



Who benefits from the *idea* of screen time?

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Abstract

Public discourse surrounding children's use of digital technologies centres on fears that excessive screen time harms development and well-being. Consequently, policymakers and organizations have introduced time-focused guidelines and advisories surrounding children and youth's media use. In ethnographic work examining digital technology use in families of preschoolers, we found that parents often spoke about device use in guilt-ridden and shameful ways. This led us to ask: if caregivers and children are not the beneficiaries in the perpetuation of the screen time concept, who is benefitting from it? We identify three major groups who benefit: technology companies (who shift responsibility away from platform design), governments (who demonstrate action without implementing complex regulation), and researchers (who secure funding and attention). We argue that examining who benefits from screen time reveals underlying power relations in this discourse and suggest three alternative, more equitable approaches for researchers and policymakers addressing children's digital media use.

Keywords

screen time, children and media, parenting, technology, platform design, policy

Introduction

Kate, a mother of three young children in Singapore, sat across from us in her public housing apartment said, "Well, if I can, I would want to say no to using devices." She sighed and confessed, "But because I have three kids and I don't have a helper . . .

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sometimes I really need to use it . . . otherwise, the housework, the cooking . . . cannot be done.” Kate’s guilt surrounding her children’s use of screen devices is not unique. Between July 2022 and January 2023, we conducted in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations with 95 families of preschool-aged children in Singapore, talking to parents about their experiences navigating children’s digital media use.¹ Across these families, one emotional register kept reappearing – guilt, embarrassment, and anxiety centred on *screen time*. Parents spoke about letting their children use devices as personal moral failings, something that required justification, apology, and self-flagellation.

Serene, a mother of three boys aged two, five, and nine, described her children’s use with subtle defensiveness, “Yes . . . they *do* get screen time from . . . um . . . a phone, and *that’s all*. [But] I lock my phone, and only when I have *no choice* . . . [and] I really need to do certain things, then I pass them the phone . . . to play some simple games.”² For lower-income families, the guilt was compounded by necessity. Parents working long hours, unable to afford additional help or enrichment activities, and living in smaller apartments relied on screens as what some ruefully call an “electronic babysitter.” Despite this, many interpreted this practical necessity as personal failures.

These experiences of parental shame reflect a broader cultural moment. We are living through what some scholars would refer to as a media panic (Drotner, 2016), part of a recurring historical pattern in which new technologies repeatedly provoke widespread public concern (Orben, 2020). Public discourse about children’s digital media use has become increasingly alarmist, with widespread fears that today’s generation is being irreparably harmed by smartphones, tablets, and social media platforms. Popular books warn of mental health crises caused by excessive exposure to social media platforms (Haidt, 2024). News articles report on studies showing correlations between screen time and negative outcomes (Ng, 2023), while professional organizations and government agencies issue guidelines for maximum daily screen time allowances, broken down by age group (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2025; Ministry of Health, 2025). Parents form support groups to resist giving their children devices, while a cottage industry of “digital detox” programmes, screen-limiting apps, and expert consultants has emerged. At the centre of this anxiety is a deceptively simple concept: screen time, or the *quantity* of time children spend in front of devices. A search on PubMed yields thousands of studies examining the effects of screen time on various outcomes, from poor health to cognitive development (Madigan et al., 2019; McAllister et al., 2021; Roberston et al., 2022; Twenge, 2019; Woods and Scott, 2016).

A central premise of much of this research and policy is that *time* is the critical variable, and that spending too much time on screens (or in fact, on social media platforms) is the problem, while reducing that time is the solution. However, sitting in those apartments across Singapore, speaking with parents, made us aware of the gap between expert guidelines and lived reality. The parents we spoke with were not ignorant or neglectful. They were doing their best, while the guidelines they felt they were failing to follow seemed disconnected from the circumstances of their lives. Lower-income families bore a double burden, as they were more likely to rely on screens out of necessity, yet they received the same admonitions as affluent families who could afford alternative activities. As some scholars have noted, the discourse of screen time (what we henceforth call

the screen time frame) placed disproportionate responsibility on parents while obscuring the structural factors surrounding digital technology use (Kucirkova et al., 2023).

While much of the debate has revolved around the effects of spending too much time on smartphones, social media, or screens. Scholars have made genuine attempts to move the conversation forward. For example, a consortium of communication scholars and media psychologists have attempted to go “beyond” screen time to try to understand media effects in early childhood (Barr et al., 2020), others have highlighted the limitations of screen time as a concept (Kaye et al., 2020), and still others have attempted to “unpack” the composition of screen time, arguing that there are different types and categories of use with differing effects on young people (Meier and Krause, 2023; Verduyn et al., 2022; Yee et al., 2024). Despite this, the screen time frame retains its grip on public and policy discourse precisely because of its simplicity and measurability.

This obsession with screen time led us to a question rarely asked: If caregivers and children do not benefit from the perpetuation of the idea of screen time, who does? When we frame the problem as screen time, what becomes visible and what becomes obscured? Who gains power, resources, or legitimacy from this framing, and whose interests are marginalized? These questions matter because social scientific concepts are never value-neutral (Douglas, 2013). When we understand screen device use as time spent, it establishes normative ideals and practices that affect the people we study, disadvantaging some and advancing the interests of others (Clycq et al., 2014).

Our paper is organized into three sections. First, we explain how concepts shape what becomes visible, measurable, and actionable. Next, we highlight how the screen time frame serves the interests of three stakeholder groups – namely technology companies, governments, and experts – while placing burdens on families. Finally, we present alternative, more equitable, approaches to understanding the impact of technology use on young people.

Concepts and their consequences

Concepts shape reality

A foundational insight from studies of discourse and knowledge production is that the concepts we use to understand the world are not neutral mirrors of reality. Instead, they actively shape our reality (Foucault, 1990; Hacking, 1999). When researchers, policymakers, and publics adopt particular conceptual frameworks, these frameworks structure what counts as a problem, what gets measured and monitored, and what interventions seem appropriate. This is particularly evident in how we conceptualize social media use. Vanden Abeele et al. (2022) have shown that the metaphors we use to frame social media (as a drug, a demon, or a donut) have real consequences for how users relate to technology, what problems become visible, who or what is ultimately responsible, and what solutions seem appropriate. Screen time, we argue, functions similarly as a conceptual frame with its own consequences for what gets seen, measured, and acted upon.

Consider how we might conceptualize children's engagement with media. We can position it as a question of content (what are children viewing?), skills and literacy (what skills do young people need to navigate communication technologies?), design (how platforms are designed and engineered?), social context (with whom, and in what relational settings, are children engaging with media?), access (who has opportunities to benefit?), rights (what are children entitled to?), or time (how many hours do young people spend on screen devices?). Each framing makes certain features visible while obscuring others. Each suggests different types of research, intervention, and distributions of responsibility.

When we frame children's digital media use primarily as screen time (a quantifiable measure of duration), we focus attention on individual behaviour and create something measurable that can be tracked, compared, and regulated. We locate the problem at the level of *use* rather than *design*. We also suggest that the solution is behavioural change and self-regulation rather than structural intervention. Having said that, we note that there are specific physical health domains such as myopia and musculoskeletal health, where cumulative duration of screen use may be the most clinically relevant variable, and where time-based guidelines have clearer conceptual and empirical value (e.g. Ha et al., 2025; Sandoval et al., 2025). Indeed, our critique is not that time is never meaningful, but that it has become the dominant frame across all domains of children's digital media use in ways that crowd out more consequential questions about design, rights, and structural inequality.

Concepts distribute responsibility

One key function of concepts, especially ones where *causality* is implicit, is that they distribute responsibility and blame (Stone, 1989). The way we frame a problem implicitly or explicitly assign agency, causation, and obligation (Stone, 1989). When we define the problem of children's digital media use as "screen time," we position the problem at the level of the individual. The implicit questions become: Are you letting your child spend too much time on screens? Are you monitoring their use? Are you setting appropriate limits? The responsibility for managing screen time, and the blame when things go wrong, falls on parents and users themselves.

This is quite different with alternative framings. If we framed the issue as "manipulative platform design," the responsibility would shift to technology companies and their design choices (Swart, 2021). If we framed it as "surveillance capitalism," we would focus on business models and regulatory oversight (Zuboff, 2019). If we framed it as "digital inequality," we would examine structural factors like income, education, and access to alternatives (Micheli, 2016). The screen time frame individualizes responsibility in ways that align with neoliberal governance, where citizens are expected to manage risks through informed choices and self-regulation rather than through collective provision or corporate regulation (Rose, 1999).³ Indeed, communication scholars have highlighted the need to be aware of how our framing of concepts may lead to responsabilization, such as placing responsibility for the negative consequences of digital technology use on children and their families (De Wolf and Vanden Abeele, 2020).

Concepts create markets

Once a concept is established, it generates demand for solutions, creating new markets and opportunities (Luyt, 2004). The screen time frame has spawned an entire solution ecosystem. There are apps to track and limit screen time, books discussing the dangers of excessive screen time (Haidt, 2024), and funding for research aimed at understanding screen time and its effects. Each of these represents economic or professional opportunities, but it also means that various actors may have interests in perpetuating the concept, regardless of whether it harms others.

Concepts serve interests

This brings us to our central analytical approach, examining *cui bono* – who benefits – from particular conceptualizations. This approach has been applied to understand other concepts in technology and social policy. Luyt (2004), for instance, showed how the concept of “digital divide” served the interests of technology companies (who could sell products as solutions) and governments (who could demonstrate action through technology initiatives) while potentially obscuring deeper questions about structural inequality and what technology access actually enables. Similarly, scholars have examined how concepts like “the achievement gap” or “at-risk youth” can individualize structural problems and serve particular organizational interests while burdening the populations they describe (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Swadener and Lubeck, 1995). We apply this lens to screen time: if we examine who benefits from screen time as the dominant framework for understanding children’s digital media use, what do we find? And crucially, whose interests are marginalized by this framing?

Such an analytical approach is useful because it reveals power relations often invisible in seemingly neutral or scientific discourse. By asking who benefits, we can see that the concept of screen time, however commonsense it may seem, has consequences for what gets studied, what gets regulated, who bears responsibility, what solutions are pursued, and who experiences burdens.

How technology companies benefit

Perhaps the most counterintuitive beneficiary of screen time discourse is the technology industry. If the problem is spending too much time on screens and platforms, then technology companies whose business models depend on maximizing user engagement should oppose this framing. Yet, screen time discourse serves technology companies’ interests, as any problems that arise from the use of their products is attributed to individual behaviour, not platform design or business models. The implicit solution is for users and parents to exercise more self-control and monitoring, not for companies to fundamentally change how their products work.

Indeed, scholars have started to explore how *design features* on online platforms can drive uncontrolled use (Flayelle et al., 2023). Consider YouTube, which is widely used by children and adolescents. YouTube’s business model depends on keeping viewers

watching as long as possible because more viewing time means more ads served and more revenue generated. The platform achieves this through design choices such as algorithms that suggest videos designed to keep users engaged, autoplay features that automatically queue up the next video, and interfaces that make it easy to keep watching and difficult to stop. When concerns arise about children spending too much time on YouTube, the screen time frame suggests the solution is for parents to limit how long their children can access the platform. It takes public and regulatory pressure away from suggesting that YouTube should redesign its recommendation algorithm, eliminate autoplay, or adopt business models not based on maximizing watch time.

In recent years, major technology companies have introduced screen time tracking and limiting features, presented as *tools* to help users manage their time (Mehta, 2023; Nyce, 2024; Zhou, 2018). These features serve multiple functions. First, they demonstrate that companies are acting on concerns about excessive use, potentially heading off regulatory pressure. Second, they place the tool, and responsibility, in users' hands. Third, and most cleverly, these features reinforce the screen time frame itself. Since the problem is time spent, the solution is necessarily individual time management. Crucially, these tools do not address underlying design features that encourage the extended use.

Such actions are what we might refer to as *regulatory theatre*, or performative actions by corporations that create the appearance of addressing problems without making fundamental changes. It is similar to how companies introduced calorie counts on menus, putting responsibility on consumers to make informed choices, rather than changing the nutritional content of their products. Indeed, scholars have highlighted how calorie labelling is ineffective and that there is a need to develop a collective, and not just personal, responsibility when tackling a complex issue like obesity and unhealthy eating (Brownell et al., 2010; McGeown, 2019). Likewise, foregrounding screen *time* helps technology companies avoid more difficult questions about practices related to manipulative design, content moderation, data collection and privacy, and business models. Tackling these concerns would require fundamental changes to business models, significant investment in content moderation, potential revenue losses, and regulatory oversight. Screen time, by contrast, places the burden on users.

How governments benefit

The second major beneficiary of screen time discourse are governments. A key part of political communication involves the shaping of public perception through the use of symbols, rituals, and gestures. This symbolic politics is, as Edelman (1967) demonstrated, independent from tangible policy outcomes, serving instead to help governments appear responsive while avoiding substantive change (similar to how corporations engage in regulatory theatre). Tackling screen time may be seen then as an example of symbolic politics as it demonstrates responsiveness to public concerns about children and technology without undertaking the complex, costly, and politically difficult work of regulating technology companies. In a study conducted in the U.S., over 70% of parents with a child aged 11 or younger were concerned about children's use of digital devices. (Auxier et al., 2020). Similarly, nationwide polls conducted in both the U.S. and Australia found that excessive screen time is *the* top health concern for parents

(Clark et al., 2023; The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, 2021). Given that these concerns likely cut across partisan lines – both conservatives (concerned about moral degradation, loss of childhood) and liberals (concerned about mental health, corporate exploitation) are concerned about screens – political action taken to address screen time are safe political moves.

Hence, policymakers issue guidelines, recommendations, and public health messages about appropriate limits on children's screen time. For example, the United Kingdom's Chief Medical Medical Officers, after reviewing commissioned research, introduced various recommendations for children's screen device use (Triggle, 2019). In Australia's 24-hour movement guidelines, the health authorities recommended "no more than 2 hours of sedentary recreational screen time per day (Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, 2021)." Likewise, Singapore's Ministry of Health introduced guidelines recommending specifying limits to daily screen time (Lim, 2025).

While the intentions behind these guidelines are informed by a desire to create healthy environments for children, they also serve political functions. First, they demonstrate responsiveness. Officials can point to them as evidence that they are addressing public concerns. They generate press coverage, creating visibility for the issue and governments' response. Indeed, there have been substantial media coverage of political responses towards children's use of screen devices across different countries (e.g. Chrisafis, 2024; Lim, 2025; Taylor et al., 2025). Second, guidelines and recommendations are relatively costless requiring only the convening of experts rather than provision for enforcement mechanisms. Third, they do not require confrontation with some of the most powerful and wealthy corporations in the world – companies that lobby extensively, contribute to political campaigns, and influence policy (De Mendonça and Grenier, 2025; Khanal et al., 2025). Fourth, they align with neoliberal governance. Issuing guidelines to help individuals make better choices fits with a dominant political ideology that emphasizes personal responsibility and self-regulation over structural intervention or collective provision (e.g. Hache, 2007). As many scholars have argued, contemporary governance increasingly operates through responsabilization, or the shifting of responsibility from state and corporate actors to individuals who must manage the consequences of their actions through informed choices (Hache, 2007; Lorenzini, 2018; Shamir, 2008). Indeed, as Orben (2020) argued, technology panics can be a useful vehicle to divert public attention away from larger structural issues.

Despite this, it is worth noting that there are emerging regulatory efforts moving beyond screen time and aimed at technology companies. The European Union's (EU) Digital Services Act (DSA) (2022) includes provisions about algorithmic transparency and enhanced protections for minors, including restrictions on targeted advertising to children and requirements for platforms to assess and mitigate risks to children. In Singapore, the Code of Practice for Online Safety is targeted at social media, putting in place measures that ensure users, especially children, are safe from harmful content and interactions (Infocomm Media Development Authority, 2023). However, when governments regulate technology companies, the process is complex, costly, and politically challenging. For example, the EU's DSA took 2 years to develop,⁴ requires substantial resources in terms of enforcement mechanisms, and is already facing severe political and legal challenges (Pamuk, 2025).

Recent social media bans, most notably Australia's prohibition on social media use for children under 16 (Reuters, 2025), represent a more interventionist government response, yet one that still operates within the logic of the screen time frame. Rather than requiring platforms to be designed safely for children, bans remove children from platforms entirely, locating the solution at the level of access and use rather than design and accountability (Goodyear et al., 2025). They demonstrate strong government responsiveness to public concern while leaving intact the underlying platform architectures and business models that motivate the bans in the first place.

Indeed, young people in countries with social media bans are already finding ways around the ban (Kaye, 2025). Scholars have also highlighted how social media bans would merely encourage children and youths to migrate to other platforms not affected by such bans (Fardouly, 2025). In other words, media bans draw from the same premise, serve similar purposes in terms of its symbolic political value, and ultimately benefit the same interests as screen time guidelines. They demonstrate government responsiveness to public concern while deflecting scrutiny from platform design, business models, and the structural conditions that make digital media environments unsafe for children in the first place. Like screen time discourse more broadly, they place the burden of solution on users rather than on the corporations whose products generate the harms they seek to address. Moreover, when young people circumvent such bans, as the evidence already suggests they are doing, there is a risk that responsibility becomes quietly relocated onto the teenagers themselves. Their transgression becomes the problem, rather than the platform designs that make these spaces compelling in the first place, or the governments that chose prohibition over the harder work of structural regulation. Bans thus carry the potential to generate new forms of responsabilization directed at the very populations they purport to protect.

How the expert market benefits

The public concern on screen time has generated much research. These include observational studies examining associations between time spent with devices or media platforms and various developmental outcomes (Roberston et al., 2022), longitudinal studies tracking screen time and development (Chen et al., 2020), intervention studies testing programmes to reduce time spent (Jones et al., 2021; Maniccia et al., 2011), meta-analyses synthesizing findings across studies (Gao and Gao, 2024), methodological articles debating how best to capture screen time (Kaye et al., 2020), and theoretical papers testing frameworks to understand the effects of media use on young people (Niu et al., 2025).

The screen time frame benefits what we colloquially call the “expert market” – a collection of knowledge producers and brokers. Researchers studying a current technological panic such as screen time can build publication records, secure grants, and achieve tenure given the public interest on communication technologies and the consequences of its use on children and young people (Orben, 2020).

But the deeper question is why knowledge producers fixate on time specifically, since expertise on *technology use* would still be in demand given the proliferation of media in our daily lives. There are two potential reasons. First, scholars have highlighted the allure

of a numerical approach especially in the intersection between science and policy, since numbers can convey a sense of objectivity that legitimizes certain kinds of work (Crosby, 1996; Porter, 2020). There is rhetorical value saying that one is examining how quantities of “screen time” cause different developmental outcomes in children. Indeed, this also legitimizes it as a policy problem, since problems can be more easily identified and addressed when we can measure them (Stone, 2012), justifying researchers’ request for research funding from governments and other stakeholders. Second, the increasing pressure to publish in academia has arguably led to compromises in deep thinking and a proliferation of “fast” research (Ferreira, 2022; Johann et al., 2024; Levy, 2007; Menzies and Newson, 2007). Screen time, being easy to define, capture, and measure, along with the simplicity and ease of collecting time-based measures of media use, makes it particularly difficult to resist.

The prominence of screen time in public discourse also creates pressure for researchers to take a clear position on the issue rather than a nuanced or ambiguous one as the media tends to highlight polarized research findings (e.g. Baumgaertner, 2024; Pearson, 2023, 2025; Remnick, 2024). The middle ground is harder to translate into media coverage, policy recommendations, or popular books. This is best illustrated by the highly publicized debate between Haidt and Ferguson over whether social media use is causing a mental health epidemic among teenagers (Ferguson, 2025; Rausch and Haidt, 2025). Each scholar adopted diametrically opposed viewpoints on the issue, with the entire episode covered by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Lee, 2024). Despite some researchers pleading for caution and nuance, it was researchers engaging in polarizing debate who dominated headlines.

We acknowledge the difficulty of our position. We are researchers critiquing research, experts critiquing expertise, and beneficiaries critiquing the system we benefit from. There is a risk of cynicism here – of appearing to suggest that researchers are simply self-interested actors with no genuine concern for children and young people’s well-being. That is not our argument. Most researchers genuinely want to understand whether and how digital media affects children and are motivated by concerns about children’s well-being. The point is that regardless of individual motivations, the focus on screen time creates a market for expertise that researchers benefit from, and this shapes what gets studied, how it gets studied, and what findings receive attention.

A convergence of interests and the burden of the screen time frame

What is striking is how these different stakeholders with different agendas all benefit from the perpetuation of the concept of screen *time*. This creates a discourse coalition: a group of actors who support a particular framing of an issue, even if their underlying interests and motivations differ (Hajer, 2005). The coalition does not require explicit coordination or conspiracy; rather, each actor has independent reasons to support the screen time frame, and these independent choices reinforce each other.

While these groups benefit, the burden of screen time discourse falls on parents and children. The most consistent finding across our interviews and observations was the emotional weight that screen time discourse generated. This burden manifested not just

in what parents said, but in how they said it, particularly in their defensive framing of even routine media use. Consider Vanessa, mother of three children. When asked to describe her children's typical device activity, she immediately distanced herself from responsibility:

On a typical day, it depends whether I'm working. *If* I'm very busy, then I *may* have to give them some screen time, but actually their screen time is mostly given by my husband. *He* tends to give them a lot of screen time.

She emphasized this point again, "If it's their father [taking care of them], they will have more screen time than if they asked me, *for sure*." Note that we deliberately avoided imposing moral judgement in how we asked about device use, and our questions were descriptive and neutral. Despite this, Vanessa framed her answer as if anticipating criticism – first qualifying that she only gives screen time when "very busy" (necessity, not choice), then attributing most screen time to her husband (not her responsibility), and finally contrasting her restraint with his permissiveness (she is the responsible parent). Her husband's leniency became a shield, evidence that whatever screen time occurred was not her fault. This pattern appeared repeatedly across our interviews, particularly among mothers. Parents described routine, unremarkable media use, such as watching a show during dinner preparation or playing a game on a car ride, in language saturated with justification, qualification, and deflection.

Indeed, research has shown that parental guilt surrounding screen use enhances stress, which has the potential to lead to family-related conflict over time (Wolfers et al., 2025). This aligns with a social constructivist perspective on media effects, which proposes that *perceptions* of media use can influence well-being independent of objective use itself (Wolfers, 2024). Along the same lines, Lee and Hancock (2024) found that individuals' mindsets about social media, particularly beliefs about being one's social media use being "out of control" or that social media is inherently "harmful," were associated with worse psychological well-being and explained more variance in outcomes than actual patterns of use. Applied to the parenting context, this suggests that the screen time frame, by cultivating a pervasive sense of parental failure and loss of control, may itself be a source of harm, one that operates through belief and perception rather than through children's actual media experiences.

This emotional weight stems from many parents' belief that allowing children screen time represents a moral failure. Samantha, mother of two, articulated this concern:

The child has the whole lifetime to use all these devices, [so] why start them so early? And if their brains get over stimulated, then it's very hard to get them interested in things. It slows them down in terms of creative thinking . . .

Samantha's anxiety about screen time affecting brain development and foreclosing future potential reflects what parenting culture scholars call "intensive parenting" – the expectation that child-rearing requires constant vigilance, expert guidance, and significant investments of time, energy, and resources to optimize outcomes (Faircloth, 2023). Central to intensive parenting is "infant determinism" – the belief that early

childhood experiences have decisive, irreversible effects on lifelong outcomes (Macvarish et al., 2014). If a child's brain is "over stimulated" by screens in early childhood, Samantha fears, the damage is permanent, since creative thinking will be "slowed down" for life. This deterministic framing inflates the stakes of everyday parenting decisions, transforming routine choices about media use into weighty moral decisions with lifelong consequences.

Alongside this emotional weight is a profound sense of disempowerment. Amelia, a mother of a newborn and a 4-year-old, described how circumstances forced her hand:

I think that it [screen time] only became [more frequent] much more recently, after I gave birth to my newborn . . . [because] I'm using it to give us some space to breastfeed . . . so, we had no choice, and we have no helper at home also.

When screen time is presented as a matter of parental decision-making – informed parents make good choices, uninformed or lazy parents make bad ones – it tends to assume that all parents have equal capacity to limit screen use so that "choosing" to follow recommendations becomes simply a matter of will or knowledge. Instead, structural factors such as family composition, presence of caregiving support, and economic resources to hire help can fundamentally constrain what choices are actually available. Amelia experienced this as disempowerment. She knew screen time was supposedly harmful, and she wished she could do otherwise, but her circumstances left no alternative. The discourse tells her she is making a choice while she experiences herself as having no choice at all.

Beyond parents, we argue that the screen time frame also burdens children and young people themselves. When we conceptualize mediated experiences primarily as time, we inadvertently position children as passive victims of technology rather than active agents. Their own perspectives, preferences, and meanings are dismissed. However, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognizes children's rights to access information, participate in cultural life, and have voice in matters affecting them (United Nations, 1989). Applied to digital media, this mandates that children be seen not simply as passive recipients of screen content but active interpreters, creators, and social participants (Livingstone, 2009). In fact, they make sophisticated distinctions between different types of media use, develop their own practices and norms around technology, and use digital platforms for identity work, social connection, creative expression, and learning (Itō, 2013). Screen time discourse flattens these nuanced practices into a single metric that treats all use as equivalent and positions children as vulnerable objects requiring adult management rather than as agents with their own digital lives.

Towards alternative frameworks

If screen time is a problematic frame that serves specific interests while burdening families and children, what alternatives might we develop? We conclude by discussing three interrelated alternative approaches.

From time to experience

One alternative is to focus on *what kinds of experiences* children have online. This requires both methodological and theoretical advances. Methodologically, there are at least three particularly promising approaches. First, *screenomics* represents a methodological innovation that captures high-frequency, in-situ data about actual device usage (Ram et al., 2020; Reeves et al., 2021). Rather than asking people to estimate their use, screenomics uses automated data collection to record what people actually do on their devices. This approach reveals patterns invisible to self-report – not just how long someone used a device, but what content they engaged with and what temporal patterns characterized their use (Yee et al., 2023). Experience sampling methods (ESM) take a different approach, capturing real-time data about media use (e.g. Beyens et al., 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2021). ESM approaches situate media use within the flow of daily life, capturing experiential dimensions and psychological experiences that duration metrics miss. Beyond quantitative approaches, qualitative and participatory methods can serve to centre children's and adolescents' own perspectives on their media experiences (e.g. Third et al., 2014). These approaches recognize children as experts on their own lives and can reveal meanings, values, and practices that researcher-designed surveys miss (e.g. Boyd, 2014).

Alongside these, there is a need for communication scholars to develop theoretical frameworks that recognize and capture multidimensional, person-specific, and context-sensitive dimensions of young people's media experiences. For example, Valkenburg and Peter's (2013) differential susceptibility to media effects model (DSMM) proposes that the same media content or platform affects individuals differently based on dispositional, developmental, and social factors. Rather than asking "does screen time harm children?" DSMM asks "for whom, under what conditions, and through what mechanisms do specific media experiences lead to specific outcomes?" Likewise, Yee (2025), in his work with preschoolers, sought to break down the concept of *screen media experiences* into six different dimensions – function, substance, features, social interaction, agency, and the spatio-temporal context – as an alternative to the screen time frame.

Rights-based approaches

A second alternative involves explicitly grounding approaches to children's media use in human rights frameworks, particularly the UNCRC. This reframes the issue from risk management to rights realization. While the UNCRC recognizes three categories of children's rights (protection, provision, and participation), screen time discourse tends to emphasize protection, while often neglecting provision and participation. Through a rights-based approach, scholars working in this area have attempted to steer research, public discourse, and policy surrounding children's digital media use to one that foregrounds how technology companies and policies can contribute to children's rights being upheld on digital platforms (Livingstone and Pothong, 2025). In practice, rights-based approaches mean putting greater focus on *platform design* informed by children's rights (Livingstone et al., 2025), including *children's voices* in policymaking (Third et al., 2014), and focusing on empowering children to navigate digital technologies in ways

that benefit them. A rights-based approach does not preclude attention to time entirely. Children's right to adequate rest, play, and offline social interaction means that duration remains one relevant consideration, but a rights-based approach would organize such discussions around entitlements and well-being rather than duration as a primary focus.

Asset-based approaches

A third alternative involves shifting from deficit-based to asset-based perspectives on children's digital media use. Much discourse on screen time focuses on what screens take away from children. An asset-based approach recognizes the positive roles that digital media can play in children's lives. This is supported by substantial research which has examined how technology can support children's learning and education (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015), identity exploration and expression (Boyd, 2014), as well as social connection and belonging (Allen et al., 2014) when designed well, thereby contributing to the well-being and flourishing of children (e.g. De Leeuw et al., 2024). Taking an asset-based approach would mean a shift in research priorities and questions. Questions researchers might ask include: What conditions support beneficial media use? What enables learning, creativity, and positive connection? How do young people develop self-regulation and digital literacy? What supports these processes? What platform features or design choices promote well-being versus harm? How do families successfully integrate media into healthy, balanced lives? Similarly, an asset-based approach recognizes that balance and moderation are part of healthy media integration, and that time is one contextual factor among many. The shift is from time as the organizing framework to time as one consideration within a broader focus on conditions that support children's flourishing.

Conclusion

The question that comprises the title of this paper is ultimately an invitation to examine often invisible power relations in seemingly neutral or scientific discourse. Our answer is that those who benefit most are not the families, but rather technology companies, governmental organizations, and experts. Screen time, as both concept and discourse, illuminates a broader pattern in how contemporary societies approach complex social issues – often preferring individualized, measurable, behavioural solutions over structural interventions requiring confrontation with power and redistribution of resources.

If we take seriously the question of who benefits from screen time discourse, we must consider alternatives that better serve children and families. This requires moving away from screen time as the organizing framework, acknowledging the limits and interests of our own expertise, and working towards approaches that balance protection with empowerment, recognize both risks and opportunities, and distribute responsibility more equitably across society. The screen time frame is not inevitable. It is one possibility among many. Recognizing this opens space for imagining and pursuing alternatives that might better serve the flourishing of children and families in the digital age.

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Data availability statement

The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Families were largely middle-class, with parents between their 20s and 40s; the majority of participating caregivers were mothers, and focal children ranged in age from 4 to 6 years ($M=5.34$, $SD=.69$).
2. Italicized for emphasis.
3. Addiction and problematic use framings operate similarly - and individualize responsibility even more strongly - but are beyond the scope of this paper.
4. And this was partially because they had experience and a legislative foundation from their development of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which took close to 6 years moving from its first draft to being directly enforceable.

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