Discourses and Gender Divides in Children's Digital Everyday Lives

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Introduction

Childhood is changing due to digital technology becoming a part of children's everyday lives. In this study, we seek to contribute to an understanding of what discourses are connected to digital technology, which is embedded in children's everyday lives, as well as how these discourses are interconnected with the development of children's gendered identity. James and James (2004) claim that childhood cannot be seen as a natural category. Rather, it is changeable over time and constructed by adult norms and culture. In our study, we acknowledge that children's experiences in today's childhood will be different from adults' childhood experiences, as well as the experiences of children in the future.

Our study was conducted in Norway, a country known as a world leader in gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2022). Research on

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gender differences shows that, by early childhood, there is already a gender gap in key academic skills and literacy, one in which girls outperform boys (Levy, 2016; Mullis et al., 2023; OECD, 2019). The origin of such gaps is not fully understood (Fidjeland et al., 2023), and many of the studies investigating the phenomena are quantitative studies contributing more to identifying the gap than to understanding how to overcome them (Lestari & Yulindrasari, 2020). For instance, research shows that girls do well in literacy and even though they outperform boys by 25%, they do not seem to translate their skills into financial success in the labour market later on in life (Levy, 2016). There are studies examining how more interactive and gaming-approached learning designs can enhance boys' literacy skills (Ellison & Drew, 2020), where the intervention stems from the boys' area of interest. The gender divide also affects educational decision-making and the chances of an eventual career path in, for example, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education (Ashlock et al., 2022; Rosalia Romero et al., 2022). Several strategies are suggested to encourage girls to pursue STEM fields (IDRA, 2019), but few studies examine how children's culture contributes to upholding the gender divide. Research also points to a digital dichotomy between males and females and indicates that there is a strong historical notion of technology as a male domain, which is connected to the rise of the engineer as a male role model (Axell & Boström, 2021; Oldenziel, 1999). There may be a different, higher level of status connected to STEM subjects, which seem to be perceived as more prestigious than the non-sciences (Levy, 2016). Lestari and Yulindrasari (2020) claim it is too little focus on how to address the gender gaps in young children's learning. According to Levy (2016), some of the mechanisms behind the upholding of a gender divide are connected to children's use of digital technology in childhood. Moreover, research on children's use of digital technology has generally meant a focus on vulnerabilities and risk.

As shown in Lafton et al. (2023), the idea of protection has been the overriding concern in studies about children's vulnerabilities in the digital age. Even though we have nearly two decades of research on children's Internet use, efforts to protect children online still incorporate the construction of the child as the *passive innocent* (Bulger et al., 2017). Public discourse may be focused on risk and seen as a cultural power struggle in

which adults seek to negotiate and control how children develop and create policies aimed at protecting children from media-related harm, which can collide with children's participatory rights (Bulger et al., 2017; Livingstone & Bulger, 2014). Livingstone and Bulger (2014) argue that the protection of children attracts, and they state that children can be innocent and immature but still act with intention and agency (Bulger et al., 2017). Tsaliki (2022) writes that now is the time to challenge dominant Western constructions of childhood and childhood innocence. She claims that 'risk talk' leads to the discursive construction of children and teens as always being at risk of being harmed (Tsaliki, 2022). She further argues that we must re-think policy-making so that we do not target individuals (girls more often than boys, she writes) but, rather, move beyond a pedagogy based on risk by engaging with digital media as it is identified by young people themselves (Tsaliki, 2022). In Norway, gender differences in parental mediation have been found, and parents are more worried about the amount of time their sons are spending online as compared to their daughters, even when girls spend more time online or gaming than boys do (Staksrud & Ólafsson, 2020). Parental worries can come from the fact that boys do have more symptoms of addiction to online games than girls (cf. Pawłowska et al., 2018; Salahuddin & Muazzam, 2019). Also, the media discourse has revolved around this issue for a long time with alarmist statements and moral panics (Cover, 2006) and this could influence parental worries.

Having the right form of subjectivity involves acquiring specific cultural ideas and practices that help us pass as an acceptable member of a culture (Lock et al., 2014). When we, in this study, examine how children position themselves discursively in interaction with one another and the researcher in the focus group, we can identify some aspects of what they consider acceptable in their digital everyday lives and, thus, interpret the cultural frames (ideas) that surround them in their digital childhood. In Norway, children on average spend more time online each day compared to children in other European countries (Smahel et al., 2020). This makes Norwegian children an interesting group to focus on when studying children's discursive development of gender identity in digital everyday life. When researching Norwegian children's digital lives, we used the context of a focus group to attempt to determine how children

discursively construct their own experiences with digital technology in their everyday lives, as well as whether there are differences between the genders in how they present themselves.

With our discourse analysis, we aim at identifying the discourses emerging when children talk about how they navigate in digital everyday life. Through transcripts from five focus group interviews with eight- to ten-year-old Norwegian children, we examine the following research question:

In what ways do children talk about their digital lives, and what can the approaches that emerge tell us about how children construct their gender identity within societal discourses about childhood and technology?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we are inspired by Foucault (1977) and aim to illuminate how identities are constructed within a network of power relations. This includes an understanding of power as both a repressive and a productive force. By viewing power as Foucault (1977) describes it, one can turn one's gaze to important dynamics in the empirical material by analytically viewing power as formative, productive, and affected by various factors (Hammer, 2017). An analytical view on power can also contribute to considering how power relations can create resistance that might not have existed without the repressive force itself (Hammer, 2017). Discourse plays a role in how gender can be performed in society, and the constitutive elements of discursive practice affect social relations (Mir, 2021). These discursive relations lead to subjectivity by adhering to their own 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, 1977, p. 23). Gender, as such, is not a picture of a fixed reality but, rather, a complex composition of gender performances in a given society (Butler, 2004). Renold (2005, p. 6) describes the Foucauldian understanding as an important step in making sense of how gender, when children are *doing boy* or *doing girl*, can be both constraining and empowering in different contexts.

According to Alldred and Burman (2005, p. 193), we must examine the broader context of meanings when we place children's voices in the

'public sphere'. We can do this by asking through what cultural understandings of children the words of children are heard and how our account of them will be heard (Alldred & Burman, 2005). Will it, in this specific context, serve the interests of children to present them as having their own perspective, or is it better to show that their perspectives are not so different from adults? It may not be their age that most defines their perspectives but, rather, their social identity (Alldred & Burman, 2005). Allred and Burman suggest that by adopting a discursive approach when researching children's experiences, we can locate the meanings of their experiences on a cultural level rather than on an individual level. By using such an approach, we can provide access to the production of culturally situated descriptions of cultural meaning and practice (Alldred & Burman, 2005).

When we consider language as a provider of subject positions, we are positioned and position ourselves depending on context and function when we talk (Alldred & Burman, 2005). This implies that multiple subject positions and contradictions are ordinary attributes in everyday life (Alldred & Burman, 2005).

Risman (2009) outlines how every society has a gender structure, affecting how one may do girl or boy in society. Such gender structures are not fixed, but they can give us an idea about how children today interpret their potential doings of gender. In line with other studies (cf. Butler, 2004; Pecis, 2016; Risman, 2009), we acknowledge the complexity involved in interpretations of doing gender. In this study, we, therefore, analyse the children's stories and thematise them within potential discursive understandings. This way of interpreting statements made by the children is inspired by how Spyrou (2020) encourages the examination and reframing of the discourses of childhood themselves, as well as how Raby and Sheppard (2021) show how children do activism in relation to how they imagine themselves. Navigating in a digital world is not activism *per se*, but as the analysis will show, such navigation is closely linked to the children's access to discursive constructions of childhood and gender, as well as how they can actively participate and become agential within the discourse.

Materials and Method

The purpose of this study is to gain further knowledge and understanding of how children discursively construct their gendered identities in their digital everyday life. The findings cannot be generalised outside their time and context but can give insight into how children's statements about how they navigate their digital lives are closely related to some of the dominating discourses in society.

Our empirical data consist of transcripts taken from five focus group interviews with eight- to ten-year-old Norwegian children in which they describe their experiences of living a digital childhood. Each of the groups had three or four children. Two groups had only girls, two had only boys, and one group was mixed. This made it possible to observe similarities and differences across gender categories. Three of the interviews were conducted in private homes, and two of them were conducted in a school. All children who participated lived in areas in and around Oslo, the capital of Norway. Literature on focus groups highlights the fact that the method is well-suited to exploring under-researched topics and is seen as well-suited when the researchers aim to generate a wide spectrum of opinions (Halkier, 2010; Thagaard, 2018). The focus groups aimed to encourage children to give their opinions and connect with the contributions of the other participants, and a non-directive style of interviewing was used.

One important methodological issue was the need to create a safe peer environment in the focus groups. We created groups of children who were already familiar with one another by recruiting them from the same school or the same group of friends. One of the ethical dilemmas we faced was that the discussion within the groups sometimes referred to existing relationships or the shared history of the group (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). This called for sensitivity on the part of the moderator to ensure we did not contribute to social divides within the group. The moderator was particularly occupied by reducing the focus on topics such as how many devices the children have access to and how 'fancy' these devices are (Kapella et al., 2022). In other literature on focus groups, the internal dynamics of the group are considered a weakness of the method because

group dynamics can, in some situations, become more important than the content of the interview (Vogl, 2012; Halkier, 2010). We found this particularly challenging when the moderator aimed to ensure that all voices were given equal space within the focus groups. Because the children were familiar with one another before the interview, they came to the interview with pre-existing expectations regarding the other participants. This required the moderator to structure the environment and enable the children's social participation in ways consistent with their understanding and methods of communicating (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008).

Vogl (2012) underlines how child responses may challenge the researcher because their verbal and interactive skills are different from those of social scientists and these skills may also vary among children. In our understanding of discourse, we see language as both performative and productive, as well as central to the construction of social reality and subjectivity. Such an understanding places language at the centre of the construction of the social realm (Ussher & Perz, 2014). When researching children's lived experiences, Spyrou (2011) argues that through what children say in a research interview, we can gain knowledge about what discourses the children have access to. There are, however, some limitations involved in considering verbal language as the dominant way of collecting data in research on young children's perspectives (Quennerstedt, 2016). Spyrou (2011) suggests that the idea of listening to children's voices has been criticised from a sociological viewpoint for locating autonomy and rationality within the children and simultaneously ignoring context, social structures, and discourses in the production of their meaning-making and their voice. By organising focus groups with peers, we aim to activate some of these social structures and find voices that are co-constructed and discursively embedded. This does, however, require that children with various language skills and diverse abilities translate their experiences into words. As such, we must acknowledge that the voices of the children are the voices of those children who are able to actively participate in focus groups with peers and that the meaning constructed in the group may depend more heavily on some voices than others.

The process of recruiting participants for the study was highly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Aiming to recruit families and

children with various socio-demographic backgrounds, we distributed information about the study through schools and kindergartens. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the institutions were overloaded and could not distribute the call. By exploiting the networks of all the researchers, we could distribute our call for participation among their peer networks in the form of snowball sampling. One of the disadvantages of snowball sampling is the risk of recruiting a homogenous group of participants because the peer network may include little variety in terms of socio-economic background (Browne, 2005). In this case, however, the sampling resulted in a diverse selection of children from urban and suburban areas, with participating children having diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (see Kapella et al., 2022 for more detailed information about the sample). During the last phase of our fieldwork, the pandemic restrictions in Norwegian institutions were eased, and we could more easily gain access to the schools, which enabled us to include two focus groups from one school in the project.

The participants and their guardians provided written informed consent. Even though it is not mandatory or legally binding, the children were allowed to sign an assent form. The aim was to emphasise the child's expert status and show that their willingness to participate was taken seriously, but at the same time, we explained that they could withdraw their consent. It is not easy for children to understand what their consent means (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). We, therefore, gave the children the option of consenting after the group conversation as well to ensure they could give consent in a more informed way.

The focus group interviews were semi-structured, and the interview guidelines mentioned (1) questions concerning the devices the children had at home, (2) philosophical questions about a world without technology, (3) various scenes or situations concerning digital technology, (4) a role-play about a child who secretly brings the phone to bed at night, and (5) questions about what kind of digital technology the children would like to have. In the interviews, the researchers used various picture cards of digital devices and apps as examples (see example in Fig. 1) for the children, combined with sketches of various situations (see example in Fig. 2) in which the people are without facial expressions so as not to influence the children to think that the situations are positive or negative.
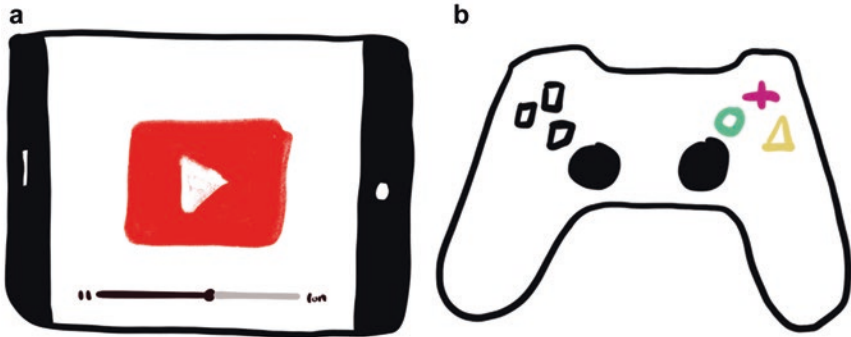
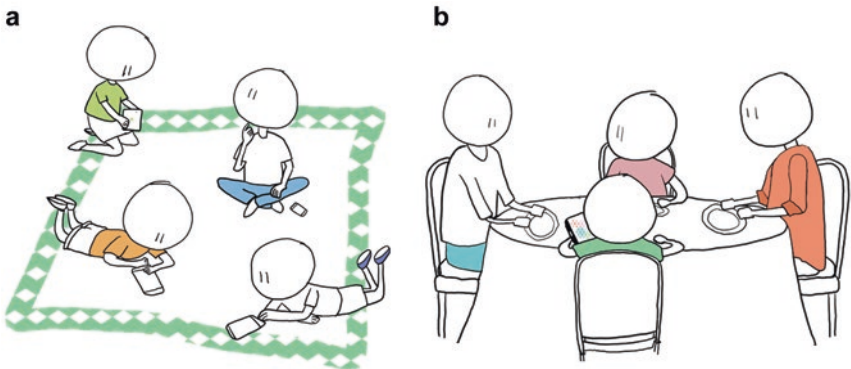**Fig. 1** Example of digital devices and apps from picture cards

Fig. 2 Example of setting from picture cards

The interview guideline made it possible for the children to talk about their digital everyday life which again made it possible for us to look at how they talked about it and if girls and boys talked about it in different ways. On average, the interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews were audio and video recorded and then transcribed verbatim, which resulted in approximately 140 pages of transcription.

Analysis

A four-step Foucault-influenced discursive approach (Table 1) was used (inspired by Alldred & Burman, 2005; Parker, 1992) when examining the transcripts of the focus group interviews. In the first phase, Alldred and Burman (2005) argue for the need to establish the relation between objects and subjects. To do so we first outlined the nouns relating to digital technology in the focus group transcriptions before placing the relevant nouns in an Excel form and naming them *constructed objects*. Second, we searched the transcripts to determine where and how the child, as a subject, was positioned with regard to these objects and added the subject positions of the child to the form. Third, we identified how the children positioned themselves as subjects, with their spoken words in the focus groups, in relation to the constructed objects when talking about digital technology. By doing this we found eight different approaches for the children to position themselves as subjects in their digital everyday life.

In the findings section, we present descriptions of and quotes from the eight approaches of positioning the child subject that we found, to provide an understanding of the analysis step from the constructed object to identifying the subject positions. In this step, we returned to the transcripts to interpret the context of how the children discursively constructed the subject position by investigating how they presented their experiences with digital technology in everyday life. The fourth and final step of our analyses is a discussion of how the children constructed their gender identity in digital everyday life by examining how their positioning can be linked to the overarching discourses identified in the literature. Two important questions steering the discussion are (1) who gains and who loses within the discourse, and (2) what institutions are reinforced or undermined (Alldred & Burman, 2005).

Table 1 Analysis description

	Aim	Analytical questions
1st step	An overview of the nouns used by the children when they discussed digital technology	Which nouns are connected to digital technology?
2nd step	Finding the child subjects that are connected to the constructed objects in the transcripts (the nouns connected to digital technology)	How is the child, as a subject, positioned in relation to the constructed objects?
3rd step	Identify what approaches the participants have when they talk about the child as a subject and look for gendered patterns	What approaches of positioning the child subject in relation to digital technology can we identify? Are the different approaches gendered?
4th step	A discussion of how children discursively construct their gender identity in digital everyday life within societal discourses	How can the different (and to some extent gendered) approaches of positioning the child subject that we find be understood when reading them as part of dominant discourses?

Findings: Eight Approaches to Positioning the Child as a Subject in Digital Everyday Life

In our study, we found eight approaches in which the children's ways of speaking about themself can be categorised. The eight approaches are presented in Table 2, and they serve as important positions when we in the discussion will examine the understandings that form the connections between and among subjects and objects (Alldred & Burman, 2005). We first list the *constructed objects* connected to digital technology in the transcripts. The *subject positions* field describes how the child as a subject is positioned in relation to the objects, and from the subject positioning, we identified the various approaches presented in the last column. Beneath Table 2 we present descriptions and examples of the different approaches we found. All names in the examples are pseudonyms.

Table 2 Table of constructed objects, subject positions, and approaches

Constructed objects	Subject positions	Approaches
Boy games, gaming console, gaming computer, gaming mouse, gaming place, Minecraft, Fortnite, Roblox, 'Adopt me', shooting games, TikTok, screen time, friend requests, Internet	Children who present themselves as users of digital technology in special ways depending on their gender	Boy or girl
Likes, tv-series, filters (on snap), gaming friends, skins, V-bucks, message apps, gaming, playing, WhatsApp, Messenger	Children who explain how their use of digital technology is a social or an individual activity	Social
Screen time, songs (on Spotify), YouTube, Fortnite, youtuber, gaming night, phone (in the bed), streaming, coding, (bad) language	Children who explain how their use of technology is sensible	Sensible
(Mom's) phone, smart speaker, Viking king, Jonas Gahr Støre (prime minister of Norway), coding, 'Tobias-phone'	Children who brag and attempt to make jokes concerning the topic of digital technology	Cheeky
YouTube, Roblox, age limits, app blocks, hacking iPads	Children who describe finding their own solutions to digital practical problems	Independent
Phone (at the dining table), app blocks, age limits, smart watch, calling app (on iPad), Discord, coding, (scary) stuff, downloading (apps)	Children who describe being attached to their parents when dealing with digital technology	Parent-attached
YouTube, Grandma, 'scary teacher', 'zombie Lars', Roblox, (scary) stuff, killing games	Children who describe curiously exploring of digital content	Curious
Roblox, private user (on TikTok), suicide video, commercial, comment fields, sharing, unknown numbers, Wikipedia, Spotify, privacy, (bad) language	Children who report being careful and critical regarding digital content	Protective

Boy or Girl

In several of the focus groups, we are presented with the story that boys play shooting games and girls are on TikTok. This story is presented from both the girls' and the boys' perspectives. One girl discussed her brothers

and said, 'They are sitting in their own rooms. They each have their own gaming place, while I am more with my mother and father'. Then, another girl in the same group said, 'I feel like boys are like gamers and stuff, while girls are a bit more active'. The first girl spoke of her sister differently than her brothers and said, 'My sister is with friends and makes appointments with them. And [she] is with friends and such. She always makes appointments on screen. She is very much on the screen and Snap and TikTok, but she also plays with friends'. At one point during this interview, the researcher asked, 'Aren't there any girls who play shooting games?' One girl answered, 'Some, but it's the boys who take it more seriously. They talk about it at school'. Another girl said, 'I don't think the boys should play it because their eyes will go crazy and they'll go crazy'. These girls describe boys as less active and social than girls and suggest that boys prefer to spend their time alone, playing shooting games.

The boys, in general, do not talk much about the girls, but in one conversation, the boys say, 'Fortnite is the favorite now' and 'Everyone plays Fortnite, but I also like Overwatch'. When the researcher asks, 'Is it girls too or mostly boys?' one boy answers with 'Mostly boys', and another boy says, 'The girls mostly use TikTok and stuff like that'.

The shared understanding among the children is that there are differences in what you do in your digital life, depending on your gender. Boys play shooting games and girls are more often on TikTok. Also, some girls have critical perspectives on boys, viewing them as more passive and less active than girls. The categories do not come without exceptions, but they are well established in all the focus group conversations.

Sensible

In one boy group they continually explain why their gaming is beneficial and how they learn from it. When the researcher asks if they think they use enough technology in school, one boy answers, 'We learn more from gaming'. Then the researcher asks, 'What do you learn from gaming?' One boy answer, 'What you must do to succeed. I am learning English, other languages'. When discussing YouTubers, one boy says, 'They have taught me to copy tricks and such on YouTube'.

When talking about a boy they know who uses bad language in the chat when playing Fortnite, the researcher asks, 'What do you do if he says nasty things?' One boy answers, 'We kick him out'. Another says, 'If he is the party leader, we leave the group'. They indicate that they do not accept bad language when playing Fortnite and that they would either kick a person using bad language out of the game or leave the game themselves. Many of the boys present themselves as reason oriented and having a healthy relationship to gaming.

Especially, the girls in one group present themselves as aware of content that is not suitable for children, such as certain commercials, suicide videos on TikTok, and unpleasant comment fields or games, and report how they manage this content by scrolling onwards if there is a bad video or turning off unsuitable commercials. In one interview, they talk about an older sister of one of the girls:

> **Child:** My older sister watches quite a lot of TikTok, so I watch with her.
> **Researcher:** How old is your sister?
> **Child:** She's eleven. That's because everyone in her grade is on TikTok. She has a private user, but everyone has TikTok and snapchat because everyone snaps on TikTok. They don't use messages. So, she must have it.
> **Child:** It's popular with snap [Snapchat].
> Researcher: Does she have her own TikTok account?
> **Child:** Yes, but she has a private user that only friends can see.
> **Child:** It's nothing dangerous.

We interpret this as the girls wanting to explain that they know there is some risk associated with having a TikTok account but that one needs to have one because that is how one communicates with friends and knows how to use TikTok safely.

One of the researchers asked one girl group about Spotify. Specifically, this researcher asks, 'Is there nothing dangerous about Spotify?' Many of the girls say no, and one adds, 'No, or the songs may have bad words in the lyrics, but I really only choose the songs that I like and that don't have such bad lyrics. You can decide for yourself which songs you listen to'. This is an example of how some of the girls also present themselves as sensible and thoughtful in their choices.

Both girls and boys present themselves as sensible in relation to the identified objects and other subjects. But they describe different areas of sensibility. For example, the boys advocate for their sensible gaming and the girls for being sensible in order to be safe on social media.

Social

Unlike how some of the girls presented boys, in general, as passive and less social than girls when playing shooting games, the boys in one group present themselves differently. The researcher asks, 'Do you mostly game with friends or also alone?' One boy answer, 'Mostly together'. Another says, 'We can play alone, but it's a bit boring'. When the same group talks about a gaming night with other friends, one of them states, 'It's boring to be with Lars because, every time when everyone else wants to be on the trampoline, he just wants to game'. They present themselves as social and more active than the girls described them as being.

One of the girls says, 'Sometimes, I play with my sister, and sometimes, alone. I prefer to do it alone'. When the researcher asks what's the best about doing it alone, the girl answers, 'Because I want to be Super Mario on Odyssey. I have also bought him a dress. I also take it on Super Mario. He also has a little hat, and it's like that princess who also has a hat'. This is an example of why we conclude that the girls may be less concerned with presenting themselves as social to the researchers. The girls do not mind reporting how they prefer gaming alone, because then, they can decide what will happen and how their character will look without negotiating how to 'do' Super Mario with others.

In this group, the children do not group each other as being social or individuals, but rather, there seems to be a discrepancy between how they perceive themselves and how they perceive 'the other'. This may relate to many things, amongst others the word social can be given different meanings amongst the participants.

Cheeky

Some boys joke and make fun of one another most of the time during the focus group interviews. They connect their humour to the subject of conversation in the focus group.

> **Researcher:** What kind of music do you listen to?
> **Child:** Bergen (a city in Norway).
> **Child:** I just listen to some music.
> **Researcher:** Only some music. I just want to hear what kind of music [the child's name] listens to.
> **Child:** I listen to Jonas Gahr Støre.
> [The boys are laughing]

One boy is joking about stealing his mom's phone; another jokes about being the heir to a Viking king and using all the Viking treasures to buy all the electronics in the world; and a third, as shown in the example above, mentions listening to Jonas Gahr Støre (the prime minister of Norway) as an answer to the question about what music they listen to. These boys are also bragging about who has the smartest speakers and who has the most friend requests. They use a great deal of English when they talk and as part of their humour.

Protective and Curious

In one interview, a suicide video on TikTok was discussed:

> **Child:** The video actually has to go through TikTok before it can be shared.
> **Child:** But that video was really bad.
> **Researcher:** So, you think that TikTok hasn't done their job?
> **Child:** No, but they deleted the video.
> **Child:** That video should have been deleted too.
> **Researcher:** But now, the video is out there and people have seen it.
> **Child:** Yes, but that's because people copied it.
> **Child:** Yeah, people have copied a lot of movies.

Child: Yes, they can also take them on YouTube and Snapchat. Then they will never disappear.
Researcher: So, it's kind of dangerous to post things you don't want there forever?
Child: Yes, you have to think about what you post.
Child: And what you film.

This group of girls presents themselves as knowledgeable about privacy and careful in sharing content. At the same time, some of the girls also describe how it can be fun to search for scary games and watch scary content. Another interesting finding is that all the girls knew TikTok so well, even though they are only 9-year-old and TikTok has the recommended age limit of 12+.

In this category, both boys and girls access content they are not supposed to in terms of regulations, such as age limit. On the other hand, they, especially the girls, seem to present themselves as being careful in how they relate to unpleasant things. At the same time, they demonstrate how they are curious and deliberately seek content they know can scare them.

Parent-Attached and/or Independent

Some of the girls tell us that it makes them feel safe to have a smartwatch so their parents can know where they are and how they can talk to their parents if they have unpleasant experiences online. In one group, the researcher asks, 'Do you think it's okay for adults to look after you?' One girl answer, 'Yes, that's really good, because then, they can make sure that you watch something safe and that you don't have nightmares at night or something'.

Both boys and girls describe their relationship with their parents and the rules they meet differ. We heard stories about parents who treat their children as equals regarding the use of the phone at the dining table if it is something important or that screen time or age limits are not strictly enforced. At the same time, some children describe parents who control what apps they download or put a block on YouTube. Some children also report that phones or iPads are regulated to affect what apps they can

download. They report the rule of no phone at the dining table but also that their parents have different rules for themselves.

The children report resistance to some of the less consistent guidelines created by their parents, and they describe how to overcome digital barriers that hinder their access to digital content. For example, in one interview, Roblox was discussed:

> **Child:** I would say that almost all children's favorite game is Roblox. There are a lot of games there, and there are also a lot of children there. Not many adults know that it is their favorite game.
> **Researcher:** Right, so good, and what do you think?
> **Child:** There's something about Roblox. Because if you want to play a game that you are not allowed to play but you are allowed to play Roblox, then you can just go to Roblox and play whatever you want.
> **Researcher:** Because everything is there?
> **Child:** Yes
> **Researcher:** Because I don't think all adults know
> **Child:** Because if you … That's just an example then. If you want to play GTA (Grand Teft Auto) [but] also you are not allowed to, because you are a child, then you can go on Roblox. Then, you can play it.

This example shows how, in many cases, both boys and girls will find their own independent solutions if their parents' regulations do not fit align their own wishes. This finding corresponds well with how children resist rules and age limits regarding social media. They do not necessarily tell their parents what they do online, but they know the regulations and how to find a way to go beyond them, as do their peers.

What the Children's Approaches May Tell Us About How They Discursively Construct Gender Identity in Digital Everyday Life

Our study aimed to contribute to understanding how children discursively construct identity in their everyday lives while living a digital childhood. We had two focus groups with boys, two with girls, and one mixed group, which made it possible to observe some differences and

similarities. After performing the first steps of a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis, we have presented our findings of the eight approaches in the children's talk connected to digital technology use in the focus groups. There seem to be some indications of gendered patterns regarding how the children present themselves. Overall, the difference is that the girls present themselves as more connected to their parents and aware of negative content online, while the boys are either very cheeky or present themselves as sensible and social in their online activities. To answer our research question, we will now discuss how the children discursively construct gender identity in digital everyday life by examining how their positioning can be linked to the overarching discourses identified in the literature. Two important questions steering the discussion are (1) who gains and who loses within the discourse, and (2) what institutions are reinforced or undermined (Alldred & Burman, 2005).

Adjusting to the Heteronormative

Across all the groups, children tell the story of boys playing shooting games and girls being on TikTok. The girls' view of the boys seems to be in line with the findings of parents who are worried about the time use of their sons (Staksrud & Ólafsson, 2020). The story fits well with earlier research demonstrating fear of addiction and gender differences in how children navigate online (Lafton et al., 2023). The story told by many of the girls about the passive gamer boy seems to be met by the boys when they are concerned about justifying their digital activities as valuable. How to become a boy or a girl is learned and shaped by social interactions, participation in peer culture, and opportunities to try different ways of doing gender (Butler, 2004). It does seem like all of our participants understand there is a gaming discourse in society warning against too much gaming (Cover, 2006; Pawłowska et al., 2018; Salahuddin & Muazzam, 2019), and how the children view each other is to a large extent shaped by this discourse. Through continuing telling the stories about what girls do and what boys do, the girls seem to gain an even more stable position in the field of being literate, whilst the stories reinforce the

ideas of boys as less literate than girls (Fidjeland et al., 2023; Levy, 2016; Mullis et al., 2023; OECD, 2019).

When introducing the concept of discourse earlier in this chapter, we stated that gender structures in society are not fixed. In our research material, the children tell quite a simple story about the 'others' whilst they become more nuanced when they tell their own story. The historical view of technology as a male domain (Axell & Boström, 2021) seems to fit with the gamer boys we talked to who mentioned the learning potential of digital technology and focusing on being social and sensible. The girls did not seem to have the same need to justify their digital activities or tell us how they learn from relating to digital content or how it is social. When the girls told us about gaming, some reported that they preferred gaming alone. We wonder if it is time to re-think gaming and examine whether stories of screen time and worries about addiction among gamer boys (Lafton et al., 2023) create a space for boys to discuss and develop their digital competence in an arena not easily accessible to girls. Among our participants, the gender identity developed through online activity seems relatively fixed, and through the girls' scepticism and the boys' explanations of what gaming can contribute to, which is perhaps contributing to the STEM discourse as a male domain.

Based on the children's narratives, we see indications that adults may have been more worried about the boys' time use and that the boys' digital activities have been thematised and discussed to a greater extent than for girls. Similar results by Staksrud and Ólafsson (2020) show that parents worry more about their sons' time spent online. Participating in such a heteronormative discourse implies, however, that boys are given a chance to become more literate when society takes their interests seriously and addresses issues of gaming (Ellison & Drew, 2020). We cannot know for certain if the boys in our focus groups have parents or teachers helping them to address the benefits of gaming, but there are indications that the 'boy-as-a-gamer' discourse contributes to upholding the gender gap rather than reducing it.

The girls in the focus groups describe how they can protect themselves from digital content and experiences they classify as unsuitable. This is in line with the discourse of children as always being at risk of being harmed (Bulger et al., 2017; Livingstone & Bulger, 2014). The girls state more

clearly that there are risks, whilst the boys to a greater extent point to the possibilities. The focus on risks concerning girls is also highlighted by Tsaliki (2022), who underlines that the risk discourse is often a larger problem for girls. However, there seems to be a difference in how the risk discourse is interconnected with children's everyday lives according to gender, shaping the idea of girls as always being at risk of being harmed and boys as predisposed to Internet and gaming addiction (Cover, 2006; Pawłowska et al., 2018; Salahuddin & Muazzam, 2019). Even though the discourse of girls being at risk leads to a high level of reflection and discussion among the girls about how to protect themselves, such discourses may make empowerment in digital arenas more difficult because they are given the responsibility to protect themselves in comparison to the boys who are more focused on the benefits and learning potential of online gaming rather than the risks.

However, when the children, especially the girls, underline the safety of letting their parents know where they are through their smartwatches or sharing unpleasant online experiences with their parents, they reinforce the discourse of the family and the parents as a safe place, where they can seek security and help when they need it. Research by Hamilton-Giachritsis et al. (2017) similarly shows the importance of family support, social bonds, and the affective involvement of parents regarding children's well-being. In our findings, we see that the girls present themselves as spending more time with their parents than they think boys would and as being more attached as presented in the parent-attached approach in the findings section. In our study, the girls are presenting themselves as attached to their parents and feeling safe coming to them with problems, more so than the boys do. The boys could be connected to their parents in the same way without telling us about it, or maybe, the boys do not experience the same types of risk as girls in a digital world, where addiction might be the most considerable risk for them (Salahuddin & Muazzam, 2019; Pawłowska et al., 2018) or they might deal with risks in other ways. In any event, the gendered stories of the fixation on categories can make it hard for children to cross these gender boundaries, maybe because of what seems to be expected of them according to their gender. When girls present themselves as family oriented and the boys present

themselves as 'out there', we wonder how such ideas may contribute to how children can perform gender in social relations.

As mentioned in the methodology section, it may be a weakness of the focus group that the children are asked to put quite complex issues into words through a focus group conversation. Even so, some interesting versions of the family discourse emerge. Childhood is regulated, and children take the rules seriously. At the same time, they argue they can negotiate or go around the rules and have shaped their arguments in ways that contribute to how they may perform their identity. The boys explain the reasonableness of the content (it is not just gaming, playing, or fun) and the girls tell us about their experiences of risks and explain how they can protect themselves. This way of adjusting to heteronormative discourses can be understood, within a Foucauldian interpretation, as both constraining and empowering (Renold, 2005). It is repressive because the children need to adjust according to their gender and empowering in the sense that the children can negotiate within these discourses: 'Yes, I am a boy, and I have a lot of screen time, but I can still be sensible and social' or 'Yes, I am a girl, but I can be careful and take care of myself, and also, I promise to tell you if I experience something bad'. By arguing within these gendered understandings of who they are, they can continue to do what they want. Not all children fit within these fixed understandings, and it seems important to turn back to the question of whether there is room for other perspectives on doing girl or boy.

Gendered Resistance to Adult Normativity

The *cheeky* way of *doing boy* can be considered as an alternative to the *sensible* way of *doing boy* and could be a result of the repressive forces in the discourses on how you are supposed to *do boy* from an adult perspective, and such repressive forces could lead to resistance (Hammer, 2017). In this case, there is resistance to the normative expectations of being a reasonable gamer boy preparing for adult life. We want to return to what cultural understandings of children are in the children's words and how our account of them will be heard (Alldred & Burman, 2005). It could be that the cheeky boys just want to have fun and do not want to be

sensible, but it could also be that they are not aware of these understandings of how to be a boy and, therefore, do not know how to negotiate them. This is an example of how discourses regulate what can be said and done within a given community (Foucault, 2018). Our sample is too small to identify whether the children have access to alternative discourses that can disrupt the discourse of sensibility. However, there are multiple ways of *doing boy* and *doing gaming* among children, and these findings challenge the discourse of productivity and sensibility as part of children's lives.

The cheeky approaches are gendered in the sense that it is only the boys we talk to who act this way, and we wonder how girls can protest against the normative expectations of everyday digital life, such as the public risk discourse (Lafton et al., 2023; Tsaliki, 2022; Bulger et al., 2017; Livingstone & Bulger, 2014). In this study, we show our interpretation of expectations for the girls through the *protection* and *parents-attached approaches*, and as mentioned earlier the girls' curiosity about scary content or being on TikTok years before the recommended age limit may be a trace of resistance. If we understand such discourse as formative (Hammer, 2017), the risk discourse may be linked to how girls describe their curiosity. Through exploring scary content and sites they are not allowed to see, they create a resistance to the rules through a kind of activism when explaining to us how they can protect themselves.

On the other hand, the girls tell us about open communication with their parents which may indicate that their parents have been involved in the use of TikTok and know about the scary content. It is, therefore, hard to say to what extent resistance is produced amongst the girls, or if their possible ways of *doing girl* make the resistance unnecessary. Some girls do not fit inside the feminine category of 'in need of protection' or do not know how to negotiate regarding this expectation. Still, earlier studies (see Blaise, 2014) show how gender is imbued in power relations and girls can explore gender positions, relationships, and identities across various peer groups. This means that the construction of our focus groups may have affected what the girls told us and how they wanted us to understand their position in the digital world.

Navigating Across Gender Categories: Concluding Remarks

In our findings, we have shown how children explore online content according to their curiosity and how they find ways to sneak around their parents' regulations instead of negotiating according to what is expected of them. It seems that the gender categories may be more fluid within these approaches. Even though some of the girls attempt to claim a place within the gaming universe, both girls and boys report that girls are less present there. However, in the mixed focus group, we found that the children elaborated on how they communicated with and related to one another while gaming to a greater extent. The categories of *doing boy* and *doing girl* became less fixed and more fluid when boys and girls participated together in conversations on gaming. Alldred and Burman (2005, p. 181) argue that it may be children's social identity that most define their perspectives, and this may indicate the need to work across gender categories if we are aiming at equality rather than defining what is a boy thing and what is a girl thing.

Children's digital everyday lives differ according to gender, and our main finding is that the children in the focus groups operate with quite fixed categories of what is typical boy and girl behaviour. The children present approaches to what they say and do, providing examples of gendered identity constructions. In our discussion, we have, based on our analysis and our theoretical backdrop, identified discourses of protection, sensibility, gaming, and literacy skills as the most prominent, all with a gendered aspect. This indicates children have access to powerful discourses telling them how to perform their gender. However, the children can still be empowered within the discourses if they manage to negotiate inside and around them and, in this way, continue with the digital activities they prefer. The potential negative consequences of the different expectations could include the fact that girls do not utilise the learning potential of technology in the same way as the boys do, as well as if the boys do not come to their parents with their negative online experiences.

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