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Media Coverage of Disasters and Young Audiences: A Media and News Literacy Perspective

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Abstract: In the digital age, youth are increasingly exposed to disaster-related media content through social platforms that function as both social arenas and primary news sources. This paper explores how disaster reporting impacts children and teenagers as a neglected audience group, emphasizing issues of misinformation, emotional regulation, language sensitivity, and developmental appropriateness. Drawing from communication theory, media studies, and developmental psychology, the study highlights the need for age-appropriate, emotionally supportive, and ethically responsible media practices. It also outlines educational, and policy recommendations aimed at fostering media literacy and civic resilience in young audiences.

Keywords: media consumption habits, news literacy, adjusted media use, disaster coverage

1. Introduction

In the digital age, young audiences are continuously exposed to a stream of distressing news, including disasters, wars, and humanitarian crises, through various media formats. This exposure raises critical issues of emotional and digital well-being, as well as risk of misleading information, matched against developmental appropriateness of content. Although often categorized as 'digital natives', children and teenagers represent a neglected demographic in both media design, distribution and content, and media literacy interventions. This paper investigates how traditional and digital media portray disasters for young audiences and evaluates the psychological, civic, and social impacts through a multidisciplinary lens. By drawing from international case studies and empirical literature, it offers recommendations for media professionals, educators, and policy makers to foster informed, resilient, and ethically supported young media users.

Today's youth navigate a media-saturated environment where news about disasters, wars, and crises is pervasive, intercepting content about entertainment, gaming, commercials, influencers or other trivial posts in their social media feed. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have become major entry points for information about national and international affairs, circulating based on criteria like virality and, certainly, not social significance. However, the unfiltered,

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sensational, and emotionally intense nature of disaster coverage in particular, presents serious cognitive and psychological challenges for young viewers. Children and adolescents are among the most neglected audiences when it comes to content design and distribution and their developmental needs are rarely accounted for in mainstream reporting.

The media landscape today is characterized by immediacy, interactivity, and emotional intensity. Disasters, both natural and human-made, dominate news cycles, looking for clicks by capitalizing on the public's fear and anger, and young audiences are often inadvertently exposed to such content through social media, YouTube, streaming platforms, and digital news apps, always in 'adult' language. However, the ways these messages are interpreted by youth remain understudied. Mainstream media rarely considers children's and teens' cognitive and emotional developmental stages, nor does it tailor content to match their media consumption habits.

This disconnect has serious implications: not only are young people exposed to distressing or misleading content, but they are also left unsupported in processing it. According to Vraga and Tully (2021), although many young people display baseline media literacy skills, namely, the interpretive, evaluative, and communicative skills necessary to engage critically with media, their application is inconsistent, especially under emotional stress. As social media is their news space and main delivery channel, the reliance on algorithmically curated content means that youth are often exposed to fragmented and emotionally charged news without interpretative frameworks. Platforms reward virality and emotional engagement over accuracy, exacerbating confusion and anxiety (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020).

At the same time, social media play a crucial role in shaping teenagers' identities, worldviews, and civic behaviors. They act as a digital environment where adolescents explore self-expression, adopt social norms, and engage with political and cultural issues. Through continuous interaction and content consumption, teenagers form opinions, values, and a sense of belonging that significantly influence their personal development (Livingstone et al., 2011).

However, their representation in the media is minimal (if any), and young audiences are frequently absent from news narratives or portrayed only as passive and vulnerable victims, for example, in the context of cyber bullying or screen addiction warnings. Livingstone et al. (2023) argue that such representation limits youth agency and excludes their perspectives from public discourse. This underrepresentation renders youth into a marginalized audience, driving many toward alternative, often unregulated sources, like popular social media platforms, where misinformation and emotional manipulation proliferate.

2. Disaster coverage and news literacy

Disaster reporting commonly employs moral evaluations, vivid imagery, and dramatized storytelling (Vasterman et al., 2005). While these tactics may attract attention, they can overwhelm young audiences. Without contextualization or age-appropriate framing and linguistic scaffold, such coverage can skew perception and heighten emotional distress. Exposure to disaster media

can have psychological and developmental impact and even lead to secondary traumatization in affected youth, who may express symptoms including anxiety, behavioural changes, and cognitive disruptions (Benoit et al., 2022).

Media literacy as a fully-fledged set of abilities to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication, is required in all cases of information; even more in the case of disturbing news. While youth may demonstrate digital fluency, studies reveal they often lack deeper critical engagement, especially when dealing with emotionally charged content. Pfaff-Rüdiger and Riesmeyer (2016) highlight that media literacy must be socially contextualized—in other words, it should not be taught or understood in isolation, but rather within the social environments where media is consumed and shared. This involves considering the influence of peers, family, and cultural norms, as well as the specific digital platforms young people use. Media & news literacy education should address how social interactions and digital habits shape the way individuals interpret, produce, and respond to media content. By acknowledging these social dynamics, media literacy becomes more relevant and effective, empowering users to navigate the media landscape critically and responsibly in real-life contexts.

Young people are not passive media consumers; they actively engage with content, interpret it through their social and cultural lenses, and co-construct meanings in digital environments (Jenkins, 2009). However, the absence of youth-specific media literacy tools renders them especially vulnerable during crises. For example, there is good evidence establishing a relationship between disaster viewing and various psychological outcomes, especially PTSD caseness and PTS (Pfefferbaum et al, 2019). Without appropriate guidance, adolescents may struggle to critically assess misinformation or emotionally distressing content, which can lead to confusion, fear, and psychological strain. This is particularly evident during events like the COVID-19 pandemic, where youth were inundated with conflicting information and emotionally charged narratives (Ophir et al., 2021). Studies emphasize the importance of tailoring media literacy education to the developmental needs and media habits of young users, ensuring that they are equipped to navigate the digital information landscape safely and effectively (Livingstone, 2018; McDougall et al., 2018).

From a developmental point of view, younger children require reassurance and simplified news narratives, as their cognitive and emotional capacities are still developing, making them more vulnerable to confusion and fear when faced with complex or distressing information. On the other hand, adolescents, who are more capable of abstract thinking and emotional regulation, benefit from balanced perspectives that acknowledge the seriousness of events while also promoting hope and resilience. Moreover, they need opportunities for critical engagement—such as discussions, media literacy activities, or community involvement—which help them process information constructively, reduce helplessness, and foster a sense of agency in the face of crisis.

3. Adjusted media use – a theoretical background

Young people's engagement with media in general is influenced by a complex interplay of their developmental stage, the norms of digital culture, their emotional needs, and the broader social context in which they live. Adolescents, for example, are at a stage where identity formation, peer influence, and emotional sensitivity are especially strong, making them more susceptible to both the informational and emotional tone of media content. At the same time, digital culture — characterized by fast-paced sharing, algorithm-driven feeds, and participatory norms— shapes how young users consume, interpret, and respond to disaster-related information. Emotional needs such as the desire for reassurance, belonging, or agency further influence how youth seek and engage with media during crises.

To fully understand these dynamics, it is essential to integrate frameworks from media literacy, which equips youth with critical thinking tools; risk communication, which addresses how people perceive and act on information in times of uncertainty; and youth development theory, which provides insights into cognitive, emotional, and social growth. This interdisciplinary approach helps create more responsive and effective strategies for supporting young people's media use in times of crisis by drawing from the following schools of thought:

Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) emphasizes that media users are not passive recipients but active agents who selectively engage with media to fulfill particular psychological and social needs. These needs typically include seeking information, reinforcing personal identity, facilitating social interaction, and attaining emotional comfort or diversion. In the context of disasters, this theory is particularly relevant to understanding young audiences, who often use media not only to gather facts and updates but also to navigate the emotional turbulence that crises provoke. For example, adolescents may follow news to feel informed, but also use social media to share their thoughts, check on friends, or find solidarity in shared experiences. The immediacy and interactivity of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) allow youth to process events in real-time while receiving emotional support from peers. Thus, social media becomes a dual-purpose space: a channel for critical information and a vital emotional resource that helps youth cope with fear, uncertainty, and the need for social connection during disasters..

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) posits that individuals learn not only through direct experience but also by observing the behaviours, emotional responses, and consequences experienced by others. This observational learning becomes especially potent during emotionally charged events, such as violence, natural disasters or humanitarian crises, where the emotional salience heightens attention, retention, and the likelihood of imitation. For young people, whose cognitive and emotional regulation skills are still developing, repeated exposure to graphic and distressing media content can result in vicarious trauma. Studies such as Houston et al. (2008) have shown that adolescents who consume high volumes of disaster-related media may exhibit symptoms of anxiety, fear, sleep disturbances, or even post-traumatic stress — despite not being directly affected by the event. The digital nature of modern media, where images and stories are amplified and circulated rapidly, intensifies this risk by making disturbing content more accessible and difficult to avoid.

However, Social Cognitive Theory also offers a more hopeful perspective: media can serve as a powerful tool for promoting positive, prosocial behavioral models among youth, depending on the content it showcases. When young audiences are exposed to media narratives that highlight empathy, resilience, solidarity, or community action —such as stories of people helping others, organizing relief efforts, or standing up for vulnerable groups— they are more likely to internalize and imitate those values and behaviours. Empowering narratives that frame youth themselves as capable agents of change can foster a sense of efficacy and inspire actions like volunteering, advocacy, or peer support. In this way, media becomes not only a site of potential harm but also a meaningful space for social and emotional learning — provided that the narratives modelled are constructive, balanced, and developmentally appropriate.

Developmental Media Psychology: Children and adolescents differ markedly in how they process media, largely due to their developmental stage. Younger children, typically in the preoperational and early concrete operational stages of cognitive development, tend to interpret media content in concrete and literal ways. Their limited capacity for abstract reasoning makes it difficult for them to distinguish between real and fictional elements, particularly in emotionally charged or visually intense content. As a result, they may perceive dramatized or exaggerated disaster portrayals as actual, ongoing threats, which can heighten fear, confusion, and anxiety. Because they rely heavily on visual cues and have limited experience in critically evaluating information, the design of media for young children must use clear, calming visuals and simplified language. It should also avoid sensationalism, as intense imagery and dramatic narratives can be particularly overwhelming for this age group.

Adolescents, on the other hand, possess more advanced cognitive abilities, such as hypothetical thinking, perspective-taking, and media scepticism. However, their increased emotional reactivity —linked to ongoing neurological and hormonal development— makes them particularly sensitive to fear-inducing or emotionally provocative content. Additionally, adolescents are highly attuned to peer norms and validation, which amplifies the role of social media in shaping their perceptions and reactions. Peer-shared content, trends, and online discussions may either inform or mislead them, depending on the accuracy and tone of the material. Therefore, media targeting adolescent audiences must strike a balance: it should provide nuanced, fact-based information while also fostering emotional resilience and opportunities for critical engagement. Understanding these cognitive and emotional differences is essential for designing developmentally appropriate media that informs without overwhelming, and empowers rather than destabilizes (Pfefferbaum et al., 2014).

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how media influence on young people is shaped by multiple, interacting layers of their environment. According to this theory, individuals are embedded within nested systems — ranging from immediate settings like family and school (microsystem), to broader cultural and societal contexts (macrosystem)— which collectively mediate their experiences and interpretations. When it comes to media consumption during disasters, these layers play crucial roles in shaping how youth perceive and respond to information. Parents, caregivers, and educators, as key figures within the microsystem, serve as essential mediators who can help young people interpret complex or distressing content. By providing explanations, emotional support,

and context, they reduce confusion and anxiety, helping youth to develop a more balanced and accurate understanding of crisis events.

In contrast, the absence of such scaffolding leaves young people vulnerable to misinterpretation and emotional distress. Without guidance, children and adolescents may internalize fear or misinformation, potentially leading to heightened anxiety or maladaptive coping. Moreover, the cultural norms and values embedded within the macrosystem influence how disaster-related media is framed and understood, further shaping youth responses. Effective mediation by adults not only filters media messages but also models critical thinking and emotional regulation skills (Chryssanthopoulou, 2022). This highlights the importance of involving parents and educators in media literacy efforts, particularly in crisis contexts, to foster resilience and informed engagement among youth.

News Literacy and Critical Engagement: Vraga and Tully (2021) highlight a critical challenge facing today's youth: although they are deeply immersed in digital media, their news literacy — the ability to critically verify, contextualize, and evaluate news content — is often inconsistent and underdeveloped. In the digital landscape, algorithms prioritize engagement, frequently amplifying emotionally charged or sensationalized stories that may be misleading or incomplete. This creates an environment where young people are repeatedly exposed to partial narratives that evoke strong emotions but do not necessarily provide an accurate or balanced understanding of events. Because adolescents are still developing cognitive skills related to critical thinking and media evaluation, these algorithm-driven exposures can shape their perceptions in ways that may distort reality, especially during high-stress situations such as crises or disasters. Moreover, the researchers emphasize the importance of equipping youth with practical critical tools like lateral reading — where individuals cross-check information by consulting multiple sources — and source triangulation, which involves comparing different perspectives to build a fuller picture. Without these strategies, young people are vulnerable to accepting misinformation or disinformation at face value, particularly when under emotional strain or cognitive overload. The pressure and urgency that often accompany crisis situations further impair their ability to critically assess information, increasing the risk of confusion, anxiety, or mistrust. Therefore, fostering robust news literacy skills tailored to young audiences is essential for helping them navigate digital media responsibly, make informed decisions, and maintain emotional well-being in an increasingly complex information environment.

Participatory Culture and Agency: Jenkins et al. (2009) introduced the concept of participatory culture to describe a shift in how young people interact with media. Rather than being passive consumers, youth are active creators, collaborators, and sharers of content across digital platforms. This transformation has significant implications, especially in disaster settings, where young people's agency can become a powerful force for social engagement and community support. Through social media, youth document unfolding events, share firsthand information, and mobilize resources quickly, often filling gaps left by traditional media or official channels. Their contributions not only raise awareness but also foster solidarity, provide emotional support, and help coordinate relief efforts, demonstrating a new form of civic participation enabled by digital connectivity (Dahal et al., 2021; Yan & Pedraza-Martinez, 2019). However, this participatory role

is a double-edged sword. While empowering, it can also expose young people to risks such as overexposure to traumatic content, emotional burnout, and the unintended spread of misinformation. The pressure to continuously produce and share updates during crises can be overwhelming, especially when combined with the emotional weight of witnessing suffering or loss. Furthermore, the rapid and decentralized nature of social media means that false or misleading information can quickly circulate, sometimes amplified by well-intentioned but uninformed youth contributors. This underscores the need for media literacy and emotional support strategies that help young people navigate their active roles responsibly—balancing empowerment with critical awareness and self-care in the high-stakes environment of disaster response.

The aforementioned theoretical frameworks highlight the multifaceted nature of youth-media interactions during disasters, emphasizing that these engagements are not passive but highly active and emotionally charged. Young people do not simply receive information; they interpret, question, and respond to it within a complex web of social relationships and personal experiences. Their emotional responses to disaster-related media are intensified by developmental factors, such as age-specific cognitive abilities and emotional maturity, which influence how they process and cope with distressing content. Moreover, these interactions are deeply embedded within social contexts—including family, peer groups, schools, and digital communities—that shape both the reception of media messages and the ways youth express and manage their feelings during crises.

Given this complexity, media systems and journalism practices must evolve to meet the unique needs of young audiences in disaster contexts. This involves creating age-appropriate content that acknowledges different developmental stages, using language and visuals that are clear, sensitive, and accessible to children and adolescents alike. Beyond content creation, it is essential to provide young people with practical tools for critical evaluation, such as fact-checking strategies and media literacy education tailored to their cognitive levels and social realities. Additionally, pathways for meaningful engagement should be fostered—encouraging youth to participate actively in information sharing, community support, and resilience-building activities. By integrating these approaches, media can serve not only as a source of information but also as a catalyst for empowerment, emotional healing, and social connection among young people during and after disasters.

4. Engagement with media outlets

Young people's engagement with news is complex and influenced by the interplay of various key dimensions, mostly: timing, personal characteristics, and the media platform used—often conceptualized as "the moment, the person, and the medium" (Sobowale et al., 2020). Timing refers to the specific context in which news is accessed. These “news moments” can vary: a dedicated moment involves intentional engagement, such as watching a news program or reading an article; updated moments refer to checking headlines periodically throughout the day; time-filler moments are casual interactions with news during idle periods, like scrolling during a commute; and intercepted moments happen when news is encountered incidentally, often via

social media feeds or push notifications. Each of these moments shapes how deeply youth engage with news content, how much they retain, and how they emotionally respond to it—especially in high-stakes contexts like disasters.

The second dimension—individual characteristics—further shapes how youth engage with news. Sobowale et al. (2020) identify four distinct youth news consumer profiles. Heritage News Consumers rely on traditional sources like TV or newspapers, often shaped by family habits. Dedicated News Devotees actively seek out information, are highly engaged with current events, and show a preference for in-depth, factual reporting. Passive News Absorbers, in contrast, consume news sporadically and without active effort, often through incidental exposure. Lastly, Proactive News Lovers combine curiosity with technological savvy, using digital tools to seek diverse perspectives and verify facts. These categories reflect not only differences in behaviour but also differences in media literacy, trust in news, and emotional resilience, especially when navigating crisis-related content.

The third factor—the medium or platform used—also plays a crucial role in shaping youth news consumption. Different platforms offer varying affordances that influence how news is experienced. Instagram and TikTok, for example, favor visual storytelling and quick, emotionally resonant content, which can engage younger audiences but may also oversimplify complex issues. Facebook remains a platform for shared news among older youth and family networks but is declining in popularity among younger teens. Twitter (now X) serves as a real-time news source, valued for breaking updates but also criticized for amplifying misinformation. **YouTube** serves as a hybrid platform where youth access both entertainment and news content, often through influencers or explainer videos that blend information with personal narratives. Reddit attracts users seeking niche or community-driven content, allowing for deeper discussion but sometimes lacking in content moderation. Podcasts, meanwhile, offer long-form, immersive engagement with news, which appeals to youth interested in context and analysis. Each platform's format, algorithmic structure, and social environment significantly influence not only what news youth consume, but also how they interpret and act on it.

Understanding these dimensions is essential for designing effective strategies to engage youth in informed, critical, and emotionally healthy ways. Educators, journalists, and policy-makers must acknowledge that youth news consumption is not one-size-fits-all but rather shaped by diverse habits, preferences, and developmental needs. Tailoring news delivery to suit different moments and platforms, while supporting the development of media literacy for each consumer profile, can empower young people to engage more thoughtfully with current events. This is particularly vital in crisis situations, where the accuracy, clarity, and emotional tone of news can significantly impact how youth understand the world and their role within it.

5. Media disaster narratives and youth

Research has examined how youth are represented in disaster-related news media, revealing five dominant narratives that shape public perceptions of their roles. First, youth are often portrayed as vulnerable individuals in need of protection, emphasizing their physical and emotional fragility. Second, they are depicted as passive bystanders who remain uninvolved or powerless during disaster events. Third, within adult-centered frameworks, children and adolescents are sometimes seen as dependents, requiring adult intervention and decision-making. Fourth, there is a growing recognition of youth as active agents who take initiative, assuming responsibilities traditionally associated with adults, such as organizing relief efforts or advocating for change. Finally, youth are sometimes instrumentalized as legitimizing figures, where their images or voices are used to justify particular disaster responses or policies (Al-Baldawi et al., 2021).

These reductive portrayals, especially those emphasizing vulnerability or passivity, risk obscuring the diverse realities and potential of young people in disaster contexts. While it is true that youth may require support and protection during crises, focusing solely on these aspects can inadvertently undermine their agency and resilience. Such narratives may also contribute to a one-dimensional understanding of youth that neglects their ability to adapt, contribute meaningfully, and even lead disaster preparedness and recovery initiatives. Recognizing this complexity is crucial for developing more nuanced and empowering media representations that reflect the full spectrum of youth experiences and capacities.

Moving beyond simplistic or adult-centric portrayals calls for a deliberate shift in media narratives to highlight the strengths and capabilities of young people. Media outlets and practitioners should emphasize stories of youth leadership, innovation, and community engagement, showcasing how adolescents and children can be vital contributors to disaster risk reduction and resilience-building. By doing so, media can play an important role in reshaping models of societal attitudes, encouraging policymakers and practitioners to involve youth more meaningfully in disaster planning and response. This approach not only validates young people's experiences but also fosters a more inclusive and effective disaster management framework that leverages the energy, creativity, and commitment of the next generation.

6. Recommendations for disaster media coverage to engage young audiences

In order to address and engage young people, the way the news media covers stories in general may need to change, addressing issues such as negativity, stereotypes, and diversity. Young people don't want the media to shy away from serious or difficult stories, but they would also like to see stories that can inspire them about the possibility of change and provide a path to positive action. Younger audiences will respond to news that has personal utility or helps with their development. They are also hungry for stories with a 'point of view' but they need to be informed by facts rather than prejudice or agenda

News media need to make websites and apps easier to use for younger groups – as simple and intuitive as their preferred social media. This could mean using clearer language, more interactive

storytelling and better recommendations that surface interesting content for younger groups. They need to tell stories in ways that better fit the moments when young people are open to news. This means creating more formats that are native to mobile and social platforms, as well as incorporating these ideas in their own websites and apps – but without losing the trusted authority of a traditional news brand. The following recommendations may be considered:

Clear, age-appropriate and emotionally sensitive language: In crisis reporting, it's essential to use simple and clear language that avoids sensationalism. Younger children interpret news more literally and are emotionally vulnerable, while adolescents require more nuanced, yet still accessible, explanations. Emotionally neutral but informative language reduces fear and confusion while fostering comprehension.

Context and historical background to support understanding: Disasters and violent events can seem abrupt and confusing. Offering timelines, maps, or historical background helps young viewers make sense of what they see. Context reduces panic and promotes critical engagement with the underlying causes of a crisis (Korona, 2023).

Visual explainers and multimedia to deconstruct complex events: Multimedia elements such as diagrams of conflict zones, simplified animations, and graphic timelines can make chaotic events more intelligible. On platforms like YouTube or TikTok, these formats provide clarity and reduce misinterpretation while catering to youth media habits (Swart, 2021).

Source transparency and misinformation awareness: During disasters, rumors and manipulated content spread rapidly. Outlets must clearly label sources, provide direct links, and use embedded prompts to guide youth in verifying credibility. Teaching techniques like lateral reading empowers youth to detect false or exaggerated narratives (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019; Breakstone et al., 2023).

Trauma-informed design to avoid emotional overload: Graphic content, repetitive exposure to violence, or sensational headlines can traumatize young audiences. Journalists should issue content warnings, minimize gratuitous imagery, and offer positive coping narratives. This trauma-informed approach protects emotional well-being while preserving informational value (Scott et al., 2023).

Interactive opportunities for emotional processing and empowerment: Youth benefit from outlets that encourage them to reflect and act—such as comment sections, polls, or digital storytelling. These outlets allow youth to express themselves, feel less helpless, and engage in collective meaning-making during crisis periods.

Featuring youth voices and experiences: Instead of only portraying youth as victims, highlight stories of young people who are navigating, responding to, or leading during disasters. Their testimonials can humanize complex crises, inspire peers, and show that young people are active civic participants.

Reporting adapted to platform-specific youth behaviors: Disaster coverage should be formatted according to platform-specific norms. For example, Instagram is suited for carousel explainers, TikTok for short updates, and YouTube for emotional or eyewitness storytelling. On each platform, messages must be tailored to its tone and user expectations (Swart, 2021).

News Literacy and critical thinking cues in content: Subtle in-story nudges—like “check this source” or “verify using another outlet”—can help young people build lasting critical habits. This is crucial when crises flood timelines with half-truths, memes, or propaganda (Brodsky et al., 2021).

Framing youth as agents of recovery, not just victims: In disaster narratives, youth are often shown as helpless. But media should also highlight youth organizing relief, sharing accurate information, or supporting communities. These representations foster resilience and civic identity (Al-Baldawi et al., 2021).

Training stakeholders in their communication, as research identifies an opportunity for relief organizations to improve their use of social media for disaster management. While relief organizations focus on informing disaster victims about aid distribution, most users are asking about how they as individuals can donate or volunteer. Thus, besides posting information directed to victims, organizations should post more information targeting potential donors and volunteers (Yan & Pedraza-Martinez, 2019).

These recommendations support a more ethical, effective, and empowering approach to disaster reporting for youth—respecting their vulnerabilities while amplifying their strengths.

7. Conclusion

As a general observation considering overall media coverage, it should be considered that adolescents increasingly explore identity and autonomy through both risky and creative digital activities. Future research should focus more specifically on how different technologies and digital features shape user behaviour, using an ecological approach to better understand adolescents’ digital lives. This clarity is essential for developing effective public policies — not only those involving parents, teachers, or clinicians, but also structural changes like legislation and tech design regulation. To fully grasp the impact of digital life, researchers should analyze it in three ways: as device and app usage, as engagement in digital environments, and as the underlying infrastructures transforming

society (Livingstone, 2024). This can help differentiate the currently confusing mix of findings linked to diverse digital services, activities and contexts and, thereby, more precisely inform public policies. These policies should go beyond efforts that depend on parents, educators, or healthcare professionals, and include long-term structural changes through laws and regulations—such as requiring companies to enhance the design of their technologies. At the same time, schools should embed media literacy within curricula, using tools like lateral reading and scenario analysis to enhance comprehension and emotional regulation while parents, educators, and caregivers can serve as critical mediators. They can provide emotional scaffolding, encourage fact-checking, and model healthy media behaviours (Chryssanthopoulou, 2022).

Further, policies are required to recognize media literacy as a core educational competency. Curricula should be developmentally responsive, culturally inclusive, and interdisciplinary. Teachers need professional development, while platforms must be held accountable for content curation. Initiatives should also support parental engagement and peer-led education. Media literacy education fosters not only critical thinking but also emotional and civic resilience. Youth empowered with these skills can participate in democratic dialogue, engage in community actions, and navigate crisis narratives with agency. Programs must highlight solutions, community responses, and youth contributions to counterbalance despair.

Disaster coverage represents an indispensable element of contemporary media; however, its psychological and developmental ramifications for young audiences necessitate careful consideration. To attenuate potential adverse effects, it is imperative that media practitioners adopt trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate communication strategies that reflect the cognitive, emotional, and social heterogeneity of children and adolescents. This entails the deployment of clear, accessible language, comprehensive contextualization and explanation, and the utilization of multimedia formats tailored to the affordances of various digital platforms frequented by youth. Furthermore, embedding news literacy education within content and facilitating interactive engagement serve to enhance critical thinking skills and emotional processing capabilities among young consumers.

Ethical journalistic practices must also emphasize the representation of youth not merely as passive recipients of distressing information, but as active agents capable of resilience and meaningful participation in disaster risk reduction and recovery efforts. Prioritizing source transparency and combating misinformation are essential to safeguarding youth from the deleterious effects of inaccurate or manipulative content prevalent in crisis communication.

Future scholarly inquiry should systematically investigate the longitudinal effects of disaster-related media exposure on youth development, with particular attention to the efficacy of integrated, multi-modal interventions designed to bolster media literacy, psychological resilience, and civic engagement. Critically, the co-production of research and intervention strategies with youth stakeholders will enhance the relevance and impact of such efforts, fostering media environments that are both protective and empowering. Through these concerted endeavours, media coverage of disasters can be reconceptualised as a constructive pedagogical and participatory platform, rather than a source of vulnerability.

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