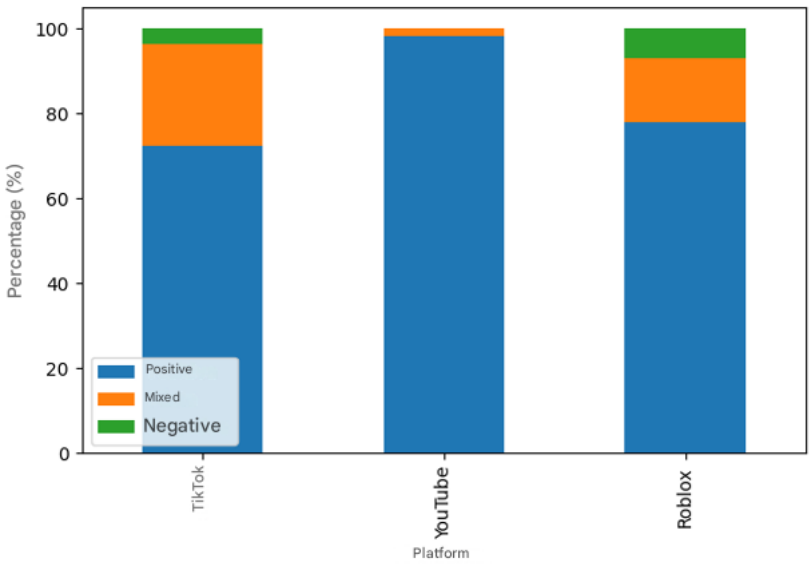
Imitative performativity refers to performances where the child replicates previous models: viral trends, other users' choreography, celebrity gestures, or established content patterns. In T3, the child who gives the middle finger in the shower is referencing a trend he already knows, according to the description, "because he has seen the challenge on TikTok," executing his own version of a pre-existing format. In T10, the 3-year-old child who names characters from "Italian Brainrot" performs memetic knowledge: his performance consists of demonstrating that he has mastered a digital cultural code. Imitative performativity is particularly visible on TikTok, where the architecture of "trends" and "sounds" encourages replication with variation. However, theoretically, all performativity is to some degree imitative: as Butler (2004) argues, acts of identity are always citations of previous norms, never creations ex nihilo.

Everyday performativity describes actions where the child does not seem to be acting at all: eating, sleeping, crying, walking, and doing household chores. What is captured is "ordinary life" without explicit narrative or spectacle. In T8, the hospitalised child hugging his stuffed animal is not playing a role: he is being patient, in the most literal sense. In T19, the girl who mistakenly hugs the wrong mother is not acting; she is reacting to genuine confusion. However, "everyday life" is also a construction: the adult filmmaker selects which moments to capture, how to frame them, what text to add. Everyday performativity is more common on TikTok than on YouTube, and almost non-existent as a pure category on Roblox, where every action of the avatar is necessarily acted out (there is no "everyday life" of an avatar; there are only commands executed).

The affective dimension: Mandatory positivity and its cracks

The analysis of affective valence reveals a finding that, although predictable, deserves theoretical interpretation: 80.6% of the corpus presents positive emotional valence. Children on these platforms appear predominantly happy, laughing, playing, and celebrating. TikTok reaches 72% positivity, YouTube 98%, and Roblox, despite its avatar abstraction, maintains 78% positive valence. This can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Distribution of affective valence by platform



Source(s): Own work, 2026.

This data should not be read as a description of children's "real emotional lives," but rather as a regime of affective visibility that platforms encourage and adults execute. Positivity is a condition of virality: content that generates pleasant emotions (tenderness, laughter, admiration) circulates more than content that makes people uncomfortable. Recommendation algorithms

reward positive engagement; parents and creators select "cute" or "funny" moments to post; audiences validate what makes them feel good with likes and shares. The result is an affective economy of compulsory positivity where digital childhood appears systematically cheerful.

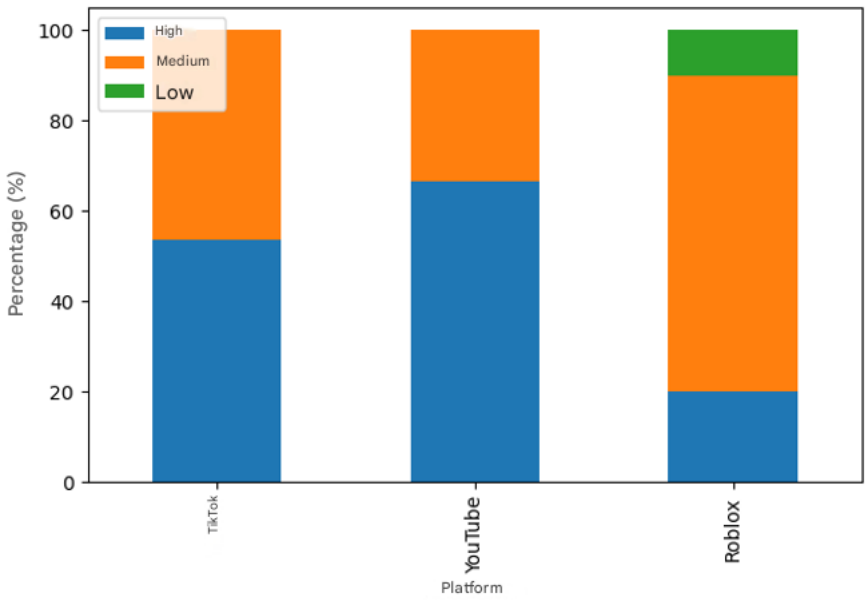
However, qualitative analysis reveals cracks in this regime. Sixteen per cent of content has mixed valence: emotions that combine positive and negative elements, often in narrative sequence. T6 exemplifies this structure: the child who says that his father "is in heaven" initially generates sadness, but the narrative twist ("he's a pilot") produces relief and laughter. Mixed emotion is not the absence of positivity but positivity that requires going through negativity: the viewer must feel concern to then experience relief. This pattern of "emotional roller coaster" is particularly common on TikTok, where the brevity of the format intensifies the emotional twists and turns.

The 3% of content with negative valence deserves special attention due to its exceptional nature. T8 (hospitalised child), T13 (children with weapons detained by police), and T54 (structural violence) present childhoods marked by suffering, illness, and criminalisation. This content does not seek to provoke laughter or tenderness, but rather compassion, indignation, or ethical reflection. Significantly, this negative content comes almost exclusively from TikTok and is associated with discourses of vulnerability or social denunciation. YouTube Kids, by curatorial design, excludes disturbing content; Roblox, due to its game logic, rarely presents narratives of genuine suffering (although it does present playful frustration).

Emotional intensity: Amplification as a strategy

Complementary to valence, we analysed the intensity with which emotions are constructed. Forty-eight per cent of the corpus presents high emotional intensity, while 49% reveals medium intensity: amplified, exaggerated emotions "for the camera." On TikTok, this intensification operates through sound editing (music that anticipates or emphasises emotions), textual editing (phrases such as "you won't believe what happened"), and gestural editing (magnified bodily reactions). On YouTube, the intensification is industrial: production teams design each moment for maximum emotional impact, with sound effects, saturated colours, and children's faces in close-up during moments of "revelation" or "surprise".

Figure 3. Distribution of emotional intensity by platform



Source(s): Own work, 2026.

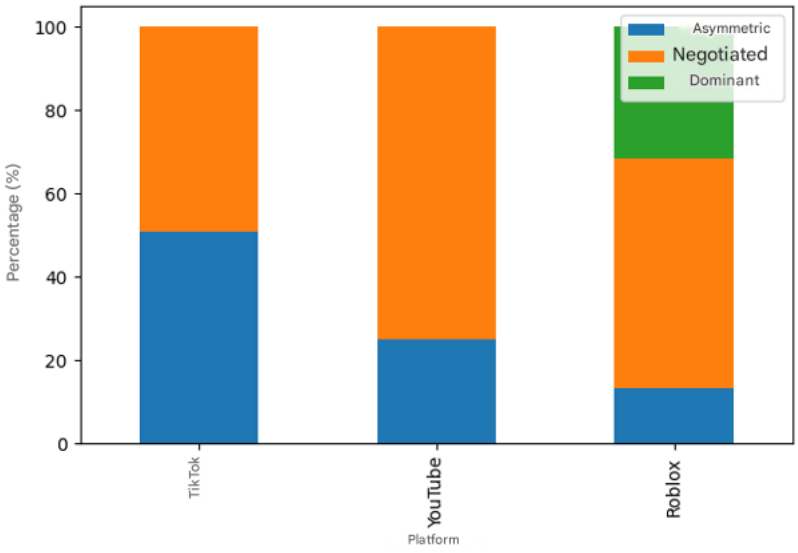
This amplification has theoretical consequences. If children's emotions on social media appear systematically intensified, what happens to the audience's ability to recognise "ordinary", unamplified children's emotions? The risk is emotional inflation where only the hyperbolic

registers as authentic, and where the "normal" tenderness of a child becomes invisible in the face of the "viral" tenderness of a child edited for maximum impact.

Power relations: Asymmetry, negotiation, and its limits

The analysis of the adult-child power relationship is shown in Figure 4 and is perhaps the most significant finding in this section: the distribution of power varies substantially by platform, suggesting that technical architectures and production models shape different possibilities for child agency.

Figure 4. Distribution of power relationships by platform



Source(s): Own work, 2026.

Overall, 34.48% of the corpus presents asymmetrical relationships: the adult directs, decides, controls; the child obeys, tolerates, executes. This pattern is particularly concentrated on TikTok (50.89%), while YouTube reduces it to 25% and Roblox to 13.33%. These cases are observed in sketches where children execute scripts written by adult creative teams.

However, 57.33% of the corpus presents negotiated relationships, the dominant modality in the sample: the child can resist, reverse, or modify the adult script. This distribution is relatively homogeneous across platforms: YouTube reaches 75%, TikTok 49.11%, and Roblox 55%. On TikTok, low technological mediation seems to correlate with greater space for child agency, although less than might be expected given the platform's supposed creative freedom. In T3, the child who gives the middle finger to the shower trend is not obeying; he is subverting adult expectations, using his knowledge of the trend to reverse the joke. In T7, the child who looks at his mother defiantly while holding up his middle finger is negotiating, through comic resistance, the limits of maternal authority. In T40, T41, and T49, children "refute" or "transgress" adult expectations linguistically and physically and are celebrated for doing so.

The dominant relationship category, where the child controls the situation and the adult yields, is exceptional (8.19%, n=19), but significantly concentrated in Roblox (31.67%), where it is completely absent in TikTok and YouTube. These cases deserve attention precisely because of this uneven distribution: they represent moments where children's agency manages to completely reconfigure the power dynamic, but this reconfiguration is structurally possible only in avatar-based gaming environments. In R12, R34, and similar platforms, children's avatars perform "euphoric" and "elastic" actions that transcend the limitations of real corporeality, exercising a form of dominance over the virtual space where the adult (often present but visually subordinate) operates as a spectator or assistant. This pattern suggests that agency is not independent of technical mediation: where the body is dematerialised into an avatar, power asymmetry is drastically reduced.

4.3. Integrated Dimensional Analysis: Platform-Specific Convergences and Divergences

To identify emerging patterns at the intersection of corporeality, performativity, affectivity, and power, an analysis of systematic co-occurrences between multidimensional variables was conducted. A pattern was defined as a combination where three or more dimensions repeatedly converge within a platform with a frequency ≥15%, proven theoretical coherence, and reproducibility in subsamples. This analysis identified four configurations that explain 65.7% of the variance observed in Table 4 and reveal that children's visual identity is not unitary but specifically mediated by technical architecture and platform economics.

Table 4. Integrated patterns

Pattern	Platform	% of cases	Corporeality	Performativity	Affectivity	Power	Dominant discourse
Corporate spectacle	YouTube	46.7	Hybrid/high mediation	Scripted stage performance	Intense positive	Asymmetrical	Talent/aspirational
Spontaneous virality	TikTok	40.2	Natural/low mediation	Everyday/imitative	Mixed	Negotiated	Entertainment
Avatarism Abstract	Roblox	58.3	Pure avatar	Elastic/interactive	Positive variable	Asymmetrical-structural	Heroic/digitally native
Moralised vulnerability	TikTok	16.1	Natural/low mediation	Everyday/passive	Mixed hopeful	Asymmetrical	Vulnerable/careful

Source(s): Own work, 2026.

The Child-Commodity: Corporate Spectacle on YouTube (46.7%)

YouTube produces a specific model where the real child's body is captured but immediately spectacularised. Children operate within professional sets, branded props, commercial costumes, studio lighting, executing pre-established scripts that fantasise about adult competition: the child chef, the miniature Batman, the domestic superhero.

The affective dimension is uniformly intensified: shouts of joy, exaggerated hugs, surprising revelations coded for maximum emotional response. Professional adults direct each take; the child's agency is limited to the execution of the assigned role. The affective economy that sustains this pattern is adoration: the audience consumes the fantasy of 'child prodigies' who dominate adult worlds through innate talent, naturalising a premise where real childhood physicality is subordinated to an optimised commercial narrative.

The visual identity produced is that of the "competent mini adult," a subject constructed as an entertainment product where the illusion of agency (the child appears to control the situation) masks their executive role in the adult script.

The Naughty Child and the Victim Child: Dualisms on TikTok (56.3%)

TikTok produces two distinct visual subjects emerging from the same platform, revealing that low technical mediation does not automatically produce a unified subject but rather multiple forms of capture and circulation.

Where YouTube spectacularises, TikTok captures. In cases such as the girl in "Chicharrón" (T1), the middle finger gesture in the shower trend (T3), the stealing of the limelight in the family dance (T5), or the pursuit of banknotes (T11), we observe moments where children subvert adult

expectations through spontaneous gestures, physical humour, or memetic literacy. The emotions are authentic—surprise, defiance, genuine laughter—without intensifying commercial optimisation. Adults film but tolerate, even celebrate, the childish resistance that goes viral precisely because of its "unscripted" nature.

The affective economy is *comic tenderness*: the audience identifies with children's ability to challenge norms through innocence. What circulates is the feeling of "filtered real life," authenticity captured as exchange value. The visual identity produced is that of the "endearing little rebel," a child who negotiates generational boundaries through humour and spontaneous creativity, exercising real, albeit limited, agency.

Simultaneously, TikTok hosts a second pattern where low mediation operates in reverse: not to capture resistance but to bear witness to suffering. Children in situations of real vulnerability, illness (T8), medical neglect (T15), exposure to violence (T13, T54), appear without visual artifice. Raw emotions (sadness, fear, resignation) without optimisation. Adults narrate and contextualise these vulnerabilities to provoke compassion or ethical outrage.

The affective economy is *structured compassion*: the audience is mobilised towards donations, moral reflection or political outrage. The authenticity of the testimony acts as a call to action. The visual identity is that of the "dignified child victim", reduced to physical suffering that demands adult or social intervention, with minimal agency where the child endures but does not transform their situation.

The Posthuman Child: Abstract Avatarism in Roblox (58.3%)

Roblox introduces a radical transformation: the elimination of corporeality as a visual variable. Children operate customised 3D avatars that perform movements impossible for real bodies, elastic jumps, extreme rotations, colour changes, coded gestures (G57-G58, G1-G20). Emotions are prefabricated in graphics engine animations, not embodied in real bodies. Agency as selection from a catalogue: children choose skins, customisations, worlds, but always within unchangeable algorithmic rules.

The affective economy is *synthetic euphoria*: the audience consumes the promise of absolute freedom and unlimited competition. Exchange value: personalisation as an expression of uniqueness within a catalogue. The visual identity produced is that of the "posthuman child", detached from real corporeality, constructed as a "digital self" with superhuman powers. Here we see an agency paradox: maximum control over the avatar's interface, zero control over its ontological architecture.

5. Discussion

Children's digital identity is not a unitary construct that can be transferred between platforms, but rather a platform-specific phenomenon co-determined by technical architectures and visual affordances. The configurations identified: natural body (TikTok), hybrid (YouTube Kids), and virtual (Roblox), constitute regimes of representation that delimit which forms of childhood are visible and amplified.

Following van Dijck (2013), platforms computationally encode social practices: TikTok privileges immediate mobile capture; YouTube Kids, professionalised production; Roblox, real-time avatarisation. From algorithmic recognisability (Gillespie, 2014, 2016), minors adjust their performances to visibility criteria: on TikTok, they internalise brevity and trends; on YouTube Kids, they negotiate adult expectations; on Roblox, the interface mediates intention and visualisation. Identity emerges as an effect of algorithmic governance rather than inner expression.

Butler's (1990) iterative performativity is inscribed in infrastructures that select and amplify acts, operating through feedback loops that monitor and modify behaviour (Zuboff, 2019). In childhood, this co-production is particularly opaque.

5.1. Visual-analytical asymmetry and capturing children's attention

The results deepen the asymmetry between early exposure to sophisticated visuality and limited critical capacity (Buckingham, 2019), derived from attention-grabbing design. From a visual grammar perspective (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020), YouTube Kids deploys cinematic compositions and sensorimotor sound design. Although the quality of interaction matters for well-being (Livingstone, Ólafsson, & Pothong, 2023), it is often orchestrated by adults through psychosensory manipulation.

It is also a matter of agency asymmetry: corporations know attention modulation mechanisms, while minors lack conceptual tools (Zuboff, 2019). In Spanish-speaking contexts, where digital access exceeds visual literacy, the gap widens; visual competence requires explicit pedagogy (Buckingham, 2023).

5.2. Differentiated regimes of agency and the emergence of the posthuman

TikTok allows for cultural reinterpretation through low scripting, although modulated algorithmically by opaque evaluative criteria (Gillespie, 2014). YouTube Kids configures negotiation within predefined adult narratives, approaching seductive discipline (Foucault, 1978) rather than peer culture, as reflected in high rates of asymmetrical relationships.

Roblox introduces a posthuman child agency by completely virtualising corporeality. Inspired by nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti, 2013), the child exists as intention, technical input, algorithmic avatar, and virtual identity, imposed by platform architecture. This inescapable mediation (Haraway, 2016) generates a paradox: a greater sense of control coincides with maximum capture. Avatars act as images with their own agency that demand customisation and economic action (Mitchell, 2005), partially subordinating children's agency and reconfiguring relationships between subject, image, and desire.

This challenges childhood theory: what does interpretive reproduction mean in relation to algorithmic representations disconnected from direct corporeality? Its implications for rights, consent, and digital protection are largely unexplored.

5.3. Platforms as technologies of visual normalisation

Platforms crystallise discourses on childhood through architecture and algorithms (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020): TikTok constructs the transgressive-entertaining child; YouTube Kids, the monetizable spectacle child; Roblox, the optimised posthuman child. These discourses regulate through visual repetition, naturalising desirable models and rendering others invisible, reproducing hierarchies of gender, race, and class (Nakamura, 2002; Noble, 2018). In Spanish-speaking contexts, alignment with narratives from the Global North predominates despite local hybridisations.

The triangulation of self-representation, performativity, and visual discourses defines the visual subject of childhood through constitutive technical mediation; algorithmically structured iterative performativity; hierarchies of visibility; fragmented agency; and platform-specificity. This construct requires interdisciplinary approaches that integrate technical analysis, visual studies, performativity, and situated discourses on childhood, overcoming psychological or normative approaches that are insufficient to capture its visual-algorithmic specificity.

6. Conclusions

This study shifts the understanding of children's digital identity from generalist approaches to a conceptualisation that recognises the platform as the central analytical unit. Children's identity is understood as a form of subjectivity produced differentially by specific visual and algorithmic regimes, rather than as an individual attribute or homogeneous phenomenon of 'the digital'.

The main contribution is not only to describe empirical variations between platforms, but to show that the algorithmic governance of children's visibility constitutes a structural mechanism to produce subjectivity: platforms do not merely mediate pre-existing expressions, but define the

conditions under which children can appear, be recognised, and acquire social value in digital environments. This differentiation is theoretically significant under the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen (2020): while TikTok preserves children's ability to "speak for their own corporeality" (albeit mediated by the platform), YouTube institutes a visual intermediation that adds adult interpretation to the body, and Roblox displaces the real body to a "digitised mirror" where the child interacts through non-corporeal representation. These three configurations produce three distinct economies of visibility and recognition.

Although the findings are limited to Spanish-language content and a specific period, the mechanisms identified are analytically transferable to other contexts and platform ecologies.

Limitations include inter-coder validation applied only to theoretically critical variables, the exclusion of certain types of content (such as animation, which is predominant on some YouTube channels), and a cultural scope that does not allow for cautious generalisation to contexts without significant local production. Even so, the study offers useful empirical evidence for designing platform-specific media literacy strategies, regulatory frameworks adjusted to the real dynamics of child visibility, and policies that recognise the agency of minors without pathologizing their digital participation.

Emerging visual phenomena are identified that fall outside the analytical framework but open future lines of research, such as the rise of content depicting simulated childhoods using artificially intelligent babies or hyper-realistic reborn babies treated discursively and emotionally as if they were real. These materials point to what can be understood as a post-representational childhood: a regime in which childhood circulates as an image, aesthetic, or affect detached from specific child bodies.

Exploring this post-representational turn will allow us to delve deeper into how platforms not only govern the visibility of childhood but also progressively produce "childhood without childhood," with implications for visual theory, childhood studies, and digital protection policies. Combining visual-discursive approaches with digital ethnography, political analysis of algorithmic design, and longitudinal studies of identity trajectories can help us move from describing the visual subjects produced by platforms to understanding how children navigate, appropriate, negotiate, and resist these constructions. Recognising digital childhood as a deeply mediated form of subjectivity, rather than an impoverished version of offline childhood, is a necessary condition for rigorously addressing the contemporary challenges of agency, visibility, and recognition of children.

7. Acknowledgements

This study was made possible thanks to funding from the University of León's own research grant programme for doctoral studies.

References

Allué, M. M., & Cárdaba, M. Á. M. (2024). “Kidfluencers.” Visual Review, 16(5), 261–270. https://doi.org/10.62161/revvisual.v16.5301

Boyd, D. (2014). *It's complicated: the social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press. https://www.danah.org/books/ItsComplicated.pdf

Braidotti, R. (2013). The posthuman. Polity Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bolaños, A. M. R., Noreña, S. M. R., & Santacoloma, J. G. (2024). La socialización de niños y niñas en la era digital. Antecedentes investigativos 2018-2023. *Aletheia, Revista de Desarrollo Humano Educativo y Social Contemporaneo*, *16 No.2 Dossier*(2145–0366), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.11600/ale.v16i2.797

Buckingham, D. (2011). *The material child: growing up in consumer culture*. Polity Press.

Buckingham, D. (2019). The media education manifesto. Polity Press.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.

Chaudhary, M., & Singh, R. P. (2024). Demographic influences on children's media exposure and advertising literacy. *ShodhKosh Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, 5*(4). https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i4.2024.3287

Corsaro, W. A. (1992). Interpretive Reproduction in Children's Peer Cultures. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *55*(2), 160–177. https://doi.org/10.2307/2786944

Foucault, M. (1978). Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books. (Original work published 1975)

Gillespie, T. (2014). The relevance of algorithms. In T. Gillespie, P. J. Boczkowski, & K. A. Foot (Eds.), Media technologies: Essays on communication, distribution, and difference (pp. 167–194). MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262525374.003.0009

Gillespie, T. (2016). Algorithmically recognizable: Santorum's Google problem, and Google's Santorum problem. Information, Communication & Society, 20(1), 63–80. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1199721

Haraway, D. J. (2016). Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373780

James, A., & Prout, A. (Eds.). (2015). Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315745008

Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2020). Reading images: The grammar of visual design (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003099857

Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: an introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781

Livingstone, S. (2019). Children's rights in digital safety and design. In K. Sharkey (Ed.), *Children's rights in digital contexts* (pp. 155–178). Routledge.

Livingstone, S. (2021). Parenting for a digital future: How hopes and fears about technology shape children's lives. *Oxford Review of Education, 47*(4), 500–519. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2021.1978674

Livingstone, S. (2025). Can platform literacy protect vulnerable young people? *New Media & Society, 27*(3), 445–462. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2025.2518254

Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K., & Pothong, K. (2023). Digital play on children's terms: A child rights approach to designing digital experiences. *New Media & Society*, *27*(3), 1465-1485. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231196579 (Original work published 2025)

Livingstone, S., & Helsper, E. (2008). Parental mediation of children's internet use. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 52*(4), 581–599. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838150802437396

Mascheroni, G., Jorge, A., & Farné, A. (Eds.). (2021). *Digital parenting: the challenges for families in the digital age*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Mascheroni, G., Murru, M. F., & Baskerville, R. F. (2020). Digital skills, risks and wellbeing among European children: Report on (f)actors that explain online acquisition, cognitive, physical, psychological and social well-being. EU Kids Online. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4267976

McGill, M. (2022). "Do I really look like that?": Unpacking discourses of control and discursive and visual dissonances in young women's selfie-practices. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2150671

Ministerio de Igualdad & Secretaría de Estado de Infancia y Adolescencia. (2025). Vamos a proteger la identidad digital de los niños y las niñas: Consulta pública del "Estatuto Digital de la Infancia" https://www.juventudeinfancia.gob.es/es/comunicacion/notas-prensa/rego-anuncia-normativa-regular-sharenting-vamos-proteger-identidad

Mitchell, W. J. T. (2005). What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images. University of Chicago Press.

Nakamura, L. (2002). Cybertypes: Race, ethnicity, and identity on the internet. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203699188

Noble, S. U. (2018). Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism. NYU Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pwt9w5

Rose, S. E., & Middling, L. R. (2025). Preteens social media use: Parents' and children's perceptions of what mediation approaches are used and why. *British Journal of Development Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12552

Schwarz, C. L. (2025). Postdigital visual literacy: Visual entanglements and dynamic learning processes in art education. *American Journal of STEM Education*, *14*, 49-58. https://doi.org/10.32674/n3gdq406

Shabankhani, B., Saeedi, M., Delpisheh, A., & Montazeri, A. (2020). Survey of agreement between raters for nominal data using Krippendorff's Alpha coefficient. *Journal of Modern Applied Statistical Methods*, *19*(1), 1–15. https://archivepp.com/article/survey-of-agreement-between-raters-for-nominal-data-using-krippendorffs-alpha

Smahel, D., Machackova, H., Mascheroni, G., Dedkova, L., Staksrud, E., Ólafsson, K., Livingstone, S., & Hasebrink, U. (2020). EU Kids Online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries. EU Kids Online. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/104981

Soh, S., Talaifar, S., & Harari, G. M. (2024). Identity development in the digital context. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12940

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory procedures and techniques*. SAGE Publications.

Tan, S. (2021). Childhood in the age of digital culture. *Youth Theatre Journal*, *35*(1–2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2020.1824950

van Dijck, J. (2013). The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199970773.001.0001

Zuboff, S. (2019). The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power. PublicAffairs.