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**MEDIA LITERACY IN FAMILIES:
DIGITAL PARENTING AND CHILDREN'S MEDIA LIVES
IN HUNGARY**

Thesis booklet

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1. Research background and justification for the selection of the topic

Digital media have become embedded in the everyday conditions of childhood. Children increasingly move between online and offline environments and rely on digital technologies for communication, information, learning, entertainment, and social participation. At the same time, the domestic media environment has shifted from shared and spatially observable forms of media use towards increasingly personalised, mobile, and continuously connected digital engagement, with smartphones becoming a primary means of internet access for children across Europe (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Smahel et al., 2020). Social media also enters children's lives at increasingly young ages, often before the minimum age formally prescribed by major platforms (Smahel et al., 2020). These developments alter not only the intensity of children's media use but also the conditions under which parents can observe, guide, and support their children's digital participation. The dissertation therefore approaches digital childhood as a socio-ecological phenomenon shaped jointly by developmental characteristics, family resources and practices, platform environments, and wider social and cultural conditions.

Expanding digital participation brings substantial opportunities, but also exposes children to a diverse range of online risks and potentially adverse experiences. Contemporary research importantly distinguishes risk from harm: exposure to potentially harmful content, contact, or conduct does not necessarily result in a negative outcome, while harm refers to experiences that children themselves perceive as upsetting, distressing, or damaging (Livingstone et al., 2011; Livingstone & Smith, 2014). The consequences of digital participation, therefore, depend not simply on whether children encounter risks but also on their developmental and personal resources, their ability to interpret and respond to online situations, and the support available to them. This is equally relevant to problematic internet use, where the literature increasingly distinguishes high levels of engagement from patterns involving impaired control or interference with everyday functioning (Smahel et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2024). Children's apparent technological confidence should likewise not be equated automatically with critical media literacy: operational fluency in navigating devices and platforms may develop earlier than the higher-order capacity to evaluate credibility, commercial intent, privacy implications, or manipulative digital practices (Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Smahel et al., 2020).

Within this changing environment, parents remain central actors in children's digital socialisation. Digital parenting extends established parental functions of care, regulation, guidance, and socialisation into the digital domain, while parental mediation refers more specifically to the strategies parents use to manage, supervise, interpret, and support children's media use (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). The dissertation distinguishes four forms of parental mediation: *active mediation*, *restriction*, *monitoring*, and *technical mediation*. However, the literature suggests that these practices cannot be understood merely as isolated behavioural techniques. Their use and meaning are also related to broader parental dispositions and circumstances, including digital competence and self-efficacy, perceptions of online risks, attitudes towards digital media, general parenting orientations, socioeconomic resources, and the quality of parent-child communication (Helsper et al., 2025; Tan et al., 2024). Moreover, the prevalence and potential relevance of particular mediation practices vary with the child's age, creating a developmental dimension that is especially important as children acquire greater digital autonomy.

Despite a rapidly expanding international literature, several limitations justify further research. First, digital parenting research remains geographically uneven. Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is substantially underrepresented in international scholarship, while influential theories and empirical findings have been developed predominantly in Western and other high-income contexts (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Sevilla-Fernández et al., 2025). This matters theoretically because parental mediation is embedded in wider institutional, socioeconomic, and cultural conditions; evidence from comparative European research indicates that such contextual factors influence which forms of mediation are feasible and culturally favoured (Kalmus & Roosalu, 2011). Hungarian research has generated valuable findings on children's digital lives and parental mediation, but the evidence remains dispersed across age groups and research traditions, and relatively little multi-wave, population-level evidence is available on changes in digital parenting over time (Kutrovátz, 2021; Nagy et al., 2023).

Second, the wider evidence base is methodologically fragmented. Many studies rely on cross-sectional, small, non-representative, or single-informant samples, and substantial variation exists in how digital parenting and parental mediation are conceptualised and measured (Modecki et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2025). There is consequently a continuing need for large-scale, representative and culturally diverse evidence and for research designs

capable of connecting parents' reported practices with the digital experiences and behaviours reported by their own children. Third, the literature has often examined the dispositional foundations of parenting and enacted mediation practices along separate analytical tracks, leaving their relationship insufficiently integrated. Finally, although earlier digital entry and age-related differences in parental mediation are both documented in the literature, their co-occurrence has rarely been examined within the same nationally representative analytical framework.

Against this background, the dissertation examines how digital parenting is practised in Hungary, how population-level patterns of children's digital lives and parental mediation have changed across survey waves, and how different forms of parental mediation are associated with selected dimensions of children's digital experiences and behaviours. It draws on the *Digital Parenting Research* series commissioned by the National Media and Infocommunications Authority, comprising nationally representative samples of Hungarian children aged 7–16 and their parents across three survey waves (2017, 2020, and 2024/25), with matched parent–child data in each wave. The 2024/25 wave provides the primary empirical basis, while earlier waves are used where directly comparable measures permit population-level comparison. The study is descriptive and exploratory and uses a repeated cross-sectional design.

The dissertation addresses five research questions:

RQ1. What characterises Hungarian 7–16-year-olds' digital media lives in terms of device access, internet use, content consumption, screen time, and social media participation; how do these patterns vary by age, and how have they changed across the 2017, 2020, and 2024/25 survey waves?

RQ2. What characterises Hungarian 7–16-year-olds' digital attitudes and self-perceptions, indicators of problematic internet use, adverse online experiences, and coping responses to such experiences; how do these patterns vary by age and, where directly comparable measures are available, how have these changed between the 2020 and 2024/25 survey waves?

RQ3. What characterises Hungarian parents' digital attitudes and self-efficacy, online risk perceptions, and concern profiles regarding their children's digital media use; and, where directly comparable indicators are available, how have these changed across the 2017, 2020, and 2024/25 survey waves?

RQ4. What characterises the parental mediation strategies that Hungarian parents of 7–16-year-olds employ, and how has the prevalence of these strategies changed between the 2020 and 2024/25 survey waves?

RQ5. What associations are observed between the parental mediation strategies employed by Hungarian parents of 7–16-year-olds and their children's digital outcomes, and which strategies show the most consistent patterns of association across the examined domains? Specifically, the following child-related outcomes are examined: children's age at first personal device ownership, age at first social media registration, leisure screen time, indicators of problematic internet use, adverse online experiences, use of anonymous chat platforms, responses to strangers' online friend requests, and disclosure to parents following negative online experiences.

2. Methodology

The dissertation is based on a secondary analysis of the Digital Parenting Research series commissioned by the National Media and Infocommunications Authority of Hungary (NMHH). The research comprises three nationally representative survey waves conducted in 2017, 2020, and late 2024/early 2025 among Hungarian children aged 7–16 and their parents or legal guardians. The 2024/25 wave constitutes the primary empirical basis of the dissertation, while earlier waves are used where directly comparable indicators permit population-level comparisons. The design is repeated cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, and the study is descriptive and exploratory in orientation.

Each wave included 2,000 children and 2,000 corresponding parents or legal guardians, forming 2,000 matched parent–child dyads. Stratified random sampling and post-stratification weighting were used to ensure national representativeness. Parent and child questionnaires were administered within the same households, enabling selected parental measures to be linked directly to outcomes reported by the corresponding child. From 2020 onwards, data were collected using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI).

The questionnaires covered children’s device access and ownership, internet and social-media use, leisure screen time, digital attitudes, PIU-consistent indicators, adverse online experiences, coping and disclosure, alongside parents’ digital attitudes, perceived capacity, risk perceptions and concerns, and mediation practices. Four parental mediation strategies were distinguished: active mediation, restriction, monitoring, and technical restriction. A dissertation-specific measure of mediation breadth additionally differentiated *passive*, *intermediate*, and *all-rounder* parental profiles.

RQ1–RQ4 were addressed primarily through weighted descriptive statistics and cross-wave comparisons, supplemented where relevant by inferential, matched parent–child, reliability, and multivariable analyses. RQ5 added a dissertation-specific analytical layer examining associations between parent-reported mediation practices or rules and child-reported outcomes within matched dyads. These analyses were exploratory and predominantly unadjusted and bivariate; consequently, the observed associations are not interpreted as independent or causal effects. More broadly, the repeated cross-sectional design permits conclusions about population-level patterns and differences across survey waves, but not within-person change.

The dissertation builds on, but is analytically distinct from, the primary NMHH research reports. While these reports mainly presented descriptive findings, the doctoral study reorganises and recontextualises selected results around its own research questions and extends the original reporting through dissertation-specific secondary analyses, including cross-variable and inferential analyses that had not formed part of the primary descriptive reporting.

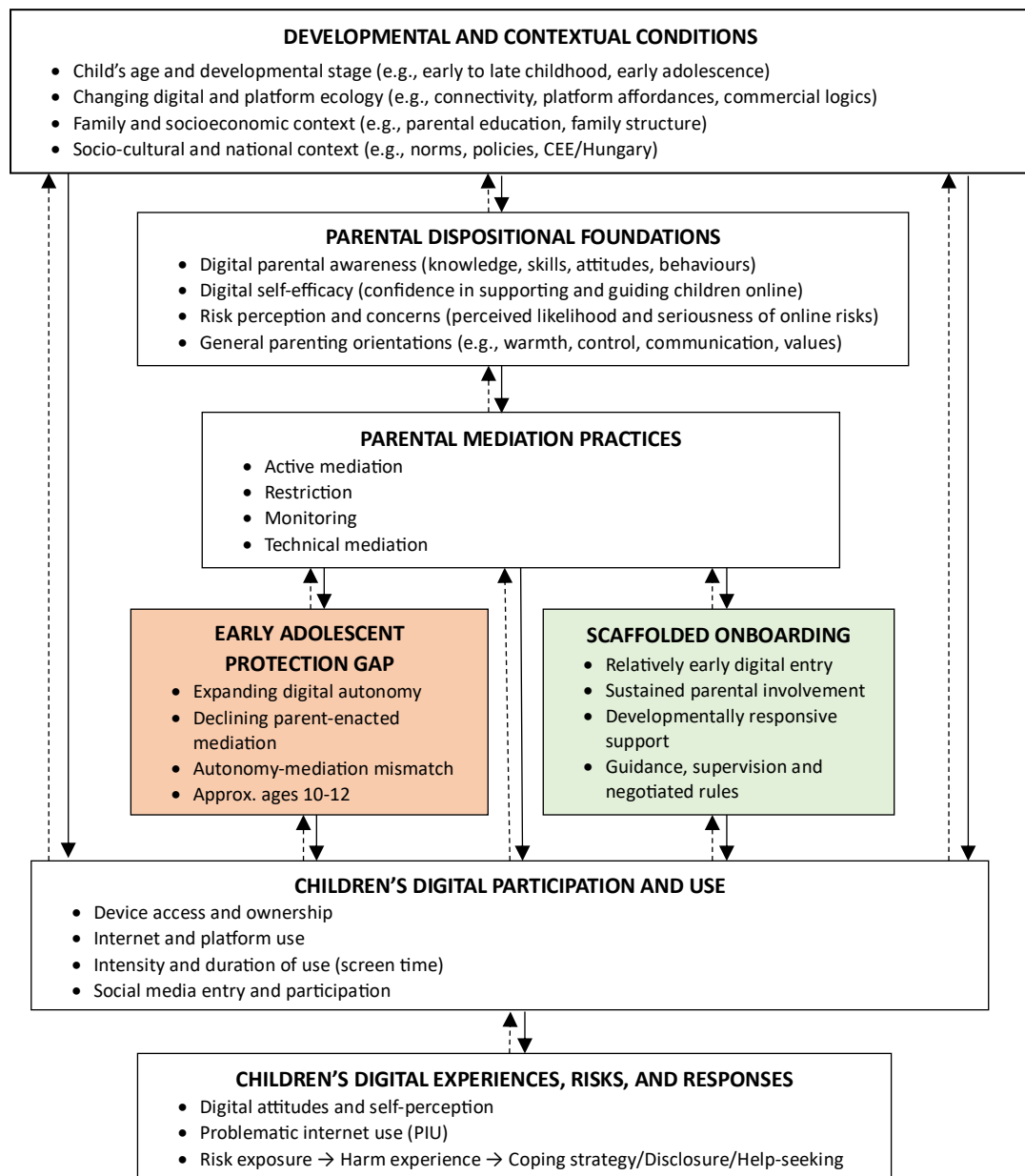
3. Scientific results of the dissertation

The scientific contributions of the dissertation extend beyond its empirical findings. They include new nationally representative evidence on children's digital lives and digital parenting in Hungary, methodological contributions arising from the matched parent–child research design and its secondary analysis, and theoretical-conceptual contributions that integrate and extend existing approaches to parental mediation.

- The dissertation documents a transformation towards earlier, increasingly personalised, mobile, and platform-centred digital childhood in Hungary.
- The findings reveal a strongly age-structured digital environment and support a distinction between operational digital confidence and critical-evaluative media literacy.
- The dissertation demonstrates the importance of distinguishing online risk exposure, experienced harm, coping, disclosure, and help-seeking. The findings show that exposure, harm, and response should not be treated as a single undifferentiated outcome.
- Hungarian parents display a complex digital-parenting orientation in which confidence and concern coexist. Parents showed high trust in their children's online competence, but more moderate perceived capacity to support them in managing online risks. At the same time, the perceived generational competence gap narrowed while parental concern became more widespread.
- The parental mediation repertoire is undergoing a population-level reconfiguration and remains strongly structured by child age and parental education. Between 2020 and 2025, restriction and active mediation became less prevalent, monitoring showed a small non-significant decline, while technical restriction increased. Parent-enacted mediation was also substantially less prevalent among parents of older children.
- Parental mediation strategies show outcome-specific rather than uniformly favourable patterns of association. Parent-enacted mediation was more consistently associated with favourable child-related outcomes than technical restriction, although patterns differed across domains and effect sizes were generally small.
- The findings extend the relevance of parental mediation beyond risk prevention to coping and disclosure after negative online experiences.

- Methodologically, the dissertation demonstrates the analytical value of nationally representative repeated cross-sectional data combined with matched parent–child information. It extends the primarily descriptive NMHH reporting through dissertation-specific inferential, matched, cross-variable, regression-based, and sensitivity analyses, while also generating methodological recommendations for future waves of the research series.
- The dissertation makes three interconnected theoretical-conceptual contributions. First, it develops an integrative literature-informed conceptual framework linking developmental and contextual conditions, parental dispositional foundations, parental mediation practices, children’s digital participation, and children’s digital experiences, risks, and responses, while explicitly separating risk, harm, coping, disclosure, and help-seeking. Second, it proposes *scaffolded onboarding* as a testable interpretation of relatively early digital entry accompanied by sustained, developmentally responsive parental guidance, supervision, and negotiated rule-setting rather than access managed solely through delay or exclusion. Third, it proposes the *early adolescent protection gap* as a provisional, empirically grounded, and falsifiable theoretical construct describing the population-level mismatch around the transition to early adolescence, when children’s autonomous digital participation expands while parent-enacted mediation becomes substantially less prevalent across successive older age groups. Neither construct is presented as an established causal mechanism; both are propositions for further empirical testing.

The figure below shows the integration of the dissertation-specific conceptual contributions into the literature-informed conceptual framework.



Note: The two highlighted constructs represent dissertation-specific conceptual contributions positioned at the interface between parental mediation practices and children's digital participation and use. The early adolescent protection gap represents an integrative, population-level configuration in which expanding autonomous digital participation coincides with a lower prevalence of parent-enacted mediation across successive age groups, becoming particularly visible around ages 10–12 in the present Hungarian data. Scaffolded onboarding represents a proposed family-level configuration in which relatively early digital entry and expanding autonomy are accompanied by sustained, developmentally responsive parental involvement. Neither construct was directly measured as a composite or longitudinal process. Arrows represent conceptual relationships and organising links and should not be interpreted as demonstrated causal effects. Dashed arrows indicate potentially reciprocal relationships or feedback processes.

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