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"You just have to join in" – A mixed-methods study on children's media consumption worlds and parental mediation

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Abstract: In contemporary society, childhood is characterized as mediatized and commercialized. Media consumption worlds (MCWs) are a phenomenon that mirrors both aspects. They are narratives that are presented through various media platforms, games, and merchandising products. In this paper, the concept of children's MCWs is developed theoretically and investigated empirically using the case of primary school children's appropriation of MCWs as well as parental mediation and attitude in Austria and Germany. A mixed-methods design was applied, starting with qualitative interviews with children and their parents and followed by an online survey for parents (N=327). The study revealed that children find individual ways to deal with MCWs, some of which foster creativity and self-expression but also consumerism. The parents' attitude is ambivalent. They view MCWs as beneficial in terms of creativity, positive values, and as peer group experience. However, parents observe critically that MCWs lure children to the media and to consumption.

Keywords: media consumption worlds, mediatization of childhood, commercialization, parental mediation, mixed methods

1 Introduction: Childhood in a mediatized world

In contemporary societies, children are surrounded by, and exposed to, media from the day of their birth and even before. The media act as central sources of information and "agents of socialization" (Paus-Hasebrink and Hasebrink, 2015, p. 296). They provide orientation, offer room for conversation with parents but even more with peer groups, and give guidance for working on identities. No other socialization agent will teach them more about the world than the media, as Dafna Lemish (2018, p. 364) put it for the medium of television. Above all, the children's favorite characters presented on different platforms become role

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models that act as guides and companions through socialization (Schuegraf, 2014, p. 348). The ubiquity of mobile internet-enabled devices in households and the creation of ever new electronic 'toys' with licensed images from movies and TV series such as children's editions of digital cameras, smartphones, and even interactive toys help girls and boys to draw from a vast repertoire of media. Today, digital media play a role even for the youngest. According to an Austrian survey addressed to parents, almost three-quarters of the 0- to 6-year-old children use internet-enabled devices at least occasionally – and that from an average age of 12 months (Saferinternet, 2020). The wide range of apps existing for toddlers corresponds with this phenomenon. The older the children are, the more their bedrooms are equipped with media devices that enable private media use (Chambers, 2016, p. 69). In times of convergent media and cross or transmedia productions (Jenkins, 2006), the young no longer access media in the form of isolated and finalized practices but across platforms as a holistic experience (Hasebrink and Hepp, 2017). Regardless of specific practices, the media's relevance has recently increased markedly, since the Covid-19 pandemic, the school closures and social distancing that followed it all contributed to increased media use among children (Education Group, 2020).

Childhood in its entangled relationship with the media can be described as mediatized childhood (Drotner, 2005; Paus-Hasebrink and Hasebrink, 2015, p. 296). For the purpose of the research at hand, three aspects of a children's mediatized environment are singled out:

First, childhood is increasingly becoming commercialized. Marketers establish a consumer-friendly environment, for instance, with media brands distributed through a multiplicity of platforms and products (Paus-Hasebrink and Hasebrink, 2015, p. 297). The occurrence and acceptance of digital media have pushed the already existing commercialization of childhood (Wasko, 2014, p. 113), including new developments such as kidfluencers on social media (Rasmussen, Riggs, and Sauermilch, 2021). Since children influence their parents' buying decisions (Giroux and Pollock, 2011, p. 74), they are addressed as customers at an ever-younger age (Paus-Hasebrink and Hasebrink, 2015, p. 297). Moreover, marketing not only affects purchases but children's identities as well (Chambers, 2016, p. 176). The commodification of childhood has even led to the invention of the marketing term "tween" for pre-adolescent boys and girls, aged between eight and twelve, who marketers address in specific ways (Sørenssen, 2012, p. 177–178). Shirley R. Steinberg (2011, p. 12) labels the corporate children's consumer culture "Kinderculture", emphasizing that the industry calls upon the young as agential, autonomous, and hedonistic in their attempt to make profits.

Second, children's media are segregated along the lines of gender stereotypes. Although much effort has been put into disregarding and subverting

gender constructions, children's media and toys, and the respective marketing strategies persist in being differentiated in terms of gender representations and roles (Dinella and Weisgram, 2018; Steinberg, 2011, p. 45). Offers for boys tend to be associated with activity and rationality, offers for girls with relationships and emotions and give special attention to female characters' appearance (Lemish, 2013, pp. 179–180). Moreover, the "nature of brands is deeply gendered" (Nairn, Griffin, Gaya Wicks, 2008, p. 633; see also Paus-Hasebrink and Hasebrink, 2015, p. 301) as there are brands addressed to girls and others to boys. Moreover, kids are targeted by marketers as adults at a very early stage. In this regard, Meenakshi Gigi Durham (2009) coined the term "Lolita effect". It describes the increasing involvement of ever-younger girls in a "sphere of fashion, images, and activities that encourage them to flirt with a decidedly grown-up eroticism and sexuality" (p. 21). This manifests itself in the form of "hypersexualized girls" with unrealistic bodies devised by the media (p. 100). They imply a world of sexual desire accessible through "consumerism" (p. 50). Even if there has been a trend towards strong female figures ("girl power") in the recent past, the unrealistic and sexualized body standards remain unchanged (Du Plooy, Coetzee, and van Rensburg, 2018).

Third, media addressing the young are marketed globally. "[...] the control of children's media is largely in the hands of a few transnational media conglomerates that dominate the rest of the media landscape" (Wasko, 2014, p. 114). Hence, in many national markets, the most popular media brands come from those global players (Paus-Hasebrink and Hasebrink, 2015, p. 298). These global productions can maximize profit using integrated marketing and by producing multimedia content and large volumes of licensed goods. What Lemish (2018) claims for television is also true for the converging media markets: "Today, children are part of a global audience that transcends local or even regional physical and cultural boundaries in consumption of television programs" (p. 365). This global audience appropriates movies and TV shows, admires celebrities and sports idols from every part of the world (Lemish, 2018, p. 365). However, local productions still have their relevance (Buckingham, 2007, p. 47), which will be addressed later. As Lemish (2018) notes for global TV shows, they are most often North American and – in second position – European productions, which fosters the Western-centric view and is subject to cultural bias (pp. 366–368).

Aim of this paper

Against the background of the above-mentioned theoretical considerations, the paper will investigate children's media consumption worlds as a concrete manifestation of the mediatization of childhood. Media consumption worlds (MCWs)

are cross-media and transmedia productions that use different media platforms (e. g., TV, movies, computer games, print magazines, smartphone apps) to tell a story. The media are complemented by toys, merchandising, and events that offer a specific lifestyle (e. g., the Frozen or Harry Potter lifestyle) and aim to make the productions an emotive experience in children's everyday lives. This experience often takes the form of consumer experiences. Some MCWs even have a focus on non-media components, as is the case with L.O.L. Surprise. These are collectable dolls with lots of accessories packaged as surprises. Here, media references like webisodes or print magazines complement the consumer experience and convey a specific "tween" lifestyle of fun, friendship, music, and fashion.

In this paper, the concept of children's media consumption worlds is developed theoretically and empirically. It was elaborated in the context of a study on children's media and consumer practices entitled "Media Consumption Worlds for Children".[1] The study aimed to investigate the involvement of primary school children in these productions by asking the following research questions:

1. How do Austrian and German primary school children involve themselves in MCWs?
2. How do parents reflect and evaluate MCWs and mediate how these are appropriated by their children?

A mixed-methods strategy was set, which started with qualitative semi-structured interviews with primary school children and their parents. Based on the qualitative results, an online survey addressed to parents of primary school children was conducted.

Before the research design is explained in more detail and the results are discussed, the concept of children's MCWs is elaborated theoretically in the next chapter.[2]

2 The concept of media consumption worlds

Today, the young are trained in a convergent media world in which technology and content are merging and media use is becoming independent of specific devices.

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1 The study was partially (qualitative interviews) conducted as a training research project in the Master's degree program "Media, Communications and Culture" at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria.

2 A prior concept was elaborated in the context of media productions for kindergarten children and preschoolers and is described in the German-language paper by Roth-Ebner (2019).

One manifestation of media convergence is cross-media – a strategy whereby producers create synergies by disseminating their content and images on different media platforms, print products, merchandising, and games and benefit from an integrated marketing strategy (Hagen and Nakken, 2014, pp. 132–133). However, the combination of different media with coordinated content is nothing new. As early as the 19th century, images of media characters were used to promote sales (Gerke-Reineke, 1995, pp. 22–23). In the 1920s and 1930s, the Walt Disney Group enjoyed success with the re-marketing of its cartoon characters in the form of T-shirts, toys, etc. This established the Walt Disney Group as a pioneer for media networks (Hengst, 1994, p. 241). In the 1970s, children's cartoon series such as "Maya the Bee", "Pinocchio", or "Heidi" can be described as media networks. The range of media spread from TV, books, and records to radio plays and merchandising articles. Around the 2000s, the internet and mobile media became established as integral components of cross-media broadcasting. In 2004, a German study on media brands for children was published, which revealed a high relevance of media-spanning marketing strategies at that time (Paus-Hasebrink, Neumann-Braun, Hasebrink, and Aufenanger, 2004). As the result of the foundation of new participation opportunities in the form of the social web, existing narrative patterns have developed further. This is the case with "Transmedia Storytelling" (TMS), a term coined by Henry Jenkins. According to Jenkins (2006), TMS means storytelling "across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (p. 98). Characteristic for TMS is that the main storyline is told *across* different media so that the users (have to) approach the narrative from different angles.[3] Another notable and essential feature of TMS is the audience's participation (Scolari, 2014, p. 70). This is why interactive digital media such as computer games, social networks, and video platforms are important components of transmedia networks. Examples of transmedia productions are the blockbusters Star Wars, Harry Potter, Pokémon, and Frozen. MCWs for children do not always fully match Jenkins' definition of TMS since the main story is not always spread *across* different media but instead submitted in similar or identical versions *through* different media platforms. Hence, they are cross-media productions that, at least, establish transmedia references to complement the main narrative. This happens, for example, when a print magazine portrays the main characters in great depth or a computer game refers to the character's attributes. This hardly has an artistic claim, as is the

3 The terms "cross-media" and "transmedia storytelling" are not clearly delineated. I suggest making the difference in the way the story is told (*through* different media components with cross-media productions and *across* different platforms with TMS).

case with some huge transmedia productions (e. g., "The Matrix" described by Jenkins, 2006). Rather, TMS is used in MCWs as a marketing strategy. A primary focus of marketing is on merchandising, which takes on excessive forms in MCWs for children. Through branded merchandising, consumer products are endowed with extra value (Sekeres, 2011, p. 400). A toothbrush with a Harry Potter portrait is not just a hygiene article but also has playful or symbolic added value; it represents a cultural product and a specific lifestyle.

MCWs pursue a double-sided strategy that was already elaborated by media networks of the past. First, they aim at making the scripts playable. This is in tune with the term "toyetic" coined in the late 1970s by Bernie Loomis, meaning that a narrative text is designed to invite playful staging using many toys (Hengst, 2007, p. 25). Second, toys are charged narratively – a strategy that Dan Fleming (1996) called the "narrativization of toys" (p. 81). Depending on the MCWs' conception, either one of these approaches is at the forefront. The Disney blockbuster *Frozen* serves as an example for the first, and the above-mentioned L.O.L. Surprise toys for the second strategy.

The term "media consumption worlds" includes the "world" metaphor to illustrate that children enter an experiential space with its distinct logic, rules, aesthetics, and affective potential when dealing with these narrations. This is in line with Marie-Laure Ryan (2013), who states that storytelling in the media network creates so-called story*worlds*, which frame and hold together all characters, narrative fragments, and forms of media representation (p. 90). Carlos Scolari (2014) also applies the "world" metaphor according to TMS, emphasizing that the transmedia networks constitute a particular space that is potentially open: "You know where a transmedia narrative world begins but never where it might end" (p. 71). The conceptualization as media *consumption worlds* takes up these considerations and highlights the commercial character of these productions. In this regard, it corresponds to the approach of brand *worlds* in advertising (Diehl and Terlutter, 2022). This advertising strategy aims to strengthen the emotional bond between consumers and the brand. Key images are used to anchor feelings and associations (Diehl and Terlutter, 2022). In MCWs for children, above all, the main characters are used in this regard. They act as trademarks that represent a product or a group of products, as stated by Uwe Hasebrink et al. (2004, p. 283) in the context of media brands. These tight and meticulously planned relations put pressure on children and their parents to consume (p. 287)

This conceptualization of MCWs can also be considered within the context of consumer culture theory, as it addresses "the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

3 Mixed-methods approach

Since MCWs, their appropriation of children, and parental mediation are a complex topic with manifold relationships and context factors, a mixed-methods approach was applied to the study. This strategy is "most suitable when a quantitative or qualitative approach, by itself, is inadequate to develop multiple perspectives and a complete understanding about a research problem or question" (Klassen, Creswell, Plano Clark, Smith, and Meissner, 2012, p. 378). While qualitative methods are appropriate for investigating complex and uncharted problems, quantitative methods allow the occurrence of known phenomena and the detection of patterns and causalities to be measured (Klassen et al., 2012). Combining qualitative and quantitative methods promises a better understanding of the subject matter than a single-method approach (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007, p. 5). Fetters, Curry, and Cresswell (2013) stress three levels of integration in mixed-methods research: the design, methods, and interpretation/reporting level. At each of these levels, several approaches are applicable. In the following, they are described in relation to the research at hand.

At the *design level*, the study follows the exploratory sequential approach since the subject of investigation and the variables for the quantitative research are unknown (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007, p. 75). Hence, qualitative data were collected in semi-structured interviews with primary school children and their parents in separate settings[4]. Afterwards, a quantitative survey addressed the parents of primary school children.

As for the *level of methods*, the study adheres to the approach of building, as "one database informs the data collection approach of the other" (Fetters et al., 2013, p. 2134). So, the small number of interviews was sufficient to explore the field and gain insights into the children's media experiences and parental attitude and mediation. Then, the qualitative results informed the generation of the online questionnaire aiming to generalize the qualitative research results and to detect causalities and patterns.

The merging approach is also relevant because both databases are brought together in the analytical process (Fetters et al., 2013, p. 2140). Survey items were determined based on the interview codes, categories, and key concepts. The survey generation entailed that the qualitatively developed codes and categories were fine-tuned, recoded, and new codes were defined. Thus, the methods

4 In two cases, permission was not given for students' interviews to be used in the research. This is why in one case, only the interview with the parent, and in the other case, only the children's interview could be analyzed.

became integratively effective in both directions. As a result, each of the key concepts revealed by the qualitative analysis corresponds to a survey question and/or item and vice versa.

With regard to *interpretation and reporting*, the concept of narrative weaving is applied, meaning that qualitative and quantitative results are brought together on a "theme-by-theme" (Fetters et al., 2013, p. 2142) basis.

Figure 1 demonstrates the mixed-methods approach applied in the study at hand.

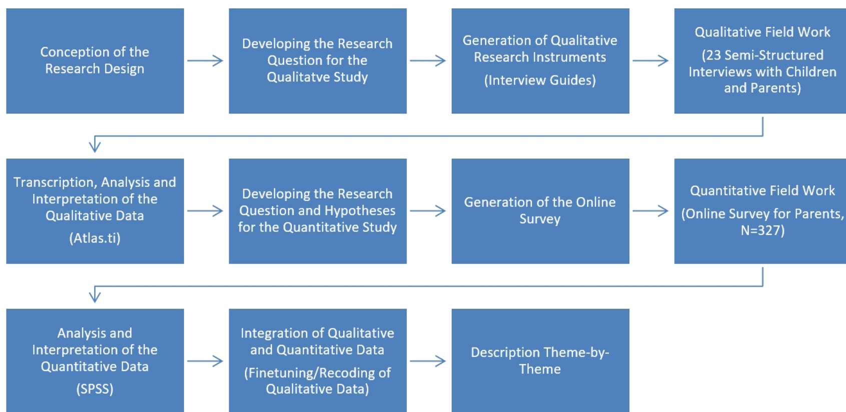

Figure 1: Mixed-methods approach.

Qualitative interviews

The study's first phase was a qualitative exploration of primary school children's media use and media-related play. Firstly, interview guides were developed for the children and the parents. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen primary school children aged five to eleven years and eleven parents in Austria and Germany from December 2018 to October 2019.[5] The focus of the sample selection was on Austria and Germany due to the geographical proximity to the author's home institution. Thirdly, the collected data were analyzed with the help of the software Atlas.ti. Codes were assigned line by line and

5 The number of parents does not correspond to the number of children because one interview was conducted with two siblings, and one parent did not give permission to share the results of the parental interview in the research.

condensed into categories, which were subsequently attributed to the research questions.

Online survey

The second, quantitative phase followed up on the qualitative stage to expand the population and gain complementary insights into causalities and the relevance of certain key concepts that were revealed by the qualitative study. The constructs identified and language used in the analysis of the interviews were transformed into hypotheses, questions, and items for the online questionnaire. For example, when asking about the positive and negative aspects of MCWs, the categories developed in the interview analysis informed the items for the respective survey questions. To determine relevancies and attitudes, a 5-point Likert scale was applied. The survey was online for one month (June 22 to July 22, 2020). It addressed parents of primary school children in Austria and Germany and German-speaking migrants in other parts of the world (the latter to maximize the number of possible answers). Switzerland was not included as a target population because the school system there differs from those in Austria and Germany; the target group of primary school children would consequently not have been comparable. A mixed sampling strategy was applied. First, respondents were invited via e-mail lists and social media and through personal contacts. After checking the demographics of the first 150 respondents, in which academic households were overrepresented, a commercial panel sample (consumerfieldwork.de) was applied to acquire respondents representing non-academic households. Ultimately, the share of academics was 36 %. All in all, 327 questionnaires were included in the analysis. The surveyed parents' offspring was 8.49 years old on average (SD = 1.40); the age ranged from 6 to 12. The gender of the children was equally distributed (41 % female, 40 % male, 18 % not recorded).

The data was collected and analyzed in SPSS 25. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used. The data were presented using means and standard deviations as well as frequencies and percentages.[6]

6 Statistical calculations were conducted by Birgit Senft (statistix.at).

4 Findings

As mentioned above, in the process of narrative weaving, the results of the interviews and the survey data were combined on a "theme-by-theme" (Fetters et al., 2013, p. 2142) basis. Findings are illustrated by figures from the survey and quotes from the interviews.[7]

Children's involvement in media consumption worlds

Asked to name the favorite MCWs of their offspring in the survey, most parental mentions related to Bibi and Tina[8] (42 mentions), Harry Potter (29 mentions), Minecraft (26 mentions), Frozen (24 mentions), and *Die drei Fragezeichen/Die drei Fragezeichen Kids*[9] (23 mentions). These are the most popular MCWs regardless of the children's gender. Yet, as noted in the introductory section, media and toys are intensely segregated along the lines of gender stereotypes. Accordingly, the study revealed different favorite MCWs for girls and boys. For the girls, Bibi and Tina, Barbie, Frozen, and Bibi Blocksberg[10] are the most popular productions, for the boys these are *Die drei Fragezeichen/Die drei Fragezeichen Kids*, Lego City, Minecraft, and Lego Ninjago. Hence, among girls, witch adventures, narratives about princesses, girlfriends, horses, and fashion predominate, while the boys are attracted by thrills and fun, narratives about adventure, and fighting. This corresponds to the above-mentioned gender stereotypes. The children's preferences also demonstrate that not only global productions are relevant but also local ones, since three of the eight gender-specific favorite MCWs are German productions (Bibi and Tina, Bibi Blocksberg, *Die drei Fragezeichen/Die drei Fragezeichen Kids*).

The study has shown that children usually are not fans of just one MCW but follow several MCWs simultaneously. On average, girls and boys engage with six different productions at least several times a month. The kids' approaches to MCWs are diverse and include a vast spectrum ranging from books, TV series, and craft or coloring templates to the internet and smartphone apps. Figure 2 shows the relevance of the media and non-media components of MCWs with books, music, and radio plays or audio books taking leading positions. Yet, other forms

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7 The quotes were translated from German into English for the purpose of this paper.
8 "Bibi and Tina" is a popular German narrative about two girls and their horses.
9 *Die drei Fragezeichen/Die drei Fragezeichen Kids* are popular German versions of the US original "The Three Investigators" that was abandoned in 1990 (Wikipedia, 2021).
10 "Bibi Blocksberg" is a popular German narrative about a girl witch.

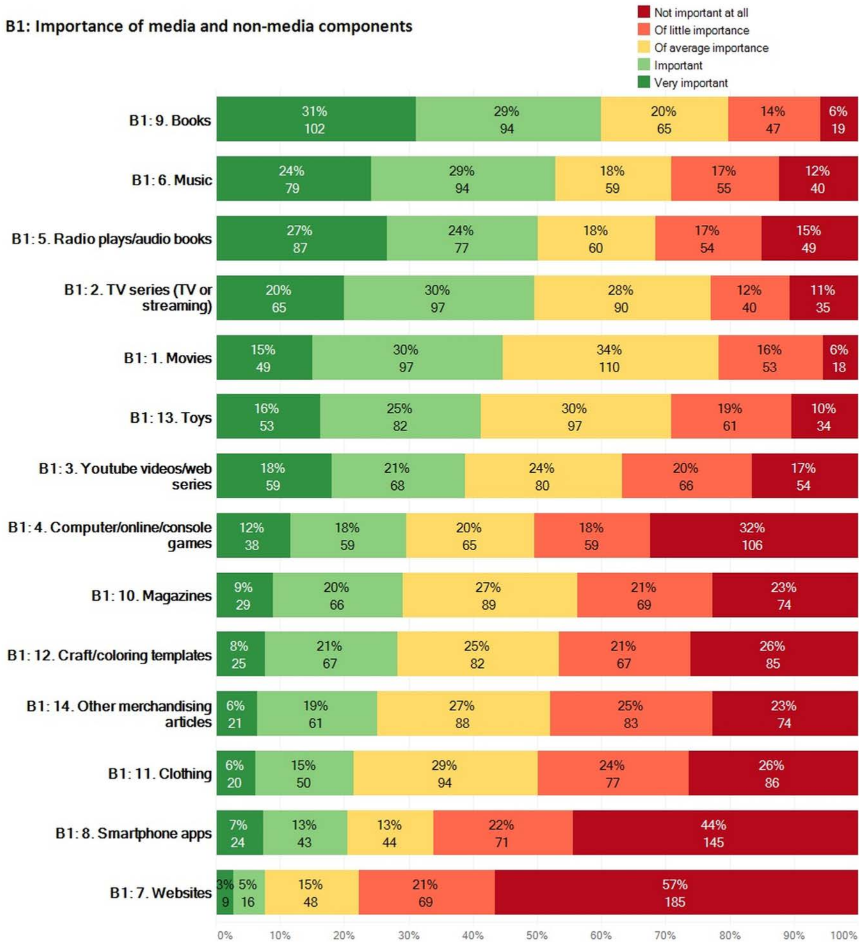

Figure 2: Importance of media and non-media components.

of offer are also relevant, which serves as evidence of the functionality of the media networks. On average, children interact with MCWs through five different forms of offer so that each child arranges its individual media ensemble, including related products.

A striking finding of the study was that MCWs are crazes which appear and disappear. This is not so much true for the market but rather for the children, whose desires change when their peer group finds something else cool or their peer group changes as they get older, and they have to deal with a new developmental task. School entry is a clear turning point. "Before, I used to have everything to do

with Elsa. But I hate her now", was the statement of an eight-year-old girl when the interviewer recognized the *Frozen* bedside lamp in her bedroom. This quotation is an example of many interview reports. For the parents, these changes in fascination mean that branded products such as, for instance, clothes or school bags showing a particular media brand are out of favor from one day to the next, and the offspring longs for new products. The online survey's results coincide with the qualitative findings: 71 % of the parents agreed at least partially to the statement that their children's interest in specific productions only lasts for a particular period of time, then a new trend comes along.

Media and commodities are crucial for social affiliation to a peer group (Chambers, 2016, p. 67; Paus-Hasebrink and Hasebrink, 2015, p. 302). This correlates with one of the most salient findings of the study, which was the intense relevance of peers. Friends and schoolmates are enormously important for entry into MCWs and, above all, decisive for which productions children turn to. Most answers to the survey question concerning where the children discovered their favourite productions related to other children or siblings (47 % mentions) and schoolmates (45 %), followed by TV programmes (38 %).

These peer group effects pile on the pressure for parents to let their offspring participate in those collective experiences and grant them access to media and consumer goods, even at certain costs. The following quote of a mother whose daughter is a fan of the horse story "Wendy" demonstrates this:

> Yes, of course, I don't want her to be bullied at school or at all, that's why you see that she gets a lot of things, but you just can't afford everything yourself, because there are two other children as well, and that is not financially viable at all. But [short pause] with some things you just have to join in. (Mother of a ten-year-old girl)

As the quote implies, merchandising plays a significant role in children's media-related consumer experiences. The girls and boys long for products of their favorite media brand, which cost more than regular products. 39 % of the surveyed parents indicated that their offspring collect products, magazines, figures etc. of their favorite MCW. 33 % stated that they want to own everything to do with it. Since the productions are often negotiated at school, it is crucial which products one has. Four out of ten parents agreed at least partially to the fact that their child is often jealous of what other children call their own in the context of their favorite MCW. Asked what her preferred production was about, a nine-year-old L.O.L. Surprise fan responded in the interview:

> That you have all versions, I mean all of the dolls, for example, from the Glitter Series, from the Eye Spy Series, from the Pets, from the Little Sisters, I mean, all! And from the Hair Goals. (Nine-year-old girl)

As the qualitative and quantitative data illustrate, MCWs invite children to collect and present their products, and the children's practices correspond to this imperative.

Relevance for children's identity and socialization

Concerning identity issues, firstly, MCWs play a role in the social aspects of identity because they are peer-group experiences (as elaborated above). Asked for important activities in the context of MCWs, the parents responded that playing with peers (70 % mentions) and speaking with peers about the productions (68 %) were the most relevant practices, which underlines the peer groups' enormous relevance. Swapping branded products is also a common peer group practice, even if not to the same extent as the above-mentioned since it plays a role for just a quarter of the children. The interviews showed that the main advantage of swapping is that the girls and boys can exchange products that they have twice for something new.

Secondly, the children identify with their favorite characters and involve themselves deeply in the narration. 63 % of the parents agreed in the online survey that their child immerses itself in MCWs. Parents interviewed often speak of their offspring "diving into" the MCW, for instance, the mother of a girl who is a big fan of *Frozen* remarked as follows:

> Yeah, she pretty much dives into the world, so she literally acts it out. And she also expresses herself like in the film, a bit like the dialogues really were, tries to repeat them that way, too. With the voice too and so on. They put themselves entirely in there somehow, as it is possible for them [as well as they can], by performing. But yes, and I think it's a bit like, it's such groupie-like behavior in part, so this longing that you would like to be the one now [...]. (Mother of a five-year-old girl)

The companies' marketing strategies are geared towards these performative practices. For example, children are called on to send in their productions to generate content for websites or magazines. On video platforms, one can find kids performing, for instance, the theme song of "*Frozen*". Thus, children produce content for the MCW and, in this regard, act as "produsers" (Bruns, 2008). In doing so, they generate data gathered by platforms and then re-used for marketing purposes. Hence, the "affective labor" (Martens, 2011) of children becomes usable in a questionable way on the production side.

Thirdly, dealing with MCWs can lead to empowerment for the children. They acquire a great deal of knowledge and are proud of what they know and have collected or even created. The girls and boys often know many details of the scripts

and present themselves as experts. 59 % of the parents agreed that this was the case in the online survey. In many interviews, the children explained the narratives and characters in impressive detail, as the following quote by a Pokémon fan displays:

> [...] you can buy a booklet, in which you can collect the Pokémon cards. Because every Pokémon card has a number. For example, from 147 there are so many ... (shows the cards) 114, 115. And then there is also 112. 110 is sweet. It's like Lucy, but don't think now it would be cute if it evolved because it is a destructive Pokémon. It destroys everything. And this one is powerful because it has 100 times 100 attacks, so powerful. How much is 100 times 100? A thousand? Mhm, 100 times 100 ... or ten thousand? (Nine-year-old boy)

Moreover, these productions engage the children's imagination. Half of the parents surveyed indicated that their offspring could live out their fantasies in MCWs. They invite children to express themselves creatively, for instance, by providing craft patterns or artwork which, according to the survey, 36 % of the girls and boys do. One nine-year-old girl even proudly presented her self-sewn L.O.L. jeans skirt to the interviewer as part of her L.O.L. Surprise collection (illustrated in Figure 3).

Figure 3: L.O.L. collection of a nine-year-old girl.

Fourthly, MCWs offer learning possibilities for the children. Eight out of ten parents surveyed agreed at least partially to the statement that their kids learned something by appropriating these productions. According to these parents, the learning potential lies in dealing with media (59 % mentions), social values (53 %), expertise on specific topics (47 %), and foreign languages (22 %). As the interviews disclose, the latter is the case, for example, when children watch English-language videos or commercials. Moreover, books, which are the most relevant components of MCWs (see Figure 2), can contribute to promoting reading, as the example of the above-mentioned Pokémon fan clearly expresses:

> I would like to have a Pokémon book so that I can read it. [...] And maybe if I have it, perhaps if I have a Pokémon book, and if it is from a film or series, then I can compare it to the TV, to check that it really matches up. (Nine-year-old boy)

In the parental interview, his mother also raised this aspect when she told the interviewer that she would have bought such a book if available but was unable to find one.

As the parents interviewed mentioned, the stories presented often relate to social values such as friendship and support and may positively influence their offspring. For instance, the mother of a Lego Ninjago fan explained:

> It's about friendship and, so to speak, when you're alone, that you often don't really have success, but that it's good to stick together. And even good versus evil is not inherently wrong either. Yes, those are elements that I think are pretty good. (Mother of a seven-year-old boy)

In the survey, the majority (87 %) of the parents also agreed at least partially with the statement that MCWs convey positive values to their children.

Parental mediation and attitude

According to Sonia Livingstone and Ellen Helsper (2008), the term "parental mediation" describes the "parental management of the relation between children and media" (p. 581). In the literature, three types of parental mediation are discussed: 1. restrictive mediation, 2. active, evaluative, or instructive mediation, and 3. social co-using of media (Nikken and Jansz, 2006, p. 182).

The survey on MCWs also revealed these three types. In the following, they will be discussed together with the parents' attitude towards these productions, since attitudes and practices cannot be separated. The data have shown that most parents are interested in the media use of their offspring. 82 % of them indicated

having detailed knowledge about the productions their child is engaged in, at least partially. Even more (86 %) participate in their children's media experience to some extent (e. g., read or watch together, talk about the productions), which is evidence that social co-using is highly relevant.

Asked for their overall judgment on a 10-point scale ranging from "totally harmful to my child" to "very useful for my child", most parents (63 %) rate MCWs as beneficial for their kids, at least partially. Positive aspects of these productions are that they offer inspiration and stimulation (55 % agreement), that they convey positive values (43 %), that the children are motivated to read (41 %), that they promote the offspring's creativity (34 %), that they promote exchange with peer groups (32 %), and that they contain learning potential (28 %)[11]. Interestingly, 57 % of the parents indicated that they themselves can get things done while their kids are dealing with their favorite production, which suggests the interpretation of MCWs as a babysitter substitute.

Yet, parents are also concerned about MCWs. While the above-mentioned general judgment was mainly positive, surprisingly, some of the critical aspects of MCWs explored in greater detail in the study found more agreement than the positive ones. On the one hand, this is evidence of the ambivalence parents feel about MCWs. On the other hand, the parents' positive interpretation is comprehensible since three-quarters of them indicated in the survey that interacting with these productions makes their offspring happy.

The parents' primary concerns related to their children being seduced to the screen (72 % agreement), to the internet (54 %), and to consume (53 %), that the products are not very sustainable or of poor quality (42 %), the skewed messages about masculinity and femininity (31 %), and the proliferation of undesirable values (22 %). The following statement of the above-mentioned mother of a Wendy fan offers a case in point for the apprehension of many parents who criticize the consumption factor:

> Well, I think it's just moneymaking. And so they lure the children with all the things because the children really like such figures and rush to get them [disguises her voice] "that's exactly what I want", "I want to wash myself with this shower gel", or "I would like to sleep with this duvet". Or there are mobile phone covers, you can just buy anything. Or the T-shirts, or that, uh. That's all, so if I buy a Wendy shirt now, it costs me 20 Euros for her, and if I go to the [mentions a popular clothes store] now and buy a standard T-shirt, for example, I can get it in the sale for 5 Euros, but it's the same, just that it has a photo of Wendy or the lettering on it. (Mother of a ten-year-old girl)

11 28 % is the rate for strong agreement and agreement. Another 53 % agreed partly to the learning potential of MCWs.

According to Gary Cross (2014), the relation between parents and their offspring concerning consumerism is ambivalent since adults see children as "'innocents' who must be protected from the consumer market and, at the same time, as recipients of parental love through consumer spending" (p. 18). This ambivalence is also true for the findings of the study at hand, which is clearly illustrated by the following parental statement:

> You can tell, okay, because you just know that she would be really happy about it, that is maybe what creates the pressure. They would think it would be great if they also had something from the range and then, of course, you would like to make that possible somehow, but if you've had enough, that's good too. And if you have one or two things, then it is actually sufficient, then they have something from the range, then it should be enough too. (Mother of a five-year-old girl who is a fan of Frozen)

As mentioned before, most parents view MCWs at least partially as beneficial for their kids, while they also have a media and consumer-critical attitude. In this particular field of tension, half of the parents surveyed agreed at least partly to feeling pressure to allow their children to engage with MCWs. 28 % view it as essential that their offspring can have a say at school about popular productions. Yet, it is just 12 % who feel pressure to buy their kids MCW-related products. As the interviews disclose, nevertheless, the kids influence the parents' purchasing decisions.

The study reported that rules for the children's media use and consumer education measures are common among the parents. Eight out of ten parents surveyed indicated that they have firmly agreed on rules for the use of media and devices. 84 % of the parents observe their offspring when they are online, and 59 % use a child-safety measure set up on their children's devices. Nine out of ten parents find it necessary that their kids learn to save towards something. To sum up, parents allow their offspring to participate in media or consumer practices while simultaneously providing media and consumer education. By doing so, they combine active and restrictive mediation practices.

Educational and competence gap

The online survey revealed that the parents' educational background influences parental mediation and how the children interact with the media. The well-known educational and competence gap comes into play (DIVSI, 2015, p. 17; Kutscher, 2014, pp. 105–106; Nikken and Opree, 2018, p. 1; Paus-Hasebrink, Ponte, Duerager, and Bauwens, 2012; Paus-Hasebrink, Kulterer, and Sinner, 2019).

Parents with an academic degree are significantly more critical of MCWs for children than other groups ($p<0.001$). Their kids engage with significantly fewer MCWs than children of less-educated parents ($p<0.001$). They favor productions that have a strong focus on reading practices and thus are attributed more pedagogical value. In contrast, daughters and sons of less-educated parents prefer MCWs with different appropriation practices (like listening to music or radio plays, watching TV, playing with [online] games, etc.). The survey also showed that children of academic parents spend significantly ($p<0.001$) less time in front of screens – irrespective of MCW involvement. While their offspring spend an average of 1.22 hours per day on a school day in front of screens, the average screen hours of primary school children in non-academic households is 1.94. At the weekend, the proportion is 2.20 in academic versus 3.25 in non-academic homes.

Tellingly, parents with academic degrees are less involved in their children's media experiences than parents with lower educational backgrounds, although not significantly so ($p=0.481$). Parents with lower levels of formal education know more about their kids' favorite MCWs (84 % at least partial agreement compared to 78 % academic parents). Moreover, they participate more in their children's media experience (88 % at least partial agreement compared to 82 % academic parents). One explanation could be that academic parents judge these productions more critically and do not support their offspring's attention at the same intensity level as other parents. However, MCWs are more relevant as a topic of conversation among academic parents and their children (74 % agreement compared to 59 % other parents), indicating that academic parents are still interested in their kids' media experiences.

5 Discussion

According to Maren Würfel (2014), transmedia storytelling is evident when media companies consider how they can make the most profit from a story (p. 2242). This can also be claimed for MCWs. The study has shown that these productions are "commercial supersystems" (Kinder, 1991, pp. 122–123) that reinforce consumer ideology and thus act as training grounds for a capitalist consumer society. Moreover, they promote children's exposure to the media and, in particular, to screens. Yet, they do not only have their downsides. They constitute valuable peer-group experiences, allow participation in the media world, self-expression and acting out creativity, and offer manifold learning possibilities.

Shirley R. Steinberg stresses two scholarly approaches to the commercialized childhood she calls "Kinderculture": The structuralist perspective with an emphasis on "the corporate invasion of childhood and its resulting exploitation" and the agential view focusing on the "'empowering' dimensions of children's participation in commercial culture" (Steinberg, 2011, pp. 10–11; see also Chambers, 2016, p. 72). The second approach emphasizes that young people construct their lives and appropriate media and toys in subversive, creative ways, unintended by the producers (Steinberg, 2011, p. 11). I agree with Steinberg (2011) that both approaches are helpful, as children "can concurrently be exploited and possess agency" (p. 11). Moreover, childhood is not a homogenous cultural phenomenon (Sørenssen and Mitchell, 2011, p. 156), just as little as culture is (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 869). Daniel Thomas Cook's (2014) theory of "commercial enculturation" emphasizes the multiplicity of childhoods and the different ways girls and boys participate in commercial culture (pp. 69–70). Since childhood is interwoven in a complex combination of economic, social, individual, and cultural factors, children make it their own, and (more) qualitative research is needed to explore the manifold practices of appropriation.

According to the study's findings, parents' attitudes towards MCWs and their parenting practices are as ambivalent as the elaborated theoretical approaches. They act within the tension arising between the divergent goals of providing access to these productions and avoiding consumerism.

To sum up, there is no need for media panic and apocalyptic thinking. The results imply that childhood should not be seen in excessively normative terms as children construct their own realities, making sense of, and for, their respective living environments. A behavioral one-fits-all solution is neither appropriate nor necessary. If we want to support the young in their development, it is more beneficial to accompany them on their paths, show deep and earnest interest, and provide a setting in which they can express their feelings, fears, and joy. The interview conversations with the girls and boys in the qualitative study serve as an example because most children appreciated the interviewers' interest in their favorite productions, toys, and leisure activities. Nevertheless, it is essential to frame the children's media use against technological and economic power relations. Given the educational and competence gap regarding parental mediation, there is a vital desideratum for media and consumer education in institutions like nursery schools or schools. Finally, toys and media producers should be held responsible as well. In times of corporate social responsibility, it is legitimate to demand quality productions, toys, and media for children. Under the conditions of a global and unleashed market, this poses a political issue as well.

Limitations

The study at hand sheds light on children's practices in media consumption worlds and parents' attitudes and mediation strategies and was thus able to answer the research questions. In particular, the mixed-methods design turned out to be an appropriate approach to explore complex phenomena. However, the study also shows some limitations. First, the qualitative interviews were conducted by students and were provided for the data set voluntarily. Therefore, some restrictions regarding the interviews had to be accepted. Due to the mixed-method approach and the fact that the qualitative research informed the generation of the online survey, this does not affect the overall findings. Second, the qualitative and quantitative approaches followed a sequential design with the survey succeeding the interviews. As the correlation between the parents' education and their involvement in their children's media use showed ambivalent results, further interviews (after the survey) could help to elaborate more on concrete situations and find out, for instance, why academic parents participate less in their children's media use than other parents. In addition, more interviews with parents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds might be reasonable to gain qualitative data on the educational-gap thesis. Third, in the survey we asked for the level of education of the legal guardians since existing literature referred strongly to correlative effects regarding the educational background. We did not ask for more demographic information regarding the parents as we wanted to keep the number of questions as low as possible. Due to the complexity of the research questions, the questionnaire was very voluminous for the parents. However, we propose to include more variables in future research which will focus either on the children's involvement or the parents' attitude and mediation strategies. Fourth, this study focused on Austria and Germany. In the future, a comparative approach with other parts of the world might be a valuable addition.

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