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Parents' meta-reflexivity benefits media education of children

La meta-reflexividad de los padres beneficia la educación mediática de los niños

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the effects of the sociological concept of reflexivity to parents' media education of preschool children. It draws upon the recommendations of the American Academy of Paediatrics referring to the restrictions of screen exposure based on different age groups, coviewing and discussing media content. It applies a social survey on the Slovenian national sample of parents to (1) review their media education practices, (2) identify the factors affecting these practices through regression analyses and (3) use path analysis to provide an explanatory model of the factors affecting children's screen exposure. A Reflexivity Measurement Tool is applied to assess the parents' meta-reflexivity scores. The hypothesis that meta-reflexivity is one of the key factors affecting media education is confirmed. The results show differences in screen exposure between age groups and higher exposure of boys when compared to girls. Children of the divorced/separated parents are more exposed to screens. Setting restrictions is quite common but it is also the quality of media content and the interaction with children that matters. Meta-reflexivity not only decreases the quantity of screen exposure. but it also makes coviewing and discussing media content with children more likely. Moreover, the significance of parents as role models is confirmed.

RESUMEN

El artículo explora los efectos del concepto sociológico de la reflexividad en la educación mediática de los padres en niños preescolares. Se basa en las recomendaciones de la Academia Estadounidense de Pediatría que se refieren a las restricciones de exposición a las pantallas en función de los diferentes grupos de edad, la visualización conjunta y la discusión del contenido de los medios de comunicación. Aplica una encuesta social a la muestra nacional eslovena de padres para: revisar sus prácticas de educación en los medios de comunicación; identificar los factores que afectan estas prácticas a través de análisis de regresión; y utilizar el análisis de ruta para proporcionar un modelo explicativo de los factores que afectan la exposición a las pantallas de los niños. La herramienta de medición de reflexividad se aplica para evaluar las puntuaciones de meta-reflexividad de los padres. Se confirma la hipótesis de que la meta-reflexividad es uno de los factores clave que afectan a la educación en los medios de comunicación. Los hijos de padres divorciados/separados están más expuestos a las pantallas. Establecer restricciones es bastante común, pero también es importante la calidad del contenido de los medios y la interacción con los niños. La meta-reflexividad no solo disminuye la cantidad de exposición a las pantallas, sino que también hace que sea más probable que los niños vean y discutan en conjunto el contenido multimedia.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Reflexivity, parental behavior, pre-school, children exposure, screen, quantitative analysis.
Reflexividad, comportamiento parental, preescolar, exposición de los niños, pantalla, análisis cuantitativo.

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1. Introduction

Digital media have become a regular part of children's everyday lives. Even babies are often confronted with digital media for longer periods of time every day, although paediatricians and psychologists strongly discourage the use of such media by children under two years of age. In these early years of a child's upbringing, parents play a crucial role in raising and educating children on the smart ways of using and living with digital media and preventing damage that the overload of screen exposure or age-inappropriate media content can create (Christ & Abreu, 2020; Lemish, 2015; Livingstone et al., 2017; Rek, 2019). They also significantly influence a child's knowledge and experience of digital media through examples, conversations, and experiences. They themselves are role models that children imitate (Rek & Kovačič, 2018). However, the process of media education is become a challenging and ever-changing task for parents to achieve.

Adopting habits of strengthening their own media literacy and aligning media related skills with current technological development have become a norm for good quality life. Media literacy refers not just to skills enabling us to use new emerging media or create online messages, but also to understanding how media works in this changing environment and to the ability to analyse and evaluate the media content and deal with credibility of mediated information (Hobbs, 2010; Kubey, 2001; Livingstone, 2004; Tommasi et al., 2021; Adam & Gorišek, 2020). Furthermore, it also highlights the necessity to comprehend the intents and consequences of media messages and the ability to critically analyse multiple codes (Buckingham, 2007; Rivera-Rogel et al., 2017).

In current fast-paced processes of digitization that are radically changing the communication of people and social groups, adults themselves are often faced with figuring out and adopting new digital media, related practices, and attitudes. Fast social and technological dynamics prevent primary socialisation from being prescribed by pre-given norms and parents hardly rely on certain established fixed patterns of behaviour, norms, or values, passed down from generation to generation in upbringing and educating their children about media. While there are some expert media education guidelines available for parents, it is the ability of parents to critically observe and reflect the social order that we find crucial for their actual media education implementation. Therefore, we argue that it is a parent's critical reflexivity that plays an important role in media education.

In that regard, we rely on the sociological theoretical framework of Archer (2007, 2012) which states that reflexivity is the intrinsic feature of human psyche. Through inner dialogue, individuals are able to consciously and strategically orient their actions to achieving their goals, and thus, they also have the potential to alter social settings to meet their needs. Through reflexive inner dialogue, individuals are able to define their concerns, develop projects and establish practices, which is constituting a bridge between social structure and individuals' agency. Individuals are analysing their ideas, concerns, and motives for actions through the on-going process of discernment, deliberation, and dedication occurring within their reflexive inner dialogues. Although everyone is reflexive, there are different modes of inner dialogue, corresponding to different individual and social contexts. The dynamics and uncertainties of the late modern society, accompanied by extensive digitalisation, encourage a specific mode of critical reflexivity – called meta-reflexivity. This mode of reflexivity, which we pay attention to, refers to a specific nexus between social settings and individuals' concerns (Archer, 2003, 2007). Meta-reflexivity refers to a critical deliberation towards the social order. This mode requires ultimate concerns referring to certain values and normative ideals providing alternatives to the mainstream information load. Therefore, it enables individuals to critically evaluate previous inner dialogues and to be critical about their effective action. In that regard, meta-reflexivity seems to be crucial for enabling one to take a critical perspective and stance towards the media content and its role in her/his life. Based on meta-reflexivity, one can actively respond to the social environment, including the rapidly transforming digital media landscape.

Previous research (Golob et al., 2021) has shown that reflexive capacities of individuals, more specifically, the ability for meta-reflection, can increase certain beneficial behaviours when identifying credible information in a digital environment. By applying Archers' theoretical framework, we investigated behaviour related to resilience against a growing presence of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation in online media. Meta-reflexivity has also proved to be an important factor in enhancing one's responsible

behaviour and empowerment (Golob & Makarovič, 2022). In this article, we draw on the sociological theoretical framework of Archer (2007, 2012) to investigate the role of reflexive capacities of parents in media education processes in primary socialisation. We further advance the consideration of reflexivity by placing it in the specific context of media education and demonstrate the applicable value of this theoretical concept. Reflexivity indicates that one can recognise the benefits and risks posed by the media while meta-reflexivity implies a critical stance towards the all-encompassing presence of the media. Without sufficient reflexive capacities, this is done without being necessarily aware of the impact the media has on various aspects of children's development.

On that basis, we explore whether meta-reflexivity supports beneficial parental behaviour in media education of young children. In identifying what we call a beneficial behaviour in media education we will rely on selected recommendations and guidelines of the American Academy of Paediatrics, which has been, in recent decades of digitalisation, one of the referential organisations in providing guidelines and policy advice in media education. We should point out that these guidelines are of changeable nature themselves as they evolve in a morphogenic manner with digital transformations and new scientific knowledge and advancements in various scientific fields related to media literacy and education. Guidelines for parents of young children on media education that we will refer to include:

- Avoid digital media use (except video-chatting) in children younger than 18 to 24 months.
- For children ages 18 to 24 months of age, if you want to introduce digital media, choose high-quality programming, and use media together with your child. Avoid solo media use in this age group.
- For children 2 to 5 years of age, limit screen use to one hour per day of high-quality programming, coview with your children, help children understand what they are seeing, and help them apply what they learn to the world around them (Hill et al., 2016).

We argue that actual implementation of these guidelines is quite loosely formulated and depends on the meta-reflexive capacities of parents. This has led us to propose our main research question regarding whether young children's parents' meta-reflexivity significantly contributes to their media education practices. Based on the empirical research, we intend to:

1) Provide a review of parents' media education practices and show how this relates to children's screen exposure.

2) Identify factors affecting parents' media education practices, including the socio-economic background, parents' attitudes to media effects on their children, parents' own media use, their familiarity with education recommendations, and the intensity of their meta-reflexivity.

3) Provide an explanatory model of the factors affecting preschool children's screen exposure.

On that basis, we hypothesise that effective media education in primary socialisation is tightly interwoven with the reflexive capacities of young children's parents.

2. Materials and methods

Based on the theoretical perspectives on media education and our on-going research on the matter, a series of survey questionnaires has been conducted targeting the parents of preschool children and educators in the kindergartens (Rek et al., 2022). For the purpose of this paper, we are using the data collected from a sample of parents of preschool children aged from one to six years. The sample consists of 1,987 survey responses, out of which 1,677 have been fully completed. The survey was administered on-line from April to June 2022 with the help of kindergartens. The parents have been sampled through a stratified random sample: for each of the ten Slovenian statistical regions, one predominantly urban and one predominantly rural kindergarten were randomly selected. The parents have been asked to report on:

- Their children's screen exposure time for different digital media as well as the parents' own media exposure.
- Their practices of media education in terms of (1) setting rules and restrictions; (2) accompanying their children while interacting with the media; and (3) discussing the media content with them – using the five-level Likert scales.

- Their attitudes about the effects of the media on children based on five-level Likert scales.
- Their familiarity with the experts' guidelines on media education for preschool children.
- Their demographic features including gender, educational level, settlement type, joint or separate living of parents, as well as the child's gender and age.

We appliedthe Reflexivity Measurement Tool (RMT) developed in our previous research (Golob & Makarovič, 2018, 2019). With this tool, we have upgraded the theoretical framework of reflexivity and made it more convenient for applied purposes. It is used to provide an approximate assessment of one's reflexivity in terms of quantitative scores for different reflexivity modes. The first set of five questions draws from Archer's ICONI combined with the contribution by Porpora and Shumar (2010) measuring the reflexivity level, namely: "during the last year, how often did you" about the following items, indicating the intensity of internal conversation:

- Plan your own future.
- Rehearse what you would say in an important conversation.
- Imagine the best and worst consequences of a major decision.
- Review a conversation that ended badly.
- Clarify thoughts about some issue, person, or problem.

Reflexivity level is thus the sum of the Likert scale responses to these five questions. This sum is combined with an indication of a certain reflexivity mode: for the purpose of our research, this is meta-reflexivity as it indicates a critical way of thinking and acting about oneself and about one's own social environment. The RMT requires the multiplication of each person's reflexivity level with her/his Likert scale responses to the question referring to meta-reflexivity: "During the last year, how often did you carefully consider the key priorities of your life and why you are doing what you are doing?". Our analysis has proceeded in three stages:

- Presenting the descriptive statistics referring to the practices of media education and children's screen exposure.
- Regression analyses on the effects of the parent's and child's demographic features, as well as parents' attitudes, media behaviour, familiarity with experts' recommendations, and meta-reflexivity towards the practices of the media education.
- Path analysis explaining how the exogeneous variables affect the screen exposure of preschool children.

3. Results

3.1. A review of media education and children's screen exposure

As shown in Table 1, setting restrictions and rules about what preschool children are allowed to watch is the most common practice of media education with the mean score of 4.45 on the 5-level scale. Almost two thirds of the parents claim that they always set restrictions for their children, while less than two per cent responded that they never do that.

Almost half of the parents' report to be present when their young child is in touch with the media – with the mean score of 4.27. Discussing the media content with a preschool child, however, is significantly less common. Less than a quarter of the parents report this practice, and the mean score is only 3.72. A comparatively high standard deviation indicates significant differences between the parents regarding this practice.

Table 1. Reported practices in media education

"Respond to the following questions on the scale from 1 to 5 where 1 means never and 5 means always."	Mean	Standard deviation	% of answers 1 (never)	% of answers 5 (always)
Do you set restrictions and rules about what your child is allowed to watch?	4.45	0.91	1.91	65.48
Are you present when she/he is in touch with the media (watches TV, video…)?	4.27	0.87	0.64	49.49
Do you talk to your child about what she/he saw in the media TV, video…)?	3.72	1.00	3.13	23.69

The recommendations of the American Academy of Paediatrics as a referential organisation in providing guidelines and policy advice in media education suggest avoiding all digital media use for children younger than 18 to 24 months and no more than one hour per day of high-quality programming, coviewing with the children (including helping children understand what they are seeing and help them apply what they learn to the world around them). Our results in Table 2 show that only 37.41 % of children younger than two years old have no exposure to screens, which is highly concerning. The deviation from the recommendations is less significant for the children from two to five years, where the screen exposure for 69.28 % of children is within the recommended time frame. For a small group of older children in our sample, the exposure is even higher – with almost a half of them being exposed to screens for more than one hour per day.

Table 2. Children's screen exposure

"How much time on average in an ordinary day does your child…?" - the sum of minutes per day for watching live TV; DVD or video on TV, computer, phone, tablet, etc; playing video games; using the web	Mean sum of total minutes per day	% of children with no exposure	% of children with up to 1 hour/day	% of with more than 1 hour/day
Younger than 2 years	25.1	37.41	53.96	8.63
From 2 years till less than 5 years old	62.7	6.48	62.80	30.72
5 years old or more	89.8	4.13	47.88	47.99

3.2. Factors affecting media education practices

The regression analyses presented in Table 3 show the independent variables that have turned out to have statistically significant effects on each of the selected media education practices. Mothers and more educated parents are more likely to impose rules and restrictions regarding media content on their children. All of the observed practices of media education are more common in urban environments.

Table 3. Factors affecting media education practices in the family

Dependent variables in the linear regression models →	Parent sets rules and restrictions		Parent's presence when child is in touch with the media		Parent talks with her/his child about media content	
Independent variables with statistically significant effects ↓	Variables	Beta Coefficients (and signif.)	Variables	Beta Coefficients (and signif.)	Variables	Beta Coefficients (and signif.)
Parent's demography	Female Urban Educated	.06 (.061) .08 (.001) .10 (.000)	Urban	.08 (.001)	Urban	.05 (.067)
Parents' behaviour	/	/	Watching TV Using computer Phone calls Playing with child TV turned on	.05 (.067) .06 (.053) -.07 (.006) .15 (.000) -.06 (.032)	Using computer Web browsing Reading press Playing with child	.04 (.094) -.07 (.009) .05 (.045) .20 (.000)
Parents' Attitudes	"Media negatively affect preschool children's mood"	0.12 (0.000)	"My preschool child learns lots of useful stuff from the media"	-.07 (.004)	"Media negatively affect preschool children's mood" "My preschool child learns lots of useful stuff from the media"	.05 (.057) - .09 (.001)
Child's age		-.08 (.001)		-.19 (.000)	/	/
Parent familiar with recommendations		.10 (.000)	/	/		.08 (.001)
Parent's meta-reflexivity		.11 (.000)		.10 (.000)		.14 (.000)

While parents' own media-related behaviour does not seem to have any significant effects on setting rules and restrictions, it does affect their presence when their child is exposed to media and the frequency of their discussions about media content with the children. Parents who watch TV and use a computer more frequently are more likely to be present while their children are exposed to screens. On the other hand, parents who spend more time making phone calls and whose TV is turned on for longer periods of time, are less likely to be present. Parents who use a computer or read the press more often are more likely to talk to their children about media content, while those who spend more time browsing the web are less likely to do so. The most significant effect, however, can be noticed for the parents' behaviour that is not

related to the media: the parents who spend more time playing with their children are much more likely to be present when the child is exposed to screens and to discuss the media content.

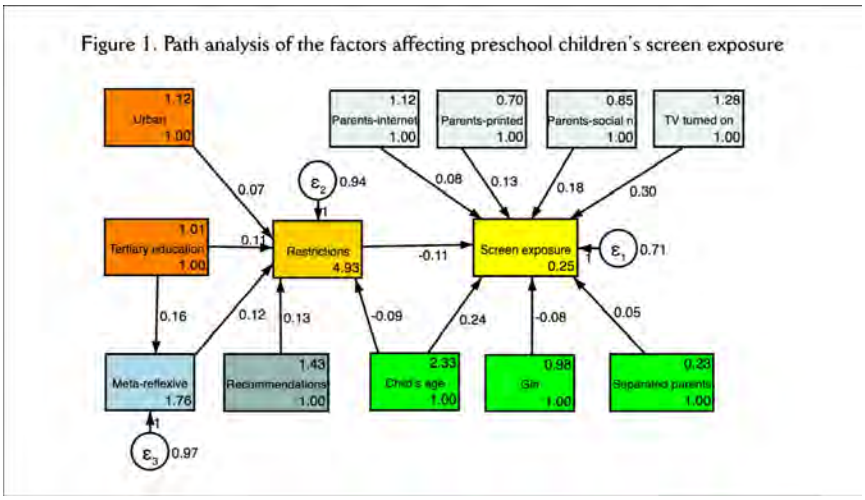
Regarding the attitudes, it is not surprising that parents who believe that media negatively affect preschool children's mood, are more likely to set rules and restrictions. Moreover, these parents are also slightly more likely to discuss media content with the children. On the other hand, parents who believe that their preschool children can gain useful knowledge from the media tend to be less present when their children are in touch with the media. They are also less likely to talk about the media content. It is not surprising that parents' rules and restrictions, as well as their presence when the children are exposed to screens, tend to decrease when children get older. Parents who claim to be familiar with experts' recommendations regarding media education of preschool children are more likely to set rules and restrictions and are more likely to discuss media content with their children.

Finally, one of the most significant findings concerns the impact of meta-reflexivity. Parents with higher meta-reflexivity scores are more likely to set rules and restrictions, to be present when their children are exposed to screens and to discuss media content with their children. In that regard, meta-reflexivity is no less important than familiarity with experts' recommendations, demographic variables, and parents' media-related behaviour. The critical stances of the meta-reflexive parents thus seem to contribute to their more cautious views on the media – encouraging them to set restrictions and observe the media effects more closely. In addition, the results show that parents with intensive reflexive inner dialogues are also more likely to engage in discussions with their children.

3.3. The effects of media education on children's screen exposure

The path analysis is intended to explain the causes of higher screen exposure of preschool children, while taking into account the demographic variables, parents' attitudes towards media effects on children, parents' media use, their familiarity with experts' recommendations, and meta-reflexivity scores. The statistically significant effects are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Path analysis of the factors affecting preschool children's screen exposure



Among the media education practices presented above, only setting rules and restrictions affects the quantity of preschool children's screen exposure. It functions as an intervening variable between meta-reflexivity and demographic features on the one hand, and the children's screen exposure on the other. Consistently with the regression analysis above, restrictions and rules are more typical of the parents who live in an urban environment, are tertiary educated, and are familiar with experts' recommendations. These parents are also characterised by higher meta-reflexivity scores. Again, consistent with the findings above, older children are subjected to fewer restrictions and are much more exposed to screens. However, parents' own media use has even more important effects than their practices of media education. When parents spend more time on the internet, social media, reading printed media, and their TV is on, their children are significantly more exposed to screens.

Finally, girls are less likely to be excessively exposed to digital screens, while the children of separated parents are slightly more prone to that.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Rapid social change with the unprecedented digital media exposure of preschool children implies that media education cannot rely solely on obtained information and/or pre-given norms – instead, reflexive deliberations on the on-going challenges brought forward by social complexity and dynamics are needed.

We confirm our hypothesis that meta-reflexivity is one of the comparatively most significant factors that affects parental media education in terms of (1) limiting screen exposure, (2) accompanying children during media exposure, and (3) discussing media content with the children. Meta-reflexivity is crucial because the familiarity with the experts' guidelines alone is not sufficient. The paper indicates that expertise and its influence are clearly important, but it is essential for individuals to develop their own reflexive deliberations and act accordingly. When some general knowledge about the topic, indicated by the familiarity with experts' recommendations, is combined with the critical elaboration of the issue, more responsible media education becomes more common. Searching for proper ways to design and implement effective media-education techniques for one's own children in the era of unprecedented and overwhelming digital media exposure demands more strategic concerns for the corresponding actions – it goes far beyond routine, and involves meta-reflexivity. A meta-reflexive person critically evaluates previous inner dialogues and is critical about effective action. This mode is driven by an ultimate concern and framed by specific value orientation, which undermines existing structural and cultural hegemony – enabling us to recognise and overcome oversimplified or distorted versions of the media constructs of reality (Strutt, 2019). As Archer (2012) says, meta-reflexivity is transcendental towards the social. Those who are meta-reflexive are not just following a herd but are looking for additional information and arguments with which they are able to decide what is sensible. One of the previous studies (Golob et al., 2021), confirmed, for instance, that meta-reflexivity enables one to be more skilled in media literacy and in checking for alternative information within the media landscape. Moreover, according to Archer (Archer, 2012), meta-reflexivity is the one mode that enables individuals to cope in an effective way with the complex, ever-changing society.

Our findings on the effects of some demographic features of preschool children are consistent with previous research (Rek & Kovačič, 2018; Rideout, 2014; Wartella et al., 2014). This includes significant differences in screen exposure between different age groups and higher exposure of boys when compared to girls. The results are also in line with the existing findings that the children of divorced and/or separated parents are more exposed to screens. We may explain this by the more limited ability of such parents to successfully coordinate their media education and make it more consistent, the limited time of a single parent, as well as emotional stress resulting from parents' separation/divorce. Furthermore, our research confirms that setting rules and restrictions is a comparatively easily attainable aspect of media education of preschool children – as it characterises most parents. We have clearly demonstrated it is important because it tends to prevent excessive screen exposure in terms of quantity. However, there is also an aspect of the quality of media content and interaction which matters. For this purpose, the parents should not rely solely on restrictions but should also invest their time talking to their children and being present when they are exposed to digital screens. The parents' absence in this regard may be a particularly dangerous trap. As indicated by our results, absent parents who fail to discuss media content with their children typically blindly rely on their beliefs about the positive effects of media on their children. Time spent with the child matters, especially when it also opens the door to the worlds beyond the digital media. The time parents spend playing with their children is positively related to media education in terms of interacting with the media and discussing them together – but it is not related to restrictions.

The qualitative and quantitative aspects of media education and screen exposure are especially important as preschool children are a very vulnerable audience. Their ability to access and use different types of media has only started to develop. Their capacity to analyse, evaluate, and reflect on the media messages is limited by their young age. The same is true for their limited ability to create media content and to focus on creative problem solving. There are also other major beneficial effects of proper media education for children's mental and physical well-being. For instance, excessive screen

exposure is predominantly associated with sedentary behaviours in children and adolescents. In addition, it is considered as one of the major factors in causing non-communicable diseases and other health risks later in life (Kaur et al., 2019). Larger exposure of young children to screens also brings negative effects and challenges regarding their eating and sleeping habits, mental state, addictions, aggressive behaviour, language development, consumerism, identity building, relationships with others, etc. (Christakis et al., 2018; De-Frutos-Torres et al., 2021; Farrell et al., 2022; Hayes et al., 2015; Adam & Gorišek, 2022; Serrano-Díaz et al., 2022). It is thus encouraging to see the results of path analysis showing that meta-reflexive parents are actively engaged in media education practices and that this engagement significantly affects limiting the overuse of screens in younger children.

In line with the previous research and trends (Rideout, 2014; Wartella et al., 2014), restrictions are most common for very young children who are not even supposed to interact with the digital media. But when the children get older, it is the quality of their interaction with the media and their comprehension of the content that matters most. This is also a crucial aspect of our further research. Another crucial – though not so surprising – finding of our research is the significance of parents as role models. Their own media use affects their children regardless of media educational practices, meta-reflexivity, and other variables. Our study confirms, in many aspects, the pre-existing academic claims about the exposure to media-related activities of preschool children regarding their parents' media habits and the level of their parents' education (Rek & Kovačič, 2018; Rideout, 2014; Wartella et al., 2014). It confirms that role modelling is crucial in developing children's media habits. Parents own media habits influence their children's use of media (Rek & Kovačič, 2018). Parents not only teach their children how to use the media, but they also become their children's role models and the ones who can cultivate a critical-thinking mindset and value judgments. By setting boundaries and interpreting a media message, they can influence their child's media habits and experience. Parents' excessive use of the media is, however, not only questionable in terms of negative role modelling, but can also be related to the lack of time spent with the children, leading to their higher screen exposure. This can be exemplified by parents reading newspapers, which does not provide a harmful example for the children but may "steal" the time that might otherwise be spent with them.

In terms of practical implications, the results of our research support the need for educating parents about the specific experts' recommendations related to media education of children. We have confirmed the significance of the parents' awareness of experts' guidelines. However, parents' education in general has also been proven to be relevant since it affects their meta-reflexivity as another factor of media education. To enhance parents' meta-reflexivity and make them more capable of deploying proper media education in their families, we suggest interactive workshops, not only for delivering the guidelines, but also for encouraging critical thinking about the media.

Authors' Contribution

Idea, T.G, M.M, M.R.; Literature review (state of the art), T.G, M.R.; Methodology, T.G, M.M, M.R.; Data analysis, M.M.; Results, T.G, M.M, M.R.; Discussion and conclusions, T.G, M.M, M.R.; Writing (original draft), T.G, M.M, M.R.; Final revisions, T.G, M.M, M.R.; Project design and sponsorship, T.G, M.R.

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