Original scientific paper
Accepted: 15 May 2026

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Deconstructing the media framing of the risks of technology overuse and parental responsibility in the Croatian context

Abstract

This paper analyses the dominant media discourse on screen time in Croatian online media over a ten-year period (2014–2024). The analysis aimed to determine the prevailing sentiment regarding the overuse or misuse of technology and to identify and deconstruct key patterns in the media framing of related risks. The study examined a corpus of 289 articles collected from 19 of the most widely read online news websites using the TakeLab Retriever tool. The methodology combines quantitative content analysis, including sentiment analysis and framing analysis based on Entman's model, with qualitative narrative analysis of selected articles. The results indicate a marked dominance of negative sentiment (more than 75%) and a shift in focus from physical risks, such as eye strain and musculoskeletal problems associated with sedentary behaviour, to mental risks, such as isolation and anxiety, cognitive risks, such as reduced concentration, and social risks, such as avoidance of face-to-face interaction. The qualitative analysis of the sample reveals a prevailing narrative of parental failure, in which parents are framed as responsible for these negative outcomes because of their lack of action or positive intervention. Such dominant framing reinforces audiences' attribution bias, creating a climate of parental anxiety and guilt. The paper concludes that this media construction diverts public debate from the need for systemic solutions and regulation of the digital environment, instead recasting systemic issues as private matters.

Key words: individualisation of responsibility, media discourse, narrative analysis, screen time, parenting

1. Introduction

New technologies are invariably accompanied by fears and anxieties (Orben, 2020; Victor, 2024). The internet is no exception; its emergence and widespread adoption have triggered a series of concerns, ranging from "stranger danger" to access to pornography. Historically, mass media such as radio and television shifted the debate towards the types of content to which children were exposed (Preston, 1941), with particular emphasis on violent content (Buijzen et al., 2007; Sherry, 2001). However, as technology advanced and the number of devices accessible to children increased, the focus shifted from content to total screen time (Livingstone, 2021). With the advent of Web 2.0, smartphones and other mobile devices, time spent online, especially among children, has become a central focus of sociological debate about the place and role of technology.

Understanding how the media frames screen time helps to elucidate the broader social anxieties associated with technological change (Livingstone, 2021). These anxieties often stem from technological determinism (Drotner, 1999; Orben, 2019), the view that social change is a direct consequence of technological influence. While the impact of new technologies on society is indisputable, directly linking technological development to negative social shifts tends to sustain a culture of anxiety rather than offer constructive solutions (Orben, 2019, 2020).

The primary research question of this study is how Croatian online media report on screen time and which discourses dominate these portrayals. We conducted a longitudinal analysis of media narratives spanning 2014 to 2024. The analysis aims to identify dominant patterns in reporting tone (sentiment), the most frequently highlighted consequences of screen time, the demographic groups perceived as most vulnerable, and, crucially, to whom and how blame and responsibility are attributed. Through this multi-layered approach, the paper seeks to show not only what the media says about screen time, but also how it conveys those messages and what the implications are for public opinion and parenting practices.

Accordingly, this study poses the following research questions (RQs):

> RQ1: What is the prevailing sentiment in media discourse on screen time: negative, positive or neutral?

RQ2: What dominant frames are used to report the consequences of screen time, identify the culprit and assign responsibility?

RQ3: How does media discourse allocate responsibility, particularly between individual actors, such as parents, and systemic actors, such as the tech industry and regulatory bodies?

2. Theoretical framework

The debate over the negative impact of media on children is not new. It re-emerges with each new technology, suggesting a deeply rooted sociocultural pattern (Drotner, 1999; Wartella et al., 2014). In the era of Web 2.0 and smartphones, screen time has become a central theme in both media and academic discourse. The focus of debate about the influence of technology on child development has shifted from content, a defining concern of the radio and television era, to the amount of time spent in front of screens (Livingstone, 2021).

Media outlets frequently report on individual studies, creating an apparently inextricable causal link between declining youth mental health and rising screen time (Livingstone, 2021; Zaman et al., 2020). However, leading experts argue that the very debate over "acceptable" amounts of screen time is fundamentally flawed (Livingstone, 2021). The contemporary context, particularly the accelerated digitalisation driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, has further underscored the obsolescence of this metric. As digital devices now enable learning, socialisation, and communication, the focus has inevitably shifted from the quantity of content and context to their quality (Schachtner, 2021).

Research findings framed in the "language of risk" (Twenge et al., 2018, 2020) have attracted significant media attention. This occurs despite a substantial body of meta-analyses and systematic reviews indicating that the correlation between mental health and digital technology use is considerably weaker than media portrayals suggest (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Orben & Przybylski, 2019). One theoretical implication of the media's construction of risk, which is central to understanding childhood in late modernity (Furedi, 2002; James & James, 2004), is its impact on parental perceptions of their own competence. Research suggests that discourses saturated with risk and fear redefine the adult-child relationship; a lack of trust in the community and institutions is often compensated for through intensified surveillance and the individualisation

of problems. Such narratives legitimise controlling parental strategies (Pereira Dias De Castro & Ponte, 2020).

This discourse is hypothesised to influence parental self-efficacy. According to Bandura's social cognitive theory, self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their capacity to perform specific tasks and achieve goals (Bandura, 1997). In the context of mediating children's digital device use, self-efficacy refers to parents' belief that they can effectively manage, monitor and mediate their children's engagement with technology and screens. Studies indicate that parents with lower self-efficacy in media mediation are more likely to adopt restrictive and controlling mediation styles (Glatz et al., 2018; Shin, 2018), which are ultimately less effective for the development of digital literacy and competence (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019).

3. Media framing theory and the attribution of risk

In contemporary media discourse, the term *screen time* is not a neutral concept but a social construct. To understand the discourse of anxiety surrounding new technologies (Victor, 2024), it is useful to examine how the media shapes the narrative of screen time by defining the problem, identifying causes and culprits, and calling for accountability. This study employs Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) as its primary analytical tool, supplemented by Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958), which explains how media framing influences audience perception.

Framing is a foundational theory in mass communication that describes the process by which media organisations select and emphasise specific aspects of reality. Because the media cannot convey reality in its entirety, journalists and editors must select and interpret events, thereby making some aspects more salient than others (Entman, 1993). This process is known as media framing.

Robert Entman (1993) defines framing as a process that operates at both the communicator level, that is, the journalist, and the receiver level, that is, the audience. In media analysis, Entman identifies four key functions of a media frame that assist in selecting and structuring information. In this study, these functions are operationalised as analytical variables:

- Define problems: determining which aspect of the phenomenon is emphasised (in this study, consequences).

- Diagnose causes: identifying who or what is responsible for the problem (in this study, culprit).
- Make moral judgements: evaluating the elements involved (in this study, sentiment).
- Suggest remedies: offering justifications for potential solutions (in this study, responsibility).

The mechanism by which cause and responsibility are assigned is further explained by Fritz Heider's (1958) Attribution Theory. Heider argues that, when faced with complex information or events, individuals have a fundamental cognitive need to identify the causes of behaviours or occurrences in their environment. Audiences rely on pre-existing, stable interpretive schemas, or primary frames, to process new information quickly and establish causal links.

Analysing the framing of screen time helps to explain broader sociocultural processes in the construction of social risks and the allocation of blame. The persistent emphasis on negative sentiment, risk and potentially catastrophic outcomes, what Entman calls *moral judgements*, creates a narrative in which children are cast as passive victims of media and parents are perceived as failing. Given the dominant social climate surrounding new technologies and specific media practices, the following research hypotheses (H) have been established:

H1: Media discourse on screen time in Croatian online media is predominantly negative throughout the observed period (2014–2024).

H2: Reporting on screen time primarily employs a framework of harm and risk, with a focus on negative consequences.

H3: Media discourse primarily distributes responsibility through a strategy of individualisation, whereby both blame for the problem and responsibility for its resolution are attributed to individual actors.

4. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to the analysis of media discourse. Framing theory (Entman, 1993) served as the primary analytical framework, guiding the identification of the dominant frames through which Croatian online media construct and interpret the issue of screen time.

The corpus was collected using the TakeLab Retriever[1] platform (Dukić et al., 2024), an AI-assisted tool for retrieving and analysing articles published by Croatian online news outlets. Articles were identified using the search terms *vrijeme pred ekranom* and *vrijeme ispred ekrana* (screen time). These terms were selected because they represent the most common expressions used in Croatian media discourse to denote concerns about the duration of technology use, in contrast to broader and more neutral terms such as internet, mobile phone, or social media.

The search covered 19 online news outlets indexed in the TakeLab Retriever database. All selected outlets rank among the most widely read online media sources in Croatia according to Gemius audience data. For analytical purposes, the outlets were grouped into three categories:

- National news portals (e.g., Index.hr, Telegram.hr, Dnevno.hr, Narod.hr, Tportal.hr, Direktno.hr)
- Specialised portals (e.g., MissMAMA.hr, Bug.hr, Zimo.hr)
- Established media outlets with online editions (e.g., Jutarnji.hr, Večernji.hr, Slobodna Dalmacija, 24sata.hr, N1info.hr, Novi list, RTL.hr, HRT.hr, Dnevnik.hr)

The initial search returned 653 articles. Articles were included in the analysis if they contained either search term in the title or body text. After the removal of duplicate records and articles lacking a substantive focus on screen time, the final corpus comprised 289 articles.

The study covers the period from 2014 to 2024, encompassing several significant developments in the digital media landscape, including the widespread adoption of smartphones among children and adolescents, growing public concern regarding social media platforms and algorithmic influence, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Examining this period enabled a longitudinal analysis of changes and continuities in media framing of screen time over the past decade.

Quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019) was used to examine the corpus. The individual article served as the unit of analysis. Each article was coded according to a predefined coding scheme based on the key elements of Entman's (1993) framing model. The coding categories included the following variables:

[1] https://retriever.takelab.fer.hr/

1. Sentiment. Sentiment was operationalised as the overall evaluative tone of the article and coded as negative, neutral, or positive.
2. Consequences. This variable captured the reported consequences of screen time. Because articles frequently referred to multiple consequences, more than one code could be assigned. Consequences were grouped into four categories:

   • Physical health (e.g., obesity, myopia, postural problems, sleep disturbances)
   • Mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression, social isolation, addiction)
   • Cognitive development (e.g., learning difficulties, reduced concentration and attention, language development delays)
   • Social interaction (e.g., impaired family or peer relationships, reduced empathy)
3. Age group. This variable identified the population group discussed in the article. Categories included children (0–12 years), adolescents (13–19 years), adults (20+ years), and unspecified/general population.
4. Culprit. This variable identified the actor presented as responsible for causing the problem (e.g., parents, technology companies, schools). Multiple codes were permitted.
5. Responsibility. This variable identified the actor or actors presented as responsible for addressing the problem. Categories were developed through an initial thematic analysis of the corpus. Multiple codes were permitted.

This coding framework enabled the systematic quantification of media trends and the distribution of key framing elements across the corpus. The quantitative findings were used both to test the study hypotheses and to inform the subsequent qualitative analysis. The latter combined thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) to provide a more detailed interpretation of the dominant framing patterns identified in the quantitative phase.

5. Results

Analysis of the article corpus revealed a clear predominance of negative sentiment in media reporting on screen time. More than three-quarters of

the analysed articles (75%) were coded as negative. Neutral articles, which typically adopted an informational or advisory tone without emphasising risks or assigning responsibility, accounted for approximately 21% of the corpus. In contrast, positively framed articles highlighting potential benefits of technology were rare, representing less than 4% of all articles analysed. These findings support Hypothesis 1, which predicted that media discourse on screen time in Croatian online media would be predominantly negative throughout the study period.

Table 1. *Distribution of articles by sentiment and publication period*

Year	Negative	Neutral	Positive	**Total**
2014-2019	51	16	0	**67**
2019-2024	165	44	13	**222**
Total	**216**	**60**	**13**	**289**

A longitudinal analysis of media reporting over the study period indicates that, while negative sentiment remained dominant throughout, the proportion of neutral and positive articles varied across years. As shown in Figure 1, reporting became comparatively less alarmist and more neutral during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, articles were more likely to adopt an informational or pragmatic tone, reflecting the increased integration of digital technologies into everyday life for education, work, and social interaction. Despite this temporary shift, negative framing remained the dominant mode of reporting across the corpus.

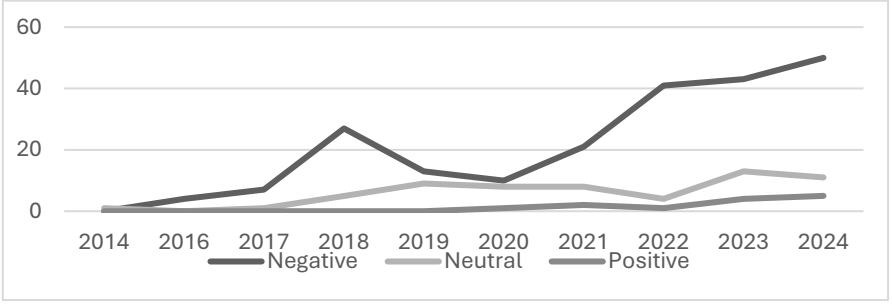


Figure 1. *Sentiment over the analysed period*

Following the pandemic period (2022–2024), the number of articles addressing screen time increased, and negative sentiment once again

became dominant. The transition from predominantly online to offline social life was accompanied by growing concerns regarding mental health, particularly among children and adolescents (Beilmann et al., 2023; Bridgman et al., 2020; Drouin et al., 2020). Consequently, media attention increasingly focused on the potential risks associated with screen time. Once the need to communicate public health measures and facilitate digital adaptation had diminished, media coverage returned to a more cautionary mode of reporting.

The persistence of negative sentiment, which has shifted from television to smartphones and social media, should not be understood solely through the lens of a classic moral panic (Cohen, 2011), a concept that implies a relatively short-lived and disproportionate social reaction. Rather, it reflects a broader and more enduring discourse of risk and technological anxiety (Buckingham & Jensen, 2012). The longitudinal analysis indicates that negative sentiment is not a temporary trend but a persistent feature of media coverage over the past decade. In the earlier years of the study period, concerns centred on television and computer use, as reflected in headlines such as "One study has a good reason why children should not stare at the TV for long; more than three hours increases the risk of diabetes" (Benedik, 2017). As new technologies emerged, media attention shifted towards smartphones and social media platforms, while the underlying narrative of risk remained largely unchanged. For example, a 2019 article asked, "Is digital media making us stupid?" (Ciboci, 2019), whereas a 2023 article warned that "13-year-olds are too young to use social media" (Hina, 2023). The technologies changed, but the framing of risk remained remarkably stable.

As Orben (2020) argues in *The Sisyphean Cycle of Technology Panics*, societal anxieties are frequently transferred to new technologies, even when empirical evidence does not fully support the intensity of public concern (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Orben & Przybylski, 2019). At the same time, media representations of screen time do more than generate concern. They also provide a forum for negotiating social norms surrounding childhood, parenting, and appropriate technology use in the digital age. Expert warnings may therefore be understood not only as expressions of anxiety but also as attempts to regulate behaviour and establish normative expectations in the context of rapid technological change.

However, the media's reliance on familiar narratives of vulnerability and risk, which attract audience attention and sustain newsworthiness

(Altheide, 2002), may contribute to a broader culture of anxiety. This process is consistent with the mediatization of parenting (Hjarvard, 2008), whereby media discourse increasingly shapes understandings of what constitutes responsible parenting in the digital age. Within this framework, blame and responsibility are individualised and located primarily within the family rather than distributed across wider social and institutional actors.

5.1. Constructing consequences: A catalogue of risks to physical, mental, and cognitive health

Within the dominant narrative of risk, media coverage constructs a detailed catalogue of the potential consequences of screen time, the overwhelming majority of which are negative. Quantitative analysis indicates that consequences associated with screen time are discussed in 97% of the analysed articles, supporting Hypothesis 2. Content analysis further reveals that these consequences are primarily grouped into three domains: physical health, mental health, and cognitive development.

The distribution of codes assigned to the consequences variable demonstrates a clear hierarchy of media concern. Consequences related to mental health and cognitive development were the most frequently reported, followed closely by physical health impacts. By contrast, social consequences, such as effects on friendships, peer relationships, and social interaction, received considerably less attention. This pattern suggests that media discourse predominantly frames screen time as an individual-level problem, emphasising its effects on personal well-being and development while paying comparatively little attention to broader social processes and structural factors.

Table 2. *Consequences of technology use by frequency of mention in the analysed online articles*

Consequences of use	N
Mental health	179
Cognitive development	145
Physical health	108
Social skills	12

The consequences identified in the analysed articles fall into three principal domains: physical health, mental health, and cognitive development.

- Physical Health: This category encompasses a range of health outcomes associated with both sedentary behaviour and prolonged digital device use. The most frequently mentioned concerns include obesity, visual impairment, hypertension, cardiovascular problems, sleep disturbances, and reduced physical fitness.
- Mental Health: This was the most prevalent and diverse category identified in the corpus, reflecting increasing public concern regarding psychological well-being. Media reports frequently associated screen time with internet and gaming addiction, depression, anxiety, insomnia, aggression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Particular attention was given to emotional regulation, with the use of screens to occupy or calm children often portrayed as detrimental to the development of self-regulation and coping skills.
- Cognitive Development: This category focused on the perceived effects of screen use on cognitive and linguistic development. Common themes included reduced attention span and concentration, delays in language development, and negative impacts on learning outcomes and academic performance.

A comparison of publication dates and the types of consequences emphasised in media coverage reveals a notable shift in the focus of reporting over time. Earlier articles (approximately 2014–2017) primarily addressed the physical consequences of screen use, particularly those associated with sedentary behaviour and prolonged television viewing, such as obesity. However, as interactive technologies, including smartphones and tablets, became increasingly embedded in everyday life, media attention gradually shifted from physical to psychological and cognitive outcomes. Between 2018 and 2024, reporting increasingly focused on issues such as addiction, depression, anxiety, and developmental delays.

This shift coincided with extensive media coverage of the World Health Organization's (WHO) 2018 decision to include gaming disorder in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), contributing to the further medicalisation of public discourse surrounding technology use (Williams & Gabe, 2015). Media reports increasingly adopted clinical

terminology, employing concepts such as "disorder", "syndrome", and "illness" to describe the consequences of screen use. The emergence of media-friendly labels such as *screenism* further reinforced this tendency by constructing a quasi-diagnostic category specifically associated with digital technologies.

Through this process of medicalisation, screen time is framed not merely as a matter of everyday behaviour or parenting practices but as a public health issue. Such framing enhances the authority of scientific and medical expertise in defining both the nature of the problem and its potential solutions. Consequently, responsibility for identifying, managing, and mitigating risks is increasingly located within the domain of health professionals, including physicians, psychiatrists, and psychologists.

5.2. Focusing on the most vulnerable: Children as the central figures of media concern

Analysis of the demographic focus within media articles reveals that the discourse on screen time is overwhelmingly centred on children. Despite the fact that digital technology impacts individuals across all age groups, media coverage disproportionately highlights children as the primary group affected, casting them as the central subjects of societal anxiety.

More than 80% of the articles analysed identify children as the primary affected demographic. Other groups—such as youths, adults, and the general population—are mentioned far less frequently and usually in different and narrower contexts. For instance, when adults are addressed, discussions often focus on issues such as visual impairment due to prolonged screen exposure during computer work or experiences of boredom associated with the digital era. In contrast, articles focusing on children explore a significantly wider and more dramatic range of issues, encompassing all aspects of their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Table 3. *Age group as the subject of media reporting*

Age Group	N
Children	232
General population	38
Youth	16
Adults	3

The prominence of children as the focal point of media attention is further evidenced by a keyword frequency analysis. The term "children" (including variations such as "child" or "child's") appears 167 times in article titles alone—far surpassing other prominent terms. For comparison, the word "parents" appears only 22 times, highlighting how parents are often relegated to the background or implied rather than explicitly mentioned.

This indicates that children are portrayed as the object of media concern, representing the locus of vulnerability and risk. Media narratives rarely frame children as active participants or agents of their digital experiences. Instead, the dominant portrayal is that of children as passive victims, overwhelmed by the allure of screens.

A close analysis of media narratives reveals that children are seldom portrayed as active, creative, or critical users of technology. Instead, the dominant thematic framing emphasises a picture of children as passive victims, overwhelmed by the seductive influence of digital screens. Media language frequently uses passive constructions—describing children as "exposed" (Gačarić, 2024), "glued to the screen" (Raguž, 2021), or even "victims of addiction" (Giovanelli, 2022). These linguistic choices reinforce the perception of children as vulnerable entities lacking agency in their interactions with technology.

Table 4. Frequency of keywords in the titles of analysed articles (N=289)

Keyword	Frequency in titles
children, child, child's	167
screen, screens	113
time	62
parents	22
years/age	21
study/research	34
mobile phone	19
experts	9
social networks	9

Another recurring metaphor in media discourse is that of the "digital nanny," which frequently appears in headlines such as "Negative consequences of smartphones as 'babysitters'" (Mikić, 2024) and "Screens are not babysitters" (Stojanović, 2016). This framing highlights what the media often portrays as a dual passivity: children left to their own devices

and parents, seemingly absent, who delegate their caregiving role to technology. Such portrayals reduce the complex and dynamic interactions between children, parents, and technology to a simplistic narrative of vulnerable children and neglectful parents.

The nearly exclusive focus on children in media discourse carries significant symbolic weight. Representing children as the primary victims of digital technology, the media effectively frames screen-related risks as broader threats to societal health and the future of generations (Buckingham, 2000). Through the repeated emphasis on the "passive, endangered child," media outlets evoke powerful emotional responses, such as fear and parental guilt (Furedi, 2002). This emotional appeal allows the media to frame intricate societal issues in a way that is both relatable and easily digestible, simplifying these issues to their most personal and immediate implications. By doing so, they also position themselves as guardians of collective societal values and the protectors of the most vulnerable group—children.

This intense focus on children helps sustain the alarmist tone of media narratives, perpetuating a culture of risk and danger. It aligns with a broader trend in media and public discourse, where children's welfare is routinely linked to wider concerns about societal stability, moral order, and the wellbeing of future generations.

5.3. Attributing blame and responsibility: The burden on parents' shoulders

The structuring of blame and responsibility represents one of the most prominent and recurring patterns in Croatian media discourse surrounding screen time. While the issue of excessive screen time is depicted as a widespread societal phenomenon with significant consequences, the burden of guilt and the primary responsibility for addressing the problem are almost exclusively placed on parents.

Content analysis reveals that, in nearly all articles where a culprit is explicitly or implicitly identified (N = 121), the parent is named as the primary culprit in 95% of the cases (N = 115). Even when other contributing factors are acknowledged—such as the intentionally addictive design of technology—the media continues to emphasise parental responsibility. This is often done in a manner that highlights specific parental shortcomings. For instance, media messages frequently outline

acts of parental failure, as demonstrated in statements such as: *"When parents seek help from speech therapists, they are often unaware that they contributed to speaking difficulties themselves through their parenting style"* (Bratonja Martinović, Lj., 2023). Similarly, a lack of sufficient parental engagement is remarked on as: *"This is because distracted parents spend less time engaged in meaningful interactions, giving children fewer opportunities to learn"* (Krmpotić, Ž., 2023). Such narratives are further encapsulated in accusations like: *"Children copy their parents, so if you are glued to your phone 24 hours a day, it is hypocritical to yell at them to get off theirs"* (Kramar, J., 2022).

These findings correspond to Hypothesis 3 (H3), which predicted that Croatian media would primarily attribute blame and responsibility for the negative consequences of screen time to individual actors—specifically, parents.

By framing the issue as a consequence of parental failure, the media frequently disregards the broader socioeconomic and systemic contexts that significantly shape children's upbringing. The complexities of societal-level influences, such as the challenges of pervasive mediatization and digitalisation, are often overlooked. As Gillies (2008) and Jensen (2018) argue, parents alone cannot significantly alter the socioeconomic realities within which their children develop.

When analysing whom the media calls to action, the responsibility is predominantly shifted to parents. Among the analysed corpus, parents were most frequently cited as being primarily responsible for children's level of screen time consumption (N = 213; 89%).

Table 5. *Whom the media calls to action (N = 213)*

Responsibility for action	N
Parents	190
Parents and other social actors	13
Schools	5
Tech companies	3
Legislators	2

The narrative of individualised responsibility (Furedi, 2002; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011) places significant pressure on parents. Society and institutions increasingly expect them to address complex systemic

challenges of the digital age—ranging from the addictive design of technology to the demands of an education system requiring advanced levels of digital literacy—solely through personal effort, household rules, and parenting strategies. By framing screen time as a private matter, media narratives systematically overlook the broader socio-economic and institutional factors that shape modern parenting.

This focus on parental failings obscures the critical role of systemic entities whose decisions fundamentally influence the digital environment. Chief among these actors are technology companies, whose operations, driven by the imperatives of the "attention economy" (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019), prioritise creating maximally engaging and often addictive products. Additionally, state and regulatory bodies, while integral to overseeing and regulating the digital marketplace, are frequently portrayed as sluggish and ineffectual in curbing the rapid expansion of these technologies and safeguarding users.

5.4. Voices of authority: The medicalisation of discourse

To ensure the narrative of risk and danger remains persuasive, the media often relies on voices of authority to impart legitimacy and a sense of objectivity. An analysis of the individuals providing advice and issuing warnings highlights the experts who dominate the public debate on screen time, effectively shaping the discourse through a predominantly medical perspective (Conrad, 1992).

Data analysis shows that scientists, psychologists, and physicians hold the most prominent positions within this hierarchy of authority. Their quotations, research findings, and recommendations serve as the foundation for the vast majority of articles (90%). Within the media narrative, these experts act as "primary definers" (Hall et al., 1978)—privileged sources who establish the initial framing of the discourse and define the problem in ways that become difficult to challenge or refute.

A cross-analysis of the data in the table above demonstrates that different types of authority are employed in distinct ways within media narratives. While psychologists adopt a positive or neutral tone in nearly one-third of the analysed articles, physicians almost exclusively present warnings about potential dangers. In fact, within the corpus of texts where physicians appear as the voice of authority, not a single positively toned article was identified.

Table 6. *Relationship between the type of expert authority and media article sentiment (N = 265)*

Voices of authority	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Total
Scientist	88 (74.5%)	24 (20.3%)	6 (5.1%)	118
Physician	64 (79.0%)	17 (21.0%)	0 (0.0%)	81
Psychologist	46 (69.7%)	13 (19.7%)	7 (10.6%)	66
Total	**198**	**54**	**13**	**265**

This finding provides empirical support for the thesis of the medicalisation of the issue. Physicians are rarely called upon in media discussions to explore the potential benefits of technology for health or development. Instead, their contributions are almost exclusively sought in the context of pathology, such as diagnosing disorders, syndromes, and illnesses. As a result, the discourse becomes confined to a reductive "healthy/unhealthy" or "good/bad" dichotomy, effectively preventing a nuanced examination of how society might navigate the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly digitalised world.

5.5. Synthesis of the dominant framework

Through quantitative and thematic data analyses, specific components of the media framework were identified: a prevalence of negative sentiment, an emphasis on health threats (physical, mental, and cognitive), and the assignment of responsibility to the family—findings that confirm Hypotheses H1, H2, and H3. Narrative analysis further enabled the deconstruction of how these components are woven into a cohesive and persuasive story. By examining a sample of 15 articles, a recurring dramaturgical structure emerged, which can be summarised as a narrative of parental failure and neglect.

This narrative often begins with a dramatic trigger in the headline, followed by the introduction of widespread fear. The problem is then recontextualised, shifting it from typical developmental challenges to a pathological framework. Rarely do these narratives offer practical or systemic solutions.

The framing of such risk narratives was analysed in three articles, which are discussed below.

5.5.1. Case study 1: Parental illusion vs. shocking reality

Headline: *"They have cell phones by age five; while parents think their kids are watching 'Doc McStuffins,' they are playing the horror game 'Granny.'"* (Filičić, K., 2020).

This article vividly highlights the narrative of parental failure by contrasting the perceived innocence of children's media habits (e.g., watching "Doc McStuffins") with the unsettling reality of them playing the horror game "Granny." This sharp juxtaposition underscores a gap in parental knowledge and casts parents as ineffective.

The psychologist featured in the article diagnoses both the problem (e.g., exposure to inappropriate content, aggression, and addiction) and its root cause: parental ignorance and inadequate control. The narrative centres on validating the claim made in the headline. The psychologist serves as an authoritative voice, confirming that children's media habits are out of control and attributing blame to parental negligence and the acceptance of media use as a norm.

The article concludes by individualising the responsibility for resolving the issue, placing the burden squarely on parents. It avoids addressing broader systemic factors, such as deficiencies in child protection mechanisms or the complexities of modern family dynamics in the digital age.

5.5.2. Case study 2: Pathologizing socialisation

Headline: *"Child psychologist warns: It happens that children have no friends in real life and that their friendships are exclusively reduced to the virtual world."* (Lučić, B., 2022).

The headline employs strong, cautionary language, using terms like "warns" and "exclusively reduced" to amplify what is otherwise a common developmental challenge into a pressing concern. The article focuses on children's lack of real-life peer relationships, appealing directly to parental emotions by framing the issue as a significant social deficit.

The presence of a "child psychologist" lends scientific authority and legitimacy to the narrative. The psychologist characterises the situation as a negative deviation from what is considered normal, presenting virtual friendships not as viable alternatives but as inferior substitutes for real-life

connections. By doing so, the article implies that children who primarily engage in virtual friendships are experiencing a social deficiency.

Responsibility is once again placed squarely on parents, whose lack of awareness and insufficient control over their children's media use is framed as the key cause of the issue. Although the article describes a broader social problem, the proposed solutions focus exclusively on individualised parental interventions. Parents are urged to "monitor," "set boundaries," and "seek help" to address their children's social deficits.

This narrative effectively disregards wider systemic and environmental factors that contribute to the problem, such as a lack of accessible outdoor play spaces or the high costs associated with extracurricular activities like sports clubs. Instead, the burden of solving this complex social issue is shifted entirely onto parents, leaving little room to acknowledge or address the broader societal context.

5.5.3. Case study 3: Medicalisation and causal chains

Headline: *"Children in Croatia are obese because they are not physically active: They spend 90% of their weekend time in front of screens."* (Matković, M., 2022).

The headline establishes a direct causal relationship, linking obesity to a lack of physical activity, and uses striking statistics—90% of weekend time spent in front of screens—to convey a sense of urgency. Obesity is framed in media discourse as a medical threat, situating this story within the conceptual framework of medicalisation.

Experts, including a paediatrician and a kinesiologist, diagnose the issue as a public health crisis. However, the responsibility for addressing it is placed almost entirely on the individual or family. In this way, the narrative transforms the abstract notion of excessive screen time into a concrete and measurable physical health condition. The experts not only warn of potential dangers but also highlight the harm already inflicted, thereby amplifying the guilt of parents for failing to prevent the problem.

The proposed solution is narrowly defined, focusing solely on altering family lifestyle choices—encouraging less screen time and more physical activity—while neglecting broader systemic and socioeconomic factors. This is a quintessential example of the individualisation of risk, where the solution appears deceptively simple (e.g., reducing screen time and

encouraging exercise), yet the problem itself is removed from its broader sociocultural and structural context.

1. Shock: The framing of a threat to something valuable, such as children's innocence, friendships, or health.
2. Medical validation: The issue is legitimised by authoritative voices such as doctors or psychologists, assigning credibility to the narrative.
3. Parental guilt: Responsibility is shifted onto parents, who are ultimately left to shoulder the blame and take action.

This structured approach demonstrates the prevalence of "parents" within the "responsibility" variable, creating a compelling narrative of individual responsibility and guilt. The findings support Hypothesis H3: in Croatian media discourse, responsibility is predominantly individualised, with a clear imbalance between individual and systemic actors—parents, rather than the technology industry, are seen as the primary agents responsible for addressing the problem.

6. Conclusion and discussion

The comprehensive analysis of Croatian media discourse on screen time (2014–2024) highlights a consistent dominance of highly negative framing. It confirms that the strategy of individualising risk is the central mechanism through which the media constructs the problem. This approach systematically shifts attention away from systemic responsibility toward the individual—specifically, parental—failure.

The research findings validate all three proposed hypotheses. The confirmation of H1 (predominantly negative sentiment) and H2 (dominance of harm and risk frameworks) reflects the distinctly alarming tone prevalent in media coverage. Most significantly, the confirmation of H3—regarding the individualisation of risk—clearly illustrates how media narratives divert accountability from systemic actors to parents, representing the study's primary contribution.

Beyond the hypotheses, the analysis identified five interconnected patterns that shape public understanding:

1. Risk discourse and negative sentiment: The alarming tone and pervasive language of warning and danger point to a deeply ingrained cultural anxiety surrounding technology.

2. Medicalisation of behaviour: Media employs clinical terminology (e.g., "addiction" or "disorder"), shifting the discourse from socio-cultural concerns to a pathological framework.
3. The symbolism of the "endangered child": Children are portrayed as passive victims, which heightens the perceived severity of the problem while disregarding their active agency.
4. The trap of individualised responsibility: Blame for excessive screen exposure is almost entirely attributed to parents (e.g., lack of control or inattentiveness), with systemic factors, such as the unregulated operations of the technology industry, largely overlooked.
5. Legitimation through authority: The reliance on medical and scientific experts lends legitimacy to the discourse, reinforcing the risk narrative and promoting solutions centred solely on parental action.

Media narratives frequently exploit and amplify the fundamental attribution error—audiences' tendency to attribute negative outcomes to internal, personal failings rather than external, systemic influences. By shifting the focus to parental failure, the media effectively diverts attention from systemic actors, such as technology companies developing addictive products and algorithms, and regulatory bodies failing to protect vulnerable users.

This discourse of risk and blame fosters a climate of parental anxiety and perceived inadequacy. Research indicates that parenting behaviours motivated by external pressures, such as fear or guilt, rather than intrinsic motivation, often result in controlling parenting styles that are associated with poorer developmental outcomes for children (Jungert et al., 2015; Laurin & Joussemet, 2017). In this manner, the media narrative has the potential to influence less adaptive parenting practices.

Through its focus on individualising and medicalising the issue, media discourse reframes the fallout of an unregulated digital market as a private family failure. This effectively deflects attention from the systemic regulatory solutions necessary to address the root causes of the problem.

7. Limitations and future directions

This study was limited to analysing the production of media discourse through content analysis, without examining audience reception or the effects of the media narratives. Future research should explore how the individualised framing of responsibility in media impacts parents, with particular attention to potential changes in parenting styles and parental self-efficacy.

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Sažetak

Cilj ovog rada je analizirati dominantni medijski diskurs o „vremena ispred ekrana" u hrvatskim internetskim medijima tijekom desetogodišnjeg razdoblja (od 2014. do 2024.). Primarni fokus analize bio je utvrditi prevladavajući sentiment o pretjeranoj upotrebi tehnologije na hrvatskim internetskim portalima te identificirati i dekonstruirati ključne obrasce medijskog uokvirivanja rizika koji iz toga proizlaze. Istraživanje je provedeno na korpusu od 289 članaka

prikupljenih s 19 najčitanijih hrvatskih portala pomoću platforme *TakeLab Retriever*. Metodologija obuhvaća kvantitativnu analizu sadržaja (analiza sentimenta i analiza uokvirivanja prema Entmanovu modelu) te kvalitativnu narativnu analizu odabranih članaka. Rezultati pokazuju izrazitu dominaciju negativnog sentimenta (više od 75 %) te ukazuju na premještanje fokusa s fizičkih rizika (poput problema s vidom ili problema uzrokovanih sjedilačkim načinom života) na mentalne (npr. osjećaj izolacije i anksioznost), kognitivne (npr. smanjen raspon pažnje) i socijalne rizike(izbjegavanje kontakta uživo). Kvalitativna analiza korpusa ukazuje na to da mediji perpetuiraju narativ roditeljskog neuspjeha, navodeći njihovu pasivnosti i/ili neznanje kao glavne uzrok navedenih problema. Ovakvo dominantno uokvirivanje potencira urođenu atribucijsku pristranost kod publike, stvarajući klimu roditeljske anksioznosti i krivnje. Rad zaključuje da ovakva medijska konstrukcija odvraća javnu raspravu od potrebe za sistemskim rješenjima i regulacijom digitalnog okruženja te sistemske problem pripasuje privatnoj sferi i odgovornosti pojedinca.

Ključne riječi: analiza narativa, individualizacija odgovornosti, medijski diskurs, roditeljska odgovornost, roditeljstvo, vrijeme ispred ekrana