

FULL PAPER

Bedingungen der Nutzung von Happy Slapping Videos bei Jugendlichen – der Einfluss der Traitvariablen Sensation Seeking und Empathie

Antecedents of Happy Slapping Video Use among German Adolescents – The Impact of Sensation Seeking and Trait Empathy

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Antecedents of Happy Slapping video use among German adolescents – the impact of sensation seeking and trait empathy

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Abstract: When adolescents use digital media, not all content is deemed appropriate. One type of problematic content is Happy Slapping (HS) videos, filmed acts of real-life violence that are distributed online or through mobile phones. The aim of this study is to investigate potential explanatory factors for the use and potential to use of HS videos among adolescents. We saw HS video use being rooted in personality traits such as empathy and sensation seeking. A survey with German adolescents ($N = 125$) aged 13 to 20 years was conducted, quota sampling for educational level. Results show that sensation-seekers and those individuals low in empathy watch HS videos more frequently than non-sensation-seekers. A gender- and education-specific distribution in the use of HS videos was found, but was not present when psychological trait variables were accounted for. Implications for media education practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: Happy Slapping; sensation seeking; empathy; personality; adolescents; violence; cyber bullying

Zusammenfassung: Happy Slapping (HS) Videos, verstanden als meist mit dem Mobiltelefon gefilmte Gewaltakte, deren Videos dann per MMS, Bluetooth oder dem Internet verbreitet werden, stellt ein neues Phänomen problematischer Mediennutzung durch Jugendliche dar. Im Fokus dieses Artikels steht die Analyse der Gründe der Nutzung von Happy Slapping Videos. Dabei werden zwei Persönlichkeitstrait als ursächlich für das Interesse an der Nutzung von HS Videos gehen: Sensation Seeking und Empathie. In einer nach Bildungshintergrund (Hauptschule/ Gymnasium) quotierten Stichprobe von $N = 125$ Jugendlichen im Alter von 13 – 20 Jahren zeigte sich in unserer Befragungsstudie, dass unkontrolliert Geschlecht und Bildung Prädiktoren für die Nutzung und Bewertung von HS Videos sind. Diese Effekte verschwinden jedoch, wenn Sensation Seeking und Empathie berücksichtigt werden. Niedrige Empathie und stärker ausgeprägtes Sensation Seeking wirken positiv auf die Nutzung von HS Videos. Implikationen für die (pädagogische) Medienarbeit werden diskutiert.

Keywords: Happy Slapping; Sensation Seeking; Empathie; Persönlichkeit; Jugendliche; Gewalt; Cyber-Bullying

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1. Introduction

New media such as multimedia cell phones or the internet offer new opportunities for adolescents to express themselves (Buckingham, 2007). However, not all of these opportunities are without risk (cf. Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Deviant behavior may also occur online, as instances of what can be labeled as “cyber bullying” (Tokunaga, 2010) indicate. Here, adolescents are bullied through the use of social media by their peers. Among these acts of deviant online behavior, the phenomenon of Happy Slapping (HS) – filming acts of violence with mobile phones and distributing these videos online – has become equally notorious and has regularly (re-)appeared on the media agenda, particularly when the portrayed acts of violence become so gruesome that they even led to the death of victims (Kaupmann, 2006; Andersson, Thapar-Björkert, & Hearn, 2011).

Although HS has received some media publicity, the attractiveness of HS for adolescents has not attracted substantial academic attention (Andersson et al., 2011). In our study, we are not interested in understanding why adolescents commit acts of violence that they later distribute online – an area better analyzed from a criminology perspective. Rather as media scholars, we are interested in the viewing and use of HS videos and which personality traits may explain their popularity. Qualitative studies on HS use among adolescents suggest personality trait variables might explain the attractiveness of HS videos for adolescents (Lange, 2008). Additionally, current research on the preference for violent media content suggests two personality trait variables that are of central importance in explaining violent media use: sensation seeking (Slater, 2003) and empathy (Bartholow, Sestir, & Davis, 2005).

In our study, we investigate the role of these two personality traits beyond the explanatory power of socio-demographic variables (gender, education) that are usually employed as predictors of HS use (Grimm & Rhein, 2007). We rely on survey data of $N = 125$ adolescents.

2. Understanding Happy Slapping

The term Happy Slapping (HS) originated in the UK, describing a phenomenon where predominantly male adolescents film physical attacks on their mobile phones and post these videos on the internet or distribute them through multimedia message from mobile phones (Saunders, 2005; Andersson et al., 2011). Comparable incidents have been reported in other European countries (Hilgers, 2010). These attacks may differ in their intensity, ranging from a slight slap laughed away by the victims themselves, up to several minutes of fierce physical attacks (Saunders, 2005). Even though HS videos usually depict acts of authentic real-life violence, some of them may also be initiated among friends. In these cases, the roles of attacker and victim may change several times in the videos (Hilgers, 2010). In contrast to these staged HS videos where victim and attacker know each other, it is assumed that victims in real attacks are usually not from the immediate social environment of the attacker (Saunders, 2005). However, viewers of HS videos are often not able to distinguish between real attacks and those that

are staged. Regardless of the production context, the violence portrayed in HS video is real.

HS may be considered as a form of “cyber bullying” (Robertz, 2010). Definitions of ‘cyber bullying’ often account for the component of intending to harm others through the use of new media, particularly the internet and cell phones (Patchin & Hiduja, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2007; Tokunaga, 2010). In contrast to the (mostly) psychological violence of “cyber bullying”, HS includes primarily physical violence, yet the distribution of these videos on the internet or via Bluetooth causes psychological pain to the victims. While HS might be used for “cyber bullying” – particularly when victims and perpetrators know each other – and the videos are distributed with the intention to humiliate others, the reception of HS videos might also occur with no direct intention of “cyber bullying”. In this case, HS seems to be more comparable to adolescents’ use of violent media content such as horror or action movies as a source of entertainment (cf. Walters, 2004; Slater, HERNY, Swaim, & Anderson, 2003)

3. Prevalence of HS in Germany

Our study focuses on Germany, where HS have appeared regularly on the public agenda as an adolescent risk associated with their use of new media technology (Hilgers, 2010; Andersson et al., 2011). Still, there is little empirically-grounded and systematic data on the prevalence of HS. Moreover, it can be assumed that the estimated number of unreported cases is high, because many HS attacks are not brought to court as offenders deny the violent attacks and victims do not report them out of shame or fear (Hilgers, 2010).

A study interviewing $N = 804$ adolescents (12 to 19) found that 72% of respondents knew of HS as a form of homemade violent video, but substantially less participants have actually seen these videos (43%; Grimm & Rhein, 2007). HS videos are usually downloaded from the internet (92%) and a majority of the respondents that had seen HS videos (62%) received them from the creator. Furthermore, boys over 16 years with rather low educational level are a high-risk group for HS more likely to watch, forward and enjoy HS videos (Grimm & Rhein, 2007).

The prevalence of HS videos among adolescents aged 13 to 19 is also accounted for in the German annual representative youth and media study JIM (MPFS, 2010). The study estimates that one-third of young mobile phone owners have watched a fight that was filmed on a mobile phone, and only seven percent of respondents indicate that the scene was staged. A majority points out that real conflicts and violence have been documented with the phone (MPFS, 2010). Beyond the age of 18 a decrease in HS use is observed. An education-specific distribution was also reported, with half of students (50%) from basic-level education (Hauptschule) has already seen such films of fights; at the mid-level school this drops to just 32% and to 25% for high-level school (Gymnasium) (MPFS, 2010).

Three-quarters of adolescent mobile phone owners know that violent content is distributed through mobile phones. One in four reported that friends and acquaintances were already confronted with such content. Six percent were them-

selves recipients of such content. More boys (29%) than girls (19%) agree that friends or acquaintances have received violent content or porn videos on their mobile phones (MPFS, 2010). Moreover, girls tended to react with sympathy and compassion to a reception of these videos, while boys are more likely to express only relief that they were not victims of this attack (Grimm, 2008).

With respect to these findings we may derive two hypotheses on socio-demographic variables impacting on the use of HS:

H1: The use of HS videos is more widespread among boys than among girls.

H2: The use of HS videos is more widespread among students from lower levels of education (lower-level-school) than from higher levels of education (higher-level school).

By use, we focus on a rather broad range of activities related to HS videos such as viewing them voluntarily and forwarding them to others (Grimm, 2008; MPFS, 2010). Importantly, we do not include the production of these videos in our analyses.

4. Personality factors for explaining HS use

We have to differentiate between the production and the use of HS videos. The latter is in the focus of this study, although we have to be aware that even use might be a rather broad concept. We do not think that receiving a link to a HS video is considered use but actively and voluntarily watching the video is seen as a threshold for a formal definition of use. Early studies have adopted a motivational perspective, identifying enjoyment (fun, entertainment), peer-group approval, the fascination of horrific images, the emotional arousal while watching as well as testing one's limits as reasons for using HS videos (Lange, 2008; Schell, 2008; Grimm, 2008). However, we consider that these potential motivations are rooted in deeper personality factors. Among potential personality factors, two stand out in relation to HS research: sensation seeking and empathy (Grimm & Rhein, 2007).

We use the term personality as the totality of a person's properties, styles, and behavioural dispositions meant to make it relatively stable over time and across situations (Hannover, Pöhlmann, & Springer, 2004). Personality is a dynamic construct that affects the behaviour, feelings and the thoughts of people. It is more than the sum of its parts, i.e. personality factors. The organization of these factors is decisive (Carver & Scheier, 2004). The personality of a human being is unique. Personality usually remains relatively stable over time, but is not a rigid construct. Rather, personality factors may under changing environmental conditions organize and dynamically evolve, which in turn has an influence on behaviour (Caspi & Shiner, 2006).

Studies over the past 20 years have shown that the personality structure remains similar from childhood to adulthood (Rutter, 2008). That is, the personali-

ty of young people is also stable and can be measured by their abilities matched test instrumentation. Among potential personality factors, two stand out in relation to HS research: sensation seeking and empathy (Grimm & Rhein, 2007).

4.1 Sensation seeking as predictor for HS use

Zuckerman (1994) was the first who described the search for the “kick” or “thrill” with the term sensation seeking (SS). He defined it as “a trait defined by the seeking for varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal and financial risks for the sake of such experiences” (Zuckerman, 1994, p. 27).

Research on sensation seeking is rooted in the notion that every person has an “optimum level” of arousal or activation, actively seeking new stimuli when current stimulation wears off and withdrawing from stimuli when it is too arousing (Brocke, Strobel, & Müller, 2003). Sensation seeking is often equated with delinquent behaviour (Möller & Huber, 2003). But, delinquent behaviour cannot be reduced to the search for new stimuli, as a person with a distinct sensation seeking trait does not necessarily need to become delinquent or criminal.

Sensation-seekers have a very responsive and powerful perception and stimulus processing apparatus. Strong stimuli are rewarding for sensation-seekers, but only for a short time and repetition of the same stimuli leads to decreased interest (Gleich, Kreisel, Thiele, Vierling, & Walther, 1998). Sensation seeking differs with respect to gender, age and culture (Möller & Huber, 2003). Studies have shown that sensation seeking is more common in men than in women, and peaks during adolescence (Zuckerman, 1994). Schierman & Rowland (1985) have examined the sensation seeking trait in conjunction with consumer choice, finding that male sensation-seekers prefer erotic media content as well as news and documentaries.

Numerous studies show a relationship between sensation seeking and preference for horror movies and morbid content (Zuckerman & Litle, 1986; Edwards, 1991; Johnston, 1995; Tamborini & Stiff, 1987) as well as brutally violent media content (Goldstein, 1999; Sparks & Sparks, 2000; Gleich et al., 1998; Burst, 1999). Slater (2003) also replicated these findings for internet use, finding that those high in sensation seeking are more likely to explore websites containing violent content. HS videos seem to fit into the category of media content that is preferred by those high in sensation seeking, as they share some of these morbid and violent content characteristics, as has been suggested – but not explicitly tested – by Lange (2008) and Grimm & Rhein (2008). As a consequence, we may postulate a new hypothesis for our research:

H3: There is a positive relationship between sensation seeking and the use of HS videos such that adolescents who score high on trait sensation seeking prefer to use HS videos.

4.2 Empathy

As HS videos depict acts of violence against ordinary people in real life scenarios, trait empathy may also a crucial role in influencing the tendency to watch these videos. The consumption of violent media in general is believed to help adolescents test emotional coping mechanisms (Jansz, 2005). As well, low levels of empathy have been found to be positively related to both real life violence (cf. Miller & Eisenberg, 1988) and the use of violent media content (cf. Bartholow, Sestir, & Davis, 2005). Furthermore, findings from research on affective disposition theory report that viewers dislike violence that is directed towards media characters for which they feel empathic (Zillmann, 1991). Related, individual differences in trait empathy are associated with differential responses to violent interactive media (Funk, Buchman, Jensk, & Bechtoldt, 2003). Decreased empathy has been found to reduce feelings of guilt when conducting unjustified violence in a video game (Hartmann, Toz, & Brandon, 2010). Grimm & Rhein (2007) assume that adolescents who watch HS videos aspire to achieve empathy control, that is, they watch these videos in order to control emotions and suppress feelings of empathy. Based on these findings, we derive H4 as follows:

H4: There is a negative relationship between empathy and the use of HS videos such as people with high levels of the trait empathy show less preference for HS videos.

4.3 The relationship between the trait empathy and the trait sensation seeking

Sensation seeking and empathy are personality trait variables that are not independent from each other (Bartholow et al., 2005; Slater, Henry, Swaim, & Cardodor, 2004). Both concepts run in opposite directions: whereas a high level of sensation seeking tends to increase the preference for violent media content, a high level of empathy tends to reduce its attractiveness. We may assume that both traits may moderate the preference for HS videos such as that high level of sensation seeking and low level of the trait empathy may particularly increase the attractiveness of HS videos. Yet, it is open to investigation what might happen if an individual high in both trait empathy and sensation seeking encounter HS videos. While we have no strong theoretical argument on our side, we may assume that as sensation seeking cannot only be achieved through violent media but through all other forms of activities and behaviour, trait empathy may have a stronger effect on the preference for HS and as such would reduce the attractiveness of HS videos even for high sensation seekers. Still, as this relationship remains open for further debate, we proposed RQ1:

RQ1: Do high levels of trait empathy reduce the attractiveness of HS videos for high sensation-seekers?

Basically, we are asking the question, which of the two trait variables is the stronger influencing factor on HS video use.

5. Method

To test our hypotheses and answer our research question, we carried out a paper-pen-survey study with adolescents.

5.1 Participants

Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis from cooperating schools and youth institutions across Germany. These were one basic-school in south Germany, a school-holiday-camp in mid-Germany and one Gymnasium in Berlin. We used a quota sample of $N = 125$ adolescents aged 13 to 20 (M age = 15.73, $SD = 1.27$; 46% Female), with an even distribution of school-type (basic-school and Gymnasium) to account for educational background. Overall, Germany uses a two- to three-tiered school system. After four to six years of joint education, students are separated at around the age of 10 to 12 years to achieve one of three possible schools degrees depending on their school performance. Either they finish school after nine (basic-or lower-level), 10 (mid-level) or 12 (higher-level / “Gymnasium”) years of enrolment, with only the latter being allowed to proceed to university or college. In our sampling, we focused on the highest (“Gymnasium”) and lowest (“basic-school”) school level. After eliminating incomplete data, our quota led to a small overrepresentation of basic-school students (56%).

5.2 Procedure

After receiving informed consent by the participant’s parents, the adolescents received a paper-and-pencil questionnaire through our cooperating institution. Questionnaires were returned from the cooperating institution to us. The questionnaire contained closed questions and a short definition of HS and a photo from a HS video, including a written description of what was to be seen on the photo. This was done as HS is referred to by different German equivalents (“Gewaltvideos”, “Prügelvideos”) and we wanted our participants to be primed by the same concept of HS when they were answering questions related to HS (Bortz & Döring, 2003). The use of this written stimulus material was deemed necessary as we expected that not all of our participants were familiar with HS videos.

5.3 Measures

Evaluation of HS use: We could expect that not all participants would have already been confronted with HS videos. Furthermore, even if participants had actively watched these videos, their willingness to commit to this deviant and socially unaccepted behavior would be limited. Therefore, we employed projective questions to compensate for potential social desirability (Davison, 1983) and asked participants how they would judge other people that watch HS videos as described in our stimulus material. Participants could rate this question from 1 (“bad”) to 5 (“good”).

Use of HS videos: We also directly asked if participants had previously watched HS videos. As we expected effects of social desirability reducing the number of participants that had used HS videos, we allowed them to indicate on a four point scale (with one additional category to indicate if they were undecided) if they a) had regularly watched HS videos (= 4), b) had watched them but only once (= 3) c) had not watched them but knew people that watched them (= 2) and d) had not watched them at all (= 1) and e) did not know if they had watched them (= missing value). Rather high proportions of participants in this latter category (15%, $n = 124$) may be read as an indication for the participants lack of willingness to indicate their use of HS videos.

Empathy: Following our strategy to overcome social desirability through projective questions, we asked in how far watching a scene as described in our stimulus material would induce certain feelings. Participants had to rate three items rated as empathic and three items rated as non-empathic reactions. Empathic items were derived from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IPR; Beven, O'Brien-Malone, & Hall, 2004) previously employed for measuring trait empathy. Non-empathic items were derived from Lange's (2008) analysis of regular users of HS videos. All six items were rated on a 1 to 6 scale and combined into one index, achieving satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = .72$, $n = 124$).

Sensation seeking: Sensation seeking was measured by the German version of the Arnett Inventory of Sensation Seeking (AISS; Roth, Schumacher, & Arnett, 2003). In contrast to Zuckerman's original sensation seeking scale, the AISS is more recent, has been adjusted for the use with adolescents, and employs 4-point Likert-type items rather than dichotomous response options. Although Arnett (1994) postulates a bi-dimensional structure of sensation seeking consisting of intensity and curiosity, replication of the German-language scale by Roth et al. (2003) found a rather high correlation of .44 between the two constructs. Additionally, they recommended the elimination of certain items to improve internal consistency. For our study, we first employed the 20 items as used by Roth et al. (2003) and then we eliminated items that, from principle component analysis, did not load ($<.4$) on one of the two sensation seeking dimensions, resulting in an elimination of nine items. As we were interested in sensation seeking per se and not elaborating on the highly interrelated constructs found by Arnett (1994) and Roth et al. (2003), we combined the remaining 11 items into a combined index. Reliability of the index was low but remained over .6 ($\alpha = .65$, $n = 122$).

Socio-demographics: Participant age, gender and school type was recorded at the end of the questionnaire. For school-type, we differentiated between higher-level education ("Gymnasium") and lower-level education ("Hauptschule").

6. Results

6.1 Descriptive data on the prevalence of H2

74% of our participants indicate they did not recognize our stimulus material by the name HS video, and more than one half of the adolescents (51%) stated that they do not consume HS videos, although we caution that there is a chance that the answers were influenced by social desirability factors.

6.2 Testing of H1 and H2 (socio-demographic variables)

In order to test H1 and H2, we investigated for socio-demographic differences in the evaluation and use of HS videos. In line with H1, girls tended to judge the use of HS videos on the average worse than boys. In addition, fewer girls than boys reported having ever watched HS videos (table 1).

Results also indicate an effect of the educational level. Higher-level education students tended to judge the use of HS videos more negatively than lower-level education students. Furthermore, fewer higher-level education adolescents reported having ever watched HA videos than their lower education level counterparts. However, the effect is not approaching significance (table 2).

Table 1: HS use and Evaluation of HS use by gender

	Girls	Boys	T	df	p-value
HS use	M = 1.62, SD = .92	M = 2.04, SD = 1.13	-2.05	106	p = .04
Evaluation of HS use	M = 1.38, SD = .68	M = 2.05, SD = 1.25	-4.03	123	p < .001

Table 2: HS use and Evaluation of HS use by education

	Lower-level	Higher-level	T	df	p-value
HS use	M = 2.00, SD = 1.25	M = 1.67, SD = .94	1.53	106	p = .130
Evaluation of HS use	M = 2.07, SD = 1.15	M = 1.32, SD = .55	4.81	123	p < .001

When simultaneously testing for effects of gender and school-type, we observe both a significant effect for gender ($F(1,119) = 9.42, p = .003$) and school-type ($F(1,119) = 14.90, p < .001$) as well as a significant interaction effect for gender and school-type ($F(1,119) = 8.56, p = .004$) suggesting that boys from lower-level education schools evaluate the use of HS videos most positively and girls for higher-level education evaluate HS videos most negatively.

Without considering psychological variables, H1 and H2 can be confirmed.

6.3 The role of sensation seeking and empathy (H3 and H4)

To get the full picture on the relationship between the evaluation of HS videos, sensation seeking and empathy a hierarchical regression was carried out. Socio-demographic variables (age, education and gender) were put in the equation at

the beginning to control for them. Thereafter empathy and sensation seeking were put in the second step. Separate regression analyses were conducted for the evaluation and use of HS¹. Results are given in table 3 and 4.

Table 3: Regression results for the influence of demographics, sensation seeking and empathy on evaluation of HS video use

	β	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Step 1			
F (3,115) = 11.784, $R^2=.235$, $p < .001$			
Age	-.184	-1.817	.072
Gender	.312	3.629	<.001
Education	-.227	-2.228	.001
Step 2			
F (5,113) = 13.818, $R^2=.352$, $p < .001$, $\Delta F: p < .001$			
Age	-.150	-1.621	.108
Gender	.140	1.618	.108
Education	-.032	-.323	.747
Empathy	-.429	-4.632	<.001
Sensation Seeking	.112	1.345	.181

Table 4: Regression results for the influence of demographics, sensation seeking and empathy on HS video use

	β	<i>T</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Step 1			
F (3,98) = 3.177, $R^2=.089$, $p = .027$			
Age	-.234	-1.957	.053
Gender	.245	2.387	.019
Education	.037	.307	.760
Step 2			
F (5,96) = 4.282, $R^2=.140$, $p = .001$, $\Delta F: p = .005$			
Age	-.217	-1.891	.062
Gender	.091	.840	.403
Education	.162	1.292	.200
Empathy	-.206	-1.776	.079
Sensation Seeking	.252	2.404	.018

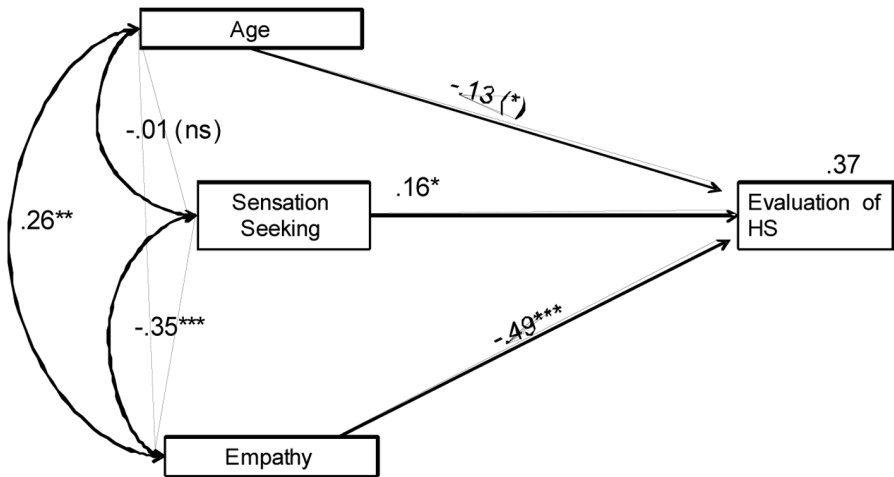
H3 and H4 are supported as proposed, as sensation seeking has a positive influence on both the evaluation of HS videos and its usage frequency while empathy has a negative effect. In terms of effect magnitude (beta-weights), sensation seeking is the weaker – and only approaching significance – predictor for HS use. For the evaluation of HS video use, sensation seeking remains a significant predictor while empathy is no longer significant on the $p < .1$ level. Of all the socio-demographic variables, age is the only one that remains significant on the $p < .1$ level

for HS video use. Moreover, the effects for gender and education found in H1 and H2 disappear when controlled for both sensation seeking and empathy.

6.4 The interplay between sensation seeking and empathy

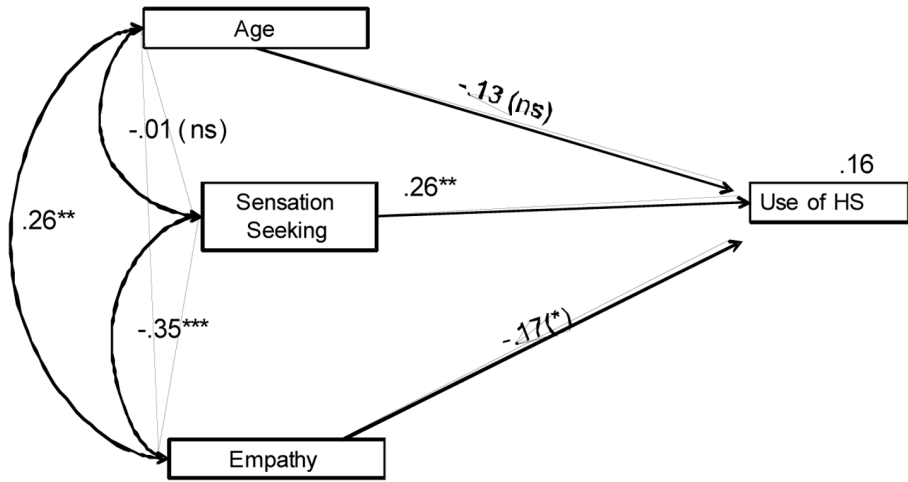
In order to answer RQ1 and to account for potential interrelationships between sensation seeking and empathy on HS evaluation and use, we carried out a path analysis using ML-estimation in AMOS 19. In contrast to the regression analysis, ML-estimation allowed our predictors to be correlated with each other. We used empathy, sensation seeking and age, as it has proven as a potentially significant predictor as independent variables that we allowed to correlate with each other. Again, dependent variables were evaluation of HS video use and HS video use. Results are presented in figure 1 and figure 2.

Figure 1: Path model for Evaluation of HS video use



N = 125, ML- Estimation, *** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$; (*) $p < .1$, ns = $p > .1$, standardized regression weights

Figure 2: Path model for HS video use



N = 125, ML- Estimation, *** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$; (*) $p < .1$, ns = $p > .1$, standardized regression weights

In addition to the findings from the regression analysis, we see that sensation seeking and empathy are significantly and negatively related with each other: Higher sensation seekers tend to show lower levels of trait empathy and vice versa. When we allow our three predictors to correlate, both sensation seeking and empathy are significant predictors for the evaluation of HS video use. Here, empathy is by far the more important predictor – high level of empathy may thus reduce the attractiveness of HS videos for high sensation seekers.

The picture is reversed when we employ the actual use of HS videos as a dependent variable. Here, sensation seeking is the only significant predictor, empathy only approaches significance ($p < .1$). Comparing the regression weights, sensation seeking is a marginally stronger predictor for HS video use than empathy. This finding underlines our results from the regression analysis.

Overall, evaluation of HS video use can be better explained by our predictors than actual use, which might be due to the problematic nature of directly assessing HS use.

7. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationship between the use of HS videos and the trait personality variables sensation seeking and empathy. To investigate this topic a quantitative survey study among adolescents was conducted.

H1 investigated the relationship between the use of HS videos and gender. Our first analysis showed a gender-specific distribution which at first glance confirm-

ing H1. However, a closer look at the data revealed that H1 could not be confirmed as the relationship was most likely confounded by different distributions of our two trait variables (empathy and sensation seeking) among boys and girls, with girls showing more empathy and less sensation seeking (cf. Zuckerman, 1994; Grimm, 2008). H1 can thus not be confirmed.

With H2, the link between the use of HS videos and the education level of the participants was investigated. Results indicate that the education level of the participants is linked to the use of HS videos. The lower-level educated participants judged the use of HS videos better than participants with a higher-level education. These results must be interpreted cautiously because higher-level educated adolescents could be more aware of moral standards in society and therefore could maybe give a more socially desirable answer to the question of the evaluation of HS videos. Also, the use of HS videos seems to be more prominent with lower-educated adolescents, but the result was not significant and therefore just a trend could be observed. As with H1, the direct effect of education disappeared when controlling for sensation seeking and empathy. Our findings in the isolated analysis of H2 may thus be due to confounding our results with different distributions of sensation seeking and empathy among students from higher and lower educational backgrounds. If this finding is limited to our study or indicative of a general trend remains open for further debate – particularly with respect to the German school system that early on separates students based on school performance. As a consequence of our study, we like to stress that HS is a phenomena that is not– as in the public discourse it often seems – limited to the poorly educated, expressed in Germany by attending basic-level school. Instead, the tendency to watch HS videos is related to psychological trait variables that may be found across all forms of education.

H3 examined the relationship between sensation seeking and the use of HS videos. A positive relationship between sensation seeking and the reception of HS videos was found suggesting that adolescents scoring high on trait sensation seeking prefer HS videos more strongly, controlling for other socio-demographic variables. Results show that sensation seeking has a significant impact on HS video use and the evaluation of it. The effect is weak but significant. This implies that adolescents looking for new experiences use HS videos more frequently than adolescents who are not looking for new and exciting stimuli. H3 can thus be confirmed and HS videos seem to represent new and intensive experiences for sensation-seekers (Brocke, Strobel, & Müller, 2003). By watching these videos they can be stimulated and thus accomplish their ideal level of arousal (Möller & Huber, 2003).

Further, adolescents with lower trait empathy reported watching these videos more often (H4). There is a rather strong and highly significant negative relationship between empathy and the evaluation of HS video use, a variable we used as a proxy measure for the potential of HS video use. Highly empathic adolescents judge people that watch HS videos negatively. For the direct measure HS video use the effect is considerably weaker and not a significant predictor. H4 can thus partially be confirmed. This is an important result, as it suggests that watching these videos might result in desensitization towards violence and the ability to feel empathy for the victims might decrease. The loss of empathy may be associa-

ted with an increased propensity for violence (Grimm, 2008). Nevertheless, our data suggests that users of HS videos feel less empathy for the victims than non-recipients, whether this is a consequence of desensitization cannot be determined with certainty. Our study focuses on the alternative direction, suggesting that recipients already have a lower level of empathy and therefore are able to watch and enjoy these videos. Potential effects that may for instance lead to a downward spiral model of media effects (Slater, 2003) need to be accounted for in a longitudinal study.

With respect to RQ1 – the potential influence of empathy or sensation seeking as a more important predictor of HS video use and preference – we may interpret our findings to suggest that sensation seeking is the more important trait for understanding the actual use of HS videos, but for the overall evaluation of HS video use – which we can interpret as the aspects that lies before the actual use – empathy is more important. These findings are particularly emphasised in our path analysis (ML-estimation) that stresses the interdependence of sensation seeking and empathy. Based on these findings, follow up studies could use these as a basis theoretical model that allows for concrete hypothesis testing.

From the results of the present study, we conclude that both empathy and sensation seeking play a role in the use of HS videos, both in terms of their reception and their evaluation). High levels of sensation seeking also go hand in hand (see path model 1 and 2) with lower levels of empathy lead to better evaluations of HS videos and more frequent use. It seems that upcoming empathy is repressed and an empathy control is performed to “enjoy” the reception of HS videos (cf. also from a qualitative point of view Grimm & Rhein, 2007). We like to stress the fact that neither gender nor educational level were predictive of the use of HS videos; instead, it is the relationship with these basic psychological traits that leads to higher (or lower) levels of HS video use.

As HS video use is a rarely studied phenomenon (Andersson et al., 2011), our results emphasize the importance of our findings particularly with respect to the well-established research area of violent media consumption. Research by Slater and colleagues suggests the importance of accounting for aspects of sensation seeking when analyzing violent media use (Slater et al., 2004; Slater, 2003). The results of our study highlight that the same variables – sensation seeking and empathy – that are related to violent media use need to be accounted for when analysing HS video use. We may now begin to ask what the specific aspects of HS videos are. We already pointed out that they depict real life violence and may thus be seen as one of the most extreme forms of mediated violence. In consequence, the effects of both sensation seeking and empathy may be even stronger than for fictional content. Still, this claim needs further investigation.

As a consequence of our research for practitioners in media education, we caution against treating HS video use as a passing phenomenon restricted to adolescent boys from lower educational backgrounds. Rather, we emphasize the psychological roots of HS video use, particularly for adolescents with high levels of sensation seeking. Providing alternative solutions for thrill seeking may be a viable option to reduce the appeal of HS videos for adolescents that are prone to HS video use.

8. Limitations

The exploratory nature of our study leads to some natural limitations. First, we had to employ a rather crude measurement of HS video use. In order to overcome potential effects of social-desirability we relied on the use of projective techniques rather than self-report. Yet, there is some evidence in our data related to the use of HS videos may have been influenced by social desirable answering behaviour. This may probably explain, why the evaluation of HS videos that we used as a proxy variable to measure HS video use was much better explained in our study than actual use. We expect that – based on the findings in previous studies (MPFS, 2010; Grimm & Rhein, 2007) – HS video usage can rarely be accurately measured through self-administrative questionnaires. Replication with a larger sample and a more direct way to measure HS video use could overcome this methodological problem. As far as our study is concerned, the results are promising enough to pursue the directions we predicted.

A second limitation concerns the causal logic of our study. As a paper-and-pencil study, we cannot predict causal order even though we conceptualize our psychological variables as trait rather than state (suggesting their natural causal ordering). We assumed that trait empathy and sensation seeking were predictors of HS video reception. However, research on violent media consumption, particularly the downward spiral model by Slater (Slater et al., 2004), suggests that the effects of violent media consumption such as HS videos. We are not able to investigate if HS video consumption has already reduced empathy levels, even though, we point out the stability of psychological traits. Experimental or longitudinal designs as employed in violent media research could be used to test the causal order of our findings, which as for now are limited to the rather abstract opinions of the adolescents in our survey study. However, we have to stress the fact that confronting adolescents with HS videos in an experimental design is not an ethnically viable option.

9. Conclusion

Our study set out to investigate the phenomenon of HS video use. HS videos were framed as an unwanted aspect of adolescents' online behaviour (Andersson et al., 2011). When focusing on such behaviour, even we as researchers have to be careful not to fall into the trap of a “moral panic” (Ben-Yehude & Goode, 1994), where we overstate the negative implications a potentially deviant behaviour such as HS videos might have. In our research we found rather low levels of HS video use and an on average negative evaluation of them. Our data give no indication that HS videos are a very popular phenomenon amongst adolescents. The actual production of HS video and the distribution of them might be limited to a very small group of adolescents. Still, we found a preference for HS videos not merely limited to poorly educated adolescent males as qualitative studies on HS might have suggested, but its antecedents were rooted in psychological traits. These antecedents were the same that might explain the preference for other types of violent media content. High levels of sensation seeking and low levels of empathy increase the appeal of HS videos for adolescents. Our research opens the ground for a

further exploration of this appeal of HS videos for adolescents. HS videos are one type of problematic content adolescents might be confronted with in a digitalized and social media environment, same as violent media or pornographic content. Media education has to find ways to compensate for adolescents' inherent preferences for these forms of problematic content. Based on our research, trying to appeal to people's empathy might be a good way to reduce the appeal of HS videos.

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Appendix

Description of HS as used in the questionnaire²

Happy Slapping videos are acts of violence that are filmed on mobile phones. They can depict a brawl, slapping or beating up of other people. After filming these videos are either sent around using multimedia message, Bluetooth or uploaded in the Internet. These types of videos have different names such as “GERMAN equivalents mentioned”

[original version: ‚Happy Slapping’-Videos sind Gewalttaten, die mit einem Handy gefilmt werden, wie zum Beispiel eine Schlägerei oder das Verprügeln von fremden Leuten. Danach wird das Video auf andere Handys verschickt oder ins Internet gestellt. Diese Videos haben ganz unterschiedliche Namen, wie zum Beispiel Schlägereivideos, Prügelvideos oder Gewaltvideos.]

HS stimulus material for empathy questions

Here you can see a picture of a video where a person is beaten. The victim is lying on the ground, moaning in pain and tries to protect his face with his hands. The perpetrator hits and kicks the victim.

[original version: Du siehst in dem Video, wie eine Person verprügelt wird. Das Opfer liegt am Boden, krümmt sich und versucht mit den Händen das Gesicht zu schützen. Der Angreifer schlägt und tritt auf die Person ein].

2 Strictly speaking, usage of HS was measured on an ordinal scale level. For convenience sake and comparability to the procedure employed for HS evaluation, we used it as a metric variable. It has to be kept in mind that most measures in social science are only on an ordinal level. For us, we see our measure as sufficiently differentiated enough to carry out regression analysis.