



Brief Summary on Book Publication:

Lampert, C., Potzel, K. & Kammerl, R. (Eds.) (2025)

Socialization in a Changing Media Environment: On the Expansion and Modification in the Relationship Network.

Baden-Baden: Nomos. Available online as open access e-Book [DOI: 10.5771/9783748963301](https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748963301) and print version.

New Challenges for Socialization in a Changing Media Environment

The [first volume of the ConKids project](#) provided an in-depth outline of how the process of growing up in families is changing under the conditions of a deep mediatized society. In the second project phase, rapid pace of media innovation led to further transformations of the media environment, creating new demands on media-related practices. The integration of AI systems into many people's media repertoires, particularly initiated by *OpenAI's* release of *ChatGPT* in November 2022, is one of the most significant changes. Another example is the AI-based chatbot *MyAI*, which has been integrated into the popular youth-oriented platform *Snapchat*. Concurrently, there is an increasing tendency to datafication in children's media practices (Mascheroni & Siibak, 2021). Users are often unaware of the data collected about them, as well as of manipulative interface designs ("dark patterns") that steer user behaviour to serve the economic interests of platforms (Kammerl et al., 2023). For both children and adults, these hidden mechanisms remain largely opaque, concealing their role in media socialization processes.

Objectives and Research Questions

The ConKids study seeks to achieve the following objects (1) to generate insights into how various media ensembles and repertoires influence changing communicative practices and social relationships; (2) to analyse the impact of media-related attitudes in different social domains on media ensembles and repertoires; (3) to identify the prerequisites for successful media-related socialization that enables agency in media use; (4) to examine negotiations of autonomy and control, proximity and distance and belonging across social domains; and (5) to explore changes in age-specific developmental tasks within a shifting media environment.

Theoretical Framework

The ConKids study is based on the concept of *deep mediatization*. This theoretical framework allows for the definition of media change not merely as the spread of digital technologies but as a form of social transformation in which collective constructions of reality are fundamentally shifted through digital communication. These processes manifest differently across social domains (e.g., family, peers, school) and can be observed through studies of media ensembles of different social domains (the totality of media used for constructing social realities) and individual media repertoires (the totality of media used by individuals for their inclusion in the social realities relevant to them).

Methods and Panel Design

The qualitative longitudinal study encompasses two cohorts and comprises 32 families from northern and southern Germany. The younger cohort (n=16) consisted of children aged approximately six years at the time of the initial data collection; the older cohort (n=16) included ten-year-olds. In the second phase, 28 families continued participation across two additional waves. For the younger cohort, the transition from primary to secondary school was a pivotal issue, while for the older cohort, entry into adolescence became a central theme.

The panel design facilitates research into the conditions under which individuals are growing up in a changing media environment by means of comparisons between both cohorts on different levels:

- *Cross-sectional comparisons* within each cohort.
- *Longitudinal analyses* of changes and development in both cohorts across four data waves.
- *Diachronic comparisons* between the younger and older cohort, examining how the same age group (10 years) differed between 2018 and 2022, thus drawing conclusions on the effects of a changing media environment for childhood.

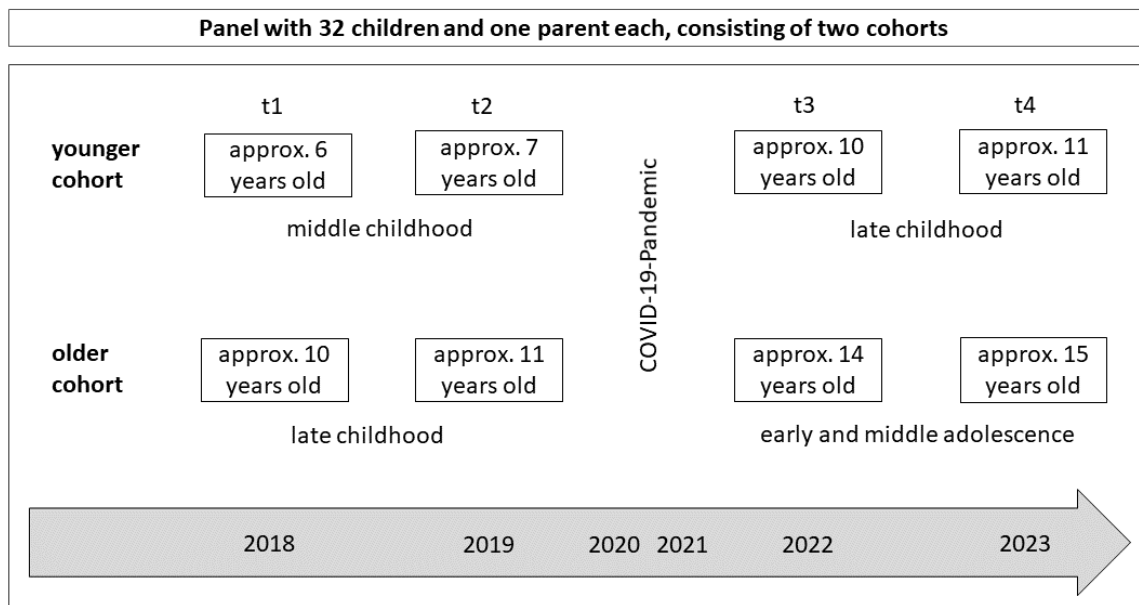


Fig. 1: Panel Design of the Study (English translation) (cf. in this anthology Potzel & Draheim 2025, p. 48)

Methods

Method 1: (Structured) Media Diaries

Media diaries have the capacity to facilitate increased awareness amongst adolescents surveyed of their own media use prior to the interview, to enable recognition of routines involving media and thus provide researchers with insights into individual experiences involving media. A few weeks before the interview, the children and adolescents were therefore asked to keep a media diary for seven days. In addition to documenting the media used and with whom, the daily reflection questions provided in-depth insights into the participants' daily and routine media use. The subjects contained within the media diary could then be explored in greater depth during the interview.

Method 2: Qualitative Interviews with Children and Picture Laying Technique

The qualitative interviews, which were conducted at the families' homes and were guided by a set of questions designed to reflect the developmental abilities of children and young people. Concurrently, the questions were designed to be open-ended, to give the children and young people an opportunity to raise topics and issues of their own choosing. The interviews were documented using a picture laying technique, in addition to other methods. During the interview, the young people were tasked with the organisation of photographs of their own media, which had been sent to the research team in advance, according to personal significance and reflected on relevant people for the use of the respective media. The resulting outcome is referred to as the *media-actor relationship* ('Medien-Akteurs-Relation').

Method 3: Qualitative Interviews with Parents

Subsequent to the interview with the child, typically one parent was interviewed. The interview focused on reflecting on the child's current media use and gaining deeper insights into the family's media habits and parental mediation. The parent interviews incorporated in a series of questions about the child's development, personal assessments of pertinent family topics and the evolution of the family's media ensemble. Furthermore, a potential shift in the significance of the family in relation to the social domains of school and peers was explored in the context of their own child's development.

Expanding Relationship Networks: Changing Roles of Family, School, and Peers

While the family remains the primary context for the development of media practices during childhood (Kammerl et al. 2022), an expansion of the relationship network becomes observable from childhood to mid adolescence – among other things, due to their age and school transitions, children meet new friends and, due to often extended school days, they spend more time at school. Both factors are reflected in changes in the media repertoires of the younger and older cohorts: Peers inspire new media acquisition in leisure time, such as smartphone apps, digital games or films and series, while learning-related media practices are adopted from school. This tends to affect older adolescents more strongly, suggesting that shifts in the media repertoire are gradually taking place are occurring in the response to the broadening of the relationship network and associated changes. In the case of adolescents, new media practices are almost exclusively inspired by their peers. Nevertheless, the relationship with family and parents continues to play a central role.

Autonomy–Control and Proximity–Distance in Families

The family relationships of autonomy and control are characterised in the younger cohort by children's increasing efforts to gain autonomy. This phenomenon has been observed to result in an increase in the media use among children, which is facilitated directly by parents, who allow them more freedom but also responsibility in their media use. Additionally, children have been observed to deliberately circumvent media-related regulations, such as access codes designed to limit usage times. The latter, in conjunction with discussions about rule adjustments for the implementation of newly acquired and existing media, lead to conflicts in many of the families studied. Parents observe this increased autonomy for instance in their children's improved media literacy skills. Even in the younger cohort, some parents report that their children are ahead of them in terms of media skills. This tendency persists among adolescents in the older cohort, who are progressively taking on the role of 'media experts' within their families. In contrast to the younger cohort, rule violations tend to incur fewer consequences. On the one hand, this is attributable to parents' aspirations to inculcate their children responsibility for their own media use in order to teach them a responsible media utilisation. On the other hand, this phenomenon is accompanied by an increasing loss of control over their children's media use. The increased use of digital media in schools poses a challenge to parents and children alike in distinguishing (easily) between recreational and educational media use.

In both cohorts, shared media practices continue to play an important role in establishing and maintaining proximity within the family. In addition to watching videos, films and series together or reading aloud and discussing books, the younger cohort also begins to maintain contact with their family members digitally by communicating via smartphone, for example via messenger services or, in some cases, social media. In contrast to the limited role of reading aloud in the older cohort, the practice of watching the news together is gaining prominence. The generation of distance within the family is primarily attributable to disparities in media interests and preferences, which make it, for example, difficult to select content for shared film evenings. The prevalence of joint family media practices is notably lower, especially among the older cohort. A categorisation of three forms of

(media-related) distancing in families can be proposed: (1) *Physical distance*, which younger and older children create by retreating to their rooms for media usage. (2) *Emotional distance*, for example due to a decreased desire of using media together with parents. (3) *Communicative distance*, for example when older adolescents progressively use headphones, making verbal communication attempts by parents more difficult and leading to annoyed reactions on both sides.

Belonging–Distinction in Peer Groups

Media can play a role in belonging to certain peer groups. The emphasis of this study is directed towards the examination of media practices pertaining to smartphones and digital games among both the younger and older cohorts. While owning a smartphone is pivotal to maintaining communication for children in the younger cohort, a range of smartphone applications are pertinent to friendships in the older cohort: From maintaining contact via messenger, staying informed about the lives of others and current topics among peers via social media, to conducting parallel (video) calls while playing online games. Communicating with peers has often become routine in the everyday lives of young people, as evidenced by the daily exchange of photos via social media applications such as *BeReal* or *Snapchat*. The adoption of specific media practices by children and young people is driven by the desire to align with their peer groups: They read books, watch films and listen to music or download social media apps because their friends do so or use them. These acquisitions have the potential to give rise to arguments between parents and children in both cohorts, and even to the infringement of rules in order to participate in the media practices of friends. This finding indicates a growing emphasis on peers and their role for young people's media repertoires. Concurrently, young people encounter divergent expectations regarding media use from their peers and family members (e.g. the demand for perpetual availability). Furthermore, both the younger and older cohorts recognise peer pressure to use certain media in order to belong. Consequently, the family is not immune to the negotiation of peer group belonging; rather, media-related issues within the peer group also exert an influence on media rules in the family and the family's media ensemble. The school also serves as a significant social domain where children and young people convene with their peers and establish central communication channels among their respective groups, for example through class chats. Concurrently, children and young people do not feel connected to all members of their heterogeneous peer group and sometimes distance themselves from their media practices by not using certain media or using them in different ways than their peers. In both cohorts, gender-related differentiation is a recurring theme, which is particularly evident in stereotypes such as girls not using digital games and boys tending to engage in intensive gaming behaviour.

Transformation of Media Repertoires Over Time

As the results of the first phase of the project have previously demonstrated (Kammerl et al. 2022), despite the presence of individual media interests and practices within the two cohorts, there are more similarities in media repertoires within the cohorts than between children and young people from different cohorts. However, there has been a convergence in media practices between the younger and older cohorts, as children from the younger cohort are increasingly engaging with digital games and social media practices aimed at an older target group at an earlier age. Evident disparities can be identified in the intensity of media use: Older adolescents possessing greater freedom and, consequently, more responsibility for their media use and self-regulation. Furthermore, they reported an increase in the frequency use of media in the classroom.

The ConKids study is a longitudinal investigation that facilitates the tracking of changes in the media repertoires of participating children and young people over a period of five years. The following observations can be made:

1. In both cohorts, there is a clear trend of physical media being replaced by new, digital formats (e.g. CD players by music streaming). In many cases, media that were previously shared (e.g. TVs) are being replaced by children's own digital devices (e.g. own tablets).
2. The media repertoire becomes more differentiated with increasing age: In the course of childhood and adolescence, the quantity of media used and associated media practices increases significantly. This development is independent of the media affinity of the parents, which indicates the increasing importance of other social domains for the changes in the media repertoires of children and young people.
3. Furthermore, the shift in media repertoires is indicative of individual interests and developmental tasks: It can be observed that more "childish" media topics and interests gradually being replaced by more adolescent topics. Furthermore, developmental tasks such as the establishment of social relationships, personality development and independence are addressed with and through media.

Finally, the study allows a diachronic perspective on the findings of the younger and older cohort: What similarities and differences can be seen between the media repertoires of both cohorts at the same age of around 10 years (2018 and 2022)?

1. Both cohorts show clear parallels: the transition to secondary school continues to be an event that brings along an expansion of new media and media practices. Central to this is the acquisition of the first smartphone, which – even if it was already available before – can now be used in more diverse ways (especially for networking). The media ensemble of families also adapts to the changed school circumstances by purchasing new digital devices for school purposes.
2. Children in the younger cohort are significantly less likely to own desktop PCs and laptops than was the case with the older cohort (they are more likely to be used as work devices by their parents). Linear television programming and CDs also seem to have been replaced by streaming services for the younger generation.
3. Children in the younger cohort use interactive online media, social media apps and online games at a comparatively earlier age than children in the older cohort did at the same age. This is accompanied by stronger social expectations from their peers.

Conclusion and Outlook

Children are being integrated into an increasingly dense network of interdependence, underpinned by networked communication, at an ever earlier age. They are pursuing individual media interests and media practices more frequently and at earlier age. As they grow older, they become increasingly independent of their parents' attempts to regulate their behaviour, leading to a relative diminution in the significance of the family as a socialising institution. The autonomy thus acquired is utilised for further media-related interactions on their own and communication with their peers. Concurrently, they also become data suppliers for media companies and an attractive commercial target group. It is therefore vital that children develop comprehensive self-regulation skills at an increasingly early age, in order to be able to act autonomously and in a (self-determined) manner in a deep mediated society. As they are generally not yet capable of this, or only to a limited extent, due to their stage of development, they are involved in a variety of communicative online practices which, on the one hand, open up experiences of self-efficacy, but on the other hand overwhelm them with regard to the externally determined exploitation logic (of media providers). In consideration of the impending expansion of AI applications in forthcoming years, it is imperative to explore effective strategies for the enhancement of support for children and young individuals in their use of digital media and, consequently, in their media-related socialisation processes.

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