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Hypermediated Adolescence: Tactical Resilience Through and Against the Digital in Post-Pandemic China

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic intensified the everyday volatility of hypermediated life. Drawing on longitudinal, multi-method qualitative material from Chinese adolescents who entered puberty during the pandemic—including platform observation, repeated interviews, family-based focus groups, and mobile ethnography—this study examines how digital resilience is enacted through routine media practices across disruption and uneven normalization. The analysis identifies four recurring practice clusters through which adolescents modulate affect, manage visibility, and negotiate relational exposure: ritualizing digital routines, narrativizing fear, playful misrecognition, and liquid platform use. These practices are interpreted through a three-layer framework of mediation: infrastructural shaping by platform affordances and algorithmic design; social scaffolding via caregivers and peer networks; and symbolic negotiation through narrative, humor, and affective framing. The study advances communication research on youth and digital media by reconceptualizing digital resilience as a set of situated communicative practices through which everyday livability is sustained within hypermediated, volatile environments.

Keywords

adolescents; deep mediatization; digital resilience; everyday digital practices; hypermediated environments; platform society

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic constituted both a public health crisis and a profound disruption to everyday social life for adolescents, reshaping schooling, peer interaction, and digital communication patterns (Marciano et al., 2022). During stay-at-home orders and school closures, adolescents increasingly relied on digital

communication to maintain peer ties, with synchronous online contact associated with reduced loneliness and depressive symptoms (Draženović et al., 2023). Digital platforms thus became infrastructures of survival for education, leisure, and social bonds, while also intensifying fatigue, disinformation, and algorithmic pressures. The pandemic magnified a condition that was already emerging: adolescence situated within what has been described as a hypermediated society, where digital systems constitute the environment of social existence (Hepp, 2019).

A growing body of research on adolescents, media use, and well-being has documented important aspects of this condition. Studies have examined associations between social media engagement and mental health outcomes, highlighting both heightened vulnerability and the availability of social support and coping resources in digital spaces (Fassi et al., 2025; van der Wal et al., 2026). This scholarship has generated valuable insights into platform-specific risks, protective factors, and individual differences. Yet much of this work remains anchored in analytical frameworks that characterize digital resilience as an individual's ability to protect and recover from detrimental online experiences (Pan et al., 2024; Qamaria et al., 2025). They are less equipped to account for adolescents' experiences in environments characterized by prolonged uncertainty, multi-platform immersion, and algorithmically mediated volatility since digital media are often described not merely as tools but as constitutive of social environments (Kramp et al., 2016, pp. 133–148). In these contexts, equilibrium is not easily restored, and adaptation does not culminate in a durable resolution. The central question shifts from whether digital resilience is possessed to how everyday life is rendered livable amid continuing instability—that is, how livable lives are made under adverse social conditions shaped by ongoing volatility (Back, 2015).

Thus, rather than asking whether adolescents are resilient in digital environments, the analysis centers on how continuity is practically sustained when schooling, peer relations, and emotional life are repeatedly reorganized through unstable, multi-platform media conditions. This study examines how such processes unfolded among Chinese adolescents who entered puberty during the pandemic, within a context shaped by prolonged and uneven disruptions to schooling and mobility alongside a rapidly evolving, highly structured digital platform environment. Building on longitudinal, multi-method qualitative material collected across pandemic and post-pandemic phases, the analysis traces a set of recurring digital practices that emerged across participants' accounts and interactions, reconceptualizing digital resilience not as an individual capacity or adaptive outcome but as a patterned configuration of cross-platform, temporally extended practices. This reconceptualization shifts the analytic focus of communication research from assessing resilience as a property of individuals to examining how continuity is practically produced within mediated environments, offering a way to theorize everyday survival under conditions where instability is no longer exceptional but structural.

2. Digital Resilience in Hypermediated Environments

Contemporary adolescence unfolds within hypermediated environments in which platforms, algorithms, and data infrastructures operate as the background conditions of social life rather than discrete channels (Hepp, 2019). Within such environments, communication is rarely episodic or bounded; instead, it unfolds across platforms, temporalities, and contexts, embedding individuals in ongoing cycles of exposure, coordination, and recalibration.

Within communication scholarship, the communication theory of resilience conceptualizes resilience as a communicative process enacted through interactional practices rather than a stable trait (Buzzanell, 2010). Related work in crisis and risk communication has examined resilience in mediated contexts as the capacity of individuals or communities to recover from disruption and restore communicative order following extraordinary events (Houston et al., 2015). At the same time, broader resilience scholarship has extended attention to more chronic and less spectacular forms of disruption, including prolonged uncertainty, infrastructural dependency, and the normalization of instability (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015). Together, these strands suggest a shift away from viewing resilience solely as post-crisis recovery and toward understanding it as an ongoing, processual accomplishment enacted through everyday communicative practices.

However, within studies of youth and digital media, digital resilience has most commonly been conceptualized as an individual capacity to manage online risks, including exposure to harmful content, social comparison, misinformation, and harassment. This line of research, shaped in part by work on children's online safety, emphasizes protective factors such as online skills and internet self-efficacy, alongside parental mediation and other forms of support (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008, 2010). Empirical studies in this tradition have generated valuable insights into vulnerability and risk mitigation, demonstrating that adolescents' outcomes vary considerably depending on socio-demographic position, platform use patterns, and access to support. However, this approach tends to conceptualize resilience as a relatively stable attribute or outcome—something individuals possess, develop, or lack—measured through indicators such as psychological adjustment, reduced harm, or effective coping.

While analytically productive, capacity-oriented models of digital resilience encounter limitations when applied to hypermediated environments characterized by continuous exposure, multi-platform entanglement, and algorithmically driven volatility. In such contexts, disruption is not episodic but structural, and adaptation does not culminate in a clear endpoint. As scholars of platform society have argued, digital media increasingly constitute the conditions of social life rather than external influences upon it (van Dijck et al., 2018). From this perspective, resilience cannot be adequately understood as recovery from deviation because there is no stable baseline to which individuals can return.

In response to these challenges, communication research has increasingly emphasized the distinction between resilience through digital media and resilience against digital media. The former highlights how platforms function as resources for sustaining social bonds, emotional regulation, and continuity of everyday life, particularly during periods of disruption. Studies of online peer support, networked intimacy, and mediated belonging show that digital communication can facilitate coping, normalization, and collective sense-making (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). During the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, digital platforms played a crucial role in maintaining peer interaction, educational participation, and emotional connection while offline routines were suspended (Ellis et al., 2020; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). By contrast, research on resilience against digital media foregrounds the risks endogenous to platform infrastructures themselves. Algorithmic amplification, datafication, attention extraction, and content moderation failures are widely documented as sources of strain that adolescents must actively navigate (Bucher, 2018; Noble, 2018). From this angle, resilience involves practices of resistance, filtering, withdrawal, or tactical compliance, such as muting notifications, curating feeds, or collectively interpreting platform dynamics. In this perspective, resilience against digital harm rarely takes the form of disengagement alone; rather, it often requires continued participation coupled with reflexive adjustment.

Although the through/against distinction has structured much of the contemporary debate on digital resilience, its coordination in everyday life remains insufficiently theorized. In hypermediated environments, these orientations are deeply intertwined: Practices that sustain connection may also intensify exposure, while strategies of protection often depend on mediated infrastructures to remain socially viable. Digital resilience therefore appears less as a linear trajectory toward stability than as an oscillatory process of provisional adjustment. A practice-oriented perspective helps clarify this dynamic by emphasizing how resilience is enacted through routine communicative work rather than through discrete acts of coping or resistance (Couldry & Hepp, 2016; Pink et al., 2015). From this view, resilience is less a property of individuals than a patterned configuration of practices that renders everyday life livable under conditions of sustained instability.

3. Methodology

Given the fragmented, platform-crossing, and temporally uneven conditions of adolescents' digital lives under prolonged disruption during the pandemic, a multi-method qualitative design was adopted to examine how everyday digital practices are enacted and recalibrated across time (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Saldaña, 2003).

3.1. Data Collection

The study employed a staged longitudinal fieldwork design centered on adolescents who entered puberty during the Covid-19 pandemic. Fieldwork was conducted in mainland China across three distinct phases: April 2020 to January 2022, June 2022 to February 2023, and February to September 2025. These phases captured adolescents' narrated experiences of initial disruption, transitional reopening, and post-pandemic everyday life. Across phases, data were generated through semi-structured interviews, family-based focus groups, online community observation, and mobile ethnography.

3.1.1. Interview and Focus Group Participants

A total of 34 adolescents participated in the interview-based components of the study, each taking part in three to six semi-structured interviews across fieldwork phases (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Interviews lasted approximately 45–70 minutes and were conducted primarily online. Seven participants additionally engaged in go-along sessions (Kusenbach, 2003) and media walkthroughs (Light et al., 2018). Interviews focused on everyday digital routines, emotionally charged experiences, cross-platform movement, and interactions with caregivers and peers around digital media use. Go-alongs took the form of co-participatory digital activities rather than continuous observation, most notably shared gameplay sessions (e.g., teaming up in multiplayer games such as Honor of Kings), during which participants interacted in real time while narrating their actions and decisions. Finally, media walkthroughs were conducted situationally across all fieldwork phases in participants' homes, where adolescents guided the researcher through their everyday sequences of device use (e.g., moving between game consoles, computers, and mobile phones), with particular attention to the order and routine of actions following the opening of a mobile phone.

All participants were aged 12–15 at the time of initial recruitment, with eligibility confirmed through self-report and age verification. Purposive sampling was employed to capture heterogeneity in schooling contexts, family arrangements, and patterns of digital engagement. Over the course of the longitudinal fieldwork, participants came to occupy divergent institutional pathways: By the final phase, 21 had entered general upper secondary education, eight were enrolled in private or home-schooling arrangements, and five had transitioned into vocational education tracks. Variation was also observed in everyday digital practices, with online gaming (N = 19), social networking and content platforms (N = 12), and intermittent content creation (N = 3) representing dominant modes of engagement. Levels of digital autonomy further differed across households, as 22 adolescents reported explicit forms of parental regulation while 12 described more informal or negotiated arrangements.

In addition, four family-based focus group discussions were conducted with adolescents and caregivers from four families, involving a total of six parents or primary caregivers. Each discussion lasted approximately 30 minutes and centered on intergenerational interpretations of adolescents' digital practices, particularly the negotiation of household rules and responses to perceived digital challenges.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants between 27 April 2020 and 1 May 2021. All participants were fully informed about the purpose, scope, and use of the study, and consented to participation, data use, and publication under conditions of full anonymity, with no personally identifying information disclosed.

3.1.2. Online Community Observation

Online community observation (Hine, 2020) was conducted across multiple digital platforms commonly used by Chinese adolescents during and after the pandemic, including three fully open QQ gaming groups (two general youth gaming chat groups and one group centered on Honor of Kings, all without entry restrictions), Xiaohongshu, Weibo, Xiaoheihe, Steam, and the Honor of Kings Companion App, all of which were active throughout the pandemic period and its aftermath.

These platforms were selected not as interchangeable sites but as functionally differentiated environments within adolescents' everyday media ecologies. Messaging-based platforms (three QQ groups) primarily supported synchronous peer interaction and informal coordination; lifestyle and content-sharing platforms (Xiaohongshu and Weibo) foregrounded visibility, self-presentation, and public commentary; and game-centered forums and companion apps (Xiaoheihe, Steam, and Honor of Kings Companion App) combined information exchange with low-stakes social interaction anchored in shared gameplay. These functional differences shaped not only how adolescents interacted but also what kinds of expression, affect, and risk were perceived as tolerable within each space. In this study, "publicly accessible" or "publicly visible" spaces refer to online environments that are accessible without individualized permission or invitation. Private accounts, direct messages, and closed groups were excluded.

Online observation was carried out across the same three phases as the interview research, collecting 320 analytically defined data units encompassing several thousand posts, comment threads, and interactional exchanges. Observational materials were screened to exclude clearly non-adolescent users, using self-disclosed age cues, schooling references, and life-stage indicators to remain broadly consistent with the study's target cohort—adolescents who were approximately 12–15 years old in 2020.

3.1.3. Mobile Ethnography Materials

Mobile ethnography was implemented during the first and third fieldwork phases, with voluntary contributions from 14 adolescents in the form of digital diaries, screenshots, and voice memos (Pink et al., 2015) documenting everyday platform use, affective states, and situational contexts. These materials were revisited in follow-up interviews to contextualize entries and reduce reliance on retrospective narration, enabling analysis of digital resilience as a processual and situational practice.

3.2. Data Analysis

The final dataset comprised 34 semi-structured interview series with 34 adolescents, four family-based focus group transcripts involving six caregivers across four families, 14 mobile ethnography items, and 320 units of platform-based observational material distributed across phases and platforms. All materials were anonymized and managed in NVivo 15. Interview and focus group audio was transcribed verbatim; mobile ethnography submissions (diaries, screenshots, voice memos) were logged as discrete entries and analytically linked to relevant interview episodes; and for publicly accessible platform materials (posts, comment threads, and fieldnotes) their source type, temporal phase, platform or interactional site, and linkage status (interview-linked or non-linked public material) were specified.

Temporal tagging followed a phase-based analytic framework developed inductively from the data and refined during analysis. The core framework comprised P0 (2017–2019) as a retrospectively invoked baseline, P1 (2020–2021) marking intermittent lockdowns and prolonged school closures, P2 (2022–2023) capturing a late-pandemic transition, and P3 (2024–2025) referring to post-pandemic everyday life. In addition to these core phase categories, two supplementary tags were used to capture temporal complexity in specific excerpts. P4 was applied to future-oriented projections, while PX was used for segments that explicitly compared, blended, or moved across multiple phases and could not be meaningfully reduced to a single-phase label.

Data analysis followed an iterative, multi-stage coding process informed by a constructivist grounded theory orientation (Charmaz, 2014). First-cycle open coding combined line-by-line and incident-based coding across the full corpus, generating 789 initial codes; each segment was simultaneously indexed by phase and data source to produce a phase- and source-sensitive analytic indexing matrix. Through constant comparison, overlapping codes were consolidated into 267 analytic concepts, retaining 20 phase-sensitive concepts whose meanings shifted across disruption, transition, and post-pandemic normalization. Second-cycle axial coding organized these concepts into 69 mid-level categories by examining co-occurrence patterns, temporal sequencing, and recurring interactional situations (e.g., routine regulation, affective escalation, cross-platform movement, intergenerational negotiation, narrative framing). Category definitions were stabilized through repeated comparison with raw excerpts, resulting in a 41-entry provisional analytic codebook, with each category specified by constituent concepts, typical contexts, phase distribution, and mediating conditions across infrastructural, relational, and symbolic dimensions. The final analytic stage employed selective coding to synthesize axial categories into four theoretically integrative resilience practice clusters, which constitute the core findings of the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

All coding was conducted by one researcher. Two external scholars in communication and social research reviewed the emergent coding structure and category definitions, with feedback incorporated through targeted recoding and refinement.

4. Findings

Across pandemic disruption and post-pandemic normalization, adolescents' engagements with digital media took shape as four recurring forms of everyday practice through which uncertainty, emotional intensity, and social exposure were tactically managed within a hypermediated environment.

4.1. Ritualizing Digital Routines

Across the pandemic and its aftermath, as school timetables dissolved into asynchronous online classes, confinement blurred spatial boundaries, and ordinary distinctions between weekdays and weekends eroded, adolescents' digital engagements increasingly took the form of ritualized routines—patterned repetitions that functioned less as sources of pleasure than as temporal and affective anchors through which days became countable and emotions manageable under prolonged uncertainty (Paschke et al., 2021).

This ritualization was most visible during moments of acute disruption when affective exposure intensified and everyday continuity became fragile, prompting adolescents to anchor days around small, repeatable digital moments—described by one participant (Cai, P1, 13, recruited at 13, heavy multiplayer game user) simply as "the only thing that told me today had actually happened." Participants consistently described these ritualized routines not as sources of enjoyment but as low-intensity affective technologies—repetitive, often deliberately unengaging practices that fragmented anxiety, boredom, or irritation into manageable units, preventing emotional escalation rather than resolving distress.

As institutional routines resumed, ritualized digital routines were compressed and repositioned within the interstices of educational discipline. One participant (Yang, P2, 15, recruited at 12, intensive exam track, primarily social media and casual gaming user), who returned to in-person schooling in late 2022, continued to reserve a nightly window for the same platform that they relied upon during lockdown, which now functioned as a buffer between academic demands and sleep. This practice, not abandoned but adapted to the intensified schedule, reflected a broader tendency among adolescents navigating high-stakes examination systems. Many spoke of selecting familiar content or repetitive tasks, which were brief and easily completed, to avoid emotional spillover.

For instance, Ling (P3, 17, recruited at 14, intensive exam track, primarily social media and casual gaming user) described how, during months of exam preparation, her nightly routine of scrolling and gaming became a reliable closure to her day:

> At that time, everything in my life was decided by the school. When to wake up, when to eat, when to study, and even when to rest were written on the schedule. The only thing that felt like mine was that half hour before sleeping….It wasn't fun, honestly. Sometimes I felt bored the whole time. But if I didn't do it, my head wouldn't calm down. I would just lie there thinking about rankings and mistakes

> and what I messed up that day. Doing so meant that the day was over. Without it, I couldn't sleep, and the next day would be even worse.

This routine marked a bodily and temporal signal of the day's end, offering a small yet consistent form of autonomy within a tightly controlled environment.

Family-based materials further illuminate how ritualized routines were embedded within intergenerational dynamics. Caregivers often expressed ambivalence toward adolescents' repetitive digital practices. While some initially viewed them as signs of overuse or avoidance, others came to tolerate or even tacitly support these routines once they recognized their stabilizing effects. In several focus group discussions, parents described learning to distinguish between excessive, escalating use and what they perceived as contained, predictable engagement. One caregiver (Ms. Zhang, P2–P3, family focus group, early 40s, mother, primary caregiver, household with explicit time-based restrictions on mobile phone) noted that although she disapproved of gaming in principle, she refrained from intervening when her child adhered to a consistent schedule and disengaged without conflict. This tacit accommodation suggests that ritualization not only regulated adolescents' internal states but also facilitated smoother negotiations with authority figures, reducing friction within the household.

In the post-pandemic period, ritualized routines were reoriented from filling absence to countering acceleration, introducing moments of continuity within temporally compressed everyday life and eliciting more ambivalent, reflexive evaluations—recognizing them as situationally useful rather than inherently positive or negative.

4.2. Narrativizing Fear

Fear circulated through adolescents' pandemic and post-pandemic digital lives not as a single emotion but as a layered, often unnameable presence, unevenly distributed across time, situations, and relationships. Unlike stress or pressure, which were linked to school or platform overload, fear was rarely articulated directly. Instead, it emerged through narrative fragments, temporal markers, and partial disclosures, reformatting overwhelming affect into tellable forms (Setty & Dobson, 2025). Narrativizing fear thus became a tactical way to acknowledge uncertainty without fully confronting its implications.

Much of this fear was chronic, embedded in adolescents' altered relationship to time. Participants and adolescents in publicly accessible platform threads (P1–P2, non-interview-linked observation) frequently described the pandemic years as a stretch of time that felt both elongated and missing, marked by phrases such as blank years, cut-off periods, or time that could not be recalled clearly. One participant (Li, P3, 12, recruited at 12, primarily a social media and online gaming user) recalled that while she could remember childhood before 2019 and her current routines, "the middle just collapses," leaving her unsure whether particular events had occurred two or five years earlier. Fear here was not attached to a specific object but to a diffuse sense that life progression had slipped out of sync, and the future no longer seemed linear. Narrativization stabilized uncertainty by situating disorientation within shared temporal reference points—such as school milestones, age markers, or widely recognized events—reframing fears of misalignment as generational experiences rather than individual deficiencies, thus reducing their isolating effects by making it collectively intelligible.

Alongside widely shared anxieties, another category of fear proved far more difficult to narrate: fear arising from sudden disruptions within the family's life world. When illness, hospitalization, or death entered the household during the pandemic, adolescents confronted threats that exceeded the interpretive frames available in school or peer discourse. These fears were immediate and embodied, oriented toward the fragility of others rather than one's own prospects, and unfolded under conditions where ordinary support structures were suspended, including restricted hospital access, repeated testing, and prolonged uncertainty mentioned by several participants.

An adolescent (Shao, P1, 13, recruited at 13, social media-oriented, primarily casual browsing and gaming user) who was 13 at the time of her father's sudden hospitalization described the experience in a manner strikingly devoid of emotional vocabulary online, narrating it instead through procedural detail and sequence. She recalled waiting for test results that determined whether she could enter the hospital and observing her mother struggle to complete paperwork while remaining composed. She explained that she did not cry during this period—not because she felt no fear, but because fear had to be kept "quiet" so as not to burden those who were already overwhelmed—becoming embedded in the accumulation of facts rather than articulated as emotion.

Such accounts illuminate why narrativizing fear often occurred outside immediate relational contexts. These participants repeatedly indicated that they did not tell parents or teachers about these experiences, not out of distrust, but because adults were perceived as either already distressed or structurally unable to respond, particularly where family crises fell outside school concerns. In this context, anonymous or semi-anonymous digital spaces became provisional sites for narration, where fear could be acknowledged without triggering intervention, judgment, or additional obligation.

One participant (Yue, P1, 14, recruited at 14, social media-oriented, primarily lifestyle and platform browsing user rather than gaming) who accompanied a caregiver between home and hospital during repeated lockdowns described posting late-night reflections on a lifestyle platform she had previously used only for browsing. Writing about hospital lights, uncertainty over whether to hope or prepare for loss, and feeling simultaneously too young and suddenly adult, she received responses offering no solutions, only recognition and quiet support. She later reflected that these exchanges did not alleviate fear, but made it "standable"—something that existed in the world rather than only in her body.

These narrativizations did not take the form of therapeutic confession or trauma discourse. Adolescents neither framed themselves as traumatized nor oriented their accounts toward recovery or growth, instead treating fear as something to be carried and kept at a tolerable distance. Accounts often ended abruptly or shifted tone, marking implicit boundaries around what could be said, while humor—prominent in other resilience practices—was notably muted in the face of uncertainty that could not be resolved.

Over time, these fears did not disappear but became dormant, resurfacing in response to specific triggers such as news reports, anniversaries, or encounters with similar stories online. Many participants spoke of suddenly recalling details years later, often without warning, and experiencing a brief resurgence of the same quiet fear. Narrativizing fear in the post-pandemic period thus took on a retrospective dimension, as adolescents revisited earlier experiences with new interpretive resources but without fully integrating them into a coherent life story.

Across these accounts, narrativizing fear operated as a resilience practice precisely because it resisted closure. By placing fear into words, timelines, or scenes, adolescents rendered it locatable and containable without transforming it into growth, resolution, or diagnosis. In doing so, they negotiated emotional limits under constrained conditions, crafting minimal yet sufficient narratives that made fear survivable and allowed everyday digital and social life to continue despite experiences that could neither be fully shared nor resolved.

4.3. Playful Misrecognition

Alongside routines that stabilized everyday life and narratives that rendered fear speakable, adolescents repeatedly engaged in a quieter yet no less consequential practice: playful misrecognition. Rather than confronting pressure, loss, or uncertainty directly, they reframed these experiences through humor, irony, gaming metaphors, and exaggerated self-description, creating a slight semantic distance that allowed engagement without full emotional capture (Murru & Vicari, 2021).

Across interviews and platform observations, institutional and emotional pressures were frequently translated into playful idioms. Academic overload, lockdown routines, and prolonged uncertainty were rendered as game mechanics: high-stakes examinations became boss fights, extended isolation was framed as being stuck in a low-reward map, and emotional depletion was described as a health bar running low. These expressions reflected a deliberate shift in register rather than confusion between games and reality. By renaming experiences in procedural terms, adolescents displaced moral judgment and transformed endurance into something temporarily manageable and shareable.

This logic was articulated clearly by Zhou (P2, 14, recruited at 13, heavy multiplayer game user), who described how he and his classmates talked about lockdown schooling after returning to campus. Waking up late was described as respawning, missing online classes as accidental disconnects, and falling behind academically as being under-leveled rather than incapable. As he explained:

> When we talked like that, it didn't mean we thought studying was a game. We knew very well that it was serious, that exams still counted, that teachers would still scold us. But if you say it directly, like "I'm failing" or "I'm useless now," it feels too heavy. When we said things like "I'm under-leveled" or "this battle is too hard," it felt like there was still a way to move….I don't think adults understand this.

Playful misrecognition thus preserved a sense of futurity by situating difficulty within a reversible logic of delay, effort, and retry.

Self-directed irony and exaggeration functioned in a similar way. Participants and many online commenters frequently described themselves online as already "finished," "ruined," or "wasted," particularly when discussing disrupted schooling or declining motivation. Interviews revealed that these hyperbolic self-descriptions were rarely literal. Instead, they operated as a pre-emptive buffer against external judgment. Mei (P2–P3, 14, recruited at 14), a social media-focused user, noted that calling herself "already done" signaled awareness of pressure while refusing the demand to account for herself in earnest terms. Saying it jokingly allowed her to speak without fully exposing herself to evaluation.

This practice was highly situational. Adolescents drew clear boundaries between peer spaces, platform interactions, and family settings. Humor about exhaustion or despair circulated freely among classmates or anonymous online audiences but was often filtered out in conversations with parents or teachers, where it risked being read as irresponsibility. Platforms characterized by relative anonymity or peer dominance, therefore, became key sites for playful misrecognition, enabling expression without immediate relational consequences.

Gaming logics provided not only metaphors but also an alternative evaluative framework. For adolescents deeply engaged in digital games, failure was framed as temporary lag rather than definitive defeat, and burnout as a resource management problem rather than a personal flaw. This was especially visible in mobile ethnography materials, such as when one participant (Qian, P2, 13, recruited at 12, primarily a social media and online gaming user) recorded a voice memo after receiving a disappointing mock exam result. Describing it as losing a round but gaining information for the next attempt, the light tone reframed the situation, preventing self-blame while acknowledging disappointment.

Longitudinally, playful misrecognition evolved from an improvised response during lockdown into a more sedimented communicative mode for engaging with uncertainty. What began as spontaneous joking under conditions of confinement became, for some adolescents, a habitual way of navigating difficulty after reopening. As pressures shifted from health risks and isolation to academic competition, employment uncertainty, and adulthood itself as an unclear or unwinnable game, the same playful idioms were repurposed to sustain partial engagement. This strategy involved being serious enough to participate, yet playful enough to avoid being overwhelmed. This practice did not eliminate suffering, nor did it always hold. Moments when humor felt forced or failed altogether were narrated reflexively as signals to withdraw or pause rather than as personal collapse. In this sense, playful misrecognition functioned as a form of digital resilience grounded in semantic adjustment rather than resolution, repositioning experience just enough to preserve agency while acknowledging constraint.

4.4. Liquid Platform Use

Across the longitudinal materials, adolescents' digital resilience was expressed not through stable attachment to a single platform but through patterned movement across platforms differentiated by social expectations, visibility regimes, and affective thresholds (Ytre-Arne & Das, 2019). Platforms were experienced as distinct social environments rather than interchangeable containers, shaping when, where, and how particular emotions could be expressed or withheld.

This mobility became especially salient under emotional pressure. Adolescents routinely relocated expressions of anxiety, frustration, or exhaustion across platforms to regulate both affective intensity and social risk. One participant (Yao, P1, 13, recruited at 13, heavy online gaming user) described his feelings when school-related anxiety escalated during periods of remote learning:

> I never really say the same thing in the same place. If I feel really annoyed or scared, I won't write it where people know me. There, everything gets taken seriously, and someone might screenshot it or tell others. In games, you can complain, curse a bit, lose a round, and it's over. If it's still too much, I just switch again….Sometimes I open another app, scroll a bit, watch something stupid, and then close it.

Such platform migration reflected learned competence rather than avoidance. Through earlier experiences of misalignment—being misunderstood, judged, or exposed—adolescents recalibrated their sense of which platforms could tolerate which kinds of expression. A participant (Huang, P2–P3, 14, recruited at 14, primarily a content-sharing platform user) explained that she gradually recognized that even neutral complaints could be reinterpreted as negativity or weakness. Over time, this learning produced differentiated uses of platforms: some became spaces for curated self-presentation, others for low-stakes emotional release, and still others for withdrawal or silence. In this sense, platforms were experienced as moral and relational spaces rather than neutral infrastructures. A gaming forum, a short-video feed, and a messaging app were not equivalent channels, but environments with distinct norms of seriousness, irony, permanence, and accountability.

Mobility followed a logic of risk distribution. This redistribution of engagement also responded to perceived informational risk. A few participants described certain feeds and trending spaces as "too noisy," overwhelming, or unreliable, prompting them to dilute exposure by shifting toward game-centered or interest-based environments where content felt more bounded and less consequential. Many participants emphasized the importance of being able to leave—temporarily or permanently—when a platform began to feel too heavy or exposed. "Letting an account die" was described as a practical reset rather than a loss, allowing adolescents to disengage without disappearance. What appeared externally as fragmentation was experienced internally as control over accumulation—of interpretation, expectation, and judgment.

Longitudinally, this logic intensified after the most acute phases of the pandemic. During periods of lockdown, when options for offline withdrawal were limited, platforms often became overloaded with emotional significance. Several adolescents described feeling "stuck" in certain digital spaces, especially those tied to school or family communication. As offline options re-emerged, many recalibrated their digital routines, deliberately loosening their attachment to any single platform via a redistribution of engagement across spaces with different degrees of demand.

Mobile ethnography revealed platform movement as patterned and situational, capturing short-term shifts often smoothed out in retrospective accounts. Daily logs and screenshots showed adolescents moving between platforms within brief time spans in response to subtle mood changes. One mobile-ethnography diary entry (Qi, P3, 13, recruited at 12, social media-oriented, primarily a casual browsing and gaming user) documented an evening sequence that moved from scrolling a social feed, to brief group chat interaction, to several rounds of a mobile game, and finally passive video viewing before sleep. Each transition corresponded to a change in emotional intensity. When interaction became draining, the participant shifted toward less demanding forms of engagement; when boredom set in, they moved again. These materials indicate that what mattered was not sustained presence on any single platform, but modulating engagement by relocating.

Family-based focus groups further contextualized liquid platform use within intergenerational negotiations over control and autonomy. Caregivers often interpreted adolescents' platform switching as a distraction or inconsistency, expressing concern that moving across apps signaled restlessness or lack of focus, whereas adolescents described it as a deliberate adjustment. In households with explicit digital rules, such as time limits or content restrictions, platform mobility sometimes increased rather than decreased, as adolescents redistributed activity across permitted spaces to maintain emotional continuity while appearing compliant. What initially appeared as an inconsistency thus emerged, over time, as a learned tactic shaped by accumulated experience rather than impulsive wandering.

Liquid platform use, therefore, exemplifies a form of digital resilience grounded in circulation rather than stability. By refusing permanent settlement in any single platform space, adolescents preserved the capacity to engage without full exposure and to withdraw without disappearance. From participants' perspectives, mobility was not fragmentation but a practical achievement: the ability to remain present while managing emotional intensity, social risk, and relational expectations under conditions of persistent visibility.

Considered together, these practices reveal an everyday logic of digital resilience where continuity is sustained through ongoing coordination across time, meaning, and platform infrastructures, instead of relying on stable coping tactics or linear recovery. Ritualized routines provided temporal anchors for movement, associating specific platforms with particular times of day. Narrativized fear often unfolded across platforms rather than within a single narrative space, with fragments of anxiety expressed indirectly, humorously, or obliquely, depending on context. Playful misrecognition frequently served as a transitional mode, allowing adolescents to test emotional expression in low-stakes environments before withdrawing or relocating. Liquid platform use, rather than standing apart, functioned as an infrastructural condition that supported other resilience practices.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Across four recurring practices, a shared logic becomes visible when they are read through three interlocking layers of mediation: infrastructural shaping by platform affordances and algorithmic design; social scaffolding through caregivers and peer relations; and symbolic negotiation via narrative, humor, and affective framing. These layers do not function as separate domains, nor do they align neatly with discrete forms of action. Digital resilience emerges from their constant entanglement as adolescents navigate technological volatility, social obligation, and affective uncertainty in ways that are continually recalibrated across platforms and phases.

At the infrastructural layer, digital resilience is shaped less by the instability produced through platform entanglement than through adolescents' orientation toward platform entanglement itself. Algorithmic modulation fragments attention, redistributes visibility, and intensifies affect in uneven and unpredictable ways (van Dijck et al., 2018), undermining the possibility of sustained equilibrium. Under such conditions, digital resilience does not crystallize as durable adaptation or technological mastery. It takes shape instead as a way of inhabiting infrastructural uncertainty—learning how to anticipate volatility, distribute exposure, and remain mobile within environments where relevance and visibility are constantly recalculated. What matters here is not control, but timing; not optimization, but the capacity to align momentarily with shifting rhythms and then disengage before saturation sets in.

Infrastructural shaping, however, is inseparable from the social relations through which digital practices acquire meaning and consequence. Engagements are embedded in dense relational fields involving caregivers, teachers, and peers, where digital behavior is continuously observed, interpreted, and morally assessed. Within these fields, digital resilience is rarely an individual accomplishment. It is scaffolded through negotiated boundaries, selective disclosures, and carefully managed silences (Kam et al., 2021) that allow adolescents to remain socially intelligible without escalating conflict or burdening already strained relationships. These intergenerational dynamics are approached as situational and negotiated conditions—varying across households with different degrees of regulation and autonomy—rather than as stable parenting styles, which have been extensively examined in prior quantitative research (Ren & Zhu, 2022).

Social expectations do not simply constrain resilience; they actively channel it toward indirectness and restraint, privileging forms of adjustment that preserve relational continuity over those that seek confrontation or explicit recognition. As relational conditions shift over time—through educational transitions, changing family dynamics, or evolving peer networks—the scaffolds available also change, reshaping what kinds of engagement are feasible, what kinds of withdrawal are legible, and how the oscillation between the two can be sustained without relational rupture.

Symbolic negotiation operates within and across these infrastructural and relational conditions, providing a means of modulating affect without demanding resolution (Wetherell, 2012). Here, meaning-making is oriented not toward coherence, closure, or therapeutic articulation, but toward manageability. Fragmented narratives, ironic distance, and tonal shifts allow fear and uncertainty to be acknowledged without being stabilized into fixed identities or publicly accountable claims. Such symbolic work does not aim to eliminate distress but to render it livable—to keep it in circulation without allowing it to dominate interaction or self-understanding. Over time, this produces an economical repertoire of expressive tactics, calibrated to avoid both emotional overload and social overexposure. Digital resilience, in this sense, unfolds through the regulation of intensity and recognizability as much as through the production of meaning.

Viewed in relation, these layers clarify why digital resilience in hypermediated environments cannot be understood as a linear movement from vulnerability to adaptation. Engagement and withdrawal are not opposing orientations but mutually constitutive moments within the same process. Participation generates exposure, comparison, and affective escalation that necessitate tactical retreat; withdrawal, in turn, depends on mediated forms of presence to remain socially viable and emotionally intelligible. Digital resilience thus takes shape as oscillation rather than trajectory, marked by continual movement between involvement and distance without settling into a stable endpoint. This oscillatory quality is not a sign of incompleteness or failure, but a reflection of structural conditions under which stability itself has become difficult to secure.

The temporal dimension of this process is crucial. What begins as improvisation under conditions of disruption gradually sediments into habitual orientations toward platforms, relationships, and self-expression. Yet sedimentation does not imply consolidation. Earlier disruptions linger within everyday routines, shaping how risk is anticipated, how attention is managed, and how futures are imagined.

As institutional pressures reassert themselves, digital resilience becomes more selective and compressed, oriented toward maintaining continuity rather than seeking transformation. Accumulation occurs without closure; adjustment without resolution. The result is not a return to a pre-disruption baseline, but a sensibility oriented toward fluctuation, marked by responsiveness to small shifts in infrastructural cues, relational climate, and symbolic tone rather than a search for stability.

In each cluster, adolescents work tactically: they seize low-intensity routine moments to anchor time (ritualizing), repurpose narrative and humor to keep fear and pressure at a tolerable distance (narrativizing, misrecognition), and redistribute visibility and exposure through platform switching and account lapse (liquid platform use). Accordingly, digital resilience is best conceptualized as tactical rather than strategic, unfolding through infrastructural, social, and symbolic mediation rather than culminating in durable mastery (de Certeau, 1980/2011; Kolotouchkina et al., 2023). It does not seek to reorganize platform architectures, renegotiate institutional authority, or secure durable protections. It operates within spaces not of one's own

making, sustaining everyday livability through momentary alignment, selective withdrawal, and recalibrated participation. This form of digital resilience is neither heroic nor resistant in a classical sense. Its force lies not in overcoming mediation, but in learning how to remain present—socially, emotionally, and symbolically—within environments where presence itself is constantly at risk. Sustained through continuous alignment and misalignment across infrastructures, relationships, and symbolic forms, it allows everyday life to proceed without the promise of stability. What emerges is not recovery from disruption, but a form of continuity forged within it.

The central contribution of this study is shifting the analytical unit for understanding digital resilience, relocating it from an individual psychological trait or adaptive outcome to everyday practices within hypermediated environments. The findings extend the communication theory of resilience's process orientation by specifying how such communicative processes are infrastructurally conditioned in hypermediated environments, where platform entanglement and algorithmic modulation shape when and how resilience practices can be enacted. Focusing on how digital resilience is enacted, adjusted, and sustained through situated media practices, the study moves beyond psychometric assessments and normative prescriptions, offering a process-oriented perspective that aligns with practice-based approaches, everyday life sociology, and theories of mediation.

Reconsidered from this perspective, the through/against distinction gives way to an internal tension structure, where digital resilience emerges as an ongoing process of modulation, not a fixed endpoint. This reframing clarifies why adolescent resilience is better understood as sustained adjustment under structural instability, rather than through narratives of empowerment or protection.

At the level of social reality, this perspective resists translating digital resilience into prescriptive guidance, instead highlighting how adolescents navigate uncertainty, emotional volatility, and relational challenges through their situated practices. While these practices may not align with adult expectations of healthy media use, they are crucial for making mediated life livable, preventing their misrecognition of these tactics as deviant, and framing them as meaningful and adaptive responses to contemporary adolescence.

6. Limitations and Future Research

By conceptualizing digital resilience as a set of situated, ongoing practices rather than a measurable outcome, the analysis foregrounds how digital resilience operates in practice through adolescents' efforts to sustain everyday livability under hypermediated conditions. This practice-centered approach deliberately resists outcome-based evaluation, yet it also limits the capacity to draw comparative claims about improvement, decline, or optimization over time.

Second, although the study adopts a longitudinal design, temporal depth is achieved primarily through retrospective narration, sedimented routines, and cross-phase comparison rather than continuous real-time tracking. As a result, the analysis is more attuned to practices that persist or stabilize over time, while more fleeting, abandoned, or experimental forms of adjustment may remain less visible.

These limitations point to two directions for future research. One involves tracing the longer-term trajectories of digital resilience practices across life stages and institutional transitions. The other calls for

closer attention to failed, short-lived, or costly attempts at adjustment, extending practice-based approaches beyond recognizable resilience to better capture its fragilities under hypermediated conditions.

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Conflict of Interests

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