

# The Digital World Through the Eyes of Digital-Native Kids: How Do Children in Different Cultural Contexts Conceptualise the Digital World?

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## INTRODUCTION

Digital-native kids navigate the digital realm like digital superheroes, leaving policymakers and experts in pixelated dust. But if the people responsible for ensuring the digital well-being of kids do not fully understand how kids conceptualize the digital world, how will children be safe online? Our unconventional approach blends art and science, uncovering the relationship of kids with their digital world through affordances, exploring how these kids conceptualise the digital world.

[Research Webpage ->](#)



## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This qualitative research is all about staying agile and iterative, avoiding preconceived notions when researching with children.

We held tight to three core elements: a diverse group of kids of the same age, an arts-based activity, and one essential question: What's the digital world look like through the eyes of these digital natives?

The main framework relied on **Grounded Theory**: (Glaser and Strauss) Unearthing theories from raw data, it's all about finding hidden patterns and connections, **Sociomateriality**: (Barad & Others, Broader than ANT), and **Arts-Based Research** (Hickey-Moody, Leavy, Kara) as a Theoretical/Methodological tool Giving kids a creative voice through drawings, we bridge gaps, level the playing field, and let them lead the way.

## INSIGHTS

**Thematic Insights:** The discussions and drawings revealed a slight variation between groups in terms of perception, as Kobayat students highlighted internet infrastructure and accessibility challenges, unlike Aalst students. Despite this, both groups shared highly similar enthusiasm and patterns regarding digital activities and apps. Parental control was evident for both groups, particularly on TikTok, with rules in place, though enforcement varied. Concerns about online safety were discussed, with Kobayat students emphasizing suspicious interactions with strangers and reporting, and Aalst students highlighted privacy and information sharing awareness.

**Creative Insights:** The drawings produced in the art-based research component featured a range of logos of digital applications and games like YouTube, TikTok, Roblox, Minecraft, and Netflix. Students also depicted devices such as desktops, laptops, tablets, and mobiles with specific content. Emotions were evident in drawing their feelings towards digital activities. Group dynamics differed between locations, with smoother collaboration observed in Aalst compared to Kobayat. While some students worked individually before merging their creations into a collective digital realm.

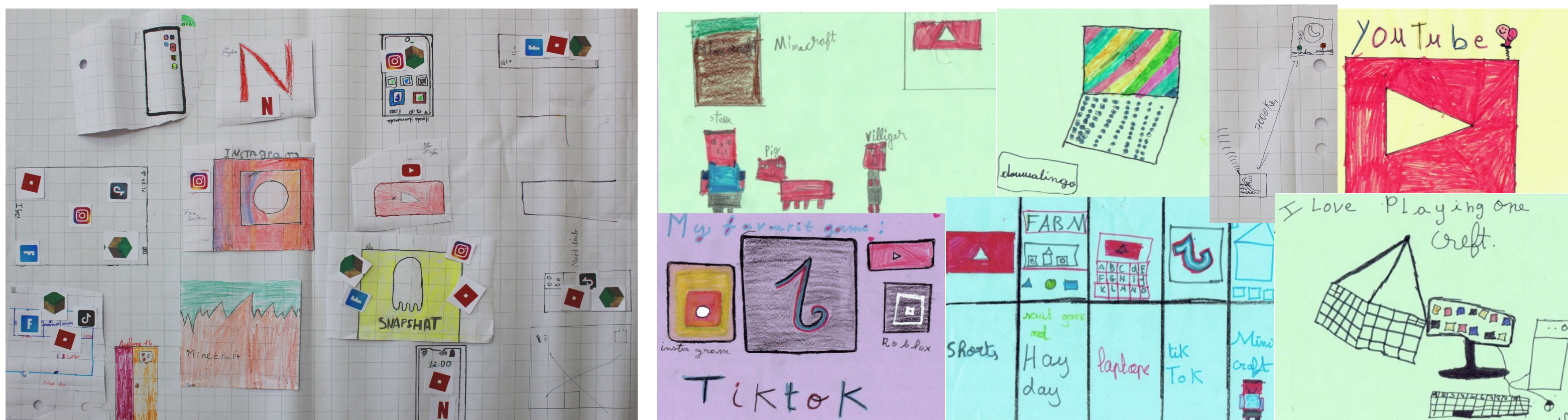


Figure 2: Selection of individual and collective drawings from Kobayat, Lebanon

## METHODOLOGY

**Planning:** The research took the shape of an awareness workshop including discussions and drawing workshops held in a classroom. The process was done in Aalst, Belgium and roughly duplicated in Kobayat, Lebanon.

the workshop included three activities: **creating a digital mind map, drawing self-perceptions in the digital world, and constructing a collective digital network.** Each activity was followed by discussions and follow-up questions to explore participants' input further.

**Execution:** In Belgium, **22 children** aged 9-10 took part in our Dutch-speaking workshop at Sint-Jozefscollege, Aalst. In Lebanon, at École Al-Carmelia, Kobayat, **70 children** aged 10 took part in the research workshop.

## PERCEPTION AS AFFORDANCES

Children's perceptions of the digital world are shaped by cues, described by Gibson's affordances theory. Using this theory, this research attempts to make the kids' perceptions tangible through identified affordances in the drawings and discussions. Identified affordances include **Playability** for gaming, **Watchability** for online videos, **Social Connectivity**, **Accessibility**, **Access Limitation** through parental control and access challenges, fostering **Responsiveness**, to adapt to these limitations. **Uncertainty** due to privacy concerns, Personalization, and Anonymity for online identity control.

[Watch a visualization of these affordances ->](#)



Figure 2: Selection of individual and collective drawings from Aalst, Belgium

## TAKEAWAYS

**Kids in Control!** Kids lead the way in their digital world, showing independence and diverse interests.

**Similar but Unique!** Children are similar in some ways and unique in other ways in how they see the digital world influenced by their backgrounds and experiences.

**Digital Challenges, Different Reactions!**

Despite freedom online, kids face challenges like restrictions and harassment, shaping their views.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Listen!** Let's listen to kids more to understand and protect them in our tech-driven world. **Balance!** Ensuring the agency and empowerment of kids while keeping them safe online. **Relate!** Approach children's perspectives in their respective socio-economic and cultural context.

**Create!** Creative methods like Art helps kids open up and share, making research more fun and effective.

It's time to prioritize their digital freedom and safety – it's their digital playground, after all.



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