

Families in the digital age: How technology is reshaping parent-child relationships in Enugu Urban, Nigeria

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Abstract

Digital technology is now a part of everyday life and family interactions in Nigeria, creating new avenues for communication, learning, and exposure. However, it also raises concerns about emotional bonds, supervision, and connectedness within households. Based on Attachment Theory, this study investigates how digital engagement is transforming parent-child relationships in Nigerian families. A qualitative approach was employed, involving semi-structured in-depth interviews with 10 parents in Enugu Urban, South-East Nigeria. Participants were purposefully selected to ensure they had relevant experience in parenting and digital technology. Thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's methodology, was used to analyze the data. Parents showed strong awareness of digital technology and recognized its advantages for communication, education, accessing information, and staying connected, especially when family members were separated. However, they also reported relational issues such as less face-to-face interaction, decreased emotional closeness, distractions, secrecy, disciplinary

tensions, and challenges in supervision and trust. Concerns about children encountering harmful content and changing family dynamics were common. Despite these issues, parents actively managed technology use by monitoring, limiting screen time, offering guidance, promoting discipline, and supporting improved digital literacy, regulation, and infrastructure. Digital technology has a dual impact on Nigerian families: it facilitates communication and learning, but also can lead to emotional distancing and relational tension. The study emphasizes the importance of improving parental digital literacy, promoting balanced technology use, and developing supportive policies to ensure that digital tools enhance, rather than harm, parent-child bonds in Nigeria and other African countries.

Keywords: Digital age, digital technology, family communication, Enugu urban, parent-child relationship, qualitative study.

Introduction

Digital technology is among the fastest-growing innovations shaping everyday life globally. Digital technology refers to internet-enabled devices and platforms such as smartphones, tablets, computers, social media applications (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook), and other digital communication tools that facilitate interaction, information exchange, and engagement within families (United Nations, 2020; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020). Over the past two decades, these innovations have transformed how people communicate, learn, conduct business, and sustain social relationships, reaching over half of the world's population more

rapidly than any previous technological innovation (United Nations, 2020). Devices such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, and internet-based platforms now shape social communication, learning, entertainment, and economic participation (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2012). While digital technology has enhanced connectivity, access to information, and educational opportunities, scholars also argue that it has gradually altered the rhythm of family life and interpersonal dynamics between parents and children (Alwagait et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2011).

Driven by this global expansion, more than 6 billion people, roughly 74% of the global population, had become internet users by early 2026, while mobile connectivity continues to boost digital adoption, with about 5.78 billion unique mobile users globally (DataReportal, 2026). In Nigeria, digital engagement has grown substantially, with around 107 million internet users (45.4% penetration) and approximately 150 million active cellular mobile connections recorded in early 2025 (DataReportal, 2024, 2025). These statistics emphasize the widespread and increasing integration of digital technologies into daily life, highlighting their growing impact on social interactions, particularly family relationships.

In Nigeria, digital technology has provided children and parents with opportunities for communication, entertainment, education, social interaction, and global exposure (Nigerian Communication Commission, 2021). Children now grow up in a highly digitized environment where online communication, virtual learning, and digital interaction form part of their daily experiences (Wu et al., 2014). Parents equally rely on technological devices for work, business transactions, social

networking, and leisure. However, despite these benefits, digital technology also poses challenges to family relationships. Existing evidence suggests that the frequent use of digital devices may reduce face-to-face interaction, weaken emotional connection, limit parental supervision, engender distraction, and increase emotional distance between parents and children (Bremer, 2005; Williams, 2021). These realities indicate that Nigerian families may be undergoing a relational shift where digital engagement competes with parental responsibilities, communication quality, and emotional bonding.

Despite growing attention to digital technology in scholarship, most studies have focused on access, usage patterns, benefits, risks, educational potential, and behavioural implications (Limone & Toto, 2021; Odofin, 2021; UNICEF, 2017). Other studies have examined psychological effects, internet addiction, cyber risks, and youth exposure to online content (Odinaka et al., 2023; Afolabi et al., 2022). However, very limited attention has been given to the relational consequences of digital technology within Nigerian households, particularly how it reshapes emotional bonding, communication, trust, intimacy,

supervision, and overall parent-child relationship dynamics. Much of the existing literature explains what digital technology does but does not sufficiently address why and how it affects parent-child relational structures, especially within the cultural realities of Nigerian families. This gap in knowledge underscores the need for this study. Hence, this study examines digital technology not only as a communication or educational tool but also as a powerful social force that is redefining family interactions and emotional relationships in Nigeria.

This research is based on Attachment Theory, originally formulated by Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth et al. (1978). It states that secure parent-child bonds are founded on warmth, responsiveness, emotional availability, and consistent attention (Bowlby, 2005). The theory highlights that children need meaningful time, affection, and care to build emotional security and strong bonds with their caregivers. In today's digital era, parents often struggle to balance online activities with parenting duties, while children are increasingly absorbed in social media, gaming, and other digital pursuits, potentially reducing

opportunities for meaningful parent-child interaction.

This competition for attention can decrease responsiveness and emotional bonds, weaken relationships, and lead to new behavioural patterns in children (Ante-Contreras, 2016). In Nigerian families, where physical closeness, communal parenting, and strong family ties are culturally important, digital technology might challenge traditional expectations of care, discipline, communication, presence, and attachment (Egielewa & Umolu, 2022; Nwonye, 2025). Therefore, Attachment Theory offers a useful perspective to understand how digital technology could impact emotional availability and alter parent-child relationships in Nigeria.

Despite the growing integration of digital technology into everyday life, concern about its implications for family relationships continues to grow. Empirical studies across diverse contexts have shown that household use of digital technology can significantly shape patterns of communication, emotional bonding, and parental engagement. For instance, research has demonstrated that spending excessive time on smartphones and social media is associated with

reduced face-to-face interaction, divided attention, and weakened parent-child attachment (Radesky et al., 2016; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). Similarly, studies have found that frequent digital engagement within families may contribute to emotional withdrawal, reduced relationship satisfaction, and increased conflict between parents and children (Kildare & Middlemiss, 2017).

Although these studies provide valuable insights, they are largely based on high-income Western contexts and may not adequately reflect the realities of African societies, particularly Nigeria, where family dynamics, cultural norms, and parenting practices differ substantially. In Nigerian families, where close interpersonal bonds, parental authority, and shared socialization are prioritized, digital technology adoption could uniquely affect communication, emotional ties, supervision, and discipline. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of specific empirical research on how digital technology influences parent-child relationships in this setting.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by qualitatively examining how digital technology shapes communication patterns, emotional bonding, and

relational dynamics between parents and children in Enugu Urban. By focusing on lived experiences in a specific sociocultural setting, this study offers contextually grounded insights that contribute to both global scholarship and local understanding of digital parenting and family relationships.

This study makes a distinct contribution to existing scholarship by moving beyond general discussions of digital technology use to providing an in-depth qualitative understanding of how digital engagement reshapes parent-child relationships within a specific socio-cultural context. While prior studies have largely focused on access, usage patterns, and behavioural outcomes, this study centres on relational dynamics, particularly communication, emotional bonding, and parental supervision. By situating these experiences within the Nigerian context, the study offers context-specific insights that extend existing knowledge and highlight how cultural expectations interact with emerging digital practices to shape family relationships.

Research questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do parents in Nigeria perceive digital technology and its role in parenting and family life?
2. In what ways does digital technology impact communication, emotional bonding, and relationships between parents and their children in Nigeria?
3. How do parents and stakeholders manage, regulate, or respond to the relational challenges created by digital technology within Nigerian families?

Literature review

Digital technology has become deeply ingrained in daily human interactions worldwide, influencing communication, learning, socializing, and access to opportunities. Over the last twenty years, innovations in smartphones, computers, internet platforms, and social media have changed social relationships and everyday communication (United Nations, 2020; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020). These tools aid in education, social connectivity, entertainment, and broader community participation, offering various advantages for engagement and information exchange (Wolf et al., 2012; Alwagait et al., 2015). In Nigeria, the increasing rate of digital connectivity has similarly

affected how parents and children interact, learn, and manage social life, creating new channels for communication, exposure, and knowledge sharing (Nigerian Communication Commission, 2021; Williams, 2021).

Despite these advantages, scholars caution that digital technology also introduces relational complexities into family spaces. Growing attention has focused on how the frequent use of digital devices may reduce interpersonal communication, weaken emotional availability, and reshape the structure of relationships within households (Bremer, 2005; Wu et al., 2014). These concerns suggest that digital technology extends beyond functional purposes to play an influential role in shaping emotional connections and interaction patterns in families.

Research indicates that parents generally recognize digital technology as useful for supporting communication, learning, exposure, and developmental opportunities for their children (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020; OECD, 2016). Digital platforms provide educational support, build technical awareness, enhance autonomy in learning, and broaden global awareness (Jackson et al., 2011; Kapur,

2018). In the Nigerian context, digital devices also support livelihood opportunities, social interaction, and access to contemporary knowledge, thereby shaping parenting experiences and expectations (Nigerian Communication Commission, 2021; Idowu et al., 2004).

Parents' views are often mixed. While they recognize the benefits of digital technology, they also worry about overreliance, harmful exposure, distraction, and behavioural impacts on children (UNICEF, 2017; Yina, 2020). Research shows that perceptions are influenced by factors such as affordability, access, technological skills, cultural norms, and social environment (Olowe & Kutelu, 2014; Didiugwu et al., 2015). Consequently, many parents see digital technology as both a developmental tool and a potential relational risk that needs careful guidance, caution, and supervision.

Evidence increasingly shows that digital technology impacts emotional bonds, communication, closeness, and overall family relationships. Research indicates that frequent use of digital devices can hinder meaningful interactions, decrease parental attention, and impair face-to-

face communication at home (Wu et al., 2014; Williams, 2021). Excessive device use is also associated with family disconnection, emotional withdrawal, divided attention, and reduced intimacy, as technology competes with real-life interactions for time and emotional engagement (Bremer, 2005; Huisman et al., 2012).

Beyond communication issues, digital platforms cause wider relational disruptions. Parents often worry about losing control over their children's socialization, due to exposure to anonymous online spaces, risky content, cyber interactions, and media values that might conflict with cultural norms (Moawad & Ebrahim, 2016; UNICEF, 2017). In Nigeria, where traditional parenting focuses on moral development, supervision, closeness, and communal responsibility, digital media can challenge these roles and expectations, leading to tension, uncertainty, and emotional distance (Eberendu, 2015; Williams, 2021). While these studies provide valuable insight, they largely emphasized technology use, behavioral outcomes, addiction risk, and digital influence rather than deeply engaging with the relational experiences that parents encounter in everyday family life.

Another area of research explores how parents and stakeholders respond to digital challenges. Reports from international and regional sources emphasize strategies like monitoring children's screen time, supervising online activities, setting household digital rules, enhancing digital literacy, and encouraging open communication about online conduct (UNICEF, 2017; Pacheco & Melhuish, 2018). Additionally, some families try to incorporate technology into shared activities or set negotiated boundaries to stay connected while reducing relational stress (Huisman et al., 2012). In Nigeria, policy initiatives aim to enhance digital safety and oversee online environments, yet challenges in implementation persist due to infrastructural, governance, and socio-economic barriers (Ige, 2022; Federal Ministry of Communication & Digital Economy, 2020). Socio-economic status, access disparities, and digital literacy levels influence how regulation affects households. Concurrently, families adopt personal strategies such as communication, behavioural guidance, and restrictions to cope. However, there is limited understanding of how these regulatory measures and coping mechanisms impact emotional

interactions, trust, and bonds within families.

Methods

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine how digital technology is reshaping parent-child relationships within Nigerian families. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for studies that seek to understand perceptions, emotions, meanings, and relational experiences directly from participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Given the study's focus on communication, bonding, emotional connection, challenges, and coping processes, qualitative research allows participants to articulate their lived realities in depth. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews (IDIs) were employed because they provide flexibility for participants to express personal experiences while ensuring focus on the core research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). This approach is suitable for understanding how digital technology intersects with family interactions and caregiving relationships.

Study area and population

The study was conducted in Enugu Urban, South-East Nigeria, comprising Enugu

North, Enugu South, and Enugu East Local Government Areas. Enugu Urban is predominantly Igbo and Christian, with strong cultural expectations regarding parental responsibility, family bonding, and communal socialization. The area is also experiencing a rapid increase in the use of digital technologies, making it an appropriate setting to explore evolving parent-child dynamics in the digital age. The study population consisted of parents aged 18 years and above who have children under the age of consent and who use digital technology in their daily lives. These parents were considered suitable because they actively combine parenting responsibilities with digital engagement, while their children are also exposed to digitally mediated environments.

Sample size and sampling procedure

A total of 10 participants were selected for the in-depth interviews. Although this number may appear small given the widespread use of digital technology, qualitative research prioritizes depth and richness of data over statistical generalizability. The sample size was considered appropriate for exploring participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and relational dynamics in detail. Consistent with qualitative

research principles, the study aimed to achieve data saturation, the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from the data (Guest et al., 2006; Robinson, 2014). During the interview process, participants' accounts became increasingly repetitive, with no substantially new patterns emerging, indicating that thematic saturation had been attained.

Given that the study was context-specific, focusing on parents in Enugu Urban, its objective was to generate rich and in-depth insights rather than broad generalizations. This approach is consistent with qualitative inquiry, which emphasizes contextual depth and analytical richness over sample size. Consequently, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who possessed relevant experiences regarding digital technology and family relationships. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative studies because it enables the researcher to identify individuals who are knowledgeable about the subject and capable of providing detailed insights (Robinson, 2014).

Participants were recruited through purposive and informal network-based

approaches in Enugu Urban. Initial contact was made through community connections, professional networks, and referrals to identify information-rich participants with relevant experience of parenting in the digital age. Eligible participants were parents aged 18 and above with children actively exposed to digital technologies, such as smartphones, internet platforms, or social media. The selection process prioritised individuals who could provide rich, diverse insights into family interactions in the digital age.

Data collection involved using a semi-structured In-Depth Interview Guide, which included questions about participants' awareness and understanding of digital technology, its importance, its impact on communication and bonding with children, relational challenges, and family digital management strategies. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality, and provided informed consent before interviews. The face-to-face interviews lasted about 40 to 60 minutes, were audio-recorded with permission, and aimed to capture accurate and comprehensive responses. An interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and the existing

literature. The guide was pilot-tested with two individuals to ensure clarity and relevance before the main data collection. Interviews were conducted in quiet, convenient locations chosen by participants to promote comfort and openness. Follow-up probing questions were used to elicit deeper responses and clarify emerging themes. Field notes were also taken during interviews to capture nonverbal cues and contextual observations.

Data analysis

Adopting thematic analysis, data were analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly read to identify meaningful patterns relevant to the three research questions. Themes were developed inductively from participants' narratives and refined through cross-transcript comparison to ensure depth and clarity (Onalu & Ingram, 2022). The analysis focused on experiences related to perceptions of digital technology, relational influences on communication

and bonding, and strategies for regulation and coping.

Ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the study

Ethical principles of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and respect for participants were strictly observed. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Personal identifiers were removed, and data were securely stored to protect participants' confidentiality. Credibility was enhanced through careful explanation of the study purpose, prolonged engagement with participants, and detailed transcription. Dependability and confirmability were supported through transparent documentation of procedures and systematic analysis. Transferability was ensured through a detailed description of the study context, allowing readers to assess applicability to similar settings (Creswell, 2013).

To further enhance credibility, member checking was conducted by summarising

key points during interviews and confirming participants' intended meanings. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to minimise researcher bias. In addition, an audit trail was also kept to document decisions made during data collection and analysis, ensuring transparency and consistency.

Results

Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

A total of 10 parents participated in the study; however, qualitative reporting emphasises depth rather than numerical representation. Therefore, seven participants with the richest and non-repetitive narratives are presented in the analysis, while the remaining three supported theme confirmation. Participants included fathers and mothers from diverse occupational and income backgrounds, aged 38 to 62 years.

Table 1: *Socio-demographic characteristics of participants*

S/ N	Pseudonyms	Gender	Marital Status	Age	Religious Affiliation	Monthly income (Naira)	Occupation
1.	Amaka	Female	Married	51	Christian	59,000	Self-employed

2.	Blessing	Female	Married	46	Christian	100,000	Civil servant
3.	Caleb	Male	Married	62	Christian	35,000	Retiree/Pensioner
4.	Izu	Male	Married	43	Christian	50,000	Online vendor
5.	Chiagozie	Female	Married	38	Christian	150,000	Teacher
6.	Alex	Male	Married	62	Christian	455,000	Professor
7.	Onyenka	Male	Married	49	Christian	242,210	Civil servant
8.	Ada	Female	Married	39	Christian	600,000	Self-employed
9.	Angela	Female	Single Mother	41	Christian	302,000	Data analyst
10	Ebuka	Male	Married	40	Christian	177,000	Civil servant

Theme one: Parents' understanding and perceptions of digital technology

Across participants, digital technology was widely recognized as a significant part of modern life, primarily understood as tools that facilitate communication, access to information, and learning. Parents described digital technology as "modern devices" that make life easier and support interaction between parents and children. For example, one participant stated:

Yes, I have heard about digital technology, and I believe most have heard about it too. Digital technology is the use of electronic devices like phones and computer tools for information and interaction; it should not sound strange in our ears. People are educated now, and the media

is doing a lot to help in the course of disseminating such information. (Participant 7, personal communication, male civil servant, 49 years)

Similarly, another parent defined it in terms of devices and reduced stress: "For me, digital technology is a modern device, such as phones or computers, which people use for communication or to help ease much stress during working"(Participant 1, personal communication, self-employed female, 51 years, January 23, 2025). The same participant further highlighted its functional roles: "As I said, they are tools that can be used to store, create, and process information. You can also use it for communication. It serves as a means for job creation also" (Participant 1, personal communication,

self-employed female, 51 years, January 23, 2025).

From another perspective, a retired father described digital technology as innovations that simplify life: "Digital technology is the use of modern equipment, Inventions that make life easier" (Participant 3, personal communication, male retiree, 62 years).

Overall, parents perceived digital technology as useful and necessary, especially for communication, learning, and access to information, while recognising that this usefulness is accompanied by potential risks.

Theme 2: Impact of digital technology on parent-child relationships

Parents consistently reported that digital technology is changing how they relate with their children, particularly by reducing physical interaction, weakening emotional closeness, and creating tension around supervision and discipline. One mother described the effect in terms of reduced connection and emotional withdrawal. She laments that "It reduces the time spent together as a family, leads to less connection, and results in significant withdrawal and the development of anxiety" (Participant 1,

personal communication, self-employed female, 51 years, January 23, 2025).

A civil servant mother linked technology to both connection and distance, but emphasised the emerging gap in Nigerian family life:

Honestly, digital technology has changed the relationship between parents and children a lot. In some ways, it has helped. For example, parents can easily keep in touch with their children, even when they are not at home. With phone calls, WhatsApp, and video chats, it is easier to communicate, check on your child, and know what is happening in their lives. It also helps children learn new things because there is so much educational information online. But at the same time, technology has also created a kind of gap. Many children now spend more time on their phones than talking with their parents. Instead of sitting together, discussing or bonding as a family, everybody is just pressing the phone. Sometimes, children even hide things they are doing online, which can reduce trust. In

Nigerian families where respect, closeness, and guidance are essential, this can affect the relationship negatively. (Participant 2, personal communication, female civil servant, 46 years, January 25, 2025)

A retiree highlighted how time meant for conversation is redirected to screens: "It affects in the sense that the time which some parents suppose to spend with their children and have some words with them is being channeled to phones...particularly Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, etc." (Participant 3, personal communication, male retired pensioner, 62 years). Another participant focused on how it weakens family bonds and undermines child's upbringing: "It brings about a loose instead of a strong bond between parents and their children. Poor upbringing" (Participant 4, personal communication, male business owner, 43 years, February 18, 2025).

Similarly, a teacher described how children's use of mobile phone cause them to ignore instructions: "On my own part, I am a send them a message to do something, and instead of carrying out that message, they may be busy with

their phones, and the message will not be delivered as expected" (Participant 5, personal communication, female teacher, 38 years).

An older academic parent highlighted both parental inattention and children's negative learning:

Just as I said earlier, it affects their relationship significantly, especially in negative aspects, because parents no longer pay adequate attention to the children, and the children will also start learning bad things on social media platforms with the use of their phones. From that, the poor results from the children's school begin to set in. (Participant 6, personal communication, male professor, 62 years, February 22, 2025).

Another father summarised both sides of this influence:

This digital technology can affect relationships in a good or bad way. In the aspect of the good, it helps them to get information on what is happening around them. It serves an educational purpose for both children and parents. In a

negative way, it could lead to addiction and create some kind of attention deficit disorder. It can lead to parents not paying great attention to the children.
(Participant 7, personal communication, male civil servant, 49 years)

Taken together, these narratives show that digital technology is experienced as both a facilitator of communication and a source of emotional distance, conflict, and reduced parental attention within Nigerian families.

Theme 3: Negotiating, managing, and responding to digital technology in the home

Rather than being passive, parents described different ways of responding to the opportunities and challenges of digital technology. They identified the difficulties involved in monitoring and regulating children's digital use, expressed concerns about exposure to harmful online content, and explained the measures they adopted to supervise, limit, and guide technology use. Participants also highlighted the need for greater support from government and digital service providers to promote safer digital environments for children.

One participant emphasised the challenge of control and the complexity of what children are exposed to:

One of the challenges is not having total control of their children. Sometimes children learn negative behaviours on the internet and may start stealing and committing online or cybercrime. This digital technology has also exposed the children to a lot of things; the parents may not be aware of those and may not know how to handle them appropriately because of lack of knowledge.
(Participant 6, personal communication, male professor, 62 years)

Another participant focused on academic effects and negative behaviours: "On this aspect, as sometimes the children leave their studies and focus on their phones, thereby not doing well educationally, or read their books" (Participant 5, personal communication, female teacher, 38 years, February 19, 2025).

Parents also talked about specific strategies they use or believe are necessary. One mother suggested time regulation and self-discipline:

"Minimising its usage/time spent using them. Develop a personal timetable on when and how to use this DT. Don't spend so many hours on your phone or other gadgets"

(Participant 1, personal communication, self-employed female, 51 years, January 23, 2025). A business owner stressed guidance and discipline: "Parents should give more time to their children. Instill discipline in them. Teach them how to use it right" (Participant 4, personal communication, business owner, 43 years).

Another parent proposed age-based rules and careful site selection:

Try to minimize the usage of digital tech. Use it only when it's necessary. Parents should advise their children not to go to sites that are not educationally inclined. They should also make a rule for their children that before any of them can use phone, they should be 18 years and should have finished secondary school. (Participant 6, personal communication, male professor, 62 years)

Participant 7 expanded the discussion by highlighting the need for improved digital infrastructure, public education, and awareness campaigns:

To solve the problems that come with using digital technology, I think there are a few important things we need to do. First, government and private companies should improve internet access and make data more affordable, especially for people in rural areas. Stable electricity is also very important because without power, technology cannot work. Parents should be able to monitor what the kids feed their eyes with and make sure they censor that. There should be more digital education and awareness. Parents, teachers, and even children need training on how to use technology safely and responsibly. This will help reduce misuse and misunderstanding.

(Participant 7, personal communication, male civil servant, 49 years, March 1, 2025).

Together, these accounts show that parents are actively negotiating digital

technology—through rules, monitoring, guidance, and calls for broader structural support—rather than simply accepting its effects.

Discussion

This study examined the impact of digital technology on parent-child relationships in Enugu Urban families. It focused on how digital engagement affects communication, emotional bonds, and parental supervision, which are central dimensions of parent-child relationships. Three main findings emerged. First, parents showed awareness of digital technology but had mixed opinions of its effects. Second, digital tools significantly influence emotional connection, communication, and everyday family interactions. Third, parents actively manage, observe, and respond to the influence of digital technology on their children, although their knowledge and ability to do so vary. These results are discussed in relation to existing research, using Attachment Theory, and considering the Nigerian cultural setting.

Parents in this study perceived digital technology as both beneficial and risky, acknowledging its educational value while recognising its disruptive potential. This aligns with existing evidence that

digital technologies are deeply embedded in daily social environments and increasingly influence children's learning, socialization, and behaviour globally (Ray & Jat, 2010). Similar to our participants' views, Huda et al., (2017) reported that technology enhances access to knowledge and skills while simultaneously exposing children to moral, psychological, and behavioural risks, thus necessitating guided and careful engagement. This dual perception highlights the tension between technological opportunity and relational risk within family systems. It suggests that parents are actively negotiating the balance between enabling digital access and preserving relational stability, which reflects broader adaptive processes in contemporary parenting.

The findings further corroborate Wartella et al.'s (2013) National U.S. Survey showing that parents value technology for learning yet remain deeply concerned about media exposure, behaviour, and health consequences. In Nigeria, these concerns are heightened by limited parental digital literacy and weaker institutional support structures compared to Western contexts. Nigerian studies also affirm that children now grow up as "digital natives," navigating tools

previously exclusive to adults (Olowe & Kutelu, 2014). Consequently, Nigerian parents face the dual responsibility of harnessing the educational and communicative benefits of digital technology while protecting their children from its potential harms. Through the lens of Attachment Theory, parents' ambivalence reflects attempts to preserve emotional closeness and authoritative guidance while managing a rapidly changing technological landscape. Where parents lack clarity and competence, attachment security may weaken as technology increasingly mediates interactions rather than human connection. This indicates that the impact of digital technology is not merely behavioral but also relational, influencing the quality of emotional bonds and the consistency of parental responsiveness within the family unit.

The study revealed that digital technology alters relational dynamics through reduced face-to-face interaction, weakened emotional bonding, and diminished parental attention. This pattern suggests that digital technology may function as a competing attentional demand within the household, reducing opportunities for sustained interpersonal engagement. These findings strongly align

with global research demonstrating that extensive media exposure reduces family interaction time, limits healthy social engagement, and contributes to behavioural and emotional challenges among children (Ray & Jat, 2010). Similarly, previous studies have also suggested that a rise in the use of digital technologies among family members could divide communication, and enhance emotional estrangement (Kapur et al., 2026), and limit parent-child interaction (Egielewa & Umolu, 2022; Kildare & Middlemiss, 2017). From an Attachment Theory perspective, disruptions in attention and responsiveness can impair emotional attunement between parents and children, potentially hindering the development and stability of secure attachment relationships.

Conversely, our findings also confirmed that technology enhances communication when families are geographically separated, reflecting international literature highlighting digital platforms as sources of connection, shared activities, and co-engagement when positively utilised (Wartella et al., 2013). This dual outcome, connection and disconnection, reflects the "coin of two sides" reality of digital

parenting in emerging societies. This indicates that the influence of digital technology depends on the context, with its effects on family relationships being influenced by how and when it is utilised, rather than simply its existence.

From an Attachment Theory perspective, secure attachment thrives on emotional responsiveness, presence, warmth, and consistent communication. Where devices continuously interrupt interpersonal engagement, emotional attunement declines, potentially contributing to strained relationships, mistrust, and weakened familial bonds. Parents in this study expressed worry over withdrawal, secrecy, excessive screen engagement, and neglect of responsibilities, behaviours that existing media research has linked to psychological distress, depression risk, attention deficits, and behavioural issues (Ray & Jat, 2010). This supports the idea that technology doesn't inherently weaken relationships but instead changes the conditions necessary for forming and maintaining attachment.

A significant contribution of this study is its illumination of how Nigerian parents practically respond to the challenges of digital technology. Parents described strategies such as restricting screen time,

censoring exposure, monitoring activities, promoting discipline, providing guidance, and advocating for broader structural support. These practices are consistent with global recommendations emphasising parental mediation, digital literacy, and structured guidance to promote safer technology use among children (Huda et al., 2017). These strategies represent adaptive parenting responses designed to restore control and relational harmony in a growing digital family setting.

However, many Nigerian parents in this study reported difficulties in monitoring and controlling children's digital engagement due to limited technological knowledge, economic constraints, inadequate regulation, and infrastructural barriers. This finding is consistent with research highlighting digital parenting challenges such as addiction, secrecy, poor supervision, and communication breakdown in Nigerian households (Salsabila et al., 2024). Broader contextual work further shows that Nigeria continues to experience significant digital divide issues related to affordability, access, infrastructure, literacy, and uneven socio-economic conditions, which affect how families navigate and benefit from technology

(Adeleke, 2020). This emphasises the structural and knowledge-based constraints that influence digital parenting practices, indicating that relational outcomes are affected not just by individual actions but also by wider socio-economic factors.

Despite these barriers, parents in this study demonstrated a strong willingness to protect children and to adapt, indicating resilience and agency rather than helpless acceptance. Their responses support calls for coordinated digital literacy training, policy regulation, parental empowerment programmes, and community-level interventions to sustain responsible technology use among Nigerian families. Overall, findings demonstrate that digital technology has become a central yet complex influence on parent-child relationships in Nigeria. Consistent with Attachment Theory, technology can either support secure attachment by facilitating communication and emotional reassurance or undermine it through distraction, disconnection, and reduced parental responsiveness. This shows that digital parenting in this setting is an ongoing, dynamic process instead of a static result, demanding ongoing adaptation and learning. The nature of its

impact depends largely on parental awareness, intentional guidance, policy environment, and relational sensitivity within the home. These findings should be understood in the specific socio-cultural context of Enugu Urban and are not meant to be generalized to all Nigerian families.

Implications for practice and policy

The study's findings carry significant implications for parents, practitioners, educators, and policymakers in Nigeria. They highlight how digital technology has become integral to family life, strongly affecting communication, emotional bonds, and relationships between parents and children. This echoes earlier research indicating that children's digital exposure influences their social, emotional, and behavioural development, emphasising the importance of deliberate guidance and support within families (Ray & Jat, 2010; Wartella et al., 2013). From an Attachment Theory standpoint, parents should stay emotionally available and responsive, even as families increasingly depend on technology for communication. Therefore, digital parenting should focus on maintaining a healthy balance, ensuring technology usage strengthens rather than weakens parent-child bonds.

Second, the findings indicate that many Nigerian parents struggle to monitor and regulate children's technology use because of limited awareness, digital literacy gaps, and insufficient knowledge of online risks. Similar concerns have been documented in international and African contexts, where insufficient parental competence leaves children vulnerable in digital spaces and undermines healthy development (Huda et al., 2017; Wartella et al., 2013). This underscores the need for capacity-building initiatives, including community-based parenting education, school-supported awareness programmes, and professional guidance from social workers, counselors, and educators to strengthen parental digital competence and confidence.

Third, the study indicates that broader structural and policy issues, such as unequal internet access, weak online safety regulation, and digital divide challenges, shape how families experience technology in Nigeria. Consistent with prior evidence of persistent inequities in digital access and infrastructure across Nigeria, these disparities contribute to differences in exposure, benefits, and risks among families and children (Adeleke, 2020).

Therefore, policymakers must prioritise national strategies that promote digital inclusion and child-sensitive online protection frameworks, strengthen regulatory mechanisms for harmful online content, and support policies that ensure safer, more equitable technology environments for children and families.

These implications highlight the need for multi-level collaboration among parents, schools, social service providers, community institutions, and government agencies to ensure that digital technology is used in ways that promote healthy parent-child relationships and positive family functioning in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of digital technology on parent-child relationships in Enugu Urban, highlighting the complex interplay between the benefits and challenges. Digital tools improve communication, education, and information access but can also create conflicts, potentially decreasing face-to-face interactions, weakening emotional bonds, and affecting relationship quality if not consciously managed. Parents showed a clear understanding of these issues, acknowledging both the

advantages and the potential risks of digital involvement in family life.

Conceptually, the findings indicate that digital technology acts as a relational mediator, reshaping how parents and children connect, communicate, and sustain emotional bonds. Based on Attachment Theory, the study highlights that positive parent–child relationships rely on ongoing emotional availability, sensitivity, and responsiveness, which can be compromised when technology replaces face-to-face interactions. However, when used intentionally, digital technology can facilitate connection and communication, especially during physical separation.

This study offers context-specific insights by examining how families in Enugu Urban manage digital parenting within the context of prevailing cultural norms, varying levels of digital literacy, and structural limitations. The results highlight that digital technology's influence on family relationships is flexible and depends on its integration into daily life. In essence, the study advocates for digital tools to enhance, not replace, personal connections within families. Achieving healthy parent–child relationships in the digital era involves

intentional parental guidance, boosting digital literacy, and creating supportive institutional and policy environments that help families harness technology's benefits while reducing its risks.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, three key recommendations are proposed. First, parents should promote the balanced use of digital technology within the home by setting clear, consistent guidelines, including regulating screen time and encouraging more face-to-face interaction to strengthen communication and emotional bonding within the family.

Second, there is a need to enhance parental digital literacy and active engagement. Parents should develop a better understanding of digital technologies and remain actively involved in their children's online activities through monitoring, open communication, and guidance to reduce the risks associated with excessive or unsupervised use.

Finally, broader institutional and policy support for digital parenting is needed. Educators, social workers, and policymakers should design and implement programmes that promote digital literacy, safe technology use, and

family-centred interventions to support healthy parent–child relationships in the digital age.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

While this study offers valuable insights, it has certain limitations. It was conducted using a qualitative approach with a small, context-specific sample, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences but limiting generalisability to all Nigerian families. These findings should be understood in the particular socio-cultural context of Enugu Urban and are not meant to be extended to all Nigerian families. Future research could utilise larger samples or mixed methods to gather more comprehensive evidence and enable comparisons across different regions, socioeconomic statuses, or cultural backgrounds. Additionally, this study only considered parents' perspectives, omitting children's voices, who are key stakeholders in digital engagement.

Future studies should include children's experiences for a more balanced view of parent–child interactions in the digital age. The focus was mainly on family relational experiences, without examining differences between urban and rural areas, levels of digital access, or technological skills. Exploring these factors could deepen understanding of how structural and contextual factors influence digital parenting in Nigeria. Long-term studies could also track how parent–child relationships change over time as technology evolves.

Despite these limitations, this study significantly contributes to understanding how Nigerian parents perceive, experience, and respond to digital technology's impact on parenting and family relationships. It offers insights that can guide digital parenting support programmes, family counselling, school awareness campaigns, and national policies to help Nigerian families manage the challenges of the digital age.

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