



How Online Role Models, Gaming and Social Media Affect Youth with Special Needs in the Areas of Time Spent and Finances

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1 Introduction

This report aims to summarize the available studies reviewed in order to provide insights into the gaming and social media activities of young people. Gaming and social media have become an integral part of the lives of many young people. Social media is the modern digital home of millennials and centennials therefore it is necessary to investigate gaming and social media related time and money consume of young people as well as particular content and role models transmitted through youth relevant social media channels. Furthermore, this report gives information about legal framework and security related to social media and gaming platforms.

According to the Consumer Centre (in German: *Verbraucherbildung*), the German games industry generated 9.87 billion euros in 2022. Almost half of this, around 4.5 billion euros, was generated through in-game and in-app purchases. Players spend money during the game on digital content such as additional levels, special equipment or in-game currency to improve their game progress (Verbraucherbildung 2023). The relevance of dealing with the time and money consume of youth on the internet is also shown by the statistics: 88 percent of young people are online every day in their free time (2022: 84%, 2021: 88%), 8 percent at least several times a week and only 4 percent use the Internet less often. Daily use of the Internet increases with age: 81 percent of 12- to 13-year-olds and 90 percent of 18- to 19-year-olds are online every day.

The Corona pandemic contributed greatly to the fact that the online presence of young people is increasing sharply. In 2019 the average online usage time in their free time of 12- to 19-year-olds was 205 minutes per day according to their own estimates. In 2020, this figure rose to 258 minutes. In 2021, the average time spent online was still higher than before the pandemic at 241 minutes per day, although there was a decline compared to the previous year (mpfs 2023: 23). The available studies reviewed for this report provide information on how much time young people spend on gaming and social media. However, studies and data regarding the target group of this report “young people with additional needs” are missing. The available studies (e.g. mpfs 2023; Post Bank 2024) either look at young people in general without any differentiation and provide general information about young people or differentiate between learners of high schools (in German: *Gymnasium*) and secondary schools (in German: *Real- und Hauptschule*). The data on media consumption by young people with additional needs are not discussed.

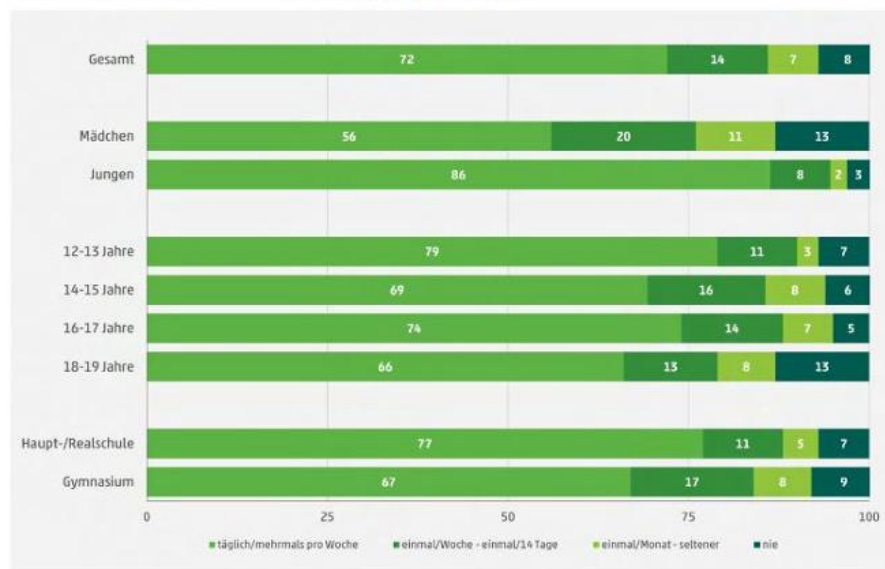
2 Gaming

[Research question: What kind of games over which platforms are played by the target groups?]

Networking opportunities on the Internet made it possible to play and connect with gamers from all over the world. This development contributes to the great popularity of online games¹. The huge importance of digital games in the everyday lives of young people was confirmed in the “JIM-Study 2023”. Only 8 percent of 12- to 19-year-olds say they never play digital games. Overall, 72 percent of young people play regularly, regardless of whether they play on a computer, console, tablet or smartphone (mpfs 2023: 47). Figure 1 “Digital Games: Frequency of Use 2023” describes the usage of digital games on computer, console, tablet and on smartphones in Germany among girls and boys at the ages 12 13 years. According to this figure 72 percent of all asked young people use digital games every day (boys 86 %) and girls (56 %). As the figure illustrates, young people spend most of their time playing these games. In terms of school types, students attending secondary schools tend to spend more time gaming than those attending high schools.

Digitale Spiele: Nutzungsfrequenz 2023

– Computer-, Konsolen-, Tablet- und Smartphonespiele (netto) –



Quelle: JIM 2022, Angaben in Prozent, Basis: alle Befragten, n=1.200

Figure 1 Digital Games: Usage frequency 2023 – Digital Games on Computer, Console, Tablet and on Smartphones (netto) – Source: mpfs 2023: 48.

¹ According to Newzoo Global Games Report (2022) in 2022, there were around 3.2 billion gamers worldwide (430 million in Europe).

2.1 Relevant Games and Platforms

In Germany, according to the European Consumer Centre Germany (in German: *Europäische Verbraucher Zentrum Deutschland*, EVZD), half of the population now plays computer and video games. People play in all age groups. The most popular platform is the smartphone (22.6 million), followed by the game console (17 million), the PC (15.2 million) and the tablet (9.9 million) (EVZD n.d.).

Digital games are especially very popular among boys and boys play much intensively than girls. However, more and more girls are playing these games and therefore girls have now also become an important target group for digital games (mpfs 2023: 50).

Figure 2 describes the “Popular digital Games on Computer, Console, Tablet and on Smartphones 2023” in Germany. Data shows that “Minecraft” is the most popular game among young people in 2023. “FIFA” is in second place. “Fortnite” is in third place. Fourth place is shared by “Mario Kart”, “GTA - Grand Theft Auto” and “The Sims”. The other ranks are followed by “Super Mario”, “Hay Day”, “Call of Duty”, “Clash of Clans”, “Candy Crush” and “Roblox”. Different games are sometimes popular among girls and boys. Boys clearly agree on “Minecraft”, “FIFA”, “Fortnite” and “GTA - Grand Theft Auto”. Girls’ favourite games are according to the study: “The Sims”, “Hay Day”, “Mario Kart”, “Candy Crush”, “Roblox”, “Subway Surfer”, “Super Mario” and “Hogwarts Legacy”. As people get older, the popularity of “Minecraft” and “Fortnite” decreases, while “GTA - Grand Theft Auto” becomes more popular. The same games are popular by young people visiting secondary and high schools (mpfs 2023: 50-51).

Liebste Computer-, Konsolen-, Tablet- und Smartphonespiele 2023

– Rang 1 bis 3, bis zu drei Nennungen –

	12-13 Jahre	14-15 Jahre	16-17 Jahre	18-19 Jahre
Rang 1	„Minecraft“ (32%)	„Minecraft“ (22%)	„Minecraft“ (21%)	„FIFA“ (14%)
Rang 2	„FIFA“ (18%)	„FIFA“ (16%)	„FIFA“ (13%)	„Minecraft“ (13%)
Rang 3	„Fortnite“ (15%)	„Fortnite“ (15%)	„Fortnite“ (10%)	„GTA - Grand Theft Auto“ (10%)

	Haupt-/Realschule	Gymnasium		Mädchen	Jungen
Rang 1	„Minecraft“ (21%)	„Minecraft“ (23%)	Rang 1	„Minecraft“ (17 %)	„Minecraft“ (27 %)
Rang 2	„FIFA“ (15%)	„FIFA“ (16%)	Rang 2	„Die Sims“ + „Hay Day“ (jew. 10 %)	„FIFA“ (24 %)
Rang 3	„Fortnite“ (14%)	„Fortnite“ (11%)	Rang 3	„Mario Kart“ (9 %)	„Fortnite“ (17 %)

Quelle: JIM 2023, Angaben in Prozent, Basis: Nutzer*innen von digitalen Spielen, n=1.107

Figure 2 “Popular Games on digital Games on Computer, Console, Tablet and on Smartphones 2023”. Source: mpfs 2023: 51.

2.2 Target Group Demographics and Behaviour when Gaming, including Time Spent

[Research questions: Who plays which games? (More males than females, regions? Is a specific game category more important with this target group?) How many in the target group play these games? (percentage, absolute number). When/how much time do youth spend playing these games? (per day/week etc., time of day)]

According to a “DAK-Study” (DAK 2019), even before the Corona period, 72.5 percent of young people in Germany regularly played computer games such as “Fortnite”, “FIFA” or “Minecraft”. It means more than three million minors. In total, almost 90 percent of all boys and a good 50 percent of girls play. According to an analysis by the German Centre for Addiction Issues at the University Medical Centre Hamburg-Eppendorf (UKE), 15,4 percent of young people using videogames show risky or pathological gaming behaviour.

According to “JIM-Study” on a weekday, young people estimate that they play digital games for an average of 92 minutes. Boys play an average of 119 minutes a day, almost twice as long as girls at 61 minutes. The amount of time young people spend playing digital games per day increases with age. On weekends, 45 percent of young people tend to play more

digital games, while 18 percent play less than on weekdays and 37 percent play the same amount as during the week (mpfs 2023:49).

The “DAK-Study” (DAK 2019) states that risky gaming behaviour can lead to increased problems at school. Eleven percent of risk gamers miss a week or more of school or training within a month. That is about three times more than for inconspicuous gamers. The young people affected have more emotional or behavioural problems. For example, about 21 percent of risk gamers report worries and fears, while only six percent of inconspicuous gamers did so. There are also differences in concentration, restlessness, and aggressive behaviour (ibid.). Young people with a lower level of formal education are predominantly spent more time on gaming (77%, high school: 67%) (mpfs 2023: 47-48).

2.3 Financial and Further Impact of Gaming

[Research questions: What are the costs and cost structure of these games? (initial purchase, pay to win, in app purchase). How much money does the target group spend on these games? (money spent per month, % of available income). What are known outcomes of the target group playing these games? (positive and negative – health, knowledge/learning, social)].

There are many dangers lurking in the incentives of gaming that can affect the amount of time and money young people spend. Children’s and young people’s self-control mechanisms are not yet well developed therefore they are viewed as risk group for developing addictive gaming behaviour (“Internet Gaming Disorder” or “Gaming Disorder”). Online-based multiplayer games in particular have a high density of incentives, for example: escaping reality/changing roles, peer pressure, rewards, recognition, challenges, competitions which can contribute to developing gaming related disorder. These risks are summarized in the “Risk Atlas” published by the Federal Centre for Child and Youth Media Protection (in German: *Bundeszentrale für Kinder- und Jugendmedien*, BzKJ) (Brüggen et al. 2022).

The “Risk Atlas” (ibid.: 162-164) describes that decisions about game investments are not made purely for financial reasons. The spending behaviour of children and young people can be influenced by manipulative game design. In-game purchases in games are made in game currency. Therefore, there is a risk that children and young people will lose track of their actual spending. Games can contain elements of gambling, e.g. loot boxes that can give rise to the risk of gambling addiction. Since when buying loot boxes, it is not possible

to determine in advance which game items they contain, the impulse can arise to keep buying new boxes. There is a risk that more money will be spent than planned through loot boxes. Furthermore, most games are initially released as free-to-play titles that are financed through the collection and sale of data (profiling and analysis), advertising and/or in-game purchases. The apparent free of charge offers are especially tempting for children and young people (ibid).

Cost traps are predominantly examined with regard to their potential for financial harm; however, their psychological implications are increasingly being recognised as equally significant. A large number of apps are initially offered for free use and download. The threshold for trying out these apps and special games is extremely low for children and young people who do not want to invest any money at first (ibid.: 164).

There are currently no available studies that specifically examine young people's spending behaviour². The most recent study found for the purpose of this report was published 2019 (DAK 2019). This study found that the average expenditure was 110 euros of young people between the ages of 12 and 17, with a peak value of almost 1,000 euros mentioned. According to the study of DAK, most of the money is spent on “Fortnite” and “FIFA”. Only part of the money went into buying the games themselves. According to the study, the young people also invested in special skills, additional characters or costumes in the game. Money was also often exchanged for play money so-called in-game currency. Moreover, the study pointed out that, in addition to loot boxes, games also offer other incentives to invest real money in the virtual world. In the popular football simulator “FIFA”, gamers can improve their team by buying new players. This can be done with “FIFA” coins that can be earned in the game - or even purchased in real life. Young people usually spend money on so-called in-game currency or on fun and decorative elements. Some gamers say they are most likely to invest the money for extras in loot boxes, which, like in gambling, “randomly” determine how the game continues. According to the addiction expert Thomasius, the risk group is much more willing to spend money on games. They put twice as much money into extras as inconspicuous players. More pronounced gaming behaviour is linked to more money expenditure in games (Riepe 2019).

² According to a recent study people in Germany spend an average of around 26 euros per month on video games (Bitkom Research 2023).

3 Social Media

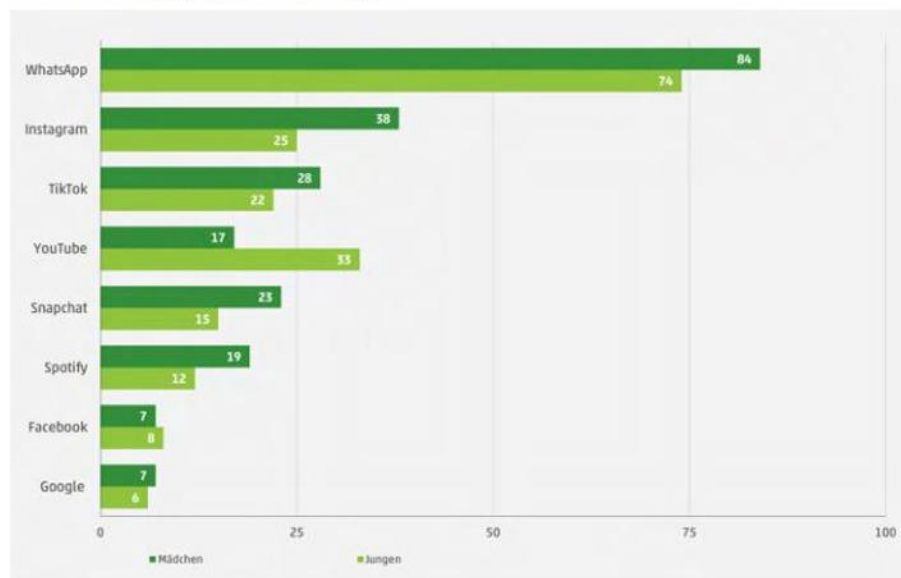
3.1 Relevant Social Media Channels and Social Media Functions

[Research questions: On which social platforms is the target group active? (TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram, new trends etc.). Which functions do they use? (watching content, producing content, text and socialise)]

Young people watch e.g. short and funny clips, “Let's Play” videos, videos in which creators talk about their everyday lives as well as videos about current news and events in the world, educational videos or tutorials and videos about sports, fashion or beauty. Young people can create and share videos on social media and leave comments. The “JIM-Study” describes Instagram, TikTok and YouTube with a widest reach among social media platforms (Figure 3) (mpfs 2023: 28). Instagram and TikTok are considered the most important apps by girls. YouTube plays a bigger role for boys (2023: 27). Especially short videos are very popular on social media platforms.

Wichtigste Apps 2023

– bis zu drei Nennungen ohne Antwortvorgabe –



Quelle: JIM 2023, Angaben in Prozent, Nennung ab 3 Prozent (Gesamt), Basis: Befragte, die ein Handy/Smartphone besitzen, n=1.162

Figure 3 “Most Important Apps 2023” Source: mpfs 2023: 28.

- **Instagram** was originally a photo platform, but now also allows the uploading of videos using so-called “Insta Stories”. The focus is on topics such as fashion, cosmetics, fitness and lifestyle. On this platform, young people can get in touch with their idols, see snippets of their lives and feel connected to them (Döring 2018).

- **TikTok** is a social network where users can upload short videos that they made themselves. The app is aimed particularly at children and teenagers. TikTok works with an algorithm that is much more sophisticated than other social networks. This algorithm decides what users see. The algorithm curates the main part of the app, the “For You” feed. A kind of television program tailored to the user. Users receive content tailored to them. The general trend and their own usage behaviour determine the values displayed (Brüggen et al. 2022).
- **Youtube** have been for long time the most popular internet address among young people. YouTube stars come from the areas of entertainment, gaming, music, sports and lifestyle (e.g. Döring 2015; Döring et al. 2018, mpfs 2020). The worldwide ranking of the most subscribed YouTubers is led by “Mr Beast” with around 289 million subscribers until July 2024 (Statista 2024).

3.2 Target Group Demographics and Behaviour on Social Media, including Time Spent

[Research questions: Who is active on the channels? (More males than females, regions? Is a specific channel more important with this target group?) How many in the target group are active on these medias? (percentage, absolute number) When/how much time do youth spend on social media? (per day/week etc., time of day)].

According to the “ARD/ZDF online study” (2023), 91 percent of young people between the ages of 14 and 29 use social media, with 66 percent using it daily and 25 percent weekly. (Figure 4).

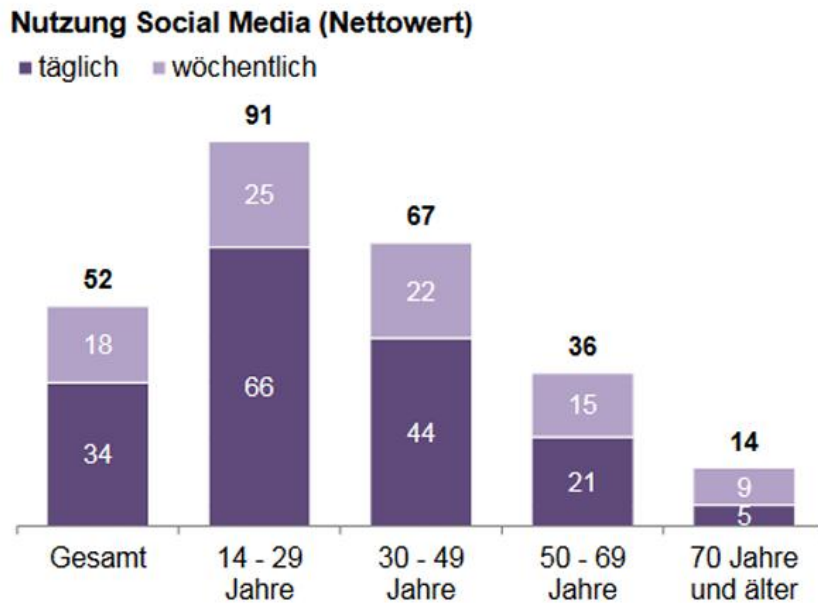


Figure 4 Social media use, figures in percent Source: ARD/ZDF-Onlinestudie (2023: 31).

3.3 Financial and Further Impact of Social Media Consumption

[Research questions: What are the costs and cost structure of these platforms relevant to the target group? (monthly fees, purchases over adds etc.) How much money does the target group spend over social media? (money spent per month, % of available income) What are known outcomes of the target group being on social media? (positive and negative – health, knowledge/learning, social, influence from role models, values, picture of self – keep short)]

It is widely recognized that social media offers influencers a powerful platform to showcase behaviors, communication styles, and attitudes that can shape the way young people think and act. Through their posts and shared content, influencers can promote certain role models and ideals that resonate with their young audiences. Children and teenagers actively follow these personalities on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok—watching their videos, liking their photos, and often trying to imitate their lifestyles. Influencers cover a wide range of topics, including gaming, lifestyle, fashion, beauty, comedy, and even personal moments from everyday life. These themes are particularly appealing to young people and can significantly shape their interests, values, and aspirations. Children and young people feel connected to the social media stars on YouTube, Instagram, in “Let’s Play” posts or in blogs and vlogs because they move in the same networks as their friends, which can lead to a mixture of social and parasocial relationships. The possibility of liking and commenting

on influencers' posts and, in the best case, receiving a response suggests friendly closeness and participation in their lives. The opinions and values of popular influencers can therefore be an important source of information for children and young people and can provide orientation when dealing with social issues. Influencer marketing tries to use this position of trust and the blurred dividing line between friendship and role model for advertising purposes (Brüggen et al. 2022: 149-150). Influencers often use influencer marketing to leverage the reach and reputation of social media stars and to achieve communication and brand goals. Many influencers offer their “own” product lines or are involved in online purchases by their target group via affiliate links. These marketing strategies help them to position their products in the best possible way for their target group (ibid.).

4 Role Models

4.1 Role Model Types and Values

[Research questions: What kind of role models do youth with special needs gravitate towards? Categories, specific examples, subgroups (differences between sexes etc.) What kind of values do these role models stand for? (capitalism, hedonism, Christian etc. – the overviews may provide ideas)]

The “JIM-Study” (mpfs 2023: 40) points out that the topic of “role models” is often discussed in connection with YouTube and similar platforms. Due to role of influencers as role models, they can have a strong influence on young people. In their posts, they often provide insights into their private lives creating a feeling of closeness and familiarity for their followers.

The most popular influencers according to the “JIM-Study” in ranking (mpfs 2023: 40):

1. “Julian Bam”
2. “Rezo”
3. “Bibis Beauty Palace” / “Gronk” / “Paluten”
4. “Lisa und Lena” / “Montana Black”
5. “Dagi Bee” / “Julia Beaux” / “Laser Luca” / “Pamela Reif”

In the following section this report introduces influencers listed in the “JIM-Study” (ibid.). This list of influencers will be expanded with additional influencers.

Examples for role model types:

“Purpose-driven influencers” - Influencers with a mission and message

According to the “JIM-Study” (mpfs 2023:40), half of the young people surveyed said that they follow so-called purpose-driven influencers (in German: *Sinnfluencer*). Purpose-driven influencers are known for campaigning and raising awareness about serious issues such as climate change, social justice or use inspiring topics to encourage people to live more sustainably, waste avoidance, food waste, animal welfare, but also topics such as body positivity.

- **Rezo** is a German content creator and entrepreneur. He became famous with his video “Destruction of the CDU” (in German: *Die Zerstörung der CDU*) which gained a lot of attention, sparked a political debate and triggered a broad social debate. In the numerous television talk shows following the European elections 2019, it was discussed that this Rezo video influenced the election results in Germany and further promoted the repoliticization of young people in Germany. Rezo has had his own channel on YouTube, with almost 1.75 million users which is mostly about music, including his own performances, covers, mashups or remixes. On his second channel “Rezo ja lol ey” he posts usually jokes and conversations with other YouTubers about line-ups, bizarre chat messages or hate comments (Wikipedia Rezo). On the second channel he has the opportunity to create more entertaining contents.

Entertainer

Successful influencers are also good entertainers. They speak the same language as their followers and deal with the same topics. They often even let everyone take a look into their private life and show their partners, friends or children.

- **Lisa und Lena:** Lisa and Lena are German influencers. The twins are among the most successful German stars on Instagram and TikTok. The Instagram account they recently ran together had around 20 million users. The profile has now been assigned to Lena. The joint account recently had 13.4 million followers on TikTok. They dance and show private everyday scenes as well as fashion on their channels.
- **Julian Bam:** He dances, sings, makes people laugh and films. He has turned his hobbies into his profession. Every week he publishes a new video on the Internet. Millions of people watch his videos. Julien Bam is a YouTuber and is one of the most famous YouTubers in Germany (Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg 2016).
- **Julia Beaux:** She is a German web video producer, influencer, actress, presenter, podcaster and singer. Julia Beaux is active in topics such as lifestyle and beauty. She likes to show fashion hauls and DIYs, or challenges with other YouTubers. In total, she has 2.4 million subscribers. She regularly publishes podcasts with casual conversations with other influencers (Wikipedia: Julia Beaux).

Gaming influencer

In recent years, social media has given rise to a plethora of new influencers and stars, including gaming influencers. A "gaming influencer" is someone who showcases and promotes video games and related products on platforms like YouTube or Twitch. They play video games, either solo or with others, and share highlights of their gameplay on social networks. These content creators have dominated the gaming world, amassing millions of fans along the way.

- **Gronkh** is a German web video producer, computer and video game journalist, computer game developer, voice actor, live streamer and entrepreneur. He produces "Let's Play" videos on YouTube in which he comments on and plays games himself. He is still one of the most subscribed YouTube channels in Germany (Wikipedia: Gronkh).
- **Paluten** has around 5.02 million subscribers on his channel. He is one of the most popular gaming influencers on YouTube (Statista 2024). Paluten is a German web video producer and has published several books for young people. He became famous by producing "Let's Play" videos (Wikipedia: Paluten).

- **Montana Black:** Monte is a web video producer and live streamer. In his performances he mainly plays Call of "Duty", "FIFA" and "Fortnite". He publishes several videos a week. Since 2018 he has been the biggest German-speaking gaming live streamer on Twitch (Wikipedia: Montana Black).

Body ideals and beauty

The perfect body that is shown in social media has a lasting impact on the understanding of beauty. Many young people are aware that the images and content of influencers are usually not created naturally, but with complex editing programs and a lot of staging. The desire of young people to emulate the ideal as best as possible is still present. Influencers practically encourage young people to set up strict meal plans, promote muscle building and put all their energy into purely external values. The body has become something that we can shape and change according to our ideas. Beauty in the form of full and shiny hair, tanned skin and a flawless, slim body is shown in numerous content (Schau hin n.d. a).

- **Bibi** has been running the YouTube channel "BibisBeautyPalace" since December 2012, on which she has published lifestyle, fashion and cosmetics videos. The channel is one of the most subscribed German-language YouTube channels. Bibi influenced a generation with make-up tutorials and shopping tips. 5.8 million people follow Bibi on YouTube and she has 8.5 million followers on Instagram. She is not only one of the first YouTubers in Germany with a large following, but also one of the first to discreetly integrate advertising into her videos. She recommends clothes and mascara, and shows how she puts items in her online shopping basket (Tagesspiegel 2024; Wikipedia: Bianca Heinicke).
- **Dagi Bee:** Today Dagi Bee has almost four million followers on the platform YouTube. She has also established herself as an Instagram star with over 6 million followers. She posts on topics such as lifestyle, beauty, fashion, travel and private matters.
- **Pamela Reif:** She is one of the most famous German influencers, sports influencers, models and author. Pam's topics are on Instagram: nutrition, workouts, fashion and make up. Gender roles

“Tradwives” and “Alpha Males”

Young influencers call themselves traditional wives or housewives and show that taking care of the home and house is the most desirable goal.

- **Malischka:** Malischka shares her daily life on social media. Malischka is 27 years old and used to work as a primary school teacher. She has been living with her boyfriend on Mallorca for several years. She describes herself as a “stay at home girl”. She presents herself as a conscious, modern young woman. In contrast, many influencers in the tradwife scene seem like characters from old black-and-white films. They wear neat smock dresses made of natural linen, floral blouses and flowing skirts. Surrounded by their happy children, they stir their sourdough in wooden bowls, lovingly arrange bouquets of flowers and never tire of praising the blessings of tradwife life in word and writing (Jordan 2024).

The counterpart of the “Tradwife”-phenomenon is the “Alpha Male” phenomenon. The alpha male is strong, intelligent, easily surpasses its competitors, and successful in his career, sports, or the fine arts such as dance, music and love.

4.2 Potential Impact of Role Models on Target Group

[Research questions: What kind of impact do these role models have? How extensive is this impact? (on target group value system, finances, behaviour, time spent etc.)]

Examples for potential impact of role models

Comparing the own life with life of influencers

Young people can try things out and compare themselves on social media. They can compete with the whole world on these platforms. Their role models on social media often have little to do with reality. Social media stars can optimize themselves and their life sections with image and video editing and leave an unreal or glamorous impression. Young people can compare their lives with the glossy lives of influencers. Their lives often seem

boring and complicated compared to social media stars. Therefore, even scrolling through influencer posts can create a bad feeling³. Many influencers convey beauty ideals, body trends or one-sided, outdated gender stereotypes. This can give children and young people the impression that a positive self-perception is only possible by fulfilling these ideals. When young people internalize this perfection of themselves, they sometimes feel enormous pressure. The demonstrative self-confidence and calls for self-determination by influencers are often associated with questionable advice: On the channels of fitness and beauty influencers, for example, you can also find tiny, inexhaustible meals or calorie tracking. At the same time, influencers link the ideals presented to consumption: They promote the ideology that everyone can manage to become “perfect” - as long as they buy the right products (Schau hin n.d. a).

The website Mediendiskurs (2023) points out that counselling centres for addiction prevention are overcrowded. Excessive use of social media is more likely to cause problems for girls. Regular comparison with other, apparently successful people can lead to feelings of inferiority⁴. If girls see that other successful women are much slimmer than themselves can trigger eating disorders.

Imitating

Many young people have a strong desire to become influencers and lead a perfect life as an online star. This can encourage young users in particular to publish pictures and clips of themselves online and give deep insights into their privacy. This can bring risks in terms of data protection, bullying or harassment. Celebrities on social media can act as a reference point for young people. They can incorporate certain characteristics of the stars into their behavioural repertoire. Furthermore, dangerous content can be shown on social media to cause imitation and possibly injury (e.g. challenges) (Schau hin n.d. a).

³ Children and adolescents often suffer from the fact that their peers on social media always seem to be more attractive and popular than they are. Studies have shown that this can trigger feelings of inferiority and depression in sensitive teenagers (Meyer 2022: 67).

⁴ Young people are considered particularly susceptible to bad influences because their value system is not yet fully developed. Social media all too often shows a glossy world with unrealistic ideals of wealth and beauty. These accusations have already been criticized in television and Hollywood films. This trend continues with social media stars, who often show a luxurious lifestyle with great styling, large apartments, expensive cars, exotic trips and all kinds of methods of self-optimization. This may give parts of the young audience a false worldview and value system (Döring 2018: 20).

Hidden advertisement

The influencer scene is characterized by advertising context and purchase appeals (Brüggel et al. 2022: 151). The website "Schau hin" (n.d. b) points out that advertising on social media is not always labelled. Influencers also test, evaluate and recommend products, services and other offers on behalf of companies. Influencer posts often have business interests behind them. This is not always easy for children to understand. Advertising is less transparent in social networks than in traditional media, especially since such posts are rarely marked as advertising at all and the marking varies in posts, videos, stories or from platform to platform. In addition, there are a variety of different forms of advertising, some of which are more and some less direct. So-called "hauls", in which influencers present purchases in front of the camera, quickly stand out as advertising. Indirect advertising messages are often very cleverly embedded in influencers' content - namely when the products are presented as if they were part of the influencers' natural world. Due to the great popularity of social media stars, such advertising messages can indirectly arouse desires to own something. Advertising messages from influencers usually have a big influence on children and young people (ibid.).

Choice of career

In addition to the admiration of fans, influencers also receive a lot of contempt - and of course envy. They are accused of being bad role models for young people (Döring 2018:19). Many young people would like to have the fame, reach, success and wealth of social media stars. According to Uhls and Greenfield (2012), the most important role model effect of stars lies in their choice of career: Most children today want to be famous, preferably as a social media star. Döring (2014) emphasizes that the effort and time involved in producing short videos is often ignored in these wishes. She emphasizes that being or becoming a social media star is a full-time job. It requires many skills that young people need to be successful, such as: a convincing personality, a likeable appearance, constantly new ideas, very regular and technically professional content production or intensive interaction with the audience (ibid.). Adapting these skills young people can develop further themselves. However, it is not stated what impact these wishes would have on school performance.

Effecting Gender Equality

Social role models influence how users perceive the world. A study from 2019 shows that social media has an impact on gender equality. According to the report “Role models in social media and their impact on equality” more intensively young people use social media, more they think in stereotypical role models. This was the result of a survey of 1,000 young women and men in Germany between the ages of 14 and 32. The children's rights organization “Plan International” asked them about their user behaviour on Instagram, YouTube and Facebook as well as their views on role models and equality. A third of the girls and women surveyed, as well as over half of the boys and men who use Instagram, Facebook and YouTube on a daily basis, think it's OK that women earn less than men for the same work. When it comes to the distribution of roles in everyday life, a similar trend can be seen: 57 percent of men and 35 percent of women believe that housework is still a woman's job. In addition, the so-called “heavy users” seem to place more value on classic ideals of beauty: women should primarily be slim and pretty, men above all muscular and well-built. The current study (Ipsos 2024) confirms the impact of social media on equality. According to the “Ipsos-Study”, the trend towards a return to traditional social role models can be observed, especially among younger people. More than a third of millennials think that a man who stays at home and looks after the children is unmanly.

Positive Effects

In connection with social media and influencers, only negative influences are often highlighted. But enthusiasm for influencers can also have positive effects: In youth, idols help with the separation process and the search for identity. The large number of influencers covers almost every hobby and every phase of life: whether DIY, books, sustainability, travel, pets, plants, music or art - with specialist knowledge for almost all interests. Young users can therefore also learn something new and expand or specialize their knowledge. Likewise, many internet personalities with different backgrounds or sexualities report on their everyday lives. Role models can also be a good thing in principle and present diversity outside the norm. In communities of influencers, young people can also meet like-minded people and feel a sense of community (Schau hin n.d. a). Young people can acquire or improve their foreign language skills by watching videos or by communicating with others. The positive effects of social media on English language skills are widespread in Germany.

5 Legal Framework and Environment

5.1 National Legal Framework for Protecting Youth in the Area of Online Risks

[Research question: What is the legal framework for protecting the target group and youth in general from the consequences of gaming and social media? Define the most important points and link out for more information.]

Gaming and social networks are not suitable for all ages. The use of popular services is subject to age restrictions imposed by the providers, which can be found in the terms of use. Legal requirements for the minimum age in social media apps: Requirements for the age restriction of social media apps arise from the Youth Media Protection State Treaty (in German: *Medienstaatsvertrag*) and the Youth Protection Act, which are intended to protect children and young people from certain content.

According to Federal Centre for Youth Media Protection (in German: *Bundeszentrale für Kinder- und Jugendmedien*, BzKJ 2024a) the “Digital Services Act” has been in force since 2024 and offers uniform regulations across Europe for the protection of children and young people in digital services. This includes requirements for providers of online services for the structural protection of children and young people e.g. for cyberbullying, sexual violence and radicalization in online platforms. The Digital Services Act (in German: *Digitale-Dienste-Gesetz*, DDG) specifies the implementation of the European regulation for Germany (ibid.).

The German Youth Protection Act (in German: *Jugendschutzgesetz*, JuSchG) obliges providers of online platforms to take special protective measures for children and young people within their services.

Structural precautionary measures

JuSchG, which implement Article 28 Paragraph 1 of the European Digital Services Act (DSA) and thus to guarantee a high level of security, privacy and protection. The regulations apply to platforms that are accessible to children and young people [Federal Ministry of Justice (in German: *Bundesministerium für Justiz*, BMJ) JuSchG § 24a Vorsorgemaßnahmen]:

- Reporting and remedial procedures through which children and young people can easily report e.g. harassment. Aim: To discover harmful acts and actively combat bullying, sexual assault or hate speech.
- Secure default settings that ensure, e.g., that children and young people can no longer be easily found or contacted by third parties using their profiles.
- Provider-independent help and reporting centres that offer quick and professional support if required.
- Provision of technical means for age verification for user-generated audiovisual content, to ensure age-appropriate access.
- Instruments for parents and other persons with parental responsibility to accompany the offer, in order to provide them with control options over the media use of children and young people as part of their care.

Data Protection Regulation

Since 2018 the European General Data Protection Regulation (EU GDPR) (in German: EU DSGVO) has regulated that personal data of children and young people is particularly worthy of protection. Providers such as Instagram, Facebook or TikTok are not allowed to evaluate personal data of minors in order to show them personalized advertising (Brüggen et al. 2022).

Visible age ratings

In the frame of Youth Protection Act (JuSchG) in order to ensure better protection for children and young people, film and game platforms are obliged to provide their offers with a perceptible age rating. The labelling requirement serves to create transparency and orientation about the actual development-promoting effect of online content for children and young people. However, the obligation only applies to those film and game platforms where responsibility for the content is attributable to the provider (BzKJ 2024b). More information about youth protection in Germany can be found on the webpage of Federal Agency for Children's and Youth Media (<https://www.bzkg.de/>) can be found.

5.2 Highlights and Issues with the Legal Framework

[Research question: What are the issues here? (Incomplete legislation, difficulties to implement, not fitting to target group, etc.? Are there any positive points to mention – new development etc.?)]

Examples for incomplete legislation:

Age ratings and access restrictions

Most social networks are permitted for people aged 13 and over. Young people under 16 or 18 also need the consent of their legal guardians to register. However, this consent is not explicitly checked during registration. These incomplete regulations raise questions about the evaluation of personal data and personalized advertising for children and youth.

Age ratings in app stores do not always correspond to legal requirements or the information in the terms and conditions. Even if an app is approved for ages 0, it may still contain adult content. Advertising or certain functions via in-app purchases may also be unsuitable for young people (Brüggen et al 2022).

Algorithmic recommendation systems of online content

Online platforms use algorithmic recommendation systems to suggest additional content and apply data processing procedures. The aim of these procedures is to present an offer that is as closely tailored as possible to personal interests (personalization). By introducing certain content such as health-endangering challenges, self-harming behaviour, extremist content, fake news, conspiracy theories, online advertising and advertising violations, as well as pornography and immorality, there is a possibility that algorithmic recommendation systems may have a risk-enhancing effect. This content may not only be relevant in terms of opinion formation, but content relevant to child and youth media protection can also be highlighted via algorithmic recommendation systems (Brüggen et al. 2022: 101-103).

Unlimited access

Health and developmental risks correlate with increased daily use of electronic media, especially in younger age groups (ibid: 155). Social media can cause addiction but there are no legal time limits on social media use.

Hidden Advertising

On social media platforms the boundaries between commercial and individual communication structures are not clear. Unmarked product placement and other forms of covert advertising are therefore commonplace on the Internet (ibid.: 167).

5. 3 Cyber Criminality as an Aspect of Financial Impact

[Research question: How extensive is the issue and impact of cyber criminality for this specific target group and what is done to protect them?]

Young people do many things in their daily lives online. These activities can be very diverse and include such as online shopping, online banking, homework, writing and reading messages, social interactions, commenting, posting and online gaming. They also tend to share their lives unfiltered on social media. Therefore, it is important that they learn about the cyber threats that can lurk online, and young people know how to ward off or minimize these risks.

Examples for cyber criminality with financial impact:

Being hacked

Identity theft involves financial risks when paid contracts are concluded in an abusive profile. Violations of personal rights and damage to reputation are potential risks that can accompany identity theft. Brüggemann et al. (2022: 145) identify three risk dimensions of identity theft: firstly, making financial transactions using the stolen identity, secondly, unauthorized access to personal data and thirdly (non-commercial) actions in the name of the person concerned online. The media phenomenon of identity theft “being hacked” is very diverse and can be associated with phenomena such as cybergrooming, cybermobbing (also cyberbullying), cyberstalking, excessive self-presentation, fake profiles or fake accounts, cost traps, profiling and evaluation, viruses and malware (ibid.: 146). The Federal Office for Information Security (in German: *Bundesamt für Sicherheit in der Informationstechnologie*, BSI) provides information on risks and protective measures on its website for parents and guardians (BSI n.d.).

6 Best Practice Providers

(Note: Find two best practice educational providers. These educators/organisations should specialise in education and risk prevention in social media and gaming and have experience with the target group. Preferably, that have some knowledge of the financial and time aspects. They should also be free of questionable economic interests, such as being financed by a gaming company. Shortly describe the best practises and explain your choice.)

There are numerous guides and information websites related to gaming and social media on the internet. These websites provide numerous tips in media education and skills development in dealing with online and offline digital media. It is sometimes difficult to keep track in the information jungle.

Klicksafe

“Klicksafe.de” is an independent information portal initiated by the EU for more security on the internet. It offers a wide range of current information, practical tips and helpful materials on digital media and topics. “Klicksafe” has a very comprehensive and informative website on various topics related to the internet, such as sexual harassment of minors on the internet, class chat, influencers, war images and agitation, addiction potential and much more. The organisation implements comprehensive campaigns and the development of concepts for nationwide qualification measures for teachers and specialists. It also supports training courses for children, young people, parents, teachers and specialists on the opportunities and risks of the internet. The target group is mainly teachers and parents, but children and young people can also get information here. “Klicksafe” works with different formats: It provides materials, podcasts and webinars (<https://www.klicksafe.de>).

Ins-Netz-gehen

“Ins-netz-gehen.info” offers information, help and advice for parents, teachers and specialists and contributes to media education. The organization provides a comprehensive range of information and advice on the digital media world and responsible media use on its portal. In addition, parents and teachers can use resources such as the advice centre

database or email advice to obtain professional advice in individual cases (<https://www.ins-netz-gehen.de>).

Websites (such as “Klicksafe” or “Ins-netz-gehen”) which educate and provide information about gaming and social media provide a wide range of useful information. However, parents, teachers, youth educators, and young people often have to sift through many pages to find the specific information they need. As a result, these websites are better suited for professionals who can quickly process and filter this kind of content. It remains unclear whether children and young people find these sites helpful or use them at all. Most of these platforms focus on delivering information rather than offering interactive or educational content specifically designed for young users, who are often not their primary target audience.

6.1 Medienscout MV

The project addresses issues related to media use such as uploading copyrighted photos and videos to YouTube and other platforms or illegal film and music downloads. The “Media Scouts MV” project shows the opportunities that the media world offers, but also its risks. It supports people in dealing with it in a self-determined, critical but also creative way. The project works with “peer education” – selected young people are trained in how to use digital media and pass on their knowledge to classmates, friends, and peers. The project is coordinated by the State Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information MV (in German: *Landesbeauftragter für Datenschutz und Informationsfreiheit MV*). The project targets teachers and specialist as multipliers who should provide support to young people in passing their acquired knowledge to their peer group.

The training of young people includes participation in four workshops with topics:

- 1) Cybercrime: Young people receive information about the “online reporting center” in connection with cybercrime, insights into the cooperation of law enforcement authorities on the topic of “cybercrime”.
- 2) Copyright, raising awareness of the handling of third-party data and questions about file sharing, YouTube, uploading your own content, data trail on the Internet.
- 3) Cybermobbing: Young people are educated about cyberbullying, forms of cyberbullying, its effects and legal aspects.

- 4) Computer games: risks or opportunities of computer games, youth protection, computer games as a meeting place.

The training of young people takes place on one weekend twice a year. After these workshops, the young people should be able to pass on the knowledge they have acquired to their peer group (<https://www.medienscouts-mv.de/>).

6.2 MMT Academics

The organisation MMT Academics focuses on educational initiatives in areas such as financial literacy, and the impact of gaming and social media. Their work emphasizes inclusive projects, particularly those supporting labour market integration and social participation. The goal of their educational programs on gaming and social media is to provide preventative support, helping young people build everyday life skills and develop a conscious, informed approach to digital media use. MMT Academics works with interactive workshops which has specific focus on promoting psychosocial skills. The workshops they offer provide support in regulating and reflecting on emotions and well-being in connection with gaming and social media use. They raise awareness of the potential dangers and risks associated with these media. The workshops cover a variety of topics, including the differences between the 'real' and the digital world, health risks, cybercrime, cyberbullying, online challenges, the hero status of influencers, mindful screen time use, violence in games, and the costs of in-game and in-app purchases. MMT Academics works with young people incl. young people with additional needs in learning development. They offer both short- and long-term educational measures and implement educational programs based on the concept of peer education. MMT Academics have become an integrated part of education in numerous schools. Through the large number of young people reached, MMT was able to gain a wealth of experience and expertise (<https://www.mmt-academics.de>).

6.3 Choice and Reflection

[write a short reflection on your finding – many good choices? Why did you choose the best practice as you did?]

Both, the project “Medienscout” and the organisation “MMT Academics” are specialised in education and risk prevention in the field of social media and gaming. They are also free of questionable economic interests, such as being financed by a gaming company.

“Media Scouts MV” works with an innovative approach “peer education”. The focus of this training project is more on data protection, cyberbullying and how to report internet crime. Role models or financial impacts of gaming and social media are not addressed in the description of the project.

“MMT Academics” has expertise in working with the target group of young people with additional learning needs, along with specialized knowledge of the financial and time-related aspects of gaming and social media. Furthermore, “MMT Academics” conducts seminars for teachers, youth social workers, and parents to raise awareness of these issues and to make a valuable contribution toward guiding young people in engaging with gaming and social media in a responsible and self-aware manner.

7 Summary, Discussion and Outlook

[Write a short reflection on what your most important findings and thoughts were. Which did you think were the most important findings and pressing issues? Why? This should help us find ideas for which core areas we should focus on for the interviews and rest of the project.]

This report highlights the living environments of children and young people in the context of advancing digitalization. These new digital spaces often demand considerable time and financial investment and are shaped by digital role models, presenting both risks and opportunities.

To ensure that young people can engage with digital media safely and participate actively in digital society, they require educational support tailored to their individual needs. However, educating children and young people alone is not sufficient; parents, teachers, and youth workers must also be equipped to provide active guidance and support.

It is therefore essential to clarify which aspects of digital media are regulated by the state and which fall under the responsibility of parents and caregivers.

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