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Digital Parenting in Eswatini: Navigating Technology, Culture and Family in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The rapid integration of digital technologies has transformed parenting globally; however, limited research has examined parental experiences within sub-Saharan African contexts. This qualitative study explored how Emaswati parents perceive and navigate raising children in the digital age, with particular attention to opportunities, risks, and cultural implications. Eswatini, a country in Southern Africa formerly known as Swaziland, provides a relevant context for examining these dynamics. Guided by Ecological Systems Theory and Parental Mediation frameworks and employing a transformative Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) design (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018), the study engaged 25 parents from both urban and rural settings. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, supported by iterative member checking. Additionally, findings reveal that digital technology functions as a double-edged sword; while it enhances educational access and digital literacy, it also raises concerns related to excessive screen time, online safety, and potential cultural erosion. Structural inequalities in access to devices, internet connectivity, and digital skills further shape parental experiences, contributing to notable urban–rural disparities. Additionally, findings reveal that parents employ a combination of rule-based restrictions and relational strategies such as co-use and participatory learning to guide children's digital engagement. Importantly, digital technologies can support cultural continuity through intergenerational learning and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Participants highlighted the need for community-based support, contextually relevant resources, and stronger collaboration with schools and cultural institutions. Overall, the findings underscore that effective digital parenting in Eswatini requires a careful balance between educational opportunities, child safety, and cultural preservation. Recommendations include enhancing parental digital literacy, targeting infrastructural inequalities, and developing culturally grounded, community-centered interventions that empower parents while, at the same time, promoting children's safe and meaningful engagement with technology.

Keywords: digital parenting, parental mediation, cultural continuity, digital divide, Eswatini families, participatory action research

Introduction

The 21st-century family exists within a deeply digitized ecosystem, where the integration of digital technologies has precipitated one of the most significant transformations in modern parenting practices (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). According to Mpofu and Tfwala (2022), the family remains the primary agent for cultivating the desired morals and values in children. Yet, the proliferation of smartphones, tablets, social media platforms, and internet-enabled devices across the past two decades has fundamentally reshaped how families communicate, educate, and entertain themselves (Chaudron et al., 2018). Within this technological immersion lies a complex duality. On one hand, digital tools provide access to educational resources, social connectivity and informational support; yet they introduce substantial challenges related to screen time management and online safety as well as developmental impacts (Beyens & Nathanson, 2020; Hiniker et al., 2015).

Children are now growing up as digital natives, often developing technological literacy before mastering traditional literacy skills (Chaudron et al., 2018). This reality requires parents to navigate increasingly complex decisions involving technology integration, including determining appropriate usage parameters, selecting quality content and establishing digital boundaries. These decisions are further complicated by evolving societal norms, socioeconomic conditions, and the rapid evolution of technological innovations that often outpace the development of evidence-based parenting guidelines (Livingstone et al., 2017). While a considerable body of research has examined the effects of technology on child development outcomes, significantly less attention has been directed toward parents' lived experiences and perceptions in mediating their children's digital engagement (Söylemez, 2023; Vaterlaus et al., 2021). Many parents report feeling inadequately prepared for this role, expressing uncertainty and anxiety due to insufficient guidance and support (Nikken & Jansz, 2014).

This knowledge gap is particularly acute in the Kingdom of Eswatini, where rapid technological adoption intersects with unique socio-cultural, economic and infrastructural realities. The potential benefits of digital access for children include enhanced educational resources and social connectivity alternatives; these positive outcomes are tempered by substantial risks such as excessive screen time, online safety threats, and exposure to inappropriate content (Muthomi & Yoder, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated reliance on digital platforms for education and social interaction, a shift that occurred faster than the development of parental support systems, thereby intensifying parenting anxieties (UNICEF, 2021).

Compounding these issues are profound socioeconomic disparities that manifest in unequal digital access and digital literacy. A deep digital divide persists in Eswatini, characterized by urban–rural inequalities in connectivity and affordability, and, as well, exhibit significant variations in parents' technological competence (International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2022). These disparities create vastly different digital parenting realities, meaning strategies developed in well-resourced Western contexts are often ill-suited for many Emaswati families (Livingstone et al., 2017). Consequently, parents in Eswatini often find themselves caught between global technological pressures and local cultural expectations, feeling ill-equipped to mediate their children's technology use effectively.

Given these contextual challenges, there is a critical lack of research exploring how Emaswati parents perceive and navigate digital parenting. Without an in-depth, qualitative understanding of their experiences, perceptions and indigenous strategies, the development of effective, culturally responsive and actionable digital parenting frameworks remains limited. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by focusing on the voices of parents to explore their experiences and perceptions of raising children in Eswatini's digital age. Grounded in Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Parental Mediation frameworks (Livingstone et al., 2017), the current study aims to provide contextual insights that can inform culturally relevant policies and support systems for families navigating the complexities of the digital era.

Objectives of the Study

Based on the above problem, the specific objectives are:

1. To identify the primary challenges Emaswati parents encounter in managing and mediating their children's technology use.
2. To explore the specific perceptions of Emaswati parents regarding the benefits and risks associated with their children's use of digital technology.
3. To examine the current strategies and mediation practices employed by parents in Eswatini to manage screen time, ensure online safety, and promote positive digital engagement.
4. To develop contextually informed recommendations for parents, educators and policymakers in Eswatini.

Theoretical Framework

With particular attention to their applicability within the socio-cultural context of Eswatini, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Valkenburg et al.'s parental mediation framework (Valkenburg et al., 1999) together provide a multi-layered lens for understanding how digital parenting practices are shaped by immediate family interactions, broader environmental systems, and culturally specific mediation strategies. Valkenburg's Parental Mediation (Valkenburg et al.,1999) integrates to provide the framework with a multi-layered lens for understanding how digital parenting practices are shaped by immediate family interactions, broader environmental systems and culturally specific mediation strategies.

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) situates parental practices within nested environmental layers, ranging from microsystems, such as family and peer interactions, to mesosystems involving connections among home, school, and community and further, extends to exosystems and macrosystems, which encompass national policies, cultural norms and societal expectations. This perspective allows the study to examine how structural, artistic, and community-level factors influence parenting decisions regarding children's technology use.

Contemporary Parental Mediation Theory (Livingstone et al., 2017) complements this framework by focusing on the micro-level strategies that parents employ to regulate and guide their children's engagement with digital technologies. These strategies range from active mediation (discussion), co-use, and restrictive mediation to technical monitoring, highlighting the behavioral and communicative practices through which parents shape their children's digital experiences.

By integrating these perspectives, the framework emphasizes how parental mediation does not occur in isolation, but is embedded within broader ecological systems. In the Eswatini context, this integration is particularly relevant, given the country's communal values, linguistic diversity, urban-rural disparities, and rapid digital transformation. The framework enables exploration of how parents negotiate digital parenting within the tension between global technological influences and local cultural expectations. It also guides the study in understanding how systemic, artistic, and familial factors collectively shape parental perceptions, strategies, and challenges in raising children in the digital age.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design, which is most appropriate for understanding lived experiences and perceptions. It outlines the research methodology employed to explore the experiences and perceptions of parents in Eswatini regarding raising children in the digital age. It details the research paradigm, approach, design, participant selection strategy, data generation methods, data analysis plan, and ethical considerations. Using the qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of parents' subjective experiences with technology in their parenting practices. Phenomenological principles guide the study to capture parents' meanings, beliefs and strategies in navigating the digital age.

Research Paradigm

A research paradigm that focused on involving participants in the process to create knowledge that leads to social change and empowered marginalized groups underpinned this study. This transformative research paradigm provided the philosophical foundation for the investigation. It was concerned with issues of social justice, marginalization, and power, and sought to conduct research that would lead to social change and empower participants (Mertens, 2020). This perspective was shaped by human interests. Therefore, research was viewed as needing to be intertwined with political and social agendas to include injustice and inequality (Chilisa, 2020).

In order to inform better support frameworks, this study aimed to understand the challenges faced by Emaswati parents; thereby, providing parents with a voice and empowerment. The goal

was transformative change in parenting support. This paradigm was particularly suitable for the study for two key reasons. First, it aligned with the study's objective to centered the voices of Emaswati parents, who often felt unprepared and marginalized by the rapid pace of technological change and the lack of culturally relevant guidance, and, second, the ultimate aim of developing contextually informed recommendations for parents, educators, and policymakers was inherently transformative, as it sought to empower parents and instigate positive change in parenting support structures within Eswatini.

Research Approach: Qualitative

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which was exploratory in nature and aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, motivations, and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on the collection and analysis of non-numerical data such as text, audio, and video, this approach sought to uncover concepts, thoughts and lived experiences that could not be meaningfully captured through quantitative methods. A qualitative design was particularly appropriate for this investigation because the research objectives centered on exploring the complex and nuanced "how" and "why" of parents' experiences, perceptions, and strategies (Silverman, 2020). This approach provided the flexibility and openness necessary to capture the rich, detailed narratives of participants, which was essential for examining a phenomenon that was deeply embedded in cultural and familial contexts.

Research Design: Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR)

Guided by the transformative paradigm, the specific research design chosen was Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR), a collaborative process that involves researchers and participants working together as co-researchers in cycles of action and critical reflection to describe real-world problems and generate practical knowledge (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). PALAR combines action learning and action research within a participatory framework and is particularly well-suited for this study for several reasons.

First, its participatory nature directly aligns with the transformative goal of empowering Emaswati parents by involving them as active agents in the research process, ensuring their voices meaningfully shape the outcomes. Second, its focus on practical solutions through iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting enables the generation of context-specific strategies and recommendations that directly address the study's fourth objective. Finally, its emphasis on cultural relevance ensures that, through collaboration with parents, the research generates findings and recommendations that are not only contextually appropriate, but also responsive to the socio-economic realities of Eswatini, thereby avoiding the imposition of externally derived frameworks.

Participant Selection

Potential participants were parents or primary caregivers of at least one child between the ages of five and 18 years living in Eswatini. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify information-rich cases capable of providing deep insights into the phenomenon (Etikan et al., 2016). To ensure a diverse range of experiences was represented, participants were selected to

reflect variation in geographic location (urban areas such as Mbabane and Manzini, as well as rural settings), socio-economic background, levels of parental digital literacy and the ages of their children. A sample size of approximately 15 to 25 participants was anticipated, which was sufficient to allow for data saturation, the point at which no new themes or insights emerge. from the data (Hennink et al., 2017).

Data Generation Methods

The primary method of data generation was semi-structured interviews, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' personal perspectives while providing the flexibility to probe emerging themes (Kallio et al., 2016). Interview guides were carefully designed in alignment with the study's objectives, with questions targeting participants' challenges, perceptions, perceived benefits, risks, and existing mitigation strategies. To complement the interview process and incorporate the participatory dimension of Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018), two to three focus group discussions were also conducted over a period of three days. These sessions took place on Monday, October 6; Wednesday, October 8; and Friday, October 10, 2025, allowing participants time for reflection between discussions. The focus groups facilitated interactive dialogue among participants, enabling them to build on one another's ideas and experiences (Nyumba et al., 2018). The sessions were particularly valuable for collaboratively generating and refining potential strategies and recommendations.

Data Analysis

Data were examined using reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019), a method well-suited to the transformative paradigm and qualitative research approach. This approach facilitated the identification, analysis and reporting of patterns (themes) within the data while simultaneously acknowledging the researcher's active role in knowledge production. The analysis followed six iterative phases: familiarizing oneself with the data through transcription, reading, and noting initial ideas; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing potential themes; defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The process was dynamic, allowing movement back-and-forth among phases to refine understanding. Additionally, the Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) design incorporated member checking, whereby preliminary themes and interpretations were shared with participants as co-researchers for validation and feedback (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). This process enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings by ensuring that participants' perspectives were accurately represented (Birt et al., 2016).

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards. Before commencement, ethical approval was obtained from the Eswatini College of Theology Ethics Committee. Informed consent was secured from all participants, ensuring they fully understood the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits as well as their right to withdraw at any time without penalty (World Medical Association, 2013). Given the potentially sensitive nature of discussing family practices, confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained using code names and the removal of all

identifying information from the data. All data were stored securely on password-protected devices.

Findings and Discussions

In this study, parents participated as co-researchers by actively engaging in multiple stages of the research process. They contributed to shaping the research focus, discussing and interpreting emerging themes, and validating the findings to ensure they accurately reflected their lived experiences. This collaborative approach positioned parents not just as sources of data, but as partners in knowledge creation, allowing their perspectives and insights to directly inform the analysis and presentation of results.

Theme 1: The Double-Edged Sword – Technology as Both Resource and Risk

Parents consistently described digital technology as both a powerful educational resource and a potential threat, reflecting a *double-edged* perception common in contemporary research on parenting and technology use. This ambivalence mirrors global findings showing that while digital tools broaden children's learning opportunities, they simultaneously introduce concerns about overexposure, inappropriate content, and reduced parental control (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). For many parents, technology is not simply a tool, but a central component of the modern learning environment; yet technology must be carefully managed.

Educational Empowerment

Participants highlighted technology's strong educational value, particularly in contexts where traditional learning resources are limited. Parents' narratives align with research demonstrating the role of digital platforms in promoting interactive and self-directed learning as well as expanding access to high-quality educational content (OECD, 2025).

Participant 1:

"My daughter uses YouTube to learn science experiments. She now teaches her classmates. The phone has become her library."

Her experience illustrates how digital tools can democratize knowledge, enabling children to access material that might otherwise be unavailable in rural or resource-constrained settings. Research shows that platforms such as YouTube and educational apps can supplement school learning by reinforcing concepts and fostering curiosity, particularly in low-resource contexts (Jantjies & Joy, 2016).

Participant 4:

"My son practices math on an app every evening. He says it's like a game, but I can see he's improving a lot."

This statement highlights how gamified learning tools can enhance engagement and motivation, making abstract concepts more accessible for children who may struggle with conventional teaching methods.

Participant 9:

"Before, we had only one textbook for the whole class. Now, with tablets, my child can read multiple perspectives and watch tutorials from all over the world."

Her perspective underscores the potential of digital technology to broaden educational horizons beyond the limits of local schools and textbooks.

Participant 12:

"My daughter loves history videos online. She even started making small projects for her school using what she learns on the internet."

This example demonstrates how technology not only supports knowledge acquisition but also fosters creativity and the application of learning in practical ways. Collectively, these parental accounts illustrate the transformative potential of digital tools in educational empowerment, particularly in contexts where resources are scarce. By providing children with flexible, self-directed learning opportunities, technology can supplement school-based education and nurture curiosity, critical thinking, and creativity (OECD, 2025; Jantjies & Joy, 2016).

Participant 3:

"During COVID, without these devices, our children would have learned nothing. Even now, they use learning apps for mathematics."

This echoes global evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic, where technology became indispensable for continuity of learning (UNESCO, 2020). This participant's reflection highlights technology not only as a temporary solution during school closures, but also as an ongoing academic support tool that enhances children's competencies in subjects such as mathematics.

Collectively, these perspectives underscore parents' recognition of technology as facilitating academic empowerment, fostering digital literacy and bridging educational gaps particularly in contexts where schools may lack adequate resources. However, as later themes point out, this empowerment is accompanied by persistent concerns about screen times, online safety issues, and behavioral impacts.

Digital Anxiety and Safety Concerns

Despite recognizing the educational advantages of digital media, many parents articulated deep concerns about the psychological, cultural and safety risks associated with children's technology use. Participants frequently described anxiety about excessive screen times, exposure to

inappropriate content, disrupted sleep patterns and the erosion of cultural values. These worries echo global research showing that unsupervised or prolonged technology use can negatively affect children's emotional well-being, sleep quality and behavioral regulation (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

For many caregivers, concerns were heightened by their limited digital literacy, making it difficult to monitor or restrict children's online behavior.

Participant 5:

"I see him watching videos late into the night. I worry about his mind and his sleep. But I don't know how to stop it."

Parents also raised fears about cultural dilution through social media exposure.

Participant 7:

"Social media shows them things we never saw at their age. I fear they will lose our Swati values."

This aligns with literature arguing that digital environments can expose children to globalized norms that may conflict with local cultural identities (Echesony, 2024).

Such anxieties illustrate the double burden many caregivers face acknowledging technology's developmental benefits while, at the same time, struggling to manage its risks within contexts marked by limited resources, digital skills, and sociocultural expectations.

Theme 2: Navigating the Digital Divide Access and Inequality

The urban rural digital divide emerged as a central factor shaping how caregivers engaged with children's technology use. Differences in device availability, internet reliability, and digital literacy created inequities in how children accessed online learning events and social platforms. Rural caregivers often felt excluded from the digital world due to infrastructural limitations, while urban caregivers grappled more with regulating excessive screen use.

Participant 10:

"Sometimes the network just disappears for hours. My children miss their online lessons, and I cannot help them because I also don't understand these digital things."

Participant 7:

"We have internet at home, but it's slow and often cuts out. My children get frustrated during their online classes, and I worry they are falling behind, but I'm not confident enough to guide them properly."

This reflects broader evidence showing that rural households in Southern Africa continue to lag in access to stable connectivity, digital devices, and ICT skills (Gillwald & Partridge, 2022). Such constraints amplify educational inequalities, particularly as digital tools become increasingly embedded in schooling (UNESCO, 2023). For many rural parents, limited exposure to technology also produces uncertainty about how to monitor content, set boundaries, or support school-related digital tasks (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020).

By contrast, urban caregivers in the study described greater connectivity and device access, but reported different challenges, such as the overwhelming volume of online content and the pressures of sustaining constant digital supervision. These patterns underscore how structural inequalities rather than parental attitudes alone shape digital parenting practices. Digital inequity, thus becomes both a technological and social problem, affecting children's opportunities for learning, participation, and safe digital engagement.

Infrastructure and Affordability Challenges

Participant 9:

"We have one smartphone for five children. They take turns, but the data finishes quickly. Sometimes they walk to the hill to get network."

Participant 2:

"In town, they have Wi-Fi everywhere. Here, we must buy data, and it is expensive. I must choose between data and bread sometimes."

These accounts illustrate the stark infrastructural and economic disparities shaping digital access for rural and peri-urban families. Limited device availability and unreliable connectivity directly constrain children's ability to engage consistently with online educational content or recreational digital spaces. As Participant 9's experience shows, rural households often resort to physically seeking better network coverage, highlighting the embodied effort required to participate in digital life. Participant 2's comment underscores the trade-offs many low-income families must make between basic needs and digital connectivity, reflecting the affordability barrier that persists even in peri-urban areas.

Such challenges are consistent with broader research on the digital divide in Southern Africa. Studies indicate that rural households are less likely to have multiple devices or consistent internet access; high costs of data often exacerbate existing educational inequalities (Mwalongo, 2023). These structural constraints not only affect learning opportunities but also limit parental engagement in guiding children's digital practices, leaving families navigating the digital world with scarce resources and little support. Moreover, infrastructural and economic barriers intersect with geographical and social factors, producing compounded disadvantage for children in remote regions (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019).

In essence, rural and peri-urban parents face a dual burden: they must manage scarce resources while simultaneously attempting to support their children's educational and social engagements

online. This dynamic amplifies parental stress and highlights the need for policies targeting equitable access to devices, affordable data and reliable network infrastructure.

Intergenerational Digital Literacy Gap

Participant 8:

"My children know more about phones than I do. They set it up, and they download things. I feel like a student to my own children."

Participant 12 shared:

"Sometimes I ask my daughter to help me with the phone, and she laughs because I don't know half of what she knows. I feel like technology belongs to them, not to me."

These statements illustrate a clear intergenerational digital literacy gap, where children often acquire technological skills more rapidly than their parents or caregivers. Such gaps are widely observed in low-resource and rural contexts, where formal digital training for adults is limited, yet children encounter digital devices through school, peers, or media exposure (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). Parents in these contexts may feel disempowered in guiding their children's online activities, particularly when unfamiliar with device functions, app navigations or digital safety protocols (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

The implications of this gap are multifaceted. On one hand, children can act as "technology mediators," teaching their parents and contributing to household digital competence (Yardi & Bruckman, 2012). Yet, the role reversal can lead to parental anxiety, diminished authority in digital matters and uncertainty about setting boundaries or monitoring content effectively (Haddon, 2016; Prensky, 2001). In the Swazi context, where traditional parenting roles emphasize guidance and protection, this reversal may heighten parental concerns about online exposure and potential influence.

Bridging the intergenerational digital divide requires interventions that enhance parental digital literacy, provide accessible guidance on online safety, and promote a co-learning strategy within families (Talves & Kalmus, 2015). Empowering parents not only supports children's educational outcomes, but also helps maintain family cohesion and cultural continuity in increasingly digital environments.

Theme 3: Cultural Negotiation Balancing Tradition and Technology

Parents described ongoing tensions between embracing digital tools and preserving cultural norms, values, and everyday practices. While digital technologies create opportunities for children to access global knowledge, they also expose them to cultural influences that may conflict with local beliefs, linguistic practices and expectations associated with respect, behavior, and identity.

Participant 12:

"Our children see many foreign things on the phone. Sometimes they come home asking why we do certain Swati customs. These phones make them question things we grew up knowing."

Participant 11:

"Even during umhlanga [reed dance], I see girls on phones taking pictures. It changes the meaning."

This sentiment reflects broader patterns observed in African and global digital parenting research, where digital media introduces children to globalized discourses and different behaviors that may disrupt traditional socialization processes. Studies show that parents in sub-Saharan Africa express concern about the erosion of cultural norms, especially when children adopt speech styles, dress codes, attitudes or moral frameworks drawn from online platforms (Awah et al., 2022). These concerns are often heightened in rural settings, where traditional practices play a central role in social cohesion and identity formation.

At the same time, parents acknowledged that technology could serve as a tool for cultural continuity. Exposure to online cultural content, traditional music, storytelling, indigenous games or national history can reinforce heritage in ways previously unavailable. Research suggests that when caregivers intentionally shape children's digital engagement, online platforms can support intergenerational learning and revitalize indigenous knowledge systems (Mdhluli et al., 2021).

Participant 19:

"I also teach them to use the phone to listen to our traditional songs. So not everything online is bad. We must guide them to use it the right way."

This duality shows that cultural negotiation is not only defensive seeking to protect tradition from external influence, but also can be adaptive. Parents positioned themselves as mediators who balance openness to global information with the responsibility to nurture children becoming culturally grounded. This aligns with the concept of digitally mediated parenting, where caregivers actively filter, contextualize, and interpret children's online experiences (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020).

Thus, the theme reveals that digital parenting in Eswatini is not solely about managing technology use; it is also an act of cultural labor. Parents strive to ensure that as children engage with diverse digital worlds, they remain anchored in the moral, linguistic, and relational norms of their communities.

Adaptive Cultural Integration

While many caregivers expressed concerns about the erosion of cultural norms through children's engagement with digital media, several parents also described intentional strategies to integrate technology with cultural preservation. This reflects a growing body of evidence showing that African families are not merely passive recipients of globalized digital influences,

but actively employ digital tools to sustain heritage, support intergenerational learning, and maintain cultural identity.

Participant 7:

"We use the family WhatsApp group to share family history. My uncle sends voice notes about our clan praises. Technology can help preserve, not just destroy."

Participant 12:

"I record my stories and traditional songs on my phone and send them to my children. Even if they are at school far away, they listen and ask questions. It's a way to keep our culture alive."

Parents' practices of using family WhatsApp groups, recorded voice notes, and digital archives align with broader findings that mobile technologies can facilitate the transmission of oral histories, indigenous languages, and customs when used intentionally (Bidwell, 2016). Research in Southern Africa demonstrates that mobile phones, particularly WhatsApp, serve as affordable and accessible platforms for sharing stories, rituals, clan knowledge, and moral teachings within extended families (de Gruchy et al., 2021). In contexts where family members often live apart due to migration or work patterns, digital tools offer opportunities to sustain cultural continuity despite physical separation.

Digital storytelling has been shown to support the preservation of indigenous knowledge and as well encourage younger generations to engage with cultural content in formats familiar to them (Shiri et al., 2021). Parents in this current study appeared to recognize that children's affinity for digital media can be leveraged to reinforce identity, belonging, and pride in cultural heritage. This aligns with scholarship emphasizing the concept of "cultural augmentation," where digital media environments enhance rather than replace traditional practices (Dutta, 2019).

Thus, adaptive cultural integration represents a transformative orientation to digital parenting; this digital difference acknowledges technological changes while assertively preserving and revitalizing cultural values.

Theme 4: Parenting Strategies, From Control to Guidance

Parents employed diverse mediation strategies, frequently evolving from restrictive to more collaborative approaches.

Rule-Based Restrictions

Rule-based strategies are a common approach for parents seeking to manage adolescents' digital device use, often through clear limits on timing, content, or access. Such strategies can promote healthier routines, including improved sleep and family interactions, when rules are consistent and understood by all family members (Gradisar et al., 2013; Hale & Guan, 2015). However, these restrictions can be undermined if adolescents find ways to circumvent them, highlighting the tension between parental control and adolescent autonomy (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

Participant 13:

"No phones during meals. No phones after 9 PM. These are our family rules, and we all follow them."

His approach illustrates how collaboratively understood rules can foster adherence and trust.

In contrast, Participant 11 noted:

"I use the parental controls to block certain sites, but my son always finds ways around them."

This example underscores the limitations of purely technical enforcement. From a self-determination perspective, overly controlling strategies may undermine adolescents' sense of autonomy and competence, potentially increasing resistance or secretive behavior. Thus, rule-based restrictions are most effective when combined with open communication, negotiation and relational understanding.

Relational Approaches

Relational approaches in digital parenting emphasize connection and dialogue in contrast with control.

Participant 14 reflected:

"I play video games with my sons. This way, I know what they are playing, and we can talk about it. We bond instead of fight."

This illustrated co-use or shared engagement, which allows parents to understand children's media activities while fostering bonding (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

Similarly, Participant 15 noted:

"I ask my daughter to teach me about TikTok. When she explains, I understand what she likes, and we can discuss what is appropriate."

This exemplified participatory learning, where children become active instructors and parents learn alongside them (Valkenburg et al., 1999).

Both strategies align with parental mediation theory, showing that co-engagement can support trust, communication and digital literacy (Lou et al., 2024). However, research cautions that co-use alone may not fully mitigate risks associated with online content; meaningful interaction and discussion during co-use are critical to achieving positive outcomes (Nikken & Jansz, 2006). These examples demonstrate that relational strategies can strengthen parent–child bonds while enabling active dialogue associated with digital practices.

Theme 5: Support Systems and Unmet Needs

Parents recognized critical gaps in support and resources for digital parenting.

Desire for Community Learning

Participants highlighted the importance of collaborative and community-based learning spaces to navigate digital parenting challenges.

Participant 16, emphasized:

"We need workshops where parents can learn together. Not just lectures, but sharing what works for each family."

This statement reflected a preference for interactive, peer-supported learning rather than top-down instruction.

Similarly, Participant 17 noted:
"*Churches should talk about this. We need spiritual guidance for these modern challenges."*

This statement suggested that faith-based institutions can serve as valuable platforms for guidance and dialogue.

These perspectives align with research indicating that community-centered initiatives, including parental workshops and faith-based programs, enhance parental competence, promote shared problem-solving, and foster supportive networks (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Nikken & Jansz, 2014). Such approaches recognize that navigating children's digital lives is not solely an individual responsibility, but benefits from collective learning and moral, cultural or spiritual framing.

Need for Context-Relevant Resources

In discussing the need for context-relevant resources, participants highlighted that generic parenting guidance often fails to account for the cultural, economic, and social realities of local families.

Participant 22 emphasized:

"The advice online is for American parents. We need guidelines that understand our context–our culture, our economy, our values."

This statement reflected a broader concern that imported parenting frameworks may not translate effectively to local circumstances.

Research supports this view, noting that parenting interventions are most effective when they are culturally sensitive and adaptable to the lived experiences of families (Lansford et al., 2018). Similarly, in Southern African contexts, locally grounded digital resources and community-based

workshops have been shown to enhance parental engagement and decision-making by aligning advice with local norms, economic realities, and social expectations (Chikafa-Chipiro & Chimbindi, 2021). This indicates that parents not only seek information but also desire guidance that resonates with their specific socio-cultural context, thereby supporting practical and sustainable parenting strategies.

Emerging Participatory Actions

Through the PALAR process, parents collaboratively developed several participatory initiatives aimed at enhancing digital engagement and cultural continuity. These included Community Digital Literacy Circles; parent-led groups where-in participants share digital skills and strategies; Cultural Dialogue Sessions, which foster intergenerational conversations about technology while reinforcing Swati values and School-Parent Compact; and formal agreements between schools and families outlining shared expectations for technology use in learning. Together, these initiatives reflect a co-created community-centered approach that integrates digital literacy with cultural and educational priorities.

Conclusions

Parents in Eswatini experience digital parenting as a balance between opportunity and risk. While technology enhances learning and digital literacy, it also raises concerns about screen time, online safety, and cultural erosion. Structural inequities, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, limit access to devices, connectivity, and parental digital skills, affecting children's educational opportunities and parents' ability to guide usage. Parents navigate these challenges through a combination of rule-based restrictions and relational strategies, often integrating technology to support cultural continuity and intergenerational learning. The current findings highlight how digital parenting extends beyond managing devices; it encompasses education, cultural preservation, and family cohesion in a digitally connected world.

Recommendations

To support digital parenting, initiatives provide parental digital literacy through community workshops and peer learning, particularly in rural areas. Critically, efforts target structural inequities by improving access to devices, affordable data, and reliable connectivity. Importantly, parenting resources are contextually grounded, reflecting local culture and economic realities. Strategies combining clear rules with relational, co-learning approaches are recommended to foster dialogue and trust. Finally, schools, community organizations, and policymakers collaborate with parents through formal frameworks, such as School-Parent Compacts and cultural dialogue programs to effectively promote sustainable, culturally sensitive digital parenting practices.

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