Psychosocial approaches as a solution to the challenge of risky online behaviours

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Review article

Abstract

Aim: To address and define the importance of ensuring the safety and protection of children and their families in the digital environment.

Methods: With surveys and their comparison, we want to assess whether the number of users in the digital environment, and consequently the number of individuals included in psychosocial programs designed to support addicts and/or excessive users and their families, increased during and after the pandemic period.

Results: The data reveals a growth in the number of users in the digital environment, as well as an increase in individuals participating in psychosocial programs aimed at supporting addicts, excessive users, and their families. We have also addressed important points of departure for the formulation of policies and thus appropriate intervention approaches that would enable the resolution of the challenge in this area. With this contribution, we also highlight the importance of free psychosocial activities to those addicted to digital devices.

Conclusion: The results of the current research confirm that the number of users of the digital environment, and consequently the number of inclusions in psychosocial support programme for addicts with digital technologies increased during and after the pandemic period. Due to the increase in the use of scree.

Keywords: children, digital environment, mental health, addiction, psychosocial programs

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1. Introduction

Considering the numerous challenges in family life, the state must design approaches, measures, strategic documents, and legislation that will effectively address the challenges of family through policy. Examples of major changes can be seen in the events related to measures relating to the COVID-19 epidemic, which have had a significant impact on children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in Article 1 defines a child as any human being under the age of eighteen. The definition of the term "child" is also used in this paper, which addresses both children and adolescents. The physical distancing measures due to COVID-19, as stated authors reference (Burns & Gottschalk; 2019; Marciano et al. 2020), had a harmful impact on children's mental health.

The digital environment encompasses a wide range of digital and online networks that individuals use to interact with the world. This includes the internet, social networks, mobile applications, online games, virtual reality, and all forms of digital communication (Sala, Porcaro & Gómez, 2024). Eurostat data (2024) show that, after the pandemic, more than 80% of European youth used the internet daily to participate in social networks. A key challenge is how to regulate this area so that children experience as many positive aspects and as few negative ones as possible in the digital environment. This area has recently gained significant attention, as evidenced by numerous international documents adopted to protect children's rights in the digital environment (e.g. the UN document on children's rights in the digital environment, 2021 Council of Europe, 2018). In General Comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child), it is stated: "The rights of every child must be respected, protected, and fulfilled in the digital environment." Since children spend a lot of time in the digital environment, we can highlight challenges related to mental health or psychological strain, where vulnerability has also increased. Excessive use of ICT can lead to addiction. Various authors (Marsh et al., 2018; Twenge & Campbell, 2020; Lobe et al., 2021; Wachs & Weinstein, 2021; Vogels et al., 2022; Sala, Porcaro & Gómez, 2024) find that increased use of social networks is associated with a higher likelihood of developing depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, among other mental health issues.

Non-chemical addiction, like chemical addiction, is based on neurological processes in the brain related to the reward system. When using social media, dopamine—a neurotransmitter that creates a feeling of satisfaction—is released. Positive feedback, such as likes, comments, and shares, further stimulate this chemical reaction, causing users to feel the need for repeated interaction (Griffiths, 2014, Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Although social media enables connection and access to information, excessive use can lead to brain overload, resulting in addiction (Wachs & Weinstein, 2021; NIJZ, 2022). Excessive use of social networks, as noted by Geisel et al. (2022), leads to addiction, resulting in social isolation, relationship issues in real life, and an increased risk of psychological disorders. Various authors emphasise that non-chemical addictions, especially digital ones, are influenced by a combination of biological, social, and personal factors, with children's mental health becoming a key challenge, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic (Wacks & Weinstein, 2021; Di Lorenzo, 2022). It is important to note that the challenges faced by children in the digital environment should be recognised early enough to enable timely intervention through educational programmes, healthcare, and family support. Various free psychosocial programs (MDDSZ, 2023) are aimed at preventing and addressing various difficulties faced by children and their families, including in the digital environment, with regular funding from the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities (hereinafter: MDDSZ). Slovenia also implements the Safer Internet Centre project, which is funded by the European Union in cooperation with the Ministry of Digital Transformation and is focused on promoting safe and responsible use of the internet and digital technologies among children, adolescents, parents, and educators (Safe.si 2024).

2. Material and methods

Data on children's mental health have given cause for concern over several years, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed this issue. Most children in 19 countries, as stated in the EU Kids Online 2020 study (Smahel et al., 2020), where data was collected; report using a smartphone "daily" or "almost all the time". According to estimates (WHO, 2020), 10 to 20% of all children and adolescents worldwide have mental health issues. Results from the Slovenian HBSC 2022 study (Jeriček Klanšček et al., 2023) show that 8.9% of Slovenian adolescents meet the criteria for problematic use of social media, and 9.1% for video game addiction. These results have increased compared to 2018. The state must provide various forms of psychosocial support and assistance, ensuring equality and social inclusion, especially for the most vulnerable social groups. A significant problem is evident, such as long waiting lists for various free therapeutic and psychosocial programs (Korošec, 2021). Professional help is becoming less accessible and waiting lists for specialist consultations are excessively long. MDDSZ has developed psychosocial programs to support children and their families who face challenges due to excessive and problematic use of the digital environment (MDDSZ, 2024).

Digitisation enables new positive ways of operating for users and offers opportunities to improve quality of life; however, it also brings a negative side, namely increased risk, and vulnerability, particularly for children (European Commission 2021, 16). Children use modern digital technologies, as mentioned in the HBSC study (Jeriček Klanšček et al., 2023), for

various purposes and activities, including playing games and using online social media or social networks. Excessive and problematic use of digital technologies can negatively affect various areas of life and health and can develop into various forms of addiction, the most common of which are addiction to video/computer/online games and online social media (Lobe et al., 2021). According to Spitzer (2016), who has studied the impact of electronic media on brain functioning for many years, their excessive use causes memory, attention, and concentration disorders, as well as emotional numbness and general dullness, which can be called digital dementia. Also, Siegel (Siegel & Payne Bryson, 2011, p. 11) developed a definition of psychological or mental health based on the concept of integrated brain functioning, understanding the complex dynamics of relationships and brain activity. The effects of screen use are also significantly influenced by the child's characteristics, developmental level, maturity, and environment, which can either mitigate or exacerbate the harmful effects of screen time (Vintar Spreitzer et al., 2021, 6).

Data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS) reveals that Slovenia saw significant growth in digital technology adoption before COVID-19, between 2018 and 2024, particularly with increased regular internet usage, especially among daily users. During the pandemic, as noted in Findings and Suggestions for Meeting the Challenges in the Field of Non-Chemical Addictions (Selak, Kralj & Žmauc, 2021), children had remote schooling and frequently used screens for homework. Upon returning to school, children exhibited increased lethargy, lack of motivation, higher levels of anxiety, depression, self-harming behaviours, and suicidal tendencies. This shift has led to greater online risks and an increase in digital inequality (European Commission, 2021, p. 16). Moderate use of ICT is crucial for children's mental well-being (UNICEF 2020, p. 23). Positive mental health during childhood is essential for effectively coping with the challenges and changes associated with developmental stages (Roškar, Jeriček Klanšček, Vinko & Hočevar Grom, 2019).

Table1: Comparison of data: 2018, 2019, and 2024 (SORS): Use of the internet (age 16-74)

Indicator	2018 (before COVID)	2019	2024 (after COVID)	Change 2018–2024
Regularly	80%	83%	91%	**+11%**
Every day or almost every day	71%	74%	87%	**+16%**
Several times a day	65%	69%	75%	**+10%**
Never used the Internet	20%	13%	7%	**-13%**
Smartphone to access the Internet	85%	92%	87%	**+2%**
Other mobile devices to access the Internet	4%	6%	18%	**+14%**

The data in table 1 highlights significant changes in internet usage patterns among individuals aged 16–74 from 2018 to 2024, reflecting the rapid evolution of digital technology and its integration into everyday life, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In Slovenia, 71 different interventions to support children and their families who face challenges due to excessive and problematic use of the digital environment (33 of which are aimed at children and adolescents) have been identified, carried out by 22 organisations or service providers (Selak, Košorok & Žmavc, 2024).

For this contribution, we will present detailed data on psychosocial programs financed by MDDSZ. These programs aim to provide individual professional and group support for those addicted to digital devices and comprehensive care for individuals with non-chemical addictions. The issue of the safety and protection of children and their families in the digital environment was addressed based on data from surveys

prepared by MDDSZ in cooperation with the Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (hereinafter: IRSSV), and these surveys were meaningfully interconnected.

2.1 Psychosocial programs

The first study based on a comparative analysis of data on the implementation of the psychosocial programs in the period 2019–2023: Logout&Restart – digital addiction, and the program Center Šteker – "Unplug", both financed by the MDDSZ (Kovač, Černič & Žiberna 2020; Petrič, Smolej Jež & Kobal Tomc, 2021; Černič, Smolej Jež, Petrič & Kobal Tomc, 2022) and data for 2022 (Kovač & Smolej Jež, 2023) and 2023 (Kovač, Cava Popović & Černi, 2024). The Logout&Restart program is a proven and innovative program of psychosocial assistance to those addicted to digital technologies, assistance to excessive users, psychosocial support, and assistance to victims of online violence, and early prevention for

families. Centre Šteker – "Unplug" is a specialised, free program that provides comprehensive treatment for non-chemical addictions. It focuses particularly on excessive and harmful internet use, social networks, screen devices, computer and online games, gambling, and online pornography. The programmes provide help to addicted and/or excessive users and their relatives in the form of individual and group meetings. The data analysis for the mentioned surveys were mostly quantitative (univariate statistical analysis), only in the part that refers to the target group of users were the results of the qualitative analysis (summaries of problems, warnings, and other comments as reported by the operators) included.

The source of data for the analysis are the annual or final reports on the implementation of the mentioned programs for the years in question, which the implementers prepare on a standardised form and submit to the MDDSZ. For our analysis, we only used the number of participants in each year, as we wanted to determine the increase in participation during the examined period. We were interested in examining the extent to which the number of individuals enrolled in programs aimed at addressing the issue of excessive use of digital devices increased during and after the pandemic.

2.2 Children's participation in digital environment

The Lundy model (2007) was applied to collect data for the second study titled Respect, Protection, and Fulfilment of Children's Rights in the Digital Environment (Narat, Boljka, & Škafar, 2022) from IRSSV. This study was used to assess the current state of the realisation of children's right to participation in the digital environment. The mentioned model meaningfully presents children's participation through four segments or the so-called checklist: Space: Children need opportunities to express their opinions in a space that is safe and inclusive, Voice: Children need appropriate support to express their opinions, Audience: Children's opinions need to be heard, Influence: Children's opinions should be considered, as far as possible. The mentioned research was used to analyse the state of exercising the right to participate in the digital environment.

The model was adapted for research purposes and combined with the findings of the "Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on Guidelines on the respect, protection and fulfilment of children's rights in the digital environment" – Guidelines (2018). We focused mainly on operational principles and measures regarding the respect, protection, and fulfilment of children's rights in the digital environment. Since the data in the mentioned study about digital environment from 2022 are already partially outdated, we also utilised data from the study The development of a new regional child well-being index – RIBO (Boljka, Narat, Marušič, & Škafar, 2024), which was also conducted by the IRSSV for the needs of the MDDSZ, to gain a deeper insight about the safe use of the online environment by children.

3. Results

3.1 Psychosocial programs

For the purposes of the first survey, we compared the data from the monitoring of the implementation of two psychosocial programs in the period 2019-2023 (Kovač, Černič & Žiberna, 2020; Petrič, Smolej Jež & Kobal Tomc, 2021; Černič, Smolej Jež, Petrič & Kobal Tomc, 2022) and data for 2022 (Kovač & Smolej Jež, 2023) and 2023 (Kovač, Cava Popović & Černi, 2024).

Table 2: Number of participants: period 2019-2023

Year	Logout & Restart	Logout & Restart	Centre Šteker	Centre Šteker
	N	% t-1	N	*% t-1
2018	(416)	-	-	-
2019	438	+5.3%	86	-
2020	526	+20%	94	+9,3%
2021	675	+28.3%	157	+66%
2022	1101	+63.33%	214	+36,2%
2023	1458	+32.5%	289	+35 %

Note: *Change from Previous Year: % t-1

Data in table 2 illustrates that the pandemic led to a sharp rise in digital environment usage, and this trend has continued, post-pandemic.

The largest increase in participants is evident between 2020 and 2022.

3.2 Children's participation in digital environment

For our second research (Narat, Boljka, & Škafar, 2022) we focused for the present paper only on the segment "space". The key findings of the mentioned second study show that children already had good access to the digital environment in 2018. According to the mentioned data in the study, Slovenia ranked among the national averages.

Fig. 1: Number of hours spent using the internet by purpose (per day during lockdown); ages 10 to 18 (KiDiCoTi2020)
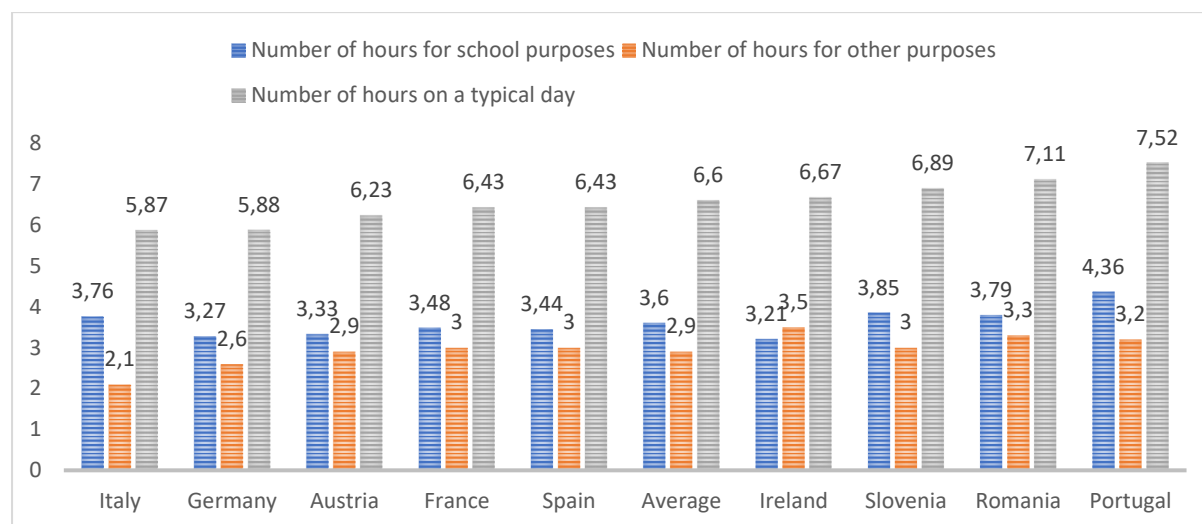
Since the data in the mentioned second study about digital environment from 2022 are already partially outdated, we also utilised data from the new study We noted the development of a new regional child well-being index - RIBO (Boljka, Narat, Marušič, & Škafar, 2024) but focused only on digital activities. The results have shown that despite the encouragingly high level of safe ICT use among children in Slovenia, some of children's habits do not align with the Slovenian guidelines for the use of screens in children. The recommended that screen time for the age group (10 -14 years) of children included in the study is no more than two hours per day.

Table 3: Time spent by children in Slovenia on digital activities in 2023 (age 10 - 14)

Activity - more than 2 Hours/Day	*Weekdays (%)*	*Weekends (%)*
Social Media	32.1%	30.8%
Playing Video Games	18.4%	23.1%
Browsing the Internet	15.9%	15.9%

Data in table 3 highlights the need for raising awareness and promoting healthy habits. In addition to the time spent using various ICTs, the manner of use and the content are also important, as they must be high-quality and appropriate for the child's age or developmental stage. These findings also highlight the need to promote healthy habits, particularly regarding time spent on social media (see also EU Kids Online 2020, Screen Time Guidelines 2021, Safe.si 2024).

4. Discussion

T Since children have the right to participate in the digital environment as well as to express themselves using ICT, they must also be aware of the risks that the use of digital technology can bring. Due to its peculiarities, the digital environment is characterised by duality. On the one hand, it provides unlimited possibilities for improving the quality of life, but on the other hand, it can mean risk and increase children's vulnerability (Demšar Pečak, 2020, 3). Experts in the field of family literacy (ACS 2021) emphasise that we must provide children with access to information and materials to enhance their social and spiritual well-being. Based on the results (Kovač, Černič & Žiberna 2020, Petrič, Smolej Jež & Kobal Tomc, 2021; Černič, Smolej Jež, Petrič & Kobal Tomc, 2022; Kovač & Smolej Jež, 2023; Kovač, Cava Popović & Černi, 2024), more and more users are looking for help with addiction to excessive use of the online environment. Beyond the amount of time spent using ICT, the manner of use and the quality and age-appropriate nature of the content are equally important

(Geisel, et al. 2022). Too much exposure to screens and online activities is worrying for the health and mental well-being of the child, as it causes increased stress, lack of attention, vision problems and lack of physical activities and sports, as well as addiction. Addiction is primarily a chronic disease of the brain's reward circuit and centres associated with motivation and memory. The disrupted functioning of these sets of neural connections manifests itself on biological, mental, social, and spiritual levels (Twenge & Campbell, 2020, Wachs & Weinstein, 2021). Behavioural or non-chemical addictions are often associated with other mental problems, especially mood disorders as well as other types of addiction (NIJZ 2017). As the number of children with mental disorders increases, it is necessary to supplement the network of experts and connect them to an interdisciplinary network of mental health centres. Timely treatment is key to successful treatment and prevention of unwanted long-term outcomes of mental disorders in children and their families.

The network of psychosocial assistance programs financed by the MDDSZ is designed for individual areas or individual target groups, among which we also include non-chemical or behavioural addictions, which also result in mental health problems (MDDSZ, 2021). As part of the psychosocial assistance programs, the state also finances programs aimed at offering individual professional and group assistance to those addicted to digital devices to improve the digital well-being of all, especially children. Despite the above, it is important to realise that using screens in free time can also be beneficial. Good online content does not have excessive visual and sound effects that occupy children and adolescents excessively, they have a positive impact on children, as it educates and informs them (Vintar Spreitzer et al. (2021, 13).

Although our country defines some forms of e-abuse in the Criminal Code (2008). It is important that children have an appropriate medium (and method) available to them where they can complain, report abuse, or ask for help and advice.

5. Conclusion

Based on a comparative analysis of data on the implementation of the mentioned psychosocial programs in the period 2019–2023, conducted by IRSSV, we have found a large increase in the use of the digital environment among children and their families, which also results in more challenges in the physical and mental health of children, which is especially characteristic during and after the corona crisis. Due to the increase in the use of screens, the harmful effects of these are also noticeable in children's mental health (Marsh, J., et al 2018; Twenge & Campbell, 2020; Lobe et al. 2021, Wachs &Weinstein, 2021, Vogels et al 2022; Sala, Porcaro & Gómez, 2024). Slovenia already finances many psychosocial programs and activities, which are usually linked to project financing,

which means that their continuous implementation is not guaranteed. The state must systematically regulate the field of education on the safe use of ICT, as it is a field that is developing extremely quickly, so both children and their parents need constant help and support in ensuring safety and assistance in the digital environment. The digital environment requires the cooperation of all government departments responsible for children and families, as well as civil society, non-governmental organisations, companies and, finally, parents and children. Policymakers must constantly monitor the situation of the safety and protection of children in the digital environment and based on research, strive to create important starting points for the preparation of appropriate intervention approaches that would enable solving the challenges brought about by the digital environment.

Conflict of interests

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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