The Routledge Companion to Digital Media and Children

Lelia Green, Donell Holloway, Kylie Stevenson, Tama Leaver, Leslie Haddon

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Publication details
Claudia Riesmeyer
Published online on: 28 Oct 2020

How to cite :- Claudia Riesmeyer. 28 Oct 2020, Children’s Agency in the Media Socialisation Process from: The Routledge Companion to Digital Media and Children Routledge
Accessed on: 21 Nov 2023

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31
CHILDREN’S AGENCY IN THE MEDIA SOCIALIZATION PROCESS

Claudia Riesmeyer

Introduction

Media socialisation research discusses the negotiation of norms and skills for media use and concentrates often on children and their socialisation through elders (e.g., Grusec, 2002; Riesmeyer, Abel & Großmann, 2019; Riesmeyer, Pohl & Ruf, 2019), named socialisation agents (Hurrelmann, 1990; Hurrelmann & Bauer, 2018; and as illustrated in the EU Kids Online model; EU Kids Online, 2014). While these agents are thought of as ‘fundamental’, other agents include the media (Beaudoin, 2014; Prot et al., 2015) and the legal system (Arnett, 1995a, 1995b, 2007). By the mid-1980s, media-pedagogical and development-psychological socialisation research began to move away from the individual’s role as the object and more toward their role as the subject within the socialisation process. The concepts of self-socialisation and agency consider the active role of the individual and compare it with their socialisation through others. This recent shift in perspective has been triggered by social and media changes such as the digitalisation of educational and socialisation processes and their possible consequences for childhood (Honig, 2002; Van Dijck, 2009; Himmelbach, 2013). The ability to contribute to individual socialisation and thus to the acquisition of skills and norms is also conceded to children – they could take an active part within the media socialisation process.

With the progression of digitalisation, the spread of (mobile) communication technologies, and extensive media use by children over the last decades, a new transformation process has taken place, questioning the importance of the various external agents in the media socialisation process. Due to their intuitive, individualised, and ubiquitous use of (mobile) media technologies, some children and adolescents are now entering the limelight themselves as they acquire skills, values, and norms for sophisticated media use. What is more, they are able to communicate their skills to the socialisation agents, who should communicate their skills to them (‘reverse socialisation’; Mead, 1970; Peters, 1985; Clark, 2011; Correa, 2014).

Despite these changes and challenges, however, media socialisation research in communication studies has thus far largely ignored the individual’s active role in the media socialisation process. It is against this background that this chapter argues that media socialisation research should consider the individual’s contribution within this process. It discusses the theoretical concepts of media socialisation, self-socialisation, and agency. This chapter also shows, based on a systematic literature review of articles published in peer-review journals and anthologies, as well as monographs, since 2000, the significance of concepts in media socialisation research to communication
studies. Finally, the chapter formulates four theses for potential research perspectives on media socialisation concerning children’s agency.

**Media Socialisation Process**

Media socialisation is part of the socialisation process, which aims to develop individuals into subjects capable of social action (Smetana, Robinson, & Rote, 2015; Pfaff-Rüdiger & Riesmeyer, 2016; Genner & Süss, 2017). Grusec (2002, p. 143) defines socialisation as a process in which “individuals are assisted in the acquisition of skills necessary to function as members of their group”. In this respect, individuals (should) learn a) to regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviour; b) to appropriate cultural norms and values to integrate into society; and c) to resolve conflicts, to evaluate social relationships, and to assume active roles (Grusec, 2002). It is also a matter of the individual knowing and acknowledging their own abilities and limitations in everyday life (Arnett, 1995a, 1995b).

Within the framework of media socialisation, the individual acquires skills and is taught norms and standards for his or her media use (Hobbs, 2011, 2013; Mihailidis, 2014; Martens & Hobbs, 2015). Krämer (2012, p. 32) speaks of “dispositions that are (can be) socially structured in a typical and sufficiently momentous way with regard to media use, i.e. have as their object the use of the media”, and which are acquired. According to Krämer’s understanding, media socialisation happens through the processing of media content. This process of teaching skills, values, and norms for media use takes place within social relationships between the individual and the socialisation agent, whereby the relationship is structured by “individual and group dispositions, media offerings with their previous meanings (classifications, connotations, evaluations), and strategies of mediation between these levels acquired or to be acquired” (Krämer, 2012, p. 187). Krämer emphasises that both the group in which the individual interacts (e.g., their family or their friends) and their individual characteristics and attitudes influence media socialisation. By emphasising the individual’s characteristics, Krämer moves away from concentrating on the individual as an object to considering them a subject in the process of media socialisation.

**Self-Socialisation and Agency: Concepts of Media Socialisation**

The concepts of self-socialisation and agency focus on the individual’s status in the socialisation process and his or her influence upon this process (Abels & König, 2010; Süss, 2010; Heinzell, Kränzl-Nagl, & Mierendorff, 2012). Both concepts have in common the notions that individuals of all generations make self-regulating contributions to the socialisation process, and that people are producers of their own development by processing their needs and their environment throughout their lives (Hurrelmann & Bauer, 2018). This process does not end at adulthood, but affects the entire life cycle (and thus all generations, regardless of their age). The concepts of self-socialisation and agency thus expand the number of socialisation agents impacting the individual because the agents’ influence shifts over the course of the socialisation process as a result of developmental tasks (for example, from parents to teachers to peers; Arnett, 1995a, 1995b).

The theoretical concepts of self-socialisation and agency have been discussed using various educational, sociological, or communication studies perspectives. These discussions are often driven by ‘non-theoretical’ research such as everyday life observations and empirical findings. Yet they are also based on theoretical assumptions. The discussion of media socialisation research as ‘non-theoretical’ must be evaluated carefully (Chakroff & Nathanson, 2008) however, because both concepts are based on theoretical assumptions, which are presented below.

The understanding of self-socialisation can be differentiated based on two characteristics: the independence of the individual and their scope of actions on the one hand, and whether the
concept of self-socialisation is discussed in general or with a concrete reference to media socialisation on the other hand. If self-socialisation is related to the media, then, in addition to the individualisation of society, technological change is inter-related with changes in media use behaviour, an increase in the media spectrum and differentiated media content. Such developments lead to self-socialisation gaining importance (Arnett, 1995a, 1995b, 2007), because “institutions (such as family and community) have lost their binding power, and individuals have gained more control of and responsibility for the direction of their lives” (Arnett, 2007, p. 214). Because of self-socialisation processes, socialisation agents have to support individuals less; instead, individuals have to make their own decisions and independently acquire skills, values, and norms for media use.

**Self-Socialisation**

A characteristic of this concept is the idea that the individual always makes an independent contribution to the socialisation process (Luhmann, 1987). This contribution is carried out in three steps. Individuals socialise themselves by a) attributing a meaning of their own to things and to themselves, b) developing their own logic of action, and c) formulating their own actions that should be achieved in the future. From this individual activity, a “childhood space, a childlike environment, in contrast to the world of adults” is developed (Zinnecker, 2000, p. 279). Children’s self-socialisation serves to develop and maintain identity through active and productive engagement with the child’s own environment and everyday life. The individual selects, interprets, and changes their social reality over the course of their lifetime (Hurrelmann, 1983; Müller, 1999). Nelissen and van den Bulck (2017) differentiate between three forms of self-socialisation, whereby the degree of independence increases according to the classification of understandings made and the developmental tasks undertaken throughout childhood and adolescence. Children could a) act as co-creators of their socialisation, interpreting and classifying information, b) socialise themselves and develop their own strategies without the influence of others, and c) socialise others.

Finally, Arnett (1995a, 1995b, 2007) and Süß (2010) discuss the concept of self-socialisation in the process of media socialisation. Arnett (1995a, p. 622) defines self-socialisation as the ability to use media for coping with developmental tasks so that children “are free to choose materials that contribute to their socialisation”. Based on the required, acquired, or the existing independence of the child (the assumption), children could make selections from the media content that “best suit[s] their individual preferences and personalities” (Arnett, 1995b, p. 527). Media content provides identity-creating identification possibilities and helps to open up the world. The characteristics of such self-socialisation are control over the social developmental tasks that need to be mastered; a selection of media according to the individual’s needs; as well as the self-reliant, independent actions of the individual. Self-socialisation through media use means that individuals “control the choice of media and media content themselves, decide on media times and media locations in relative autonomy and independently construct the significance of media content in the reception process”, and they do not direct other socialisation agents’ media dealings “with regard to externally determined socialisation goals” (Süß, 2010, p. 110). Because the individual is actively involved in the socialisation process, there is no subordination or media control by other socialisation agents. The adaptation and application of imparted abilities, values, and norms, as well as the acquisition of new abilities, take place with the individuals themselves. These subjects exercise their reflective abilities through their media use (e.g., with regard to media literate media use). For children, this implied freedom means not only using media in accordance with their wishes and needs (Pfaff-Rüdiger & Riesmeyer, 2016) but also in dealing responsibly with media offerings and using media to reflect opportunities and minimise risks (Livingstone, 2004).
Agency

The concept of agency also assumes that individuals are competent social actors. Agency is synonymous with power, the ability to act; or is simply equated with action (Raithelhuber, 2008). Following this concept, agency focuses less on the socialisation process (like self-socialisation) than on the result of socialisation, the concrete action or non-action of the individual, and the consequences of actions. “Having a sense of agency means that one can be generative, creative, proactive, and reflective” (Levesque, 2011, p. 92).

Agency is embedded in Barnes’ social theory (1995), Bandura’s learning theory (2001), and Giddens’ structuring theory (1984) among others, with Giddens defining agency as being linked to the individual’s ability to influence actions, to intervene in events, or to affect something causally. He states, “agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things” (Giddens, 1984, p. 9). Expectations are formulated, corresponding action plans are drawn up, self-regulation is implemented, and self-reflexes are evaluated (Bandura, 2001). Barnes (1995) goes further, arguing that the consequences of the action, or of the decision to act, assume that the individual is also able to think through the consequences of the action. Individuals thus contribute to the shaping of the social worlds in which they participate.

The common thread regarding the idea of agency is that the individual is not only seen as a subject capable of acting (as in the concept of self-socialisation) but that he or she is also granted power – “the power to produce an effect, to have influence, to make a difference” (Buckingham, 2017, p. 12). Individuals must ensure that others recognise their capacity to act and their sense of responsibility for the consequences of their actions. This desire to be recognised for their abilities is intrinsically motivated (Giddens, 1984, p. 80), and when applied to the process of media socialisation this means that if socialisation agents (can) trust the individual child and his/her contribution to his/her socialisation they allow greater freedom to act independently. Alternatively, the child might claim that agency, whether or not the socialisation agents permit him/her to do so, creating potential conflict.

Self-Socialisation and Agency: State of Research

Both the concept of self-socialisation and agency have in common the notion of the individual as an independently acting subject with his or her own needs, ideas, and actions. The concepts assume that children and adolescents are independent social actors with specific rights, duties, and requirements as well as abilities and limitations regarding their actions. These characteristics should also be accounted for in research. Given this, what role has the individual played thus far in media socialisation research within communication studies?

A systematic literature review was conducted to answer this question. It included all publications since 2000 including monographs, articles in anthologies, and articles in peer-reviewed journals in English and German. The year 2000 was chosen as the starting point due to changes in the media ecosystem (such as the establishment of mobile communication technologies). Publications were searched for in the EBSCO Host database and in the archives of peer-reviewed journals Journal of Children and Media (English language), Publizistik, Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft, and Merz–Medien und Erziehung (both German language), and SCM – Studies in Communication and Media (with articles in both English and German). All publications that mentioned the keywords media socialisation, mediation process, socialisation agent, self-socialisation, agency, and media in the title, the abstract, and/or the keywords were included. The search terms were deliberately broad in scope because it could not be guaranteed in advance that the publications would exclusively use the terms ‘self-socialisation’ or ‘agency’.

Claudia Riesmeyer
Both ‘self-socialisation’ and ‘agency’ can also be used, for example, when comparing the different socialisation agents or the consequences of the socialisation process. In addition, despite the different conceptualisation of each term, they are treated equally for the literature review since both concepts focus on the individual and his or her role in the socialisation process. The sample was not limited to empirical studies of children and adolescents, but included studies of all ages in order to capture phenomena relating to different groups, such as socialisation by children and socialisation as an intergenerational task. Articles that did not contain an empirical study but discussed the concepts theoretically were also included in the sample.

The sample, once cleared of duplicates, comprised 1,082 publications. The broad search strategy meant that the sample also contained articles from journalism research and from the field of organisational or political communication research. Therefore, the second stage excluded from the sample all publications that either had no focus on communication studies (e.g., articles dealing with diplomatic relations) or that did not focus on any of the search terms mentioned (e.g., as a theoretical basis or as an empirical construct). This revision led to 159 publications being included in the systematic literature review (152 publications in English, 7 in German). This sample comprised 11 monographs, 22 articles in anthologies, and 126 peer-reviewed journal articles.

In the final step the articles were read and coded as to whether they used one or both concepts or at least referred to them. Twenty-four categories were created to allow the systematic ordering of article contents. This approach was necessary in order to capture the content, to categorise it, and to ensure that the texts could be correctly encoded even if they did not use the specific terms ‘self-socialisation’ and/or ‘agency’.

The literature review shows that, despite the relevance of the concepts of self-socialisation and agency, they have thus far only made a small contribution to media socialisation research. Only 19 of the 159 publications use the term self-socialisation or agency and/or deal with the role of the individual as a subject in the socialisation process without using either of the two terms. Second, where other socialisation agents are taken into consideration, the publications were deemed to address ‘self-socialisation’ and/or ‘agency’ where they primarily focus on the role of the media within the media socialisation process (e.g., television, books, video games, or social networks). Such articles often also deal with non-medial agents, such as parents (or the nuclear family), teachers, and peers. Very few publications that compare the influence of agents and their importance for media socialisation also observe that the influence of the agents changes over the course of childhood and adolescence.

With regard to the topics dealt with by the publications, they are primarily concerned with the role of the media; and media use or influence on the formation of identities, self-representation, and self-perception. Mediated norms for media use, the processes, and the importance of media socialisation are discussed. The sample also contains numerous fields of application of media socialisation, e.g., the connection between media socialisation and political socialisation, sexual education, consumer, and religious socialisation.

The systematic literature review not only illustrates the low importance of the individual and the concepts of self-socialisation and agency, but also the at times very broad use of these terms. On the one hand, the boundary between self-socialisation and socialisation through others is drawn inconsistently. This applies to more than the question of whether peers are to be counted as self-socialisation or socialisation agents because of a very similar living environment. Some authors also define media as self-socialisation because they are used by individuals to socialise themselves, as Arnett (1995a) proposes. Other authors separate the media from self-socialisation and thus emphasise the educational mandate of media as a socialisation agent. While the concept of self-socialisation is discussed, so too is the media content the individual uses for his or her socialisation and how other agents use media in order to be able to socialise and pass on their knowledge. Some of these aspects
would have to be characterised by the concept of socialisation through others. Finally, the sample contains texts that combine agency with the possibility of the individual producing media of their own, thus emphasising the active component of the concept, focusing on the action result.

**Open Up for the Future: Four Theses**

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the relevance of self-socialisation and agency for media socialisation research relating to children in the field of communication studies. Self-socialisation is understood as the socialisation of the individual, the person themselves, and thus as a process, while agency looks at the outcome of the process. The state of research makes it clear that there are various starting points that can be considered in future research endeavours and which are summarised in four theses, as follows.

**Thesis 1: Media Socialisation as Comparative Research**

One basic question asked by media socialisation relates to the origin of socialisation: who learns which skills, when, and where? Up until now, media socialisation research in the field of communication studies has focussed on the media as an agent, followed by parents (or the nuclear family), teachers, or peers, and their influence at one measuring point. As a rule, the focus is on one agent; a comparison between agents is almost absent from the selected publications. This could be a starting point for further discussions.

Closely linked to this absence is one relating to the perception of the mediation process over time: how do the socialisation agent and the individual mutually assess their roles in the socialisation process? How do they perceive each other? Precisely because media socialisation is a process that begins at childhood, and because there may be different and contested ideas about its end (Hurrelmann & Bauer, 2018), it is a challenge to grasp the (mutual) comparison of all socialisation agents at different points in time. Research shows that media socialisation research in the field of communication studies has thus far largely failed to make this comparison. This may reflect methodological challenges: researchers either have to rely on self-reflection by the socialisation agents and their ability to remember, or they would have to fall back on a panel design in order to survey long-term influences and proportions. However, for reasons of research pragmatism and economics, panel designs are often only partially feasible. ‘The Class’ project by Sonia Livingstone and Julian Sefton-Green (2016) is an exception, during which both communication scholars accompanied a London school class for a year and conducted interviews with the students, teachers, and parents at various times.

When media socialisation as a process is investigated empirically, the role of the individual should always be considered. Children and adolescents acquire skills independently in the process of media socialisation since the acquisition of knowledge does not necessarily have to be carried out by other bodies but can also be intrinsically motivated. Initial studies indicate that children and adolescents can name their own contribution to socialisation (“Who taught you how to use and deal with the media?”); compare their own socialisation activities with those of other bodies (Pfäff-Rüdiger & Riesmeyer, 2016; Riesmeyer, Pfäff-Rüdiger, & Kümpel, 2016); and define norms and values for their media use. This freedom of children and adolescents to take part in socialisation in a self-determined way and to make decisions independently means that older socialisation agents (e.g., parents, teacher) have to support and trust them to acquire skills and knowledge in order to counter risks from the very beginning (Blum-Ross et al., 2018; Riesmeyer, Abel, & Großmann, 2019).

Which abilities can be made concrete in self-socialisation, and when children and adolescents need support from other socialisation agents, has not yet been clarified. Krämer notes, in addition
to self-socialisation, in the sense of “testing along and in a variation on the practical knowledge acquired so far”, that “the family is probably one of the essential sources of strategies of media use” (Krämer, 2012, p. 170). Initial research findings show that the attribution of who contributed what to children's media socialisation varies in terms of the skills learned. The majority of those surveyed acquire technical skills themselves (following the principle of trial and error); parents and school play the major role in imparting background knowledge and (self-)reflection (evaluative media literacy; self and social skills; Pfaff-Rüdiger & Riesmeyer, 2016; Riesmeyer, Pfaff-Rüdiger, & Kümpel, 2016). To promote “critical understanding” which “should also lead to action” should be the aim of media education and the media socialisation process (Buckingham, 2019).

This implies that children and adolescents need guidance in the media socialisation process; they need to be taught values and norms in order to be able to apply them and adapt them to new conditions and media environments. Only in this way are they able to make their own decisions and reflect on them (e.g., with regard to the evaluation of received media content or interactions in a chat group). This decision-making power should be recognised in future research, and not either/or but with both guidance and self-direction, and, ideally, all possible socialisation agents considered. Such an approach includes regularly reviewing the definition of socialisation agents, and, if necessary, extending it if new agents arise. Traditional concepts do not yet consider agents that operate on social media platforms: neither followers as individuals (subjects who follow an account, e.g., peers), nor followees (objects followed by an account, e.g., influencers or friends) are currently accounted for. These should be considered, however, since initial studies already emphasise the importance of social media platforms in providing a benchmark for adolescents (Riesmeyer, Abel, & Großmann, 2019; Riesmeyer, Pohl, & Ruf, 2019).

Finally, in addition to the skills taught to children and young people, the comparative perspective concerns the origin of knowledge and the way in which knowledge is imparted: what is the knowledge of the socialisation agents based on and how do they intend to impart this knowledge? The contexts of everyday life become particularly relevant here. Arnett (1995a, p. 619), for example, notes that parents always educate within the cultural context around them and adapt cultural patterns and peculiarities that their parents have taught them. Especially with regard to technological change, this observation raises the question of whether the adaptation of abilities and educational patterns can be or should be media-dependent or media-independent. Individuals may be able to apply unknown standard patterns to new media technologies, but they must define and adopt new values and standards of media use into their futures – media socialisation also means a lifelong-learning process for all socialisation agents.

**Thesis 2: Media Socialisation Means Lifelong Learning**

Future research should, therefore, understand media socialisation as a lifelong-learning process that does not end when early adulthood is reached (‘emerging adulthood’; Arnett, 2007, p. 208). Until now, media socialisation has often been defined as a process that begins in childhood where older socialisation agents teach younger people skills, knowledge, values, and norms for media use. Here, research into media socialisation in the field of communication studies should consider the changes in media offerings. In the meantime, more intuitive media technologies have been developed, and older socialisation agents (parents, grandparents, and teachers) can and must themselves acquire the skills of applying these. Against this background, all socialisation agents are called upon to constantly check their knowledge, and, if necessary, acquire new/further skills in order to be able to set values and standards. If the concept of self-socialisation or agency is thus redirected away from children and young people toward the generation of adults’ skills, this can help to explain how adults acquire new technologies and associated skills.
Thesis 3: Media Socialisation Is Not a Unidirectional Process

Closely linked to thesis two is that media socialisation should not be understood as a unidirectional process. Using the example of self-socialisation, the previous logic of the socialisation process breaks down because children and young people can also take over a socialisation function (e.g., toward their parents; Correa, 2014; and/or their followers; Riesmeyer, Pohl, & Ruf, 2019). If the basic assumption of the individual as an independently acting and responsible subject applies, then this not only emphasises the active role of the subject within the process but also implies its importance as a socialisation agent, since the self-acquired knowledge can, in turn, be passed on to others – irrespective of generational affiliation. The perception that the younger generations socialise the older generations is not a new one: Mead defined ‘reverse socialisation’ in 1970. Socialisation is a bidirectional process between parents and children, between generations, that imparts skills, values, and norms from each to the other. Within this concept of the socialisation process, the active role of the individual and thus self-socialisation is already in place. There is an equal agency of parents and children (Kuczynski, 2003; Clark, 2011; Van den Bulck, Custers, & Nelissen, 2016; Nelissen & van den Bulck, 2017) that is assumed. However, this concept of the socialisation process has rarely been implemented in empirical media socialisation studies in communication studies thus far.

Thesis 4: Media Socialisation as an Interdisciplinary Common Starting Point

Finally, current research indicates that media socialisation in general, but also the concepts of agency and self-socialisation in particular, are repeatedly associated with specific fields of application. These include where research deals with the connections between media socialisation and sexual education, for example, and political, religious, or consumer socialisation (e.g., how Muslims use Google to research religious practices instead of discussing them with their parents, or how young people use media offerings to make purchase decisions; e.g., Davignon, 2013; Moeller & de Vreese, 2013; Wright, 2014). Since these issues are at the interface of media socialisation, and since they deal with the role of the individual, media socialisation research in the field of communication studies should also take up these common starting points in order to grasp what part ‘young people’ play in the construction “of their own social lives” (Poynotz, Coulter, & Brisson, 2016, p. 51).

References


