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Behind the Screens

Essays on Digital Media, Children and Families

Daniel Dahl



Behind the Screens

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Daniel Dahl

Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Thursday 21 May 2026 at 13.00 in Hörsal 7, Södra huset D, Universitetsvägen 10D.

Abstract

Digital media are an integral part of our lives. Mobile phones, computers and tablets are regularly used by young and old for entertainment, relaxation, work, school work, communication and a range of other tasks. Varied public responses to digital media use range from enthusiasm to concern, especially when it comes to children and adolescents. Amidst these reactions, core sociological questions about how digital practices are woven into the social fabric have been left unanswered.

This dissertation investigates how digital media are embedded in the lives of children and adolescents, their families, and the broader social worlds they inhabit. I use a multi-methods approach to study digital media use by employing survey data linked to Swedish administrative registers, and interviews with parents of children who use digital media. This dissertation consists of three single-authored articles, each studying different angles of the digital media lives of children and adolescents.

Study I uses the Swedish Kids and Media survey to examine the relationship between gaming, social media use and socioeconomic background. While prior research has emphasized age and gender as primary drivers of digital media patterns, it has largely overlooked how these factors moderate the influence of socioeconomic background. By accounting for age and gender, I find that differences in use between children of different backgrounds grow with age, where older adolescents whose parents have lower education are more likely to report spending at least four hours using gaming or social media on a regular day, compared to peers whose parents have a higher education. I also find that, while patterns are similar across genders, the types of digital media used vary: Differences are largest for boys' gaming, and girls' social media use.

Study II also uses the Swedish Kids and media survey, this time to investigate how digital media use fits into the broader landscape of daily activities. I use latent class analysis on a range of self-reported online- and offline activities among teenagers to create types of users who report similar activity combinations. I identify three distinct user profiles: *offline entertainment*, *gamers*, and *high media users*. These groups show internal coherence within the reported activities, and challenge the assumption that digital media use necessarily displaces other activities. In explaining the variation between the generated classes, I also find stark gender- and family background differences, while digital confidence, self-efficacy, plays only a minor role in explaining the classes.

In *Study III* qualitative analysis is used on interviews with parents of middle-school-aged children to develop a framework for understanding the role of digital media within families. To capture the various hopes and worries involved in parenting around digital media, the analysis establishes that it is central to consider the social context of use as a primary concern for parents: a spectrum ranging from solitary individual use to interaction with known peers, and finally to anonymous social engagement. This article details how parents navigate this spectrum by tailoring their mediation approaches to their child while weighing the benefits and risks of different levels of digital media use.

This thesis contributes to the study of digital media use among children and adolescents by providing connections to social structure, everyday life, and the family.

Keywords: *digital media, children, adolescents, parenting, social media, gaming.*

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Till Stina

Contents

List of studies	2
1 Introduction	7
1.1 Defining digital media	9
2 Background.....	9
2.1 Digital media	9
2.1.1 Digital media is part of contemporary society	9
2.1.2 A brief introduction to social media and gaming.....	10
2.1.3 Classifying types of digital media use	11
2.1.4 The dualities of digital media.....	12
2.1.5 The digital divide	12
2.1.6 Digital self-efficacy.....	13
2.1.7 Research on digital media and negative outcomes	14
2.1.8 Digital media in society	16
2.2 Children	17
2.2.1 On childhood and development	17
2.2.2 Age.....	18
2.2.3 Gender.....	18
2.3 Families	19
2.3.1 Parenting in the 21 st century.....	19
2.3.2 Connecting socioeconomic status to differences in leisure	21
2.3.3 Digital media in the family	21
2.3.4 Parental mediation	22
3 The research context	22
3.1 Sweden.....	24
4 Methodological considerations.....	25
5 Ethical considerations.....	27
6 Abstracts	28
6.1 Study I	28
6.2 Study II	28
6.3 Study III	29
7 Concluding remarks	29
8 References.....	31

List of studies

- Study I Digital differences: SES gaps in recreational digital media use widen with age and vary by gender
- Study II Bridging the gap: A latent class analysis of adolescent lifestyle sectors
- Study III Of Children and Screens: parents' ambitions and room for action around children's digital media use

Abstract of the dissertation

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In *Study III* qualitative analysis is used on interviews with parents of middle-school-aged children to develop a framework for understanding the role of digital media within families. To capture the various hopes and worries involved in parenting around digital media, the analysis establishes that it is central to consider the social context of use as a primary concern for parents: a spectrum ranging from solitary individual use to interaction with known peers, and finally to anonymous social engagement. This article details how parents navigate this spectrum by tailoring their mediation approaches to their child while weighing the benefits and risks of different levels of digital media use.

This thesis contributes to the study of digital media use among children and adolescents by providing connections to social structure, everyday life, and the family.

Sammanfattning

Digitala medier är en del av våra liv. Mobiltelefoner, datorer och läsplatlor används regelbundet av folk i alla åldrar till underhållning, avslappning, arbete, skolarbete, kommunikation och en rad andra saker. Reaktionen på denna utveckling varierar från entusiasm till oro, speciellt när det rör barn och ungdomar. Mitt i allt detta återstår flera grundläggande sociologiska frågor om hur digitala vanor i våra dagliga liv är kopplade till olika aspekter av social struktur.

Den här avhandlingen undersöker hur digitala medier kan kopplas till barn och ungdomar, deras familjer och de bredare sociala sammanhang som de deltar i. Jag använder olika metoder för att studera användning av digitala medier genom att använda tvärsnittsundersökningar kopplade till svenska registerdata, och intervjuer med föräldrar till barn som använder digitala medier. Denna sammanläggningsavhandling består av tre egenförfattade studier, som alla undersöker olika vinklar av barn och ungdomars liv med digitala medier.

Studie I använder den svenska tvärsnittsundersökningen Ungar och medier för att undersöka sambandet mellan data/tv-spel, sociala medier och socioekonomisk bakgrund. Tidigare forskning har betonat rollen av kön och ålder vid studiet av digitala medievanor, men har inte tillfredsställande undersökt vilken roll dessa faktorer har när det kommer till sambandet mellan användning av digitala medier och socioekonomisk bakgrund. Genom att ta hänsyn till ålder och kön finner jag att skillnaden i användning mellan barn från olika bakgrund ökar med åldern, där äldre ungdomar vars föräldrar har lägre utbildningsnivå är mer sannolika att rapportera att de spenderar minst fyra timmar på att spela data/tv-spel eller använda sociala medier, jämfört med jämnåriga vars föräldrar har högre utbildning. Jag finner också att, även om mönstren är liknande för både pojkar och flickor, så varierar det vilken typ av digitala medier de använder: Skillnaderna är störst för pojkars data/tv-spelning, och för flickors användning av sociala medier.

Studie II använder också Ungar och medier-undersökningen, denna gång för att se hur digitala medier passar in i ett vidare landskap av dagliga aktiviteter. Jag använder latent class-analys på en lång rad självrapporterade online- och offline-aktiviteter hos ungdomar för att generera olika typer av användare som rapporterar liknande kombinationer av aktiviteter. Jag finner tre skilda profiler av användare: analog underhållning, gamers och högkonsumenter av medier. De tre grupperna visar intern koherens bland de rapporterade aktiviteterna och ifrågasätter att användning av digitala medier nödvändigtvis ersätter andra aktiviteter. Sammansättningen av de olika grupperna visar också på stora skillnader när det kommer till föräldrars utbildningsnivå och kön, medan självförtroende i att använda digitala medier spelar mindre roll.

I Studie III använder jag kvalitativ analys på intervjuer med föräldrar till barn i mellanstadieåldern och utvecklar ett ramverk för att förstå vilken roll digitala medier spelar i familjer. För att förstå de olika typer av förhoppningar och oro som kommer med att vara förälder till barn som använder digitala medier, utvecklar jag ett ramverk som utgår från den sociala kontexten där barnet använder digitala medier: från ensam användning, till att interagera med familj och vänner, till att delta i digitala arenor där det finns anonyma främlingar. Denna artikel beskriver hur föräldrar hanterar detta genom att anpassa sina praktiker till sitt eget barn samtidigt som de överväger för- och nackdelar med olika typer av digitala medier-användning.

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Stockholm, April 2026.

1 Introduction

Digital devices such as mobile phones, tablets, computers and consoles mediate much of our daily routines. These developments have transformed leisure time, communication and entertainment in ways that only a few decades ago were the stuff of science fiction. Meanwhile, as is commonplace with rapid technological development, this expansion has also been met with a range of worries. Young people are at the center of these debates, both as early adaptors of technical developments, as well as the objects of concern.

This dissertation investigates digital media use among children and adolescents, answering questions about the shape and form of media use, and considering its variation across factors in the individual and the family. Employing a multi-method approach, I ask simple questions about digital media use, linking it back to the environment where people come from, and place it in their everyday lives. In this work, I aim to further our knowledge about children and adolescents' digital media use in its different contexts, from macro patterns to micro situations, from children's own reported behavior to parents' hopes and worries. In doing so, I hope to provide a more nuanced picture of a phenomenon deserving serious of consideration. These findings can be used as a backdrop for future discussions and inquiries about the intensity, purposes and effects of digital media use.

This dissertation consists of three single-authored studies, and contributes to the field by providing empirical analyses and building upon sociological theory. By adding context pertinent to sociological inquiry to topics previously mostly studied by other scientific disciplines, I contextualize the everyday lives where digital media use takes place. I draw on traditions such as social stratification, sociology of everyday life and family sociology to reclaim digital media use as a topic for sociological inquiry.

Study I aims to ground digital media in family background, by connecting digital media use in the form of time spent gaming or using social media to parents' education level. This connects to one of the most established traditions of sociological research: How children's behaviors vary by family background. Previous research have studied this, often neglecting the role of two of the most important predictors of digital media use: age and gender. Thus, the aim is to describe how children of different backgrounds, ages and genders vary in the intensity of their digital media use. I find that the gaps between children of different backgrounds are negligible among younger children, but as they become teenagers, the differences between children of

different backgrounds grow much larger. Among older teenagers, children with lower-educated parents are likely to spend much more time using digital media than children with higher-educated parents. This study contributes methodologically to the field by adding interactions which allow for variation along important subgroups. This has been previously emphasized by some authors (Orben et al., 2022), but rarely implemented. I also make use of the reliability of Swedish register data on children and their parents' characteristics to make connections to their background. Furthermore, I find a pattern where children diverge more during ages when parental supervision is lower. In the paper, I offer explanations for this possibly counterintuitive finding.

Study II investigates how digital media use fits into the broader landscape of daily activities. By combining a range of self-reported activities performed during adolescents' leisure time, I aim to delineate lifestyle sectors, where common patterns combine into ideal types. This serves to investigate how digital media use varies in relation to other parts of life. Using a rich dataset of a variety of screen-mediated and other leisure activities, I identify three types of profiles of roughly equal size: *offline entertainment*, *gamers*, and *high media users*. These groups show internal coherence within the reported activities, suggesting that some preferences span over the analog-digital divide, and challenge the assumption that digital media necessarily displaces other activities. Furthermore, these types show stark differences by gender and family background, while digital self-efficacy only provides a minor role in explaining the classes.

Study III adds to the dissertation by using qualitative analysis of interviews with parents of middle-school-aged children, and developing a framework for understanding the role of digital media use within families. The analysis of parents' hopes and worries around their children's digital media suggests that to understand the challenges parents face, one must consider *how* the children use digital media, and to *whom* they direct their actions. The social context is described as a spectrum ranging from solitary use to interaction in public spaces populated by strangers. I also detail how parents navigate this spectrum by tailoring their mediation approaches to the individual child while considering their own ambition and the wider social context of their children's lives. This framework provides a tool for understanding the challenges parents face, suggesting that it is more important *what* the children do, than *where* they do it, transcending specificities of single platforms.

1.1 Defining digital media

In this dissertation, I use *digital media* to describe “the array of domestic and personal digital and networked devices for information, communication and entertainment”, as formulated by (Livingstone et al., 2015, p. 4) and later used by others such as Jeffery (2019). In effect, this term encompasses a long range of activities which are mediated by screens on a computer, video game console, tablet or mobile phone. It excludes linear television. It is a wide term, which puts the focus on how the activity or medium is transmitted, rather than on the specific content. Its drawback is that is vacuous, while its usefulness comes from its flexibility. You can fill it with any new activity which arises. In Study III, we get a glimpse of the many uses of digital media.

2 Background

This section provides an overview of contributions and perspectives pertinent to this thesis regarding digital media, children and families, in that order.

2.1 Digital media

2.1.1 Digital media is part of contemporary society

This dissertation is guided by a conviction that digital media are part of society. This means that digital media use is affected by, and has the potential to affect, existing structures and institutions within society. To speak with Granovetter (1985), digital media are *embedded* in social relations of different sorts. Furthermore, sociology was born out of an interest in modern society after the industrial revolution. This is what Weber (1920/2002), Marx (1932/2023) and Durkheim (1951/2005) did. What has been called the IT revolution (Castells, 2010) is yet another case of technological development affecting people in many areas of their everyday lives.

Specifically, this dissertation places its main focus on the role of digital media use in the lives of children and adolescents. This is because young people are often said to be early to adopt new technology (e.g. Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020), because they are born into it to a larger extent than previous generations, sometimes even described as digital natives (Prensky, 2001). Furthermore, childhood and adolescence are subject to intense public scrutiny, and often the focus of lively debates among adults, and different visions about what constitutes a good or equal childhood and proper development. Finally, childhood and adolescence are a

part of life where social life is intensive, and leisure time is less characterized by the responsibilities of adult life, opening up for interesting variation in the ways that children choose to spend their free time.

Many studies have previously documented and analyzed how children and adolescents use digital media in their everyday lives (boyd, 2014; Green et al., 2020; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Smahel et al., 2020). While specific games or social media platforms may come and go, some things seem to hold true over time and place. One is that although much of social interaction and entertainment is internet- or screen-mediated, the base of people's lives remains in the physical reality of places like homes and schools, and many phenomena reproduce online (boyd, 2014; López-Sintas et al., 2017).

2.1.2 A brief introduction to social media and gaming

This dissertation places its main focus on gaming and social media, two of the most commonly used digital media genres (Smahel et al., 2020), and also subject to recurring debates (Orben et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2017; Twenge et al., 2020; Van Rooij & Kardefelt-Winther, 2017).

Examples of social media are Tiktok, Instagram and Facebook. Social media can be described as large platforms allowing people to produce and consume content in the form of combinations of text, sound, video and pictures, to present themselves and interact with people known and unknown to them. Typically, they include some sort of profile showing some curated information about themselves (Lindgren, 2025). Besides expanding people's personal networks, social media can work to deepen and enhance existing relationships based in the offline world (boyd, 2014). There are many ways to participate on social media. Early work documented how social media can be used to develop and deepen relationships with peers, gathering information about interests, produce content such as posting comments or pictures, or sharing what others have produced (Ito et al., 2009/2019). However, using social media can also involve more passive use, such as simply scrolling a Tiktok feed, without leaving any comments, sharing or otherwise interacting with the content (Lindgren, 2025).

Gaming can take many different forms and serve different purposes. Itō and Bittanti (2009/2019) proposed a framework centered around the practices and functions of gaming, which works to describe different roles gaming can take in people's lives. They are *killing time*, referring to types of gaming which can serve to take up empty space in one's schedule,

or procrastinate, often when out of the home. These are suitable for portable gaming devices, which at the time of writing considered mostly smaller gaming consoles, but in the present time it would probably be complemented by smartphones and tablets. The next form of gaming is *hanging out*, which is when people use gaming as an opportunity to spend time together with family and friends. This can be in the same room, casually, but also in more engaged forms, such as in massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs). These games easily take up lots of time of both active playing in the pursuit of goals, but also involve more casual conversations and socializing with people they know off-screen or only through the games. The authors describe this as “part of the everyday and commonplace practices of social play for youth” (Itō and Bittanti, 2009/2019, p. 209). Finally, *recreational gaming* describes when people participate with a focused effort to pursue goals or master skills, where gaming is the main object. This is a type of gaming which would prototypically have someone define themselves as a gamer.

2.1.3 Classifying types of digital media use

Digital media use encompasses a range of activities, to different ends and means. In studies of the digital divide, use promoting skills or learning is sometimes referred to as capital-enhancing (van Deursen et al., 2015; Zillien & Hargittai, 2009) or educational (Becker, 2022). Beyond this, digital media use has become an intrinsic part of social life and leisure. The concept capital-enhancing, however, is rarely properly operationalized, and often centered around information-seeking or immediately useful tasks. As noted by Pearce and Rice (2013) and Micheli (2016), many activities are difficult to divide neatly into capital- or non-capital-enhancing. If participating in multiplayer games helps users form bonds with friends, social media participation keeps people in the zeitgeist and allows them to connect with new people, or watching Youtube tutorials provides new skills, they must have some capital-enhancing potential, depending on how they are used.

An easier conceptual distinction is that between the extent to which use is active or passive (Orben, 2020). *Active use* refers to activities where the user contributes and participates, such as in gaming, chatting, and posting messages, while *passive use* to a larger extent consists of consuming others’ content. However, there is no agreed-upon definition of passive or active use, so definitions vary. Engberg et al. (2022) defined passive use as watching TV or similar entertainment on a computer, while participatory or active use included a range of other use such as homework, emailing, chatting or surfing the internet, with gaming as a unique category. In health-oriented research, digital media use is often part of a category called

sedentary behavior (Parker et al., 2022), contrasting activities involving physical exertion. Study II includes a range of activities, some which are easy to delineate as digital, such as gaming on a computer/console, some which fall in between, such as listening to music, and some which are specified as being done off-screen, such as meeting friends, not online.

2.1.4 The dualities of digital media

The role of digital media in everyday life, and its effects on society, children and the future, have been hotly debated in recent years. Digital media, computers, screens and the internet have been used to represent hopes of a better future as well as ruining the social fabric (Lindgren, 2025; Livingstone, 2002). Thus, we have seen measures implemented with the purposes of improving access and providing skills thought necessary for future labor markets and citizenship (European Commission, 2019), as well as support for policies intended to minimize negative effects of use (WHO, 2019).

As a consequence of this duality, some studies use a frame where opportunities and risk coexist acknowledging that digital media use can bring consequences, good and bad (Livingstone et al., 2017; Sanders et al., 2024). Lemish (2022) proposes a reasonable position: since digital media is interwoven in the everyday lives of young people, and there are so many types of use, they may come with a variety of consequences, good and bad, in different areas of their lives. The outcome of that use depends on what people do and what they are exposed to. Lemish (2022) then provides a range of examples of how different types of use could lead to different outcomes:

“behaviorally (e.g., imitating sharing or aggression), socially (e.g., making new friends and strengthening existing relationships through social media or bullying their classmates on the internet); cognitively (e.g., learning school preparedness skills or developing short attention spans); creatively (e.g., creating computer graphics, writing blogs, and uploading their own videos or reproducing clichéd commercial formulas and stereotypical messages); or even physically (e.g., learning balanced nutrition or developing bad eating habits”

(Lemish, 2022, p. 6).

2.1.5 The digital divide

This duality can also be seen in the development of theories of the digital divide. This provides an approach to inequalities in the study of digital media, describing how internet use can be structured unequally in and between societies. Studies of the digital divide can be divided into three stages: The first stage focused on differences in access to the internet,

viewing digital media as something with positive potential. In many countries in Europe, North America and Asia, a large proportion of citizens have the means to connect online frequently (Roser et al., 2015). The second digital divide covers differences in usage, skills and motivations with which individuals use the internet and digital media. Recent years have also seen the rise of a third-level digital divide, factoring in outcomes of digital use, thus taking a slightly more critical turn. It then considers a range of global, social or economic inequalities (Scheerder et al., 2017). This dissertation's Study I and Study II mainly concern the second-level digital divide, providing a foundation for explanations of differences in the third-level digital divide.

One positive view of digital media use is that it could lead to developing skills useful for future work, education and social participation. As an example, in the early days of internet research, the label *digital native* was attributed to the generations of students and people growing up in a world connected by the internet. The basic thought was that they "are all 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). This reasoning implied that young people learn the necessary digital skills through social osmosis, even though early research had documented how even in societies where most people do have access to digital devices and digital media, some lack the interest, or confidence, to develop the needed skills (Eastin & LaRose, 2000). Questioning the label digital native, Hargittai (2010) showed how digital media use and skills were linked to existing socioeconomic inequalities.

2.1.6 Digital self-efficacy

The concept *self-efficacy* has been used to connect behavior to one's own view of their ability (Bandura, 1997). For digital media use, digital or ICT (Information and Communication Technology) *self-efficacy* (Scherer et al., 2017) has been used to gauge people's confidence in using digital devices. Although similar to digital skills, skills represent the actual ability to do something, while self-efficacy mirrors people's confidence in performing the task (Livingstone et al., 2023). Both are commonly used in survey formats, but while skills typically answer a question about ability like "Can you do this?", self-efficacy answers questions about people's confidence in their ability: "How good are you at this?" (Helsper, 2012). Thus, high self-efficacy can work as a pathway to producing positive digital outcomes.

Studies of digital self-efficacy rarely combine findings with measures for activities performed off-screen (Bundsgaard & Gerick, 2017; Scherer et al., 2017; Xiao & Sun, 2022) and studies

of offline activities have had only few indicators or composed measures of digital media use (Gracia et al., 2022; Leversen et al., 2012; Mullan & Hofferth, 2022). In Study II, I use digital self-efficacy as an example of a motivational construct, to see if that helps explain variation in the differences in offline and online activities.

2.1.7 Research on digital media and negative outcomes

This dissertation does not measure health or behavioral outcomes related to digital media use, but the following discussion serves to inform the reader about the larger pictures and stakes at hand, and helps inform about the need for considering differences in how subgroups use digital media.

Academic work has studied the potentially negative effects of digital media use among children and adolescents. While earlier efforts focused on, and established the study of problematic gaming (Männikkö et al., 2020), recent years have made connections between social media use and negative health-related outcomes (Orben et al., 2022; Twenge et al., 2018). Researchers in the U.S. have also linked a macro trend of increases in mental illness such as depression and suicide-related outcomes among girls to increased digital media use (Twenge et al., 2018). While a documented mental health decline among young people in many countries seems to be established as a consensus, and coinciding with the advent of widespread use of smartphones and increases in digital media use (McGorry et al., 2024; Twenge, 2020), the role of mental health effects from digital media use in general, and social media in particular, is still hotly debated. Systematic reviews have concluded that screen-time in general has only minor associations with depression and that there is little support for associations with other mental issues (Tang et al., 2021), and studies with longitudinal designs do not always find support for a relationship between digital media use and worse mental health (Jensen et al., 2019; Orben et al., 2019). A meta-analysis of meta-analyses of a range of effects on screen use, from literacy to health, found small to moderate effects (Sanders et al., 2024), as did a meta-analysis for problematic social media use and stress, anxiety and depression (Shannon et al., 2022).

Several methodological challenges highlight the difficulties in assessing causality. Researchers have pointed out a lack of studies using sufficiently causal designs (Keles et al., 2020), or the insufficient accounting for bidirectional effects and sufficient control variables (Orben, 2020). Thus, interpretation of results and methodological choices can influence conclusions: Valkenburg et al. (2022) found that similar effect sizes were interpreted

differently in studies, even when relying on the same datasets. Where some viewed these as negligible, others found them substantial. Another example is how one team of well-established researchers used rigorous analysis to conclude that the connection between digital media use and well-being was so small that it should not lead to restrictive policies (Orben & Przybylski, 2019), while another team of well-established researchers replied by using the same dataset to argue that social media use for girls was correlated with negative health to an extent larger than hard drugs (Twenge et al., 2020).

Similarly, Valkenburg et al. (2022) highlighted that the use of aggregated data can smooth over individual effects that are not controlled for in the models. Thus, different people might be affected in different ways, depending on who they are, how they feel, and what they do. The idea that individuals are affected differently was formalized by Przybylski and Weinstein (2017), proposing a Goldilocks hypothesis. Their cross-sectional findings suggested that moderate social media or gaming was unproblematic, while longer use was associated with lower well-being. This was later tested in more rigorous analyses, accounting for differences over age and gender (Orben et al., 2022). They found that for younger adolescent girls, high social media use was correlated with lower life satisfaction, but very low use was not. Among older adolescents, both boys and girls, this was supported for both very high and very low daily use. This vulnerability among girls' well-being and social media has been highlighted in several studies (Booker et al., 2018; Twenge et al., 2022). In one study, higher reported depressive symptoms in relation to girls' intensive social media use was connected to negative experiences such as online harassment, and worse sleep, body image and self-esteem (Kelly et al., 2018).

These differences can also be broken down even further, into differences in personality traits, motivations for use, and types of using within one form of digital media. Thus, the outcomes might depend on who uses it and how (Kross et al., 2021). As such, one study reported longer social media use among children and adolescents to correlate with mental health conditions. And within that group, those with internalizing conditions, such as anxiety or depression, reported higher use as well as a range of negative feelings such as social comparison, while those with externalizing conditions, such as adhd, just reported spending more time using social media (Fassi et al., 2025). Among similar lines, Alphenaar et al. (2025) reported that very low and very high social media use was associated with worse subjective well-being, and that personality traits mattered for the size of effects. One study using using game-behavior

data found motivation for playing videogames to be a stronger predictor of worsened well-being than just playing time (Vuorre et al., 2022). A meta-analysis concluded that both prosocial and violent video games affected behavior in the direction of the content (Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014).

In sum, accurate analyses of causality would require large samples, plenty of information and many data points per participant over time. Such datasets have been rare, but one randomized clinical trial study found that reduced digital media use led to short-term improvement in well-being among children and adolescents (Schmidt-Persson et al., 2024). Another study, using person-specific effects for data collected several times a day on a large sample, concluded that the effect of social media on individuals depends, from adolescent to adolescent. In their sample, 44% felt nothing, 46% reported feeling better and a minority, 10%, felt worse while using passive social media (Beyens et al., 2020).

In line with Lemish's (2022) argument that digital media can come with the potential of causing bad and good outcomes alike, it might be reasonable to assume that it is difficult to find substantive effects that prove anything, even if they exist for some people.

2.1.8 Digital media in society

Every day people face choices about how to spend their time. The concept *lifestyle* has been part of sociology since its inception, with Weber and Veblen noting the role of symbols and status groups in social stratification (Veblen & Mills, 1899/2017; Weber, 1922/1978). Its guiding principle is that one can find patterns within individuals, in the form of behavior and preferences. These patterns can then be recovered among other people, often stratified along different positions in the structural environment. Lifestyles reveal something about people's identity by describing what they do and like. Veal (1993, p. 247) defines lifestyle as a "distinctive pattern of personal and social behavior characteristic of an individual or a group". In Study II, I use a slightly more limited concept, *lifestyle sectors*, as formulated by Giddens (1991) to describe the how adolescents report spending their free time. Lifestyle sectors are smaller units, which carry some internal coherence, together forming lifestyles.

Further expanding on the lifestyles concept, Ragnedda and Mutsavairo (2016) describe, through *digital leisure cultures*, how one's digital habits are part of life and identity-building. As digital media has become part of the daily routines, not participating in the digital can lead to one being left out of vital parts of social life. In a similar sentiment, Ragnedda (2018)

expands on a bourdieusian framework, linking it to the digital divide, where *digital capital* draws on one's offline capitals, such as social, or economic, to further one's success in the digital realm, and subsequently to gain more advantages. This offers an explanation to how digital media use can build on offline characteristics, to produce outcomes which then furthers one's overall situation in life.

2.2 Children

2.2.1 On childhood and development

Considering children as a proper, age-limited category of people is a relatively modern construct, dating back to the 19th century (Gillis, 2011). Since then, ideas about what constitutes a good childhood have been debated and subject to change. Even though many things have become better for children as their rights and voices have been increasingly strengthened, the last 50 years have shown a turn from optimism to pessimism about the ways children's childhoods play out, often with reference to idyllic childhoods of past generations. One recurrent reason for this pessimism has been the influence of new media on children and its potential threat to well-being and development (Cunningham, 2020b). Even since the 1920s, movies and radio, comics, television, video games, and now digital media have all been portrayed as threats to young people and their futures. Ideas permeating these debates have been quite similar to today's debates around screens, with addiction, nostalgia and inappropriate content coming back time and time again (Leick, 2019).¹

The present media climate seems to provide a mostly negative view of digital media's impact on society. An analysis of Danish news reports found 74% to focus on negative aspects on digital media, mostly in relation to mental health, self-control and time, and an increase in debates around addiction (Størup & Lieberoth, 2022). Similarly, a systematic review of research on U.K news articles on social media between 2014 and 2024 found 58% to be negatively oriented, and 98% to mention risks (Davies et al., 2025).

One recurring underlying thought, permeating thinking around screens and the ways they interrupt visions of childhood and development, is that if people spend so much time on their screens, they surely must miss out on other things in life that are more productive and

¹ This critique of new media is often described in terms of Cohen's (1987 [1972]) concept *moral panics*, which details how youth' phenomena gets identified as some sort of threat to society, this position gets voiced by influential people, media, and experts, solutions or other ways of tackling it are presented, and the phenomenon can go away, go out of the public eye, or expand. The use of this concept, however, easily implies that these concerns are inflated and unwarranted. This dissertation does not aim to test the validity of worries around the effects of digital media may for individuals or society as a whole.

rewarding. This was formulated as the *displacement effect* by Neuman (1988). Although the idea of time displacement is logically enticing, a recent time-use study of Australian early teenagers found little support for displacement due to mobile phone use (Röhlke, 2025). Similar findings have been previously reported (Tak & Catsambis, 2023), while others point towards several forms digital media leading to less time spent on schoolwork (Mayen et al., 2025) or that digital media eats up time spent on other media (Hall & Liu, 2022). Study II further challenges this concept by investigating how adolescents report combinations of online and offline activities.

2.2.2 Age

This dissertation puts emphasis on the age of the participants. As mentioned above, children and adolescents make a good case for the study of digital media, but my argument is that it matters at what time one studies their digital media use.

Articles 1 and 3 in this dissertation consider children in the latter part of what can be called middle childhood. This is a time in life when children often start spending more time away from their parents than when they were younger, and parents' opportunities to monitor or manage details in their children's lives decrease, and friends start to matter more (Kerns & Brumariu, 2016). In adolescence, however, independence usually increases and peers take an even more important place in children's lives. Thus, adolescents turn increasingly to their peers for support, intimacy, information, and learning how to behave (Allen & Tan, 2016). They seek, and are more left on their own, to make judgments about appropriateness, from more varied sources of influence than before (Smetana et al., 2014).

These differences can also be seen in empirical work on digital media habits. Teenagers overall report having more screen time overall than younger children, peaking around age 15-16 (Atkin et al., 2013; Smahel et al., 2020; Swedish Media Council, 2017), an age with lower parental supervision, but other aspects of teenage life, such as dating or more status-oriented behavior, are less common (Ito et al., 2009/2019). Decreased supervision of digital media use in particular, and as a result, increased online freedom, is also more common among older children (Livingstone et al., 2017; Özgür, 2016; Sonck et al., 2013).

2.2.3 Gender

Gender also plays a central role for understanding the differences in children and adolescents' digital media habits. Although this dissertation does not explain the origins or creation of gender norms behind these differences, gender is central to Study I. And even though both

genders use both digital media forms, studies in a variety of countries report boys gaming more than girls, and girls using social media more than boys (Borgonovi, 2016; Swedish Media Council, 2017; Twenge & Martin, 2020).

Examples of mechanisms behind this development have suggested that gaming has been plagued by gender stereotypes, exemplified by most prominent gamers being male, and that this can deter women from pursuing gaming, thus missing out on the positive sides that can come with it (Paaßen et al., 2017). Furthermore, gaming has been reported to be more common among younger girls than teenage girls (Swedish Media Council, 2019a). One study interviewed girls who saw gaming as something for younger children, and thus reduced their gaming activities as teenagers. Along similar lines, they motivated increased social media activity as a form of focusing on social relationships, while boys maintained social relationships when they were gaming (Leonhardt & Overå, 2021). Similar sentiments of women motivating social media use to maintain friendships and staying in touch with social networks have been reported among adults (Krasnova et al., 2017).

2.3 Families

This dissertation also places emphasis on the family as a unit of analysis. This concerns the role played by parents' socioeconomic status in predicting differences in digital media use, the relationship between lifestyles and social background, and the role of digital media in the everyday lives of families, viewed from the parents' eyes.

2.3.1 Parenting in the 21st century

Ideas about contemporary parenting are prevalent in this dissertation's Study I and Study III. Parenting is a concept often used to describe parents being responsible for more than fulfilling the basic needs of a child, which is called childrearing. Instead, parenting assumes that parents are seen the mainly responsible people for ensuring that their child develop to their potential as much as possible, and stay safe (Jeffery, 2025). Several authors have narrated how late-20th century parenting represented this shift from childrearing to parenting, where children are seen as increasingly vulnerable, at risk of not developing into their full potential without the right guidance from parents, who in turn are expected to listen to experts and science on how to treat their child. And new forms of media have often been a part of that threat to the child's development and safety (Cunningham, 2020a; Lee et al., 2023).

Much research has been devoted to identifying the best parenting, often building on Baumrind's (1966) parenting styles. Contrasting this, the past decades have seen critical scholars describe parenting in general, and primarily in Western countries like the U.S. and U.K. (Faircloth, 2023), as increasingly intensive. Introduced as a concept by Hays (1996), *intensive parenting* refers to a type of childrearing which is "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays, 1996 p. 122). This type of parenting builds on the idea that parents are responsible for the child's future development, health and success. Parents are expected to be involved with spending quality time with their children, protecting them, and enroll them in a range of organized activities. This is driven by contemporary views of children as vulnerable, and increased reliance on expert recommendations (Faircloth, 2023). In her investigation into parents using digital tools to protect and control their children, (Nelson, 2010, pp. 174-175) identified a parenting style identified by "constant oversight, belief in children's boundless potential, intimacy with children, claims of trust and delayed launching".

Recent years have seen the emergence a softer parenting style, called *democratic parenting*: "egalitarian, child-centred and 'empowering' [...] which privileges negotiation, agreement and trust" (Jeffery 2025, p. 125). Furthermore, the lack of reliance on experts reflects a form of parenting described by Reich (2016), called *individualized parenting*, characterized by adapting one's parenting choices to the needs and personality of the individual child, and believing in one's own capacity as a parent to make choices about the child. However, while Reich's (2016) case was centered on refuting experts' well-founded advice on vaccines, the parents in Study III can be seen more as responding to a novel situation, which they have to face every day, where they perceive a lack of trustworthy expert advice, clear directions and implications. Similar sentiments of parents trusting their own capacity have been reported by authors in other contexts while researching parenting around children's digital media use (Hernandez et al., 2024; Jeffery, 2025 ; Mollborn et al., 2022; Willett, 2023). A recent Swedish study on parenting also nuanced the notion of intensive parenting, reporting that most parents find parenting challenging, but that strong endorsement of intensive parenting attitudes were lower among more privileged parents in terms of SES, gender, age and age of child (older parents and children) (Mollborn & Billingsley, 2025).

2.3.2 Connecting socioeconomic status to differences in leisure

Bourdieu's (1984) seminal work has been foundational to the study of what people do in their free time, and its connections to social structure. He describes how one's social environment forms taste and preferences, and in extension habits, and how this permeates most parts of everyday lives. Digital media in the form we know it today did not exist then, but this can be seen as a start towards making connections between home environment and digital media use.

Building upon a sober bourdieusian approach, Lareau (2003/2011) demonstrates how family practices differ by social class, and in extent, how that can serve to reproduce inequality. This does not connect directly to digital media either, but it offers some insight into how family practices regarding their leisure time can vary along SES lines. *Concerted cultivation* is a parenting style prevalent among the middle class, characterized by heavy involvement by parents in children's leisure and education, and free time being dominated by adult-led organized activities. This style places a focus on developing skills which can be useful in future middle-class careers. Meanwhile, working-class parents were more prone to perform *accomplished natural growth*, characterized by taking care of basic needs while allowing more independence during leisure time and relying more on schools to take care of the child's education (Lareau, 2003/2011). Lareau's theory of concerted cultivation and accomplished natural growth has been tested empirically and quantitatively, in the United States (Bodovski & Farkas, 2008; Cheadle & Amato, 2011) as well as in France (Barg, 2019), and generally stood up well.

2.3.3 Digital media in the family

Parenting around children's digital media use involves balancing one's own ambitions with children's wants. Parenting in the age of smart phones and digital media can be described as transcendent, with virtual and online worlds intersecting. Families often own a multitude of screens, performing many functions around the clock, making it increasingly difficult to affect behavior without disrupting needed communication, work-, school- and social life (Lim, 2016).

There are many reasons for parents to encourage or allow their children to use digital media, as well as to limit them. Digital media devices, especially cell phones, can be a central way of communicating within the family (Rudi et al., 2015) and a way for parents to provide their children with emotional support (Jensen et al., 2021). One pragmatic approach is to keep children occupied so that parents can keep up with household chores or get some well-earned

rest (Beyens & Eggermont, 2014; Eichen et al., 2021; Zaman et al., 2016). Furthermore, some parents view the internet as an inevitable part of children's lives, which children need to be successful or keep up with friends and avoid being left out (Lorenz, 2025; Symons et al., 2017; Zaman et al., 2016).

Meanwhile, reasons for worries among parents have centered around a range of issues. Some consider individual issues like exposure to inappropriate content, addiction, displacement, cognitive effects and brain function (Balleys, 2022; Hernandez et al., 2024; Lorenz, 2025; Marsh et al., 2024; Symons et al., 2017). Other concerns are more about the effects of social interaction, such as online strangers, bullying, and sharing personal information to other people (Hernandez et al., 2024; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Lorenz, 2025).

2.3.4 Parental mediation

The foundation for studying digital parenting around screens comes from media studies and the *parental mediation* perspective, a tradition focused on producing typologies of styles that describe parents' involvement and the restrictions they apply to their children. Early studies primarily concerned television watching, younger children, and focused on negative effects. In later years, however, the focus has been turned towards computers and mobile phones. Calls have been made to factor in how digital media fit into everyday life, to study children of ages where they exercise more agency, and to factor in the dynamics of interactive and sociable forms of digital media (Clark, 2011; Fletcher & Blair, 2016; Jiow et al., 2017; Livingstone et al., 2017). Paper III expands on parental mediation literature by detailing the need to extend parenting around children's digital media use to consider a wider social context.

3 The research context

This dissertation uses data collected between 2014 and 2024. One pressing question is how generalizable these findings are within this period, and how applicable these findings are going into the future, i.e. what is the range of the data? Study I uses survey data from 2014 to 2020, and the Study II from 2014-2016. While both use controls in the analyses for data collection year, this does not say anything about what came before or after.

All data used in this dissertation was collected during a latter phase of Web 2.0, a term used to describe a paradigm of internet use. While the prototypical view of Web 1.0 described a phase

where going online mostly involved visiting and viewing web pages, Web 2.0 has been characterized by the possibilities of interaction and active involvement, where consumers to a larger extent have the opportunity to also be producers of content. This includes the rise to ubiquity of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, but also the increasingly social media-like video streaming platform Youtube. Within this paradigm, 2015 can be seen as a turning point, possibly best illustrated by a shift towards short-form video content, and recommender algorithms replacing chronological order as the mode of presenting content on these platforms. The success of the social media platform Tiktok can be seen as a trailblazer in this regard, with others following suit (Lindgren, 2025).

This study can also be said to take place in what can be called the post-PC age, where smartphones with internet access have replaced personal computers as the main tools to navigate digital media. This era started in 2007, with the advent of the Iphone (Balbi & Magaouda, 2018). This development, of having constant access to a wide range of uses, in tandem with the digitalization of so many functions in daily lives, makes it difficult to draw a line between the social and the digital (Lindgren, 2025).

However, two notable things can be used to limit this feeling of today's similarities to the earlier years of data collection: the Covid-19 pandemic, and the rapid development of artificial intelligence, or generative large language models.

It seems like the next big thing in digital media regards the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) (Mansfield et al., 2025). Even though forms of AI have been implemented in our daily digital media use for a while (Lindgren, 2025) these findings precede AI and as the dominant trope in digital media discussions. The participants of Study I and Study II filled out their answers before generative large-language models, such as ChatGPT were presented, and although mentioned, it was not a dominant theme in Study III.

As regards how use has changed since the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2025 Kids and Media survey reported that time spent using digital media among children and adolescents has been on a slight decline since 2020, especially among children aged 9-12. This goes for social media, as well as for gaming (Andersson, 2025).

In 2014, the most popular games among 9-12 year-olds were Minecraft, Pokémon Go and Roblox, while it was Counterstrike, Pokémon Go and Minecraft among 13-16 year-olds and Pokémon Go, League of Legends and Counterstrike among 17-18 year-olds (Swedish Media

Council, 2015). In 2024, it was Block Blast, Roblox and Fortnite among 13-16-year-olds, and Block Blast, Minecraft and Hay day among 17-18-year-olds. The year 2020 showed a shift from console/computer gaming to gaming on mobile phones, while more intensive gaming, more than three hours per day, was still most common on computers/consoles (Swedish Media Council, 2021). This speaks to the relevance of using the gaming on computer/console as a measurement: less valid for overall gaming, but useful for heavy gaming.

Regarding social media, the most popular platforms for all ages in 2024 as well as in 2020 were Snapchat, Tiktok and Instagram. Meanwhile, in 2014 it varied more, with Instagram, Kik and Facebook at the top for 9-12 year-olds, and Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat for the 13-16 year-olds, and Facebook, Instagram and Twitter for the 17-18-year-olds (Andersson, 2025; Swedish Media Council, 2015, 2021).

3.1 Sweden

Sweden is one of the most digitalized countries in the world, being in the top for both highest internet coverage and usage (Our World in data, 2021). This can partially be explained by Sweden having policies in place for promoting internet access and use, including infrastructural investments like providing high-speed broadband (Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2014). From middle school age, most children in Sweden have their own smartphones and the vast majority report using it daily (Swedish Media Council, 2021).

The past years have shown a turn from optimism to concern in Swedish policy. While previous efforts served to increase digital competencies by mandating ICT use in schools (Swedish Ministry of Education, 2017), recent years have seen action to ban mobile phones from schools (Government Offices of Sweden, 2025). Furthermore, The Public Health Agency of Sweden (2025) have issued guidelines about limiting screen-time among children. Since their first introduction, these guidelines have generally moved from a focus on screen time limits for younger children to include older children and more nuanced views on types of use. This development follows several other health authorities issuing guidelines aiming to limit negative effects of young people's digital media use, such as the WHO (2019), the AAP (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021), and the APA (2019), effectively making it a public health issue.

4 Methodological considerations

In Study I, I use generalized ordinal logistic regression analysis, In Study II I use latent class analysis and multinomial logistic regression, and in Study III I use qualitative thematic analysis. I provide details about the procedures in the respective studies. In this section, I will focus on some considerations regarding strengths and weaknesses associated with the different types of data.

This dissertation might be considered as being mixed-methods, in that it contains both quantitative and qualitative analyses. However, none of the included studies are mixed-methods in that they all include only one type of data, analyzed through either a qualitative or a quantitative lens each, and the synthesis of the studies is not formalized. The studies of this compilation theses are written to stand on their own, rather than building upon each other, thus deviating from some expectations of mixed-methods research (Creswell & Inoue, 2025; Small, 2011). Rather, it is multi-methods, involving the collection and analyses of both qualitative and quantitative data, but without the purpose of systematically integrating them into one coherent study (Creswell, 2021).

The three studies complement each other by studying young people's digital media use from different angles. The two quantitative studies differ in that Study I uses a variable-centered analysis, explaining the relationship between variables: parents' education level and social media use, and parents' education level and gaming within a sample of a population of Swedish children and adolescents. Study II employs a person-centered analysis, aiming to identify subgroups within a sample from a population, based on their response patterns in a larger set of variables (see Howard & Hoffman, 2018). Both these studies look for macro scale patterns within large samples. Study III changes perspective, where parents become the main subject, using open-ended interview questions. This interview study places a focus on the thought structures and experiences of parenting around digital media. This leaves room for new findings and patterns which cannot be gathered from prespecified answers in a survey, within the limits of what can be accomplished within a qualitative interview study (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Together, they provide a more holistic picture of the general shapes of children's digital media use, as well as help identify the core of parents' hopes and worries in relation to it.

Studies I and II use survey data collected by Statistics Sweden on behalf of the Swedish Media Council. The data set has both strengths and weaknesses. First, it is one of few data sets offering a variety of questions regarding both digital media use and other leisure activities, for a wide age range. It also has linked information about the child and parent from Swedish administrative registers, which reduces the risk of information- and item-non-response bias for these characteristics. Furthermore, the data collection consisted of a national random stratified sample procedure with the aim of drawing statistical inference to the general population.

However, this dataset also comes with drawbacks. First, being a survey, it consists of questions about behavior, without actually recording said behavior, instead relying on children and adolescents appreciating their time use. These two are not the same, and introduces bias in the accuracy of these measures. Alternative data collection methods, such as log data of people's behavior (e.g. Scharrow, 2016) or experience sampling methods, sometimes called time-use surveys, might produce more accurate measures (Sonnenberg et al., 2012). However, collecting large-scale data on these behaviors which take place on a variety of platforms, and for Study II, also non-digital behavior, and linking these to register data in order to make connections to demographic characteristics, is likely a project bigger than what is feasible for a dissertation.

All waves of data collection for the Kids and Media surveys have low response rates, at 33-42%. This introduces non-response bias, meaning that the people answering the survey risk being different than the people not answering the survey. Statistics Sweden's analysis of non-response bias also confirms that there is systematic variation in who responded in the survey (Swedish Media Council, 2019b). I identified two ways of mitigating this bias: using weights provided by Statistics Sweden, which gives more importance in the analyses to people with the characteristics of being less likely to respond in the survey, or using the same variables as controls in the regression analyses, which gives similar results and thus removes the need for weights (Solon et al., 2015; Winship & Radbill, 1994). I chose the latter procedure, barring one variable, disposable income, which was collinear with other variables, reported differently during different years, and was composed partially of other variables in the analysis. In Study I, I also repeated the analysis with weights, which led to some changes in estimates, but with the same interpretation of general patterns in the data. Furthermore, by adding weights, one does not remove all bias. Even though it is an educated guess that people

outside of the sample would answer similarly to those in the sample, we do not know this for certain. Ideally, such weights' should also contain some knowledge about the key variables (Groves, 2006). As the effect of non-response can vary for different variables within the same survey, one would then need to know the real value of the variable in question (Hedlin, 2020). Similar challenges of not knowing what individuals actually would answer, or why they would not answer certain questions, remain with multiple imputation methods, where one estimates the most probable response based on how other people have answered questions. One solution, although suggested for studies with strong causal ambitions, is to limit the range of one's analysis to the people who actually partake in the study and the information they provide, the *in-sample correlations* (Schuessler & Selb, 2025), while being aware of the limited generalizability of the results. Using this heuristic, the results from Studies I and II can be interpreted as being limited to the samples used, resting on the knowledge that it was collected rigorously with the aim to generalize to the larger population.

Study III uses qualitative analysis of interview transcripts. The analysis focused on the thought structures provided by the participants, rather than their actual behavior, and aimed for inductive discovery, saturation and conceptual development rather than comparisons of subgroups of parents or children, or prevalence of certain individual characteristics. This approach to analysis is appropriate for the size of the participant pool, and the homogeneity within those participants, and is in line with what has previously reported as feasible with this type of data and amount of participants (Deterding & Waters, 2021; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Small, 2009).

5 Ethical considerations

The research conducted in this dissertation has been granted permission by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, decisions no. 2020-01531 and 2023-03762-01, guided by the ethical guidelines set out by The Swedish Research Council (Åkerman, & Vetenskapsrådet, 2024). Data management has been performed in accordance with the GDPR, involving safe storage of data in digital environments at Stockholm University. All participants involved in data collection have agreed to participate, and have beforehand been presented with formalized information about participating in the studies and their right to withdraw. Statistics Sweden collected data for Studies I and II on behalf of the Swedish Media Council (see Swedish Media Council, 2019), whereas the author collected all data for Study III. All

participation is anonymous, and the results focus on presenting general patterns, with great care to protect individuals' anonymity.

6 Abstracts

6.1 Study I

Gaming and social media are popular activities among children and youth, while their relationship to individuals' background is understudied. This study analyzed how the relationship between parents' education, gaming and social media use varies across age and gender, using cross-sectional survey data from Swedish children and adolescents aged 9-18 (N=6,321) combined with population register data. When simultaneously considering age and gender, sharp differences arose among the older participants. Boys aged 16-18, coming from a home with higher educated parents, had half the predicted probability to spend at least four hours gaming on a regular day, compared to boys whose parents had the lowest level of education. Similarly, girls aged 16-18 having the highest educated parents were half as likely to spend four hours on social media on a regular day. Among children aged 9-12, social media as well as gaming habits differed more across gender lines than by parents' education. These results unveil a relationship between social background and digital media habits, where the gap between adolescents of different backgrounds grows with age.

6.2 Study II

Digital media use among adolescents is widespread and varied, taking up prominent space in everyday lives. Yet it is largely unknown how digital media use fits together with other activities. Building upon Giddens' concept of lifestyle sectors, and borrowing from theories of the digital divide, this study investigates how combinations of digital and offline activities can be combined into types, then related to social background and digital self-efficacy. Using latent class analysis on survey data from adolescents (ages 13-18) in Sweden, I identified three types of leisure use: 'offline entertainment', 'gamers', and 'high media users'. These groups showed internal coherence within the reported activities, crossing the offline-online divide and question the assumption that digital media automatically displaces other activities. The group with most varied use, 'high media users', had the highest digital self-efficacy, although differences between classes were modest. Furthermore, the 'offline entertainment' class was most likely to have higher educated parents. Two of the classes showed stark gender

differences. These findings contribute to the literature by showing coherence in activities over the online/offline spectrum, with gaming standing out as a unique activity, and linking higher digital self-efficacy to varied, rather than monotonous, use.

6.3 Study III

Digital media devices and their applications form a ubiquitous part of children's lives. Meanwhile, parents are tasked with making sense of, and managing their children's digital media use to facilitate individual development, social experiences, and protecting them from harm. How do parents approach their children's digital media use? This study draws on qualitative interviews with parents in Sweden to develop a framework for understanding the role of digital media in the everyday lives of contemporary families. By considering to whom the child directs their use, this framework adds context to hopes, worries and challenges that parents report. Furthermore, parents respond to this digital embeddedness by trusting their own capacity and tailoring approaches to the child's individual traits, while considering the effects this can have on their social lives. Ultimately, this work illustrates a tension between individual action and social structure, where families' room for action is challenged by their social networks. These findings can be applied to future discussions of parenting in the digital age.

7 Concluding remarks

The studies in this dissertation approach children and adolescents' digital media use from different perspectives, using a multi-methods approach. In this work, I have discovered several notable patterns, on different levels of analysis.

In Study I nuanced the oft-reported claim that children of lower SES report higher levels of recreational digital media use. While, among younger children, there were no differences in self-reported social media or gaming use within boys or girls among children aged 9-12, these differences became larger among adolescents, and largest among adolescents aged 16-18. While the type of digital media used were different for boys and girls, patterns were similar for both genders. Thus, this pattern suggests that SES differences grow during ages when parental supervision is lower, and children's freedom to choose what to do with their time is higher. This is a pattern whose significance goes beyond digital media use, and I report on instances where similar patterns arise. I provide tentative explanations as to why these

differences develop, but these are just guesses since they are outside of the model. Future research should aim to explain the mechanisms driving this phenomenon, and if these differences persist when adolescents turn into young adults.

Furthermore, due to the difficulties in proving the causal effects of digital media use, I have tried to keep a neutral voice regarding possible implications of these differences in intensive gaming and social media use. Depending on what future findings hold, these findings could be interpreted as part of explaining a newer form of inequality, or a springboard to explain differences in leisure activities.

In Study II, I departed from the idea of lifestyles: that there is some internal logic to people's behavior which forms individual patterns, while these patterns can be discernable in among a larger population. As I only studied leisure, or after-school-activities, I used Giddens' (1991) concept of lifestyle *sectors*. The three latent classes, or lifestyle groups discernable from the data at hand, did show internal consistency, where one group reported lower digital media use, and higher on offline activities, while also reporting to read more, and use text-based digital media more. Meanwhile, another group reported a pattern where they did a lot of everything, most notably watching more TV/movies than the other groups, listening more to music and using social media more. The third group, which I labeled 'gamers', is a group whose most notable feature is that they are more likely to report more time spent gaming, while doing less of both digital media use and other things. By combining offline and online activities, we get a broader view of how these teenagers view their time spent on leisure. These findings can be interpreted as challenging the displacement effect (Neuman, 1988), where screen time eats up time spent on other activities. For more substantive support for a displacement effect, one could envision more groups with a pattern more in line with, or the inverse of, the *Offline entertainment* group. The findings also suggest gaming as a singular activity which does not spur intensive use of other digital media activities.

Although reporting of the findings in studies I and II have pointed out differences between groups in their leisure activities, there are also many similarities within those groups, suggesting cohort- or age-related commonalities between these groups. Study I shows many similarities in reported intensity of use within age-groups, and sometimes also between genders. Similarly, in Study II, for several indicators, groups show similar tendencies, such as spending time on forums being rare for all three groups, and all groups report watching online video clips. Thus, the interpretations are best viewed as differences in relation to each other.

Study III used qualitative analysis of interviews with parents. In this study, I examined hopes and worries among parents to middle-school-age children, and the challenges which come with parenting around digital media use. I argue that the social context is a primary concern for parents, and that this transcends different types of platforms. In doing so, I seek to widen the scope of parental mediation, which mostly covers solitary, private use. I also highlight a tension orienting one's parenting between the needs of the individual child, the sociability of digital media, and the role that the families' social networks play in deciding around children's digital media use. It is my intention that the framework presented can be used to better articulate and analyze the challenges of parenting around children's digital media use.

Summarizing the contribution of this thesis, I present three studies which all highlight that even though digital media use can be performed in solitary, patterns reproduce between individuals along institutions which predate digital media, such as SES and gender, that it can be varied and homogenous at the same time, and that it is interwoven into the social fabric which makes it difficult for individuals to deviate from the norm. I hope this helps establish digital media use as a topic for further sociological inquiry.

8 References

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