

MediaMovez: Empowering children to behave safely online

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Today's children are growing up in an always-on, interactive digital media society. Research has demonstrated that digital media equally create opportunities for children, in terms of entertainment, education, and communication, as well as posing risks for their well-being and safety. One of the most pressing issues in the current societal debate on digital media is its growing threat for children's privacy and security. This threat not only includes the safety risks involved in sharing of personal information online, but also commercial data collection and profiling practices. These practices raise serious concerns about digital dossiers that could follow children into adulthood, affecting their access to education and employment. To ensure that children can participate fully in the digital media culture but at the same time use online media safely, there is a growing call to invest in children's digital and media literacy.

Media literacy education generally focuses on developing the knowledge (including technical skills and understanding of how digital media messages are constructed) needed to become critical consumers and creators of media messages in a variety of forms. As such, it aims to promote more reflective ways of using media, and hence to stimulate safe (online) media behavior. However, the earlier research has revealed that even if children have acquired the necessary media-related knowledge, this does not ensure they also use and respond to media in a reflective manner. This implies that enhancing children's knowledge of media will not automatically result in safe online behavior. Existing theories on digital and media literacy fall short in explaining how to overcome this knowledge-behavior gap. To do so, these theories need to be expanded with insights from theories on behavior change and, because the cognitive capacities needed to translate knowledge into behavior are still maturing in children, theories on cognitive development. In light of this need, **the MediaMovez project seeks to validate a novel theoretical framework, the Digital Media Empowerment model, using an integrated theoretical approach (combining theories on media literacy, behavior change, and cognitive development) to explain how children (10-14 years) can be empowered to behave safely online.**

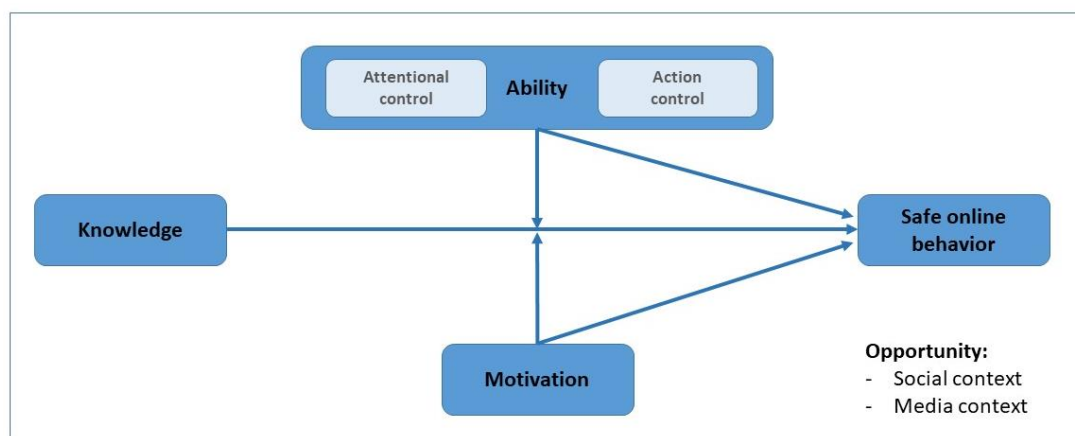


Figure 1. Conceptual framework, the DME model

A team of three researchers will address this aim in a three-step approach, including the development and testing of an innovative game-based research methodology that is then used to test the model's theorized relationships through observation and manipulation of its mechanisms.

The project is theoretically innovative in its integrated theoretical approach, thereby revitalizing existing theories on media literacy. By adopting such an approach, the project will not only focus on the knowledge children need to safely consume and create digital media content, but will also take into account the mechanisms that increase children's agency to actually act on that knowledge. It is methodologically pioneering in using an advanced game-based methodology. This approach is unique as it allows unobtrusive observation of children's online behavior in a simulated real-life environment (reduces problems with response bias) and simultaneously enables experimental manipulation of the mechanisms predicting children's online safety behavior through intervention.

The project has societal importance as it produces evidence-based guidelines for developing interventions that establish sustainable changes in children's media behavior. Such guidelines are imperative because only when interventions are effective in helping children to make the crucial transition from having the necessary knowledge to actually applying that knowledge in order to act safely, can they fully benefit from the opportunities digital media have to offer. Dissemination of the research findings will be ensured by close collaboration with end users and are societal stakeholders (e.g., Nationale Academie voor Media en Maatschappij, Netwerk Mediawijsheid) throughout the project.