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Video gaming and parents' mediation strategies in a Norwegian context

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Introduction

Today's children and youth are digital "from head to toe, at home and on the go" (Hart & Frejd, 2013, p. 25), whereas their parents were raised in a primarily unplugged reality. Living the everyday life in a mediatised world implies that screens have a key impact on identity development and formation processes (Bildung) as well as on the playing patterns of the emerging generation

(Johansen, 2015). This is of great relevance for the parental responsibility "to bring up and maintain the child properly" (Children Act, 1981, §30).

Video gaming is one of the significant digital arenas for tweens and teenagers in Norway in relation to entertainment, learning, socialization, and friendship (Medietilsynet, 2022, p. 3). Many parents worry that their children are caught up in gaming, which steals time from schoolwork, friends, or other "valuable" social activities (Helle, 2020; Ask, 2011; Dralega et al., 2019). According to the Norwegian Media Barometer (Shiro, 2022), 92% of 9–15 year-olds are online for nearly 3.5 hours per day, 84% play video games for nearly 1.5 hours daily, and almost as many girls as boys are gaming.

The research report *Videogames and Critical Media Literacy in Family Contexts in Norway* (Dralega et al., 2023) identifies different attitudes and a variety of needs among parents, and a diversity of mediation strategies when relating to their children's video gaming. Thus, the research points to the key role of critical media literacy in the home setting. This is in line with the increased focus in the academic field and from the educational authorities on the importance of equipping the emerging generation with tools for critical analysis to engage, understand and critique the rapidly changing media environment. (Project Censored 2022). As for video games, although children and youth are quick in learning technical features, their ability to fully comprehend the online risks, the socio-cultural and political-economic contexts of the gaming world, as well as underlying values and perspectives, is increasingly questioned. (Twenge, 2017, Neumann et al., 2017, Buckingham, 2019).

In view of the above, this study focuses on video gaming in families with children ages 10–19 from the parents' perspective. The two research questions are as follows:

1) What mediation strategies do parents adopt in order to meet what they consider to be key challenges in relation to their youths' video gaming practices?
2) How may these mediation strategies be understood in view of critical media literacy?

Material and methods

The data for this chapter is provided by a research and development project which, among other things, was aimed at generating new knowledge about critical media understanding among parents of 10–19 year-olds in Norway (Dralega et al., 2023). The qualitative research set out to understand everyday family experiences with video gaming, i.e., phenomena in their real context (Bryman, 2016). The informants were recruited through existing networks. Three parents were males, and eleven were females, representing nine countries: Norway (5), Palestine (2), Somalia (1), Turkey (1), China (1), India (1), Syria (1), Eritrea (1) and the Philippines (1).

The informants were divided into four groups that met once for about an hour from October 2021 to January 2022. One group met face-to-face, whereas the other three met online. The conversations mainly dealt with the parents' digital competence related to challenges and strategies regarding regulating their children's video gaming. They emerged from flexible, open-ended questions and were aided by a semi-structured interview guide. Through this approach, the study gained access to the informants' views, opinions and understanding (Bryman, 2016).

The audio and video recordings were transcribed and manually coded. These transcripts, combined with interview notes, provided the material for analysis. The interview data was coded following an inductive/deductive hybrid thematic analysis (Proudfoot, 2022). The coding followed a bottom-up approach where we first identified practices (such as timing, filtering, introducing, and dialoguing), and through several iterations, codes were further refined and clustered. They were later grouped into broad categories of restrictive and enabling mediation. Timing and filtering were classified as forms of restrictive mediation while introducing, dialoguing, and co-playing were forms of enabling mediation. These identified codes and categories were validated by being connected with literature, ensuring they build on and add to typologies within current writings on parental mediation and digital literacy.

Furthermore, the study was undertaken in accordance with national ethical guidelines (NESH, 2021). Drawing on an understanding of the notion of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007), during the course of the project, we were conscious of the unequal and unbalanced power dynamics, contextual roles, interests, and vulnerabilities that shaped the relationship between us as researchers and our research subjects in the process of generating and interpreting research data.

Theoretical perspectives

Theories of parental mediation and critical media literacy constitute the conceptual framework for this study.

Parental mediation

In view of today's digital childhood, the mediation of children's use of technology is a central aspect of contemporary parenting. Parents have "a primary responsibility for the child's care and development according to what is best for the child." (UN, 1989, art. 18). According to the Norwegian Children Act, their responsibilities include both a duty to care for the child and a right to make decisions on behalf of the child. It is expressly stated that the responsibilities "shall be exercised based on the child's interests and needs" (Lødrup & Sverdrup, 2021, p. 1), which today includes relating to the complexity of the mediatised culture. Accordingly, "teaching children about the digital world is primarily the parents' responsibility" (NOU 2021:3, p. 107).

Researchers increasingly use the notion of parental mediation to describe ways parents manage the relationship between children and media to minimise perceived disadvantages and maximise perceived benefits (Brito et al., 2017; Mascheroni et al., 2018). The term describes parent-child interactions and parents' behavioural and communication strategies related to children's media use (Nagy et al., 2023).

The academic literature on parental mediation has identified four main strategies (Kutrovátz et al., 2018; Nagy et al., 2023; Camerini et al., 2018). *Restriction* describes parental strategies based on limiting access to content, platforms and shopping affordances and establishing rules about the use of devices. *Enabling* strategies focus on setting up frameworks that guarantee safe internet use, utilising technical control and monitoring while leaving enough free space. *Monitoring* focuses on controlling activities and checking the content children consume and share, highlighting the growing role of surveillance in contemporary parenting. The strategy of *deference* aims to educate children to engage in autonomous and responsible media practices, avoiding parental intervention.

Research on parental mediation specifically related to video gaming practices has introduced nuanced perspectives highlighting a combination

of restrictive and enabling strategies (Dralega et al., 2019; Hingpit & Salomon, 2021). Livingstone and Blum-Ross (2019) argue that the deeper question for parents is figuring out what benefits children could gain from digital opportunities if the risk factors were managed.

Nikken & Jansz (2006) identify three strategies: *restrictive mediation*, *active mediation* and *social co-playing*. Whereas the first strategy applies rules to the child's playing behaviour, including the prohibition of certain games, the second type involves a critical discussion of games by the parents, subsequently endorsing or rejecting content. The third strategy refers to parents playing with the child in a deliberate, focused effort or in a more coincidental manner.

Due to overlaps in the parental mediation approaches, this study adopts two converged strategies when analysing the data: *restrictive* and *enabling* (Nikken & Jansz, 2006; Kutrovátz et al., 2018; Nagy et al., 2023).

Critical media literacy

This study considers critical media literacy an integral part of parental mediation. For parents to make informed choices about restricting and enabling, a form of critical media literacy is needed.

Critical media literacy has been at the centre of attention in a lot of research (Buckingham, 2003; Kellner & Share, 2007; Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012). This key theme is closely linked to the focus in the Norwegian national curriculum on digital competence, which is a dynamic area of competence that should be continuously developed "in children and young people, parents and teachers, and in the culture as a whole" (NOU 2021: 3, p. 52).

Our understanding of critical media literacy draws on strands of The New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2015; Luke, 2013; Green & Beavis, 2012) that conceptualise literacy as a significant social practice. These approaches consider critical awareness and dispositions as part of what people do with digital media and focus on unpacking everyday media texts. Applied to video games, critical thinking is highlighted, emphasising digital, socio-economic and cultural contexts and actions. Critical thinking tends to increase awareness of representation, diversity, social contexts and societal structures (Kellner & Share, 2007; Garcia et al., 2013; Ranieri, 2016).

Buckingham (2003) provides a useful means of mapping the field outlined above, introducing four categories as essential components of critical media literacy: *production, representation, language,* and *audience.* In terms of *production*, critical literacy involves understanding commercial and political influences on the media industry. The *representation* dimension is about people's ability to uncover life values, perspectives, and worldviews in media narratives. The *language* dimension deals with the linguistic means used by the media to convey messages, including the rhetoric of various media. As for the *audience* dimension, literacy involves an awareness of one's position as a media user regarding how media targets the interests and needs of different audiences, as well as reflections on how to relate to and interpret media in everyday life.

In the analysis below, we utilise Buckingham's categories as useful tools for interpreting parental mediation strategies. The importance of linking the concepts of parental mediation and critical media literacy is in line with Savic (2022). He suggests that digital literacies should be understood as shared within the family context since digital devices and media, such as video games, challenge traditional hierarchies of expertise within the family.

Findings

Regarding research question 1, the study found evidence of various parental mediation strategies among the informants regarding their children's video gaming practices.

Restrictive mediation: Timing and filtering

According to one of the parents, *timing* is challenging and tends to create conflict in the family. Age limit is also a contentious issue:

> *There is the time limit dilemma. When should the games go on and when should they be stopped. And the thing with the age limit... so he (son) hasn't been allowed to play Fortnite until now.*

And now… the four-year-old knows everything about it… and we probably argue about this every day…

This informant also reiterates the tensions arising from regulating video games:

What I experience as a very big problem is that it is more or less impossible to stop when adults say "stop,"…and that regardless of whether you have agreements/rules… So, stopping is so challenging and creates so much conflict.

One parent brings up a nuanced discussion on time-use on video games versus mobile phones, arguing that girls spend more time on their phones while boys spend more time on the consoles. Another informant reiterates this point:

Yes… it's hard to stop… an example was at Christmas, I turned off the internet network when I went to bed around midnight and then the gaming stopped. But it often is a bit odd in relation to the daughter, who is on the phone… because they have so many gigabytes in their subscription that they can be on it as long as they want – so there was a lot of conflict with the use of time between the boy and girl and platform differences.

Another parent says the following about rules related to time use:

My son has to stop using the screen at 8 p.m. In one of our heated discussions on limiting the time spent playing video games, my son protested saying: … but mum. It is so unfair. I have never in my life been as social as I am now. Why should I stop?" My heart melted and he was allowed to play a bit more then…

Filtering is another strategy used by parents to regulate children's video gaming. The challenge of regulating age limits and parental guidance is a source of tension for some of them:

I managed to put filters for the youngest on that YouTube. This however does not work on streaming services such as Netflix where

*we have separate users. Lots of algorithms are left there. I have
put an age limit on Netflix to try to avoid the Squid game, but it's
all over the place. I can't even begin to find it.*

A parent ascribes to using filters which she admits are illusive, as well as
admitting being helped out by older siblings:

*No one is allowed to watch the Squid Game, talk about it and sing
the song. Once, my 12-year-old took the phone from the 4-year-
old and said he was not allowed to look at the Squid game. The
12-year-old took care of it. She did what I should have done.*

The example above illustrates how an older sibling may take on responsibility
regarding restricting younger children's access to certain media. For a parent
who had recently moved to Norway, the task of mediating their children's
video game play was particularly challenging:

*This is a terrain that is scary for most parents, especially with
immigrant background. Having to deal with many unknowns
can be overwhelming. Parents (new to Norway) have to learn
everything by themselves, which can both be a lot and feel scary.*

The same parent adds that the uncertainties of living in a new socio-cultural
context and not knowing how to assess appropriate content often led parents
to adopt restrictive approaches:

*Often their approaches are like 'don't do this or that', you are
not allowed…' etc. 'I think it's wrong to deny the kids whether it's
positive or negative'.*

One area where parents feel the need to regulate is the language their children
were exposed to in certain games:

*…The vulgar language is a specific thing you can set a limit with.
We have partly managed that by shutting down the platform if
it became too much bad language. It was partially controlled…*

> *Also explain what are swearing words, what are bad words and what are not… it is probably an eternal discussion…*

Furthermore, parents encourage their children when they create or experiment with avatars that have multicultural identities:

> *My three youngest children have a father who is not Norwegian. In relation to choosing characters… if they can choose something that connects with the other culture, then they choose it. If they can put a flag "from their father's country of origin" on the Rocket league, they will do it. Same sentiments apply if they can choose curly or frizzy hair rather than anything else.*

Another parent focuses on the opportunity to experiment with fantasy about identity, stating:

> *Looking at it positively…you can be many versions of yourself…my son has played Assassin's Creed as a girl. I see that he can choose avatars in all colours and shapes. So, it is positive with exploration.*

About stereotypes in play, one informant reflects:

> *I noticed that there were more stereotypes in the older games. In the newer ones, one spends resources on the fact that you can change so much of yourself. Previously, there were one or two possibilities.*

Another parent argues from religious convictions (Islam), saying that he had noticed that in many games, the females were scantily dressed, and that these games were forbidden for their two sons.

Enabling mediation: Introducing, dialoguing and co-playing.

One of the parents in our study *introduced* his child into the gaming world to give the opportunity to enjoy socializing with peers:

Yes. I introduced him to a part of the gaming world earlier on, so he has become incredibly good. Very, very good – that he often shows me how good he is. He also used to play a lot with people from all over the world but now there is a group at school that he plays with. So, in a group like that at school, the socialization happens as they play the games – they meet both physically and in games.

The aspect of socialization also emerged, as shared below:

… it was helpful that she was able to have many friends on the platform called Discord from all over the world where they all converged and played games and chatted. Here, she actually found a very safe space in the video games. When things got better at school, she spent less time on the platform. But just when she was having a really bad time, she spent a lot of time on Discord with friends that she had had for maybe 4–5 years. So, I think it's an important place for many young people to have.

Another enabling mediation strategy commonly used by parents is *dialoguing*. Discussions between parent and child about video games are used to stimulate the child's critical thinking and understanding. The informant quoted above shares how both she and her husband play video games with their three children and the dynamics therein:

Me and my husband are a team. We probably think that we bring different aspects to the games for the children. He plays a lot of Minecraft with them and is very exploratory. He has linked up two PCs for each (himself and 11-year-old son) to have their own in the room. Our daughter (12-year-old) is now also integrated into the social relationship with my husband and our son. And the youngest (7) also plays some Minecraft but is not part of that community. She plays more with her 11-year-old brother. And they've been playing Minecraft quite a bit. I play Mario Kart with our daughter (12). She wins in such a way that it's great, great fun.

One of the informants expressed that it is important to sit down with the children and explain the pitfalls of video games before letting them explore things for themselves. Another parent provided a generational introspection on how her husband's experience with his parents has helped him understand his own child's video gaming and how that understanding has helped him engage in dialogue with the youngster:

> *I'm sitting and thinking about my husband's experience… because my husband plays a lot now. He played a lot at an early age but struggled very much to gain acceptance from his parents. That has helped him adopt a conversational (dialogical) approach with his children over the role and impact of video games.*

According to one of our informants, violence in video games is a problem associated with parental guidance on age limits. His approach is to discuss it with his child:

> *For my part, my son has been quite mature from a very young age. We have discussed many things we have seen together, sometimes above his age limit. Knowing that he understands the difference between what is real and what is fake. Previously, we had several discussions around this and now I feel that he has understood. I am now not too concerned about the age limit. Had I noticed that he had been violent and aggressive, I would have taken a different approach. I guess it varies from individual-to-individual, yes.*

Another form of mediation described by parents involves participating in children's gaming worlds through playing with them, i.e., *social co-playing*.

> *Sometimes we play together. Lots of Minecraft, Fortnite, FIFA, Rocket League, Assassin's Creed. I play more often with the boy than with the girl.*

For the parent who played FIFA, Rocket League, Fortnite and Minecraft, it was a positive experience playing together with the children as this made them all happy, as she elaborates here:

> *They are very happy when I join the game and I enjoy showing off in the game when I have time to sit down to play. I think that is actually good.*

For another parent, playing video games with his children was a socialization time, especially when the son was younger. But as his son grew older and became more skilled, this involvement dwindled. The father says:

> *I played with my son a lot in the game called Overwatch. But he also played with a number of friends he has met online. When I quickly become worse, he made it known that it wasn't very exciting for neither him nor me. I haven't been asked to play since he was 15. Before that I was asked every now and then. Now he occasionally only shows me fragments of how he does it and figures and the like.*

The importance of parental participation in children's everyday activities and hobbies, such as gaming, was seen as an important aspect of parenting, given that denying them access to gaming was seen as difficult:

> *… It is important to adapt to your child's life and new hobbies. Playing video games are part and parcel of children's lives today and it is impossible to deny them.*

Co-playing with parents gave the youth a sense of mastery of the games and confidence to play with their counterparts. Sometimes, it led to playing less with their parents and more with their counterparts online (virtual friends) and offline (classmates).

Discussion

We may now explore research question 2. The findings indicate that parents and children engage in complex and ongoing negotiations which reflect different literacies. These negotiations create space for a collaborative process towards developing digital literacies and safe online practices.

Discussing the findings related to restrictive mediation

The excessive time spent on video games is a challenge well reported in research (Seddighi, Dralega, Corneliussen & Prøitz, 2019; Medietilsynet, 2020). For parents uncertain of technological benefits or harm, policing screen time offers simple and straightforward help in reducing competing interests in the family. However, rather than providing a reasonable path forward, screen time rules "have proved a new rod for the parent's backs" (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020, p. 33). Although done in a restrictive manner, these strategies indicate a social practice, a level of awareness of the dangers of video games and critical thinking as proposed in the literature on critical media literacy (Gee, 2015; Luke, 2013). This is also related to the increasing research interest on whether children have access to or play games rated 18 by Pan European Game Information.

A prominent feature of gaming culture is the convergence between gaming and social media platforms such as Twitch and YouTube. They stream gaming-related content and draw massive viewership, leading to new phenomena such as the practice of "just watching" (Yodovich & Kim, 2022). Children are often more knowledgeable than their parents regarding the technical aspects of such digital media, given that they are keener to experiment with navigating their features. However, parents are generally more skilful in critically understanding social and cultural issues, such as the ways video games project stereotypes and violent speech. The informants' awareness of representation and diversity, as well as social contexts and societal structures of race, identity, and belongings (Buckingham, 2003) in video games, as seen in the quotations about the children's avatar choices, indicate that they exercise critical media literacy through restrictive frames of parental mediation.

Discussing the findings related to enabling mediation

Introducing and dialoguing are arguably positive parental mediation strategies that promote critical media literacy the most. Scott (2020) uses the term "initiating" to describe one form of enabling mediation strategy, where a family member takes the lead in beginning a child's engagement with a media text or device.

Through an enabling environment for the children, youths may socialize and grow as they navigate their social world through video games. Parental reflections on their enabling approaches are here considered as critical awareness and dispositions. Luke suggests that meta-knowledge of "meaning systems and sociocultural contexts in which they are produced and embedded", besides skills to negotiate these systems and the ideologies that underpin them, are vital elements of critical media literacy (Luke, 2000, p. 72). Applied to video games, the approach highlights critical thinking, emphasising digital presence, socio and cultural contexts and appropriate actions.

A notable characteristic of co-playing approaches is that expertise shifts between parent and child. Thus, such approaches reduce the gap in digital literacy between parents and children and alleviate tensions often observed in restrictive practices. Co-playing in video games offers opportunities for critical media literacy in the sense that co-playing promotes socialization (Dralega & Corneliussen, 2018), reduces conflict (Dralega et al., 2020), and promotes dialogue and learning within a social context (Dralega et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This chapter explores strategies used by parents to regulate video games in family contexts. The study adopts qualitative methodologies including focus group discussions with fourteen parents of youths between 10–19 years of age. The theoretical framework of parental mediation and critical media literacy is adopted.

In response to *research question 1*, we find that the parents in our study employed a mixture of restrictive and enabling strategies: restrictive through timing and filtering and enabling through introducing, dialoguing, and co-playing. The restrictive strategies involved policing their children's game-playing time and accessing age-restricted gaming content. Parents also screened the type of gaming content their children played to limit exposure to verbal and physical violence. As for the enabling strategies, initiating, dialoguing, and participating in children's game play were involved.

Parents' struggles over screen time are indicative of more fundamental issues that are reconfiguring families in the Western world as they simultaneously respond to the new norms of the democratic family, and to the external

societal risks and pressures. The prevalence of digital technologies such as video games in children's everyday lives seems to give families a platform for negotiating their conflicting desires and expectations.

In response to *research question 2*, the discussion indicates that the parents exercise critical media literacy through various parental mediation strategies. We have identified representation, language and audience. Within the representation dimension, we see parents commenting about gender and ethnicity as part of this critical literacy. The language dimension is identified through the use of vulgar language and prohibition. Our informants articulate an awareness of the rhetoric of digital media. In the audience dimension, through the parents' reflections on issues around time use, socialization, representation and so on, we see how critical the target informants are.

Whereas the restrictive mediation strategy points towards negotiating more fundamental issues, the enabling strategy highlights critical thinking about meta-knowledge systems.

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