

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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“Account run by mom/dad”: An ecosystemic five-country study of musically gifted children’s social media exposure and visibility

Guadalupe López-Íñiguez^{1*} 

¹ University of the Arts Helsinki, Sibelius Academy, Finland

* **Correspondence:** Pohjoinen Rautatiekatu 9, Helsinki 00100, Finland, Tel: +358 503139067, E-mail: guadalupe.lopez.iniguez@uniarts.fi

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Highlights:

- Social media increasingly structures musically gifted children’s development, recognition, and career opportunities.
- Visibility is believed to create opportunities that remain uncertain, but clearly intensifies anxiety, perfectionism, and self-surveillance.
- Families, industry actors, institutional leaders, and platforms collectively shape musically gifted children’s digital exposure and identities.
- Current child protection frameworks insufficiently address algorithmic visibility and developmental consequences for performing children.
- Gifted children often appeared more ethically reflective than adults.

Abstract

This study examines how social media exposure and visibility are negotiated within the ecosystems of musically gifted children enrolled in elite music education programmes. Drawing on interviews with 79 participants across five countries, including gifted children, parents, teachers, and institutional leaders, and an illustrated vignette prompting depersonalised reflection, the study conceptualises platform visibility as a relational and systemic phenomenon embedded in contemporary music careers. Using Care Ethics and Systems Thinking, the analysis examines how visibility is negotiated across five dimensions of care. Findings show that social media participation is understood as opportunity, professional necessity, and risk. While adults often view online visibility as beneficial for career development, gifted children report self-surveillance, perfectionism, anxiety, dependence on external validation, and concerns surrounding privacy and consent. Care is distributed across families, institutions, audiences, and platform infrastructures, yet strained by systemic pressures prioritising visibility, engagement, and exposure. The study introduces the concept of accelerated visibility trajectories to describe how artistic development, identity formation, public evaluation, and professionalisation become compressed within algorithmic feedback systems. It further conceptualises star syndrome as the compounding developmental effects of early visibility and sustained public exposure in gifted populations undergoing intensified training and digitally mediated talent development. The findings contribute to research on platformised cultural production, digital childhoods, and gifted education by showing how algorithmic visibility restructures childhood musical development. The study argues that existing ethical and child-protection frameworks remain insufficient for platformised environments, with gifted children facing distinctive risks, and calls for greater collective responsibility across families, institutions, and platform governance structures.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Platformisation of Music Careers

The emergence of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the conditions through which musical careers are initiated, developed, and sustained. Whereas pathways to recognition in the music industry were historically mediated through institutional gatekeepers such as record labels, broadcasting companies, critics and journalists, concert agencies, and performing venue infrastructures, contemporary musicians, both emerging and established, increasingly operate within visibility economies structured through digital platforms, including Instagram, YouTube, Vimeo, Spotify, and TikTok, to mention a few. Within these technocratic and market-driven environments, visibility itself has become a central condition of cultural participation, transforming how many professional musicians across the world, including many gifted children and adolescents who are already employed by the music industry, engage audiences, circulate artistic identities, and monetise their work through a variety of professional opportunities.

Scholarship in social media studies increasingly conceptualises the transformation of the creative economies as part of a broader process of *platformisation*. In this process, digital infrastructures recognise cultural production, labour, and attention through algorithmic systems and data-driven architectures (van Dijck et al., 2018; Poell et al., 2021). Rather than functioning merely as promotional tools, platforms actively shape the conditions under which artistic work becomes visible, valued, and economically viable for many. Thus, attention, rather than artistic production, becomes the driver of online musicianship. As van Dijck et al. (2018) have argued, platform ecosystems increasingly mediate social, cultural, and economic life through infrastructures that privilege connectivity, engagement, and data extraction. Within music cultures, this restructuring has intensified expectations that musicians continuously maintain online visibility, cultivate audiences, and participate in ongoing forms of self-presentation and promotional labour.

Research on digital music labour demonstrates that contemporary musicianship increasingly extends beyond artistic production into forms of do-it-yourself (DIY) entrepreneurship and labour. Musicians are often required to manage audience engagement, maintain visibility across platforms, produce continuous content, and strategically cultivate digital identities, all of which have become central determinants of artistic success (Everts & Haynes, 2021). This hybridisation of roles reflects what has been described as the protean or flexible music career, where musicians must continuously adapt to shifting digital environments and maintain a persistent online presence to sustain career momentum (Westerlund & López-Íñiguez, 2024; see also, Haynes & Marhsall, 2017). Baym (2015) conceptualises these dynamics through the notion of *relational labour*, describing how artists increasingly sustain careers through ongoing communicative interaction with audiences (including marketing of events and commercial products) rather than solely through artistic output. Similarly, studies of digital creative economies suggest that social media environments reward not only musical competence and skills, but also consistency of engagement, affective accessibility, visibility maintenance, and algorithmically optimised participation. Indeed, such visibility and engagement significantly contribute to the uptake of emerging musicians and entertainment events, positioning these platforms as primary infrastructures for audience formation and exposure (Nwagwu & Akintoye, 2023).

Within systems of musical education, precocity is often publicly valued and forms a crucial component of formal and informal music education ecosystems. In such contexts, highly gifted and talented children and adolescents are not only recognised for their early developmental achievements but may also already perform at advanced artistic levels and engage directly with professional music industries from a young age, including through public performances, competitions, recordings, and digital self-presentation (see further, López-Íñiguez & McPherson, 2023, 2026a, 2026b). However, within these systems, exposure and visibility are unevenly distributed and strongly shaped by platform architectures. Research on algorithmic culture demonstrates that online visibility is neither neutral nor meritocratic; instead, it is produced through recommendation systems, engagement metrics, ranking logics, and network effects. For instance, Bucher (2018) argues that algorithms function not simply as technical mechanisms but as cultural forces shaping anticipation, participation, and self-presentation. Similarly, Gillespie (2014) demonstrates that platforms actively govern visibility by determining which content becomes amplified, discoverable, or marginalised.

These dynamics are particularly significant in cultural industries characterised by high uncertainty and intense competition, such as music (López-Íñiguez, 2026). Salganik et al. (2006) demonstrated that cultural markets are strongly path-dependent, meaning that early visibility advantages can be amplified through social influence processes, with measurable effects on music consumption, particularly in streaming ecosystems that

host short-video modalities that go viral. Such findings align with broader theories of cultural economies, in which attention and visibility are scarce and unevenly distributed (Anderson, 2004; Davenport & Beck, 2001; Lanham, 2006). Although digital platforms theoretically democratise participation, empirical research consistently shows that attention remains concentrated through recursive systems of amplification and engagement optimisation based on how artistic products are ranked, filtered, and redistributed according to the systems' own constraining algorithmic individualisation processes (Prey, 2018).

1.2. Digital Childhoods, Privacy, and Parental Mediation

In recent years, these dynamics have become increasingly relevant for children and adolescents involved in highly visible, competitive creative and sporting practices. Research on digital childhood demonstrates that young people's identities are increasingly constructed within digital networked environments characterised by datafication, visibility, and persistent digital traces often beyond their control (Livingstone & Third, 2017; Lupton & Williamson, 2017). Furthermore, in *The Anxious Generation*, Haidt (2024) has extensively synthesised empirical literature on mental health trends in the United States and Europe to argue that the shift from a "play-based childhood" to a "phone-based childhood" has coincided with measurable increases in adolescent anxiety, depression, sleep disruption and deprivation, and social fragility since the 2010s, when widespread smartphone and social media adoption grew rapidly not only among adults but also among children and teenagers. Haidt's argument that highly curated, aestheticised content correlates with social comparison and performance-based identity formation among young people is directly relevant to young musicians.

Rather than existing outside platform systems, childhood itself has become increasingly mediated through digital infrastructures. In these environments, visibility, participation, audience exposure, and judgment are normalised features of everyday life, leading to phenomena such as *kidfluencers*. This transformation raises significant concerns regarding children's well-being, developmental autonomy, and digital rights. A growing body of interdisciplinary research suggests that social media environments may radically intensify processes of social comparison, anxiety-driven self-monitoring, emotional evaluation, and identity performance among adolescents. At the same time, scholarship emphasises that relationships between social media use and well-being are heterogeneous and context-dependent, rather than universally harmful. For instance, Orben and Przybylski (2019) have argued that simplistic causal narratives surrounding screen time obscure the importance of examining how particular forms of interaction, evaluation, and platform engagement shape young people's experiences differently across contexts. This is particularly true regarding the frequency, intensity, and evaluative structure of interactions with these platforms.

These issues become especially complex in the case of musically gifted children, who typically display unusually precocious "intellectual, creative and/or physical maturity well before the majority of their peers" (Gagné, 2021, p. 77; see also Gagné & McPherson, 2016). Research in gifted (music) education and developmental psychology, in particular, has long demonstrated that exceptional musical ability is frequently associated with early specialisation, structured intensive training, rapid skill acquisition, accelerated expectations, and heightened public evaluation (Gagné, 2004; López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023; McPherson, 2016; Subotnik et al., 2011; Winner, 1996). Historically, however, although highly gifted children and musical prodigies (such as Mozart, Michael Jackson, Judy Garland, Lang Lang or David Garrett) were exposed to intense concert tours with large audiences and/or to radio, television, and print media, most children's musical development was scaffolded through institutional structures. These included conservatoires and specialist music schools, competitions, and teacher-guided performance environments. Social media platforms significantly alter these developmental conditions by exposing young performers, particularly those who are highly gifted, to immediate and potentially global audiences. These platforms enable them to actively produce content, perform their (musical) identities, and receive quantifiable, written feedback (likes, views, shares, comments). This creates what Haidt (2024) conceptualises as a high-frequency evaluation environment, in which self-worth may become tightly coupled with audience metrics.

Therefore, within platformised music cultures, musically gifted children may experience what this study conceptualises as *accelerated visibility trajectories*: developmental pathways in which artistic training, audience formation, digital self-presentation, and public evaluation emerge simultaneously during childhood through algorithmically mediated visibility systems. Unlike traditional models of musical progression, where exposure often occurred gradually and within bounded institutional and family contexts, social media environments compress developmental, professional, and performative processes into continuous cycles of visibility and external feedback. Importantly, gifted children's participation in these systems is rarely autonomous or individually managed. Haidt (2024), for instance, emphasises the erosion of protective developmental contexts

in relation to unstructured play and offline peer interaction. For musically gifted children, these protective buffers are often already reduced due to intensive training schedules, creating a compounded vulnerability when combined with social media exposure and visibility. Thus, parents become incredibly important actors regarding healthy development within larger systems (in line with developmental systems theory; see Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Research on *sharenting* demonstrates that parents play a significant role in constructing and curating children's online identities, often through practices intended to support, protect, or promote their children (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017, Langlais et al., 2026). In the context of elite music education, these practices may become increasingly professionalised, as parents manage accounts, upload performances, cultivate audiences, and facilitate visibility opportunities connected to musical development. For instance, a quick browse on Instagram will reveal hundreds of musically gifted children's accounts that read "Account run by mom/dad". This study, therefore, extends the sharenting literature by examining what may be understood as *professionalised sharenting*, or even *externally driven kidfluencing*, within elite musical ecosystems, where gifted children's online visibility intersects with aspirations for artistic careers, recognition, and competitive success. Haidt (2024) extends this concern, arguing that children lack the developmental capacity to fully understand the long-term consequences of persistent digital visibility, especially in public-facing environments. Thus, the structural ambiguity between protection and exposure in musically gifted children's lives is aligned with what could be called a "curated childhood performance".

The exposure of children within platformised cultural industries raises significant ethical and legal concerns, particularly regarding informed consent and long-term data persistence. International frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989) and the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016) emphasise children's rights to privacy, protection, rest, and meaningful participation in decisions affecting them. Yet social media environments complicate these safeguards in digital environments through persistent data circulation, algorithmic amplification, and the long-term permanence of digital traces. Questions, therefore, emerge regarding children's capacity to consent to visibility, the durability of online exposure, and the relational dynamics through which decisions about posting and public performance are negotiated. Despite growing scholarship on digital childhood, platform labour, and online visibility, research has rarely examined how these dynamics intersect in the lives of musically gifted children embedded in elite training environments and, in some cases, internationally recognised professional music careers. Existing studies frequently focus on either child influencers, adolescent social media use, or professional adult musicians independently. Except for recent discussions on musically gifted children and their childhood rights (Rautiainen et al., in press), very little attention has been paid to how these children, their parents, teachers, and institutional leaders collectively understand and negotiate social media exposure and visibility within highly specialised artistic ecosystems.

1.3. Aims of the Study

This study addresses that gap through a five-country ecosystemic analysis of social media exposure among musically gifted children enrolled in specialist elite music programmes. Drawing on interviews with children, parents, teachers, and institutional leaders, the study examines how platform visibility is understood, negotiated, justified, resisted, and emotionally experienced across interconnected relational systems. Rather than approaching social media exposure as either inherently beneficial or harmful, the study conceptualises it as a relational and systemic phenomenon emerging from the interaction between platform visibility economies, caregiving relationships, institutional cultures, and early professionalisation processes. Overall, the intersection between algorithmic visibility, legal childhood protections, and exceptional talent development represents an emerging and underexplored area of inquiry within music research, digital media studies, and child protection frameworks.

2. Theoretical Frameworks: Care Ethics and a Systems Perspective

To analyse social media exposure in the lives of musically gifted children, this study adopts a multiperspectival framework grounded in Care Ethics and Systems Thinking. This combined framework conceptualises digital visibility as a relational, ecological, and morally complex phenomenon emerging across interconnected human and technological systems. Rather than treating social media exposure as a simple matter of opportunity, self-expression, or risk, visibility is understood as an ongoing process negotiated through relationships of care, institutional and family expectations, platform infrastructures, and broader visibility

economies. Care Ethics provides the primary normative and analytical foundation for this study. Emerging from feminist moral philosophy, Care Ethics challenges individualistic conceptions of autonomy by foregrounding relationality, interdependence, vulnerability, and responsiveness as constitutive dimensions of ethical life. Gilligan (1982) argued that moral reasoning is grounded not only in abstract principles of justice but also in relational concerns involving responsibility, empathy, and care. Building on this tradition, Noddings (2013) conceptualised care as an ongoing relational practice centred on attentiveness and responsiveness to others' needs, while Held (2006) extended Care Ethics into a broader moral and political framework of dependency and social responsibility.

These perspectives are particularly relevant because musically gifted children's social media exposure is rarely an individual matter. Decisions concerning the sharing of performances, account management, audience cultivation, and engagement with followers are typically negotiated among children and the adults and institutions involved in their musical and personal lives. Within Care Ethics scholarship, Tronto's work (1993, 2013; in music, see Hendricks, 2023; López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023; López-Íñiguez, in press) is especially important. Tronto conceptualises care as a multi-phase process involving *caring about*, *caring for*, *caregiving*, *care receiving*, and *caring with*. This framework enables an examination of how responsibility for children's social media exposure is recognised, allocated, enacted, and experienced within elite music education contexts. Caring about concerns recognising needs and vulnerabilities, including how parents, teachers, and institutions identify both opportunities and risks associated with social media participation. Caring for refers to assuming responsibility and deciding how to respond, often through parental mediation and institutional encouragement or safeguarding. Caring frequently becomes distributed across relationships rather than located solely within the child. Caregiving concerns practices through which care is enacted, including monitoring comments, moderating interactions, selecting content, and protecting children from harmful exposure. However, caring intentions do not automatically produce positive outcomes and may intensify perfectionism, self-surveillance, comparison, or audience validation. Care receiving focuses on how care is experienced by children themselves, foregrounding whether visibility practices meet emotional and developmental needs rather than assuming that good intentions constitute ethical care. Finally, caring with extends care into broader questions of solidarity, justice, and collective responsibility, recognising that social media exposure emerges through larger ecosystems involving schools, competitions, audiences, music industries, and algorithmic platforms.

Importantly, Care Ethics does not assume harmony within caregiving relationships. Rather, it foregrounds tension, uncertainty, and competing values as constitutive dimensions of care itself. Within digital environments, these tensions emerge around protection versus promotion, privacy versus visibility, developmental pacing versus professional opportunity, and child autonomy versus parental mediation. Caring practices may therefore simultaneously function as support and exposure, protection and acceleration. Complementing Care Ethics, this study adopts a systems-oriented perspective to conceptualise social media exposure as an ecological and relational phenomenon shaped through interactions across interconnected levels. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, development is understood as emerging through dynamic interactions between individuals and layered environmental systems ranging from immediate interpersonal relationships to broader cultural, institutional, political, and technological structures. This framework is particularly useful because musically gifted children's development cannot be separated from the systems in which they participate simultaneously: families, specialist music institutions, peer cultures, competitions, digital communities, platform infrastructures, and the wider music industry. Contemporary digital platforms complicate these boundaries by collapsing distinctions between local and global, private and public, and interpersonal and institutional spheres.

The systems perspective is further informed by Systems Thinking and complexity theory, which conceptualise human phenomena as emergent outcomes of interconnected and adaptive systems rather than linear chains of cause and effect (Meadows, 2008; Senge, 2006). Systems Thinking emphasises interdependence, recursive feedback, adaptation, and emergence. This becomes especially relevant within digitally mediated music cultures, where visibility increasingly operates as a systemic condition rather than a personal choice. Platforms function not merely as communication tools but as infrastructural environments shaping interactions and governed partly through non-human actors such as algorithmic systems (van Dijck et al., 2018; Gillespie, 2014). From a systems perspective, musically gifted children's social media exposure emerges through interactions across multiple levels. Micro-level relationships involve children and their immediate caregiving and educational environments; meso-level processes include schools, competitions, peer cultures, and institutional expectations; and macro-level systems encompass platform infrastructures, recommendation systems, legal frameworks, music industry logics, and cultural norms surrounding branding and visibility. These levels are interconnected through recursive feedback processes (Meadows, 2008). For

example, a parent's decision to upload a child's performance video may be amplified through algorithmic processes, audience engagement, and platform monetisation. The resulting likes, comments, and views may subsequently shape children's emotional and educational experiences (see López-Íñiguez, 2026), influencing their future participation or withdrawal.

Visibility can therefore be understood as a dynamic system in which engagement generates exposure, exposure generates expectations, and those expectations may subsequently reshape behaviour across the broader ecology. In this sense, pressures towards visibility may become normalised even when adults express concerns about overexposure or emotional strain, as participation increasingly appears necessary for artistic relevance and career development. Responsibility for children's digital visibility is thus not located solely in individual decisions but distributed across interconnected relationships, institutions, and technological systems. Recent systems-oriented scholarship in music education further supports this perspective. López-Íñiguez and Westerlund (2023; see also López-Íñiguez, *in press*), drawing on Tronto's political ethics of care and ecological understandings of education, argue that care itself should be understood as a social and systemic practice rather than merely an interpersonal disposition. This shifts analytical attention away from locating responsibility exclusively in parents or gifted children and instead situates children's online visibility within larger systems of platform capitalism, competitive music cultures, institutional prestige economies, and digital attention structures. Furthermore, digital platforms may compress traditional developmental boundaries by accelerating transitions between childhood participation, public recognition and scrutiny, entrepreneurial branding, and early professionalisation.

2.1. Research Questions

In light of the above, this study asks: How are social media exposure and visibility negotiated, mediated, and experienced within the interconnected care and platform ecosystems surrounding musically gifted children?

The following sub-questions guide the study:

1. How do musically gifted children, their parents, teachers, and leaders of the specialist music programmes understand and justify the opportunities and risks of social media visibility?
2. How are caregiving responsibilities negotiated in relation to musically gifted children's online exposure, participation, and visibility?
3. How do platform dynamics and visibility cultures shape musically gifted children's emotional experiences, self-perceptions, and developmental trajectories?

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, multiperspectival design grounded in Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) and interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Care Ethics and Systems Thinking. Situated within an interpretivist paradigm (Blumer, 1954; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), the study assumes that meanings surrounding social media exposure are socially and relationally constructed through lived experience, interaction, and institutional context, moving beyond individual-level explanations of online behaviour and the overexposure of children.

3.2. Participants and Sampling Strategy

The dataset consists of qualitative interviews with 79 interconnected participants across five specialist music education ecosystems in five countries, spanning three continents. Participants included 22 musically gifted children, 25 parents, 19 instrumental teachers, and 13 institutional leaders affiliated with highly selective music education programmes, conservatoires, or advanced music academies designed for intensive music training (see details in Table 1 below).

For participant inclusion, musical giftedness was understood as musical ability that was well above average relative to peers of a similar age and stage of musical development. Before the researcher visited each research site, teachers and programme coordinators were asked to identify potential child participants who met this criterion. Their identification was based on their professional knowledge of the children and their musical development, as well as the selection and evaluative practices of the specialist music programmes. These practices typically involved demonstrated musical ability assessed through performance examinations or auditions and, in some cases, additional evaluative procedures such as sight-reading, improvisation, interviews,

composition exercises, or formal identification processes related to giftedness in music and beyond. Thus, no single standardised measure of musical giftedness was applied across all five research sites; rather, participant identification relied on locally embedded professional assessments of children whose musical abilities were considered well above average. A defining characteristic of the sample was that all child participants also had some degree of social media exposure connected to their own musical activity and/or broader musical learning. This ranged from informal, self-managed posting of performances or rehearsals to sustained parental mediation of online accounts used to share musical and/or personal content. In several cases, accounts were explicitly parent-managed (“account run by mom/dad”), with decisions on posting frequency, audience engagement, and content selection made by the parent. Participants studied a broad range of classical instruments, including piano, violin, viola, cello, flute, clarinet, bassoon, percussion, trumpet, and voice. Many children also demonstrated multipotential profiles involving high academic achievement, multilingualism at an early age, and advanced engagement in areas such as mathematics, philosophy, literature, sport, or science.

Table 1. Participants

Group	Age	Sex
Gifted Children (<i>N</i> = 22)	Range: 9–17 years <i>M</i> = 14.5, <i>SD</i> = 2.4	11 girls, 11 boys
Parents (<i>N</i> = 25)	Range: 40–62 years <i>M</i> = 48, <i>SD</i> = 6.26	15 women, 10 men
Teachers (<i>N</i> = 19)	Range: 36–68 years <i>M</i> = 49.21, <i>SD</i> = 9.20	14 women, 5 men
Program Leaders (<i>N</i> = 13)	Range: 40–68 years <i>M</i> = 54.23, <i>SD</i> = 8.96	4 women, 9 men

Parents represented both musically trained households and non-musical backgrounds. In most cases, one parent participated in the interview process, although some parents requested joint participation. Teachers and programme leaders held diverse positions within specialist music education systems, including performance instruction, programme coordination, and oversight of talent development. Many also indirectly shaped children’s visibility, or conversely its limitation, through educational guidance, performance documentation, and institutional communication practices.

Participants were recruited through institutional collaboration with specialist music programmes. Recruitment was facilitated by programme staff to ensure that the researcher did not access personal contact details directly. Convenience sampling was employed to capture a relationally embedded understanding of social media exposure across interconnected roles within musically gifted children’s ecosystems. Given the relatively small and identifiable nature of specialist music communities, and the high profile of some teachers, leaders, and even children and their parents, specific countries and institutions are not disclosed to preserve participant anonymity.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews designed to balance consistency across participants with flexibility to explore individual experiences and differences in depth. Interview protocols focused on three broad areas: 1) experiences of social media use in musical contexts, 2) perceived opportunities and risks associated with online visibility and participation, and 3) the emotional, relational, and ethical dimensions of digitally mediated musical development and early professionalisation in music.

A distinctive feature of the data collection process was the use of a shared hypothetical vignette involving a musically gifted child (see Figure 1; “Anna” or “Daniel” versions were available) navigating decisions about whether to share musical performances online in the context of increasing audience attention. Participants were invited to advise the child and reflect on appropriate courses of action. The vignette functioned as a complex dilemma and methodological tool for eliciting situated moral reasoning and relational decision-making, particularly concerning care, responsibility, vulnerability, and visibility.

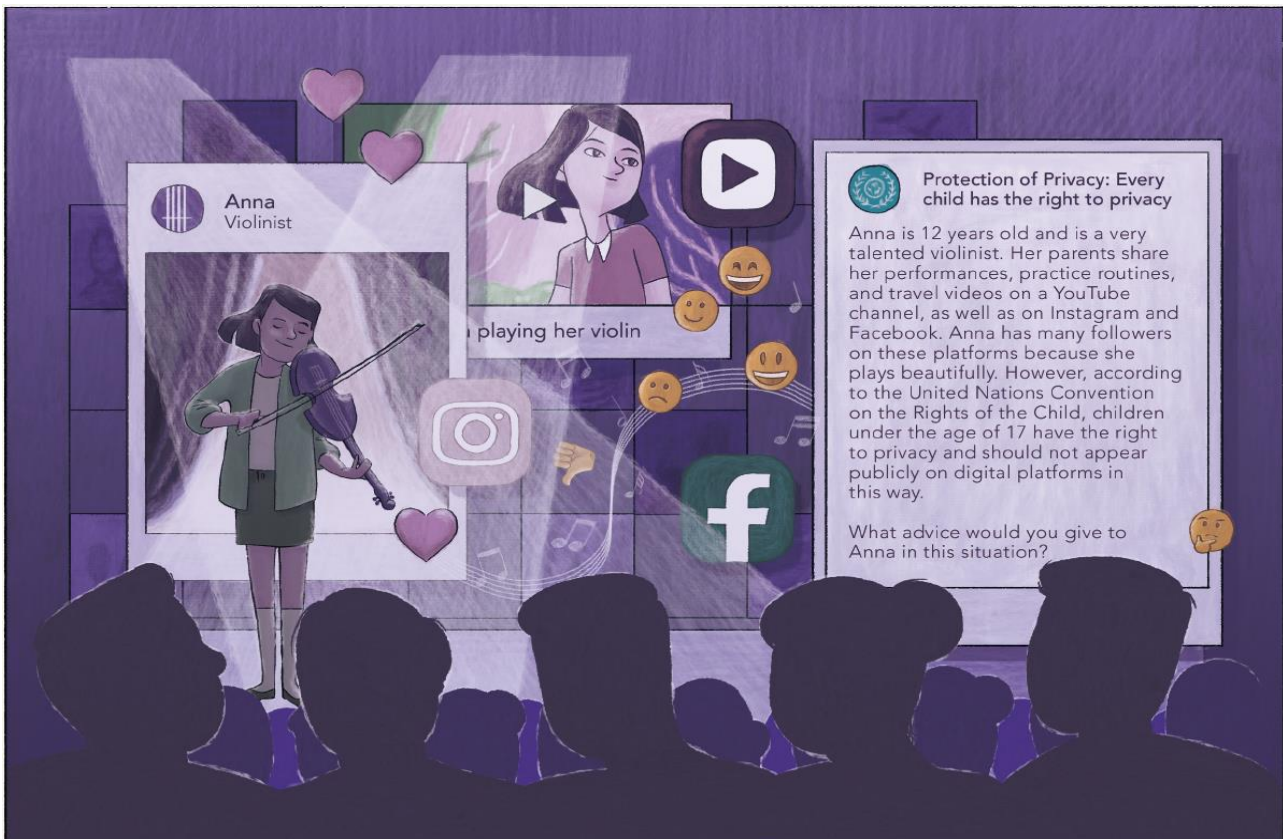


Figure 1. Dilemma on media exposure for participants.

[Concept, original idea, and text credit: Guadalupe López-Íñiguez. Illustration credit: Marga Doek.]

The author conducted all interviews during field visits across the five sites, with visits lasting several days at each location. Interviews lasted 60–120 minutes, with approximately 20–30 minutes dedicated to social media practices. These segments formed the analytical focus of the present study. Interviews were audio- and video-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised before analysis. Data collection took place between autumn 2024 and autumn 2025. Interviews were conducted at a pace that allowed ongoing reflection and iterative refinement of interview focus. Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively, with emerging patterns from earlier interviews informing attention to potentially divergent or additional issues in subsequent interviews. Thematic saturation was assessed pragmatically during this iterative process and was defined as the point at which additional interviews no longer yielded substantively new analytical insights, categories, or dimensions relevant to the research questions. Saturation was not understood as the statistical exhaustion of possible responses; rather, it was reached when successive interviews predominantly reinforced, rather than expanded or substantially altered, the developing thematic structure. The researcher monitored this process across interviews and continued data collection until further interviews were no longer contributing materially new themes or analytical dimensions.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), following Braun and Clarke (2019). RTA conceptualises themes not as pre-existing entities discovered within data, but as interpretive constructions generated through sustained engagement between researcher, theory, and participant accounts. Analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti (v. 25) and followed a recursive six-phase process: familiarisation with the data, initial coding, generation of provisional themes, iterative refinement of thematic structures, interpretation in relation to theoretical frameworks, and final consolidation of analytical narratives.

In line with RTA principles, analytical quality was approached through transparency of process, theoretical coherence, reflective awareness, and interpretive depth rather than inter-coder reliability or replicability. Consequently, no quantitative weighting of themes was undertaken; instead, excerpts were selected to illustrate relational meaning, variation, and analytical complexity across the dataset. This process was further informed by the author's positionality as a trained classical musician with lived experience in acceleration as a

child within specialist music education environments, as well as international competition participation characteristic of these settings. This insider positioning provided contextual sensitivity to the emotional dynamics, norms, and expectations shaping elite musical training and visibility practices. Following established approaches to insider qualitative research (Denzin, 2006; Yardley et al., 2020), reflexive memo-writing was employed throughout the analysis to document interpretive decisions, emerging insights, and potential biases.

Last but not least, the analysis was facilitated by Care Ethics and Systems Thinking as sensitising and interpretive frameworks, respectively, rather than prescriptive coding structures. Care Ethics directed analytical attention toward how participants described and negotiated care, responsibility, attentiveness, emotional responsiveness, and relational obligations within digitally mediated musical environments. In addition, Systems Thinking served as a complementary lens to situate social media exposure and visibility as an ecological phenomenon emerging through interactions among multiple stakeholders and systems, including the platform architectures governed by algorithmic logics that are central to this paper, and organised and reinforced by recursive feedback loops between them.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The Uniarts Helsinki Ethical Review Committee granted ethical approval for this study on 28 April 2023, in accordance with the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK). All adult participants provided informed consent, and child participants provided assent alongside parental consent. Particular care was taken to ensure voluntary participation, pseudonymisation, and developmentally appropriate interviewing practices, given the involvement of children and the potentially sensitive nature of discussions concerning gifted children's lives, emotional well-being, digital visibility, and online (over)exposure.

4. Findings

Across all participant groups, social media visibility emerged as an increasingly normalised component of elite music education and early career development among highly gifted and talented children. Children, parents, teachers, and institutional leaders repeatedly referred to Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and similar platforms as spaces through which musically gifted children become visible, competitive, and professionally recognised. Yet, these same participants simultaneously expressed anxiety, uncertainty, and ethical discomfort regarding children's exposure online. Following Tronto (1993, 2013), the next subsections describe the main elements within the five phases of Care Ethics.

3.1. Caring About: Social Media Visibility as Opportunity and Concern

Participants first demonstrated *caring about* by recognising that social media exposure and visibility were consequential and required attention. For instance, gifted children frequently articulated awareness that online visibility could create opportunities: "It's great to promote myself. It's great for new opportunities and stuff... but I don't really like posting myself, I don't enjoy it, but I know it's kind of important if you want to be seen."

Another child described already considering a more professionalised online presence: "I have a private account on Instagram, so I don't really post, but sometimes I post videos of me playing... I'm thinking about posting like officially and then open [the] account [publicly]."

Institutional leaders similarly described social media visibility as embedded within contemporary musical trajectories:

"Today, if you start, it's with 10 or 11 [years old]. International. You can go to [major city] for a big competition. Then you come back, you are going to the mayor of the town, and you're coming in all media, and you have all your social media, and you have all your videos, and you have your homepage. Every month, I look at the whole page [of] the very young. This is not just a child playing anymore. Th[ey are] professional[ly] made and everything is organised. It's a career already starting."

From a Systems Thinking perspective, these accounts indicate a broader ecosystemic normalisation of platform-mediated visibility. Social media participation was not described as a purely personal choice, but as increasingly integrated into competitions, auditions, branding practices, and professional expectations. At the same time, participants across groups expressed strong concern regarding children's exposure to networked audiences, which seems morally ambivalent. One teacher reflected:

"It has its own positives and negatives. I think obviously it's nice to share it with a small group, but then I'm not sure about what happens when they want to share this with the whole world. I'm not sure what that means for a very talented child who is already quite sensitive to stimuli and judgment."

Another leader stated: "The kids have [social media apps], yeah, but they feel obligated to spend time on social media, all [of them], to be relevant." Leaders also mentioned that teachers "compete in social media about their talented students' successes... we have a big issue with that."

Some parents recognised the impact of social media on gifted girls' lives: "Some of the talented girls in my son's music class have profiles on Instagram, and I've seen that a lot of followers are grown-up men. Are they there for the music playing? I don't think so... Ugh, it's gross."

Children themselves also demonstrated awareness of online risks: "You don't know who's watching you. Anyone could watch it. It could be just a couple of children watching it, or it could be loads of strange adults or something."

3.2. Caring For: Professionalised Sharenting and Relational Responsibility

The second phase of care, *caring for*, concerns assuming responsibility and deciding how to respond to perceived needs. Within the dataset, this phase emerged strongly through parental involvement in children's online visibility. Children described this relational dynamic with parents: "[My mother] has been encouraging me to post my stuff on Instagram, and like telling me it would be good for me, and I understand that, because I see other people doing it and getting opportunities from it." In some cases, this visibility extended beyond musical promotion into commercial and semi-professional online activity, as one child explained: "my mom is pretty active on IG, and I often help her playing or discussing products."

Parents frequently described themselves as attempting to balance opportunity, protection, privacy, and future career responsibilities. Several parents discussed maintaining shared or partially controlled accounts: "We both share the password." In response to the vignette, parents mentioned: "We know this actually happens... we could share 12 different names like this example... we tell the grandparents regularly [about this], because they'll take pictures [and] put them on Facebook." Another parent explained that "I upload it, but it's not public... only the people who have the link can see. And, um, I don't want them to be more exposed on social media."

Participants repeatedly framed such practices as protective rather than promotional. One participant reflected extensively on digital permanence and emotional well-being:

"The digital footprint worries me. As a parent, I would want to know exactly where it was going and what it was for... that's always going to be there, is that something that my child is going to want to see in 20 years' time?"

Another parent said: "Our daughter doesn't live for likes, whereas a lot of her music class peers do... they're getting their affirmations and self-esteem from something that's not even real." Parents also emphasised emotional protection: "It is part, we can't deny this, because it gives opportunities, you might be seen somewhere, but on the other side, that does not need to be based on sacrificing somebody's mental health, or anxieties, or privacy." Yet, gifted children's testimonies when reading the illustrated vignette revealed that parental management was not always experienced as fully consensual. One child stated:

"No, my parents don't ask permission... I would like for them to ask permission [from me] to share material in social media... I don't dare to say that I am not happy with some of the stuff they post about me."

This quote was particularly important because it revealed tensions surrounding relational autonomy and children's ability to meaningfully resist parental decisions regarding online exposure. Indeed, teachers and leaders repeatedly questioned whether children possessed sufficient maturity to consent to public visibility. As one participant explained:

"Even if the child is super gifted and he's [a] super virtuoso from a young age, [it] doesn't mean that he's matured mentally to do things like that... people... put that first, the kids, before their actual maturity, their mental maturity."

Another parent directly challenged assumptions that children's agreement alone legitimised exposure: "They haven't reached the age to say if that's okay or not... just saying the kid likes it is [not] the good reason

for doing that thing.” Similarly, in response to the illustrated vignette, a teacher mentioned: “Are they at the age to decide? That’s the question... just saying the kid likes it is not enough, because they’re not at the age to really understand what it means to put themselves out there like that.”

In a small number of cases, children’s accounts also indicated early forms of platform-based commercial exposure beyond music alone, with one participant noting: “Many important people also follow my account and have offered me to do some promos of [musical instrument products].”

A parent reflected:

“I would call the child protection services... If you’re using the child to get likes, you’re a politician. Congratulations! You take the child’s agency away. You just prove that you’re doing this for the money. What comes first, your money or your child’s welfare and security?”

3.3. Caregiving: Platform Visibility, Self-Surveillance, and Emotional Labor

The third phase, *caregiving*, concerns the actual practices through which care is enacted. This phase revealed a notable paradox: while social media participation was often framed by adults as supporting gifted children’s musical development, the practical work of care frequently fell to the children themselves. Rather than being shielded from pressures of visibility, evaluation, and audience scrutiny, many engaged in ongoing self-monitoring and self-regulation to minimise harm. From a care ethics perspective, caregiving appeared largely reactive and damage-limiting rather than enabling children’s flourishing, effectively shifting responsibility onto them. Child participants repeatedly described how platform logics intensified self-surveillance, perfectionism, and emotional dependence on audience feedback. As one child noted:

“If I post something, I want it to be perfect, like really perfect, otherwise I just won’t post it. Because I can hear every little mistake, and I keep thinking that if I can hear it, then everyone else will hear it too, and then they’ll think I’m not that good.”

Children described acute awareness of public scrutiny and evaluation. One child reflected: “I don’t think it’s good mentally to always think about, ‘Okay, what did they write about me?’” Another participant explained: “I’m my biggest critic... When I have to post that, I know that other people who are like musicians are going to notice those facts, and they’re going to think, ‘Oh, she’s not that great.’” The same child continued:

“I’m really insecure about my looks. I think about how I look when I play... not just how I sound, because people don’t just listen, they watch everything, and I know that, so it’s not only about the music anymore.”

Children also described pressures associated with likes, followers, and online approval. In response to the illustrated vignette, one child observed, “I don’t know, but I feel like the kids want a lot of likes. And they feel like their playing is not good enough if they don’t get a lot of likes. For sure, Harry feels like this.”

Teachers recognised similar dynamics: “[My student] is quite aware of this social media, and she wants to be there and wants to have [external] approval.” Parents themselves observe this loop too: “[My child] checks how many likes she gets, and it really affects her mood, like if it goes well, she’s very happy, but if it doesn’t, then she starts doubting herself and even questioning if she’s good enough.” Another parent: “If [my child] gets haters or bad comments, I think [the child] will feel sad... and might even quit violin, because things are taken very personally.”

Children also described social media distraction and compulsive use. One participant explained:

“I actually erased Instagram from my phone. I don’t use it for like a year... it just distracted me so much... when I was practising, I had a hard time practising, and I didn’t want to practise. Then I got on my phone, and I said, okay, maybe two minutes and 10 minutes passed.”

Another child described deliberately disconnecting before performances: “Before a concert or a competition or anything, I turn off my phone... I just don’t need any friends to write me, ‘Oh, I hope you don’t mess up or something,’ because that just makes me anxious.” One child mentioned: “It’s not possible for me to just doomscroll for 24 hours... In a way, [instrument] practicing is saving me from the screen addiction I see among my school peers.”

A teacher worried about the qualities of the performances being shared by parents:

"I opened Facebook and suddenly saw my student video from the concert that was taken here, which wasn't good, and it was in the media. I said to the father, 'Listen, please, before you do that, ask me if the performance is good enough', because he doesn't understand if it's good or not."

3.4. Care Receiving: Vulnerability, Anxiety, and the Limits of Protection

The fourth phase, *care receiving*, concerns how care is experienced by those receiving it. Here, evidence of care receiving was often limited, as children's accounts frequently revealed emotional vulnerability, discomfort, anxiety, and ambivalence toward social media exposure, even when adult participants believed they were acting protectively. Rather than experiencing social media participation as caring or protective, children often described new forms of pressure and risk that appeared to undermine the intended benefits of adult care, almost transforming care receiving into a form of "care stealing", whereby the emotional resources intended to support children became redirected toward managing the demands and reactions of unknown online audiences. For instance, as one child explained, "I guess, sometimes you can get hate and stuff. I don't know. I just don't really like sharing myself online and showing myself." Another stated: "They could get hurt maybe emotionally very bad with things that people can write because they can write everything and anything."

Children also demonstrated concern regarding surveillance, manipulation, and digital safety: "People can edit the photos and a lot of that stuff... or they could spread rumours." Parents similarly acknowledged the emotional risks attached to social media participation: "People could do very offensive and unflattering things with the material that's out there and just won't be able to deal with it."

Yet, despite such concerns, participation often continued because visibility was increasingly perceived as inevitable within contemporary music cultures. Checking the illustrated vignette, one parent reflected: "This is the world we live in." Similarly, a teacher stated: "When you are a performer, you become public anyways." And one of the leaders also mentioned: "Nowadays, it's just part of being a musician... You can't really avoid it if you want to have a career."

3.5. Caring With: Collective Responsibility and the Care Paradox of Visibility

The final phase, *caring with*, concerns collective responsibility and the ability to organise care at the social, institutional, and policy levels. Across the dataset, participants repeatedly expressed ethical uncertainty while simultaneously describing social media visibility as difficult to resist. The tensions within this phase illustrate a broad failure of caring as a democratic practice, in which responsibility for gifted children's well-being in digital environments is largely diffused by platform economies, while no shared framework exists for governing visibility in ways that sustain long-term care.

Adults frequently articulated discomfort regarding gifted children's public exposure. One teacher reflected: "I think they're not like a child trophy... it just makes me question the intentions behind sharing that. And even worse: the intentions of the companies which get the material." Another parent described online exposure as potentially exploitative: "I personally don't like that, I think [it is] child's labour in a way." In response to the illustrated vignette, one of the teachers said: "It is like this famous musical prodigy from [country]... she had a skyrocketing career when she was a child, and now... it's all about her looks, her femininity and, in a way, appeals to the masses."

One of the leaders similarly reflected on the sexualisation of girls in social media:

"Some of the girls are trying to be sexy on stage because then they post it in Tik Tok... so the boobs are falling out more or less. And they are like 16, 17 years old [and] haven't thought about it. So, I started to talk with the young talents, the girls about it, and I see almost everyone is wearing trousers now on stage. And-and it's also like how the industry sexualises girls. And how they are trying to push really this image of the perfect princess. It's really sick."

Participants also repeatedly emphasised limited control over digital circulation: "We don't have control over necessarily how it's shared or what's done with it after it is published." At the same time, participants described social media visibility as normalised within contemporary music systems. One leader explained: "The kids... feel obligated to spend time on social media... to be relevant." Adults also questioned long-term implications: "We don't know enough about how in their adult life they're going to look back at all of this, and whether they will feel it was something good or something that was imposed on them." Another parent put it like this when confronting the illustrated vignette:

"In this picture, I see my own child... This social media thing is, in a way, forcing him to choose this musical path... I get it, he is great at playing, but such exposure is only reducing his options in life... too many eggs and too much pressure in one basket alone... he might look back and say, 'I felt forced to do this because of the likes and shares and not because it was my choice'... so very sad, but the system is built like this."

One of the institutions had adopted a policy discouraging families from sharing concert footage online, according to a parent:

"They go mad at school because parents will take videos of concerts and try and put them online... Every term, they're sending emails out to parents saying, 'Please, stop sharing the footage.' Mainly because they try to protect children who shouldn't be online."

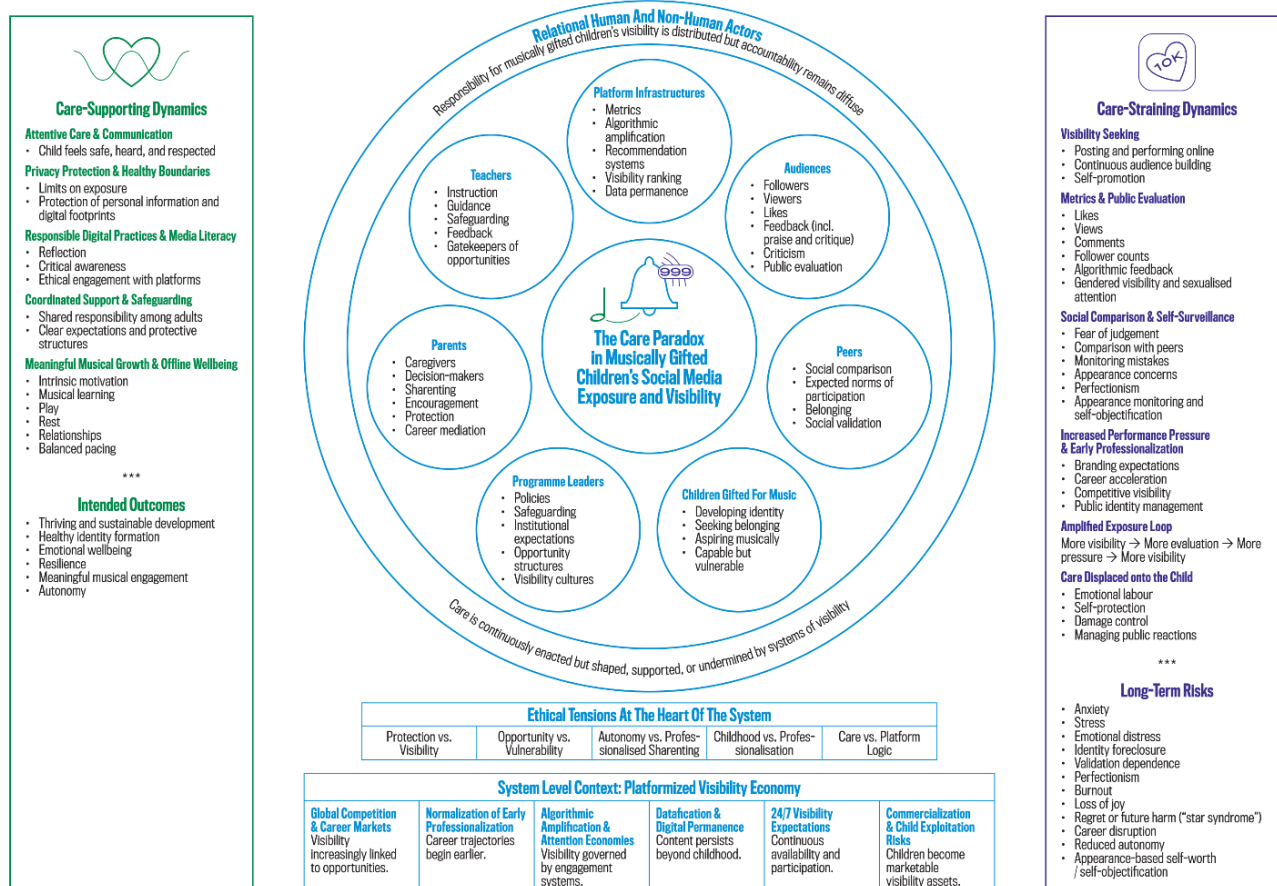
3.6. Synthesis of Findings

Across all five phases of care, musically gifted children's social media participation emerged as a relational and systemic phenomenon shaped by families, institutions, platform cultures and economies, and professional music environments. Participants simultaneously understood social media as an opportunity, visibility, a professional necessity, and a risk, revealing an ecosystem marked by ambivalence and moral tension from the outset. Within this context, parents and other actors often acted from caring intentions by supporting gifted children's musical development, encouraging participation, and facilitating opportunities, yet uncertainty persisted regarding what constituted appropriate care within digital visibility cultures. Responsibility, therefore, became distributed unevenly and messily across families, music institutions, platform dynamics, and broader visibility economies, shaping local caregiving practices and expectations. At the same time, caregiving became increasingly entangled with platformised forms of self-presentation, audience evaluation, emotional response, and behavioural adaptation. Gifted children's accounts revealed a significant care gap between developmental needs for emotional safety, privacy, and stability of self-worth, and system pressures toward visibility, branding, and continuous exposure. Consequently, care was not absent within the ecosystem, but strained, negotiated, and often undermined by the very social media structures through which care was enacted and reproduced (see Figure 2).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how musically gifted children's social media exposure is negotiated within the interconnected ecosystems of families, specialist music institutions, and platform cultures. Across five countries and 79 participants, the findings show that social media is no longer simply an optional promotional tool for talented young musicians. Instead, it has become part of the developmental infrastructure of contemporary music careers, shaping how giftedness and talent are recognised, evaluated, and circulated from increasingly early ages, despite recent strengthening of platform age restrictions. These findings align with scholarship on platformisation and digital cultural labour, which argues that visibility and engagement increasingly function as prerequisites for participation in contemporary creative industries (Baym, 2015; Poell et al., 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018).

A central finding of this study is that social media exposure functions as a relational and systemic phenomenon rather than an individual choice. Visibility is produced through interactions between parents, teachers, institutions, audiences, and algorithmic platforms that continuously reward musically gifted children's engagement, circulation, and self-representation. In this sense, children gifted in music develop not only within traditional pedagogical systems but also within visibility economies, where attention itself becomes a form of value (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Lanham, 2006). The findings, therefore, support existing research demonstrating that algorithmic systems do not distribute visibility neutrally, but amplify particular forms of participation and engagement (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014; Prey, 2018; Salganik et al., 2006), as well as the rise and increase of kidfluencing practices (see further, Rautiainen et al., in press).



This is a conceptual map illustrating dynamics identified in participants' accounts. It is not a predictive or causal model.

Figure 2. An ecosystemic and multiperspectival map of musically gifted children's social media exposure.

[Concept, original idea, and text credit: Guadalupe López-Íñiguez. Figure design: Aleksí Salokannel.]

The study extends research on platformised cultural production by demonstrating how these dynamics reshape childhood musical development. For musically gifted children, social media does not merely accelerate exposure; it compresses and accelerates development and artistic professional trajectories into continuous cycles of public scrutiny, quantifiable feedback, and self-presentation. The participating children described becoming highly aware of likes, comments, followers, and aesthetic presentation, while several participants linked online visibility to anxiety, perfectionism, distraction, and fear of judgment. These findings suggest that the pressures associated with gifted musical development may increasingly intersect with the pressures of developing and maintaining a visible online presence.

Importantly, these dynamics did not always appear to be gender neutral. For some participants, social media exposure seemed to involve specifically gendered forms of attention, particularly in relation to girls' visibility online. Accounts of adult audience attention, heightened awareness of appearance, and pressures surrounding femininity and presentation suggest that visibility may, in some cases, expose musically gifted girls to forms of evaluation extending beyond musical achievement. Their online presence may therefore become organised not only around artistic competence but also around bodily presentation and perceived attractiveness. For instance, this finding can be situated within recent scholarship on the gendered dynamics of social media exposure. Choukas-Bradley et al. (2022), for example, argue that features of social media such as idealised images and quantifiable feedback intersect with developmental processes and broader gender socialisation to intensify appearance-related concerns among adolescent girls. Similarly, Fioravanti et al.'s (2022) systematic review of experimental research found that exposure to idealised images on social networking sites can negatively affect body image, with appearance comparison playing an important explanatory role.

The present findings extend these discussions into the context of gifted music education. For musically gifted girls, online visibility may involve a simultaneous evaluation of musical ability and physical or gendered self-presentation. This does not mean that all girls in the study experienced social media in this way, nor that such pressures were exclusive to girls. Rather, the findings indicate that gender may shape the forms of

attention and evaluation surrounding young performers and should therefore be considered when examining the consequences of early public exposure. In particular, when musical performances are embedded within visually oriented platform environments, the boundaries between evaluating artistic competence and evaluating the performer as an aesthetically presented person may become increasingly blurred. This concern is further supported by research on social-media-based objectification. Vendemia and Fox (2024) found that sexualised images of young women elicited more appearance-related and sexually objectifying responses from peers and were associated with heightened self-objectification among viewers. Although their study involved young adult women rather than musically gifted children, it provides a relevant conceptual lens for interpreting the accounts in the present study concerning appearance, femininity, and unwanted forms of audience attention. The implication is not that young musicians' online performances are necessarily sexualised, but that visual platforms may create conditions in which a performer's body, appearance, and perceived attractiveness become available for evaluation alongside, or sometimes beyond, the artistic content itself.

Gendered dynamics of visibility therefore warrant greater attention in future research on giftedness, music education, and children's digital lives. Existing discussions of talented children's social media exposure have often focused on opportunities, professional development, privacy, or parental mediation. The present findings suggest that these issues should also be examined in relation to gendered expectations concerning appearance, femininity, self-presentation, and audience attention. Future research could investigate whether and how these dynamics differ across gender identities, musical genres, cultural contexts, and platform environments, as well as how children themselves interpret and negotiate such forms of attention.

More broadly, musical development risks shifting from *process-oriented learning* toward *visibility-oriented optimisation*. These findings resonate strongly with Haidt's (2024) argument, although developed outside the context of music, that Gen Z children increasingly develop in high-frequency digital environments structured around social comparison, performance, and continuous feedback. This study extends his framework, showing how these dynamics can be even more pronounced in contexts where children not only consume but also produce exceptional (pre-)professional content that is sought after and rewarded by the masses. However, this study also expands this view, since although all children (and adults) might be affected by these dynamics, musically gifted children in particular appear to suffer the most, both because of the additional professional element of their marketised, performative, and curated childhoods, as well as the intensity and earlier exposure to professionalism, alongside already demanding practice routines and, in some cases, heightened emotional vulnerability. This constellation of pressures is captured here under what could be termed *star syndrome*, referring to the compounding effects of early visibility, professionalisation, and sustained public evaluation in digitally mediated talent development (see further, Giles, 2002). This conceptualisation builds on broader research on the unhealthy long-term developmental consequences of early public exposure in child celebrity trajectories (e.g., Rapport & Meleem, 1998).

The findings also contribute to gifted education research by identifying what may be conceptualised as *accelerated visibility trajectories*. Historically, except for a few rare exceptions, extremely talented young musicians' public exposure was mediated gradually through institutions and systems such as conservatoires, competitions, and teacher-guided performances. Social media collapses these boundaries by placing musically gifted children as consumer products into immediate and potentially global evaluative environments. As a result, both musical and personal identity formation increasingly occur under conditions of persistent observation and control, along with quantifiable feedback. This intensifies dynamics already associated with giftedness research, including accelerated expectations, perfectionism, and early specialisation (McPherson, 2016; Subotnik et al., 2011; Winner, 1996). At the same time, the study highlights ethical ambiguity surrounding parental mediation. Parents frequently framed their actions as protective and supportive: acting as caregivers, gatekeepers, and facilitators of early public exposure, particularly when managing accounts or controlling content visibility within systems that reward visibility accumulation. Yet, gifted children's accounts revealed tensions surrounding consent, autonomy, and emotional comfort. Several children expressed discomfort with material being shared without meaningful consultation, even when parents believed they were acting in the child's best interests. These findings complicate simplistic distinctions between "supportive" and "exploitative" sharenting. Instead, they support previous research showing that parental mediation of children's online identities often involves overlapping motivations of protection, promotion, and participation (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017).

Care Ethics proved particularly valuable for understanding these contradictions. Across Tronto's (1993, 2013) phases of care, participants consistently demonstrated attentiveness to both opportunity and vulnerability, highlighting how care is inherently relational and conflictual rather than harmonious (Tronto, 2013; see also Held, 2006; López-Íñiguez, in press). Adults recognised the emotional risks associated with social

media exposure and visibility, including comparison, dependency on external approval (even from strangers), privacy concerns, and long-term digital permanence. However, despite this awareness, visibility was repeatedly described as unavoidable within music careers. Participants often felt that social media had become necessary for remaining “relevant,” competitive, or professionally visible, although did not really clarify whether this actually affected their musical activities or extended invitations. This type of normative pressure to expose reflects broader transformations in creative labour, in which relational visibility increasingly functions as a condition of professional survival (Baym, 2015; Everts & Haynes, 2021). All in all, the study reveals not only how the phenomenon of social media exposure and visibility unfolds in gifted music education and children’s (pre-)professional music careers, but also a systematically normalised care paradox. Adults attempt to care for gifted children while simultaneously reproducing conditions that may undermine their well-being, including the very visibility systems that generate pressure, self-surveillance, and emotional strain. While the participating children were generally reflective and morally grounded, adults were morally ambivalent and conflicted, and at times attributed their behaviours and decisions to systemic constraints. Responsibility, thus, became distributed across interconnected systems, the music and technology industries, institutional prestige cultures, audience expectations, engagement metrics, and algorithmic recommendations, encompassing both human and non-human actors. From a systems perspective, it can be argued that such problematic structures are often reproduced collectively through recursive feedback loops and adaptive participation rather than deliberate endorsement (Meadows, 2008; Senge, 2006).

These loops are not neutral: posting musically gifted children’s performances, successes, and daily life activities generates audience engagement; engagement reshapes behaviour; behavioural adaptation encourages further exposure; additional exposure enforces more emotionally engaging, frequent, polished, and highly visible content; and such content encourages self-monitoring and performative optimisation. This recursive process many contribute to a loss of childhood and raises important ethical and policy questions. Existing child protection frameworks, as discussed earlier, were not designed for aggressive digital environments in which children’s identities would be circulated, archived, and algorithmically amplified across potentially global audiences. Questions surrounding informed consent, developmental readiness, digital permanence, and children’s right to withdraw from visibility remain unresolved. In the case of gifted children, not only in music but across the performing arts, this is particularly significant because their already accelerated training pathways and early professional careers may limit opportunities for experimentation, privacy, alternative identity formation, and career choice (see further, Rautiainen et al., in press). Thus, this study makes a compelling case for the urgent and necessary revision of existing policies governing children’s digital visibility, consent, and protection in platformised environments.

A limitation concerns the use of convenience sampling in this study. Although participants were recruited across five countries, recruitment through specialist music programmes may have resulted in a relatively interconnected sample with shared institutional and educational backgrounds, creating a potential risk of pseudo-saturation. Although saturation was assessed iteratively by monitoring whether subsequent interviews generated substantively new insights, this possibility cannot be entirely excluded. The findings should therefore be interpreted as contextually situated, with transferability to families and practitioners beyond specialist music programmes requiring further investigation. Ultimately, this study argues that contemporary platform cultures are transforming not only music careers but also the conditions of gifted childhood. Addressing the challenges identified here requires moving beyond an exclusive focus on individual parents or children. Responsibility is distributed across the wider ecology in which visibility is produced, including families, teachers, educational institutions, audiences, music industries, and platform companies, as well as the executives, designers, and developers who shape the infrastructures through which children become visible. A more adequate response must therefore recognise how care, agency, artistic development, and children’s rights can be sustained within systems that may structurally reward visibility, acceleration, and engagement more readily than privacy, developmental pacing, and protection.

Statement of Researcher

Researchers’ contribution rate statement:

GLI: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Visualisation, Writing.

Conflict statement:

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest

Data Availability Statement:

Due to ethical and privacy considerations, the data supporting this study are not publicly available. Data sharing would risk compromising participant confidentiality and was not covered by the consent provided.

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The University of the Arts Helsinki Ethical Committee granted ethical approval for this study on 28 April 2023, in accordance with the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK). All adult participants provided informed consent, while assent was obtained from child participants alongside parental consent. Particular care was taken to ensure voluntary participation, pseudonymisation, and developmentally appropriate interviewing practices, given the involvement of minors and the potentially sensitive nature of discussions concerning gifted children's lives, emotional well-being, digital visibility, and online (over)exposure.

Author Biography

Dr Guadalupe López-Íñiguez is a Spanish musician and university researcher at the Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki. She holds a PhD in educational psychology and a master's degree in cello performance. She is an Honorary Senior Fellow (Music Psychology) at the University of Melbourne and a Docent (Music Education) at the Sibelius Academy. Since 2009, she has led funded research projects on topics including constructivism and conceptual change, giftedness and talent, employability and careers, well-being, performance optimisation, and theories of emotion and motivation. She has authored over 70 peer-reviewed publications and is the author of *Real-Life Experiences of Children Gifted for Music* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). She has also co-edited several volumes, including *Caring for Gifted and Talented Music Learners* (Oxford University Press, in press), *Research Perspectives on Music Education in Ibero-America* (Routledge, 2025), and *Learning and Teaching in the Music Studio – A Student-Centred Approach* (Springer, 2022).

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