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The multiple roles of media use within the family system during lockdown: A thematic analysis of parental reports from the UK

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Abstract

Children's media use increased during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Here, we present a thematic analysis of online survey responses from 69 parents (of children aged 0–11 years) who described their family media use after the first UK lockdown. Data highlight an increased reliance on media use driven by the challenges of managing time, work, leisure and social connection. Parents reported the additional work of regulating family media use amidst concerns about harmful effects. We draw on an ecological systems approach to discuss how the role of media in family functioning is determined by societal institutions and discourses around parenting and screens.

KEYWORDS

children, COVID-19, digital media, family system

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries underwent lockdowns whereby caregivers were expected to work from home, childcare was moved from external settings to the home and face-to-face social interactions outside of the home were restricted. In the UK, nurseries, pre-schools and schools shut their doors to all children (with the exception of vulnerable and key worker children) on 23rd March 2020. While some reopened their doors on 1st June 2020 to

Adam Galpin and Gemma Taylor contributed equally to this work.

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some year groups, many children remained at home with their families. Social restrictions were relaxed in the UK from the 23rd June 2020. Understanding the impact of lockdown restrictions on family life, particularly in relation to digital media use, remains a hot topic due to the shifts to life online during lockdown with caregivers working remotely, children's schooling provided online, face-to-face interactions replaced with video conferencing and even baby classes held online. However, managing children's media use has been a contentious issue since the American Academy of Paediatrics first introduced the notion of time restrictions for children's media use in 1999 (AAP, 1999).

Research to date has illustrated the myriad ways in which the challenges introduced by lockdown have significantly impacted the rhythms and structures of family life. For instance, in Finland, parents reported making a variety of adjustments to their normal family routines to accommodate the challenges of home-schooling (Häkkinen et al., 2020). In addition, inequalities in childcare became increasingly apparent during the pandemic with many caregivers balancing childcare and working responsibilities which was associated with mother's psychological distress (Xue & McMunn, 2021). Unsurprisingly, media use increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. A meta-analysis found daily increases of 1.4 h in media use for children aged 6–10 years, followed by an hour for adults, 0.9 h for adolescents and 0.6 h for 0–5-year-old children (Trott et al., 2022). Notably, increases in children's media use during the pandemic and resulting restrictions were associated with caregiver's positive attitudes toward children's screen use (e.g. "This allows my child to have contact with family/friends") and caregiver's own screen time (Bergmann et al., 2022), parent psychological stress levels (Hartshorne et al., 2021; McArthur et al., 2022) and loss of childcare (Hartshorne et al., 2021). Parental media use mediated the positive relationship between parental employment status and children's media use (Farah et al., 2021). Parental rules and restrictions for media use were negatively associated with children's media use (McArthur et al., 2022). Such findings offer insight into how external events (e.g. a lockdown), parental attitudes and rules, and external pressures interact to influence the immediate environment of the child.

A family systems approach emphasises the importance of analysing families through a system of relationships, roles, activities, rules and routines (Argyle, 1988; Livingstone, 2007). The system serves to support familial goals (e.g. to keep children safe, to improve living standards), needs (e.g. for downtime) and values (e.g. the importance of education). A family systems approach encourages us to question how the sudden enforcement of lockdowns has affected previously established family media practices. For instance, Eyimaya and Irmak (2021) found an increase in screen use between 6–13 years during lockdown in Turkey when families did not have clear screen time rules at home and engaged in inconsistent general parenting practices. How might lockdowns influence a family media practice such as co-viewing? Vanderloo et al. (2020) discuss the importance of parents and children co-using digital media together as a way of mitigating potential harms from screen media during lockdown. Research demonstrates that co-use facilitates children's attention and comprehension of media content (see Dore & Zimmerman, 2020 for review). Given that many parents were balancing childcare and working at home, it is reasonable to ask how lockdown impacted on joint family media use.

A number of approaches have applied an ecological lens to understanding how external factors intersect with the role of media within family life. Hertlein (2012) integrates an ecological perspective into her model of family functioning, recognising the impact of technology in shaping family relationships and in bridging connections between the family and the outside world. This is salient in the context of a pandemic when families rely on technology for connection to work, school and for relational needs. Jordan (2004) has adapted Bronfenbrenner's

ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) to explain the role of media in children's lives across nested systems of family and school (the microsystems), societal institutions and resources (the exosystem), and prevailing cultural context and values (the macrosystem). In addition, the mesosystem captures the intersections between different systems, for instance the way school and family life may impact each other. The model is used to explain how different ecological contexts intersect to contextualise a child's experience with media and the role of media in their development. Hurwitz et al. (2020) used an ecological systems approach to interpret findings that children in Mexico spent more time using media within the family home compared to children in Boston who spent more time playing outdoors. The authors evoke several ecological factors to explain the findings, including differences in public messaging about screen time, views of the educational potential of media, and the presence of crime and pollution. The study highlights how institutions within the exosystem (e.g. policy makers who disseminate guidance for parents), and environmental influences at the macrosystem level, provide the broader contexts for the immediate environments of a child's life (e.g. the family microsystem).

When viewed through this lens, we are directed to consider how a pervasive environmental influence such as a national lockdown has impacted how families fulfil leisure, social and child-care needs. We present a qualitative data analysis of responses to an online survey of UK parents and caregivers on changes in children's media use during the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK. We sought to explore the ways screen media have intersected with family life during lockdown. Taking an ecological systems approach, we pay attention to the role of media within the family system and the relevance of the less immediate influences of societal institutions and broader cultural values.

METHOD

Participants

Seventy-one parents (67 mothers, 4 fathers) with children aged between 0–11 years were recruited in the UK during July–August 2020. Two parents filled in the media use questions for two children, thus data for 73 children is included in this study. See [Table 1](#) for demographic data.

Materials

To scaffold parents' reflections on the influence of the lockdowns on their family media use, we asked about media use before, during and after lockdown.

Quantitative questions

The questionnaire started with demographic questions, questions about parent's working status during lockdown, childcare status before, during and after lockdown, children's media use including time spent using media, their reasons for use and parent–child co-use before lockdown, during lockdown and in the last 24 h.

TABLE 1 Participant demographic data.

Variable		N			
Child age		Age category (months)			
	Mean age = 76.37 months SD = 44.43 Range = 10–143 months	10–35	36–71	72–107	108–143
		22	11	18	22
Child gender	Females	30			
	Males	43			
Childcare		Lockdown status			
		Before	During	After	
	School	39	1	8	
	Nursery	20	2	9	
	Childminder	0	3	1	
	Grandparents	4	2	5	
	Childcare at home	5	64	44	
	Mixed	5	0	5	
	Other	0	1	1	
Parent working status during lockdown	Working from home	38			
	Furloughed ^a	9			
	Key worker	15			
	Maternity leave	3			
	Other	6			
Parent Education	Degree or higher	55			
	A-Levels	8			
	GCSEs	2			
	Vocational qualifications	6			
Family Income	£42001 or more	48			
	£24001–£42000	15			
	£14001–£24000	7			
	No response	1			
Number of adults in the household	1	3			
	2	63			
	3	4			
	4	1			
Number of children in the household	1	33			
	2	31			
	3	6			
	4	1			

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Variable		<i>N</i>
Parent ethnicity	White—British	61
	White—Other	2
	Asian—British	3
	Asian—Indian	2
	Black—African	1
	Mixed	1
	Asian—Pakistani	1

^aFurlough refers to workers who are asked to take a temporary leave of absence by their employer and paid at least 80% of their usual salary during this time.

Qualitative questions

To gather qualitative data, we asked free text questions to probe (1) how parents perceived their child's digital media use had changed since the start of lockdown, (2) the impact of childcare and parental work commitments, and (3) parents' general feelings about how digital media was used during and after lockdown.

Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Salford Research Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited online via social media July–August 2020 to fill in a questionnaire hosted on Online Surveys (Jisc, 2020). After reading the online participant information sheet and consenting to take part in the study by ticking a box to indicate their consent, participants were taken to the questionnaire. The questionnaire took approximately 20 min to complete.

RESULTS

Quantitative analysis

Full analysis of the quantitative data can be found here: https://osf.io/zfq75/?view_only=1e4de33110fe40b282cfc396c98a7e77.

Participants in the current study reported increased digital media use across both television and mobile devices during the lockdown period, and parents of older children reported a greater increase in use compared to younger children. During the lockdown period, children were more likely to use digital media to connect with family members, to learn, to stay out of trouble and so that parents were able to get things done (see Figure 1).

In summary, the quantitative data from our study show similar trends to other quantitative studies conducted internationally (e.g. Bergmann et al., 2022; Trott et al., 2022). Thus, our sample can be considered fairly typical of the general picture in the literature to date in terms of 0- to 11-year-old children's digital media use during lockdown. However, without qualitative data,

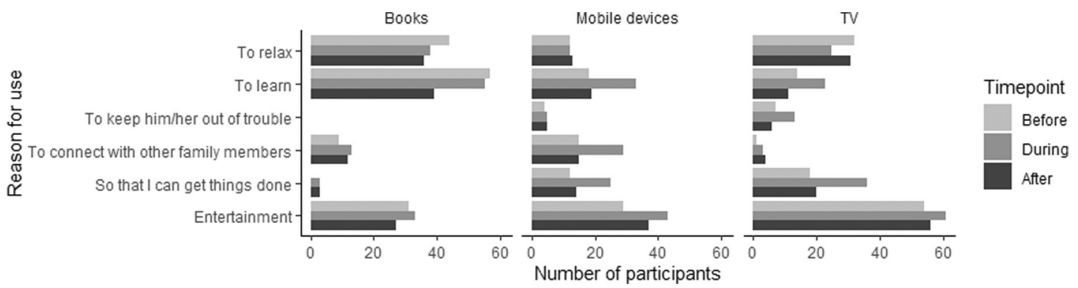


FIGURE 1 Reasons for media use by media type and timepoint (before, during and after lockdown).

the majority of existing studies do not shed light on the myriad ways media use intersects with changes to the family system over lockdown.

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative comments were provided to at least one of the questions by all but two of our 71 respondents. Of interest, the question which asked respondents to comment on whether their child's media use had changed over lockdown generated the most data (67 responses) which could be suggestive of the level of attention paid to the issue of child media use, at least in the context of a lockdown. Fewer responses were provided when asked about the impact of childcare and parental work commitments (34) or when invited to provide additional comments about how digital media was used during and after lockdown (30). The data analysis was conducted by AG using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial organisation of codes and themes was shared and discussed with the co-authors before the final set of themes was agreed. Three main themes were identified: Managing time and activities, Media use and family needs, and Regulating media use.

Theme 1. Managing time and activities

This theme incorporates the occasions where respondents raised the difficulty of co-ordinating and balancing competing commitments as a consequence of lockdown. The challenge of managing childcare was particularly salient in the data (Sub-theme 1.1). Parents also reported the use of media as a way of managing childcare pressures (Sub-theme 1.2).

Sub-theme 1.1: Managing childcare

More than a quarter of responses oriented in some way to the task of managing time and activities. Several respondents described coordinating multiple demands from home-schooling or childcare, and the need to balance these with full-time working or study:

“My work has been flexible to a point but I have been unable to give either my kids or my job the attention they need”

(P9, Mother)

This extract details how, despite some flexibility with work, the respondent felt “unable” to give enough attention to both work and childcare demands, a perception echoed in the following comment:

“An impossible task not helped by the weight of expected school work for 4 children”

(P6, Mother)

The challenges introduced by home-schooling echo the situation described by parents in Finland (Häkkinen et al., 2020). In addition to the pressures created by home-schooling, two respondents reported disruption to childcare arrangements normally provided by extended family.

The challenges brought on by home-schooling and changes to childcare, and the need to balance competing demands, created logistical challenges:

“Had to use holiday, swap working days to cover childcare”

(P54, Mother)

“I home schooled my two children while my husband worked upstairs. He worked slightly reduced hours so I could also fit in work from home.”

(P45, Mother)

“During the time it [the school] was closed my son wanted to spend time with me as I was at home and I was trying to help out my husband as much as possible as normally they would be able to go out to the park or play centre etc.”

(P52, Mother)

The first two extracts describe changes to existing work patterns to accommodate childcare. The loss of holiday to meet childcare demands highlights the additional cost of lockdown on time which might otherwise be used for rest and recuperation. The second extract highlights how the childcare was managed logistically to support the job demands of both parents, enabling the husband to “work upstairs” presumably away from the distraction of home-schooling, while he in turn reduced his working hours to allow his spouse to work at home. The suggestion that the husband’s working hours were only “slightly reduced” suggests that he was less flexible than his wife when it came to changing working patterns. This reflects the findings of Collins et al. (2021) that women were far more likely to reduce their working hours than men. The third extract refers again to the task of “help out my husband” due to restrictions in the normal range of leisure activities.

In some cases, the pressures had clearly placed a strain on family life:

“Even though we were both working and my partner was the one at home he did nothing towards homeschooling or childcare. We still live in a very sexist era.”

(P8, Mother)

“The increase in TV use is mostly due to how his Dad interacts with him now that he’s responsible for a bigger chunk of childcare. I say that I want to limit it but he says it doesn’t matter because most of the time the telly is on but our son is also playing. I’m not sure how true that is.”

(P59, Mother)

In the first extract, the respondent, a mother, expresses frustration at inequality in the way childcare was managed within the family. Reference to “a very sexist era” orients to their perception that societal expectations influence childcare roles, providing an example of how the socio-cultural context permeates the operation of the family system. Even in Iceland, which tops the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2022), women in heteronormative relationships have reported bearing the brunt of additional burdens placed on families by lockdown (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021), including both emotional and household responsibilities. The second extract describes how, while the father has taken on more responsibility of childcare, this has led to concerns about how the “Dad interacts with him” and also indicating a lack of trust within the family: “I’m not sure how true that is.”

These extracts present a picture of family life that has been challenged by changes in childcare, demands of home schooling and pressures of working from home. We see evidence here of how the different ecological contexts impacted family life during lockdown. Parental employers, particularly regarding flexibility to change or reduce working hours, impacted family routines. How these changes were applied within the family seemed in turn to be shaped by broader cultural roles, with the female carer required to make more sacrifices for the sake of childcare. The following theme describes the ways in which screen media have intersected these challenges.

Sub-theme 1.2: Media to ease the pressure

Screen media was used by several respondents to occupy their children so that they could get on with other activities:

“Partner finds it hard to end his working day. I find it hard to get a working day so snatch time at laptop when possible. You Tube is a vital distraction tool if we absolutely need to get something done. TV on in the background most of the day simply because we are at home and can’t go anywhere so feels too lonely/boring isolating to just play with child/work every moment of the day. It becomes our downtime too”

(P34, Mother)

As before, the extract suggests an imbalance in terms of who is expected to manage childcare, with the male partner struggling to end his working day contrasting with the mother struggling for the opportunity to get work done. The mother is tasked with the balancing act of managing activities as they “snatch time at laptop”. YouTube is described as a “vital distraction tool”, suggesting it can be relied on but possibly only as a last resort as implied by the emphasis on “absolutely need to get things done”. Television is cited as a way of alleviating loneliness or boredom and as a way of occupying children and helping parents achieve some “downtime”. Television was the most frequently cited screen media used to occupy children in both our quantitative and qualitative data, and most often it was used so parents could get work done:

“TV use also increased—on previous school mornings the TV wasn't allowed on but during lockdown the TV was on in the mornings and at intervals throughout the day. It sometimes had to be used when I needed to do work Teams/Zoom meetings.”

(P43, Mother)

The extract describes how TV “had to be used” when the respondent needed to focus on work meetings, suggesting they felt there were no other alternatives to occupy their child. This use of television was cited as a reason for an increase in their child's screen media consumption. The findings are reflected in a study of parenting across 14 European countries that found the use of digital media as a babysitter was a characteristic feature of many families' media practices (Brito et al., 2017), and this was amplified during lockdown (e.g. Egan et al., 2021).

To summarise, the current theme describes a depiction of lockdown life that was salient in our data. Parents have faced challenges in managing and co-ordinating childcare, work and downtime. They have often turned to screens as a means for support.

Theme 2. Media use and family needs

Lockdown meant that many public resources were no longer available for family leisure activities, and physically socialising outside of the household was also restricted. The current theme describes additional ways that media was used to compensate for disrupted family needs.

Sub-theme 2.1: The role of media in family activities

Lockdown restricted access to leisure activities, disrupting the normal rhythm of family life, and prompting some of our respondents to use screen-based activities as alternatives:

“Leisure time that would normally be spent outside has been spent on the Xbox playing with Dad.”

(P14, Mother)

As in the previous extract, several respondents discussed the incorporation of media as a joint activity between family members:

“More time on YouTube and watching films or football on tv with daddy”

(P16, Mother)

“Use of tablet has increased a lot due to lack of ability to go out for activities and him not being in nursery. We usually have the TV on in the background most of the day with children's TV (such as CBeebies) and we put movies on for him we all watch together. The time he spends on his tablet is split between entertainment shows he watches and educational videos on a topic he asks up about.”

(P52, Mother)

In the first extract, the respondent describes how lockdown has led to more time co-viewing between their son and his father. Likewise, the second extract links a “lack of ability to go out” with a rise in media television viewing and tablet use. The respondent describes how they “all watch together”, highlighting the use of movies as an activity for the whole family. The use of educational videos on the tablet also generates family discussion. The following extract likewise emphasises the benefits of television on generating topics for family conversations:

“Increased tv usage, including feeling guilty about it, but as a necessity! However, I do think it's brought lots of benefits, including talking points and ideas which we haven't been able to get from being out of visiting places”

(P33, Mother)

Here, the respondent suggests they have not been able to visit places which would normally provide stimulus for “talking points and ideas”. Families have also developed new behaviours to fulfil media-related needs:

“As a family we have increased our media use to connect with family members that don't live in our household (using platforms such as FaceTime, WhatsApp, and Teams). We have also used media to watch YouTube clips which is something we wouldn't have previously done before lock down.”

(P65, Mother)

The respondent here refers to the development of new media habits which have been implemented “As a family”. The data provide examples of the use of a number of screen-based behaviours, including gaming, television watching and YouTube, which have been implemented between the whole household or a subset of family members.

Sub-theme 2.2: Keeping the extended family together

The importance of the extended family can be seen in the rise in use of social technologies, which were a salient feature of life during lockdown, often described as a way of keeping in touch:

“We have all used more media. We have regularly zoomed family and friends weekly 2-3 times a week during lockdown. ... lockdown has shown how positive it can be to have the media use to stay connected to family and friends.”

(P44, Mother)

The extract indicates that lockdown has prompted recognition of the benefits of media as a tool for staying connected. Several of the respondents cite such uses of technology as underpinning the rise in screen time:

“She hadn't used any media at all prior to lockdown...This then changed to weekly family zoom calls and online baby classes”

(P64, Mother)

“My child has been using various media to keep in touch with family and friends (with permission) more than before lockdown which has definitely increased the use of media”

(P13, Mother)

In summary, lockdown has prompted changes in media habits incorporated within family systems. The use of media to replace access to other activities, to connect to the wider extended family, and to ease the pressures of childcare (Theme 1) has led to a rise in media use within the family. The following theme discusses how families have implemented regulations in response to their changing media habits.

Theme 3. Regulating media use

This theme captures the range of ways that parents reported managing their child's media use, and how their perceptions of screen use justify their regulatory strategies.

Sub-theme 3.1: Negative perceptions of media use

Whilst parents have discussed the useful affordances of screens during lockdown, responses also included perceptions of risk or harm. This is expressed strongly in the following extract:

“Social media has altered family life for the worse. We are both guilty of spending too much time on our phones”

(P69, Mother)

Here, the respondent is presumably referring to both caregivers, and seems definite in their perception that social media has a negative impact on family life. Other extracts describe negative consequences of screens on children, including “sedentary behaviour and lack of motivation for school work” (P39), “emotional well-being” (P44) and “not become addicted to it and are able to function as well-rounded human beings!” (P47). The range of perceived negative effects of media use are echoed in salient media discourse (Galpin & Taylor, 2018) although it is unclear whether the perceptions described here are from direct experience, from access to research or from news articles.

These negative perceptions were often nuanced and discussed alongside benefits (see sub-theme 1.2, 2.1 and 2.2), but nevertheless, parents report feeling “guilty” (P69; P33), and “a responsibility” (P47) to implement a range of media regulatory strategies. Livingstone (2007) describes how family rules are a way in which societal values and beliefs are enacted in daily practices, and therefore parental beliefs about screen use may impact the family system from external sources such as news media and shape the regulation strategies employed within the home. Indeed, parents' positive attitudes toward children's media use were related to greater increases in children's media use during lockdown (Bergmann et al., 2022).

Subtheme 3.2: Implementing new rules

A consequence of the use of media to ease childcare pressures (Theme 1) is that media use itself becomes an activity to co-ordinate, leading to changes in the way it is regulated within the family

system. The following respondent describes an increase in media use as a result of “juggling a lot”, which in turn has prompted a need to “set some boundaries” or “take screens away”:

“It has increased but we are aware of it. We do not allow screens at the table. If we feel behavior is dipping we take screens away. We do feel quite maxed out still and are juggling a lot so we do feel fairly reliant on screens but we always make sure we read to them and also set some boundaries. I have a 3 year old and 7 year old so life is busy.”

(P45, Mother)

This extract captures the way lockdown has impacted family life and the tensions between feeling “reliant on screens” and negative perceptions of screen use. Such apprehensions were salient in the data and several participants commented on implementing regulations with their children:

“Son’s games console has allowed connection to his friends, same goes for us using computers/mobile devices eg/zoom/teams. Allows time apart when all together in the house but does encourage sedentary behaviour and lack of motivation for school work which I have to work to address”

(P39, Mother)

This respondent describes “time apart” as a positive consequence of media use on family life, but “sedentary behaviour” and “lack of motivation” for school as negative problems which creates “work to address”. The reference to “work” suggests addressing the balance is an effortful process. In parallel, the following respondent describes a change in their routine to ensure “screen time was broken”:

“As a parent, I have taken an hours break each day to go for a walk/cycle or run with my child to ensure that screen time was broken.”

(P42, Mother)

Respondents reported a variety of strategies for regulating media use. For example, media used for contacting friends and family was allowed “under supervision by myself or her mother” (P41), or “with permission” (P13). One respondent mentioned placing restrictions on *where* screens could be used:

“We do not allow screens at the table.”

(P45, Mother)

Others described imposing boundaries on *when* media could be used:

“Trying to get her to recognise that spending hour of her phone is not good. Also trying to stop use at night time (early hours of the morning)”

(P61, Mother)

The respondent in this extract refers to placing limits on use at “night time”. The threat to sleep from screen use before bed is a debate visible in both academic research and popular media which may have influenced the regulation strategy reported here. The respondent also orients to a more

general concern relating to *amount* of screen time (“spending hour of her phone is not good”) and here an educational approach of “trying to get her to recognise” is favoured, possibly because the phone is a personal device which cannot be regulated with simple restrictive measures.

The concept of ‘screen time’ frames many of the academic and public debates around child media use and was also visible in several of the responses in our data:

“More time watching YouTube where previously this was not an option. We have tried to balance this and place time limits.”

(P21, Mother)

The emphasis on placing “time limits” highlights a particular concern with the *amount* of YouTube viewing. Other respondents refer to a general goal of “trying to reduce” reliance on media (P67, Mother) or to “limit it” (P59, Mother).

An additional regulatory measure based on restricting the *type of use* is reflected in the following extract that emphasises use for educational purposes:

“It has increased for working from home and home schooling but we still limit laptop use to education/work and have TV for relaxation/downtime. We do not allow the use of tablets at home for general screen time/gaming etc.”

(P48, Mother)

To summarise, parents use a variety of media regulation strategies, and although the source of the beliefs underpinning these strategies were not explicitly oriented to, they echo many of the academic and media discourses on child screen use.

Subtheme 3.3: Relaxing regulations

In contrast to a tightening of regulations, three respondents described how lockdown led to a loosening of restrictions:

“I am very conscious that we had quite rigid guidelines in place for our children in relation to tech before lockdown. During lockdown this fell apart! Whilst this can be perceived as a negative, it has enabled my children to access educational resources and the gaming they have done has enabled them to keep in touch with friends. I believe that our children have felt less isolated during lockdown as a result of their use of technology. I think technology and devices are great but I do feel a responsibility to ensure that my children do not become addicted to it and are able to function as well-rounded human beings!”

(P47, Mother)

The extract here describes how previously “rigid guidelines” “fell apart” during lockdown. “Fell apart” suggests any relaxing of regulations was unintentional and beyond the parents’ control. The respondent here has recognised the value of technology for education, keeping in touch with friends and with feeling less isolated. However, they express concern about guarding against addiction. The emphasis on “well-rounded human beings!” also conveys the perception that too much screen time displaces other important experiences. It is unclear from this extract whether the “rigid guidelines”

were resumed as lockdown eased. The following extract is more candid about a return to “time restrictions”:

“We have never really promoted the use of consoles or screen time, we have always placed time restrictions and allowed alternate days for usage. However, lockdown has shown how positive it can be to have the media use to stay connected to family and friends. Even though this has supported us during lockdown, we have reverted back to limiting time as we know the prolonged time on screens does not support the emotional well-being.”

(P44, Mother)

Here again, the respondent is recognising the positive uses of media for connection, but in highlighting how it “supported us during lockdown” is justifying a return to stricter limits now that lockdown is over. In contrast, the following respondent appears to be suggesting that lockdown has prompted a change of attitude:

“Media has multiple purposes of connecting with grandparents, learning but also age is a huge factor for going on YouTube. Watches documentaries and an array of videos which we’ve decided are age appropriate where previously we had been strict.”

(P21, Mother)

In summary, the data describe both parents’ concerns around media use and recognition of some of the positive affordances which have helped children during lockdown. The balance of these positive and negative perceptions of media use has led to different parental response, including both the introduction of more regulatory measures and a loosening of regulations.

DISCUSSION

Our qualitative data has allowed us to understand parents’ reasons for children’s increase in digital media use during lockdown and the ways in which media use intersected with family life. Impacts on the normal activities undertaken by families meant media were used as a means of fulfilling leisure and social needs, with children’s increase in mobile device use also related to connecting with other family members. Digital media were vital for children to learn and accommodations were often needed within the household to support home-schooling. Salient in the data was the need for screen media to allow the caregiver to get things done. Indeed, needing to get work done was often cited reflecting the challenges caregivers faced when balancing childcare and working from home, and frequently involved a re-organisation of space and time within family routines.

A number of influences on family life during lockdown were prominent in our data, and an ecological systems lens enables us to see how these factors intersect. Lockdown precipitated a sudden change in the microsystems of the child’s life, restricting access to school and peers, which in turn required compensatory adjustments from the family system. At the societal level, our data included examples of how lockdown removed access to resources external to the household, including childcare and leisure activities. The ability to compensate for this loss of resource was strained by parents’ competing needs to fulfil employment obligations (situated

in Bronfenbrenner's exosystem) and was supported by the degree of flexibility which parents could employ to support each other and co-ordinate childcare. This in turn raises the importance of socio-economic status in relation to how parents mitigate loss of resources. Access to media devices as alternative forms of entertainment, power to control work schedules, adequate space within the family home and having at least one parent not in full time work would all point to the benefits of financial resources to mitigate the impacts of lockdown. However, no responses explicitly oriented to financial status and a full analysis of the impact of socio-economic factors is beyond the scope of the current data. In summary, understanding the child's experience during lockdown requires an appreciation of the interactions between microsystem (school and family) and exosystem (work and societal resources) factors.

Broader (macrosystem) cultural values on gendered parental roles were referenced by some of our respondents in terms of the ways that families re-organised themselves to face the challenges of childcare during lockdown. During lockdown, attempts to balance working responsibilities and childcare have been associated particularly with mother's psychological distress (Xue & McMunn, 2021). Building on these findings, our data suggest that societal views of gender and parenting have led to mothers generally absorbing a greater degree of burden and emotional effort to maintain the functions of the family system. It should be noted, however, that 94% of our respondents were mothers.

Wider discourses on the perceived dangers of media use were also apparent in our data. Such messages proliferate through media institutions and regulatory bodies and can then impact the family through the way media is regulated (Livingstone, 2007). Our data revealed a logistical and psychological struggle to keep child screen time in check. A contrasting account was previously presented by Plowman et al. (2010), whose data on parental attitudes to child media use in Scotland suggested that, whilst parents worried about harmful effects of media, they generally felt such effects could be mitigated with adequate moderation and supervision. In contrast, in the context of a lockdown, many of our families experienced guilt and anxiety as they struggled to find ways to regulate screen use. Such challenges have been identified in previous research even without the exacerbating conditions of a national lockdown. For instance, Evans et al. (2011) studied family reactions to the AAP recommendations on screen time and found a reported challenge in adhering to screen time guidelines involved finding access to alternative activities which required parental time and money, plus available community resources. Such challenges are only heightened in the context of a lockdown, where parental time is increasingly pressured and many community resources are suspended. In our case, this led to experiences of guilt and to the development of new methods to regulate media use. The impact of screen time discourses is also evident in the emotional conflict apparent in our participants as a result of turning to media as a distraction. Indeed, caregivers often reported feeling "guilty" about their children's media use in the present study and these feelings could exacerbate any existing well-being issues. Changing the currently negative narrative around children's digital media use is therefore important. This may be particularly important in countries that have strict guidelines in place for children's media use, such as the AAP guidelines in the USA, since these guidelines may cause parents to feel they are not 'good parents' if they do not follow them (Findley et al., 2022). Such evidence suggests how wider cultural beliefs of what makes a 'good parent' (a macrosystem influence) and societal institutions such as the AAP (an exosystem influence) are played out with the family system through the implementation of family media rules; relationships which were also reflected by responses in our data.

While some families sought to regulate their increased reliance on media, others described a re-consideration of family views toward media. The data suggested that some families incorporated media use into their family leisure activities during lockdown and

emphasised using digital media together. This suggests that caregivers see the value in co-using digital media with their children consistent with research highlighting the importance of digital media co-use (Dore & Zimmermann, 2020). In her sociotechnical model of family functioning, Lanigan (2009) emphasises how family time can be increased through joint computer use, which can have a positive impact on family cohesion. The loss of alternative resources imposed by lockdown changed the significance of particular media activities for family life, demonstrating how family functioning can adapt when changes are precipitated by ecological factors such as a lockdown to the meaning attached to particular technologies (Blinn-Pike, 2009). Lanigan (2009) emphasises the potential of technologies to erode the boundaries of family life by allowing external institutions and people to connect to the household. While this can create challenges through the blurring of boundaries between spaces for work and home, in the case of a lockdown, technology provided the means through which work and education could be transplanted into the home space. This allowed necessary and valued activities to continue. One further salient change in our data was increased use of social technologies, such as Zoom, to keep in touch with family and friends. Indeed, our data suggested that, for some families, digital media regulation strategies were relaxed, citing the benefits for their children keeping in touch with friends. Research by Bacigalupe and Lambe (2011) describes the value of communication technologies in supporting transnational family bonds; we suggest that a lockdown mirrored many of the challenges created by geographical separation, and we see similar applications of technology to support relational needs.

It is important to note that the generalisability of our findings is limited to families from higher socio-economic backgrounds in the UK due to our relatively small homogenous sample. Research demonstrates that experiences of lockdown differed drastically according to socio-economic background with those from lower socio-economic backgrounds facing more job loss and a reduction in earnings (Blundell et al., 2020). Indeed, Bergmann et al. (2022) found that family socio-economic status was negatively related to 8–36 month old's digital media use. In addition, just 4/71 of our participants were fathers. This is perhaps not surprising given the research demonstrating that mothers took on more childcare during lockdown (Xue & McMunn, 2021) but nevertheless limits the generalisability of the views expressed in our qualitative data beyond mothers. Furthermore, the majority of our respondents identified as coming from white ethnic backgrounds and two parent households, and it is possible that variation in family and household structures across different ethnic backgrounds may have shaped lockdown experience. For instance, in the UK, Asian families are more than 5 times more likely than white families to live in three-generation households (Pilkaukas & Martinson, 2014) which would plausibly reduce some burden on childcare. Globally, the UK has one of the smallest percentages of households with both a child under 15 and an adult over 60, and is most similar to other European nations, North America and Australia in having an average of 3 people per household compared to larger households across most other global regions (UN, 2017). Lockdown restrictions also differed significantly across different countries. Adapting the OxCGRT Stringency data (OxCGRT; Hale et al., 2021) which measures national lockdown and policy measures, Bergmann et al. (2022) gave the UK the highest stringency rating (3, on a scale of 0–3) due to closures of playgrounds and restrictions on both social contact and going outside. The presence of national differences in household structure and lockdown policies raises the question of how family pressures over lockdown varied globally and highlight the importance of applying an ecological approach.

CONCLUSION

Our data revealed that media played a salient role in family life during lockdown, influenced by a number of external factors including working arrangements, discourses on screen time, and expectations of gendered parenting roles. Parents highlighted the beneficial and positive role that digital media played during lockdown for replacing other leisure activities, connecting with extended family and assisting with childcare. However, while our respondents relied on media devices, they also reported feelings of guilt based on their perceptions of harms from media use. The extreme circumstances of lockdown shine a spotlight on the difficulty in maintaining media regulation without access to resources and support from the community or extended family. However, these are circumstances that many families may face regardless of lockdown, particularly as we enter significant challenges to the cost of living. It is important that we promote a more positive narrative with reference to the role media can play in supporting family life.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data is available at https://osf.io/zfq75/?view_only=1e4de33110fe40b282cfc396c98a7e77.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

This research was approved by the University of Salford Research Ethics Committee.

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

Participants fully consented to the use of their anonymised data for publication purposes.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES

Not Applicable.

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