Young children, digital media and smart toys: How perceptions shape adoption and domestication

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## Sample

Purposive sample of 21 medium‐ or high‐income and digitally savvy families in Portugal.

# Abstract

Contemporary homes are filled with digital technologies, and children are exposed to them almost since birth, initiating their first digital experiences at very early ages (Chaudron et al., 2015, Young children (0–8)). This trend is expected to become stronger, as our future has been envisioned around the concept of the IoT (Internet of Things), and the first smart toys are arriving at the homes of digitally savvy families. This study focuses on the digital practices of young children, looking particularly at smart toys, aiming to: a) explore how smart toys are being adopted by families, considering the perceptions of children and parents about drivers and barriers to adoption; and b) understand the domestication of smart toys. Our research is exploratory and builds on the theoretical framework, methodological protocols and ethical guidelines of the international projects “Young Children (0–8) and Digital Technologies” (Chaudron et al., 2015, Chaudron et al., Young children (0–8); Dias and Brito, 2016, 2017, Crianças (0 a 8 anos)) and “Media and Social Discourses around Young Children and IoToys” (Mascheroni Holloway, 2017). Our methodology is qualitative, based on visits to families including interviews with children and parents and participant observation. We selected a purposive sample of 21 medium‐ or high‐income and digitally savvy families in Portugal. Concerning drivers and barriers for adoption, most children identify several smart toys and express interest in having them. Parents are motivated by the amount of satisfaction that the toy will afford the children and the added‐value in terms of learning or developing skills. However, most parents prefer mechanical toys, sports or outdoors activities and the high price is an obstacle. Concerning domestication, smart toys are still scarce in homes and perceived as novelty, thus being in a very early stage of domestication.

# Outcome

"Our exploratory study revealed that, although smart toys are present in the market and in media discourses (Mascheroni Holloway, 2017), they still have not arrived to most of the homes in our sample. Young children are aware of their existence, eager to try them and own them. They perceive them as appealing, mainly because of the human-like interaction they afford. However, parents do not share this enthusiasm. They mentioned two main barriers to adoption: (a) their perception of the presence of digital media in the lives of children as already excessive, addictive and prejudicial of other aspects such as social skills and physical activity; (b) not finding worth the investment in high-priced toys without being sure that children would play with them for a long time and benefit from developmental and educational stimulation from them. These perceptions are aligned with overall mixed perceptions of digital media in general explored in the literature (eg, Chaudron et al., 2017; Dias Brito, 2016, 2017 ), in which parents identify benefits and opportunities, but also downsides and risks. However, parents are not informed about the risks of smart toys, although they have been discussed in journalistic media discourses (Mascheroni Holloway, 2017). Concerning the domestication of smart toys, our research reveals that it is still in a very early phase. In the few homes where we have found smart toys, they are regarded as a novelty, although the children reveal expertise in their use. Their appropriation is mostly individual, engaging only the children and not revealing much impact in family dynamics. Also, we observed that assigning meaning occurs even before the first stage of domestication, as bears weight on the whole pro-cess, beginning with the decision to adopt or not.As smart toys become more common in the homes, further research is needed to fully understand their domestication and the implications of this process for play practices and family dynamics". (Brito, R.; Dias, P.; Oliveira, G., 2018: 818-819).