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Article

Longitudinal Insights on the Perception and Negotiation of Challenges in Media Use among Young People

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Abstract: Current debates increasingly portray children's and adolescents' media use as problematic or even addictive, often leading to a pathologization of their media practices. However, prevalence studies predominantly show that only a minority of young people meet clinical criteria for media-related disorders, while many more experience challenges. The present study investigates how adolescents and their parents perceive problematic media use, how these perceptions develop over time, and how they are negotiated within families. The study draws on data from a longitudinal study. Using a child-centered and dyadic research design, semi-structured interviews with 13 adolescents and one parent each were analysed across four survey waves between 2018 and 2023. The analysis theoretically builds on the communicative figurations approach and uses qualitative content analysis. Criteria derived from Internet Gaming and Social Media Disorder served as sensitizing concepts for identifying perceived problematic or challenging media-related experiences. The findings show that all adolescents reported various challenges related to their media use across their entire media repertoires. Longitudinal analyses reveal that perceptions of problematic media use are dynamic and develop alongside adolescents' expanding media practices. Parents often identified problematic patterns earlier, and concepts of problematic media use were continuously negotiated within the family. The results further highlight the relevance of platform affordances in shaping experiences of prolonged engagement. The study argues for a broader understanding of problematic media use as a socially negotiated and developmental phenomenon rather than solely an individual pathology. It concludes by emphasizing the need for more qualitative, longitudinal, and repertoire-oriented educational research.

Keywords: Problematic Media Use; Challenges in Media Use; Children; Adolescents; Longitudinal Study; Media Socialization; Communicative Figuration; Qualitative Content Analysis

1. Societal Perspectives on Youth's Challenges with Digital Media

Internationally and in various academic as well as public discourses, there has been an increasing discussion in recent years about the challenges posed by the digital media environment and screen time for children and adolescents [1,2]. These include political debates on banning social media for minors (e.g., as implemented in Australia or discussed in Great Britain, the Netherlands and other European countries), warnings from paediatricians regarding the harmful influence of digital media, and discussions in (health) psychology about media addiction. Not least due to a first verdict against Meta and Google regarding the addictive potential of their apps Instagram and YouTube in the United States of America, the scope of the debate and the influence of media providers have become very prominent [3]. These societal debates about the addictive potential of digital platforms are being taken up by parents, teachers, and even young people themselves, leading to a certain degree of uncertainty, but often also to the stigmatization and pathologization of all young people as "addicted" to digital media in general. However,

when current data is considered, it becomes evident that depending on the deployed instruments (e.g., some studies differ between problematic use and risky usage patterns), the societal background and age group only a small percentage of adolescents are experiencing an addictive use of digital media in western countries: For example, in their meta-analysis, Duong et al. [4] report varying prevalence rates depending on cultural background and type of medium (e.g., social media, gaming, smartphones): 6.3% to 44.0% in Asia, 0.3% to 8.2% in the United States, and 1% to 21.3% in Europe. For the European context, the EU Kids Online Study describes that 8% to 36% of young people perceive at least one criterion of excessive internet usage [5]. For Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, a study has revealed estimates of 4.9%, 7.8% and 0.3% for the respective countries for 12- to 16-year-old adolescents [6]. In Germany, current studies show a prevalence rate of 6.6% for excessive social media use and 4.5% for excessive gaming among 10- to 17-year-olds. However, it is evident that the percentage of at-risk users, who are only showing fewer symptoms of problematic usage patterns, is significantly higher here as well, at 21.5% for social media and 6.6% for gaming [7]. Additionally, Busch et al. [8] pointed out, that the prevalence of gaming disorder has increased in the past years among German adolescents from 2.9% in 2019 to 3.9% in 2024.

This goes hand in hand with the observation that a large proportion of young people in Germany feel consumed by digital media and often end up spending more time on them than they intended [9]. Consequently, significantly more young people are facing the challenges posed by digital media use. The challenges associated with adolescents' media use can take many forms. However, this article focuses on their self-perceived (problematic) usage patterns. In today's deeply mediatised society [10], learning a self-directed and competent manner of media usage is a key developmental task [11]. However, this seems to pose problems for many young people from their own perspective and those of significant others. Thus, a discrepancy between individuals' perceptions of their digital media use and the reality of excessive media use is already evident at this point [12]. The family—as the primary agent of socialization, whose influence persists for a prolonged period—plays a decisive role in the development of media usage patterns [13,14]. However, there are still very few qualitative data available that specifically describe which aspects of digital media use are important to young people and how these develop across different age groups.

This article addresses precisely this disparity by examining qualitative longitudinal data, drawing on the current state of research, and the various definitions of problematic media use. The dyadic data from a media socialization project are analysed using the communicative figurations approach [15]. The findings focus on the following questions: What do young people perceive as challenging or problematic in their own media use? Which aspects focus their parents on? How do these perceptions develop over time in the context of media socialization? How are different perceptions negotiated within the family? Finally, the article reflects not only on content-related aspects of the research insights but also stresses the need for qualitative research approaches which include the whole media repertoire [16] of children and adolescents in the field of problematic media use.

2. Overview: Research on Problematic Media Usage Patterns

On the one hand, this chapter provides an overview of how problematic media use is defined in the current state of research, as the field is previously characterized by a wide range of concepts for this phenomenon. On the other hand, it aims to provide an outline of the current state of research on problematic media use among children and adolescents.

2.1. Definitions of Problematic Media Usage Patterns

Computer gaming disorder was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) in 2013 by the American Psychological Association [17] and later to the World Health Organization's list of mental disorders (ICD-11) in 2018 [18]. Referring to this classification, computer gaming disorder is associated with a loss of control, prioritization over other activities, and continued use despite negative consequences over a period of the last twelve months. Based on these criteria, pathological gaming, for example, can clearly lead to significant impairments in personal, social, educational, and work-related areas of life [18]. The DSM-5 lists the following nine criteria for the diagnosis of Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) [17]: (1) excessive preoccupation with playing computer games, (2) withdrawal symptoms, (3) development of tolerance, (4) unsuccessful attempts to control gaming, (5) loss of interest in previous hobbies and leisure activities, (6) continuation of excessive gaming despite awareness of the psychosocial consequences, (7) deceiving others about the extent of gaming, (8) using video games

to escape or alleviate a negative mood, and (9) risking or losing important relationships, one's job, or educational or career opportunities. If, in the past twelve months, at least five of these nine criteria have been met according to one's own assessment, this is considered an internet gaming disorder. Other media formats have not yet been included in the classification systems, but this definition and its criteria have been frequently applied to other areas in recent years, such as social media disorder [19,20]. Although the ICD-11 and DSM-5 criteria provide a solid foundation for developing diagnostic scales, current research indicates that different survey and data collection methods are used for both pathologic gaming and other types of media use [21,22].

In addition to defining media addiction as a mental disorder, approaches that refer to "excessive" or "problematic" media use have gained traction, particularly in the field of media education [20,23]. These terms refer to behaviours that are subjectively classified as problematic by the persons themselves and/or family members, partners, etc. In line with the descriptions of pathological media use or media addiction, recent studies differentiated between general media use or internet use and a focus on specific forms of use [19,23,24]. Despite distinctions between different forms of problematic media usage, research has shown that differing types of problematic media use are positively correlated with each other [25,26].

Some studies also equate high usage times of digital media with problematic usage patterns or use the term "extreme" to describe these usage behaviours [27]. In this regard, several findings point to a positive correlation between longer usage times and problematic media usage patterns [1,28,29]. However, high usage times are not necessarily associated with problematic media use or with subjective distress in the individuals concerned [1,23]. Rather, in addition to sheer usage time, other factors, such as individual factors (e.g., self-regulation), the social environment (for example parental mediation or fear of missing out) and technical characteristics (such as dark patterns), and their interactions should be considered when examining the phenomenon of problematic media use [30–32].

2.2. State of Research on Problematic Media Usage

As noted at the outset, determining what constitutes appropriate media use is a major challenge for the majority of young people, even if they are not explicitly affected by problematic media use. Studies highlight adolescence as a particularly critical phase in this regard, especially with a focus on problematic gaming which has the highest prevalences in mid adolescence [19,23]. Furthermore, adolescence is often viewed as a critical phase due to neurobiological and psychological factors, the search for one's own identity, and the desire for social belonging, but also due to still insufficiently developed self-regulation skills [33].

However, regarding changes depending on the age group, the existing research findings are primarily cross-sectional, as longitudinal studies on problematic media use are still relatively rare as meta-analyses show [30,34]. In their scoping review of 57 research papers, Richard et al. [35] found that the temporal stability of problematic gaming among adolescents varied according to the age of the survey participants and the duration of the study, ranging between 20% and 84%. Mihara and Higuchi [36] confirmed this result in their literature review. They showed variations in the natural development of problematic gaming with a tendency to be more stable in adolescence than in adulthood. In a long-term study, Carbonell et al. [37] analysed perceptions of problematic internet and smartphone use from 2006 to 2017 among 800 university students starting at the age of 17. The results showed an increase in participants' perceptions of their own problematic internet and smartphone use over the last ten years, with social networks being blamed for this increase. Furthermore, the participants from 2017 reported higher negative consequences of both internet and smartphone use than those in 2006. However, long-term observations showed a decrease in problematic use after a strong rise in 2013. Berber et al. [23] showed a significant decrease in problematic social media usage and gaming over the course of three years (2018–2021) starting with an age group of 13- to 16-year-olds. This finding was evident in both the assessments given by the young people themselves and those provided by their parents.

The study by Berber et al. [23] also highlights differences in how adolescents and parents perceive problematic media use. Parents tend to rate the problems slightly more serious than the adolescents themselves do. Toh et al. [38] conducted one of the very rare qualitative studies on problematic media use. Their study strengthens the result that parents are more likely to view their children's media behaviour as problematic. However, research approaches that take both perspectives into account are still very scarce.

Given the current state of research, four desiderata for research on problematic media use can be identified:

1) To this point, most studies have used a cross-sectional approach. This provides little insight into temporal and age-related changes in potentially problematic media use. *Longitudinal approaches* could shed more light on these developments over the course of time.
2) A majority of studies focus solely on the perspective of those affected or, in the case of children and adolescents, on that of their parents. However, given the discrepancies in perceptions regarding problematic media use, a *multi-perspective research design* appears essential.
3) Most studies focus on and analyse a specific medium (e.g., smartphones, social media, or gaming). At the same time, however, existing studies make it clear that there is a connection between different patterns of problematic media use. Considering a *person's entire media repertoire*, consisting of all media and relatively stable media practices of an individual [16], could provide insights into interactions and connections between different forms of problematic media use.
4) The vast majority of research approaches use a quantitative access. Consequently, existing classifications of problematic media use and their characteristics are the focus of investigation. However, research has not focused on the question of young people's own assessments of their media use as being addictive is in line with these classifications. *Qualitative methods* offer the opportunity to gain deeper insights into specific media practices and potential individual factors influencing problematic usage patterns.

3. Theoretical Approach: Communicative Figurations and Problematic Media Usage

To address the identified research gaps, this article draws on the approach of communicative figurations [15], which conceptualizes socialization and media appropriation processes as embedded within communicatively constituted networks of interdependent actors in a deeply mediatised society [10]. The communicative constructivist approach builds on Norbert Elias' figurational sociology [39] and has been further developed to examine how social domains are constructed and transformed through communication across different (digital) media. Communicative figurations are understood as relatively stable patterns of communicative interrelations characterized by four core dimensions: actor constellations, frames of relevance, communicative practices, and media ensembles. Together, these dimensions enable the analysis of how social realities are continuously produced and negotiated through communication in everyday life [15]. The first dimension, *actor constellations*, refers to the network of actors involved in a communicative figuration and the relationships between them. The second dimension, *frames of relevance*, describes the orientations, values, norms, and shared understandings that guide communication within a figuration. These frames influence which aspects of media use are considered important, acceptable, risky, or problematic. The third dimension, *communicative practices*, encompasses the recurrent forms of communication through which social relations are maintained and meanings are negotiated. These practices include everyday conversations, conflicts, rule-setting, monitoring, advice-giving, and shared media activities. From a communicative figuration perspective, problematic media use is not merely an individual behaviour but becomes socially meaningful through communicative practices in which concerns, expectations, and experiences are articulated and interpreted. The fourth dimension, *media ensembles*, refers to the interconnected set of media technologies and platforms that actors use within a communicative figuration. For example, the family can be conceptualized as a communicative figuration in which parents and children are interconnected through ongoing communicative practices and shared orientations. From this perspective, media socialization is not understood as a one-sided process of parental influence but as a relational and dynamic process in which all actors contribute to the negotiation of norms, values, and expectations regarding media use [40]. Accordingly, the negotiation processes and the media ensembles prevalent in communicative figurations also shape the individual media repertoires of children and adolescents.

Applying the communicative figurations approach to problematic media use offers several advantages: First, it allows the analysis of young people's complete media repertoires integrated in the media ensembles of important social domains (e.g., family, school or peer group) instead of focusing on isolated platforms or applications. Second, it situates individual experiences of problematic media use within broader social relations and communicative contexts. Third, the approach is particularly suited for longitudinal research because it captures how communicative practices, media ensembles, and frames of relevance evolve over time. This makes it possible to reconstruct how perceptions of problematic media use emerge, stabilise, or change throughout adolescence and how these perceptions are negotiated between parents and children. Rather than treating problematic media use solely as an individual deficit or pathological condition, the communicative figurations perspective highlights its social construction

within everyday communicative processes and ongoing media socialization.

4. Longitudinal and Dyadic Research Approach

Drawing from a child-centered approach [41], this research followed the goal of taking young people's own experiences with media and their illustrations of media usage into account. In the project "Connected Kids—Socialization in a changing media environment (ConKids)", founded by the German Research Association (DFG), we utilized a dyadic research approach by conducting semi-structured interviews with 27 young people and one of their parents each from northern and southern Germany across four survey waves (2018, 2019, 2022, and 2023). The first wave of the study began with 32 families, with whom regular contact was maintained in addition to the surveys. In particular, between the second and third surveys, some children, adolescents, or their parents decided, for various personal reasons, not to continue participating in the study. The study's focus was on the conditions of socialization in the context of deep mediatisation. As a starting point, the family was viewed as a communicative figuration that influences the media repertoires of children and adolescents through its media ensemble, prevailing attitudes, and negotiation processes. In addition, the social domains of peers and school were included in the analysis as important communicative figurations. In this context, we investigated changes in media practices from a longitudinal perspective. Challenges in media use were implied in this perspective as a part of young people's media-related experiences.

The semi-structured qualitative interviews with the young people were supported by a laying technique, in which they sorted photographs of their own media according to their personal relevance. The guidelines were developed in collaboration with several researchers and validated through a pre-test. In the course of the surveys, the interview guides were adapted to reflect the developmental stage of the children/adolescents and changes in the media environment. This reconstructive approach supported narrations about the abstract topic of media use in general and gave insight in their media repertoire as well as relevant actors for their media practices (e.g., friends, siblings, family member), individual media preferences and topics surrounding their media use. To capture the relationality of media practices and the accompanied negotiation processes within the communicative figuration family, complementary interviews with usually one parent per family were conducted to provide insights into parental perspectives on the family's media use, parental mediation and personal media-related experiences and attitudes. Typically, the interviews took place face-to-face at the families' homes, and the parents were questioned after the adolescents (Additionally, during the first two survey waves, parents and their child took photographs of everyday situations with media in the family. During the third and fourth survey wave the young people were asked to keep a media diary. Both data methods are further described by Potzel and Draheim [42] but are not included in this analysis).

4.1. Sample

The participants represent two cohorts. For this contribution, the older cohort, consisting of 13 cases (the analysis includes all cases that participated in the study during the first three surveys. One boy and his mother decided not to participate in the survey for t4), is analysed about their reflections on challenges in media use. Seven of the young people in this cohort identified as female, five as male and one as non-binary. At the first survey wave, participants were about ten years old and just transitioned to secondary school in the German school system. Ten teenagers attended an academic secondary school track, and three others attended a non-academic secondary school. At the time of the fourth survey, they were about 15 years old. The majority lives together with two parents and at least one sibling. At the time of the fourth survey wave in two cases the parents were divorced or separated.

Compared to data of the second cohort with younger children, these young people addressed perceived challenges more frequently and articulate. In line with the prevalence rates increasing in middle adolescence, their data is therefore more suitable for answering the research questions. However, none of the participants had any official diagnosis for problematic media use of any sort. One girl had (not further described by her or her mother) psychological challenges that seemed to have an impact on her media use. Interviewed parents were a median age of 43 years during the first survey wave and consisted of ten mothers and three fathers. This imbalance results in the fact that the interview was supposed to take place with the primary caregiver. Given the parents' higher educational background and (often) higher social-economic status, this sample represents predominantly German middle-class families. The sampling was theory-driven: Amongst other sampling criteria, such as age and gender,

the sampling criteria were intended to observe families with different media-related attitudes that range from a critical perspective on (especially) digital media to more media-savvy families, that engage with new, digital media enthusiastically.

4.2. Data Analysis

Besides a theoretical and methodological approach, which allows to analyse changes in media socialization within social negotiation processes, longitudinal research calls for methods that permit to structure and systemize huge amounts of data. For this, we analysed the data with qualitative content analysis by Kuckartz and Rädiker [43]. This approach on qualitative content analysis follows an open exploration of data by an iterative process of building or refining categories and coding the data. From first exploration, over data analysis to presenting results this process is ought to be focused on answering the research questions. Characterising for qualitative content analysis is its "high degree of flexibility" [43] in utilising inductive or deductive categories for coding. Furthermore, the method is loose from methodological positioning making it compatible for a variety of theoretical approaches as our background of communicative constructionism (see Section 3). In this way, theory-driven deductive categories derived from the communicative figurations approach—such as the differentiation of media repertoires, media ensembles, the constellation of actors, communicative practices, or the frames of relevance—could be supplemented with themes drawn from the interviews.

The data has been anonymised, and names of young people and relevant family members were given pseudonyms for better traceability. Analysis was conducted by at least two researchers with the software MAXQDA to ensure a degree of intersubjectivity. Coding followed a deductive-inductive approach, combining theoretical knowledge with exploratory analysis to uncover new insights. Categories included in the analysis addressed reflections on own media use and media literacy, media-related conflicts and attitudes. Additionally, categories based on the criteria for internet gaming disorder [17] as well as the discourse around its criteria [21] and the ones derived for social media disorder [25] were used as a sensitizing concept [44] for developing a coding scheme. This helped to identify and categorise possible challenges in media use. Categories were coded when interviewees described own challenges in media use as well as others' problematics, like family members or friends, to take figurative aspects into account. While young people are exposed to a variety of difficult media experiences, like cyber-grooming or -mobbing, a statement was coded as a (possible) challenge in media use, when young people traced challenging or problematic media usage back to their own lack of competence or skill to handle the situation reasonably. **Table 1** shows the applied categories, short descriptions that were taken from literature about internet gaming disorder and social media disorder [21,25] and anchor examples from our data. After conducting a cross-sectional analysis of the data from each survey wave, longitudinal analyses to reconstruct changes in the perception of problematic usage patterns were examined.

Table 1. (Deductive) Coding Scheme for Perceptions of Problematic Media Usage.

Category	Description	Anchor Example
Intensive use	e.g., mental preoccupation with specific media, like computer games	"I'd already spent a lot of my screen time on TikTok, I'd already been on it. […] And TikTok in particular is so addictive because of all that endless scrolling, so you just end up… Well, I'd set my screen time limit. But then I was still on the app the whole time, until it was just over (laughing)." (f14)
Withdrawal symptoms	e.g., irritability, anxiety, sadness when media practice is cancelled	"I: So do you find that when you use things like computer games or stuff like that, you find it harder to concentrate? M11: Well, I do get a bit aggressive. I don't really think I lose concentration, though. I just think about it now and then" (m11)
Development of tolerance	e.g., the need for increasingly longer media usage (e.g. gaming)	"But, er, if I've just been watching a film, and I did enjoy it, but it was […] well, then it just doesn't stick in my mind, because I do that pretty much every day. That's why it doesn't stick." (f10)
Loss of control	unsuccessful attempts to control a specific media practice	"M14: Mobile phones are so addictive. […] I: And do you have any strategy of your own for recognising when you realise you'd actually like (laughs) to read more? M14: Yes, then I put my mobile away [...] I: And does that actually work? M14: Rarely. I'd have to think about how I should actually go about solving that." (m14)

Table 1. *Cont.*

Category	Description	Anchor Example
Loss of interest	e.g., loss of interest for former hobbies and leisure activities as result of gaming	"I ended up spending a little more time outside before that. I've already noticed that, too.[…] That I'm spending all my time there completely on digital media, so to speak. […] So even now, I'm using WhatsApp and stuff more." (m10)
Continuation of intensive use despite of psychosocial consequences	e.g., lack of attention; not enough sleep; arguments with others because of use	"I: Do you really feel that other things are suffering as a result, because you spend so much time on your smartphone? F13: My social progress definitely." (f13)
Decieving others	e.g., misleading others regarding the time spent on a specific medium	"[Mother] was very surprised the other day at how much screen time she's been having, and it turned out that she'd once looked over her shoulder whilst she was entering the unlock code and had entered the code herself – so she'd been unlocking the screen for herself time and time again." (m45)
(negative) emotion regulation	using a medium to escape or alleviate a negative mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety)	not coded
Risking or losing important relationships, educational or job opportunities	serious conflicts or problems with family members, at school or work because of media usage	not coded

To answer the second desideratum, a comparative analysis of the individual perception on challenges in media use of the young people and their parents was conducted to identify similarities and differences in the family's negotiation of what is being perceived as problematic media use.

5. "So at Some Point It Just Kind of Turned into an Addiction."—Results on Perceptions of Problematic Media Use

In all 13 cases challenges in media usage were reported. Most young people mention own problematic patterns of media use in middle to late adolescence during the third or fourth survey wave. Drawing from the internet gaming and social media disorder criteria helped to systemise their descriptions of challenges in media use. **Table 2** visualizes this longitudinal development of reports on challenging media usage based on the initial deductive coding scheme (see Section 4.2). To gain further insights in the familial negotiation of challenges in media use, the table not only includes perceptions on challenging media use of the interviewed young people, but also (self-)observations on problematic media use of parents, siblings or peers. Except for *risk to or loss of important relationships* all criteria were discussed in least one case of the older cohort. *Development of tolerance* and *emotion regulation* with media occurred the lowest in the data with one case each. Meanwhile in the course of the four survey waves in all cases challenges with *intensive use* of media and in eleven cases a *loss of control* over media use were discussed within the family and therefore part of the frames of relevance in families. Overall, both challenges were reported the most by young people themselves or their parents.

Table 2. Longitudinal Development of Reports on Challenging Media Use.

Category	Cases per Survey Wave			
	t1	t2	t3	t4
Intensive use	11/13	12/13	13/13	12/12
Withdrawal symptoms	1/13	2/13	1/13	-
Development of tolerance	1/13	1/13	-	-
Loss of control	1/13	4/13	8/13	7/12
Loss of interest	1/13	4/13	4/13	2/12
Continuation of intensive use despite of psychosocial consequences	2/13	4/13	5/13	5/12
Deceiving others	3/13	2/13	3/13	3/12
(negative) emotion regulation	-	-	1/13	1/12
Risking or losing important relationships, educational or job opportunities	-	-	-	-

Open coding enabled to find more aspects of media use young people perceived as challenging or problematic: *Content overload* refers to being overwhelmed by scary or violent content in films or social media and for older young people identifying fake news or fake content in general. Possible challenges in media use therefore increased with the growing number of media practices in young people's media repertoires. Especially during the first two survey waves some children expressed being overwhelmed from *managing the flood of messages* in their class's

group chat on WhatsApp. As in the case of one mother and her daughter, parents actively intervened to help their children cope with these challenges:

> *"Anna: Two hundred messages// just in one chat on this day*
>
> *Mrs. Wiese: Yes, sort of, in two hours' time. And then it went on for ages in the evening too, and then, um, when a 'so what are you up to?' (laughs) pops up at 11 pm, well, I don't think that's appropriate. I mean, the, um, children need their peace and quiet too […] So we've got lots of settings in place so you can't see when she's online or when she's read messages, to take the pressure off her to reply."* (f11 and f44, t2)

With further development of the young people, their own and their parents' attention on challenges in media use grew (see **Table 2**). The headlining quote of this chapter "at some point it just kind of turned into an addiction" by a 15-years-old girl (t4) expresses the perception of a gradual loss of control over a specific media practice after unsuccessful attempts of self-regulating intensive use of a medium. To further investigate how perceptions on what young people find as problematic about their media use, we will focus on these two most named aspects of *intensive use* and *loss of control* and their connection to each other from a longitudinal perspective and will discuss findings about perspectives on problematic media use in families.

5.1. Longitudinal Development of Challenging and Problematic Media Use

The notion of intensive use and loss of control over media use developed as cross-media over the course of the survey and was therefore usually not related to just one specific medium or application. Longitudinal data in combination with a repertoire-based approach on (challenging) media use showed, that while the focus on intensive media use was usually described for social media use or gaming, in some cases young people describe similar challenges for different media practices, like reading books or watching TV-shows even before they noticed them for social media or gaming.

Figure 1 illustrates the development of perceptions on intensive use in the cases of Bente and Jakob. Perceptions of the young people themselves and their parents' perceptions about their children's challenges in media use were included in the figure.

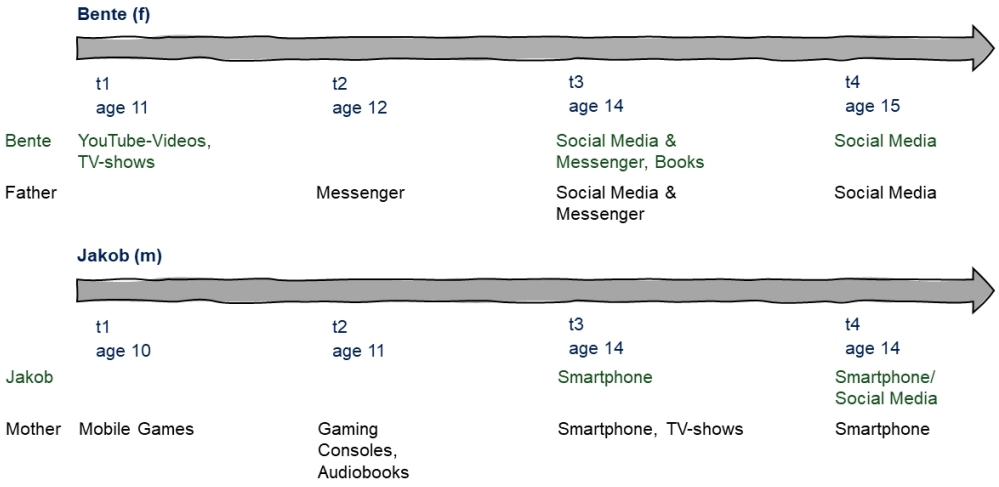


Figure 1. Intensive Use as a Cross-Media Challenge in the Cases of Bente and Jakob.

The case of Bente exemplifies how intensive use develops as a cross-media challenge that can go along with a loss of control over media practices: During the first survey wave, Bente describes having troubles to quit watching YouTube-videos and TV-shows. She states that her parents tell her that she shouldn't watch videos for too long, but they don't control her screen time. When she thinks, she has watched online videos or TV-shows for too long for a few days, she takes a break for one day. In the parent interview her father explains that he is not worried about her TV-consumption. In the second survey wave, Bente starts using the messenger WhatsApp. While she herself is not

worried about her messenger usage, her father perceives her as struggling to stop texting with her friends. This changes during the third survey wave: Bente now shares her father's perception. Explaining her problems to stop texting, she says: "it's always this urge, even though it's actually shit" (Bente, f14, t3). This notion of loss of control over her messenger use expands to different media as well. She recalls on arguing with her parents about reading books for too long at night and having troubles to quit scrolling on social media. Last continues to be a challenge for her during the fourth survey wave, where she elaborates on the challenge of rather unconscious smartphone use: "I don't really notice it that much during the day. I just look at it now and then. And then I always think, 'No, put it down for a bit' " (Bente, f15, t4).

Indications from the case of Bente can be found in other cases as well: Young people noticed in every phase of the study different challenges around their media use, but often struggled to manage them, which then continues to be challenging when they integrate new media in their media ensembles. Other than in Bentes case, perceptions of intense media use can derive more strongly from the parents. For example, until the third survey wave, it is Jakob's mother who is worrying about a "risk of addiction" (Mrs. Wolff, f41, t1) regarding digital gaming for her son. Later, she also finds the amount of him listing to audiobooks concerning (t2). During the interview in the third survey wave, Jakob addresses for the first time, that he sometimes uses his smartphone longer than he intended to and therefore cherishes his parents' restrictions on his screentime. That perception aligns mostly with his mother's. Additionally, Mrs. Wolff is concerned that he sometimes watches TV-shows all day. When Jakob is about to turn 15 during the fourth survey wave, his parents stop their restrictions on screentime because they consider him to be old enough to manage his media usage. He and his mother notice that he uses his smartphone more frequently and for longer than before. Jakob describes the social media app TikTok as "addictive" (Jakob, m14, t4) to him.

Parents' involvement in noticing problematic media practises and addressing them as part of their parental mediation refers to a relevance of managing problematic media practices in the communicative figuration family. Family members collectively construct concepts of problematic media use through negotiation of perceptions of their own and others' media practices, as the following section shows.

5.2. Negotiating Concepts of Challenging or Problematic Media Use as Part of the Family's Frame of Relevance

Negotiation processes in communicative figurations are the bases for specifying appropriate media practices for each member of a figuration. In our sample, avoiding problematic patterns of media use appeared as an important part of the frames of relevance in the families, that guide media practices, attitudes and media-related negotiation processes. While children and parents mostly describe similar concepts of problematic media use, children will sometimes find their parents views as a little bit exaggerating but overall understandable, as a boy puts it: "If I sit there for more than two hours doing nothing else, they just say I could be doing something (laughing) useful. I can see their point, though." (m15, t4)

Still children and parents describe ongoing conflicts about media use in all survey waves, which suggests that young people may be confronted with different expectations on media practices in other figurations like their peer group, where media practices establish connection to and communication with each other.

In ten cases parents described problematic pattens of media use in survey waves before their children expressed similar self-observations or concepts of problematic media use, like in the case of Bente between the second and third survey wave. This hints to the connection between parental views to young people's perception of what is considered as problematic: In these cases, power balances seem to be in favour of the parents' concepts of problematic media use which are passed on in the process of media socialisation.

From the perspective of the parents in our sample problematic media use was mostly framed as intensive use, referring to duration or the quantity of time spent using a specific medium. The comparison within the cohort shows that what is considered as "too much" time is different for most families. Some parents or children named specific time frames that are considered as low or high (ranging from four to seven hours to even all day or night) according with the young people's age. Others do not provide specific time frames but negotiated concepts of too much time spent on media in relation to other social actors. At 14-years old, Bente discussed her daily smartphone time in comparison to her classmates:

"Sometimes I just think to myself, 'Come on, don't overdo it.' I've been on my mobile for two and a half hours

now. OK, that's not exactly a short time. But some of the kids in my class are on their mobiles for six hours or so. And then I think to myself, 'Oh, come on, it's not that bad, is it?' " (Bente, f14, t3)

The peers' media use is often discussed by young people and their parents to exemplify problematic media practices and in order to define one's own media use as less problematic. Even in Jakob's case, while Mrs. Wolff is concerned about her son's media use, she finds his peers to be even more problematic:

"But he's not like some of his other friends, who actually spend the whole day playing games on their mobiles – playing here, playing there – and then at half past seven in the evening, they're still playing [...]. He's not like that at all." (Mrs. Wolff, t3)

While young people in our sample mostly perceived their peers to show worse media habits, norms around media practices from their peer group (e.g., participating in online gaming or activities on social media) also drove some of the media practices perceived as problematic, like the peers' expectation to constantly reply to messages or the fear of missing out on their media activities. However, media-related expectations from the school environment, like teachers or administration, only took on a marginal role for negotiation processes of challenging media use. Some parents discussed that the use of the tablet in class made it difficult to track their children's screen time.

Concepts of problematic media use are not just negotiated in relation to external actors to the figuration. Almost all families in this sample discussed specific family members as bad examples of media use internal to the figuration. For example, one mother worries about her husband's screen time and him being a bad role model for their children:

"My husband's always been someone who's constantly on his mobile phone. […] Which I don't think is great – especially as a role model for the children, of course. But what can you say to a grown-up, right?" (f45, t3)

From adolescence on most young people in our sample didn't describe their parents as role models for acquiring new media practices. But some young people perceived their parents as role models for less or a (more) mindful media use. Being asked, if he can learn something according to media use from his parents, Jakob explained the following:

"I think they use it like, well, they pay more attention to it than I do. I mean, how much they use it and all that. I think that's better. Because you should still be more mindful of how long you spend on your mobile phone or whatever." (Jakob, m14, t4)

Young people in this sample as Jakob actively sought their parents' help when they couldn't manage their challenges through self-regulation, often because they acted as role models for less (digital) media use. The parents then supported them in the regulation of time and duration of media use. While in these cases challenges in media use were managed collectively in the figuration, finding appropriate coping strategies for challenges in media use presented a challenge for parents, too. Like their children, parents often sensed problematic patterns in their own media use, like being stuck on social media or their smartphone in general. One mother describes being drawn into digital gaming and is now more aware of her son's problems with quitting his gaming:

"One game I played myself, he showed it to me. That's SimCity. [...] And you can already tell. Ah, // and then you could reach the next level and then you're sitting there, and when you say, 'one hour and then you put it away' and you could reach the level right now […] I also thought to myself, shit, now you have to put it away. I'm missing the goal. And I have to start all over again, and I understand that, [talking to her son] you want to finish the game. So, these games are cleverly designed." (f45, t4)

This raises attention to manipulative design patterns of games and social media as a challenge to healthy media usage for children *and* parents. Media affordances, while often invisible, are present as intertwined with the communicative figuration of the family and shape how family members define problematic media use.

6. Discussion of the Results: Are All Young People Addicted Now?

The findings challenge the widespread public narrative that contemporary adolescents are generally 'addicted' to digital media. While all young people in the sample reported challenges related to media use, the qualitative longitudinal data demonstrate that these challenges cannot be equated with pathological or clinically relevant addictive behaviour. Rather than describing severe impairments, most participants reflected on difficulties in regulating media practices, particularly intensive use and temporary experiences of loss of control. This finding aligns with current prevalence studies showing that only a minority of adolescents fulfil diagnostic criteria for problematic or addictive media use, whereas a substantially larger group reports difficulties managing their media use [4,5,29]. From an educational perspective, terms such as 'addiction' or 'being addicted' may reflect young people's and parents' perceptions of difficulties in regulating media use, rather than indicating the presence of a clinically defined addictive disorder. At the same time, such assessments can have the effect of stigmatizing people with addiction. This finding supports recent international discussions in media education and digital well-being that argue against equating intensive media engagement with pathological behaviour and instead emphasise adolescents' capacity to develop reflective and self-regulated media practices within their everyday lives [14].

The results suggest that adolescents in our sample are aware of potential challenges associated with digital media. Many participants critically reflected on their own habits, monitored their usage times, and actively developed strategies to regulate their behaviour. Such self-reflective practices contrast with stereotypes portraying young people as passive victims of digital technologies. Instead, the findings support perspectives from media socialization research that conceptualise media-related challenges as part of broader developmental processes of learning self-regulation and media literacy within a deeply mediatised society [11]. Accordingly, this study was not designed to determine whether adolescents meet clinical diagnostic criteria for media-related disorders or to estimate prevalence rates. Rather, it adopts a media socialization perspective to examine how adolescents and their parents perceive, interpret, and negotiate experiences they consider challenging or problematic in everyday media use. From this perspective, the attribution of media use as "problematic" is itself a socially constructed and communicatively negotiated phenomenon. Focusing on these negotiation processes complements rather than replaces clinical research by providing insight into how notions of problematic media use emerge and become meaningful within everyday family life. A central contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that challenging media practices emerge across entire media repertoires rather than being confined to a single platform or medium. Challenges associated with intensive engagement, difficulties stopping media activities, or feelings of losing control appeared in relation to social media, gaming, messaging applications, streaming services, television, and even reading books. This finding supports calls to move beyond platform-specific perspectives and instead investigate problematic media use within broader patterns of everyday media practices [16]. Focusing exclusively on individual applications risks overlooking the continuity of underlying self-regulatory challenges across different media environments. The longitudinal perspective further reveals that problematic media use should not be understood as a stable personal characteristic. Rather, perceptions of challenges changed over time and evolved alongside adolescents' expanding media repertoires. Similar to findings from longitudinal quantitative studies [23,37], the data indicate that experiences of problematic media use are dynamic and closely linked to developmental transitions. Still, while most of our sample can be categorized to a relatively stable and educated German middle class, young people struggled to cope with perceived challenges in media use accordingly. New media practices often introduced new challenges, while previously problematic behaviours sometimes diminished or disappeared. This developmental perspective questions deterministic assumptions that early intensive media use inevitably leads to persistent addiction.

The analysis also highlights the importance of communicative figurations, particularly the family, in shaping understandings of problematic media use. Parents frequently identified problematic patterns before adolescents themselves articulated similar concerns. Through ongoing discussions, conflicts, and negotiations, families collectively constructed frames of relevance regarding what constituted 'too much' or 'bad' media use. In many cases, adolescents gradually adopted parental interpretations, indicating the continued significance of parental influence during adolescence. At the same time, young people actively negotiated these definitions by comparing themselves with peers or other family members and by questioning parental evaluations. Problematic media use therefore emerges not solely as an individual experience but as a socially negotiated phenomenon embedded in communicative relationships. These findings extend international research on parental mediation by suggesting that parents do not

merely regulate media use through rules or restrictions but also act as interpretative partners who co-construct shared understandings of appropriate, excessive, or problematic media practices. Family media socialization therefore appears as an ongoing process of negotiating meanings rather than simply enforcing behavioral limits [13,14]. Another important insight concerns the role of media affordances. Both adolescents and parents described situations in which platform design, recommendation systems, endless scrolling functions, or game progression mechanisms contributed to prolonged engagement. Such observations resonate with recent debates emphasising that problematic media use cannot be explained exclusively through individual deficits but must also consider structural and technological factors [30–32]. The findings suggest that young people often recognize these influences and perceive them as challenges to their self-regulation. Consequently, educational and societal discussions should avoid locating responsibility solely within individual users. Instead, media education should increasingly enable adolescents to critically understand persuasive platform design, algorithmic recommendation systems, and other digital choice architectures that shape media practices.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study draws on a comparatively homogeneous sample consisting predominantly of German middle-class families with relatively high educational backgrounds. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the qualitative longitudinal design sought to reconstruct developmental processes and family negotiations surrounding perceived challenges in media use. Even within this comparatively homogeneous sample, substantial variation emerged regarding media-related norms, parental mediation, and adolescents' self-perceptions. Nevertheless, future research should investigate whether these negotiation processes differ across more socioeconomically, culturally, and structurally diverse family contexts, including migrant families and families with different educational or socioeconomic backgrounds. Second, the analysis is based on adolescents' and parents' retrospective interview accounts. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as reconstructions of subjective experiences rather than objective measures of media behaviour. From the perspective of communicative figurations, these subjective interpretations are not a methodological weakness but constitute the phenomenon under investigation, as perceptions of problematic media use are themselves socially negotiated. Nevertheless, future mixed-methods studies could complement qualitative interviews with media diaries, digital trace data, ecological momentary assessments, or objective screen-time records to further examine the relationship between perceived and actual media practices and to reduce potential recall bias. Finally, the present study deliberately adopted diagnostic criteria for Internet Gaming Disorder and Social Media Disorder as sensitizing concepts rather than as diagnostic instruments. The aim was not to identify clinically relevant disorders but to explore how adolescents and parents interpret everyday challenges in media use within ongoing media socialization processes. Future studies could therefore combine qualitative longitudinal approaches with validated screening instruments to distinguish more clearly between normative self-regulatory challenges and clinically relevant disorder while preserving insights into adolescents' subjective meaning-making.

An additional avenue for future research concerns differences between media platforms. Although adolescents frequently described platform affordances such as endless scrolling, algorithmic recommendations, autoplay, or game progression as barriers to self-regulation, the present study intentionally adopted a repertoire-oriented perspective rather than comparing individual platforms. Future qualitative and mixed-methods research could systematically contrast social media, online games, messaging services, and video platforms to identify which affordances are most strongly associated with persistent self-regulatory challenges. Such a comparative perspective would contribute to a more differentiated understanding of how platform design interacts with adolescents' developmental tasks and family media socialization.

7. Conclusion and Call for More Qualitative Educational Research on Problematic Media Use

This study contributes to research on problematic media use by providing longitudinal and dyadic insights into how adolescents and their parents perceive, negotiate, and manage challenges associated with media use. The findings demonstrate that experiences of intensive use and temporary loss of control are widespread among adolescents, yet they rarely correspond to clinical understandings of addiction. Instead, these challenges emerge as part of ongoing media socialization processes and are embedded within communicative figurations, particularly the family. By adopting a communicative figurations and media socialization perspective, the study reframes prob-

lematic media use as a socially negotiated phenomenon rather than an exclusively individual or clinical condition. This perspective complements existing psychological and clinical research by highlighting how meanings of problematic media use emerge through everyday communicative practices and shared interpretations within families. The study further shows that problematic media use cannot be adequately understood through isolated examinations of single platforms or media types. Adolescents' challenges develop across their entire media repertoires and evolve over time as new media practices emerge. This finding underlines the value of repertoire-oriented and longitudinal perspectives that capture the dynamic nature of media-related experiences [16,45].

Methodologically, the results highlight the importance of qualitative approaches. Existing research on problematic media use is still dominated by quantitative studies and diagnostic frameworks derived from clinical classifications. While these approaches are valuable for estimating prevalence and identifying risk factors, they provide limited insight into how young people themselves understand and experience media-related challenges. The present study demonstrates that adolescents' subjective interpretations often differ from clinical definitions, and that meanings of problematic media use are actively negotiated within social relationships. Future educational and media-pedagogical research should therefore place greater emphasis on qualitative and longitudinal methodologies. From an educational perspective, this also implies shifting the focus of media education from preventing excessive screen time towards fostering reflective media literacy, critical awareness of persuasive platform design, and adolescents' capacity to negotiate healthy media practices within their social environments. Such approaches can illuminate how young people develop self-regulation strategies, how families negotiate norms and expectations regarding media use, and how technological affordances interact with socialization processes. More research is needed on the interplay between media design, everyday media repertoires, and communicative practices within families and peer groups. Future studies should therefore combine qualitative longitudinal designs with mixed-method approaches, including media diaries, digital trace data, and validated screening instruments. Furthermore, comparative analyses across different digital platforms and more socioeconomically and culturally diverse samples are needed to better understand how media affordances, family contexts, and social inequalities shape adolescents' experiences of problematic media use. A stronger integration of qualitative perspectives would also help move public debates beyond simplistic narratives of a generation that is supposedly addicted to digital media. Instead of asking whether young people are addicted, educational research should investigate how they learn to navigate complex media environments, which resources support this process, and under which conditions challenges become problematic. Such a shift would contribute to a more nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of problematic media use in contemporary childhood and adolescence. Ultimately, understanding problematic media use requires moving beyond the question of whether adolescents use digital media "too much" towards understanding how they make sense of their media practices, how these practices are embedded in everyday social relationships, and how educational contexts can support healthy and reflective participation in a deep mediatised society.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, K.K. and S.D.; methodology, S.D.; validation, K.K. and S.D.; formal analysis, S.D.; investigation, K.K. and S.D.; data curation, K.K.; writing—original draft preparation, K.K. and S.D.; writing—review and editing, K.K. and S.D.; visualization, S.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of German Educational Research Association (DGfE) (04/2017/DGfE and 20th September 2017).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the nature of the personal data, the collected data was not published. The interview guides, categorization systems, and templates for case studies can be found in Lampert et al. (2025) https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748963301.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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