Parents' Views of Video Games: Habitus Forms in the Context of Parental Mediation

Henrike Friedrichs, Friederike von Gross, Katharina Herde, and Uwe Sander
Faculty of Educational Science, Bielefeld University, Germany

Abstract
This research project was conducted to explore parental attitudes towards and their mediation of video games. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 28 parents (14 couples) assessed their media-related habitus, their media-educational habitus and the interaction between the habitus. The results show that the media-related habitus has a significant influence on the media-educational habitus.

Keywords: *parental mediation, video games, media-educational habitus, media-related habitus*

This study presents and discusses empirical evidence in the little-visited field of German-speaking parents' opinions and attitudes to the use of video games by their children. Only a few scholars have addressed this topic in recent years (MPFS, 2012; Wagner, Gebel, and Lampert 2013; Junge 2013; Kammerl et al. 2012) In the study reported here, 14 families with children aged 6 to 17, both parents took part separately in qualitative, semi-structured interviews. The interviews explored the use of video games by their children, the parents' own experience with video games, their ideas about and attributions of video games and the styles of mediation they applied when it comes to gaming. Based on the data interpreted by means of qualitative content analysis (cf. Kuckartz 2012), the media-related habitus as well as the media-educational habitus of the parents could be reconstructed.

Media and Habitus Forms

Bourdieu describes the habitus as a system of consistent and transferable dispositions that are the basis for generating and structuring practices, ideas and attributions (cf. Bourdieu 1993, 98). The habitus has two facets: The habitus is "structured structure" (Bourdieu 2010, 166), shaped by one's position in the social structure and it is "structuring structure" (ibid. 166) which is because the habitus acts as "modus operandi" (ibid. 168), as a "generative formula" (ibid. 166). Bourdieu found that the habitus influences the personal preferences for many choices in everyday life up to gestures and mimicry of a person (cf. Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu 2010).

The theory of media-related habitus has been part of the debate in the social sciences and media education since soon after 2000 (cf. Swertz 2003; Swertz 2012; Kommer 2006; Kommer 2010; Kommer 2013; Kommer and Biermann 2012). The concept of the media-related habitus connects the concept of habitus with the media. Hence, following Kommer and Biermann (2012, 90), the media-related habitus is a system of consistent media-related dispositions, which are the basis for the generation of and the structuring of media-

related practices, ideas, and attributions regarding media and media use. These practices, ideas, and attributions are acquired through the process of localization within the social space and the structural ink to the ontogeny influenced by the media and social environment. The media-related habitus refers to all media but the present study examines only the parents' media-related habitus with regard to video games. Thus it analyses the parents' experience with video games and reconstructs the opportunities and risks of video games from the parents' points of view.

The second focus is on the media-educational habitus of the parents. The media-educational habitus is defined as the system of consistent media-educational dispositions that are the basis for the generation of and the structuring of media-educational practices and of ideas and attributions regarding media education (Friedrichs 2013). Analyzing the media-educational habitus, we looked at parental mediation of video games. In doing so, we reconstructed the media-educational practices of the parents and their views on what are the appropriate ways of conducting parental mediation (e.g., concerning the rules which kind of video games a particular child is allowed to play). Both media-related habitus and media-educational habitus are defined as parts of the whole habitus of a person (Friedrichs 2013).

The concept of habitus can in general be a suitable theoretical basis for issues of media education and parental mediation, for a number of reasons. For example, the concept helps to explain differences in types of mediation between parents from different social backgrounds (cf. Swertz et al., 2014). Furthermore, it can offer an explanation of why pedagogues like teachers or educators do or do not include media into their work (cf. Friedrichs 2013; Kommer 2013).

The Relationship Between the Media-Related and the Media-Educational Habitus: Two Family Portraits

The interviews show that experience of video games, which shapes the media-related habitus, differs a lot between parents, from no experience at all to extensive experience in various video game genres. Some parents have played video games continuously from their own childhood or youth while others stopped playing as they grew older. Some parents never played and therefore had no contact with any video games before their own children started to show interest.

The analysis of the interviews suggests that the media-related habitus plays a key role in regard to the media-educational habitus since the media-related habitus functions as a limiting element. Each person's media-educational practices vis-à-vis video games depend on their general media-related knowledge and experience and on their ideas and attributions in connection with the particular medium of video games. No gender stereotypes were found. Not all of the fathers were gamers and not all of the mothers had negative attitudes to video games.
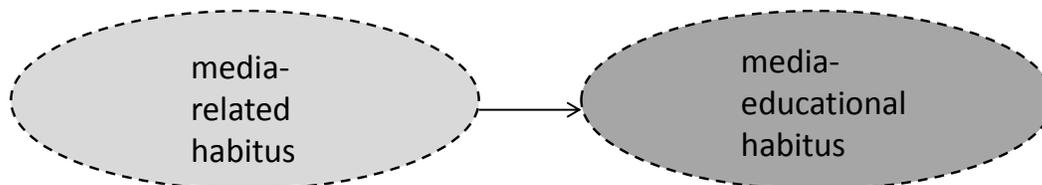

Figure 1: *The limiting effect of the media-related habitus on the media-educational habitus*

We will attempt to clarify the ways in which the media-related and the media-educational habitus interact by introducing two families (the Meiers and the Muellers), in which the parents differ greatly in terms of their experience with video games, and whose media-related habitus differ greatly.

The Meiers have four children. The father is 37 years old and a blue-collar worker, the mother is a 33-year old housewife. They have a 7-year old daughter, and three sons aged 6, 9, and 11. All of the children play

video games. The daughter plays roughly every two days for 30 to 60 minutes. Mrs. Meier is a frequent video game player.

The Muellers have two children. Both parents are 44 years old. The father is a carpenter and the mother is a teacher. Their 13-year old son plays video games on a daily basis. His parents allow him to play for two hours a day. His 14-year old sister is not really interested in video games.

Media-Related Habitus

Experience with Video Games Among the Parents. Both Meier parents are gamers themselves. The father started playing when he was around 9 years old, and he has been playing ever since. The mother has been playing video games since she turned 14. Currently, she plays between one and six hours daily, depending on her schedule and how busy she is with her daily duties. Both parents use video games to relax.

By contrast, neither Mueller parent plays video games. The father never played video games when he was young. He has no knowledge of the different gaming genres or particular games and calls himself a "Neanderthal" on this topic. The mother is slightly better informed but she has barely ever played, and, just like the father, she has no interest in doing so.

Opportunities and Risks of Video Games from the Parents' Point of View. The Meiers know the video gaming market really well. For the Meiers, video games signify, above all, entertainment and an opportunity to socialize. Both parents favor video games for children if they see a learning effect, in addition to the entertainment value, as mother Meier states:

> There are indeed a few video games where I would say that the kids get a chance to learn something. There are a few strategy games, for example, where you need the cornfield first, and then the mill, to make flour out of the wheat. And then the baker takes the flour, and takes the water from the well, and, well, he makes the bread. That way, they learn how certain things are interconnected and go together.

Similarly, the Muellers emphasize learning as a positive side effect for the children: To learn how to use a computer is a skill which is indispensable nowadays in daily business life, they reason. As with the Meiers, father Mueller feels that strategy games, in which his son "for once has to use his brain" are a better choice. He compares strategy video games to analog chess games. The mother emphasizes the fact that video games give her son the opportunity of facing challenges and overcoming them. Moreover, she feels that educational games are useful for younger children.

Both Meier parents prefer playing video games to using other media such as TV. They say that when they play video games they get to be active, as opposed to just sitting in front of the TV and watching, which they perceive as a very passive activity.

Both couples acknowledge the risks associated with video games for children and teenagers. The Meiers—who are enthusiastic gamers themselves—see risks arising from games that are not age-appropriate, as they may cause anxiety, stress or aggression. From their own experience, both Meier parents feel that video games may lead to aggressive behaviors, even in adults.

They see further risks in games that do not challenge the children mentally. In their opinion such games are not useful at all:

> Personally, I would say that 90% of the games are garbage because they treat you as though you were a robot. You're being degraded to someone merely pressing buttons. You sit in front of the screen and you have button A and button B, and you're pressing A-B-A-B. (father Meier)

As a consequence, the Meier parents forbid the use of games like these.

Mr. Mueller emphasizes above all the risk that the children may miss out on real-life experiences. While he as a carpenter would know what to do in many situations, he feels that many teenagers nowadays are overwhelmed by something as simple as using a nail or a screw. He also regards the activities of his childhood and teenage years, playing outside and enjoying the fresh air, as far more valuable for childhood development than playing games, as his son does. Unlike the Meiers, Mr. Mueller sees the video games—rather than the TV—as the medium by which one consumes only passively without mental exertion. Both Mueller parents agree that too much gaming, especially playing violent games, can lead to aggressive behavior, and that an excessive consumption of video games has a negative effect on children and teenagers. The father also emphasizes the danger of not being able to distinguish between virtual and actual reality. The mother sees other risks: firstly, that the excessive use of video games may come at the expense of the use of other media, like the book, and secondly that online role playing games bring dangers from peer pressure:

> What I find dangerous is that these virtual realities and these communication games about which I am thinking—and this is exactly what I am seeing about him right now, he arranges meetings: "I have to go. I have to go to the computer because: the others are also there." I find that very, very, very dangerous. Also from the point of view of the potential toward addiction, where you can't get out of it anymore.

Media-Educational Habitus

To reconstruct the media-educational habitus of the parents participating in the study, we also looked at their orientation towards the child's needs and their media-educational activity level with reference to Wagner et al. (2013). With regard to video games orientation towards the child's needs refers to the attempt to formulate mediation practices based on all of the child's needs, reactions and perceptions. The media-educational activity level refers to the total volume of parental interventions in their children's use of video games, including both creating rules around the games-playing itself and around the surrounding communication and encouraging playing. In the analysis of the data, the dimensions used by Wagner et al. (2013) have been extended to include a third dimension of the media-educational habitus, that of media-educational ideas and attributions, which includes the parents' subjective views of the importance of parental mediation, their ideas of what constitutes parental mediation, the guiding principles they use (e.g., USK,[i] PEGI[ii]) or similar institutions for the protection of youth in the media), and how—when it comes to video games—they view their own style of parental mediation.

Looking at both sets of parents' orientation towards the needs of the child allows us to suggest conclusions about the relationship between their media-related and their media-educational habitus. Parents who like to play games themselves have a more distinct orientation towards the child's needs than those who have little experience. The Meiers, for example, choose the games based on how they expect each child to react:

> (…) I'm thinking it's "Gothic," yeah, and when I see it, well: I started playing it and I realized: "that's really gloomy." And I know: Pascal [11 years old] will have nightmares if he sees that. But it wouldn't bother Mathias [9 years old]. He is not bothered by violence. He doesn't mind, but he's not like: "wow, blood, how cool!" either. That means: you could let him play that. (father Meier)

Less experienced parents too tend to have some idea of the importance of the use of video games for their children, but the specific needs of their children play little or no role in formulating regulations. The more experienced parents focus a lot less on the risks of the games, perhaps because of their more positive view of video games, though this more positive view does not prevent them rejecting some particular games or genres. Their choice of games is based on their own experience of playing them and their detailed knowledge of them, and is more nuanced than that of less experienced parents. They do not accept without question the

recommendations of institutions for the protection of minors in the media like the USK or PEGI, but they adapt them for their own children. They do not reject such guidelines; indeed, they see the benefit of recommendations especially for inexperienced or unsure parents who might find making assessments overwhelmingly difficult. Furthermore, they feel that the USK guidelines can be seen as a good basis for media education as it both offers responsible advice and saves parents a lot of effort.

To make this point clear we introduce a third family from the panel. In the Schmidt family the father (34 years old) is an experienced player whereas the mother (34 years as well) does not play at all. Their oldest child is a 16-year-old boy who plays video games regularly. The father says:

> In my opinion parents should control what their children are playing. That`s a fact. That`s clear. We don`t have the USK for no reason here in Germany, which controls video games and I think their guidelines are a good guiding principle. Well, USK 16 [authors' note: games allowed for players of 16+] is a bit complicated to enforce all the time but USK 12 [authors' note: games allowed for players of 12+] is useful for younger children and there is no discussion concerning USK 18 [note by the authors: adults only]. That`s basically it. Parents don`t have to play themselves. Just follow the rating.

The findings indicate that less experienced parents often make use of the recommendations without questioning them. In addition, some families have confidence in social discourses about video games (e.g., they trust the programs and games offered by public broadcasters) as shown in the responses of another panel family, the Beckers. Both parents are over 50 and their daughter is seven years old. The father has some basic knowledge of gaming but does not play himself. The mother does not play at all and never has. Their daughter likes to play browser games occasionally but does not ask to play a lot. Because both parents have so little knowledge and because they have "considerable confidence" in the public broadcasters' socially accepted programs they decide to place their trust in the games offered by their Internet websites. According to father Becker:

> We assume that we don`t need to control all the games on the "Sendung mit der Maus" [authors' note: a well-known TV program for preschool children by a public broadcaster in Germany] Website. We have considerable confidence in the pre-school program of the public broadcasters. That´s why we don`t test all the games before our daughter plays them. That`s the field in which she can choose for herself.

Both couples with experience of video gaming and those without it limit their children's use of video games. The less experienced parents focus especially on the quantitative aspects of video game usage and have a more critical view than the more experienced parents of how much time should be spent playing, and how often. Moreover, the more experienced parents analyze their children's play behavior in greater detail, and, unlike the less experienced parents, play video games together with their children. Accordingly, the less experienced Muellers are not very interested in their son's playing: the son tries to inspire excitement in his parents about playing, without success. Mother Mueller pointed out:

> He bought, yeah, exactly, a bike racing game, and the idea was that Jens [the father] would play with him, because he likes bike races. You had to, somehow—I mean, I'm not sure—you had to do a race, buy players, and somehow, I mean, it was really boring actually. But he does try to draw you in. But no one is really interested in that (laughs), and there are more important things to do.

The media-related habitus does influence the media-educational habitus in this case as well. If the parents are or have been gamers themselves, their media-educational activity level tends to be higher.

Independently of their own experience, both couples view their parental mediation of video games as part of their parental duties. As mother Meier explains:

> They start working with computers in second grade. Banning it completely at home is the wrong approach, in my opinion, like I said: if it happens under the parental supervision, and not like: the kid comes home at 1:30pm, but Mom is working till 4pm, and the kid is unsupervised. I'm not okay with that. But as long as Mom and Dad know what the kids are up to, I think it's okay.

Future Prospects

Other studies have painted a similar picture of parental mediation, particularly with regard to video games, but none using Habitus-specific explanations. We find, though, that through these specific explanations it is possible to understand better a range of ideas, attributions, and practices around parental mediation. Future studies should take a closer look at possible feedback effects between the media-educational habitus and the media-related habitus and at the overall parenting style, which we would like to define as educational habitus. It can be assumed, for example, that the overall parenting style will closely resemble the style of parental mediation: parents who are generally restrictive are likely also to be restrictive about their children's use of media. It will be important to explore the relationships between parents' perspectives on video games (media-related habitus), their own parental mediation towards video games (media-educational habitus) and their children's views on the parental mediation. We would like to conduct two separate quantitative surveys, one for the parents and one for the children. By analyzing the responses from the survey of the parents, a typology of different styles of parental mediation of the children's use of video games, i.e. different media-educational habitus, can be reconstructed. To obtain a deeper insight into these different types of parental mediation, qualitative semi-structured interviews with children from selected families will be included in the design.

References

Bourdieu, P. 1993. *Sozialer Sinn. Kritik der Theoretischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp.
———. 2010. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London/New York: Routledge.
Friedrichs, H. 2013. "Der Medienerzieherische Habitus Angehender ErzieherInnen und Bedingungen für die Ausübung von Medienerziehung in Kindertagesstätten." *Medienimpulse*, 4. Accessed December 10, 2014. http://www.medienimpulse.at/articles/view/611.
Junge, T. 2013. *Jugendmedienschutz und Medienerziehung im digitalen Zeitalter. Eine explorative Studie zur Rolle der Eltern*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
Kammerl, R, L. Hirschhäuser, M. Rosenkranz, C. Schwinge, S. Hein, L. Wartberg, and K. U. Petersen. 2012. *EXIF – Exzessive Internetnutzung in Familien. Zusammenhänge zwischen der exzessiven Computer- und Internetnutzung Jugendlicher und dem (medien-) erzieherischen Handeln in den Familien*. Accessed December 10, 2014. http://www.bmfsfj.de/RedaktionBMFSFJ/Broschuerenstelle/Pdf-Anlagen/EXIF-Exzessive-Internetnutzung-in-Familien,property=pdf,bereich=bmfsfj,sprache=de,rwb=true.pdf.
Kommer, S, and R. Biermann. 2012. "Der mediale Habitus von (angehenden) LehrerInnen. Medienbezogene Dispositionen und Medienhandeln von Lehramtsstudierenden." In *Jahrbuch der Medienpädagogik* (Volume 9), edited by Renate Schulz-Zander, Birgit Eickelmann, Heinz Moser, Horst Niesyto, and Petra Grell, 81-108. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
Kommer, S. 2013. "Das Konzept des 'Medialen Habitus': Ausgehend von Bourdieus Habitustheorie Varianten des Medienumgangs analysieren." *Medienimpulse*, 4. Accessed December 10, 2014. www.medienimpulse.at/articles/view/611.
Kuckartz, U. 2012. *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung*. Weinheim und Basel: Beltz Juventa.

Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverband Südwest (mpfs). 2012: FIM-Studie 2011. *Familie, Interaktion & Medien*. Accessed December 10, 2014. http://www.mpfs.de/fileadmin/FIM/FIM2011.pdf.

PEGI, 2015. "Frequently Asked Questions. What is PEGI and why was it built?" Accessed February 16, 2015. http://www.pegi.info/en/index/id/26/#question_0.

Swertz, C., G. Kern, and E. Kovacova. 2014. "Der mediale Habitus in der frühen Kindheit." *Medienpädagogik. Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis der Medienbildung* 22: 1–18. http://www.medienpaed.com/Documents/medienpaed/22/swertz1412.pdf.

USK, 2015. "Welcome to the USK." Accessed February 16, 2015. http://www.usk.de/en/.

Wagner, U, C. Gebel, and C. Lampert. 2013. *Zwischen Anspruch und Alltagsbewältigung. Medienerziehung in der Familie*. Düsseldorf: Landesanstalt für Medien Nordrhein-Westfalen.

---

[i] USK is the German abbreviation for the Entertainment Software Self-Regulation Body, an organization which has been voluntarily established by the computer games industry. It is responsible for the classification of computer games in Germany (cf. USK 2015).

[ii] The PEGI [Pan-European Game Information] systems provides parents and caregivers with detailed recommendations regarding the age suitability of game content in the form of age labels and content descriptors on game packages (cf. PEGI 2015).