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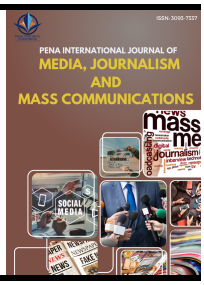

Safeguarding Generation Alpha: A Parental Responses and Digital Media Literacy Approach for Navigating the "Elsagate 2.0" Crisis on YouTube Kids

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ABSTRACT

The *Elsagate 2.0* refers to a scandal and phenomenon of a wave of disturbing videos on YouTube and YouTube Kids that appeared to be family-friendly yet contained graphic themes, including violence, abuse, and sexual fetishism. *Elsagate* videos generally used popular children's characters, bright colours, and catchy music to appeal to young viewers, while masking the darker, inappropriate elements embedded within. The public has raised a lot of concerns and controversy about its safety, as it allows all communities to upload content. Critics, including parents and members of Congress, criticise features like auto-play and algorithm-driven recommendations that make it difficult to prevent children from accessing inappropriate content, despite the platform's intended safety measures. Children's poor digital media literacy and natural curiosity drive them to click on visually appealing thumbnails, often leading them to inappropriate content through clickbait, where misleading titles or thumbnails are designed to attract clicks. Reports further suggest that young children struggle to distinguish between reality and fantasy. This research aims to examine parents' perceptions and investigate parents' awareness of the *Elsagate 2.0* phenomenon on YouTube Kids toward digital media literacy. A qualitative approach was employed using semi-structured interviews with 30 Malaysian parents. The research identifies the factors that expose children, particularly Generation Alpha, to inappropriate videos, including developmental vulnerability, misleading content, and YouTube's flawed algorithm. The findings, which used thematic analysis with digital and media literacy theories, show that parents employ strategies like co-viewing, content monitoring, and digital tools to mitigate risks, though YouTube's algorithmic limitations remain a significant challenge. The research underscores the need for media literacy education to equip parents with the skills necessary to navigate the digital age and protect their children from online dangers. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the importance of media literacy skills, including the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, create, reflect, and act, in safeguarding children from inappropriate online material. The parents are aware of the risks and a significant challenge in keeping up with the constantly evolving digital landscape.

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1. Introduction

The golden era of *Sesame Street* and *Teletubbies* is over. Today, children's television programmes are in crisis, while YouTube algorithms feed millions of young minds with daily doses of content [1]. Entertainment for children now predominantly comes in the form of brightly colored animations and familiar characters on YouTube, which has become their primary source of media consumption [2,3]. Yet, this shift has brought disturbing challenges, most notably the resurgence of the *Elsagate* phenomenon.

Over 500 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute, amounting to approximately 30,000 hours of new content per hour [4]. A concerning trend that has surfaced is known as *Elsagate*. This troubling phenomenon refers to the production and dissemination of inappropriate and potentially harmful content targeted at young children [2]. *Elsagate* first emerged in 2012, when Generation Z, those born between 1995 and 2009, often described as digital natives proficient in technology and social media, were exposed to massive amounts of traumatic content [5]. Although it was hoped that the phenomenon would end in 2017, it has re-emerged in new formats and now affects Generation Alpha.

This topic remains highly relevant today, especially with the increasing use of YouTube among children. Approximately 85% of children aged two to twelve watch YouTube, a rate double that of broadcast television [4]. Many parents, believing that YouTube offers educational benefits, inadvertently expose their children to content that can negatively affect their psychological development [6,7]. It is common for parents to rely on YouTube videos, cartoons, and nursery rhymes to pacify their children [4]. This practice, however, increases the likelihood of children being influenced by unhealthy and destructive content, a trend that is visible in many households [8]. Popular programmes such as *Cocomelon*, *Didi & Friends*, and *Upin & Ipin* are among the widely consumed content.

Since YouTube's algorithm continues to fail in detecting disturbing video fragments [9], parental supervision of children's digital consumption is crucial. In Malaysia, awareness of *Elsagate* remains limited, and many parents depend on YouTube for their children's entertainment without fully understanding the risks. Therefore, it is important to examine parents' media literacy in navigating these challenges to safeguard their children.

YouTube was the most visited social media platform in 2023 [10]. Approximately 3.7 million new videos are uploaded daily, with over 122 million active users worldwide [11]. Due to the overwhelming volume of uploads and the difficulties in filtering content, a troubling trend emerged on YouTube in 2017 known as the *Elsagate* scandal. These videos featured popular cartoon characters such as *Peppa Pig*, *Spiderman*, and *Elsa* engaging in highly inappropriate behaviour, including drug use, sexual misconduct, and dangerous acts such as suffocation actions that violated YouTube's terms of service. Disturbingly, such videos, although intended for children, went undetected for a long time, even on YouTube Kids [9].

Elsagate is named after the character *Elsa* from Disney's Frozen series, who frequently appears in the content. The suffix "-gate," derived from the Watergate scandal, is commonly used to denote scandals [12]. The term *Elsagate* refers to a phenomenon involving a wave of disturbing videos on YouTube and YouTube Kids that appeared family-friendly but contained graphic themes, including violence, abuse, and sexual fetishism. These videos often used popular children's characters, bright colors, and catchy music to appeal to young viewers, while concealing inappropriate and harmful elements within [2,13]. They were typically live-action or animated, featuring misleading titles and buzzwords such as "education," "learn colors," and "nursery rhymes" to exploit YouTube's algorithm and deceive parents into believing the content was safe for children [14,15].

Although *Elsagate* had existed since at least 2012, it gained widespread attention in 2017 after media outlets such as The Guardian and BBC exposed YouTube channels producing inappropriate content featuring adults dressed as children's characters [14,16]. Many children from Generation Z, the primary audience of these videos, were unknowingly exposed to harmful material, raising concerns about long-term psychological impacts. Natasha Daniels, a child psychotherapist in Chandler, reported an increase in the number of children aged six to twelve experiencing anxiety caused by disturbing YouTube videos, leading to symptoms such as loss of appetite, insomnia, crying fits, fear, and tension over the previous five years [17].

Elsagate also became a widely discussed topic on Reddit, a social media platform that shares news, reviews, and hosts forums, where users highlighted similar content on YouTube and YouTube Kids [18, 19]. The subreddit r/*Elsagate*, moderated by a user under the name "Lfodder," became the first platform to raise awareness of the phenomenon [20,21]. The subreddit quickly grew to tens of thousands of members, establishing itself as a reliable hub where internet investigators could discuss and flag videos that bypassed YouTube's censorship system [12,22].

Despite YouTube's and advertisers' efforts to remove tens of thousands of *Elsagate*-related videos and demonetize inappropriate content [23,24], disturbing videos continued to resurface. This placed advertiser on edge and pushed YouTube to intensify its moderation measures [22]. In 2019, a related disturbing trend known as the *Momo Challenge* emerged on YouTube and YouTube Kids, further exposing the platform's struggles in filtering harmful content. The challenge featured a grotesque character with bulging eyes and a menacing grin, known as *Momo*, who allegedly appeared in children's videos such as *Peppa Pig* and *Fortnite*, encouraging viewers to engage in dangerous behaviors, including self-harm [25]. The presence of *Momo* instilled significant fear among children, with some developing anxiety and sleep disturbances after exposure [26,27]. Although the *Momo Challenge* was likely a hoax used by hackers to spread fear and potentially harvest information, its rapid circulation underscored children's vulnerability online and highlighted the urgent need for proactive monitoring by both platforms and parents. YouTube later announced that it found no evidence of the *Momo Challenge* on its kids' app but pledged to remove any harmful content if detected [25].

Even so, the problem persisted, and by the 2020s, a new wave of disturbing content referred to as *Elsagate 2.0* reemerged. This time, content creators shifted from using familiar children's characters to incorporating popular video games such as *Minecraft* and *Among Us*, directly targeting Generation Alpha [16,24,28]. According to an investigation by Ros Syammimi and Norshuhada [29], many disturbing thumbnails featuring blood and violence from these games were marketed specifically to children [24]. A study by Newzoo's Global Gamer Study in 2023 reported that 94% of Generation Alpha were avid fans of gaming, with Minecraft being the most popular [30]. *Elsagate* channels exploited this trend by using game-related content to attract young viewers, monetizing their attention through pre-roll advertisements from gaming companies such as *4A* and *Epic Games* [24].

The recurring issues on YouTube demonstrate that reliance solely on the platform to eliminate harmful content is insufficient. Instead, media literacy is vital in empowering parents to protect their children effectively. Media literacy encompasses the ability to access and evaluate media messages, as well as to create, reflect, and act, using information and communication to influence the world [31]. Since parents play a crucial role in their children's lives, actively monitoring their activities on YouTube Kids and developing their own media literacy skills are essential strategies for safeguarding children from *Elsagate 2.0*.

On the other hand, Generation Alpha those born between 2010 and 2024, have grown up immersed in technology, with nearly half owning tablets at a very young age [32]. This early, often

unsupervised, exposure to digital content puts them at risk of encountering inappropriate material. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2020 found that 80% of parents with children aged 11 and below allowed them to watch YouTube, with 53% reporting daily use. While many parents rely on devices to keep their children occupied, they are often unaware of the hidden dangers lurking on platforms such as YouTube. For instance, a notable case in Malaysia sparked controversy when a mother reported that her son had been exposed to hypersexualised videos featuring characters from the popular game *Among Us* [2,8].

In response to such concerns, YouTube launched the YouTube Kids app in 2015, providing parents with greater control over the content consumed by their children. Nevertheless, disturbing videos continue to appear due to the limitations of algorithmic detection [15,33]. Public concerns and controversies over the platform's safety persist, as YouTube allows content from all communities to be uploaded without strict gatekeeping [3]. Critics, including parents and members of Congress, have highlighted problematic features such as auto-play and algorithm-driven recommendations, which make it difficult to prevent children from being exposed to inappropriate content despite the app's safety measures [3,34]. For example, auto-play can lead children from innocent nursery rhymes to inappropriate videos, such as *Mickey Mouse & Minnie Mouse Pole Dancing*, which often attract millions of views and turn disturbing content into a profitable enterprise [20].

Although YouTube Kids has implemented measures to combat such content, including the removal of videos that violate child safety policies and thumbnails that breach nudity or sexual content guidelines the reality is that YouTube Kids is no longer the primary platform for children [5, 35]. Despite YouTube's minimum age requirement of 13 years [35], research by Hasanagic *et al*., [36] found that 95% of children aged 7 to 12 accessed the main YouTube app, while only 3% used YouTube Kids. Many children bypass these restrictions by using their parents' accounts [37-38], thereby increasing the likelihood of exposure to mature and inappropriate content.

Most children lack consistent access to media literacy education, which is essential for identifying and verifying misinformation [39]. Their limited media literacy skills, combined with natural curiosity, often drive them to click on visually appealing thumbnails. This behavior frequently leads them to inappropriate content through clickbait, where misleading titles or thumbnails are deliberately designed to attract clicks. Furthermore, young children struggle to distinguish between reality and fantasy and are often unable to regulate their behavior in response to media exposure [40]. Content creators exploit this innocence by repeatedly using familiar keywords and images to position their videos in front of children, making it possible for them to encounter disturbing material within just 10 clicks [37]. This clickbait tactic, when coupled with YouTube's recommendation algorithm, pushes children deeper into harmful content [3] a problem that persists despite YouTube's mitigation efforts. A key issue lies in YouTube's recommendation algorithm, which prioritizes engagement metrics such as views, likes, and comments. This system can be easily manipulated, as some creators use click farms and bots to artificially inflate these metrics, thereby maximizing engagement [3]. The artificial boost increases the visibility of such videos, making them more likely to be recommended to other children. The auto-play feature further worsens the situation, as videos continue to play automatically if children do not intervene [2]. Against this backdrop, this research seeks to examine parents' perceptions and investigate their awareness of the *Elsagate 2.0* phenomenon on YouTube Kids in relation to digital media literacy.

1.1 Elsagate and Elsagate 2.0 Phenomena

The term *Elsagate* originated in 2017 as a reference to disturbing YouTube content targeting children, often featuring popular characters such as *Elsa* from Disney's Frozen—hence the name.

These videos appeared child-friendly by using familiar characters, bright colors, and catchy music, yet they frequently contained graphic themes such as violence, abuse, and other inappropriate content [21]. The aim was to exploit YouTube's algorithm, making it difficult for the platform's filters and for parents to distinguish these harmful videos from legitimate child-appropriate content [25].

Despite YouTube's efforts to curb *Elsagate* content, similar videos resurfaced in the 2020s under what is now termed *Elsagate 2.0*. Unlike the initial wave, *Elsagate 2.0* increasingly features characters from popular video games rather than well-known animated franchises [16, 24, 28]. This shift reflects a focus on Generation Alpha, who are avid consumers of gaming content on YouTube [30]. The thumbnails and titles of such videos are often graphic and disturbing, portraying blood, violence, and other inappropriate visuals. While designed to attract young viewers, this content poses significant risks to children's well-being [24].

1.2 New Generation and YouTube Usage

Generation Alpha is projected to be the largest generation in history, with a population exceeding two billion [41, 42]. They are particularly drawn to authenticity, interactivity, and gamification, and are twice as likely to perceive gaming as a creative outlet compared to previous generations [41]. The social researcher who coined the term Alpha emphasised that this generation is defined by its deep integration into digital technology from birth [41,42]. Many of its members, often referred to as "iPad kids," have been exposed to smartphones and tablets from a very young age [42]. Consequently, Generation Alpha's lives are profoundly shaped by technology, with online video consumption among young children doubling since 2017 [35].

YouTube plays a pivotal role in the development of Generation Alpha, providing entertainment as well as educational content that supports language, numeracy, and social skills [43,44]. However, concerns have been raised regarding YouTube's recommendation algorithms, which at times expose children to inappropriate content despite being labelled as "kid-friendly" [2,3]. This has contributed to phenomena such as *Elsagate*, in which disturbing videos featuring children's characters bypass filters and reach young viewers [41,42].

In response, YouTube introduced YouTube Kids as a safer alternative designed to provide more age-appropriate content [45]. Nevertheless, many children continue to access the main YouTube platform, where a substantial amount of child-directed content remains available [35]. Studies indicate that children as young as three are frequent YouTube users, with toddlers and pre-schoolers representing one of the fastest-growing audience groups [46].

In Malaysia, YouTube ranks among the most visited websites, particularly among children. Similar to global trends, Malaysian children are heavy users of the platform and spend considerable time watching online videos [47]. However, parental awareness of the risks associated with harmful content remains limited [3,8]. Children are often drawn to bright visuals, catchy songs, and taboo themes such as faeces, urine, or violence, which increase the addictive appeal of such content [6, 48]. Prolonged exposure has been linked to heightened aggression, early sexual behaviour, and emotional distress [49]. Furthermore, *Elsagate* videos frequently lack dialogue, relying primarily on sound effects and exaggerated actions, which may impede language development in young children [20].

2. Methodology

In this research, a qualitative approach is utilised to collect relevant data, as this method allows researchers to explore and gain deeper insights into real-world issues [50]. According to Tenny *et al*., [51], qualitative research is defined as the process of gathering individuals' experiences, perceptions,

and behaviors. Semi-structured interviews were employed to gather data since they provide flexibility in examining specific areas of concern and enable participants to fully express their experiences and opinions in detail. The in-depth, semi-structured interview is particularly valuable because it allows new questions to emerge during the interview based on participants' responses. However, the interviewer must prepare specific topics or guiding questions in advance [52].

In this study, eight open-ended questions were used to guide the interview process, with two additional questions added during the sessions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of Malaysian parents who are educated and have Generation Alpha children under the age of 13 who frequently consume YouTube. This ensured that their personal experiences and awareness of media literacy were fully captured. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 30 parents from across Malaysia's 14 states: *Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Perlis, Pulau Pinang, Selangor, Terengganu, Sabah, Sarawak*, and *Wilayah Persekutuan*. The sampling criteria were: (i) parents who have children under 13 years old, and (ii) parents who allow their children to access a smartphone or tablet to use YouTube or YouTube Kids at least three times per week.

Participants were selected based on judgment criteria, their willingness to participate, and their agreement with the research regulations. Purposive sampling is commonly used in research that requires participants with specific characteristics or expertise [53,54]. This study prioritised individuals who were accessible and volunteered to participate in the interviews. Before the interview, participants were given a clear briefing about the study and informed of their right to withdraw at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Consent forms were obtained from all participants, signed to indicate their agreement to take part, with confidentiality measures clearly outlined. To build rapport and encourage engagement, face-to-face interviews were conducted, as suggested by [55].

Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour 30 minutes, allowing for focused yet flexible discussions that enabled participants to share valuable insights. To ensure a higher engagement rate, interviews were conducted in quiet and comfortable venues, including public libraries, participants' offices, and homes. During data collection, interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

For the data analysis stage, ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis tool, was used to conduct thematic analysis by coding and identifying emerging themes. This study employed thematic analysis, as developed by Braun and Clarke [56], which enables the identification, analysis, and reporting of themes within qualitative data. Thematic analysis was chosen as it provides a structured yet flexible framework for exploring parents' perceptions of the *Elsagate 2.0* phenomenon, making it suitable for examining complex and nuanced experiences.

Thematic analysis involves identifying and reporting patterns in interpreted data, which requires several steps [57]. First, the data collected from semi-structured interviews were transcribed, followed by familiarization with the transcripts through repeated readings. Next, ATLAS.ti was used to generate initial codes, which were then organised into meaningful categories aligned with the research objectives. These categories were later refined and sorted in Microsoft Word into separate sections to facilitate the process of theme identification, reviewing, and refinement.

2.1 Digital and Media Literacy by Hobbs (2010)

Media literacy refers to the ability of individuals to access, analyze, and produce media effectively to achieve specific outcomes [58]. Parents must guide their children through social media by teaching them how to act responsibly online, build positive relationships with media, and critically analyze

content [59-60]. As digital platforms such as YouTube grow in popularity, parents need to develop the skills required to evaluate the appropriateness of media content for their children. This is particularly crucial on YouTube, where the recommendation algorithm often struggles to categorize content accurately by age appropriateness, and the auto play feature further exacerbates the issue [61]. Media literacy also helps bridge the generational gap by enabling parents to better understand the technologies their children use an essential skill in today's rapidly evolving digital environment [62]. This discussion emphasizes five digital and media literacy competencies identified by Hobbs [31] access, analyze and evaluate, create, reflect, and act which are directly related to this study (see Figure 1)

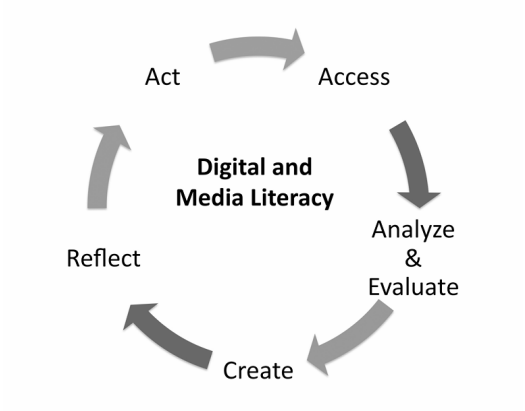

Fig. 1. Essential Competencies of Digital and Media Literacy (Adapted from Hobbs [31])

i) Access

Access refers to the ability to make responsible decisions and obtain information by finding, sharing, and understanding materials, as well as comprehending ideas and knowledge [31]. Parents with strong access skills should be able to navigate digital platforms such as YouTube and utilise tools like parental controls to ensure their children are exposed only to appropriate content [63]. For instance, enabling age-restricted mode can help prevent inappropriate content from appearing on the home page, serving as a simple yet effective parental control measure [64]. Media literacy further enables parents to create safer online environments by filtering content that may expose their children to harmful material, including the disturbing videos characteristic of *Elsagate 2.0*. Strengthening access skills ultimately empowers parents to take an active role in supervising their children's media consumption [59,60].

ii) Analyse and Evaluate

Analytical abilities refer to the capacity to identify a message's source, purpose, and point of view, as well as to evaluate the credibility and quality of its content [31]. Parents must critically assess the material their children are exposed to, ensuring it aligns with their developmental needs and is free from harmful or manipulative elements [59,60]. For example, parents can assist children in setting boundaries for video consumption and teach them to recognize cues in thumbnails or search results that may indicate inappropriate content [65]. Such practices empower children to independently evaluate the suitability of the media they consume.

iii) Create

Media literacy for parents also encompasses the ability to create and curate media environments that foster safe digital habits. By actively selecting and designing positive media experiences, parents can shape the content their children consume rather than relying solely on platform algorithms [65]. For instance, parents may select and organize suitable content, such as creating playlists on platforms like YouTube that are age-appropriate and aligned with developmental needs [66]. Moreover, parents with strong media literacy skills can establish clear guidelines for content consumption and support children in engaging with digital platforms healthily and productively.

iv) Reflect

Reflect refers to the ability to examine one's own behaviour and communication style through the lens of ethical and social responsibility [31]. Reflecting on media's influence enables parents to recognize the broader impacts of media consumption on their children's values, beliefs, and behaviours. Media-literate parents can critically assess both their own and their children's digital habits, acknowledging the long-term psychological and emotional effects of exposure to inappropriate content [59-60]. For instance, when parents co-use media with their children, they can engage in discussions about the content, fostering critical reflection on what they view together [63]. By reflecting on the consequences of media consumption, parents are better positioned to navigate digital spaces and guide their children toward healthier interactions with media.

v) Act

Finally, Act refers to the ability to engage in social action by contributing as a member of a community and working both individually and collaboratively to exchange knowledge and address issues within the workplace, family, and community [31]. Media literacy equips parents to take action in protecting their children from harmful content. This includes blocking or reporting inappropriate material, utilizing parental controls, and fostering open discussions with children about responsible digital behavior [62,63]. Media-literate parents are also more inclined to participate in advocacy, promoting safer digital environments and improved platform regulations. By acting on their media literacy skills, parents play a vital role in guiding their children to navigate online spaces safely and responsibly [59,60].

3. Results

3.1 Factors Influencing Children's Exposure to Harmful Content

3.1.1 Navigating digital platforms

Children are in their developmental stage, which makes them more susceptible to the influence of *Elsagate* content. Participants noted that children, driven by curiosity and a lack of judgment, are particularly vulnerable to harmful material. They emphasised that children at this stage of development are not yet mature enough to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Their curiosity often leads them to unknowingly explore inappropriate content, thereby increasing their risk of exposure to harmful material. Due to their limited cognitive abilities, children are unable to

adequately assess whether online content is appropriate, which can result in confusion between reality and virtuality. This highlights the necessity of parental involvement in guiding children through these developmental challenges.

> *"At 13 years old, children start making decisions, but if they are not mature enough, they can be easily influenced… they still cannot distinguish between reality and virtuality." (P2)*
> *"I think they are curious about the content because children are still ignorant." (P4)*
> *"The worst part is that they might not even understand whether what they are watching is good or bad." (P7)"*

3.1.2 Content Related Risks

Participants described *Elsagate* content as misleading, containing harmful or inappropriate elements disguised as child-friendly entertainment. They observed that *Elsagate* videos often employ popular cartoon characters to convey inappropriate messages. Content that appears suitable for children may, in fact, include disturbing themes such as horror elements and unusual behaviours performed by adults in superhero costumes. These videos make use of familiar titles and children's characters, such as superheroes, to attract young viewers while embedding adult themes, violence, or horror imagery. This misleading presentation not only confuses children but also exposes them to inappropriate ideas and behaviours. Such deceptive strategies exploit children's trust in familiar imagery, rendering them vulnerable to content that may be detrimental to their well-being.

> *"My son's favourite YouTube channel is Fat TV, where the adults in the video wear superhero costumes while doing strange things such as fighting. Some are humorous, but at times it even features The Nun." (P1)*
> *"Although the title suggests it is a children's programme, there will be some content that corrupts children's thinking." (P12)*
> *"…there are also characters dressed up as animated heroes, like Spider-Man and Hulk, but they go around beating people up." (P16)*

3.1.3 Accessibility and Technological Challenges

Children now have access to YouTube content at their fingertips, anytime and anywhere. The ease of access to harmful content on YouTube raised serious concerns among participants who are parents. At the same time, limitations in safety tools increase the likelihood of children being exposed to *Elsagate* content.

> "*Google can also use Safe Search, but I think Safe Search is not complete enough, and children can still browse inappropriate things." (P2)*
> *"Everything is one click away… It can be a safe video, then in the recommendations Elsagate appears… I have even tried 'Don't recommend this channel', but there are still many similar ones." (P26)*
> *"YouTube doesn't have gatekeepers or strict settings to filter content… If we look on YouTube, some content does not have restrictions." (P17)*

Although tools such as Safe Search and parental controls exist, they are often insufficient to fully block inappropriate material. Algorithmic recommendations can still expose children to harmful

videos, even after parents' attempt to block certain channels or keywords. The mass production of similar content also makes it impossible to avoid entirely. Moreover, the absence of effective gatekeeping on YouTube makes it difficult for parents to rely solely on technological safeguards to protect their children. This technological gap demonstrates the need for parents to act as watchdogs, constantly monitoring and guiding their children in the online environment.

3.2 Impacts of Harmful Content

3.2.1 Social development impacts

Exposure to harmful content has a significant impact on children's social development. One of the main effects is that children tend to imitate what they see and hear online, often incorporating it into their speech. Participants noted that swearing is among the most common behaviours children quickly adopt from *Elsagate* content, particularly from their favourite content creators. While YouTube can serve as an educational tool, it also exposes children to inappropriate language, including swearing. This creates a contradiction in which children benefit from learning new skills, yet simultaneously acquire undesirable behaviours. Furthermore, most participants agreed that the frequent use of offensive language in videos further normalises swearing among young viewers. These findings highlight the need for stricter parental content curation to ensure children are primarily exposed to positive material.

> *"But in fact, my child learned most of his English from YouTube… at the same time he learned some swear words." (P11)*
> *"The most obvious example is that they will learn to swear like the characters in the video." (P13)*
> *"What I found is that they will start to swear because the videos they watch also use swear words." (P14)*
> *"I also found that she would swear because sometimes she would watch gaming content where the streamers would swear while playing games." (P25)*

3.2.2 Physical Behavioural Impacts

Harmful content such as *Elsagate* has a significant impact on children's physical behaviour, particularly through imitation. The imitation of inappropriate behaviours depicted in *Elsagate* content was a common concern among participants. Children frequently copy actions they observe in YouTube videos, including physical violence, dangerous stunts, and improper conduct.

> *"If they watch this video (Elsagate), they'll learn improper acts… if it contains fights and killings, they'll mimic the behaviour." (P1)*
> *"He suddenly touched my chest… After he fell asleep, I checked the phone and found that the dinosaur violated the Ultraman girl. So my child imitated it after watching." (P2)*
> *"Elsagate content will make children imitate the behaviour of the characters in the video… If they engage in those unhealthy behaviours, including fighting, our children will follow them." (P5)*
> *"They also imitate physical behaviours from cartoons, like jumping off the sofa, chair, or bed, because they see characters jumping on furniture." (P7)*

Most participants reported that *Elsagate* content containing violent or sexualised material normalises physical aggression, as well as dangerous and inappropriate actions, leading children to replicate them in their daily interactions. These behavioural impacts underscore the need for parental guidance and critical reflection during co-viewing with children.

3.2.3 Cognitive and Psychological Impacts

Elsagate content negatively affects children's cognitive development by distorting their understanding of acceptable behaviour. Participants stated that exposure to violent or inappropriate videos encourages aggression and undermines children's ability to process social norms. This distortion manifests in behaviours such as throwing objects in anger or adopting disrespectful attitudes. The harmful values conveyed in these videos may lead children to believe such actions are acceptable. These cognitive challenges highlight the importance of parents possessing media literacy skills to help children analyse and critically evaluate online content.

"They can be very rude and imitate the behaviour when they are angry, especially when they are fighting with siblings." (P16)
"I think it teaches them bad values... making kids think that, 'Oh, I can do this as well.'" (P26)
"When they are angry, they throw things." (P27)

The psychological impact of *Elsagate* content on children was another notable concern. Participants mentioned that these videos often contain numerous frightening scenes involving monsters, which result in nightmares for many children. Consequently, children frequently experience fear, anxiety, and distress.

"My son is very timid, and he was scared after watching these videos." (P1)
"He always said he was very scared to sleep at night. It's because of these monsters… It just instils fear in them." (P6)
"Whenever she saw 'Momo' in YouTube videos, she would tell me that she was scared." (P5)

The disturbing imagery and violent themes often instil a sense of insecurity, leading to sleep disturbances and heightened emotional sensitivity. Participants shared experiences where their children became fearful of the dark, timid, and even traumatised by certain images. Several children showed signs of long-term emotional distress after being exposed to *Elsagate* videos. These psychological impacts underscore the need for parents to create a safe and supportive environment for their children.

3.2.4 Extreme Risks

In extreme cases, exposure to *Elsagate* content has been linked to self-harm and the potential for suicidal thoughts among children. The normalisation of such behaviours in certain videos creates a dangerous environment in which vulnerable viewers may imitate these actions. Participants described how *Elsagate* content indirectly encourages self-harming or suicidal tendencies, posing a serious risk to children's mental health. These extreme outcomes highlight the urgent need for stronger parental oversight and stricter content regulation.

"Some of them will even choose to commit suicide or make mistakes that may lead to imprisonment because of the negative emotions in the videos." (P2)
"I mean, in more extreme cases they encouraged self-harming, even to the point of suicide, which is something that children should never be going through." (P6)

3.3 Parent's Awareness of Media Literacy

The findings highlight the central theme of this study, namely the essential competencies of media literacy among Malaysian parents. Five key themes were identified: (i) Parental Access Skills, (ii) Safeguarding Content, (iii) Parental Media Curation, (iv) Reflective Parenting, and (v) Proactive Digital Parenting (see Figure 2).

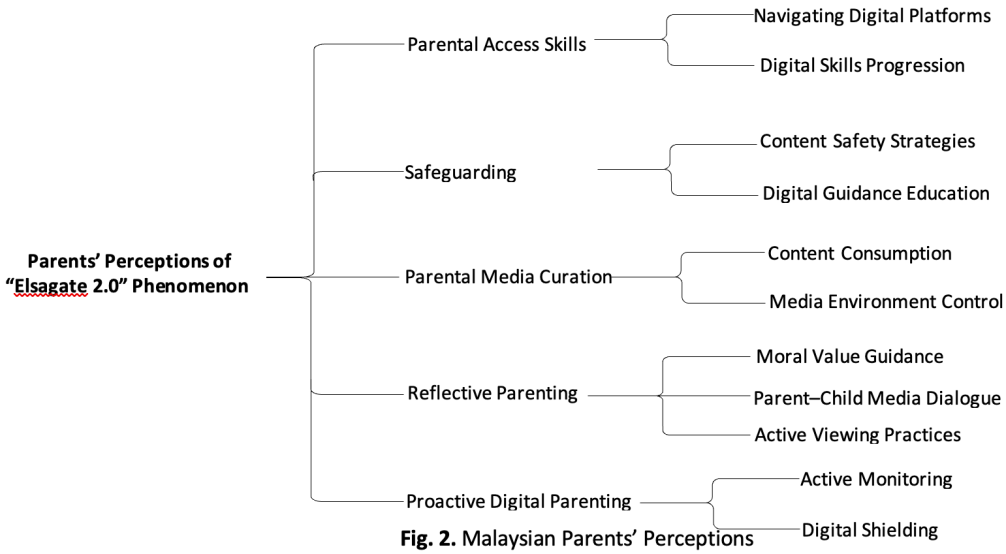

Fig. 2. Malaysian Parents' Perceptions

3.4 Parental Access Skills

3.4.1 Navigating Digital Platforms

Parents need to develop an understanding of what is happening on the internet today, particularly in relation to YouTube, which is one of the most popular platforms among Generation Alpha children. This awareness involves how parents navigate online content and control their children's access to appropriate material. Most participants reported filtering YouTube content to prevent their children from being exposed to inappropriate material.

"I heard about the Momo Challenge before Elsagate through online articles. It appeared in children's cartoons on YouTube and encouraged self-harm, so I decided to control my children's access to some extent," (P1).
"I saw the word Elsagate on Facebook. There was some information on Facebook, so I learnt about it—especially the Peppa Pig incident. I knew there was a problem. Since then, I have avoided all related content, and my son has never seen such videos," (P2).
"I learnt about the 'Momo' incident from Facebook before this, and now Elsagate 2.0 has become a phenomenon on YouTube. Then I realised the content is harmful for children, so I needed to take action to protect my kids by filtering video content," (P5).

"I've read about Elsagate online. My son has come across some videos where characters look frightening, such as Cars with sharp teeth and spider legs, appearing in the dark to scare children. Fortunately, I was aware of this early on and filtered all the YouTube content to ensure it was suitable for children," (P6).

Most participants demonstrated an awareness of *Elsagate* content on YouTube. They explained that they gained this awareness through Facebook discussions, online articles, and first-hand experiences. They recognised the most iconic *Elsagate* trends, such as the *Momo Challenge* and the misuse of familiar cartoon characters like *Peppa Pig* and *Cars* to deceive children and convey inappropriate messages to audiences too young to distinguish between reality and fantasy. This shows that parents had developed access skills, enabling them to keep up with the latest emerging digital challenges while filtering YouTube content for their children's safety.

3.4.2 Digital skills progression

Active learning and the upgrading of technical skills and knowledge are essential for parents to keep up with the latest news and tools to ensure children's safety in the digital world, particularly with the rapid advancement of digital technology. At the same time, continuous development of digital skills and media literacy education must be encouraged so that parents are equipped to recognise the risks associated with digital platforms. This is supported by participants' views:

"I would seek help from Google to block those (inappropriate) words… so that my children could not see them," (P12).
"I think parents need to read online or at least encounter this kind of news to know what is going on, and to upgrade ourselves with the latest technologies to help prevent harmful content for children," (P16).
"Media literacy is important for parents, especially in this digital era. We cannot avoid YouTube in our daily lives, and media literacy is essential for both the present and the future. As parents, we need to learn how to protect our children from inappropriate sources out there," (P17).
"I apply screen-time limits for my children, normally around one hour after they have completed their homework and two hours during weekends. I use Android's Digital Wellbeing to control my children's screen time," (P19).

Participants suggested that parents in the digital age should continually educate themselves about digital tools, resources, news, and media literacy skills. They emphasised that parents need to remain aware of current developments and seek assistance from tools such as search engines, parental controls, and online guides. Media literacy serves as the foundation for these actions, enabling parents to navigate digital challenges, particularly on platforms like YouTube, and to create a safer online environment for their children.

3.5 Safeguarding Content

3.5.1 Content safety strategies

Younger children, particularly those without adequate parental supervision, are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of YouTube exposure. Therefore, the ability to critically analyse and evaluate YouTube content is vital for parents to safeguard their children from harmful material, such as *Elsagate 2.0* videos. Participants suggested several practical content safety assessments,

including checking thumbnails, viewing figures, video titles, intent, and the actual video content, to ensure alignment with educational and developmental needs. At the same time, most participants believed that parents could educate their children to recognise warning signs in content, thereby empowering them to independently evaluate appropriateness in the future. These strategies and efforts can assist parents in reducing the likelihood of harmful messages being delivered to children.

"Normally I check the thumbnails, the number of views, and the titles of the videos. After that, I educate my kids on how to choose the right video," (P11).
"We can only start with changing the mind set of children, sharing with them, and helping them to understand the purpose, connotation, or hidden meanings of YouTube content," (P13).
"I think it is better to watch the content of the videos rather than relying on the title, because sometimes the title looks normal, but the content does not reflect it. Normally, the skills I teach them are simple: they need to look at the opening of the video first. If the video contains blood, weapons, or frightening faces, I tell them to stop and choose another video," (P15).
"I usually watch a video first, and once I feel that one video is safe, then generally all from that source will be safe. We should select the right content for children for their safety," (P25).

3.5.2 Digital guidance education

Parental education plays a critical role in shaping how parents monitor their children's internet usage, including YouTube content. Some parents are aware of the potential risks and the importance of digital and media literacy. Participants in this study consistently emphasised that educating their children about moral values and critical thinking is essential in guiding them to recognise harmful content. The education provided by parents helps children understand the consequences of inappropriate behaviours and develop the ability to evaluate content responsibly. For instance, parents stressed the importance of teaching their children right from wrong, particularly regarding sensitive topics such as violence and explicit material.

"For me, I think that as long as parents educate their children on what is good and bad, they can still protect them. What I do is ask them to show me the video they want to watch. If the video fulfils my standard (laugh), I allow them to watch," (P18).
"I think it is crucial for them to know right from wrong, especially when it comes to guns, shooting, and pornography. I don't want them exposed to violence or pornography early, as they have a negative effect on childhood. What I do is use a star sticker as a point. If my kids watch good content, they get stars; if they watch inappropriate content, I remove the stars. Then they can exchange the stars for a reward, such as ice cream, a doughnut, etc.," (P22).
"We have been constantly educating him, telling him what is right or wrong. Rather than simply filtering, because if we don't help them, they will still access it by themselves. Kids nowadays are different from our time. I educate him by showing examples of the right videos he can watch, followed by examples of the bad or wrong videos he shouldn't watch. If he watches good videos for a month, I reward him with something he likes, such as a colouring book, stationery, storybook, or toy," (P24).
"I always educate them. For example, whenever I hear that the YouTube videos they watch contain swear words, I warn them not to use or repeat them. If they see content containing violence, bullying, or swearing, we must tell them that such things are bad and wrong and that they should not learn from them," (P27).

"I think the first step is to educate my son—teaching children to know what content should or should not be watchable. The most important thing is to educate them about harmful content, including violence and Elsagate-type material," (P28).

These responses indicate that parental education strongly influences their approach to both direct teaching and content filtering, reflecting a broader understanding of how to guide children in navigating digital spaces. Providing such education empowers children to evaluate YouTube content independently and make informed decisions, even when not directly supervised. Parents with higher levels of education also tend to be more proactive in teaching their children how to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate content [67].

3.6 Parental Media Curation

3.6.1 Content consumption guidelines

Creating guidelines for children's content consumption is a key skill in fostering responsible digital habits and ensuring children are protected from harmful content such as *Elsagate* videos. In this study, the majority of participants stated that they actively accompany their children while watching YouTube videos, providing immediate guidance when inappropriate content appears. In contrast, some participants mentioned that they no longer accompany their children while watching videos. On the other hand, encouraging parents to watch together with their children provides an opportunity for children to ask questions and express curiosity, enabling parents to explain, correct, and provide further details. Participants emphasised the importance of supervision in fostering responsible media consumption, although the level of involvement varied according to the child's age and perceived maturity.

"For children aged two to four, we should watch with them, share what we see, and teach them what to do and what not to do. When it comes to my son's age, seven years old, I am not worried because I think my son has not yet seriously imitated the bad behaviours in the videos," (P3).

"I used to sit next to her and watch what she watched. I always try to make sure that she has healthy media habits. The effect now is that I'm really satisfied; when she was growing up, I didn't need to pay much attention to her video sources and content," (P10).

"I would watch with them (my kids), and if it is not suitable for their age, I would tell them not to watch it. If it contains self-harm content, I will not let her watch it. I educate them early to watch appropriate content. If I found out she watched inappropriate content without my knowledge, I would punish her by not allowing snacks for about a week," (P26).

"As parents, we should be aware of this issue, set guidelines, and provide education to our children on how to watch content responsibly. For example, we teach our children not to click suspicious links in video descriptions and to be cautious based on the colourful nature of the video," (P29).

3.6.2 Media environment control

Setting boundaries and ensuring parental involvement in content selection and control are important, as these can reduce children's exposure to potentially harmful information. Participants shared their approaches to minimising exposure to *Elsagate* content, including selecting videos specifically designed for children, limiting device usage, and carefully filtering age-appropriate content. The use of YouTube Kids and restricted mode on apps or the web was also highlighted as a

way to filter inappropriate videos. Some participants further argued for restricting children's access to unsupervised devices, which reduces the likelihood of them encountering unsuitable content.

> *"I normally subscribe only to trusted channels for my kids, such as National Geographic Kids, because all my children are really obsessed with animals. Usually, I will set up or select the content for them to watch. I'm very lucky because my children are close in age, so the video content they watch is quite similar," (P4).*
> *"I've already blocked some specific channels or videos that promote violence and harmful stereotypes for kids, such as Elsagate videos. Those videos are completely inappropriate, not good for children, and set a very bad example for them to follow," (P7).*
> *"I have a rule in my house: my kids must watch YouTube on the TV, because when they open a video, it's easier for me and my wife to monitor. On my phone or tablet, I hide the YouTube app to prevent them from secretly watching videos. So we decided only to allow them to watch via the TV," (P9).*
> *"YouTube isn't entirely harmful; it can be beneficial, but it requires careful selection and supervision to ensure the content is appropriate. Most of the videos we choose for our kids are specially made for children. I notice there are several categories of video content specifically designed for children, categorised by age. For example, Cocomelon is suitable for children up to 4 years old, while for children aged 5 and above, there are different cartoons, such as Ultraman, Upin Ipin, Didi and Friends, Boboiboy, and more," (P30).*

3. 7 Reflective Parenting
3.7.1 Moral value guidance

YouTube videos have limited restrictions on harmful content for children. Parents are therefore responsible for teaching their children to respect video content and helping them to differentiate between educational and manipulative entertainment. This guidance can assist children in understanding the ethical and social responsibilities they should adopt in real life to develop strong character. While parents cannot control the digital world through ethics, they can instil moral values in their children. Participants emphasised the importance of imparting moral values so that children may ethically navigate the online environment. This includes teaching them about the consequences of dangerous behaviours and equipping them with the skills to make wise decisions about the content they consume, particularly in relation to harmful challenges and risky trending videos. This was supported by several participants:

> *"I think, as a parent, there is no way to control this kind of thing, so we have to instil a sense of right and wrong in children. Early exposure is important to develop responsibility for any video they watch. Usually, I will show them which videos they can and cannot watch at their age. However, when they are older, I will give them a little more freedom regarding what they can watch," (P8).*

> *"They (children) must know how to distinguish what they should and should not watch, especially harmful challenges and risky trending videos. They have a responsibility to differentiate, so parents also have the responsibility to teach and educate them," (P14).*
> *"I will warn them and tell my children what they can and cannot do, and I teach them to distinguish right from wrong. I am responsible for teaching my children to respect all video content and helping them to differentiate between educational and manipulative*

entertainment videos. Some videos are good for early exposure for children at kindergarten level, but some are manipulative entertainment videos, such as Elsagate," (P21).

3.7.2 Parent–child media dialogue

Meaningful interaction between parents and children helps parents to recognise how media consumption affects their children. Such interaction allows parents to correct or address inappropriate behaviours at an early stage, before it is too late. Most participants encouraged open conversations between parents and children. This includes discussing the video content watched together as well as the digital experiences of the parents. These exchanges build trust, strengthen relationships, and at the same time help parents to gain a better understanding of their children's digital behaviours, while also guiding them towards safer interactions with media.

"Sometimes my kids will also share with me what they are watching, then I ask a few questions about the video. Questions such as: What do you like about that video? What made you feel uncomfortable about that video? Would you watch that kind of video again? From this, I want to build trust with my kids so they do not hide anything from me. If I find that some of their stories involve inappropriate content, I will gently inform them that this is not right," (P1).
"I would love to share my digital experience with my son. I changed the format into a kind of bedtime story, and at the same time, I showed him the effect of watching inappropriate videos. I shared more about my emotions—for example, I enjoy and feel excited when watching some action cartoons, and I feel pity when I watch videos showing animal violence. So, I think we should share everything we feel when watching videos with our kids too," (P2).
"As parents, what we can do is communicate with them more, maybe ask them about the things they have been watching. In addition, we should always listen to the stories our children want to share. They like us to give them our full attention by showing that we are interested in their stories. At the same time, I have asked them to share the digital experiences they have had," (P3).

3.7.3 Active viewing practices

Active Viewing Practices, also referred to as active viewing, highlight the important role parents play in modelling positive media habits. Parents engage in active viewing when they sit together with their children and actively translate and interpret what is shown on screen. This also involves encouraging the exchange of opinions after co-viewing. Participants emphasised the importance of watching videos with their children and engaging in discussion about the content being viewed. Such practices provide opportunities to build closer connections and encourage children to think critically about what they have seen and learnt from the videos. In addition, they enable parents to monitor their children's exposure to content and provide immediate corrective feedback when necessary. As children grow older, they begin to reflect on the behaviours and decisions of characters in the videos they watch. This reflection can reduce the likelihood of children adopting inappropriate behaviours displayed by such characters.

"For children aged two to four, we should watch with them, share what we see, and teach them what to do and what not to do. We need to guide them towards videos that are appropriate for their age," (P3).

"Sometimes when I am next to him, I will watch (YouTube) with him. Then we start discussing the video, like having questions and answers. Sometimes we talk about the feelings related to that video; sometimes I listen to his comments and he shares his opinions," (P11).
"I watch with them, educate them, and monitor their viewing. We often advise them by explaining the story behind the cartoon," (P24).

3.8 Proactive Digital Parenting
3.8.1 Active monitoring

Maintaining oversight of children's online activities is crucial to ensuring their safety in the digital environment. Participants shared various parental oversight strategies, including constant monitoring, checking watch history, and active content control. These strategies enable parents to supervise their children's online activities and help mitigate the impacts of *Elsagate* content. Monitoring was identified as a key strategy for safeguarding children's online safety. For instance, Participant Two suggested creating conditions that made it easier to observe children's online engagement, such as placing televisions and laptops in common spaces. Some parents also proposed the use of CCTV in shared areas to monitor children's activities. Others mentioned that allowing children to watch YouTube videos on the television in the living room enabled them to keep track of their viewing in real time. These strategies ensured that parents remained aware of the content their children consumed and could intervene when necessary. Participants explained:

"Both of my children like to watch YouTube, so we will monitor them," (P4).
"As he is watching it on TV, I can monitor what he watches at the same time," (P9).
"My child's computer is set up in the living room with CCTV, and we can see what the child is doing online," (P18).
"So I think parents also need to play a part in being there for their kids to ensure that what they're watching is right," (P29).

On the other hand, parents' educational background significantly influenced their strategies for monitoring their children's online activities. Those with higher levels of education were found to be more proactive in using digital tools to ensure content safety. Participants emphasised that regularly checking watch histories allowed parents to identify harmful content, determine appropriate action, and either restrict access or educate their children about safe content. Higher educational attainment appeared to correlate with more consistent and informed oversight. As participants noted:

"My husband and I would occasionally check his history to see what he watched," (P6).
"Occasionally, I will check their YouTube history to see what they have watched," (P18).
"So far, I think one thing that's helpful is to check the history and from there to be able to see what they're watching and then to decide ourselves whether or not this is safe content," (P22).

Parental content control involved setting clear restrictions and actively managing what children could access. Participants highlighted the importance of acting as gatekeepers and limiting exposure to potentially harmful themes such as violence and inappropriate behaviour. Some explained that children required parental permission before being allowed to watch certain videos. This proactive control of digital environments demonstrated parents' strong commitment to protecting children from harmful influences and fostering healthy media consumption habits.

"Most of what my children watch is controlled by us," (P4).
"Because she often watches YouTube and is afraid of 'Momo', I teased her by using it to reduce the time she spends watching YouTube," (P5).
"The other one is, if it's on TV, he doesn't get to decide what he wants to watch. He will need to ask for my permission first, and only then will I tell him," (P9).
"Therefore, parents must personally take responsibility for controlling exposure to violence, sexuality, negative attitudes, and other inappropriate content that contradicts our Malaysian culture," (P24).

3.8.2 Digital shielding

Taking proactive measures is another important parental responsibility in protecting children from *Elsagate* content. These measures include addressing the issue by making use of existing digital tools. Participants shared their experiences of using Google Safe Search, enabling age-restricted modes, and reporting inappropriate content on YouTube. By actively employing these tools, parents can reduce potential risks associated with harmful content and provide a safer digital environment for their children. Furthermore, some participants suggested the stricter use of content-filtering and blocking tools to ensure greater safety.

"I would use Google to set up some ways to block him from being exposed to certain words such as pornography, sexuality, sex, or porn," (P2).
"If the story of the video is violent or pornographic, I would help them delete the recommended videos," (P4).
"I tried 'don't recommend the channel'… I tried a few times where I reported the videos to YouTube," (P6).
"Mostly, I adjust the settings on YouTube or Netflix by enabling the children's age-restricted mode… helping to avoid harmful content," (P7).

3.9 Discussion

Through the results, most Malaysian parents are aware of *Elsagate* issues. The findings indicate that the *Elsagate 2.0* phenomenon poses significant challenges for parents in Malaysia. Based on parents' perceptions, several factors contribute to children's easy exposure to and influence by *Elsagate* content, thereby addressing the first research objective. Factors such as developmental vulnerability make it difficult for children to distinguish between reality and virtuality; misleading content confuses young viewers; and the accessibility of harmful material is exacerbated by flaws in YouTube's algorithm. Parents suggest that children under the age of 13, who are still in their developmental stage, are particularly vulnerable to harmful content. This is supported by [68], which highlights that due to their age and stage of development, children are especially susceptible to risks posed by digital platforms such as YouTube. However, Dr Jianghong Li has previously observed that by the age of six, children are capable of forming opinions about what is right and wrong [69].

Moreover, *Elsagate* content often employs familiar cartoon characters to conceal harmful themes such as violence and horror, deceiving children into watching inappropriate material. This further emphasises that children are the ideal targets for *Elsagate* content, as they are unaware that the content is unverified or not the real *Peppa Pig* and are deceived as intended by the creators of such videos [70]. This statement is supported by [71], which argues that children are often attracted to content based on recognisable patterns such as the familiarity of cartoons rather than evaluating

its appropriateness or educational value. Furthermore, YouTube's lack of strict gatekeepers and its algorithmic recommendations continue to expose children to *Elsagate* content even with tools such as Safe Search and YouTube parental controls. Thus, harmful content remains only one click away from children. This finding aligns with Alqahtani *et al*., [3], who expressed concerns that, without parental supervision, YouTube's algorithmic recommendations could quickly expose children to inappropriate material.

Another valuable insight provided by parents regarding their perception of *Elsagate* relates to the impact of harmful content on children's development, which also addresses the first research objective. These impacts include social, physical, behavioural, cognitive, and psychological consequences, and may even extend to extreme cases such as self-harm. According to parents, exposure to *Elsagate* content can lead children to imitate inappropriate language, such as swearing, and harmful physical behaviour, negatively influencing their social and behavioural development. This is because children learn and imitate behaviours by observing and listening to others. As noted in Severino *et al*., [72], children experiment with socially acceptable and unacceptable language during their development in order to test boundaries. Furthermore, a 2020 United Kingdom survey revealed that more than half of children aged six to twelve had encountered inappropriate language or swearing on online video-streaming platforms such as YouTube [73].

In addition, one parent shared that his children imitated inappropriate acts after viewing sexualised content, raising concerns about the potential replication of such behaviour in real life. Cyber-safety expert Brett Lee, who has worked to investigate online crimes, reported arresting many child sex offenders in the past five years due to *Elsagate* content featuring popular children's characters in sexual scenarios [34]. Cognitive impacts are also evident, as children's abilities in attention, memory, perception, and reasoning [71] are disrupted by exposure to *Elsagate* content. This distortion of understanding around acceptable behaviour leads to the adoption of harmful values.

Parents further reported that their children experienced fear, anxiety, and sleep disturbances after viewing *Elsagate* content. This is supported by Natasha Daniels, a child psychotherapist in Chandler, whose study found that YouTube videos increase anxiety among children aged six to twelve, contributing to insomnia and fear [17]. Additionally, one in five children encounters frightening content online [73]. In more extreme cases, *Elsagate* content poses a serious threat to children's mental health, as they are vulnerable to self-harm and suicide-related messages. This can be related to the 2019 case known as the *Momo Challenge*, which exploited children's vulnerabilities by instructing them to engage in self-harm or suicide [74].

Since all participants in this study had higher education, they were more proactive in monitoring their children's YouTube content. Educated parents are more likely to actively engage with digital tools, such as parental controls, co-viewing videos, and discussing content with their children to ensure online safety. This suggests that higher education may equip parents with the skills to critically evaluate digital content and apply effective monitoring strategies to protect their children.

To mitigate the impact of *Elsagate* content exposure, the strategies suggested by parents aligned with media literacy skills: access, analyse and evaluate, create, reflect, and act. These strategies reflect parents' awareness of how media literacy can help safeguard children from the *Elsagate 2.0* phenomenon on YouTube, thus addressing the second research objective. Access includes staying updated on the latest *Elsagate* trends and risks, developing media literacy skills to navigate digital challenges, and maintaining familiarity with the platforms their children are engaging with. Most participants were aware of the YouTube videos their children watched, and they recognised these as *Elsagate*-related content. This highlights the importance of parents taking preventative measures.

One parent, for example, shared that she would self-learn how to use the tools to ensure her children had access to appropriate content.

Many parents struggle to understand and connect with their children's online interactions due to a lack of awareness of digital platforms and the social norms significant in their children's lives [75]. A clear finding from this study is that parents of children aged seven and above tend to adopt a more hands-off approach, not actively choosing videos for their children, while parents of younger children (aged seven and below) are more involved in selecting and controlling content. This aligns with the idea that by the age of seven, children begin to develop a moral sense of right and wrong, which may lead parents of older children to feel confident in allowing them to make independent content choices [69]. Nonetheless, the degree of parental involvement may also depend on the family's educational approach. Only a minority of parents felt fully confident and unconcerned about their children's media consumption, believing that it remained under control.

Moreover, the findings suggest that parents need to critically analyse and evaluate the purpose of YouTube content and educate their children on distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate material. This is supported by Lafton *et al*., [68], who emphasise the importance of parents being proactive in guiding and educating their children through the digital world, as many children are unable to make informed judgements about the content they consume. In terms of guidance, it is essential to establish boundaries and regulate access to ensure children are only exposed to safe content. The results also suggest that parents should take responsibility for supervising and controlling their children's viewing habits. Since children have limited awareness of the risks associated with internet and technology use compared with adults, parental guidance is essential to help them avoid online dangers [68].

In addition, parents highlighted the importance of instilling moral values and ethics through open communication when co-viewing YouTube videos with their children, which corresponds to the reflect element of media literacy. The majority of parents reported encouraging regular open conversations with their children about the content they watched, consistent with the findings of Moguš and Varga [76]. Parental engagement can serve as a protective factor [68], allowing parents to instil moral values and ethics and help children develop a clear sense of right and wrong.

When it comes to co-viewing, most parents occasionally watched YouTube with their children. Co-viewing allows parents to understand the content their children are exposed to and to offer immediate guidance when necessary [76]. Finally, the ability to act aligns with the findings emphasising the need for parental oversight in protecting children from *Elsagate* content. Strategies include monitoring online activity, checking YouTube watch history, and using digital tools such as safe search to create a safer digital environment. Several parents suggested regularly reviewing their children's watch history as an effective monitoring method. For example, if the history was empty, this could indicate that a child had deleted inappropriate videos, highlighting the need for parents to maintain open discussions. Parents also reported using parental controls such as Google Safe Search, YouTube's age restrictions, and blocking and reporting features to ensure a safer viewing experience for their children.

In addition, this research suggests that parents could implement several ideas shared by the participants to guide and educate children in watching digital content wisely through the "Smart Digital Media" approach. This involves innovation in gamification, using a reward-based method known as the "Star System" (see Figure 3). The system applies game-like rewards to encourage children to engage with beneficial digital content, while reducing their reliance on inappropriate material. It makes family media rules more engaging and less restrictive. Parents allocate a star rating according to the type of content and ask children to colour the stars based on the parents' decisions. For example, educational videos may be given two stars, positive cartoons two stars, content with

age-appropriate language one star, and non-beneficial or random/trending videos no stars, with an accompanying penalty. Children are required to collect stars each week, which can then be exchanged for useful rewards such as books, food, travel experiences, stationery, or other items they need.

Fig. 3. "Smart Digital Media" approach for kids

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study investigates parents' perceptions of the *Elsagate 2.0* phenomenon on YouTube and their awareness of media literacy in protecting their children from harmful content. Through qualitative interviews with Malaysian parents, the research highlights the vulnerability of Generation Alpha children to the negative effects of *Elsagate* content. Parents recognise that children are at a developmental stage that makes them more vulnerable to harmful content due to their limited ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy. The findings demonstrate the need for parental involvement to guide children through the digital world. The study also reveals that all participants have higher education, which appears to influence their proactive strategies in monitoring their children's online activities. Educated parents were more likely to engage in media literacy practices, such as co-viewing, utilising parental controls, and discussing content with their children to ensure online safety. This highlights the potential role that educational background plays in shaping the effectiveness of media literacy strategies.

The study emphasizes the importance of media literacy skills, including the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, create, reflect, and act, in safeguarding children from inappropriate online material. Parents in the study expressed the necessity of staying informed about current media trends and employing tools like parental controls to filter harmful content. This study suggests that parents can implement "Smart Digital Media" approach to provide guidance to educate kids to watch wisely by involving innovation in gamification.

In addition, the research also found that while the focus was on the negative impacts of *Elsagate content*, YouTube also provides educational benefits, such as improving language skills. Therefore, future research should explore both the positive and negative impacts of YouTube and consider a mixed-methods approach for a more comprehensive understanding.

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