



## Brief Summary on book publication:

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# Socialization in a Changing Media Environment. On the Role of the Communicative Figuration Family.

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## Introduction: Socialization in a changing media environment

As part of the comprehensive process of social transformation, which is summarized in the professional literature with the concept of (deep) mediatization (Hepp 2020), communication is increasingly being realized with the help of (digital) media and shaped by them. No other area of the social and technical environment has changed as much in recent decades as the digital communication structure. In flux are not only the media environment (totality of potentially available media services and content in a society), but also the media ensemble (totality of media services and content used to construct social realities) of social domains (e.g., families, peers and school classes) and the media repertoires of individuals (totality of media used by individuals for their inclusion in the social realities relevant to them). As part of the mediatization process, the (spatial, social and temporal) boundaries between social domains are redefined. This results in numerous challenges for the socialization of individuals, i.e., for their confrontation with the social and material environment, which leads on the one hand to communization and on the other hand to the acquisition of competencies, which affect the relationships of autonomy and heteronomy, proximity and distance, and belonging and distinction. In the current public debate as well as in the professional discourse, there are different assumptions about the possible consequences of the mediatization process for the socialization of children: Children are confronted earlier and earlier with the possibilities, but also the risks, of Internet usage. On the one hand, the multitude of media available in the household means that children's use is more individualized and takes place outside the parents' field of vision, which can have a negative effect on the relationship between family members (e.g., Sonia Livingstone 2002: "living together separately"). On the other hand, it is emphasized that family members can stay in contact more intensively through digital media, like via a "digital umbilical cord" (Buckingham 2013), and various opportunities arise for parents to monitor the child's activities.

## Objective and research question

The objectives of the ConKids study are to (1) provide insights into the influence of different media on changes in communicative practices and social relationships, (2) shed light on the conditions and factors for successful media-related socialization, (3) identify conditions for favorable or unfavorable negotiations of autonomy and heteronomy, proximity and distance, and belonging and distinction in the context of different social domains, and (4) reveal indicators for typical developmental or situation-specific changes (or disturbances) in the socialization process. Finally, the study aims to make an

innovative contribution to children's media and media-related socialization research. Specifically, the following research questions guide this effort:

- To what extent do life course transitions influence children's media repertoires and their interactions in different social domains?
- How does the socialization performance of families (as a social domain) change in connection with other social domains?
- To what extent does the socialization process of children differ regarding the media ensemble and the associated prevailing attitudes and values in the social domains?
- How do children deal with these challenges and which factors crystallize as relevant and conducive to successful socialization?

## Methodological design of the study and description of the panel

The study is designed as a qualitative longitudinal study with two cohorts and is based on a sample of a total of 32 families from northern and southern Germany who participated in two survey waves within the project period. In the younger cohort, the children were about six years old at the time of the first wave (cohort 1; n=16). In the older cohort, children were approximately ten years old at the same time (cohort 2; n=16). Thus, in both cohorts, the children were shortly after the institutional transition to primary or secondary school and thus after entering a new stage of life that often requires repositioning in a new social environment.

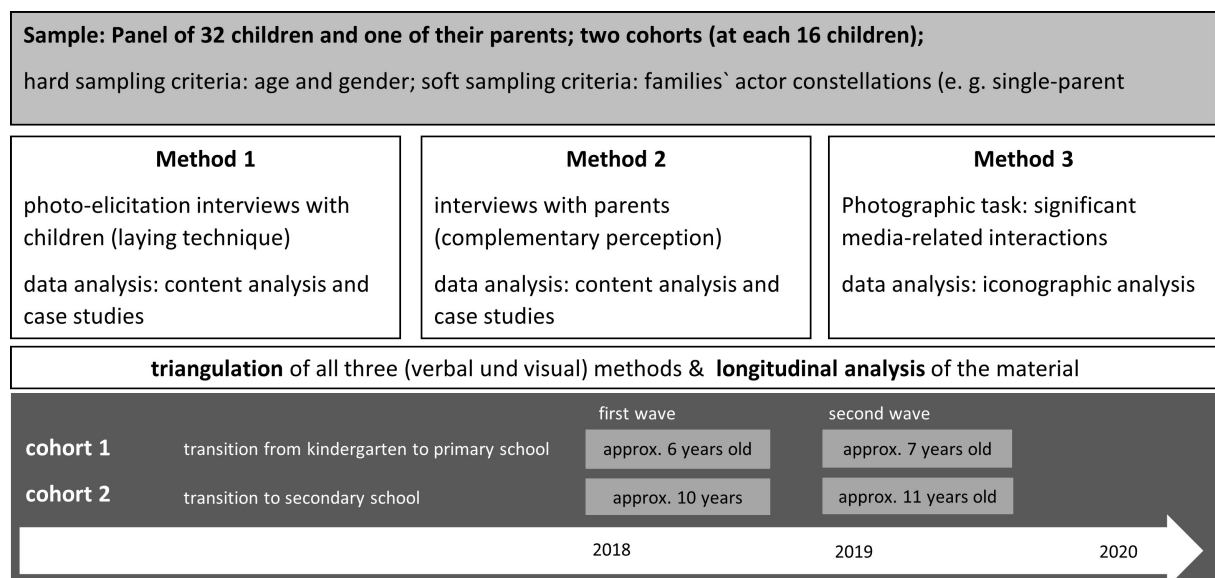


Fig. 1: Design of the study (cf. Potzel & Lampert 2022, p. 59)

The panel design allows for several types of comparisons that are of interest considering a changing media environment:

- Cross-sectionally, children can be compared within each of the two cohorts.
- Longitudinally, changes across the different survey periods can be examined for both cohorts.
- On the one hand, the two cohorts can be compared cross sectionally. On the other hand, direct comparisons can be made that allow conclusions to be drawn about deep mediatization in childhood when the younger cohort reaches the age that the older cohort was at the beginning of the surveys.

## Survey methods

### **Method 1: Qualitative interviews with children & picture laying technique:**

In preparation for the qualitative interviews with the children, the families were asked to take pictures of the media that the child uses/can use and to send the pictures to the research team. In the interview situation, the children were first asked to classify the different media according to their personal importance (very important, less important, not important). In the second step, they were asked to associate people (e.g., family members, peers, or teachers) with these media according to their role in communication and interaction. Interviewers asked about the specific forms of interaction characteristic for each media practice (e.g., family disputes over media, sharing media). Furthermore, *central topics for the subsequent interview* were the child's individual media repertoire and the family's media ensemble; familial media use patterns and talking about media in the family; shared media practices and topics with/within the social domains of peers and school; and the role of institutional transition.

### **Method 2: Qualitative interviews with parents:**

Parents were usually interviewed after the children. The guideline primarily included questions about personal needs and the child's media repertoire, as well as about important actors, guiding themes and communicative practices. In doing so, it connected to the topics of the child interview and was supplemented by a description of the family's media ensemble and their own family-related media usage. The parent was also shown the result of the laying technique and given the opportunity to comment on it and verbally add to it.

### **Method 3: Photographic task:**

Following the interviews, the children and parents were asked to re-enact typical media usage situations in the home environment. They were asked to choose a situation in which they both felt comfortable, or which was associated with positive feelings and a situation that was perceived negatively. The interviewers took care of the photography. The interviewees could have several photographs taken and decide for themselves which photograph best suited the task. The main purpose of the photo task was to start a conversation with the parents and children about typical positive and negative usage situations.

## Results

### Media repertoires of children

1. The children's media repertoires differ noticeably within a cohort. The differences between the older and younger cohorts are greater than those within cohorts or between survey waves.
2. Children are increasingly acquiring practical media skills through informal and formal learning processes (e.g., reading or operating skills), which open access to new media practices and expand their own media competence.
3. Parents are increasingly relaxing regulations in this context and granting more freedom for unaccompanied media usage.
4. Children's media-related interests and practices are becoming increasingly differentiated, in some cases combined with the desire to use certain content together with the family and/or on their own. Particularly among older children, specific interests of their own are emerging in media use.

The change in the media ensemble tends to favor individualized media repertoires and less connecting communication: Households have an increasing variety of media devices, and children are provided with their own (used and new) ones. As a result, children develop their own media repertoires with devices, applications and content that reflect their individual interests. Individualization tends to make connecting communication within families more difficult.

### Media-related negotiation processes

#### *Proximity-distance relations*

In families, media practices and interests play a central role in the creation and negotiation of proximity and distance in the relationship between family actors. On the one hand, *proximity can be established* through shared media interests and practices. In particular, in the younger cohort, shared media practices, such as the use of print media or the reception of films and series with parents and siblings, contribute to the creation of closeness. In the older cohort, on the other hand, content-related exchanges about common, media-related topics and interests come to the fore in creating proximity. In addition, sibling relationships in both cohorts are characterized by diverse shared media practices. On the other hand, *family members can distance themselves* from each other through specific divergent media interests. For the children, independent and unaccompanied media use opens the possibility of implicitly or explicitly expressing a distancing from other family members. The focus here is on spatial withdrawal to one's own room, where the children occupy themselves with media on their own. While engagement with specific media content, practices or topics plays a rather subordinate role for attempts at distancing among younger children, the increasing desire for self-determination in media use can lead to fewer media practices in which closeness can be established. Over time, siblings increasingly use media separately from each other in some cases due to differing interests; in other cases, certain (shared) media practices or the selection of media content lead to disputes and conflicts between siblings.

### ***Power relations - "control and autonomy"***

As part of the general development process, children demand more autonomy and are increasingly granted more freedom by their parents. However, the degree of control and regulation on the one hand and the degree of self-determination and personal responsibility on the other are negotiated in the family with the help of media and media practices.

The structure of relationships within the family is continuously constructed through communication. The quality of the relationships is also determined in the negotiation of joint and individual media practices. In this process, parents also try to influence their children through their media education. Parents' regulations of children's media use and the children's handling of these parental rules are central aspects of the negotiation of control and autonomy in the parent-child relationship. In the older cohort, children increasingly push for autonomy with respect to their media practices and interests. The children's cognitive and socio-moral development and, linked to this, extended operating skills in dealing with media form the starting point for these tendencies. Older children's increasingly independent use of media is also increasingly oriented toward their peer group and the media practices, topics and interests that prevail there.

### **Media education - Media-related regulations of parents**

Three types of media-related regulation are predominantly found in families. The most common are *time-related regulations* that restrict the duration of children's media usage. In most cases, these regulations apply only to screen-based media, such as the television, computer, smartphones or game consoles. In some families, there are also rules that determine the specific time of children's media usage. A second type of regulation is found in the *setting of content restrictions*. For example, specific audio games, video games or series and films are banned. Parents often base this approach on predefined age ratings. Finally, parents often *regulate access to certain devices or media content*. For example, children must first ask a parent for permission before using the device, or the media in question may only be used in the presence of the parent.

*Media-related conflicts and discussions about existing media rules:* The duration of media use is the most frequently mentioned topic of discussion in the family among the younger cohort. Discussions and conflicts arise above all when parents stop the children in using certain media (after a specified period has elapsed or at the parents' request).

- Regulation of media usage is also used to reward (e.g., additional media time as an incentive for activities) or punish (bans or reduced usage time) children, or are an established educational tool used by parents to influence children's behavior.
- In everyday life, situational interventions by parents occur time and again (e. g., a TV ban as a result of a conflict about TV).

- To enforce media-related regulations, some parents use technical aids such as passwords or access codes for computers, laptops or tablets, but also various applications to restrict children's media use in terms of time or content (e.g., Family Link).

Allowing children to engage in their own unaccompanied activities in the digital communication web leads them into new asymmetrical relationships (e.g., because no attention is paid by parents and children to the rights, they cede to digital media providers).

## Conclusion

Children are being integrated at an ever earlier age into an increasingly condensed interdependent web of network-based communication. In the process, they distance themselves from their parents' efforts to regulate them as they grow older. The freedom they gain is used for more media-related interactions on their own and communication with peers. At the same time, however, they become data suppliers for media companies and an attractive commercial target group in the process. Accordingly, children must develop comprehensive self-regulation skills at an ever earlier age as a prerequisite for autonomy and (self-determined) action. Since they are usually developmentally unable to do this, or can do so only to a limited extent, they are involved in a wide range of communicative online practices which, on the one hand, open experiences of self-efficacy, but, on the other hand, overtax them in terms of the externally determined logic of exploitation (by the media providers).

## Literature

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Suggested quotation

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Further information: <https://sozialisation.net>