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“You can reach so many young people there, because I think all young people use TikTok”: young people’s views on science communication about adverse childhood experiences

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Abstract

Communicating science to young people in ways that consider their media use, platform affordances and ethics is increasingly recognised as important. We examined Finnish young people’s perspectives on science communication, especially regarding adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Based on an analysis of interview and workshop transcripts with young people aged 13–17 years ($N = 210$), the findings show that young people prefer social media platforms, especially TikTok, for ambient exposure to science communication but content should be linked to longer formats (such as existing research articles). Participants demonstrated an awareness of strategies to tackle mis- and disinformation and clickbait. In the attention economy, researchers communicating about ACE-related research results should pay attention to empathy, hope and making positive changes.

Keywords

Digital science communication

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1 - Introduction

In media-saturated and post-digital societies [Haslop & Ringrose, 2025] and the attention economy [Fairchild, 2007; Marwick, 2015], where content creators increasingly compete for users' time and attention, developing reliable and ethical science communication on social media is an increasingly important challenge. This challenge is exacerbated in the context of youth-targeted science communication.

In the past decade, short video hosting platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok have rapidly gained popularity [Newman et al., 2023; Plaisime et al., 2020], especially among young people, for consuming audiovisual content from entertainment to news and facilitating different forms of self-expression and community building [Southerton & McLean, 2025]. Scholars have increasingly focused in recent years on science communication practices on social media engaging diverse age groups [Belova et al., 2022; Hargittai et al., 2018; Martin & MacDonald, 2020; Ningtyas et al., 2024; Plaisime et al., 2020; Portman et al., 2025] and inclusive and participatory approaches to science communication [Cassidy, 2021; CPAS Inclusive Science Communication Collective, 2025; Shilubane et al., 2024; Smeets et al., 2025]. Considering the importance of social media platforms as young people's key sources for finding informative content [Belova et al., 2022; Portman et al., 2025; Southerton & McLean, 2025], nuanced research is needed on young people's perspectives on platformised science communication addressing topics and experiences that are important to them. This study has a specific focus on science communication regarding adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

As several studies, also those involving the perspectives of children and young people show, most children encounter adversities and hardships during childhood [Madigan et al., 2023; see also Petrucci et al., 2019]. It is well understood that young people need opportunities to engage with research findings about the information they share, including about ACEs and their consequences. Research has shown that young people provide highly valuable information for research and practice and can help improve definitions, assessments, support and policy [Johansen et al., 2025; Laajasalo et al., 2023]. It is both ethical and practically necessary to include the views of children and young people about ACEs, to ensure that the research that represents them is communicated accurately and ethically on public media. However, as Zaman et al. [2024] argue, even in collaborative and inclusive studies, researchers often disseminate their findings beyond the reach of young people.

Drawing on qualitative data collected from workshops and semi-structured interviews (individual, pair and group), this article (1) investigates the views of 13–17-year-olds on science communication in the broad sense on social media platforms and (2) examines how young people approach science communication regarding ACEs. The article bridges the topics of contemporary research on ACEs [Felitti et al., 1998; Racine et al., 2025], the attention economy and young people's social media practices [Fairchild, 2007; Marwick, 2015; Southerton & McLean, 2025], and science communication on social media [Belova et al., 2022; Bucchi & Trench, 2021; Cassidy, 2021; Hargittai et al., 2018; Smeets et al., 2025; Zaman et al., 2024].

2 - Context

2.1 - *Adverse childhood experiences*

While childhood and adolescent trauma have long been investigated [Bowlby, 1944; Rutter & Maughan, 1997], Felitti et al.'s [1998] landmark study is widely regarded as the first on ACEs. It surveyed adults about experiences of abuse, domestic violence and family dysfunction, revealing that most respondents had at least one ACE. These experiences were strongly linked to numerous psychosocial and health problems in adulthood, with risks increasing alongside the number of ACEs.

Since Felitti et al.'s [1998] seminal study, ACE research has grown rapidly across disciplines [Struck et al., 2021], with over 70 meta-analyses on mental health outcomes [Sahle et al., 2022]. International studies have consistently linked ACEs to poor mental, physical and social well-being, including substance use, violence, risky sexual behaviour, low education levels and major somatic diseases [Hughes et al., 2017; Petruccelli et al., 2019; Yeo et al., 2024]. High ACE accumulation (six or more) can reduce life expectancy by decades [Brown et al., 2009]. While early research was largely retrospective, newer methods have shown that ACEs negatively affect child development, even after accounting for genetics [Grummitt et al., 2024; Kranzler et al., 2024].

Approaches to communicating these sombre findings to the general public have varied, from emphasising negative long-term personal consequences and individual decline to more community- and strength-centred approaches — the latter to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes [Kelly-Irving & Delpierre, 2019]. Although research has explored the most effective ways of communicating ACE research to adults [Gollust et al., 2022; Purtle et al., 2021] and how ACEs are discussed in social media by adults [Srivastav et al., 2021], studies including young people's views on science communication regarding ACEs and the role of social media are lacking.

2.2 - *Science communication in an attention economy*

As Bucchi and Trench [2021] have argued, science communication can be understood as 'social conversation around science' [p. 8], ranging from planned dissemination, such as public presentations and opinion pieces, to spontaneous and unpredictable means — that is, research results cascaded by others in media, art and other contexts. Social media platforms are fruitful yet contradictory forums for conversations around science [Martin & MacDonald, 2020; Ningtyas et al., 2024; Portman et al., 2025], given that platforms amplify both correct and incorrect information. Researchers investigating science communication on social media have previously focused on topics including credibility, misinformation (i.e., erroneous information without malicious intent), and disinformation (i.e., intentionally false information) [Amazeen et al., 2024; Belova et al., 2022; Cagle et al., 2025; Hargittai et al., 2018; Pimentel, 2025; Portman et al., 2025; Scheufele & Krause, 2019].

As Portman et al. [2025] concluded, science communicators should always be mindful of a platform's technical, content-related and communicative affordances [Kallio & Mäenpää, 2025; Nieborg & Poell, 2018], different formats, presentation styles [Bik & Goldstein, 2013], and ethics. Furthermore, in digital environments, multiple platforms and content creators increasingly compete over users' time and attention. Algorithms tailored to the needs and

interests of content consumers strive to focus users' attention on specific platforms for as long as possible. This competition to capture and retain users' attention, time and focus is known as the attention economy [Fairchild, 2007; Marwick, 2015]. Clickbait titles, whose aim is to catch users' attention and make them watch content, are an integral part of content production in the attention economy.

In the post-digital era [Haslop & Ringrose, 2025], characterized by constant entanglement of digital and non-digital spaces, social media platforms are integral to young people's everyday lives [Hargittai et al., 2018; Plaisime et al., 2020; Portman et al., 2025]. Different platforms appeal to young people of different ages, and as new platforms emerge, media habits change and evolve. In this article, our specific focus is on the short video platform TikTok. According to a Finnish survey, nearly 60% of 16–24-year-olds use TikTok daily ['Digitaalinen elämä', 2024]. In recent years, TikTok has become Finnish young people's most important platform for accessing news content; moreover, Finnish 13–18-year-olds claim that short videos are their favourite way of consuming news [Nuoret ja uutismediasuhde, 2026; Sihvonen et al., 2025]. These findings resonate with international research showing that young people rely on the internet and social media as 'their main sources of science information' [Portman et al., 2025, p. 1; see also Belova et al., 2022].

The use of TikTok to engage young people with scientific research poses complex ethical questions for science communicators. The platform has been publicly debated in relation to harm to users, including harmful psychological impacts, mis- and disinformation, propaganda and hate speech [Hannan, 2024; Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021; O'Connor et al., 2025]. However, public debate often neglects young people's media habits and wishes for trustworthy news and science-related content on TikTok [Southerton & McLean, 2025; see also Belova et al., 2022; Hargittai et al., 2018]. In a recent Dutch survey [Smeets et al., 2025], almost 82% of respondents considered that enthusing young people was a highly important task for science communicators. Drawing on existing research on ACEs, the attention economy, and young people's social media uses and preferences, this article investigates how 13–17-year-olds perceive science communication on social media, with particular emphasis on research concerning ACEs.

3 - Methods

This study drew on qualitative data collected from 13–17-year-old young people (N = 210), from diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, social class, ethnicity and education (comprehensive school, vocational school and upper secondary school), living in different (urban and rural) parts of Finland. The fieldwork was planned and conducted in collaboration with youth services in four municipalities during spring 2025.¹ During the data collection, we participated in activities organised for young people, including thematic workshops (n = 40, 162 participants) organised during school hours at a youth centre and semi-structured individual (n = 5, 5 participants), pair (n = 4, 8 participants) and group (n = 5, 35 participants) interviews conducted at youth centres outside school hours. The workshops targeted ninth-grade students (15–16-year-olds), and the interviews included young people between the ages of 13 and 17.

1. Data collection was completed as a part of the research project ACElife, whose aim is to broadly study the nature and consequences of ACEs and ways to prevent them. See more: <https://acelife.fi/en>.

We used co-creative methods to collect the data, including visual collages and visual elicitation [Clark-Ibáñez, 2007; Pyyry et al., 2021], as starting points for discussions and to enable non-verbal participation and conversational knowledge production. In the workshops (duration approximately 10 minutes), participants sorted the logos of social media platforms, streaming services, newspapers, etc. on paper under two headings: “Tell about science here” and “Don’t tell about science here”. The participants were provided with pens and sticky notes to express their own ideas. Furthermore, after introducing the concept of ACEs on a general level, we asked workshop participants to write down their own thoughts about what ACEs could be on sticky notes to collect young people’s perspectives on a topic that has predominantly been researched among adults. The participants chose whether they wanted to write down the ideas by themselves or discuss the topic with their peers while writing.

During individual, pair and group interviews (duration 15–120 minutes), we used the same collage method to facilitate discussion about science communication. Furthermore, we compiled a word cloud of the different ACEs collected from young people’s thoughts in the workshops and used it as a starting point for discussing how research findings about ACE issues should be communicated — and whether they should be communicated at all — to young people. During the interviews, instead of talking about personal experiences, we kept the discussion at a general level regarding science communication.

The workshops and interviews enabled the participants and facilitators to engage in a collective form of meaning making, which facilitated the fruitful application of the concept of science communication as conversation [Bucchi & Trench, 2021]. The conversations highlighted diverse media uses and preferences. Throughout this study, young people’s viewpoints and opinions were understood from a social constructionist perspective [Weinberg, 2014], which emphasizes interpreting their talk as illustrating the situational knowledge produced at particular moments during the research.

We considered ethical issues at every stage of the study, including institutional research ethics (ensuring data privacy, obtaining informed consent and guaranteeing data protection) and lived, relational and situational research ethics regarding encounters between researchers and young people [Abebe & Bessell, 2014; Metz & Miller, 2016; Rahman & Deuchar, 2025].² The municipalities gave their permission to conduct the research, but the final decision to participate was left to the young people themselves.³ Before each workshop and interview, we audio-recorded participants’ verbal, informed consent to participate in the research and to publish the study findings. The municipal youth services informed the participants’ guardians about the research. No personal data, apart from data to confirm the age group (13–17-year-olds), were collected. In the transcripts, we anonymised all personal data revealed by the participants.

Different research contexts and locations (during vs. after school hours at the youth centres) required careful consideration of relational research ethics, as well as researchers’ positionality in the field and knowledge production. In the workshops, organised during school hours, we emphasised the confidentiality and voluntariness of participation and that

2. The Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region at Tampere University approved the fieldwork and interviews (approval no. 26/2025).
3. In Finland, children over 15 years of age have the right to decide independently about their participation in research without needing their guardians’ permission. However, in certain justified cases, the age limit may be lower, including research settings that do not involve the collection of sensitive data and/or research conducted in settings such as informal leisure activities, during which obtaining guardians’ permission might be difficult.

the young people's thoughts would not be evaluated or linked to schoolwork. In both workshops and interviews, we paid specific attention to being transparent about our own position as researchers (not teachers, youth workers or other authorities) and aimed for sensitivity in interpreting young people's nonverbal forms of communication regarding participating or withdrawing from activities or possible hesitance towards interview topics.

The main research questions provided the starting point for the analysis: How do young people perceive science communication on social media platforms? How do they approach, and what kind of wishes do they have for, science communication regarding research about ACEs? The analysis began with multiple close readings of all workshop and interview transcripts, followed by three rounds of thematic coding⁴ [Ahrens & Chapman, 2006; Miles et al., 2014]. The first round was based on a double strategy of deductive coding based on the key themes (social media platforms, ACEs, information seeking, entertaining, educating, relatability, reliability and trustworthiness, engagement, misinformation, disinformation, format and platform preferences, emotional tones) and inductive coding, with new codes arising from the empirical material. The initial codes demonstrated the discovery of detailed themes from the data in relation to topics such as young people's media and social media uses, contents, formats, platforms, styles, trends, content creators, emotions, as well as descriptive direct quotes from the data.

The second round of coding included grouping codes under broader categories: preferred platforms and formats for science communication, preferred science communicators, influence of platform affordances and algorithms, encountering mis- and disinformation and clickbait, evaluating reliability and trustworthiness, criticism of media publicity about young people, encountering ACE-related social media content, styles and tones in ACE-related communication, and researcher's roles in communicating about ACE-related research. Finally, during the third round, these categories were organised into clusters following the research questions of this study. These thematic clusters included (1) science communication in the attention economy; (2) young people's strategies to tackle misinformation, disinformation and clickbait; and (3) science communication about ACEs.

4 ■ Results

4.1 ■ *Science communication on TikTok's attention economy*

I think TikTok is probably the best [platform for science communication]. It is, like, used so widely, and you rarely meet a young person who doesn't use TikTok. It's usually, like, "For real? You don't use TikTok?"

The preceding quote exemplifies young people's thoughts about which platform researchers should use to communicate scientific findings to them, as also concluded by another participant: "You can reach so many young people there, because I think all young people use TikTok". Although participants mentioned diverse contexts, such as schools,

4. The main author of the article, Heta Mulari, held primary responsibility of coding. The emerging results were reflected upon and discussed with Venla Hakala and Laura Mielityinen who participated in planning and conducting the fieldwork.

documentaries or podcasts, in every workshop and interview, social media was named among the most efficient means of reaching young people. Among the platforms, TikTok stood out. Even participants who did not regularly use social media believed that young people, in general, could best be reached via TikTok. Furthermore, most participants preferred short videos to receive informative content, exemplified by interview quotes such as “I’m thinking more about young people in a collective sense, and I feel that it [science communication] goes better as a video”, and “Make a short video on TikTok. 15 seconds”.

Importantly, although we asked young people to consider how science could be communicated to them, this does not imply that all of them would personally want science content in their personalised feeds. Thus, their reflections were guided by the focus of the study, not by an existing desire for such content. However, participants expressed a habit of using TikTok to consume news content (created by, for example, the Finnish public service media Yleisradio and major newspapers) and informative videos via their personal feeds, alongside entertainment and humour.

Consequently, encountering science communication on TikTok’s thematically and stylistically diverse video flow seemed comfortable (‘It’d be nice if there was some factual content on there as well’), although some claimed that informative videos often felt boring or uninteresting and were easily avoided unless the topic was attractive, recognizable, or relatable, or if the video could capture the watcher with its distinctive audiovisual style: “Well, sometimes it [a research video] might be somewhat interesting, but I don’t always feel like watching it”. Thus, although science communicators can potentially reach young people on social media platforms, young people actively select content they find interesting and captivating.

In many interviews and workshops, young people reflected on the key issues concerning the attention economy, such as effective algorithms, the need for platforms to capture users’ attention immediately, the problem of focusing one’s attention on a single video for a long time and the connections between shorter and longer presentation formats. Among the key advantages of TikTok, participants named the affordance of the personalised, algorithmic video flow which eliminates the need for users to deliberately select a video; instead, videos are encountered by accident within the video flow — “because you get so many, you don’t need to click those videos yourself; they just come to you”, and “perhaps [science communication should be] on TikTok, because there you just receive videos and you don’t have to decide what you watch”. Another participant reflected on science communication in the context of their media habits as follows:

So, in general, it’s on social media that I spend most of my time. I don’t really search for any research on the internet on purpose ... so it’d be best if it were [posted] somewhere that young people use daily and, like, where you encounter it automatically, so that you don’t need to use any specific search terms or anything.

Furthermore, participants claimed that although research videos may be encountered by accident, the attention economy logic of TikTok emphasises the first few seconds of a video, which are designed to catch users’ attention. Young people suggested that the beginning of a research video should preferably relate to users’ own lives, interests or experiences: “Some

kind of topic or question that is common among young people, so that you really start to think about it". Many described this hook as going straight to the point, starting with an interesting question, citing a current visual or audiovisual trend or describing the topic in an unusual, even thought-provoking way:

It should be trending — like, something that really gets us to watch it. It could be a bit dramatic ... and perhaps not very long. If it is, for example, a video, it could be a short video, and you could then mention, "Hey, you can read more about this here."

This quote summarises many of the elements identified by participants as characteristics of what makes a short video communicating science interesting. Importantly, they emphasised that although an interesting research video needs to be short, it should include links to longer forms of information, such as podcasts, articles or documentaries: "In a TikTok video, for example, you can go through the main points, and then in the video ... description, there could be a link to a YouTube video or, like, a podcast where the topic is explained more thoroughly". The young people shared an understanding that most longer presentation formats, such as podcasts, documentaries or research articles, went unnoticed unless there was an initial informative short video "trailer" about them on TikTok.

4.2 ■ *Young people's strategies to tackle clickbait and misinformation*

If you, like, try to *appease* [in English] the algorithm, it quickly goes into ... They don't have time to explain the news or the topic properly, and then it lacks the context. And not many young people start to look for the context ... So, it's very important in TikTok — if you put news there — for you to do it right and as carefully as possible because it's so easy ... not to check the information, and then you believe what you saw, or you believe what you understood from it.

The young person quoted above insightfully describes the pitfalls of publishing science videos on TikTok: the simultaneous need to follow the logic of the platform while considering the dangers of misinformation and oversimplification due to the limitations of the short video format. Participants frequently discussed mis- and disinformation on TikTok in relation to, for example, old news circulating on the platform: "They [the posts] don't have dates, and ... if the algorithm brings you a news article that was published a year ago, it's, like, spreading misinformation". Another example was war-related news out of context, as one participant concluded:

There's a 13- or 12-year-old watching them [news videos] and taking it all literally, because the news has the hook right away to keep them there. It's often a kind of clickbait title ... and when you read the article, it's usually about a random dude somewhere who's said something related to that, but not really anything closely related.

As hinted at by this young person, thought-provoking clickbait titles are an integral element of the attention economy. Clickbait was mentioned critically in a couple of workshops and interviews in the context of spreading mis- or disinformation. According to participants, TikTok videos are vulnerable to clickbait journalism due to the short video format and the style-related need to articulate the key topic at the very beginning in an attention-grabbing way:

They try to get people to listen using, like, clickbait. Especially in short videos, sometimes, like, they say something in the beginning, but when you watch until the end, the issue kind of changes. Or, like, if you don't watch the video until the end, you might end up having a false view of the issue.

Participants used several strategies to evaluate misinformation and assess reliability on TikTok. Among the most common strategies was checking whether the publisher was an official and/or verified account holder (such as Yleisradio or a university) or a “random” person, with the latter deemed untrustworthy. When asked about trustworthy science communication, most participants thought that the person presenting the research findings should be a researcher — “an expert”, “someone who knows a lot about it”, or “the person who’s done the research”. The young people’s other strategies for evaluating reliability included searching for more information on the topic, comparing the information to that from other sources and evaluating the audiovisual styles of the videos, such as how the people in them introduced the issues — “that they don’t beat around the bush but say it directly”.

4.3 ■ *Science communication regarding ACEs: serious, empathetic and hopeful*

In the interviews, a more general discussion about science communication platforms, styles and formats, as well as strategies to tackle misinformation and clickbait, was followed by the topic of how to communicate research results regarding ACEs. As a starting point, we used a word cloud visualising a collection of ACEs listed by workshop participants, which included topics such as violence, bullying, harassment, discrimination, school stress and social pressure. Thus, to enable discussion of ACE-related science communication, the topics were introduced to the young people by the researchers. However, the discussion was dialogic: some participants spontaneously shared their experiences of encountering ACE-related content on their social media feeds, meaning that these themes were not unfamiliar.

Although most participants deemed the short video format to be a suitable means for communicating ACE-related research results, many were critical of the tone and style of the videos. In this regard, the young people had differing opinions. Some preferred an entertaining, even slightly humorous, tone: “If it’s a serious issue ... you need to take it seriously, but [it should] be somehow entertaining at the same time”. However, most participants wished for a more serious, neutral tone and style: “Keeping a very factual style and perhaps not adding any new pop music as a background song”, and:

Of course, you can foreground positive emotions if [the video] moves on to discuss ways of getting help in dealing with difficulties you might have because of those experiences. But even in that phase the video should never downgrade the experience, and that’s why a serious and ... factual tone about the issue is very important.

Interestingly, this wish for seriousness was coupled with a need to emphasise everydayness and openness. Many participants welcomed science communication about ACEs that would highlight hidden and even taboo issues in a neutral, open way: “Not to make the issue into something more — like, not talked about or hidden. Instead, it should be introduced in a tone that dares you to talk about the issue later”. This finding resonates with research results about young people’s participation in surveys about violence: answering survey questions may make the respondent realise that they are not alone in the situation, which can be a helpful and reflexive experience [Hakala et al., 2024]. Furthermore, some participants welcomed scientific knowledge about ACEs as a helpful, open and neutral way of understanding their own experiences:

If you haven’t come to terms with what’s happened yet and why it was wrong, it’s super helpful to see content that’s ... objective — like, science says that this is true. Therefore, it might help many to understand the issue and deal with it a bit better.

Science communication about ACEs is actualised in wider public media through commenting, criticising and negotiating contemporary debates about different childhood experiences and young people in general. Media debates about ACEs and young people are often overtly sensational, sometimes leading to clickbait journalism and media panic [Robards et al., 2026], which is why science communicators should consider these pitfalls. Several participants in this study were critical of the current media debate, stating, “Nowadays young people are very often talked about in an accusing or oppressive tone — like, young people did something like this again”, and “Like, there’s no empathy [between] the generations”. To counteract this, they called for an empathetic, supportive and hopeful view of young people and ACEs, as exemplified by the following discussion quote:

Participant 1: Then perhaps, if you talk about traumas, it could be somehow supportive. Like, if the watcher has experienced something like what’s discussed in the video, they would have a feeling of not being alone in the situation.

Participant 2: Something like empathy?

Participant 1: Yep. Precisely. Precisely that.

Although many participants claimed that empathy and hopefulness were crucial elements of science communication about ACEs, as exemplified by “It’d be nice if it would bring in hope that you can get over this issue”, they were also critical of false hope or overt optimism. Instead, they called for a combination of factual and empathetic styles and information on how to find help when undergoing difficult life situations:

[If the research result is,] well, 750 young people committed suicide; there won’t be any hopefulness in that [research video]. I’d say that, then, it’s more about negativity than positivity. But there could be, for example, hope in the end, and it could say, “Hey, you should know that there’s help available.”

Finally, researchers involved in science communication on social media platforms need to critically reflect on why and how to make an impact as well as on the ethical responsibilities associated with thematic and stylistic choices. The participants demonstrated an ability to assess the tone of content and evaluate researchers' between-the-lines affective positionings, exemplified by a young person who called for dedication: "You do notice if someone has, like, passion ... that they really are interested in talking about this", and attempts to foster positive change, showing that "you don't do it only because it's your job but because you really want to change something".

5 ▪ Discussion

5.1 ▪ *Key research findings*

Science communication on social media is a complex task, and researchers need to balance young people's wishes for science-related content with platform policies, affordances and styles (such as short video), as well as ethical issues. A clear finding of this study is that young people prefer science to be communicated to them through social media, in formats familiar from their everyday lives and with content that is informative, reliable and sensitive, and delivered by the researchers themselves. The wish for researchers to participate in science communication on social media resonates with a recent quantitative study in a Dutch context, in which nearly 70% of participants considered researchers to be the most suitable actors for communicating science [Smeets et al., 2025; see also Belova et al., 2022; Portman et al., 2025].

In this study, TikTok stood out as the preferred platform for science communication. For the participants, the key advantage of TikTok was its algorithmic short video flow, which enabled them to receive science content through ambient or incidental exposure without specifically searching for it. Although participants located the preferred forms of science content via the key attributes of the attention economy, i.e., short-form videos and thought-provoking introductions of key topics during the first seconds of videos, they simultaneously called for content that would counter oversimplifications, misinformation and clickbait [Hannan, 2024; Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021].

The young people in this study demonstrated considerable knowledge of TikTok's role in the attention economy [Fairchild, 2007; Marwick, 2015], as well as media literacy regarding platform-specific affordances [Kallio & Mäenpää, 2025; Nieborg & Poell, 2018], content formats, and mis- and disinformation. Their descriptions of strategies to tackle mis- and disinformation and can be compared to the recent EU Kids Online Finland Survey [Heikkiniemi et al., 2025], in which 10–15-year-old Finnish children and young people were asked about their internet use, including critical media skills. Of these, 64% agreed with the statement "I know how to check whether the information I find online is reliable". Overall, over-13-year-olds were more confident about their digital literacy skills than younger participants.

Importantly, our findings about 13–17-year-olds' considerable media literacy should be understood as situational and taking shape in the specific context of TikTok affordances and short video formats [Southerton & McLean, 2025]: the findings cannot be generalised to cover all young people, platforms and media formats. Previous research has highlighted that

young people express criticism, frustration and uneasiness over their lack of control of algorithmic, sometimes harmful content and the need for critical, conversational media education regarding mis- and disinformation and constantly developing AI-generated content [Belova et al., 2022; Haslop & Ringrose, 2025].

Especially in recent years, TikTok has raised concerns, particularly regarding mis- and disinformation and hate speech [Haslop & Ringrose, 2025], as well as its psychological effects, such as addictiveness and the “rabbit holes” of harmful content. While young people use social media platforms to process their traumatic experiences and to find helpful content and support [Multas & Kulmala, 2025], concerns about potential risks related to vicarious trauma and inaccurate advice have been raised [Woolard et al., 2024]. Consequently, reliable research-based information regarding these themes is needed. The participants in this study welcomed science communication about sensitive issues, such as ACEs, on TikTok, as long as findings were communicated in an informative, respectful and empathetic manner.

5.2 ■ *Limitations and future research directions*

Our research was subject to certain methodological limitations. While we met over 200 young people from different parts of Finland, the sample should still be understood as context-specific, and not applicable to young people in general. Also, despite our careful considerations of relational research ethics and researchers’ positionalities, the changing interview dynamics and power relations present in the interviews may have shaped the data. Furthermore, in the analysis, we did not consider the similarities and differences in young people’s viewpoints based on age, gender, ethnicity or social class but highlighted some of the key viewpoints regarding science communication shared by the young people we met.

Although social media platforms are often highlighted as essential for reaching young audiences, research on the actual outcomes and impacts of platformised science communication remains scarce. Portman et al. [2025] recently conducted a scoping review of research articles on the cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural impacts of social media science communication on young audiences. A conclusion of this extensive review was that evidence of impact is still limited despite the assumed importance of social media-based science communication. Furthermore, as Cagnoli [2024; see also CPAS Inclusive Science Communication Collective, 2025] argued, participatory science communicators should focus more explicitly on the possibilities for and barriers to inclusion among diverse science audiences. In addition, trauma and ACE-related content on social media is predominantly produced by young White people [O’Connor et al., 2025], which highlights the need to examine whether marginalised young people encounter relevant science-based information on sensitive topics on these platforms.

6 ■ **Conclusion**

Effective science communication on social media platforms regarding sensitive topics, such as ACEs, is necessary since research on these topics affects young people’s lives, public understanding and policy while posing clarity and interpretation challenges [Gregory et al., 2024]. The participants in this study described several key issues concerning ethical science communication about ACEs, including the need for a serious and informative tone, openness,

empathy and hope. This is especially relevant in a media landscape where news content about young people often focuses on concerns or even media panics.

Many participants viewed short videos as trailers for topics and called for links to more thorough presentation formats, such as podcasts, documents, investigative features or research articles. Although marketing research [e.g., Salminen et al., 2024] demonstrates that the actual click-through rates (how many viewers proceed from social media content to other platforms) are usually low, science communicators should still consider this finding and provide longer formats (such as existing research articles) alongside videos as a strategy to tackle mis- and disinformation. Thus, young people's suggestion of combining informative, trustworthy and empathetic short-video formats with links to more thorough presentation formats places young people's knowledge at the core of addressing problems related to the attention economy, misinformation and clickbait. Sensitive science communication about ACEs has the potential to counteract mis- and disinformation — a perspective foregrounded by both the participants and existing research [Smeets et al., 2025; Portman et al., 2025].

To tailor platform-specific, stylistically sound and sensitive research videos about ACEs, our research findings provide empirical support for participatory and co-creative approaches with young people. Participatory approaches [Cassidy, 2021; CPAS Inclusive Science Communication Collective, 2025; Shilubane et al., 2024; Smeets et al., 2025], as well as different visual methods, such as visual elicitation [Clark-Ibáñez, 2007; Pyry et al., 2021], enable science communication strategies to be shaped by young people's lived experiences rather than determined externally. Understanding how young people perceive science communication on social media can help practitioners tailor their communication (both content and formats) accordingly.

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Data availability statement

The data collected and analysed in this study are not publicly available.

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