Children Digital Consumer Culture and Child Well-Being: Making Sense of the Past to Enlighten their Future

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I. Introduction

With over one third of internet users worldwide being under the age of eighteen (Livingstone & Third, 2017), internet appears to offer an ideal medium to tackle Grand Challenges (GC) concerning children current as well as future well-being. Digital technology is supposed to favor advances in the solution of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[i]: poverty (SDG1), good health (SDG3), quality education (SDG4), gender equality (SDG5), prepare them for future good jobs and economic growth (SDG8), reduce inequalities (SDG10), responsible consumption (SDG12); even ameliorate conditions of peace and justice for them to grow up (SDG16). GC are described as long standing, multifaceted social issues that defy easy solutions (Ferraro et al., 2015). They contain critical barriers that render solutions implemented by individual organizations or government less effective (George et al., 2016). Partnerships are recommended to accomplish SDGs by 2030 (SDG17).

However, establishing the effects that Children Digital Consumer Culture (CDCC) (Montgomery, 2000; Bassiouni & Hackley, 2014) might have on child well-being is a complex matter. It requires to be analyzed at an *issue* field level (Zietsma et al. 2016). Several exchange fields are participating in the ongoing debate of how digital technology is transforming children's lives. Industrial, professional and opposite social movements exchange fields are producing fragmented conclusions, sometimes in direct opposition to each other, to

position their claims. The issue has transcended private, community and even national structures. Our preliminary findings present an emerging *interstitial* issue field overlapping institutional fields (Furnari, 2014), with members of different fields interacting with one another with the purpose of negotiating coordination to respond to the issue at hand, cared for by people across several social groups. Furthermore, since our topic is "inherently cross-jurisdictional and will remain so over time" (Zietsma el al., 2016, p. 26), we propose there might even be a need and albeit, an opportunity for evolution towards a *bridging* issue field.

The purpose of this paper is to present key findings of our systematic literature review (SLR) on how CDCC relates to child well-being, and which factors might affect that relation. With a plethora of empirical studies presenting sets of indicators to measure and obtain evidence to present to avid policy makers, there is still no consensus on what exactly constitutes child well-being, and which dimensions compose it. The ever-expansion and mutation of CDCC further complicates relating these two concepts. This paper fills this gap by providing a theoretical model of how CDCC relates to child well-being, identifying factors that might affect said relation. The importance of defining child well-being, is grounded upon the need to identify its dimensions to optimize how CDCC could foster positive child well-being, giving children worldwide better childhoods, and enlightening their futures.

II. Concepts and Model

II. a) Grand Challenges (GC)

GC have been defined as "a specific critical barrier(s), that, if removed, would help solve an important societal problem with a likelihood of global impact through widespread implementation" (George et al., 2016: 1881). GC are multidisciplinary, foster epistemological pluralism and call for the pursuit of unconventional ideas and novel approaches to tackle large, unresolved problems. Ferraro et al. (2015) identified three main dimensions of a GC: *complexity* (many interactions and associations, emergent understandings and

nonlinear dynamics), *uncertainty* (both problems and their evolution are difficult to forecast for the actors), and they are *evaluative* (problems can be approached and understood in multiple ways across jurisdictional boundaries). GC typically transcend geographic, economic, and societal borders, being multidisciplinary by nature. The greater the complexity and interdisciplinary of a challenge, the greater the number of concerned stakeholders. Key to enable successful interaction among heterogeneous actors over prolonged periods of time is to define a structure and rules of engagement (participatory architecture), accepting difference in points of view (Ferraro et al., 2015).

Hard-to-measure concepts such as child well-being are relevant to GC since they often indicate how people understand their situations, thereby shaping their actions. Ferraro et al. (2015) suggested linking GC to recent work on institutional complexity and the consequences of multiple institutional logics, being that organizations might be embedded in multiple (and sometimes even opposite) normative orders. Managing coexisting multiple logics in times of institutional complexity, is a necessary organizational competency for engagement in GC.

II. b) Exchange and Issue Fields

Zietsma et al. (2016) defined exchange fields as a "community of organizations that interact together frequently and fatefully" (Scott, 1995: 207-208) in a "recognized area of institutional life" (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983: 148). A focal population of actors and their exchange partners, sharing practices, norms and references to a common identity. They might be classified into *industry*, *professional* and *social movement* exchange fields.

Being that the concept of organizational fields is vital to understand institutional processes and organizations (Scott, 1995), and they are often complex and pluralistic, Zietsma et al. (2016) complained that the literature had focused on common culture, shared networks, and boundaries (established through common meaning systems and intense relationships), relegating the differences among field types and their characteristics. They presented a scaffolding structure upon which to construct further research on institutional fields.

Especially relevant to our study is the differentiation between *exchange* and *issue* fields, per the purpose a field serve: to negotiate, govern and/or compete over meanings and practices that affect multiple fields. They typically contain a diversity of actors, "even including populations to their own institutional infrastructure that may be in different exchange fields", and may be categorized within *competitive*, *interstitial* and *bridging* issue fields (Zietsma et al., 2016: 22).

Interstitial spaces are "small-scale settings where individuals positioned in different fields interact occasionally and informally around common activities to which they devote limited time" (Furnari, 2014: 11). Bridging issue fields exist when "issues are inherently cross-jurisdictional and will remain so over time, such as the governance of common resources or shared issues" (Zietsma et al., 2016).

II. c) Factors affecting the relation between CDCC and Child Well-Being

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Insert Figure 1 about here

Our model (Figure 1) addresses our research question: *How does CDCC relate to child well-being? Which factors might affect this relation?* To build the model, we draw on institutional notions of exchange fields and field conditions (Zietsma et al., 2016).

Our model offers three contributions to the literature. First, it is a theory driven perspective on CDCC, child well-being and the factors that might influence this relation, in the context of institutional fields.

Second, this study contributes to the growing stream of organizational approaches to GC. Building on the notion that GC demand collective action, our framework shows how the dynamics between multiple stakeholders to advance towards SDGs related to child well-being. We allow the 'messiness' inherent in such phenomena without trying to impose a corner solution to the problem (George et al., 2016).

Third, our study contributes to policy debates centered around how to address how CDCC relates to child well-being, presenting evidence that summarizes both possible risks and benefits, to illuminate both transnational regulation and national public policies when necessary.

III. Systematic Literature Review Method

CDCC and child well-being have received much academic attention, especially in the last decades, expanding over several disciplines. Research findings on the topic are scattered in an almost infinite constellation of academic sources, making the study of the phenomenon seem like an impossible quest. To better identify, evaluate and synthesize the resulting literature we conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) (Booth, Papaioannou & Sutton, 2002) to answer our research question: How does CDCC affect child well-being? What factors may affect that relation?

First, we ran a scoping search, identifying existing (key) reviews on databases such as EBSCO, PROQUEST, ERIC, JSTOR and Google Scholar. Since our topic was multidisciplinary, we sampled a wide range of disciplines' databases, while brainstorming terms for each of the concepts included in our research question. We used broad terms: child well-being, children well-being, children wellness, child development, children and internet, children and media, children online, children media culture, children digital lives, children as consumers, children as digital consumers, online children consumption.

We encountered some difficulty identifying the second key word (CDCC). We applied the pearl-growing technique (Booth et al., 2002), by identifying highly relevant papers for each concept to be analyzed.

On the second stage, we conducted the search with the identified key terms, connected by Boolean operators AND, OR, NOT. Selected bibliographic databases were searched from 2000 to the present, to include studies that accompanied the cohort of digital natives, children eighteen by 2018.

On Stage three we applied the snowball technique to identify further studies and references as cited in articles previously selected. Key researchers were identified and additional searches were performed to retrieve their most relevant publications. Due to the relevance, certain international NGOs played in measuring our field of study, their web pages were periodically screened to retrieve reports with up to date findings on our subject. We also conducted hand searches on selected journals.

A title screen review followed, sorting into relevant and non-relevant citations. Our inclusion criteria were: 1) Population: children (0-18 years) 2) related to CDCC and/or Child Well-being; (2) it utilized quantitative, qualitative of research methods to relate CDCC to child well-being; (3) it utilized quantitative, qualitative of research methods to include factors that affected said relation; and (4) it produced findings relevant to social policy regarding the influence of CDCC on child well-being.

We excluded 1) medical studies that discussed specific illnesses or mental pathologies; 2) studies based on adults; 3) studies analyzing specific questions related to local culture; 4) studies evaluating specific indicators and instruments (mostly in psychological publications).

All works that meet our criteria were tabulated to facilitate comparisons and contrasts among studies.

We are currently on the final stage of our SLR, content screening.

IV. Preliminary Findings

While we are still on the stage of final selection and careful reading on our iterative process, some preliminary results have emerged from key studies identified in the scope search.

Three main paradigms underline the CDCC literature children: children are vulnerable and should be protected by legislation; children are empowered, sophisticated consumers capable of auto regulation; or an integration of child and adult (Schor, 2004; Marshal, 2010). Livingstone (2017) cautioned about interest groups backing these paradigms, stirring up "moral panic" to protect the status quo, the predominant value system.

Amongst these transnational, multidisciplinary debate, the concept of "child well-being" was often used as an all-encompassing concept, and still was an ambiguous concept. Since the way child well-being is defined alters adults approach towards it, literature is consistent upon the need to delimitate this elusive concept.

Pollard and Lee (2002)'s SLR proposed to fill in the "gaps and unanswered questions". Yet, it became apparent that no consensus had been reached on the concept, measuring and indicators of what constituted child well-being. Well- being has been referred to as a multi-dimensional concept including several dimensions: material living standards, health, education, personal activities, political voice and governance, social connections and relationships, environment, security (physical and emotional) (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi., 2009).

Raghavan and Alexandrova (2014) finally presented a theory of child well-being, applying three philosophical theories of well-being: *mental state* (conducting to Hedonism, to do well is to feel well, to have a positive mental state); *desire based* (known as subjectivist, well-being is grounded upon completion of desires/ preferences/ life plan), and *needs based* theories (deemed as objectivist, since they claimed that there are certain things all human beings need, besides from feeling well or even fulfilling one's life plan). They introduced a non- reduction constraint to these theories: child well-being is important per se, not just as a mean to an end, to become a successful adult (well becoming).

Livingstone &Third (2017) emphasized the influence of parents and educators in mediating the impact of CDCC on their children and students, and the

importance of clear public health regulations. They reminded that rights are exercised in the contexts were children live, and how there was little research conducted outside the US and Europe ("Global North"). The "Global South" was asked to join in the research conversation, paying special attention to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Several exchange fields are expressing opposite (competing) opinions regarding CDCC and its relation to child well-being, as witnessed by reports, news, articles, interviews, and even talks broadcasted over the internet to international audiences. Though their mention is too broad to be included in this study, we offer our conclusions on this mostly non-academic documentation, revised during the early scoping stage of this study, Industry exchange fields advocate for market freedom, trying to avoid regulation, offering to work together towards ethical standards like other industries dealing with children as consumers (specially regulations on children as consumers related to tobacco, alcohol and junk food). Professional exchange fields were concerned how CDCC might be related to the global rise in issues affecting several dimensions of child well-being. Health care providers targeted CDCC as the main culprit in the global rise of rates in child obesity, attention, eating and anxiety disorders, depression, addiction and even adolescent suicide. Education exchange fields still "have the jury out" on whether CDCC's benefits to children education balance probable negative outcomes and risks to children's physical and emotional safety. Social movement exchange fields mobilized and coordinated actors and resources to advocate for children's rights to be protected online, creating awareness on both the benefits and the risks children might experience online. Parents, social policy agents and governments worldwide demand sound evidence upon which to build both their child rearing and regulation practices (Livingstone, 2017).

Other exchange fields appear to be interacting in an emerging interstitial issue field. Articles in the media present international meetings evidencing Public Private Cooperation endeavors. Multidisciplinary forums abound, and *Think tanks* burgeon to study the scope of CDCC influence on child well-being. Think tanks are examples of interstitial fields that unite actors that occupy stable

interstitial positions encompassing different fields: academic, business, political, media content regulation; while maintaining their separate identities (Zietsma et al. 2016).

Stories of data protection issues, sexting, cyberbullying and other online crimes to children caught media and public policy agents' attention. The precautionary principle was applied, regulating against possible risks to children online, to answer claims from the public domain, mostly parents and social movement exchange fields. The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)[ii] was passed, establishing a unique set of data protection, its compliance compulsory for companies operating in the EU, wherever they are based. It seeks to give users more control over personal data, and level the playing field for businesses. It raised the age for children to access social media.

The attention to our topic and the pressure from transnational regulation might have acted as an exogenous trigger, providing the opportunity for agency to change institutional arrangements, as field actors interpret these changes in societal logics (Zietsma et al., 2016). Further observation of the evolution of this emerging interstitial issue field is needed to evaluate if it evolves into a *bridging* issue field. Alignment upon general principles and values should be achieved, and a study of its dynamics of change (scope, pace, and pathways of change) would render important information on its purpose and structure. Change should be faster and likely radical within an interstitial field, since they are typically under organized to begin with. On the contrary, within bridging issue fields, change would be primarily convergent, adding up to significant transformation over time. The pace of change would be slow, since "each change must be defined in nonlinear negotiation processes" (Zietsma et al., 2016: 51). Child well-being in this age of permanent digital flux might greatly benefit from ongoing, stable collaboration a bridging issue field might provide.

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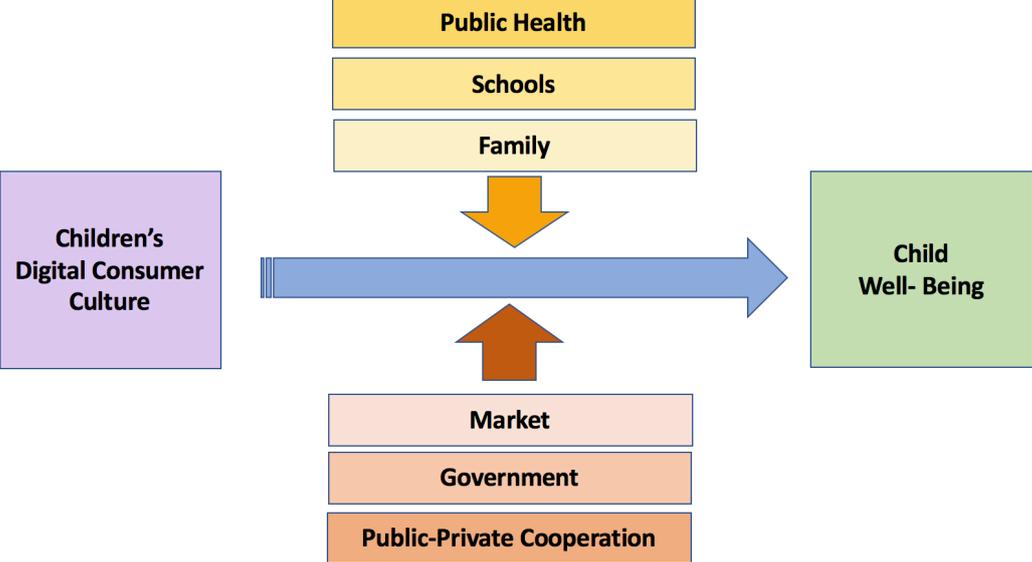Scott, W. R. 1995. *Institutions and Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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FIGURE 1

i https://sustainabledevelopment. un.org/sdgs

ii https://eugdpr.org/