

# Short Films on Screen Media-related Issues as a Strategy in Teaching Health: A Pilot Project

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## ABSTRACT

*Screen media potentially have such impact that serious health issues can be revealed among users. This paper presents the idea of making short films to create increased awareness in a pilot group of German school students and their peers. Moreover, we discuss the need for teacher trainee, as well as full-service teacher education.*

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## Background

The availability of digital media to German children and teenagers as well as the amount of time they spend using them have been investigated and documented since 1998-99 by the Media Research Group Southwest (*Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, MPFS*) in their annual JIM<sup>1</sup> and biannual KIM<sup>2</sup> reports. According to the 2009 issue of the JIM report 70% of German teenagers between 12 and 19 years of age consider computers<sup>3</sup> in as much as watching TV<sup>4</sup> important. Today, nearly all teenagers in Germany have access to computers and, as a consequence of increasingly favored so-called flat rates available nationwide, the Internet too.

Despite the fact that online and offline times can hardly be differentiated anymore, purposes are clear: teenagers communicate via email, instant messenger services, or social networks such as the internationally popular MySpace or Facebook, versus the national platforms of *wer-kennt-wen* or *SchülerVZ*. Additionally, they seek entertainment and information or play various types of games on their computers and consoles. Furthermore, mobile phones are widely used for texting and sending or receiving pictures or videos in addition to making calls only.

Controversy notwithstanding, modern screen media offer a wide range of possibilities as they help organize and personalize daily routines such as studying as well as diversified leisure time. Still, critical issues such as cyberbullying, the abuse of personal data, and pornographic or violent contents can be associated and have therefore been addressed in the 2009 JIM report. As represented in Figures 1 and 2, about one-third of German teenagers have

notice of a case of cyberbullying, and especially male adolescents engage in the process of forwarding and receiving unsuitable and harmful contents most prominently via Bluetooth.

In the course of improved technologies and increasing choices in gaming for example, disorders attended by excessive<sup>5</sup> use of computer/Internet have currently been attracting attention and initiating research mostly on potential effects on performance in school/university (Möble et al. 2007, 2009), social interaction, emotional status and behavior (Gentile 2003; Hauge & Gentile 2003; Anderson et al. 2007) or physical wellbeing (Vandewater 2004). Some investigators have found that excessive computer/online gamers show increased activity in brain regions similar to those in alcoholics (Thalemann & Grüsser, 2005; Thaleman, Wölfling, & Grüsser, 2007).

Whereas the diagnosis of internet/video game addiction has been denied entry in the international classification of diseases (ICD-10), the German Federal Ministry of Health met concerns by addressing the excessive use of internet as an aspect of health care in the 2009 issue of the national annual report on drug abuse and addictions (*Drogen- und Suchtbericht 2009*). According to an intermediate report on therapy projects and the treatment of pathological Internet use in Germany released in January 2009, the prevalence of pathological Internet use varies from 1.6% to 8.2% in international studies,

<sup>5</sup> According to ICD-10, excessive gamers show at least 3 criteria of psychological dependency such as uncontrollable need; loss of control; withdrawal from other activities; excessive playing despite negative consequences; tolerance; withdrawal symptoms. Based on this, Baier and Rehbein (2009), representing the Criminological Institute of Lower Saxony (KFN), developed the KFN-CSAS II to test for symptoms of addiction in computer/online gamers in Germany.

<sup>1</sup> JIM = *Jugend, Information, (Multi-) Media*

<sup>2</sup> KIM = *Kinder + Medien*

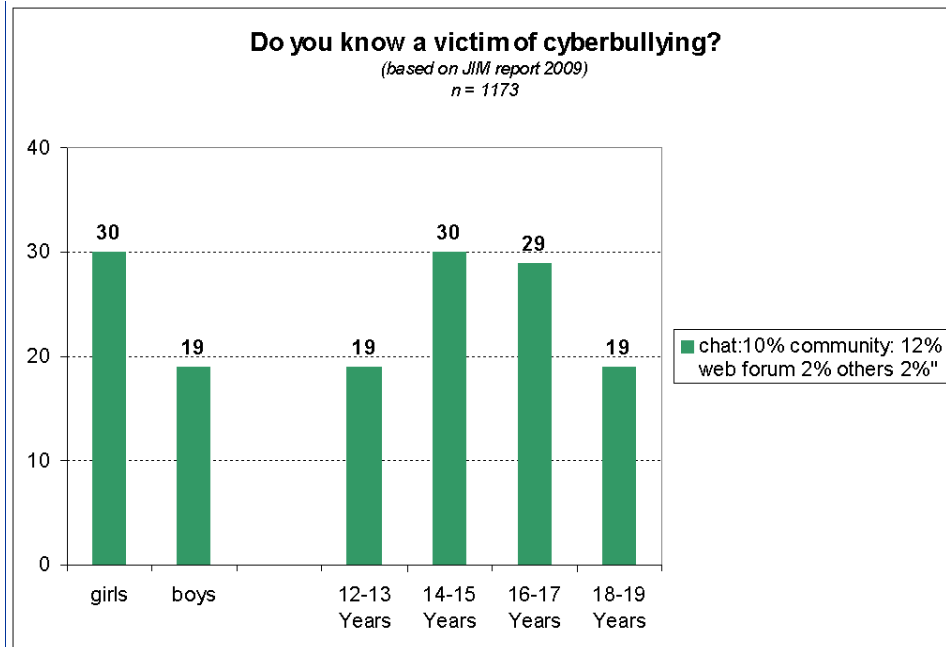
<sup>3</sup> estimated daily online time: 134 minutes

<sup>4</sup> estimated daily consumption: 137 minutes

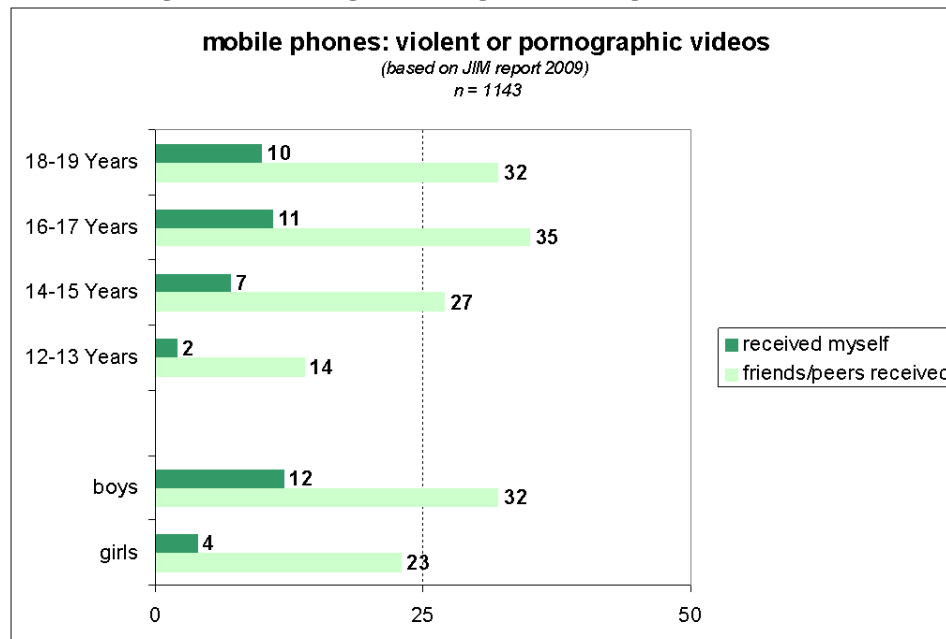
revealing the lack of valid data today. Therefore, it is clearly stated that in addition to the need for more research especially schools, universities and other

educational institutions should use their influence to educate and help create awareness.

**Figure 1. Percentage of Known Cyberbullying Victims by Age and Sex**



**Figure 2. Percentage of Teenagers Receiving Critical Content**



As a means of prevention various professional videos on screen-media related issues are available at [www.klicksafe.de](http://www.klicksafe.de)<sup>6</sup> both in German and English. Based on the strategy of film-making the authors acted on the challenge of collecting data for prevention by conducting a 7-day school pilot project in June 2009. The main objectives were to:

- find aspects school students consider relevant in screen-media related issue discussion;
- learn about how school students choose a genre to convey messages in their own short films on screen-media related issues;
- find peer rating categories for school student films; and
- learn about preventive quality of school student films.

## Methods

### Procedure

Before the beginning of the project a questionnaire-based pretest<sup>7</sup> was performed both on the experimental and an analyzing group<sup>8</sup> to learn about their screen-media consumption habits,<sup>9</sup> notice of (cyber-) bullying cases and expectations as to a film project on screen-media related issues. Scheduled as shown in Figure 3, the authors worked with a selected group of 20 school students from a local school in Siegen, Germany aged 18 on average.<sup>10</sup>

During the first phase of preproduction the experimental group was shown a video on excessive computer gaming (*Which world do you live in?*)<sup>11</sup> and another one on cyberbullying (*Stop Cyberbullying*)<sup>12</sup> to test for the relevance of the topics. Students discussed both content and message and were asked to work in small groups of 6 or 7 persons to make a list of screen-media related issues

relevant to them. In the second phase students selected one issue they were interested in particularly and made a storyboard to present their idea in a short film.<sup>13</sup>

During the production and postproduction phases three films were produced in cooperation with the media center at the University of Siegen:

- *Handy statt Helfen?* (Cell Phone vs. Helpfulness?)
- *Zweiweltleben* (2-World Life)
- *Game Over*

After editing was completed the groups presented their films to the other members of the experimental group and had the chance to discuss the production and postproduction phases with a media design expert from the media center at the University of Siegen.

The experimental group films were presented to the analyzing group and a questionnaire-based posttest<sup>14</sup> was performed asking the students to:

- rate the films individually according to German school grading;<sup>15</sup>
- explain their rating;
- explain why/why not peers should be presented with the individual films; and
- explain why (or why not) parents or teachers should be presented with the individual films.

Three months after the pilot project the experimental group was tested for individual screen-media consumption habits again as well as the degree to which their expectations of the project had been met.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore they were asked to rate the project according to German school grading.

### Data Analysis

The experimental group students discussed the depiction of the issues of excessive computer gaming in *Which world do you live in?* and cyberbullying in *Stop Cyberbullying*. As a group they came to the conclusion that the aspects as such were highly important to them and needed to be addressed. *Stop Cyberbullying* especially drew attention to an issue

<sup>6</sup> Internet platform targeting the protection of minors.

<sup>7</sup> 4-level Likert items (1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: somewhat agree; 4: fully agree)

<sup>8</sup> The analyzing group did not participate in any intervention program such as the experimental group, however was presented with their films for rating (Figure 5).

<sup>9</sup> online activities such as Emailing & chatting; gaming; TV watching; using mobile phones

<sup>10</sup> This group of students varies from others as in addition to their school education allowing them entry to university they are trained for jobs in the social sector such as pre-school teachers. The experimental and the analyzing group are from parallel classes at the same school.

<sup>11</sup> The video is available at [www.klicksafe.de](http://www.klicksafe.de) (internet platform targeting the protection of minors).

<sup>12</sup> The film is also available at [www.klicksafe.de](http://www.klicksafe.de).

<sup>13</sup> This group of students was familiar with making storyboards at this point already. Other groups, especially younger students usually need extra sessions to learn and practice the method.

<sup>14</sup> open questions

<sup>15</sup> German school grades range from "1" (very good; equaling international grade "A") to "6" (failed, "5" and "6" equaling international "F").

<sup>16</sup> The same 4-level items were used as in the pretest.

that some students had not been aware of or had not paid much attention to. *Which world do you live in?* was discussed controversially as students found that the video was obviously made by adult experts trying to teach teenagers about potential risks of excessive gaming and the issue was presented unrealistically due to the most prominent effects or signs such as withdrawal from family and school life, friends, free time activities etc. being shown in exaggeration. This led to the question of how the students would want to address screen-media related issues relevant to them in a film.

Among student films, *Handy statt Helfen?* is concerned with teenagers filming an act of physical violence with their mobile phones. An aggressive young male under the influence of alcohol attacks a young female who is smoking on a bench. After a few verbal attacks the situation gets out of hand and the young woman is pushed around. At the same time another young man and woman enter the scene. They both take their cell phones and begin filming without hesitation. Their conversation is centered on the quality of the video they can produce.

*Zweiweltleben* intertwines three storylines of young women who wish their lives to be more like those of their favorite soap opera or commercial characters. They want to be pretty (A) or successful (B) and find the love of their lives (C). At the beginning, short sequences from popular German daily soap operas and commercials are shown. The video ends with the three young females watching TV together when one of them gets up to turn off the show, indicating that they have had enough.

In *Game Over* an elementary school boy is constantly playing with his portable console – as a consequence he does not pay attention to breakfast, his mother or the traffic. As a car nears and a crashing scene is anticipated the boy awakens in a cold sweat. Later he throws away the console.

#### *Experimental Group: Pretest vs. Posttest*

The pretest shows that results as to online times and having notice of cyberbullying resemble those of the German teenage average reported in JIM 2009 as experimental group students assess their online activities such as Emailing, chatting, downloading music or videos and playing games to 2.07 hours a day (124 minutes).<sup>17</sup> About 28.2 % of the students say they know of a case of cyberbullying, 12.8 % of them being friends. Their estimated daily TV consumption of 2.9 hours (174 minutes) is somewhat higher than the German average however. In the posttest, three months after the project students' assessed only time was 1.24 hours per day (75

minutes) and their daily TV consumption was 1.39 (84 minutes).

Students had high expectations as to having fun (3.7) and achieving skills in making film (3.8). In both categories expectations were met despite slight differences (having fun: 3.6; achieving skills: 3.4). In using skills students already had (2.7) as well as learning how to use new computer programs (2.8) results were better than expected (using skills: 2.9; new programs: 3.3). As to conveying a message through film, expectations were met (pretest 2.97 vs. posttest 3.0). Figure 4 presents five<sup>18</sup> experimental group expectations comparing pretest and posttest results.<sup>19</sup> Overall, the experimental group rating of the pilot project was “good” (1.8). Figure 5 shows the group ratings for the experimental group films. All three films were highly appreciated as they were graded in a range from “very good” (1) to “good” (2) on average.

Analyzing group students' statements explaining their grading allow for five rating categories to be established:

- film presents issue clearly (*Handy statt Helfen?*; *Zweiweltleben*; *Game Over*);
- film creates awareness (*Handy statt Helfen?*);
- film shows need for intervention (*Handy statt Helfen?*);
- good quality of acting or composition (*Game Over*; *Zweiweltleben*); and
- suitable complexity of storyline and film product (*Zweiweltleben*).

Furthermore analyzing group answers<sup>20</sup> indicate that showing student films to other teenagers could help them:

- draw attention to phenomena such as filming, acts of violence and risks of excessive gaming;
- reconsider their attitude; and
- reconsider their own habits.

Further rating categories can be deduced from these answers in addition to the ones listed before:

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<sup>18</sup> The items were selected as *having fun*, *using skills* and *learning new ones* as well as *learning how to convey a message* and *use new programs* (as in film editing) are crucial in terms of a successful project.

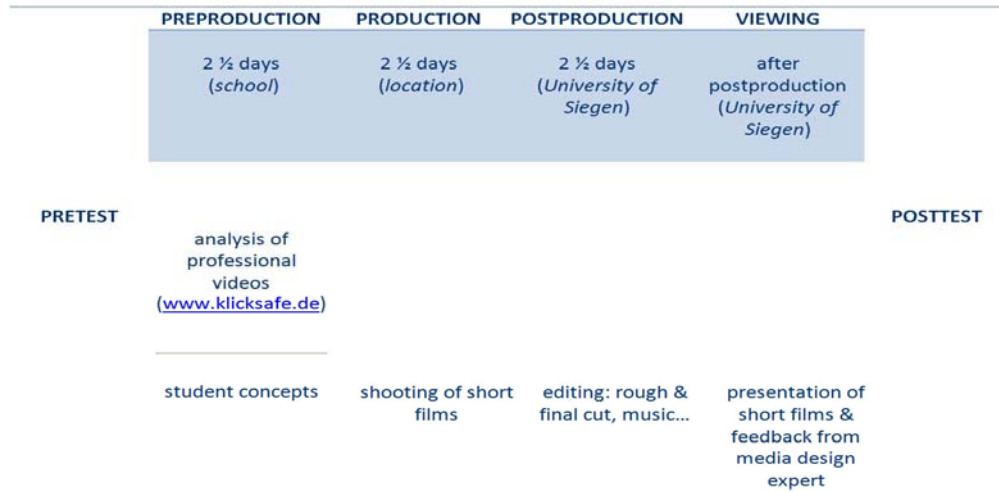
<sup>19</sup> 4-level Likert items

<sup>20</sup> 57 % of the students chose “yes” each time when asked whether the individual experimental group films should be presented to other peers. 43 % of students chose “no” at least once.

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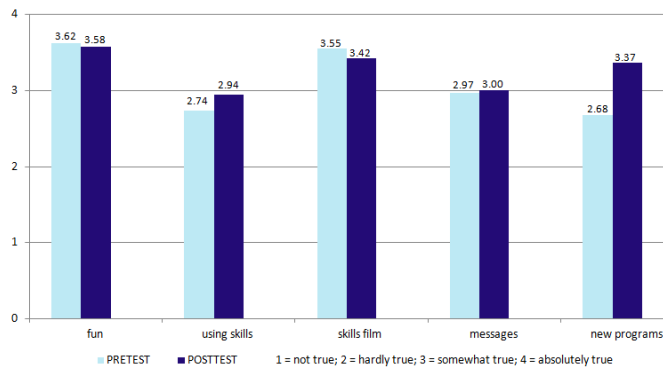
<sup>17</sup> Seeking information online was not tested for.

**Figure 3. Schedule of Pilot Project - June 2009**

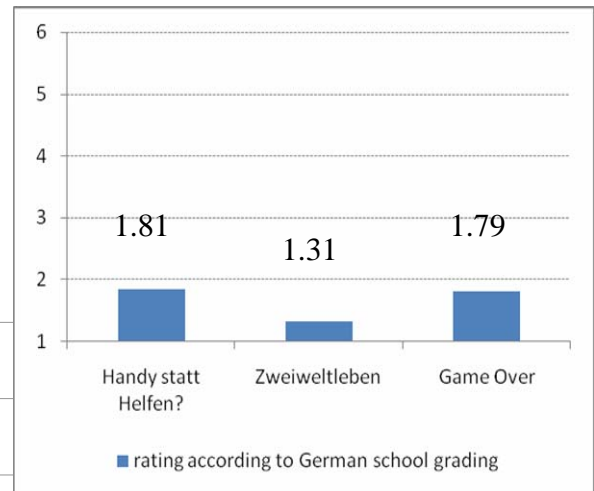


1. (re-) presentation of reality/everyday situation (*Handy statt Helfen?*);
2. medium film is suitable to convey message (*Handy statt Helfen?*); and
3. peer-to-peer approach is suitable (*Handy statt Helfen?*; *Game Over*).

**Figure 4. Experimental Group Expectations - Pretest vs. Posttest**



**Figure 5. Group Ratings of Experimental Films**



If students choose to state their friends do not need to be presented with the videos *Handy statt Helfen?* or *Game Over* they reason their friends neither engage in filming acts of violence nor excessive computer gaming.

Except for 2 out of 15 answers strongly hint at the need for creating awareness of screen-media

related issues in parents or teachers and the chance to improve teachers' skills by showing them what young people think and worry about.

### Discussion

The pilot project shows that using mobile phones to film an act of violence, being affected by soap opera/commercial characters and excessive computer gaming are relevant screen-media related issues to the experimental group students. Further tests will show if youths can relate and wish to make film on other critical issues as addressed in JIM 2009. As to choice of genre more data need to be collected to learn whether fiction is preferable over documentary. Peers (analyzing group) highly appreciate being presented with relevant aspects conveyed through film. Yet it has to be assumed that the rating was influenced by the fact that members of the analyzing group know the experimental group students personally as they attend the same school. Therefore, further tests changing this variable are required to learn if the same effect can be achieved in students representing different school types and if other rating categories show in independent groups.

Potential long-term effects of making film vs. watching film, such as altered individual attitude, awareness or habits, also need to be examined more closely in as much as finding whether students believe their films influence their own habits/attitudes vs. peer habits/attitudes. Posttest results from experimental group student assessment concerning reduced online times and TV consumption could be ascribed to arbitrary fluctuation or focus on other activities and considerable increase in studying for final examination.

Experimental group rating of the project is potentially attended by context variation as students had the chance to work extracurricular with media experts at the University of Siegen. Moreover, acceptance of professional films (top-down approach) vs. student films (peer-to-peer approach) in target groups needs to be studied.

Analyzing group answers as to presenting student films to teachers or parents resemble qualitative feedback from the small number of German institutions such as media competence or life skill centers offering workshops to adults as they report participants ask for prevention concepts and teacher education.<sup>21</sup> As a consequence, teacher

trainees and full-service teachers should also be educated.



Man approaches woman seated on bench...



and later, attacks her.



Man and woman video an act of violence...



and later, compare video quality.

<sup>21</sup> Paper *Rund um's Netz* available at: <http://jugendinfo.de/toleranz/admin/attachviewer.php?typ=Thema&dateiorig=datensicherung+2008.pdf&dateiverzeichnis=46010&dateiname=e247b64bd3fc67b7ece37bdae7965844>.



(A) Young woman looks at a dress, and later ...dreams of wearing a dress for a dance.



(B) Girl looks yearningly at fancy house... and later, dreams of emerging from it.



(C) Boy and girl are meeting at the park... and later, girl dreams of being kissed.



Boy playing during breakfast...and later



... same boy just before accident (dream)...



Boy waking up...



and throwing away console after bad dream.



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