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Digital Media and Children's Well-Being in Residential Care

Summary: This article analyzes data from a qualitative study that aims to investigate the well-being and vulnerability of children and adolescents in residential care. The empirical findings focus on the importance of digital media for children's and adolescents' well-being from their perspectives. The results highlight how smartphones enable more possibilities and the creation of digital spaces for the creation and maintenance of well-being, emphasizing social relationship as the basis for autonomy, identity, safety and agency. It also reveals the importance for vulnerability associated with digital media, including unwanted attention and harassment. The results call for a balanced approach of providing protection but still maintaining participation and thus cautioning against excessive control and punitive measures regarding digital media in residential care.

Keywords: alternative care, digitalization, well-being, vulnerability, childhood studies

1 Introduction

The mediatization and the concomitant digitalization of the lifeworld of children and adolescents constitute a topic in various fields of practice of social work (Tillmann, 2020; Unger, 2021). Digital media are indispensable when working with adolescents, because a large part of the communication happens there, as shown in research on open youth work (Kolbe et al., 2021; Reutlinger & Deinet, 2019) or on residential care (Burschel et al., 2022; Deitz et al., 2022; DigiPäd 24/7, 2022; Steiner et al., 2017). They have a major impact on well-being and fundamentally change the formation of childhood and adolescence (Danby et al., 2018; Deutscher Bundestag, 2017; Fattore et al., 2021b).

The always-on lifestyle made possible by this digitalization (Boyd, 2012; Tillmann, 2020) emphasizes the importance of digital media for children and young people in their everyday life. The spaces constructed with them and the resources that can be accessed via them are central to their lifeworld and the coping of their current everyday tasks. The following questions then arise: How do digital media influence the subjective well-being of children and young peo-

ple? In what way do digital media offer an expansion of children's and adolescents' possibilities for action or put them in precarious situations?

This article, therefore, deals with the importance children and young people attribute to digital media and their associated opportunities to produce well-being. From a child standpoint view the subjective meaning of digital media is shown for children's and adolescents' well-being in residential care. We are investigating these questions in the ongoing study "Childhood Vulnerability and Children's Understandings of Well-being" in the field of Swiss child and youth welfare, funded by the Swiss National Fund[1]. We interviewed a total of 56 participants, children and young people aged 8–14 years (21 female, 32 male, 3 queer) from three language regions of Switzerland. Of the participants interviewed, 33 live in residential institutions of child and youth welfare, and 23 children and young people use open offers of child and youth welfare, such as youth centers or other socio-cultural offers. In total, we were able to interview children from six cantons and twelve institutions. In this article, we focus on the results from residential care.

We talked to the children and adolescents using guided face-to-face interviews (Fuhs, 2012; Heinzel, 2012), which were conducted narratively to the greatest possible extent (Nohl, 2017; Rosenthal, 2015). As our project is part of the CUWB network (Children's Understanding of Well-Being, www.cuwb.org), we followed their research protocol (Fattore et al., 2021a). The guideline focuses on children's and adolescents' well-being and includes narrative-generating questions about important people, places, activities, and experiences, as well as the task of creating a drawing about them to be talked about during the interview. We extended these elicitation methods to include specific questions about vulnerability, safety, and experiences in the home. The qualitative interview study (Pohl & Pomey, 2023) did not explicitly ask about digital media or digital spaces. However, they were mentioned by children and young people in a substantial proportion of the interviews, which in turn emphasizes their importance in their lifeworld. As described, we asked about important places and activities and that's where digital spaces do get relevant for children's well-being. Precisely because the question of the significance of digital media was not asked directly, the phenomenon can be understood as a relevant result of the qualitative study. We designed it as a key category along the grounded theory methodology and analyzed the significance of digital media for well-being. In addition, the statements of children and young people also show how digital vulnerability can arise.

In the analysis, which we conduct using grounded theory (Pohl & Pomey, 2023; Strauss & Corbin, 1996), we work on subjective meaning following

symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 2013) and Thomas's theorem "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas & Thomas, 2018). We analyze the significance of digital media for well-being by using a coding approach (open, axial, selective coding) and examine how children and young people understand well-being, how they experience security and insecurity, when they feel uncomfortable and what makes them vulnerable from their point of view.

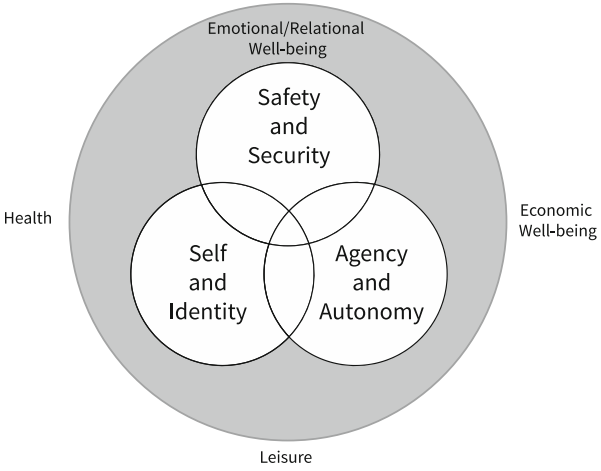
In this context, digital media are also crucial to children's and adolescents' well-being, especially in the residential context, as out-of-home placement creates a spatial separation from family and peers. Therefore, as a first step, this article links the topics of digital media and well-being and shows the relevance of the topic based on the current state of research. Subsequently, the significance of digital media for children and adolescents, both for their well-being and in relation to childhood vulnerability, will be discussed from the data. This is followed by analyses of some empirical examples of the use of digital media in residential care. Finally, these findings are discussed against the background of already existing findings and theoretical considerations.

1.1 *Digital Media and Well-Being*

As a theoretical frame for well-being we will be using the model introduced by Fattore and others (Fattore et al., 2016, p. 46). The model describes well-being from a children's standpoint of view which can be extended by a praxeological understanding of well-being practices in digital spaces. Its center consists of three interrelated main domains constituting well-being: autonomy/agency, self/identity, and safety/security. These three domains are built upon emotions and relationships, the background that constantly influences these three interrelated domains. "The three centrally placed domains are also connected with three additional themes, or what we refer to as dimensions, placed around the periphery of the circle. These dimensions refer to concrete areas of children's lived experiences evident in our analysis: economic well-being, health, and leisure. These domains of well-being are dealt with independently" (Fattore et al., 2016, p. 46).

With a closer look at relationships, children and adolescents name them to be of significant importance. Along with the relationships within families, those with friends are equally important for children's and adolescents' well-being (Fattore et al., 2016, p. 56–57). Children need the care of both family and friends and at the same time must be able to take care of them. The maintenance of these relationships has long since ceased to take place only in *analog* form because communications and the actions and interactions based on them

Figure 1 **Model of Children's Well-Being (Fattore et. al, 2016, p. 46)**



have been mediatized to a significant extent and therefore also take place in *digital* spaces (Krotz, 2007; Tillmann, 2020). This results in the always-on lifestyle already mentioned, in which children and adolescents are constantly connected and grow up that way (Turkle, 2011). Digital media are to be seen as an additional instance of socialization (Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2016, p. 198–199). Thus, the lifeworld of children and adolescents extends far beyond physical social spaces, such as the home, the immediate neighborhood, or school (Fattore et al., 2021b; Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Subsequently, it can be asked to what extent digitality affects well-being at different levels (Livingstone et al., 2015). This is because the almost innumerable possibilities offered by access to digital spaces can influence well-being both positively and negatively, which we present below (Kalmus et al., 2014). However, this influence depends on individual, social, and structural factors (Corsaro, 2014).

One of the most recent studies on the influence of digitality on the subjective well-being of children by Nadan and Kaye-Tzadok (2019) focuses primarily on the topic of relationships among peers. The virtual arena is "a place for complex social relations, including experiences of social exclusion and bullying alongside feelings of affiliation and social engagement" (Nadan & Kaye-Tzadok, 2019, p. 469). Digital spaces offer children and adolescents opportunities to negotiate peer relationships, stimulate identity processes, and experience themselves as capable of acting. The thus resulting experiences and relationships can have positive and negative effects on their well-being. Nadan and

Kaye-Tzadok (2019) also conclude that digitality is a meta-area in the discussion of well-being, as it influences all other areas of life, and they see a need for future research in this area. Mediatization and digitalization thus have a fundamental impact on subjective well-being by influencing its basis – relationships and emotions. At the same time, they also have a direct impact on the individual areas of well-being: they offer opportunities for agency and identity formation or change children's and young people's perceptions of safety and actual security.

1.2 *Children's Perspective: Digital Media in Residential Care*

If the use of digital media by children and adolescents is investigated, there are generally few findings that explicitly mention children and adolescents in residential care (Bernath et al., 2020; Deitz et al., 2022; DIVSI, 2014; Feierabend et al., 2020, 2021; Tillmann & Weßel, 2021). The findings of selected studies that explicitly refer to residential care seem ever more important and will now be summarized.

The cell phone fulfills several crucial functions for children and adolescents in residential care. Particularly important is the possibility of contact with the outside world, first and foremost with peers, followed by contact with the family (Behnisch & Gerner, 2014; Burschel et al., 2022, p. 80; Witzel, 2015). Precisely because the institutions are often experienced by children as "total institutions" (Goffman, 1973) the unlimited expanses of the digital world seem to become even more important for children in residential care. They cannot leave the physical space, often feel trapped there, but through digital media, the world is open to them again to a certain extent. In institutions, they often have few opportunities to appropriate physical space, which is why the digital world offers crucial opportunities, especially for contact searches. Digital media can also be used to overcome spatial separation and maintain contact with friends and family. This "staying in touch" despite spatial separation can offer safety/security and be recognized as an important action strategy for escaping vulnerable situations. Communication with friends serves as a means of exchange, as well as creating a sense of belonging, and is a form of actively shaping everyday life. Shaping one's own everyday life is expressed, for example, in the possibility of spontaneous dating. This is a way to achieve (more) autonomy (Behnisch & Gerner, 2014; Tillmann, 2018). If children and young people want to successfully cope with everyday life and participate in society, the use of digital media is therefore indispensable (Burschel et al., 2022, p. 67; Witzel, 2015). Digital media and digital spaces are thus central to creating free spaces and opportunities that contribute to personality development and to forming identity and relationships (Burschel et al., 2022, p. 82; DigiPäd 24/7, 2022). In addition, mediatiza-

tion and digitalization are changing the communicative actions of children and young people. For example, they can get in touch with their peers more quickly and via more channels, which in turn is also reflected in mutual expectations (Behnisch & Gerner, 2014).

Studies also show that children and young people growing up in residential care have less access to electronic devices and opportunities to use the Internet freely (Burschel et al., 2022, p. 61–65; Steiner et al., 2017, p. 7). In this context, children, and adolescents demand from professionals not only free access to Wi-Fi but also digital normality that goes hand in hand with this, as is the case in regular families. According to the children and young people in the study, professionals should be more open to digital media and build a digital network (Burschel et al., 2022, p. 69).

1.3 *Professionals' Perspective: Digital Media and Their Regulations in Residential Care*

Since digital media and its use in residential care depend a lot on the professionals it is paramount to also consider their perspective and how they handle digital media in residential care. Professionals often see themselves torn between enabling participation and the development of competencies and resources through digital media, and the demand to protect children and young people from digital threats (Tillmann, 2018; Witzel, 2020). Following UN Children's Rights, it becomes apparent that protection is emphasized more often than participation and provision (DigiPäd 24/7, 2022). In this context, the authors of the DigiPäd 24/7 study (2022) speak of the construction of "digital vulnerability." By this, they mean that children and young people are predominantly seen as vulnerable subjects in the digital space and that their opportunities for participation and agency are neglected. Instead of overprotection, children and young people's individual biographies and the media education they have experienced in this context should be considered. This is important, especially when it comes to provision and participation, in order to counteract disadvantages (Deutscher Bundestag, 2017, p. 324) and thus not widen the already existing digital divide (Kutscher & Iske, 2020). This is because children and young people who are growing up in residential care are often doubly disadvantaged due to biographical vulnerability experiences and institutional restrictions that make them vulnerable too (Pomey, 2017). The overemphasis on the risks of digital media then leads to additional structural disadvantages for these children. In addition to biographical and institutional vulnerability, they are also constructed digitally vulnerable, a fact of which professionals are little or hardly aware of.

The insufficient understanding of the mediatized lifeworld of children and young people leads to non-transparent and incoherent actions on the part of professionals: The withdrawal of the smartphone is used to sanction undesirable behavior not related to digital media. This cloudy professionalism can be found in several studies (Behnisch & Gerner, 2014; Burschel et al., 2022, p. 78–80; DigiPäd 24/7, 2022). This raises the question of (non)assumption of responsibility regarding media literacy education (responsibilization). Responsibilization means that it is hardly clear who is teaching media literacy to children and young people, as many shy away from the task and feel little responsibility.

In principle, a correlation can be established between the media competence of professionals and their attitude towards and work with digital media (Steiner et al., 2017, p. 9–10). If professionals have a higher level of media competence, they have a more positive attitude towards digital media and integrate them more actively into everyday life. They do specific media education work but also monitor and control media consumption to a greater extent (Steiner et al., 2017, p. 9–10). Regarding the above-mentioned responsibilization, the MEKiS study also reveals that not all institutions have concepts relating to digital media and that children and young people are rarely involved in the creation of such concepts (Steiner et al., 2017, p. 11). This may explain the sometimes unclear or even non-existent assumption of responsibility in areas of media literacy training. Thus there is a need for specific and broad knowledge, as well as appropriate training for professionals in this area (Steiner et al., 2017, p. 12–13; Wagner et al., 2019).

2 Empirical Findings: Importance of Digital Media for Children

The findings of our study show the importance of the smartphone as a physical-material basis for the construction of digital spaces that allow the initiation and maintenance of social relationships, enable participation, increase agency, and are a fundamental component of the habitus of children and adolescents. The resulting essential importance of the smartphone for the production and maintenance of well-being suggests that socio-pedagogical interventions concerning smartphone also directly influence the well-being of children and adolescents.

The following chapters show the children's views on the importance of digital media for their well-being and their vulnerability, as well as their views on the professionals' regulations.

2.1 Importance of Digital Media for Well-Being

In the data, digital spaces emerge as important and significant spaces in the lifeworld of children and young people. The smartphone represents a collection of

these spaces and opens access to a wide range of possibilities. These include the construction of one's own spaces, which, for example, serve as a retreat and offer space for private things or enable exchange with peers. The importance of the cell phone and the possibilities it offers can be illustrated with the following quote:

I: Tell me a bit about your phone.
M: It's just important, because I have everything on it, my life, pictures, contacts (.) just this stuff. (Marvin, L. 230–231)

Having everything – his whole life – on his cell phone is an indication that the smartphone is a central component and representation of Marvin's lifeworld; spaces and resources are made available through it. With the pictures, he can bring back memories, e.g., of his family (Marvin mentions the term "souvenir photos" later on). Contacts, in turn, stand for the central function of accessing social references that are not immediately and momentarily present in the physical environment. The conclusion he does not specify further ("just this stuff") could be an indication that no clear distinction can be made between analog and digital life worlds: On the one hand, the smartphone is very important for Marvin (here, "just" could be taken as a supposed taken-for-granted) and on the other hand, it is nevertheless difficult for him to name exactly what all happens via digital media, because it is interwoven with his everyday actions, which is also expressed by the statement that his life is on the smartphone.

Various interviews show that children and young people use cell phones to initiate and maintain social contact both in the analog/physical space and exclusively in the digital space. It is about maintaining friendships, but also about negotiating and conducting love relationships. Thus, when asked who she feels comfortable with, Emma tells the following story:

E: Erm, we saw each other on Sunday, and we exchanged our Snapchat and Instagram and in fact, he wrote me that he still loves me on Instagram, and I wrote him that I love him too, thus, we are together now and, erm, I will only see him on the weekend, well // Only on the weekend? // Yes, that really sucks // I understand // and so the most important person for me among my friends, that's him (Emma, L. 193)

The exchange of contacts via social media (Snapchat and Instagram in this example) allows the children to shift the relationship into digital space, as a substitute for not being able to meet physically. In this way, the mutual approach to each other can continue uninterrupted. The exchanges that take place in the

digital space are complementary to regular physical meetings. Emma's statements ultimately explain who is the most important among her friends (in response to the question of which people she feels comfortable with). She is not explicitly asked about the form of the relationship or the type of communication, and yet she details it. This, in turn, can be used to infer the naturalness with which Emma maintains social relationships via digital media.

How naturally children and young people generally integrate digital media and their use into their everyday routines can also be seen in the following quote, in which Damian answers the question of why he spends time on social media:

D: Well, it's with my friends, we see each other often there (Damian, L. 412)

The prerequisite of the simultaneous physical presence of friends in the same geographical location, which is indispensable for analog space, does not apply in digital space. Nevertheless, from the perspective of young people it is still possible to see each other ("we see each other"); Damian refers to the visual sense. This is an indication that children's and young people's perceptions are changing / have changed. They can see and meet their peers in both physical space and digital space. The focus here is not on a possible, qualitative difference in maintaining a relationship in digital or analog spaces, but much more on the lifeworld reality, whose possibilities expand with mediatization and digitization. By having them and their peers as "building blocks" for placement in different digital spaces, there is a multiplication of possibilities for networking. In terms of (re)combining data in digital space (Nassehi, 2019), networks are created and maintained (Wunder, 2021), which can be transferred to the analog world (retranslation to analog) and have their effects there.

Access to social relationships via digital spaces is basically empowerment for children and young people. They emphasize that smartphones are important for them to make appointments with friends. They thus express the desire to be able to decide for themselves if and when they contact them and then to act accordingly. Another adolescent gives the example that she locks herself in the bathroom at home with her smartphone to call her boyfriend when there is violence in the family. Two adolescents report that they need their cell phones to feel safe, and one adolescent specifies this and says that she needs her best friend to feel safe. If she is not present, then she needs her cell phone as a substitute to feel equally safe. Still, other adolescents talk about experiences of self-efficacy in games (for example, one adolescent reports how she has repeatedly beaten her boyfriend and the boys in her class and says that she feels strong

because of this), or how gaming serves to cope with stress or boredom. From these examples, it is evident that digital spaces can lead to the enabling and elevation of agency.

In relation to gaming, the experience of autonomy can also be identified:

I: And, what makes gaming cool?
L: Because it's a world which is unlimited a bit, like a world not restricted by one's own measures of objects and infinite, like or well not fully infinite, but you have so many possibilities that are exciting (Liam, L. 52–53)

The beginning of the statement "because it's a world" shows once again that digital space is definitely something real for children and young people, like a world that exists and can be experienced. It is clearly different from the physical-material world in which they exist physically. This digital world has something infinite, which does not follow their own standard rules. Therefore, it is less limited and offers more space for possibilities and autonomy: Autonomy in terms of place and one's actions, which are not subject to one's usual rules. Thus, games can offer spaces to withdraw and relax or to engage in daring adventures and experience shared stories with friends. Liam, for instance, quite naturally talks about good "experiences" or not-so-good ones while gaming with friends. Other young people want to give free rein to their creativity and talk about architectural projects such as building a church in Minecraft or a drone in Roblox.

Digital media are thus conducive to well-being in several ways. Children and young people locate resources important to them in digital media or access them using digital media. They initiate and maintain relationships and experience self-efficacy, agency, security, and autonomy.

2.2 *Importance of Digital Media for Vulnerability*

On various occasions, children and young people point out vulnerable situations and dangers in connection with digital spaces. One young person reports being overwhelmed by the mixing of analog and digital space: Since she has posted more videos on Tik Tok, she is suddenly approached on the street by other people, some of whom are unknown to her.

A: I'm getting, – everyone is looking at me afterwards (5)
I: You'd rather not have that, would you?
A: (laughs). I just feel, erm, so shy.
I: Shy?

A: Yes. Because afterwards / Sometimes they ask me so many questions (Aisha, L. 432–436)

Aisha feels exposed to the looks and questions of others. Unlike in the digital space, she cannot easily avoid people in the analog space; they can approach her and talk to her. She does not have control over the space and social interactions in the same way as when she is on Tik Tok, in the digital space. This unsettles her and puts her in a vulnerable position. Being exposed in a social environment epitomizes what we mean by vulnerability (Butler, 2012; Janssen, 2018). This situation may not present an inherent danger; however, it becomes apparent that Aisha's actions in the digital space make her uniquely identifiable to people she barely knows or not at all. Other young people report similar situations, namely that they deliberately do not show their faces or disguise their voices in posts and lives, for example, so that they are not recognized and are thus also protected from pedophilia on the Internet. This shows that they have an awareness of certain dangers in the digital space.

L: But when I go live, I'm showing my face, anyway, not showing my face, I never show my face, only on my second account. (Lukas, L. 17)

Children themselves cannot always ensure that their face is not shown on the Internet. One of their concerns is that peers will post unsolicited photos of them on the Internet, e.g., when they change their clothes. This again highlights the uncontrollability and insecurity that digital media entail and to which children are exposed. It also becomes clear that new forms of violence and vulnerability and the exploitation of precarious situations become visible.

In individual interviews, harassment in the digital space is also reported. The children and young people report unwanted subscription requests (people who want to follow their profile) or being sent unsolicited nude pictures. One young person tells of being harassed during a live session, where a person refused to leave the digital space despite several requests to do so. These examples illustrate that as the possibilities increase, so do the potential dangers: supposedly private spaces can quickly be invaded, and children and young people can be observed from the shadows of anonymity.

The diverse possibilities for communication via digital media also offer room for exclusion and can lead to experiences of powerlessness. One young person reports how one of his girlfriends called him out on social media after a verbal altercation (he insulted her, among other things) on social media. Despite his remorse and desire to get in touch with her again, he explains that he

cannot contact her, or that his only option is to leave a comment under her posts and ask her to talk to him. In the analog space, he could still physically approach her, whereas, in the digital space, the break-off and exclusion are much more absolute and goes hand in hand with more inability to act.

The possibility of expanding social contacts through digital media can not only put children and young people in precarious situations and make them vulnerable within digital spaces. One young person reports that she initiates social contacts via social media. She describes how, after a period of digital interaction, they meet in the analog world. The description of this encounter entails a certain insecurity and embarrassment.

Digital media can put children and young people both in vulnerable situations and at risk in several ways. The blending of digital and analog spaces can lead to them having less control over what happens: Digital contacts can be transferred into the analog space and lead to situations of feeling exposed that they find difficult to escape. At the same time, the digital space also remains to some extent unpredictable, for example, when children and young people no longer have any control over who is on live circuits. If digital contacts shift to the analog space, this can lead to precarious situations and, conversely, contacts in the digital space can be restricted and terminated with a click, which can lead to powerlessness and exclusion.

A similar blending of analog and digital worlds is particularly evident in gaming among young people. In interviews, it is not clear in places whether they are now talking about real, physical experiences or whether they are talking about stories that happened in video games. The emotions that are then partly generated by experiences in games also have further effects on the analog world.

2.3 *Regulation of Digital Media*

Using selected examples of children's perspectives on regulation, the influence of socio-pedagogical interventions on access and use of digital media will now be presented. In several interviews, children and adolescents report that social pedagogues restrict or deny them access to smartphones. This is either dependent on their situational behavior or a fixed rule of everyday life in the home. If Noel misses his mother and feels sad about it, he would like to call her, but must ask first:

I: And you're allowed to call if you ask?
N: Yes, it depends on which social worker is present.
I: Ah ok (...) you're not always allowed to call if you want to?
N: No, if I had my phone, I'd probably do it

I: Yes, you don't have a phone here?
N: Here, well yes here, but not on me.
I: Not in your room?
N: In the safe. (Noel, L. 303–310)

In this situation, digital communication with relatives or friends could be a beneficial resource for well-being. It is about recognizing what would be helpful but being unable to access it. However, in this example, his agency depends not only on the necessity of seeking permission from the social pedagogues, but also on the presence of specific individuals. This indicates that the answers can be different and thus the regulation is perceived as arbitrary. However, this is not only a matter of obtaining permission before Noel can act, but also of handing him the physical basis to act. He is completely dependent on the actions of the caregivers. If children and adolescents are allowed to have their smartphones for only 30 minutes a day, they may not be able to reach their contacts, and in the evening, when the contacts would be reachable, they must hand in their cell phones. This time issue seems to be left out of consideration.

Other children and adolescents report rules that allow the use of smartphones only on certain days of the week or that the cell phone is taken away as a sanction for misconduct, which is regulated, for example, in contracts between them and the social pedagogues. These narratives are indications that the caregivers exercise a certain control over the relationships of the children and adolescents, mostly with the main argument of wanting to protect them and therefore also increasingly control the content of digital media. As the quote above makes clear, the cell phone is locked away "in the safe," that is, in the place where the most valuable objects are kept. Symbolically, the most valuable social relations are locked away here and thus made impossible.

Several interview statements show that the withdrawal of the smartphone often happens with reference to reasons that have nothing to do with the use of digital media. Sometimes, it also depends on the predefined levels/phases to which the children and young people are assigned. These phases depend on their general behavior and not solely on the use of digital media – but provide for withdrawal as a sanction. For children and young people, this leads to a lack of understanding:

E: Unnecessary. Just unnecessary. Give me my phone if I, just leave my phone with me. As long as I get up in the morning and don't sleep at school, everything is fine. I'm not getting it. As long as I participate in school, don't fall asleep, have enough sleep, and do homework and everything is well and I do my chores and my room is

tidy, why am I deprived of my phone? Just give me my phone. But they always say it doesn't work for you. Did you try it? No. Then shut up already.
I: So, you don't even have the possibility to just try out if it works?
E: No, I don't. If I had it, everything would be fine. And right now, after my phone has been suspended for the sixth time, I'm only getting it for one and a half hours. (Elena, L. 223–225)

Elena is aware of the tasks she has to accomplish for a successful everyday life. She believes that if she can successfully manage her everyday life, she should be allowed to have her cell phone. However, her reasoning does not seem to count, and she is not allowed to prove herself.

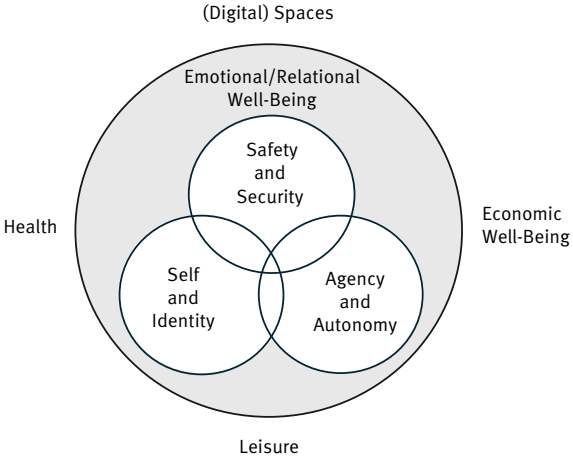
One young person reports that social pedagogues regularly check her cell phone and, for example, open and view unopened messages in apps. If the messages are judged to be offensive or dangerous, this leads to the withdrawal of the smartphone. Especially on Snapchat, nude pictures are probably sent more often without being asked. There, the messages delete themselves when you click on them. In order not to be caught during a cell phone check, the only option left for the teenager is to have to look at the picture so that it is deleted. The young person though might have specific reasons to not open those messages, since the sender would clearly see that it was opened by the receiver. Attempts to explain themselves and their reasons for not opening the messages though, would not be acknowledged and would incentivize opening these messages and be exposed to this content, such as nude pictures for example.

Instead of openly discussing disputes and negotiations about cell phone use with young people, regimented sanctions and rules prevail. The young people experience this predominantly as control rather than protection and meet the social pedagogues with a lack of understanding. In addition, discussions could also focus on what young people use their cell phones for, what subjective meaning they associate with it – creating a sense of belonging, gaining recognition, maintaining relationships, obtaining information, gaming, listening to music, regulating emotions, etc. – what is problematic about it and to what extent they could act in a media-competent manner. Instead, especially in the residential context, where children and adolescents have fewer opportunities for contact with family and peers, regimentation seems to dominate.

3 Discussion

The aim of this article is to show the importance of digital media for the (subjective) well-being and vulnerability of children and adolescents in residential care – from a children's standpoint of view.

Figure 2 **Model of Children's Well-Being Extended to Relevance of Digital Spaces (Own Representation Based on Fattore et al. 2016, p. 46)**



The thesis introduced at the beginning by Nadan and Kaye-Tzadok that digitality is to be conceptualized as a meta-area in the discussion of well-being becomes clear when considering the data interpretation just cited against the background of the model of Fattore et al. (2016, p. 46). The well-being model can be extended to include the *digital spaces* which cut across all subject areas, since all domains (autonomy and agency, self and identity, and safety and security) are mediatized and digital media thus permeate all areas. The now four dimensions – in the sense of an analytical separation – relate to specific areas of children's lived experiences in digital spaces, to economic well-being, to health, and to leisure. This could be represented graphically as follows.

The following discussion will show the importance of establishing digital media and digitality as an additional dimension in the above-mentioned model. It represents a concrete area of children's lived experiences of well-being.

Since relationships seem paramount to creating and maintaining well-being, the data has shown that children and adolescents initiate and maintain their contacts to a significant extent via digital media; these are family contacts as well as peers and romantic relationships. Therefore, digital media is a key to accessing one of the biggest resources for their well-being: relationships. The smartphone allows children and young people to carry their best friends, families, and peers in their pockets. This enables them to constantly create new possibilities and spaces that all could be referred to as concrete areas, where well-being is created and maintained. They draw upon those possibili-

ties and spaces to create a feeling of safety (e. g. holding one's smartphone in the absence of one's best friend), to feel more autonomous (e. g. entering one's own world when gaming), to gain more agency (e. g. call one's parents when overwhelmed with emotions), or to create a sense of identity (e. g. having what constitutes one's life on the mobile phone).[2]

At the same time, opportunities arise that promote vulnerability by exploiting the already existing vulnerable characteristics of children and young people in precarious situations. Feelings of safety can be threatened (e. g. being identified and approached in the analog world because of one's actions on social media), they can find themselves in insecure situations (e. g. initiating contact through digital media and meeting up physically), or their agency might be limited or denied leading to a feeling of powerlessness (e. g. getting blocked on social media and being inhibited to contact one's friends that geographically are not reachable for them).

In conclusion, the experiences children and adolescents have with digital media seem to be of significant importance for their well-being but might also increase their vulnerability. Since professionals in residential care are mandated with protecting those children and adolescents, it is understandable that they might prefer heavier regulations that guarantee this protection. But considering the data on the children's perspective on regulations some points need further discussions, to ensure that regulations don't completely inhibit them to create and maintain well-being through digital spaces.

Given the importance of social relationships and social participation, the question of frequency versus volume of use must be raised. Relationships, for example, cannot be cultivated exclusively on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 17:00 to 19:30. Referring to the situation with the safe, this aspect becomes even clearer: Physically locking up the smartphone is tantamount to locking away social contacts and social participation outside the institutional walls. Symbolically, the physical separation of children and adolescents in residential care from their parents, friends, and other social contacts is underlined or even doubled: the material-physical basis of access to social relations is once again spatially separated from them. At the same time, a hierarchy is established: The socio-pedagogical professionals decide on the relationship formation of the young people as well as on their use of digital spaces in general.

It is interesting to note that precisely because children and adolescents are exposed to increased social control in residential care, they may be more likely to enter digital worlds that are significantly less visible to social workers. This means that a shift in power is becoming apparent, as children and young people are increasingly transferring life content to the digital world and thus

often to the private sphere. As a consequence, it is even more important to deal in a media-competent way with digital content that makes children and young people vulnerable. They not only need to be protected from danger, but they must be empowered to deal safely with digital media with the social workers as companions in this process.

Interventions concerning the restriction of digital media use and the withdrawal of cell phones must therefore always be revisited. Using these as punishments for general misbehavior leads to a cloudy professionalism (DigiPäd 24/7, 2022), which must be avoided. And even when these interventions are used because the misbehavior is related to digital media, they must be adequate, against the background of media literacy education. Excessive use of the cell phone due to gaming must not lead to the complete removal of the device. Equally questionable would be the complete control of communication via cell phone based on a cyberbullying incident. Restrictive interventions must be proportionate to the sanctioned behavior.

Especially in residential care, it seems important to emphasize that children and adolescents are not discursively made vulnerable in a double sense (DigiPäd 24/7, 2022; Janssen, 2018). Of course, it remains to be noted that people generally put themselves in precarious situations and make themselves vulnerable by entering and staying in digital spaces. If this is made impossible with the provision of protection – due to the discursively constructed vulnerability mentioned above – the possibility of action and thus social participation is restricted or even completely denied which creates vulnerability through social exclusion.

In general, it can be said that digital media are an essential part of children's and young people's lives and that there is an increasing shift from analog to digital space and a blending of the two. Communication and interaction are increasingly taking place in the digital realm. Well-being is established, maintained, or also endangered by activities, agency, and experiences of autonomy, a sense of security, and identity formation, also in the digital space. When working with children and young people and digital media, it is therefore much more important to address these contradictions than to try to resolve or avoid them.

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Notes

1 SNF-research project: Childhood vulnerability and children's understanding of well-being

2 Another ongoing practical research project is investigating the significance of music as a digital practice, which also reveals the significance of digital media for the regulation of emotions (...).

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