

Journal of Turkish Science Education

<http://www.tused.org>

© ISSN: 1304-6020

Well-being through digital storytelling: an analysis of young people's stories

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of digital technologies and young people's well-being has become a topic of increasing concern and interest within psychological and educational research. While the advantages of digital engagement for socio-emotional skill development are acknowledged, there is apprehension regarding excessive screen time and its potential impact on mental health. The study's objective was to provide a gender-focused analysis of the main topics related to well-being addressed in young people's videos. Specifically, it addressed the following research question: What issues did boys and girls express in their digital stories, and how can these issues be related to well-being? Drawing upon the positive psychology framework, the study analysed the stories of 31 young participants aged 14 to 20, exploring wellbeing-related themes. Data were collected by transcription of the digital stories and analysis using thematic analysis. The qualitative analysis reveals shared and gender-specific themes, shedding light on the nuanced ways digital engagement intersects with well-being outcomes. Although the study highlights similarities in well-being concerns, it also acknowledges the possibility of subtle differences in how boys and girls express their needs. The findings underscore the importance of understanding the impact of digital technologies on young people's well-being and suggest avenues for future research and intervention. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between digital technologies, storytelling, and the well-being of young people, offering insights for practitioners and educators striving to support positive developmental outcomes in the digital age.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received:

18.07.2024

Accepted:

29.11.2024

Available Online:

22.09.2025

KEYWORDS:

Digital storytelling,
well-being, young
people.

To cite this article: Guedes Teixeira, E., Monteiro, A., & Barros, R. (2025). Well-being through digital storytelling: an analysis of young people's stories. *Journal of Turkish Science Education*, 22(3), 542-560. <http://doi.org/10.36681/tused.2025.028>

Introduction

The implications of digital technologies for young people's well-being are controversial. From one perspective, advantages are recognised for developing socio-emotional skills, primarily through games and videos (Monteiro et al., 2023). However, a significant concern in the literature is young people's excessive time on digital devices, especially mobile technologies, for Internet access (Andersen

& Jiang, 2018). This issue has been linked to poor mental health among at-risk young people, including anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and panic disorder, as reported by George et al. (2018) and UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre et al. (2021).

This paper is based on four digital storytelling (DS) workshops held in the framework of a European project involving young people facing vulnerable situations (Anderson & Mack, 2019). DS can be seen as a research method supported by a video narrative tool created by combining multimedia digital tools, allowing individuals to tell their own stories (Yılmaz et al., 2017, de Jager et al., 2017). According to Lambert (2013a), DS entails short first-person digital video stories that blend voice, images, and sound, organised around seven steps of personal storytelling. Digital stories are potent pedagogical and research tools, fostering exploration, investigation, and creativity (Svoen et al., 2019). These stories cultivate a sense of social belonging and inclusion and promote the development of media and digital literacy, thereby enhancing conditions for social inclusion (Monteiro et al., 2022; Pandian et al., 2020).

Since DS use multimedia tools and social media dissemination, this study aims to provide a gender-focused analysis of the main topics related to well-being addressed in young people's videos. Previous studies highlight varying perspectives, some identifying positive and negative impacts on mental health and media use (Chassiakos et al., 2016), while others suggest no discernible relationship (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre et al., 2021).

The contribution of this research to the existing field lies in the challenges posed by other studies (e.g. James et al., 2017), which call for the development of studies focused on the individual factors and the mechanisms that support the positive or negative results of digital use, as well as exploring differences between groups of young people who differ in these individual factors, in this case the gender. Moreover, the results of this study will make it possible to discuss the possibilities of DS experiences as a research methodology (Rubio-Hurtado et al., 2022).

Young People's Well-Being and Digital Storytelling: Possible Implications

Although addressing the well-being of young people in the 21st century is becoming increasingly relevant, the relationship between the use/exposure to digital devices and well-being in adolescence remains a gap in the scientific literature (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre et al., 2021).

Especially in the last decade, the expansion of young people's access to the Internet, particularly through mobile digital devices, has introduced relevant reflection questions within the scope of education (Monteiro et al., 2024). Excessive exposure to digital devices and the Internet is associated with negative psychological functioning, particularly in emotional and affective development. The COVID-19 pandemic made it more serious. The parents of these children and young people also belong to a generation that cannot do without Internet access, whether for work, leisure, or other reasons. However, it is unclear if this digital engagement compromises normal youth development and well-being.

Some variables must be considered in the analysis of digital engagement and well-being, such as the time of exposure to technology devices, their use (to communicate, to observe others' contents, to get information to improve their academic skills), or other specificities. These variables explain the controversial research results regarding the influence of digital technologies on quality of life, emotional well-being, and levels of self-esteem. Research also reports the constructive benefits of Internet use (Limone & Toto, 2022), although these aspects still need more development (Rosič et al., 2022).

In this context, the positive or negative effects appear to be short-term, such as the experience of a particular emotion, rather than long-term effects, such as life satisfaction. Dierlin and Johannes (2020) argue that young people are more vulnerable than adults to the adverse effects of digital technology use, which are not so evident.

Low and excessive use of digital technologies decreases well-being. In this sense, Baños et al. (2017) refer to the studies that relate digital environment use and behaviour disorders in young people, but also underline the Internet's potential to prevent and promote positive mental health in young

people. Young people's interactions with social media were intricate and deeply personal, and their choice of social media platforms changed quickly. Nevertheless, they are interested in engaging in platforms that provide mental well-being content, and social media is becoming a valuable tool for promoting education and support related to well-being (Jayman et al., 2023).

Regarding gender, girls are more often vulnerable to social comparison and show more concerns about the need for approval on social media (Teixeira & Monteiro, 2024). They invest more in intimate and dyadic interpersonal relationships and popularity searches. Depressive processes are more common in girls (Platt et al., 2021), and well-being negatively correlates with depressive states. The longitudinal study by Liang et al. (2016) showed that addiction to the Internet is more likely to precede depression in girls rather than in boys, which demonstrates girls' possible disadvantage concerning the emergence of depressive states related to Internet use. In addition, girls are more affected by their online identities and behaviours than boys are. In contrast to boys, girls report that their virtual selves and actions play a significant role in shaping their self-perception and desire to feel accepted (Serrate-González, et al., 2023). According to Twenge & Martin (2020), the relationship between low levels of well-being and mental health problems (cyberbullying, sleep disorders, or fear of rejection) in girls is more related to the use of digital media when compared to boys (Konstantopoulou et al., 2019).

Twenge & Martin (2020), using a representative sample of young people between 13 and 18 years old from the United States and the United Kingdom, concluded that gender differences were significant in the relationship between digital use and well-being. According to the results of their study, girls spend more time on the Internet in social interaction activities, preferably using smartphones. Conversely, the boys spend their time gaming on various electronic devices. They prefer group interactions and show higher levels of aggression. Concerning video games, differences between boys and girls were also found. Boys tend to allocate more time to leisure dedicated to video games over time, whereas girls exhibit preferences in selecting their gaming devices (Iglesias-Caride et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, the question remains: what is the role of the virtual world in this relationship? Gender differences are immediately identified in terms of the preferred type of digital devices and the objectives for which they are used (smartphones, social media, texting, general computer use and online, in the case of girls; gaming and electronic devices in general, in the case of the boys). The relationship between low levels of well-being and a high amount of time spent on social media shows much more pronounced disadvantages for girls. Curiously, young people who manage time properly using digital media present higher levels of well-being than those who do not use them at all, and this effect is more evident in boys (Twenge & Martin, 2020).

Boys use more distractions and fun situations to deal with stress in daily life. They are more focused on their dominance in the peer group, but, in return, they receive less emotional support from peers. They are more interested in themselves and their dominant goals. From this perspective, the characteristics of girls' relational processes place them in a position of greater fragility about emotional issues, namely low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, but do not inhibit antisocial behaviours. For boys, the most common problems are aggression and antisocial behaviour, but they are more protected from emotional issues (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). In sum, some relational processes are protective of some problems and risk factors for others. Facing the above, understanding the impact of numerous variables, including age, life trajectories and the experience of certain events, may be responsible for the inconsistency in the results of studies in this domain.

On the one hand, the same relational processes can have different consequences for boys and girls. On the other hand, young people can integrate the two styles mentioned above, whether they are traditionally associated with boys or girls, leading them to adopt an appropriate pattern of relationships with their peers.

When digital technologies are introduced into adolescent development processes, despite the differences between boys and girls regarding the psychological and emotional outcomes associated with digital technology use, some studies highlight the role of these media in personal and social development (Limone & Toto, 2022). These findings can support the idea that strategies such as DS can bring different benefits for boys and girls regarding their well-being.

Previous studies involving DS and the well-being of young people generally use DS as a means of social activism, intervention, and research in the field (Botfield et al., 2018; Finnegan, 2023). These studies target young people with different characteristics: LGBTQIA+ (Bellamy, 2018), migrants and refugees (Botfield et al., 2018), indigenous (Loebach et al., 2019), young people with cancer (Pereira et al., 2019), out-of-school girls (Buckler et al., 2022) and focus mainly on the implications of technologies and stories for mental health (Granic et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2016). The main findings suggest that intervention through DS can increase the well-being of young people belonging to underrepresented groups if carefully and respectfully planned, since sensitive and personal topics are addressed.

Those studies also conclude that empowering participatory processes can reflect the unique experience of each young person. Regarding the contents covered in the stories, Pereira et al. (2019) state that, although no differences were observed according to sociodemographic characteristics, the young people's struggles and life situations, such as severe illness, are reflected in the stories. Buckler et al. (2022) refer to DS as a capability approach for young people who miss formal schooling.

In the same line of reasoning, Hall et al. (2016) highlight the importance of DS in research to actively engage young people in narrative processes involving themes related to their well-being and mental health, meeting their needs. Botfield et al. (2018), in turn, identify the primary research gaps as the lack of digital stories about sexual health and interculturality and the need to consider ethical issues of using DS and sexual health methods. The authors also mentioned that the possibility of using digital methods as a form of self-representation and autobiographical narrative should be further explored. These arguments justify the relevance of studying themes related to well-being that emerge from young people's DS as presented in this article.

Methods

Aims/Objectives and Research Question

This paper explores the implications of digital storytelling workshops on the well-being of young people, with particular focus on the themes that emerge in their narratives. The study's objective was to provide a gender-focused analysis of the main topics related to well-being addressed in young people's videos. Specifically, it addressed the following research question: What issues did boys and girls express in their digital stories, and how can these issues be related to well-being?

Rationale

The framework of positive psychology supported the analysis of young people's stories. According to positive psychology, growing up is associated with autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the last understood as a sense of connection with and care for others. These needs could be achieved through digital communication, for example, through which young people can experience different competencies (social comparison, civil participation, and self-presentation, among others) (Barros et al., 2010). Civil participation supports the feeling of engagement and empowerment in a group, the need to struggle for a shared cause, and improves the sense of responsibility and respect for others' differences (e.g., Tynes et al., 2008). Cognitive development also impacts emotion regulation and self-control in virtual environments. Online self-presentation could increase self-esteem and the feeling of well-being, based on New Zealand's Child and Youth Well-being Strategy (n.d.). In contrast, social comparison can lead to depression and anxiety, especially if young people's previous levels of self-esteem are already low. Furthermore, actively engaging with social media is linked to enhanced well-being, while passive use may harm it (Jayman et al., 2023).

Participants

31 individuals aged between 14 and 20 took part in the study, with a modal age of 17 and an average age of 16.87. Of these, 12 were male (39%), and 19 were female (61%). In terms of the level of education, the young people were distributed in: 9th grade (19%), 10th grade (19%), 11th grade (49%), and 12th grade (13%).

As stated, the project involved young people facing vulnerable situations, and most of their parents were employed in sales or other low-skilled occupations, with some experiencing unemployment (29% for mothers, 10% for fathers). Correspondingly, their educational qualifications in the 9th grade suggest a lower level of education, since in Portugal, compulsory education has been set at the 12th grade since 2009 (Law No. 85/2009).

Instruments and Methods

Data were collected during four DS workshops held in Portugal from April to September 2021. The production of the videos followed the steps proposed by Lambert (2010, 2013a, 2013b): owning your insight; owning your emotions; finding the moment; seeing your story; hearing your story; assembling your story; and sharing your story.

The young people were invited to write a personal story with a maximum of 250 words. The stories were shared in the “story circles”, as proposed in Lambert’s methodology (Lambert, 2013a). The young people recorded the final version in audio and imported it into a video editor. After searching for Creative Commons images or importing their photographs and drawings, the videos were assembled and, when authorised, made public.

Thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019) was used to identify shared and specific vital themes emerging from participants’ digital stories (girls: $n = 19$; boys: $n = 9$), focusing on gender regularities and singularities regarding the outcomes and indicators of well-being, based on New Zealand’s Child and Youth Well-being Strategy (n.d.).

Research Design

The authors followed the six-step thematic analysis process proposed by Braun et al. (2019), which included familiarisation with the dataset. In fact, besides being the facilitators of the digital storytelling workshops, meaning that they were present during the making of the videos, namely the story circles, the editing and the première, the researchers viewed and listened to the videos to fully transcribe the text, which was then read and re-read. First, observations and comments on each story and the complete data corpus were noted. Subsequently, researchers proceeded to code the material according to the well-being outcomes and their indicators, presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Well-being outcomes and indicators as defined in the New Zealand child and youth well-being strategy

Well-being outcomes	Well-being outcomes indicators
Accepted, respected and connected	Ability to be themselves. Sense of belonging. Experience of discrimination. Experience of bullying. Social support. Support for cultural identity. Languages.

Learning and developing	Early learning participation. Regular school attendance. Literacy, numeracy and science skills. Social skills. Self-management skills. Youth in employment, education or training
Happy and healthy	Prenatal care. Prenatal exposure to toxins. Subjective health status. Preventable admissions to hospital. Mental well-being. Self-harm and suicide.
Loved, safe and nurtured	Feeling loved. Feeling safe. Family well-being. Injury prevalence. Harm against children. Quality time with parents
Involved and empowered	Involvement in community. Representation of youth voice. Making positive choices. Criminal offences
Have what they need	Material well-being. Material hardship (child poverty). Low income (child poverty). Food insecurity. Housing quality. Housing affordability.

Note: Child Well-being and Poverty Reduction Group (2022)

Following this phase, initial themes were generated, and data were collated for each theme. This material was then further developed, reviewed, split, combined, and sometimes discarded.

Researchers were particularly interested in organising the themes according to participants' gender within the scope of the analysis, which focused on gender differences in well-being outcomes present in the digital stories. As a result, the themes that emerged from the coding were redefined and divided into shared and gender-specific categories, which will be presented in the tables related to well-being outcomes in the next section. Given that the analysis of the stories does not always allow for mutually exclusive categorisation due to the intersection of themes, the presentation of results will occasionally reflect this overlap.

The final phase involved writing up the analysis, incorporating data extracts and contextualising them within the relevant literature.

From an ethical standpoint, various considerations were considered at different stages, as StoryCenter (n.d.) outlines. These included measures to safeguard the well-being and emotional support of the young individuals, the acquisition of informed consent from all participants, and the assurance that particularly sensitive stories would not be disclosed to the public.

Findings

How Boys and Girls Expressed Well-Being Issues in the Digital Stories

The thematic analysis results are presented according to the gender variable. The differences mentioned below are not statistically significant. The authors aimed to identify the main topics concerning well-being addressed by boys and girls in their digital stories and the gender-based

differences in the topics addressed. The analysis considered the well-being outcomes indicators based on the Child Well-being and Poverty Reduction Group's proposal (n.d.).

The well-being outcomes most mentioned by both boys and girls were associated with the idea of being accepted, respected and connected (G: 25%; B: 33%) which referred to shared themes related to bullying/cyberbullying, online benefits and disadvantages/dangers, the need for respect and recognition, loneliness, mental health concerns, and integration in a new country (migration).

Table 2

Thematic analysis of young people's stories related to the well-being outcome 'accepted, respected, and connected'

Well-being outcome indicators	References	Thematic analysis	
Ability to be themselves.	Girls (19 digital stories)	Specific themes	Shared themes
Sense of belonging.	14 references (25%)	Girls:	Bullying/cyberbullying
Experience of discrimination.	Boys (9 digital stories)	Coming out as gay	Online benefits and disadvantages/dangers
Experience of bullying.	15 references (33%)	Homophobia	Need for respect and recognition
Social support.		Seeking psychological help	Loneliness
Support for cultural identity.		Importance of socialising with other young people and leisure (music, dancing) to express emotions and to relax	Concerns about mental health
Languages.		Leisure, holidays, travelling	Integration in a new country (migration)
		Getting to know new cultures	
		Abusive love relationships (disclosing or sharing intimate content without consent, revenge porn, manipulation)	
		School disengagement	
		Boys:	
		Greater ability to understand others - empathy	
		Gratitude	
		Recognising the need for an attachment figure – (in)security	

As presented in Table 2, the well-being outcome related to being accepted, respected, and connected had many male and female references. Regarding shared aspects, both groups mentioned situations related to peer violence, both online and offline, highlighting some benefits and dangers of the Internet. They also expressed concerns about mental health. Their stories conveyed feelings such as loneliness and the desire for integration, respect, recognition, and social inclusion.

Why don't people and society think before criticising someone?

We are in the 21st century, and there is still the prejudice of image and how people look.

(...) Why must our society criticise people with coldness, arrogance, and negative points?

Why do they only see this side? And why don't they see the good side of people? (Rita, girl, 18 y.o.)

I have been here in Portugal for seven months, fulfilling my goal of studying. (...) I am here, in Porto, because I had a scholarship from São Tomé to study in Portugal, and I obviously did not let the opportunity go by because where I was studying, I had a hard time learning. (Artur, boy, 17 y.o.)

Regarding specific references, girls mentioned a broader range of topics, such as leisure, cultural identity, sexual identity, emotional/psychological issues, abusive intimate relationships, and even school disengagement. The boys focused on empathy, gratitude, and needing an attachment figure.

Table 3 presents themes related to the learning and developing outcome were frequently mentioned by girls (25% of references in the videos), with similar results as the previous outcome, and by boys (31%).

Table 3

Thematic analysis of young people's stories related to the well-being outcome 'learning and developing'

Well-being outcome indicators	References	Thematic analysis	
Early learning participation.	Girls (19 digital stories)	Specific themes	Shared themes
Regular school attendance.	14 references (25%)	Girls:	Emotional learning and self-improvement:
Literacy, numeracy and science skills.	Boys (9 digital stories)	Social learning	not giving in to threats and pressure; self-
Social skills.	14 references (31%)	Respect	acceptance; self-
Self-management skills.		Helping others who may be going through similar situations	esteem; self-care; self-
Youth in employment, education or training.		Giving meaning to adversity	confidence; self-
		Learning about preserving intimacy online	control; self-
		Boys:	acceptance; breaking with patterns of comparative thinking;
		Self-recovery	internal locus of control, perseverance
			Areas of vocational interest and choice of future profession
			Encouragement to follow dreams

As can be seen in Table 3, the shared themes for both genders were emotional learning and self-improvement: not giving in to threats and pressures, self-acceptance, self-esteem, self-care, self-confidence, self-control, self-acceptance, breaking with patterns of comparative thinking, internal locus of control and perseverance, areas of vocational interest and choosing a future profession, and encouragement to follow dreams. As for the most distinctive aspects, girls focus on social learning and respect, helping others in similar situations, finding meaning in adversity, and learning about preserving intimacy online. On the other hand, boys emphasise self-recovery with the help of other people:

In the Association, I learnt to respect others, to improve my skills, such as my self-esteem and confidence, to control my emotions, to control my impulsiveness. I have also managed to change several

things about myself, to have more goals, to express myself more, but above all, I have grown, and I am beginning to see life differently. (Paula, girl, 15 y.o.)

I think using technology was very important, especially to talk to our families or with homeschooling. We gained another achievement: teachers so far away, always helping us, which we know was difficult. (Luís, boy, 16 y.o.)

A similar number of boys and girls reported stories related to the outcome of being happy and healthy, comprising 23% for girls and 18% for boys. This category involves mental health issues, concerns related to anorexia and body image, worries about illness, experiences of grief, like the loss of a close family member or pet, and occurrences of physical violence.

Table 4

Thematic analysis of young people's stories related to the well-being outcome 'happy and healthy'

Well-being outcome indicators	References	Thematic analysis	
Prenatal care.	Girls (19 digital stories) 13 references (23%)	Specific themes	Shared themes
Prenatal exposure to toxins.		Girls:	Mental health concerns
Subjective health status.	Boys (9 digital stories) 8 references (18%)	Seeking psychological help	Anorexia/body image concerns
Preventable admissions to the hospital.		ITD	Illnesses
Mental well-being.		Dealing with parents' divorce	Grief (loss of close family member; pet)
Self-harm and suicide.		Psychological violence	Physical violence
		Suicidal thoughts or suicide attempt	
		Boys:	
		Domestic violence	
		Regret and culpability	

Table 4 indicates that both genders depicted health-related concerns in their stories. These situations encompassed illness, grief, and matters associated with body image. Delving into more specific details, girls addressed risk behaviours, sexually transmitted diseases, psychological violence, and attempted suicide. In contrast, boys mentioned situations involving domestic violence, remorse, and feelings of guilt.

In 2021, I got sick from a mistake, and that mistake resulted in two STDs [sexually transmitted diseases] that led to me going to the health centre every week and often to the ER. I was having treatments until one night I got ill and had, I can say, the greatest pain of my life. In the morning, I woke up and was frightened by what I saw, so I went straight to the emergency room. (...) The things that STDs can cause! (Teresa, girl, 18 y.o.)

Suddenly, I started to reduce my meals to the point I stopped eating. All because I wanted to be thin. (...) That morning, I could not get out of bed. I didn't have the strength. I requested an ambulance to take me to the hospital. During the ride, I passed out and lost consciousness of everything. For 15 days, I was intubated, and my life was at risk, weighing just 47 kilos. (Filipe, boy, 17 y.o.)

With fewer references from boys and girls, the outcome loved, safe, and nurtured had 18% references in girls' stories and 11% in boys' stories, as presented in Table 5.

Table 5*Thematic analysis of young people's stories related to the well-being outcome 'loved, safe and nurtured'*

Well-being outcome indicators	References	Thematic analysis	
Feeling loved.	Girls (19 digital stories)	Specific themes	Shared themes
Feeling safe.		Girls:	Family emotional support; parents' emotional support
Family well-being.	10 references (18%)	Family problems (break-ups; divorce; alcoholism; road accidents)	
Injury prevalence.	Boys (9 digital stories)		
Harm against children.	5 references (11%)		
Quality time with parents.		Boys: Recognition of teachers' work and effort Support from the social network (friends and teachers) Social and family support School support	

As seen in Table 5, boys and girls told stories that valued emotional support from parents and their extended family. In fact, girls mentioned topics related to family problems, such as break-ups, divorce, alcoholism and road accidents. On the other hand, boys emphasised the recognition of teachers' work and effort, support from the social network, including friends and teachers, as well as social and family support, and school support:

It was spread through the Internet, which made the whole school, colleagues and friends of Mariana see the photos. (...) She suffered from much bullying. (...) She was alone, scared, ashamed and sad. She felt humiliated. She had the onset of depression and suicidal thoughts. Distressed, she spoke calmly to her parents and asked for help. They decided to change her school to have a fresh start. Mariana went to a psychologist to get her mental health as good as before. She made new friends and learned from the past that she should never give in to threats and do what she does not want to; be careful what she posts online and does. She is becoming a new Mariana. (Helga, girl, 15 y.o.)

She was abused by her father when she was little, and it got him arrested. The girl is not good at her studies and is bullied at school. She still has social anxiety and getting her out of the house is impossible. All these personal problems ended up giving her depression and anxiety. (Fernando, boy, 15 y.o.)

With a lesser degree of prominence, there were only six references from girls and two from boys to the outcome involved and empowered.

Table 6*Thematic analysis of young people's stories related to the well-being outcome 'involved and empowered'*

Well-being outcome indicators	References	Thematic analysis	
Community involvement. Representation of youth voice. Making positive choices. Criminal offences.	Girls (19 digital stories) 6 references (5%) Boys (9 digital stories) 2 references (4%)	Specific themes Girls: Online risks and on social media: unrealistic beauty standards (impact of influencers and YouTubers on young people); cyber-bullying Recommendations for other young people about the dangers of the Internet Surviving hardship: coping The importance of reporting bullying Boys: Knowing how to take advantage of life's opportunities	Shared themes Online opportunities: overcome isolation and promote communication and school learning Using social media to communicate with family members who are living abroad, claiming their sexual identity

As depicted in Table 6, regarding the outcome involved and empowered, shared concerns revolve around online opportunities, including overcoming isolation, fostering communication and learning in school, using social networks to connect with relatives abroad, and asserting their sexual identity. In terms of gender-specific themes, girls delved into discussions about online risks and social media, addressing issues such as unrealistic beauty standards promoted by influencers and YouTubers, as well as cyberbullying. They also provided recommendations for other young people regarding Internet dangers, shared experiences of overcoming challenges and coping, and emphasised the importance of reporting bullying. Conversely, boys concentrated on understanding how to make the most of life's opportunities:

Today, on this channel, she talks about her experience and shows people going through the same thing that they are not alone. Always remember to be careful about the comments you make online, because they can ruin a person's life, and never forget to love yourself the way you are, and forget about silly Internet standards. (Sofia, girl, 14 y.o.)

Since I was a little boy, I have loved soccer. I played at school and at home with friends until I joined a soccer school and became the team captain. (Eduardo, boy, 15 y.o.)

Table 7*Thematic analysis of young people's stories related to the well-being outcome 'have what they need'*

Well-being outcome indicators	References	Thematic analysis	
Material well-being.	Girls (19 digital stories)	Specific themes	Shared themes
Material hardship (child poverty).	2 references (4%)	Girls:	Family's financial difficulties
Low income (child poverty).	Boys (9 digital stories)	Migration in search of new opportunities	
Food insecurity.	1 reference (2%)	Boys:	
Housing quality.		Migration to solve health problems	
Housing affordability.			

As Table 7 shows, the girl's story focused on migration in search of new opportunities, while the boy referred to the need for migration to solve health problems:

With the bit of [money] we had, we were very happy. However, one day my parents decided that I should come and study here in Portugal, because it is a significantly developed country, compared to our country, São Tomé, and I would have new opportunities. Seeing my parents' concern for me, I did not want to disappoint them by refusing, so I accepted. It was a good idea for everyone, but it was also a huge shock, especially for my brothers, who had great affection for me. I felt terrible about it, but I was discreet so as not to make things worse, and today I am in Portugal. (Maria, girl, 21 y.o.)

I was born in the south of Africa, in Angola. I was a boy who did not always go to school because I was always sick. Moreover, in 2016, everything changed in my life. I was diagnosed with spinal cord insufficiency. Due to a lack of resources, my parents decided to move to another country. We chose Portugal. (André, boy, 18 y.o.)

Discussion: Differences in Well-Being Outcomes Based on Gender

Gender refers to psychosocial and cultural features that society attributes to masculinity and femininity. This means gender stereotypes and gender-related norms result from social and cultural production (Rubegni et al., 2019). It is applied to several areas, such as marketing and targeting messages to men and women using gender stereotypes. Our discussion about the topics presented by boys and girls regarding well-being (or lack of it) will be sustained on these gender stereotypes, because less attention is paid to the similarities found (McLean et al., 2007; Hyde, 2014). In contrast, some studies (e.g., Masanet et al., 2021) continue to highlight the gender gap in digital environments and the differences in how boys and girls relate to them, associating this gap with stereotypes and male and female roles.

As previously mentioned, accepted, respected and connected and learning and developing were the outcomes with the most references, both by boys (33% and 31%) and girls (25% for both). However, there were gender differences, as girls chose to address broader concerns within each outcome, except for the outcome loved, safe and nurtured. This is in line with a systematic literature analysis presented by Mutlu & Dağ (2022), whose results point to the diversity of themes presented by women, the most relevant of which were grouped by the authors into themes related to self-efficacy, social responsibility, catharsis and socialisation.

Issues related to cyberbullying have increased over the past 20 years, and according to Platt et al. (2021), it is more frequently experienced by girls. The more evident relationship between low levels of well-being and cyberbullying in girls, as noted by Twenge and Martin (2020), is not confirmed in our analysis. The stories of our participants include this theme, but do not differentiate between boys and

girls. Cosma et al. (2002) concluded that higher levels of gender inequality were linked to greater gender disparities in traditional bullying. However, lower gender inequality was related to more pronounced gender differences in cyber victimisation. Besides gender, the effect of cyberbullying on well-being is also shaped by elements such as the quality of friendships and the availability of social support. While strong peer connections can serve as a protective factor, differences in social networks based on gender may affect how adolescents handle and respond to cyberbullying. The importance of reporting bullying/cyberbullying is included in the outcome involved and empowered, and this report is what differentiates girls and boys. This leads us to think that the current generation of young girls is more aware of having their voice heard and that a criminal offence can have repercussions due to the social echo it acquires in some countries. This idea is reinforced in the involved and empowered outcome, in which the girls emphasise the importance of raising the awareness of other young people to the dangers of the Internet and to cope with hardship situations.

Returning to the accepted, respected and connected outcome, both boys and girls presented stories about the need for respect and recognition, loneliness, and integration in a new country (migration). These concerns align with the indicators of a sense of belonging, social support, and support for cultural identity.

Regarding the learning and developing outcome, the results also put in evidence that there is no differentiation between girls and boys regarding youth employment, education or training; their digital stories focus on areas of vocational interest, choice of future profession, and the encouragement to follow their dreams. Boys only explore the topic of self-recovery in specific themes. It could be related to males' tendency to express more hope, which is protective for depression symptoms (Goh et al., 2023), and more likely to use humour to cope with stress (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Nevertheless, girls mentioned the relevance of giving meaning to adversity. Girls also mentioned helping others in the same situation, but boys point out a greater ability to understand others – empathy, when the well-being outcome accepted, respected and connected is analysed. Considering these results, gender differentiation does not stand out. Rose and Rudolph also found no gender differences in young people's reports of helping their friends' behaviour. We agree with them when they state that the question is not addressed to empathy itself, but how it is operationalised, and also because empathy is experienced internally.

The issue of intimacy only becomes evident in girls. Preserving online intimacy appears not only in the learning and developing outcome but also in accepted, respected and connected outcome, namely regarding abusive love relationships (disclosing or sharing intimate content without consent, revenge porn, manipulation). Highly emotional stories with sentimental topics related to relationships and love are aimed at women (Källström et al., 2018). Girls are viewed as vulnerable to risks from sharing personal information, reflecting the idea of femininity as giving and passively exposed to potential predators (Steinfeld, 2022). McLean & Breen (2009) also highlight the reporting of more intimate processes in girls. Concerns about intimacy issues may be associated with girls' greater permeability to opinions and evaluations from peers (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Connected with this content, online risks and social media addressing unrealistic beauty standards are found particularly in girls' digital stories.

Body image concerns are shared in the happy and healthy outcome in both genders. These results contrast those found by Aran-Ramspott et al. (2024), who emphasise the concern with body image and the influence of social media on girls. Again, while body image is more connected with female stereotypes, it may be that this stereotype is beginning to dissipate in today's society. Nowadays, body image issues seem to address both boys' and girls' concerns in digital settings (Revranché et al., 2022).

We find that in the happy and healthy outcome, boys indicate concerns about domestic violence, regret and culpability, while the girls specifically present other topics in their digital stories. It could be suggested that girls mentioned psychological help, psychological violence, parents' divorce and suicidal thoughts or attempts because they are more vulnerable to depressive symptoms (Platt et al., 2019) and because social media use was only associated with internalising symptoms for girls (Svensson, 2022).

Despite the increase in depressive symptoms among young people since 2012, particularly in girls (Keyes et al., 2019), we did not find gender differences in the digital narrative of our participants. The prevalence of shared topics related to mental health concerns, anorexia/body image concerns, illnesses, grief (loss of a close family member or pet) and physical violence are more evident.

Concerning the loved, safe and nurtured outcome, both genders mentioned themes about the importance of the family as a support network. In contrast, Källström et al. (2018) mention stories centred around deep emotions and sentimental themes like family are generally directed towards women. According to our results, boys mentioned other types of networks, such as support at school, especially but not exclusively from teachers, support from friends and society in general, while girls focused more on the family as a safe haven and the main emotional assistance, especially from parents. In this respect, the girls' stories show concerns for family problems (break-ups, divorce, alcoholism, road accidents), which can jeopardise their main source of support. In addition, within the accepted, respected and connected outcome, girls evidence school disengagement, which can be seen as a threat, so their stories place the family context as the most protective.

Regarding the outcome involved and empowered, and in the specific themes, boys essentially mentioned knowing how to take advantage of life's opportunities, while girls delve more deeply into issues linked to online risks and social media, namely unrealistic beauty standards promoted by influencers and YouTubers, and cyberbullying; making recommendations for other young people about how to deal with these dangers; coping and surviving hardships. In short, while girls established a link between empowerment and fighting against discrimination and self-protection (a defence against something negative), boys related it with advantage (as an opportunity), which aligns with their sense of agency.

The relevance of narrative identity development is crucial in adolescence, and according to McLean & Breen (2009), narrative-making-meaning processes result from a reflection on personal past events and how individuals interpret their own changes over time. Their study, supported by storytelling mechanisms, points out boys' higher self-esteem but also highlights girls' reports about relational topics, namely those relationships that involve intimacy, the concern with making others feel better, getting closer to others, and, finally, sharing the self. Positive emotionality in stories predicts self-esteem for both genders. However, reconstructing negative past experiences into more positive experiences is particularly a better predictor of self-esteem for boys. The positive narrative-making-meaning addresses different aspects of well-being (including making positive choices), depending on gender. Girls' well-being is more focused on relationships, and boys' well-being is on agency, the ability to influence one's functioning and the course of events through one's actions. It is curious to find this trend with pre-young people (11–12 years old), as Rubegni et al. (2019) reported. They stated that the mean agency of male protagonists was significantly higher than that of females. According to Källström et al. (2018), a story with information conveyed clearly and directly works better for men. In part, our results are in line with these studies. In fact, knowing how to take advantage of life's opportunities became evident in boys' digital stories. However, topics related to online opportunities, such as overcoming isolation and promoting communication and school learning, are shared by boys and girls, as well as issues addressed to the self (self-acceptance, self-esteem, self-care, self-confidence, self-control, self-improvement) and emotional learning.

Finally, regarding the outcome of having what they need, the two young African immigrants who mentioned it referenced the difficulties they suffered in their home country and their search for better living conditions and new opportunities, such as education (girl) and medical treatment (boy). The two youngsters also mentioned adaptation and difficulty integrating into a new country. In sum, the most relevant variable in this outcome is undoubtedly the social condition of socioeconomic vulnerability. Although this outcome is the least representative considering all the DS, it is interesting that the lack of material well-being is addressed in migratory movements. According to Shishko (2022), migration is a topic in DS for men. In our case, boys and girls are both aware of the material difficulties that arise from migratory processes.

Conclusions

Well-being is one of the central constructs explored in positive psychology, and it has been transported to the educational context due to its humanistic and developmental perspective. This line of thinking justifies those DS and other educational interventions can be analysed in the light of positive psychology as they work on children and young people's emotions, identifying their potential and resilience issues.

In our case, the participants had the opportunity to interact, share, and produce audiovisual content on topics that concerned their lives, carrying out activities in a project whose intervention occurred immediately following the social confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The contents of the digital stories can be considered evidence that the collaborative production of DS can contribute to the promotion of mental health. Developing and creating stories in the participant group about concerns over (well) being online created conditions for sharing overcoming strategies, emotional support among peers, and personal and social well-being.

This study, supported by DS, enables adolescents to express their perceptions, beliefs, experiences and insights through digital media authentically and genuinely. Exploring their narratives allows us to interpret more deeply those experiences concerning well-being. The contribution of this study to the previous research is to emphasise a different way of researching the problem of well-being in adolescents, through options that are more in line with their generation features, such as the use of digital technologies. The richness of the contents presented by them and the qualitative analysis carried out have put into question the traditional gender beliefs and stereotypes, namely in the scope of well-being. The literature focused on gender differences tends to emphasise the differences between boys and girls.

According to gender stereotypes, stories that focus on strong emotions and sentimental themes like family, relationships, and love are typically targeted at women. In contrast, men tend to respond better to narratives featuring relatable characters and presenting information clearly and straightforwardly.

Indeed, most theories on gender seek to find and explain differences. Evolutionary theories, cognitive social learning, sociocultural, and expectancy-value theories are good examples. To point out the similarities between boys' and girls' challenges is to disrupt conventional gender stereotypes that advance females' socialisation into prescribed behaviours, disrupting conventional gender socialisation practices. This leads us to highlight social constructionist theory because it focuses on processes which express self-movement and ongoing self-organisation and, at the same time, explains how DS shapes people's social identities based on their gender.

Regarding the research question "What issues did boys and girls express in their digital stories, and how can these issues be related to well-being?", our results show that they expressed well-being issues in similar ways, addressing similar topics. Our results also show that the main topics concerning well-being are related to the need to be accepted, respected and connected, followed by recognising the opportunity to learn and develop themselves. The differences between girls and boys are not highly evident, and they are limited to particular topics, such as intimate relationships, which appear in the girls' stories and not in the boys. In addition, boys' positive meaning in DS provides them with an experience of well-being when focused on agentic personal storytelling.

To assume that gender differences observed in real-life social behaviour are reproduced similarly in virtual contexts is questionable. Although this argument makes some sense to us, today's young people, who were born into the digital world, have developed with digital technologies and have also shaped them. The speed and permanence of communication, the contact with sociocultural differences and the sharing of the problems of adolescence itself may have attenuated the expected impact of gender. This can be deduced from the contents of digital stories, which analysed the different outcomes based on well-being experiences.

We suggest further studies supported by DS to address the challenges girls confront today's culture, particularly concerning gender stereotypes (Hlalele & Brexa, 2015). It is also important, in the

future, to examine how other forms of digital engagement compare with digital storytelling in influencing and expressing well-being. Furthermore, the present study sheds light on the need to deepen the research, from a multicultural perspective, on how different theoretical frameworks, technical and methodological procedures can influence the understanding of how young people express well-being issues through digital means. Regardless of the approach adopted, we recommend that teachers and practitioners provide tailored support strategies to individual preferences and experiences, always mediated by an environment where both boys and girls feel equally comfortable discussing well-being topics. In the digital age, can boys and girls emerge as leaders in gender transformation, challenging traditional gender socialisation norms through online activities? Finally, in most of the stories created in the workshops, there was a special closing with a message of hope. In these cases, friends, family, and other professionals were given a fundamental role in overcoming situations that threatened young people's well-being.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by national funds, through the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P. (FCT), under the multi-year funding awarded to CIE (grants no. UIDB/00167/2020, UIDP/00167/2020 and UID/00167: Centro de Investigação e Intervenção Educativas).

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