



Full length article

A parental perspective on apps for young children[☆]Francette L. Broekman^{*}, Jessica T. Piotrowski, Hans W.J. Beentjes, Patti M. Valkenburg

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ABSTRACT

Touchscreen applications (apps) for young children have seen increasingly high rates of growth with more than a hundred thousand now available apps. As with other media, parents play a key role in young children's app selection and use. However, to date, we know very little about how parents select apps for their children. Guided by uses and gratification theory, a survey was conducted with 600 Dutch parents who had at least one child between three and seven years old. Across two studies, we identified parents' most important needs that drive their selection of children's apps as well as the extent to which these needs differ by parenting style. Results indicate five overarching parental needs when it comes to children's apps, and confirm that these needs vary by parenting style. Findings offer important insight into how parents select apps for their children.

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Touchscreen technology is taking up an increasingly important role in modern family life. Not only is the number of tablets (portable touchscreen computers) growing every year, but the prevalence of children below the age of seven using these media is also rising substantially. For example, in the US, research indicates that 75% of children under the age of eight are using mobile devices – and this number continues to rise (Rideout, 2013). These figures are similar in other western countries (Mediawijzer, 2014). Given these increasingly high rates of access and use, it is not surprising that touchscreen applications (apps) for this young audience have seen similarly high rates of growth with more than a hundred thousand apps now available for young children (Godfrey & Reed, 2013). And while the overall amount of children's apps has grown rapidly, apps targeting early childhood dominate the market. In fact, comparing 2009 to 2011, apps for toddlers and preschoolers saw the greatest growth (an increase of 23%). Indeed, with 58% of (top 100-selling) apps targeting this age group, today's app market seems to be focusing squarely on early childhood (Shuler, Levine & Ree, 2012).

During children's early years, parents play a key role in children's app selection and use (Rideout & Hamel, 2006; Wright et al., 2001).

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Often referred to as media gatekeepers, parents influence children's media use by setting an example of media habits, by co-viewing with their children, by discussing their values and attitudes about media, and by regulating or encouraging use of particular types of content (Austin, 1993; Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011; St Peters, Fitch, Huston, Wright, & Eakins, 1991). Presently, there is a wealth of literature highlighting the powerful role of parents in children's traditional media habits (Rideout & Hamel, 2006), but studies focusing on touchscreen media are scarce. Still, it seems reasonable to argue that parents are just as influential in shaping young children's access and use of touchscreen media (i.e., apps).

Considering that parents play an influential role in young children's media selection and use, it is valuable to understand what parents are looking for in children's media. Research on traditional media has shown that parents indeed have specific needs that precede their encouragement of children's media use. Rideout and Hamel (2006), for example, have shown that parents want media content that is educational or that can occupy their children in order to have uninterrupted time to complete household tasks. Likewise, parents may also have certain needs that drive their selection of particular apps for their children. Until now, there is no research on what parents want in apps for their children (*parental needs*). The first aim of this research is to address this gap by identifying parents' most important needs in apps for young children.

As one might expect, parental needs are not universal. For instance, while some parents may find the educational value of apps to be crucial when selecting apps for their children, other parents may place greater emphasis on the entertainment value of

apps. These differences in needs can likely be explained, in part, by a host of individual differences. Indeed, research has shown that certain individual characteristics can influence parents' needs for choosing media for their children (Nikken & Jansz, 2013; Valcke, Bonte, De Wever, & Rots, 2010). One of the most important overarching parental characteristics to consider is *parenting style*. Defined as the many specific activities that influence child behaviors (Darling & Steinberg, 1993), parenting style has been shown to influence how parents approach and manage their children's media – and is typically a robust predictor of children's media use (Eastin, Greenberg, & Hofschire, 2006; Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011; Rosen, Cheever, & Carrier, 2008). Since it is likely that parents' needs are associated with parenting style, the second aim of this research is to investigate how parental needs for young children's apps may differ by parenting style.

To address both aims of this research, two complementary studies were conducted using survey data from a sample of Dutch parents with children aged 3 to 7. In study 1, we explore the range of needs that parents might have when it comes to apps for their children and investigate which of these needs are most important for parents. After identifying these needs, in study 2, we evaluate how parenting style is associated with these needs.

1. Study 1: identifying parental needs in apps for children

In order to understand why parents select particular apps for their children, we focus on needs that drive parents to select these apps. In previous research with traditional media, researchers have found that parents are often looking for content that can provide entertainment and educational benefits to their children, serve as babysitter or bedtime coping method, support family bonding time, provide background noise, or encourage physical activity (He, Irwin, Sangster Bouck, Tucker, & Pollett, 2005; Zimmerman, Christakis, & Meltzoff, 2007). It is unclear, however, if the needs parents express for traditional media are the same for apps. It is possible that the digital affordances of apps meet alternative parental needs when it comes to selecting content for their children.

1.1. Parental needs

To best understand parents' needs when it comes to selecting apps for their children, it is useful to build on theory that can explain the process of media selection. Uses and gratifications (U&G) theory is considered one of the most regarded theoretical paradigms to explain this process. U&G is an audience-centered approach, which posits that individuals have particular needs that drive their media use (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Rubin, 2009). Thus far, research suggests that people choose new media technologies as well as traditional media to gratify at least five general needs (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). These are the need for: (1) entertainment, (2) information seeking, (3) social interaction, (4) emotional satisfaction, and (5) passing time.

In addition to these general needs, Sundar and Limperos (2013) have argued that there are additional nuanced needs which are more specific to the unique affordances of each medium (medium-specific needs). For example, Leung and Wei (2000) suggested that the mobile phone is not only used to gratify the need for information and social interaction (general needs), but has also at least two components not generally associated with traditional media: mobility (no need to look for or queue up for public phone) and immediate access (regardless of time, location and availability). Similarly, people are not only motivated to use apps to fulfill their general needs for social interaction, entertainment, and emotional satisfaction, but also needs more specific to the affordances of the medium (referred to as “app-specific needs”) such as immediate

access, mobility, and socializing (Lin, Fang, & Hsu, 2014). As a result of these varying medium-specific needs, it is typical for empirical work to apply a U&G perspective to each new medium that emerges. Indeed, U&G theory has been used to explain individual needs in new media platforms such as mobile phones, video games, the Internet, YouTube, and Facebook (Ebersole, 2000; Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Joinson, 2008; Kaye & Johnson, 2002; Leung & Wei, 2000; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Sherry, Lucas, & Greenberg, 2006; Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004).

When it comes to young children's media, the application of U&G becomes more complex. Specifically, in the case of young children's media use, the “media selector” (the parent) is the focal point of interest, instead of the actual user of the medium (the child). Adding to this complexity, existing literature suggests that parents have both *parent-centered* and *child-centered* needs (O'Connor, Chen, del Rio Rodriguez, & Hughes, 2014; Stipek, Milburn, Clements, & Daniels, 1992) that influence parents' media selection. Parent-centered needs typically focus on outcomes in favor of the parent. This suggests that parents, in their role of media gatekeeper, are able to articulate both their own and their child's needs when it comes to young children's media content and that these needs, together, are crucial in the selection of media content. For example, a mother may want an app that occupies her child so she has time for other things. In addition, parents may also have parent-centered needs that benefit their child. For example, a mother may want her child to learn something or to have fun when using an app. Here, instead of the mother wanting time for herself, she wants something positive for her child. Both cases reflect parent-centered needs. Child-centered needs, however, reflect needs of the child as perceived by the parent. For example, a mother may know that her child enjoys being rewarded in game-play or enjoys playing independently, and therefore looks for apps that offer fulfillment of these needs.

Although most applications of U&G do not make a distinction between needs of different parties involved, in this particular situation where the user (the child) differs from the selector (the parent), this distinction is a logical one. Importantly, most of the earlier mentioned general needs for using media can be reasonably translated to discrete parent-centered and child-centered needs. For example, a parent can indicate the need for “entertainment” as a parent-centered need (“I want my child to have fun when using an app”) as well as a child-centered need (“My child wants to have fun when using an app”). In this study, in order to obtain a comprehensive view of parental needs, both parent-centered and child-centered needs are investigated. In particular, we ask:

RQ1a. What are the most important parental needs when it comes to apps for 3-7 year-olds?

RQ1b. To what extent are parental needs in children's apps parent- and child-centered?

1.2. Study 1 method

1.2.1. Procedure and participants

After receiving ethical approval from the University of Amsterdam, a large research institute in the Netherlands (GfK) collected the data. Parents were recruited through GfK's existing online panel (approx. 50,000 Dutch households). They were compensated €1.50 (\$1.71) for their participation. In sampling, parents that had at least one or more children aged 3–12 were selected for potential inclusion (approximate $n = 10,000$). A total of 3000 of those parents were randomly invited to fill in an online survey. Among those who were invited, 1320 matched the inclusion criteria for this research (i.e., had a tablet used by at least one of their children aged 3–7).

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