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## Reframing research on children's rights and digital technologies

*LSE PhD researcher Zichen Hu uses the Digital Futures for Children centre's research database to show how research on children's rights in the digital environment is evolving from risk-centric narratives towards a goal of global, participatory research, and the gaps that remain.*

Children's rights in the digital environment are an urgent priority, for which high-quality research evidence is needed to inform policy and practice on a national as well as global level. The **Digital Futures for Children** centre's global **research database** addresses this need by providing a public library of curated resources on a range of topics related to **children's rights and digital technologies**, drawing on evidence from around the world.

The database particularly includes research from underrepresented geographies to address the overrepresentation of global North research on children and digital technologies. Existing research often focuses on Western contexts, sidelining how cultural, economic, and regulatory differences shape digital experiences. For instance, the impact of screen time on mental health may vary between highly regulated digital environments like China and less restrictive ones like the U.S., yet few studies examine these variations. This gap obscures the distinction between universal and context-specific challenges, hindering national, regional, and global policy development.

Based on a review of over two hundred resources included in our database, this blog identifies key trends and critical gaps in the current evidence landscape.

## Risks and Opportunities: Reframing the Discourse around Empowerment and Agency

The academic literature on children in digital environments remains predominantly risk-focused. Although it is of vital importance to determine how and if the internet is harming children, this tends to overshadow the opportunities for empowerment or agency that the digital environment may offer

children. Resources in the database reflect the multitude of risks and harms children face in the digital environment. For instance, cyberbullying has been linked to low self-esteem and suicidal ideation in **Egypt**, and AI chatbots are critiqued for their “empathy gap” and potential to foster emotionally harmful dependencies, as evidenced by recent tragic cases involving youth suicide in the **UK** and the **US**. Invasive digital advertising targets children as young as eight with manipulative content in **Australia**, from junk food to gambling, while algorithmic systems have been found to routinely expose young users to violent, frightening, or otherwise inappropriate material in the **US**. Research in the US, Canada and UK found that sexual and gender minority youth face heightened risks of **online discrimination** and **abuse**.

Yet while these risks are real and urgent, efforts to address them can marginalise children’s voices. For instance, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child’s **Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography** has been **criticised for failing to provide a preventive, child-centred and international framework** that can meet the global surge in child-sexual-abuse material. To avoid treating children as passive subjects of protection rather than active participants in shaping digital futures, attention to empowerment and agency is essential.

Agency – the capacity to act independently, and empowerment – the process of gaining authority, are distinct but related concepts, and neither is merely the absence of risk. Digital environments can simultaneously pose challenges and offer opportunities for growth. **Research shows** that children actively develop digital literacies and contribute to technology design, as seen in CCI studies where they participate as co-designers. Focusing on Belgium, Frau-Meigs **recognises** that algorithm literacy is a critical skill for navigating opaque systems, rather than viewing children solely as vulnerable users in need of protection, such approaches begin to position them as rights-bearing digital citizens, capable of engaging with and influencing the systems that shape their lives.

## Calling for Intersectional Analysis of Children’s Digital Lives

Research on and with children belonging to marginalised or minority groups (e.g., **transnational and comparative studies on foster youth**, and similar studies on **neurodivergent children**), etc.) highlights their globally unequal access to digital resources. These disparities disproportionately affect socioeconomically disadvantaged children, as seen in studies across **Latin America**, where digital access, literacy, and participation remain unevenly distributed.

However, intersectional perspectives remain underrepresented. While structural inequalities are frequently acknowledged (e.g., **infrastructure disparities**), there is comparatively limited attention to how categories such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and class intersect to compound children’s digital exclusion. Emerging work, including studies on **queer and racialised youth** in the Asia Pacific; and **South Africa**, demonstrates the value of intersectional analysis for understanding how online safety, algorithmic bias, and surveillance practices are experienced unequally across

identities. These gaps suggest that future research must do more to interrogate how overlapping forms of marginalisation shape children's digital lives in complex and often invisible ways

## Strengthening Participatory AI Research

While much existing research emerges in response to observed harms, the integration of participatory approaches into AI-related inquiry represents a productive step. This shift is particularly urgent as AI systems such as chatbots and **generative tools increasingly mediate children's digital experiences**. While equipping children with **critical AI literacy is an important step**, it remains insufficient if not paired with systemic safeguards that recognise children's emotional, relational, and cognitive vulnerabilities. For example, **Kurian's** work on the emotional risks of dependency on AI companions highlights the limits of technical fixes and the need for more holistic, socially grounded responses.

The adoption of participatory methods positions children not only as users or beneficiaries of the digital environment but as agents. **Savadova's** participatory research with young children in Azerbaijan foregrounds children as active co-producers of knowledge about their digital lives, challenging conventional research approaches underpinned by a logic of extracting data from participants. Such approaches also disrupt the dominant techno-solutionist orientation—exemplified by policy reliance on age assurance technologies in the UK and **critiqued for their ethical and practical limitations**.

## Expanding Research in Underrepresented Regions

What remains pressing is the need for contextually grounded, locally situated research that can illuminate how structural challenges (e.g., **poverty and inequality across Europe, Africa Latin America**); **infrastructural deficits across North, Central and South America**, and weak regulatory frameworks, etc.) are experienced and navigated on the ground. Such comparative research is crucial not only for documenting lived realities but also for informing culturally relevant and feasible policy interventions.

For example, rules governing children's digital media use often reflect deeply embedded cultural expectations. **Research conducted in South Africa and Ghana**, reveals that negotiations on mobile phone access center around concerns about social mobility, respectability, and generational boundaries. This stands in contrast to many European regulatory approaches, which tend to prioritise individual autonomy, privacy, and data protection. These differences shape how risks and benefits are experienced and perceived. Therefore, expanding research in underrepresented regions is not merely a matter of filling geographic gaps. It is essential for producing more equitable and context-sensitive knowledge systems that can shape global policies that are truly inclusive, rather than implicitly normative or Eurocentric.

To ensure children's rights in the digital age, research must move beyond reactive, risk-centric models and embrace participatory, context-sensitive, and globally inclusive approaches. The Digital Futures for Children global research database provides robust evidence for this shift by exposing empirical gaps, amplifying underrepresented voices, and reframing the discourse around empowerment and equity. Only through comprehensive, anticipatory research can we build digital futures that truly reflect and uphold the diverse realities of children's lives worldwide.

*This post gives the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

Featured image: Photo by [Chris Burgett](#) on [Unsplash](#)

### About the author



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Zichen Hu is a Research Associate at the Digital Futures for Children centre. Zichen (Jess) is also a PhD researcher at the Media and Communications Department, LSE where she studies dynamic networks and emergent publics of Covid-19 vaccine conspiracy theories via communities on 4chan, 8kun and Reddit.

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