

“They may seem mature, but their actions are guided by developing brains”: Understanding vulnerability in Finnish media education materials on teenagers, social media, and body ideals

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Abstract

This article studies the definitions of vulnerability in media education materials on social media and body ideals and analyzes how understandings of vulnerability shape media education practices recommended by these resources. Using feminist discussions of vulnerability as its theoretical framework, the article zooms in on media education resources offered by three Finnish organizations – National Audiovisual Institute, The Finnish Society on Media Education, and The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare. I show how understandings of vulnerability as a psycho-biological weakness can lead to critical media education practices where media deprivation becomes the foremost strategy to tackle body ideals. I argue that instead of trying to do away with (young) people’s experiences of vulnerability through media deprivation, media education on body ideals would benefit from working with these experiences. Here an understanding of vulnerability as always present and always relational, put forward by feminist scholars, could show itself useful. When vulnerability is understood as a relation between two bodies or more, vulnerability becomes a valuable resource for media education and a fruitful starting point for media production practices that take into account (young) people’s different susceptibilities to harm.

Keywords: body ideals, social media, vulnerability, teenagers



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Introduction

In early 2023 Helen Thai et al.'s study on the effects of reducing social media use on the body image of teens and young adults was published in the *Psychology of Popular Media* journal. This study, which suggested that limiting the time spent on social media can have a positive short-time effect on young people's mental health, unsurprisingly raised the interest of the media worldwide. While the study itself focused on Canadian university students with a history of symptoms of anxiety and depression, media and tabloids (e.g., *NPR*, 2023; *American Psychological Association*, 2023) interpreted the study as proof that all young people need to limit the time spent on social media in order to feel better about their bodies. The reporting quoted several psychologists who confirmed that "[a]dolescence is a vulnerable period for the development of body image issues, eating disorders and mental illness" (*American Psychological Association*, 2023). Since all young people were found similarly vulnerable to beautiful images online and the harms associated with their consumption, social media breaks were recommended for all despite their differing positions, social media practices, and motivations for media use.

The above-mentioned study and its media reporting, seemingly with an agenda of proving that social media has a negative effect on young people's identity and body image, are not rare examples of discussing youth online. Similar views are evident in a multitude of news pieces dealing with social media. In this discussion, the 'unrealistic' beauty standards of social media, the phenomenon of sexting, the easy accessibility of pornography, digital media's effects on young people's physical health and the general "addictiveness" of social media, are treated as major causes for worry – especially in relation to 'vulnerable populations', such as young people (Albury & Byron, 2015, 2019; Spišák, 2016). While media education has with digital media taken an increased interest in the media literacy of adults, the safety of children and young people continues to concern media educators the most (Buckingham, 1998, 2008; Ito & al., 2008; Jones, 2011; Tsaliki, 2015; Kovanen & Spišák, 2018). In this article, I ask how vulnerability is understood in one subcategory of media education – media education materials that discuss body ideals and social media. The analyzed materials come from three organizations guiding media education in Finland – *National Audiovisual Institute*, *The Finnish Society on Media Education*, and *The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare* – and they include guidebooks, expert interview videos, lesson plans, online articles, and reports. All media education materials are directed towards teachers and youth workers working with young people from the age of 13 to 19.

Vulnerability, as "a universal condition" of human life (Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2019, p. 2) and as "a fundamental trans-species ontic commonality" (Cole, 2016, p. 263), has during the last decade or so become a central framework for feminists and cultural scholars to think about power. Scholars (Kittay, 2020; Rozmarin, 2021) have argued that explorations of vulnerability as an ontological human quality can stand as an important counter force to neoliberal culture where subjects are imagined as self-mastering and independent — and

vulnerability is represented as a failure. While neoliberal mainstream understandings of vulnerability often use the vulnerability of marginalized people to support paternalistic views, feminist analyses of vulnerability (e.g., Cole, 2016; Butler, Gambetti & Sabsay 2016) point to the ‘power of vulnerability’ (Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2019), arguing that vulnerability does not equal non-agency. As Judith Butler (2016, p. 24) reminds us, all subjects are simultaneously “acted on and acting”. Feminist scholarship on vulnerability shifts attention away from vulnerability’s causal relation to (non)agency and emphasizes how different formulations of vulnerability paint marginalized people out as fragile, inactive, and in need of protection.

Scholarship on media education has not previously paid much attention to the concept of vulnerability or how different understandings of vulnerability shape people’s actions in digital spaces (for important exceptions, see Durham (2016) and Whitaker (2019). Yet, as vulnerability converges with questions of agency (e.g., Rozmarin, 2021), and as, from the point of view of radical pedagogy at least, raising agential citizens is the core of media education (Buckingham, 1998; Burnett & Merchant, 2011), inquiries into vulnerability are much needed. This article points towards ways in which the naming of teenagers as a vulnerable group in media education and the connotations attached to this naming can have real world effects on the digital lives of young people. The article considers what can be accomplished if media educators expand their understanding of vulnerability and start looking at it in new, perhaps less-restrictive ways.

The article supports an understanding of vulnerability, not as a weakness, but as a relation between two bodies or more. Following the definitions of feminist scholars, such as Alyson Cole (2016) and Miri Rozmarin (2021), I discuss vulnerability as an ontological potential that exists in all living creatures, yet its probabilities of resulting in hurt vary based on one’s socio-political position (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014). Vulnerability is not something that needs to be lessened – or that can be lessened – through hindering access to beauty images on social media, for example. Vulnerability exists in all bodies as they act and navigate in digital spaces and others (e.g., Rozmarin, 2021). Yet, it remains highly important to strive for decreasing the hold of socio-political structures that cause physical and/or mental hurt on specific bodies.

With the rapid changes in digital technologies and communication, teenagers and educators need guidance in navigating the socio-cultural complexities of their mediatized lives. This guidance must lean on an understanding of teenagers’ media use as varied and complex practices and valuable resources for education (Albury & Byron, 2015). Media education cannot focus solely on protection, but it needs to include teenagers’ rights to media consumption, communication, and participation on its agenda (Buckingham, 1998, 2003, 2000; Ito & al., 2008; Keinonen, 2016). These “positive rights” (Albury & Byron, 2019, p. 169) are easily lost when vulnerability becomes viewed as a weakness. I argue that media education needs to pay increasing attention to vulnerability. By suggesting that all teenagers

are easily hurt by the 'unrealistic' beauty, exercise, and diet content on social media, media education on body ideals and social media jeopardizes directing help to young people who have been hurt by beauty standards (Cole, 2016), while creating barriers for the digital lives of young people in general.

The article continues with an overview of the media education materials and methods used in analysis. The first analysis section discusses the definitions of vulnerability in the materials, particularly from the viewpoint of ontology. The second section outlines what the understandings of vulnerability within the materials means for media education in practice. The third section deepens the discussion on media education and its methods. I focus on the assignments and practical ideas introduced by the materials and discuss them from the points of view of feminist theories of vulnerability and definition of vulnerability as a relation.

Media education materials and method

The article addresses the understandings of vulnerability in Finnish media education materials that deal with body ideals and social media. The materials analyzed come from three organizations guiding media education in Finland: *National Audiovisual Institute (Kansallinen Audionvisuaalinen Instituutti [KAVI])*, *The Finnish Society on Media Education (Mediakasvatusseura [FSME])*, and *The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (Mannerheimin lastensuojeluliitto [MLL])*. As the Finnish field of media education is inhabited by multiple actors, some of which focus solely on media education and some which offer education beside other activities (see Kanerva, Lahtinen & Oksanen–Särelä, 2022), it is impossible to cover all Finnish media education materials in this article. I have chosen to analyze materials by KAVI, FSME, and MLL, since these organizations are arguably the three most influential actors on the field of media education in Finland. Their work is well-known at schools and in youth organizations, and due to the materials' easy accessibility online, well used by educators.

KAVI is a central governmental agency operating under the *Ministry of Education and Culture* in Finland and is stipulated by the Finnish law to promote and coordinate media education at a national level and supervise the provision of audiovisual culture in Finland so that it is safe for children (KAVI, 2023a.). KAVI has a separate online service, *Mediataitokoulu (Media Literacy School)*, which is directed to people giving media education at schools, kindergartens, libraries, and organizations (*Mediataitokoulu*, 2023). *Mediataitokoulu* offers online courses, guidebooks, expert interview videos, and practical assignments for the use of educators.

FSME and MLL are non-governmental organizations focusing on the wellbeing of children and young people. While FSME specializes in media education, MLL is Finland's largest child welfare organization with 75,000 members and 541 local associations. FSME promotes and develops media education in Finland through passing on current research, training educators, and producing education materials (FSME, 2023). MLL "works to promote health and a good

environment for children” (MLL, 2023) by organizing afternoon programs for school children, providing families with home-services, such as child-care services, and arranging clubs, groups, excursions, training, and special events. Both FSME and MLL provide media educators with resources, such as online courses, lesson plans, expert interviews, online articles, blogs, columns, and guidebooks.

For this article, I have looked through all media education materials and resources by KAVI, FSME, and MLL that discuss social media and young people from the age of 13 to 19. To locate the materials, I firstly searched through the organizations’ bank of materials manually, looking for pieces with social media and teenagers in their title. I then used the online pages’ search functions and looked for hits with the keywords “body ideals” (kehoihanteet), “beauty” (kauneus), “eating disorder” (syömishäiriö), “picture editing” (kuvamuokkaus), “body pressure” (ulkonäköpaineet), “digital wellbeing” (digihyvinvointi), “self-esteem” (itsetunto), and “selfie”, as well as their different variations. Based on the search, body ideals are discussed in KAVI, FSME, and MLL’s materials relatively seldom considering how often the topic comes up in public discussion. While some materials delve quite deep into the matter of ideals, some materials refer to the topic only in passing.

I was able to locate 33 examples of media education materials that touched upon the theme of social media and body ideals. These included five online courses aimed at teachers and other people working with teenagers, eleven guidebooks, seven expert interview videos, four lesson plans for schools, five online articles, and one study report. I scanned through each of the pieces aiming to identify their general theme or frame of discussing the topic. The pieces were surprisingly similar with only three overlapping themes becoming visible: *identity*, *digital wellbeing*, and *safety*. The theme of identity dealt with questions on how social media images by peers as well as influencers affect young people’s body image. Digital wellbeing considered young people’s feelings in relation to edited images. Safety addressed the netiquette, tactics and rules of social media platforms and sites.

For this article, I looked at these 33 examples and three themes from the point of view of vulnerability. My research method can be characterized as conceptual analysis. In conceptual analysis (see Rodgers & Knafl, 2000; Walker & Avant, 2015), a chosen pool of material is scanned for entries of a specific term and its associate expressions, after which the researcher determines how the concept is defined and what the context of its use is in the material. The researcher makes suggestions on how the concept and its use could be developed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a certain topic. The term vulnerability often comes explicitly up in the materials, yet I also read implicit expressions of beauty images’ relation to teenagers’ wellbeing as being related to vulnerability. The themes of identity, digital wellbeing and safety make up the context for discussions on vulnerability. All three essentially define vulnerability, albeit from different angles. The theme of identity asks how vulnerability comes into being in relation to social media. Digital wellbeing searches for ways to deal with vulnerability. Safety is concerned with practical reactions or *solutions* to

vulnerability in media education. To get a clearer understanding on the meanings of vulnerability in the studied material and to point towards ways in which these could be developed, I read the materials in line with gender and cultural studies' understandings on vulnerability. Feminist discussion on vulnerability is therefore both the theory that I am basing my arguments on and part of the methodological apparatus through which I am teasing out patterns and commonalities in the materials.

Identity – vulnerability as teenaged psycho-biology?

In popular discussion, social media is often described in contradictory terms as an important instrument in creating a more equitable society and as something which jeopardizes people's safety (Ito & al., 2008; Burnett & Merchant 2011). KAVI, FSME, and MLL's materials similarly understand social media as creating opportunities, but also challenging in the lives of young people. In the context of body ideals, however, the view on social media as a challenge is much more common. Following the definition of the *Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture* and its 'Right to Learn' (Oikeus oppia, 2020–2022) development program, KAVI (e.g., 2023a), FSME (e.g., 2023), and MLL (e.g., 2023) position media literacy as a crucial skill for the citizens of modern societies. The organizations define media literacy as the ability to interpret and estimate media content, the capacity to create content, and the aptitude to operate in media environments.

While study on media education tends to discuss media literacy as a pedagogical approach, media education materials describe media literacy as a skill that needs to be learnt (Ruokamo, Kotilainen & Kupiainen, 2016). The majority of materials (e.g., MLL lesson plan, 2023; FSME guidebook, 2020) view young people as technologically savvy *diginatives* that do not need help in using digital devices (see Prensky, 2016; Buckingham, 2008; Digital and Population Data Services Agency in Finland, 2021). Yet, all materials suggest that teenagers need guidance in learning what kind of social media content to consume and produce, and how and when to do it. Some materials question the idea of young people being born with similar digital and technological knowledge arguing that there are differences according to economic and geographical backgrounds (e.g., FSME expert interview, 2021). Yet, these materials too express worry over social media and digital devices' effects on teenagers' psychological and physical health. Social media is anticipated to deterministically influence teenagers' body images, alter their brains, and affect their social relationships, sleeping habits, and exercise practices, instead of social media being only one aspect among the broad social, historical, and cultural forces that create shifts in generational behavior (Buckingham 2008).

In discussing the media literacy of teenagers, materials often turn to KAVI (2023b) and *Ministry of Education and Culture's* (Uudet lukutaidot, 2023) categorizations on the media skills that children of different ages need to develop. The categorizations focus on the media competences of children from the age of six to seventeen. According to the categorizations, a 13–17-year-old needs help in understanding how media affects them psychologically and

socially and how it can problematize their body image and mental health. KAVI, FSME, and MLL discuss teenagers as people who are in a fragile state of development, which makes them fundamentally vulnerable to what they see online:

It is important for an adult to understand that a teenager is vulnerable to digital media because of their age, developmental stage, and budding sexual identity. They may seem mature, but their actions are guided by developing brains. The increase of sex hormones and stress hormones creates turmoil in the frontal lobe of their brains. (MLL online article, 2023)

Buckingham (2008) notes an approach that treats vulnerability as a causal effect of the changes happening in the teenager's brain (apparent also in the above quote) as a psycho-biological one. In this approach, common in psychological views of adolescence and in public discussion, youth is imagined as a period of chaos and identity conflict that needs to be resolved for adolescents to become their *true selves*. Adolescence is seen primarily as "a state of transition", a state of vulnerability, and a matter of "becoming" (Buckingham 2008, p. 3). Through this view, adolescents' experiences are only significant if they help them to progress to adulthood and overcome their bodily insecurities.

Utilizations of vulnerability as an ontological condition shared by all, yet characterizing specific groups, can easily be used to support existing power structures (Gilson, 2014; Cole, 2016). The idea of shared vulnerability seems to imply that those who are hurt by body ideals are weaker than the ones that are not (see Rozmarin, 2021). This tendency is evident also in the analyzed materials. KAVI, FSME, and MLL's materials discuss vulnerability as something which is part of the teenagers' specific psycho-biology. Teenagers are believed to be in dire risk of being compromised by social media images of "perfect beach bodies, brand new clothes and cars, and champagne glasses" (FSME online course, 2023a). Adults, by contrast, are understood to be invulnerable to beauty ideals or at least significantly less so than teenagers. The materials suggest that educators can help teenagers to find healthy limits to their media use (FSME online course, 2023b), offer a shoulder to lean on when problems appear in digital surroundings (MLL guidebook, 2021), and give the young person compliments for the images shared on social media which can help to boost up their self-esteem (KAVI guidebook, 2014).

While the materials treat vulnerability as part of the teenaged psycho-biology, some acknowledge that teenagers have varying competences, needs, and fragilities in relation to social media:

Young people's media use is so deeply intertwined with the rest of their life that it becomes impossible to separate media's effects on the young person's wellbeing from other factors in their life. In other words, a teenager who is feeling good about their life probably also feels good when using digital devices; the ones that are most vulnerable

to the negative effects of digital media are probably the ones that also have other kinds of challenges in their life. (FSME online course, 2023b)

Materials that recognize teenagers' different vulnerabilities point towards vulnerability's relational character, instead of treating it as something that simply exists in the adolescent body (Rozmarin, 2021). FSME's online course (2023b) reminds its student that although digital wellbeing is about individuals, factors, such as "family background, the models learnt at home, devices, and the availability of technology" also influence how the young person is doing in their life. While materials discussing vulnerability as relational are prone to mention that social media has both negative *and* positive effects on teenagers' wellbeing, the discussion on the positive sides of social media is often significantly short. The above quote from the FSME's online course, for example, says that the course's focus is on the problems caused by social media. The material states that since the majority of studies on children, young people, and digital technology focus on social media's negative effects, the course will do the same.

Research and public discussion on teenagers, body image, and social media is indeed often focused on the negative. This discussion (e.g., MTV, 2022; Yle, 2021) also uses highly gendered terms to negotiate its subject, even when questioning the previously prevailing assumption that it is girls, in specific, who suffer from body image and eating issues. Interestingly, KAVI, FSME, and MLL's materials seldom name gender when discussing social media and body ideals. In the few cases where gender becomes a topic, the focus is on girls, hiding the experiences of not only boys, but also trans and nonbinary adolescents who, according to recent studies (e.g., Gordon, Moore & Guss, 2021), are more likely to suffer from these issues than other adolescents are:

When it comes to the subject of body image, the technological affordances of the applications that young people use play a significant role. In the past few years, Instagram has become popular among young people. Girls are usually more active on Instagram than boys. Girls also take, edit, and share more selfies than boys do. The meaning of looks is accentuated specifically on visual social media applications, such as Instagram and Snapchat, that are popular among girls. (FSME online article, 2020)

Although the apparent genderlessness of most materials on social media and body image can be seen as a tactic to incorporate all genders into the discussion, I claim that leaving gender unnamed carries further problems. If body image and eating problems are not discussed in connection to gender, their gendered logics and connections may remain hidden (Anwar, Pal & Hui, 2021; Elias, Gill & Scharff, 2017). This can result in different genders approaching education on body ideals and social media as alienating or irrelevant.

Digital wellbeing – decreasing vulnerability through social media breaks

Since KAVI, FSME, and MLL's materials often view teenagers' vulnerability as a psycho-biological quality that has to do with maturing bodies and psyches, media education becomes recognized as a tool to manage vulnerability. The materials seem to imply that vulnerability is something which decreases with time as adolescents progress into adulthood and gain stable identities. Yet, the fact that teenagers' lives are deeply intertwined with social media use makes media education an important practice for helping to keep teenagers safe or safer.

As feminist scholars (see e.g., Gilson, 2014; Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2019; Rozmarin, 2021) have raised worries over the ways that vulnerability has been utilized for neoliberal and paternalistic gains, they have shown how vulnerability, when understood as a weakness, can be used to motivate marginalized people's control, often in the name of protection. It is noteworthy that KAVI, FSME, and MLL's materials generally do not encourage educators to control and limit teenagers' social media use directly. Rather the focus is on assisting teenagers themselves to find the limits to the time spent on digital devices. Yet, it is important to note that in neoliberalism, power often works through self-management and comparing oneself to the norm (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2015). MLL's 'DIGIFIT lesson plan' (2023) and the DIGIFIT training program associated with the plan, which are meant for children and teenagers from the age of 11 to 17, for example, guide teenagers to ponder their digital device use through the following introduction:

Is your phone always in your hand? Does gaming take time away from your schoolwork? Is it sometimes difficult for you to concentrate? Does it feel like your smartphone disturbs your sleep? Are there too many messages and everything interesting around? Have you tried to cut down on media use without success? Do you fancy trying out something new? Train and get better. With Digifit training program you can try out new ways to decrease your digital load and the technological stress bumping through your brain. (MLL lesson plan, 2023)

The introduction poses a series of questions through which to estimate a young person's digital practices. The impreciseness of the questions makes it easy to answer yes to at least one or two of the questions. Through the program, young people's social media use easily becomes recognized as a problem (see Albury & Byron, 2015). The program suggests reducing "digital load" and "technological stress" through several tactics – getting an alarm clock instead of using a cellphone to wake up; starting a social media detox; and organizing the week so that it has a particular "social media day" when a young person uses as much social media as they like, in contrast to other days when social media time is held to the absolute minimum. The absolute minimum is explained as consisting only of replying to the most important phone calls and messages.

While the view of teenagers' social media practices as something which easily jeopardizes their safety and should therefore be limited and scheduled cuts through most of KAVI, FSME, and MLL's materials, there are differences between how strict the boundaries are to social media use recommend within the materials. In FSME's expert interview (2021), psychologist and Professor of Educational Theory Katariina Salmela-Aro states that educators should, instead of strict limits, guide teenagers to autonomy in their digital media use and help them find balance in how much time they spend on digital devices. They state that restricting young people's social media use too much can make social media seem all the more tempting (see Egan & Hawkes, 2009; Spišák, 2016). KAVI's guidebook (2014) similarly states that restriction should not be taken to extremes, since social media and its practices are important for teenagers' identity development:

Young people share images of themselves and things that interest them on social media. Through publishing these pictures, they select what they want to share of their lives. Young people use images to tell a story of what they are like. Sometimes young people imitate styles and poses that they have seen in celebrity images. Through identifying with celebrities, young people gain material for their identity. On the internet, young people can try out different expressions of identity and strengthen their sense of a unique self. (KAVI guidebook, 2014, p. 5)

Some analyzed materials, on the other hand, encourage far stricter boundaries to media use, and claim that social media and its beauty images cannot but challenge a teenager's self-esteem and body image. MLL's reporting of a media survey that the organization did in 2018 with 1554 Finns aged 13–17 is an extreme example of this. The reporting not only assumes that social media is something that always causes pressures, but actively uses this assumption to counter teenagers' own interpretations of the topic:

Some of the interviewed young people stated that they never share images of themselves on social media but only follow other people's posts or publish pictures of their drawings. Because of this, these young people did not think that social media creates beauty pressures. Some of the young people said that they had left online environments where they had felt pressured.

"Social media does not create pressures for me anymore. It used to, so I quit the platforms and surrounding that I didn't like."

Some of the respondents did not understand what these pressures mentioned by the survey were. This can mean that we [educators] may not be speaking in terms that are comprehensible for young people. It is also possible that young people are not aware enough of the pressures that social media creates. (MLL research report, 2018)

While the above quote is a rare example in the materials, I see the report's way of bypassing teenagers' experiences as an emblem of understanding vulnerability as a psycho-biological quality. Since vulnerability to beauty pressures is thought to touch all teenagers, statements

from young people of not feeling pressured are deemed as implausible. The report suggests that such statements result from young people's incompetence in understanding pressures, thus making teenagers' vulnerability part of the same cause that is suggested to create vulnerability.

My critique of the understanding of vulnerability as a psycho-biological feature shared by all teenagers to the same extent does not mean that I think that teenagers should stay in online spaces and continue following accounts that give them anxiety. I consider the above informant's decision to leave spaces that made them feel bad as a beneficial one. It is further a decision which shows significant understanding of one's own emotional responses. Despite this, I do think that the understandings of vulnerability as an equally shared quality of teenagers can sometimes result in media education practices that are based *only* on restricting. In this kind of education, teenagers may be encouraged to leave online environments and quit practices that they enjoy in anticipation of hurts that have not happened or that are not necessarily likely to happen (Cole, 2016; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014).

Beyond safety – vulnerability in action

As discussed before, neoliberal understandings of vulnerability tend to associate vulnerability with weakness. Neoliberalism imagines vulnerability as a state which hinders agency and therefore cannot work as a basis for practices like activism (see Butler, Gambetti & Sabsay, 2016; Koivunen, Kyrölä & Ryberg, 2019). Since the analyzed materials often associate teenagers with vulnerability as weakness and immaturity, it is perhaps not surprising that the materials usually do not regard teenagers' use of social media and its beauty content as agency, even when it involves sophisticated digital skills (see Durham, 2016). Instead, teenagers are viewed as helpless to the pull of beauty images on social media, passively copying negative models in their media use. These models are then deterministically seen to take a toll on teenagers' body images:

Students generally know that on social media, images are edited. They are very aware of it, yet editing cannot but influence them. They see this perfect feed, perfect bodies, everything is really just perfect. They know that what they see is not true, but it cannot but affect how they think they should look and how they should be. (KAVI expert interview, 2021)

When social media's effects on teenagers' wellbeing and body image are seen as undeniable, limiting the time spent on social media becomes an important tool in the fight against *unrealistic* body standards. The above quoted KAVI expert interview and MLL's DIGIFIT training program (MLL lesson plan, 2023) discussed in the previous section guide teenagers to constantly evaluate their media use. If they notice effects, such as tiredness, lack of self-esteem, anxiety, and sadness, they are encouraged to take a break from social media. The materials do not separate different social media platforms, sites, applications, and

practices from one another. Rather they view social media as a whole which necessarily challenges teenagers' body image and health.

Although the above quoted KAVI expert interview views teenagers as passive consumers of social media beauty content, the interview does view teenagers as subjects that have significant knowledge on social media (see Buckingham, 2008; Ito & al., 2008). Some analyzed materials, in contrast, believe that teenagers' ignorance on the *inauthenticity* of social media images is the problem. These materials suggest tackling body esteem problems through giving teenagers more information on social media (Warfield, 2018) and guide teenagers and educators to look at images from the point of view of their editing, for example:

It is important to remember that social media is a performance where everyone can portray themselves and their lives as they like by using figurative or literal filters. You can guide the teenager to think about (through examples, such as Bored Panda, [...]) what has been cropped out of the image and the effort that has gone into producing the picture. It is important to provide teenagers with a safe space to handle their disappointments, failures, and feelings of worthlessness. (FSME online course, 2023a)

Reminiscent of public discussion on social media and body ideals (MTV, 2022; Yle, 2021), the above quoted FSME's course treats selfies and social media images as performances that should not get mixed up with reality. The course states that teenagers need to learn that "almost all images" on social media are edited and that what they see in these pictures is often impossible for "real people" to achieve. It further suggests that teenagers familiarize themselves with the art and pop culture magazine *Bored Panda* and its article "50 Reasons Not to Trust Photos You See on Social Media" (2017). This picture-article shows examples of how the cropping of images can change images' meaning. While the assignment is linked to a section of the online course which focuses on body image and self-esteem, none of the pictures in the article are about editing bodies to make them look thinner or more attractive per se. Instead, the exercise teaches general criticality towards social media.

The above assignments likely stem from educators' deep desire to take care of teenagers and children and to stay away from images that they understand to be harmful to teenagers' health. Yet, the exercises contrast with Livingstone and Third's (2017) suggestion that in digital environments, children's rights to participate should be taken into account as much as their safety. Scholars working on the field of media education (e.g., Buckingham, 2003; Herkman, 2007) insist that media education should take media production as its starting point. Teenagers as well as adults learn most about media and their ways of using it by actively producing social media as part of media education and by "assessing social media moments together" (Albury et al., 2017, p. 168). If media images are removed from their original contexts and evaluated as isolated images, such as in the case of the *Bored Panda*

exercise, they lose at least some of their meaning (Burnett & Merchant, 2011). Critique of social media images may further feel alienating for young people, if it concentrates on images that the teenagers themselves enjoy and find meaningful in their lives.

It is noteworthy that KAVI, FSME, and MLL's materials do include some examples of practical assignments that educators can do together with teenagers and that put media production at the center of learning. Some, like FSME's assignment on social media influencers (2019), focus on the assumed inauthenticity of social media. This assignment asks teenagers to parody social media influencers' videos, pointing towards the videos' performativity. Some exercises, however, leave teenagers more space to form their own opinions of social media practices. KAVI's exercise, "Creative selfie" (KAVI guidebook, 2019, p. 7) encourages teenagers to take selfies, but in a new way or a way that feels the most comfortable to them:

The range of self-portraits is vast. Self-portraits or videos do not need to focus on the face but they can also portray other parts of the body, such as hands or feet. Pictures or videos can be taken by turning the camera towards the person or by taking a photograph of a reflection on the mirror. Taking a picture of one's own shadow is one example of a self-portrait. Self-portraits can be edited by cropping, adjusting the colors, and using filters. One can also use different tools, such as a selfie-stick, to make a self-portrait. Self-portraits or videos can be taken with a camera or they can be drawings or paintings.

Ask students to make a self-portrait or a video. There is no one recipe for creativity, you can encourage students to distinctiveness, innovation, playfulness, and experimentality. (KAVI guidebook, 2019, p. 7.)

The assignment puts forward a view where vulnerability does not need to stand in the way of teenagers acting in digital spaces. Rather vulnerability can rather work as a source of creativity and agency. As several scholars studying vulnerability suggest (Butler, Gambetti & Sabsay, 2016; Butler, 2016; Rozmarin, 2021), while vulnerability can stem from abusive power structures making marginalized subjects and groups more susceptible to harm than others, vulnerability as such does not mean a reduced sense of life or limited possibilities for action. In the above assignment, teenagers learn to navigate in digital environments by producing selfies and self-images that are at odds with their experience of vulnerability. The emphasis is in this way put on reducing the likelihood of hurt for teenagers – not on reducing vulnerability as such (see Livingstone & Görzig, 2014). KAVI's assignment supports expressions of vulnerability in digital environments. By calling for creativity and innovation, the assignment suggests picturing shadows, reflections, hands, and feet, instead of or besides more traditional self-portraits. The assignment negotiates possibilities for differently positioned young people to participate in today's visual digitalized cultures on their own terms. Young people's vulnerability or past experiences of hurt do not need to stand in the way of digital subjecthood and agency.

Towards advantageous media education practices

This article has considered the definitions of vulnerability in media education materials, discussing the types of media education practices that the definitions lead to. I have shown that understandings of vulnerability as a psycho-biological shared quality between teenagers may materialize as a wish to limit teenagers' use of social media's beauty, exercise, and food related content, even in cases where teenagers themselves do not experience pressure in relation to them. If vulnerability is understood as a potential within all bodies that actualizes in socio-cultural relations, however, vulnerability reveals itself as something that can be worked with and used as a resource in media education practices. Media education that sees vulnerability as a relation, looks for ways in which teenagers can participate in digital cultures while being vulnerable, all the while being mindful of the possibility of vulnerability turning into hurt.

While this article has criticized media education that views vulnerability as a weakness, my purpose has not been to claim that teenagers do not need guidance in using social media. Eating disorders are regrettably common among both teenagers and adults, as are issues with body image and self-esteem that do not fill the criteria of disorders. I do not wish to dismiss these harms or the way that they sometimes actualize in relation to social media content. Neither do I wish to reject the worry that educators feel around the subject of body ideals. (See Albury & Byron, 2019). Yet, the view on teenagers' vulnerability to beauty ideals as a shared weakness comes with severe limitations that educators must consider before turning to strict limits to media use to reduce the vulnerability of teenagers.

Media education focusing solely on limiting – especially when media education deals with social media content and practices that teenagers find important for their lives and identity – may severely damage the ground on which teenagers and educators meet in media education situations. Critical media education focusing on risks can result in teenagers feeling confused, as it implies that what teenagers enjoy is wrong or flawed (Burnett & Merchant, 2011; Spišák, 2016). Teenagers may also feel alienated or frustrated by exercises where social media content is removed from its context (Albury & Byron, 2015).

I suggest that educators re-evaluate their ideas of vulnerability and re-consider what the purpose of media education truly is. Is media education's aim to decrease vulnerability or is it create agential subjects capable of navigating their digital surroundings? After all, vulnerability is an inseparable part of life. Should teenagers not be guided to live with vulnerability in their changing digital surroundings? With an approach that suggests accepting vulnerability, it becomes relevant to view vulnerability as a right. As Hokkanen et al. (2021) state, people need to have the right to be vulnerable while operating on social media.

Media education must take vulnerability into account without assuming that every teenager is vulnerable in the same way. This could help to direct support to those young people that

have been hurt by beauty ideals. As scholars studying vulnerability argue (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014; Cole, 2016), vulnerability needs to be kept apart from hurts and risks from harm.

Psychological research on teenagers receiving sexual messages online (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014,) shows that people who use internet multiple hours a day, are more likely to encounter *risky content*. Yet these people's resilience to the content is also greater than those who spend less time online. Based on this, it seems unfruitful to isolate teenagers from beauty, diet, and exercise content. Rather, open discussion on the content, paired with media production, will more likely work as an advantageous media education practice.

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Funding

The research has been funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation, Varsinais-Suomi Regional Fund (85232104) and by 'Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture', a research consortium (352520) funded by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland (327392).