

# **Digital Media: Is it Empowering or Damaging the Socialization of Children**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explores the influence of digital media, particularly those platforms which are accessible on smartphones, on the socialization patterns of 4–10 years old children of Peshawar, Pakistan. Informed by Media Ecology Theory; the study investigates how children's engagement with digital media impacts their communication, social relations language skills, and behavior. The data were obtained by means of 8 focus group discussions: 4 with children and 4 with mothers and teachers using purposive sampling technique. The most commonly used digital devices were smartphones and they were incorporated into everyday practices, as per thematic analysis. For children, the bulk of a child's screen time is often on entertainment and social media, not educational content. The results also suggest advantages and pitfalls to digital socializing. And, as much as digital tools can foster connection and collaboration, they have also weakened face-to-face communication skills, created social anxiety, and resulted in self-comparison. Gendered trends in use of content were discovered, confirming outdated stereotypes. Parental mediation was found to be a factor which played an important role in the shaping of healthy digital behavior. As a result, the study suggests that the use of digital media among children is a common practice and needs to be carefully guided in order to lead to favorable developmental consequences. Suggestions are made for parents, teachers and policy

makers to promote balanced and beneficial use of digital media in early childhood.

**Keywords:** Children, Digital Media, Media Ecology Theory, Socialization, Peshawar

## INTRODUCTION

In today's digital world, the socialization process of children has been deeply influenced by the extensive usage of mobile-based digital media. Children, as categorized by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), are people below 18 years of age who should be provided special care and protection given their developmental and dependency status (UNICEF, 1989). This period of life is characterized by intensive cognitive, emotional, and social development, and thus children are highly susceptible to environmental factors, including digital technologies. Socialization historically defined as the mechanism through which people learn to internalize the norms, values, and behavior of their culture is increasingly taking place in digital spaces that operate independently of geographical and temporal locations (Grusec & Hastings, 2015). Children now are not so much passive consumers of content as active agents in interactive digital spaces in which they connect, learn, play, and shape social selves. Such a transformation calls for reassessment of traditional socialization theory against widespread digital exposure, especially through smartphones and mobile phones with internet access (Kardefelt-Winther et al., 2020). With digital technology and youth culture intersecting now more than ever before there is a mix of opportunities and worries. Smartphones have become the chief medium

through which children interact with the world. Children are exposed early to content on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and gaming platforms, often without adult mediation, and if they are lucky enough not to get addicted or harmed in some way by that contact then we all should be thankful (Radesky et al., 2020). Although these platforms are venues for creativity, social bonding, and an entry to global cultures, they also bring some problems such as mental health issues, internet safety hazards reduction in face-to-face interaction and forming unrealistic social expectations (Twenge & Campbell, 2021). As pointed out by Genner and Süss (2017), the use of digital media meets various psychological needs for children, including seeking cognitively stimulating content, expressing emotions, establishing routines, and connecting socially. Unlike static media like television and radio, digital media is interactive and tailored to individual users, permitting children to organize their activities. That level of interactivity shifts the socialization role from a passive respondent to an active participant. On the other hand, this participatory form of socialization has its downsides. It empowers socialization but also bombards children with a torrent of unscreened information, peer pressure, and advertising manipulation (UNICEF, 2021). The region of Peshawar, Pakistan, illustrates how socialization through digital media is more challenging in non-Western semi-urban settings. Here, socio-cultural constructs are rooted in religion, family, and community. The spread of mobile phones seems to offer access to globalized content which challenges traditional norms and can radically alter children's understanding of gender, authority, and social hierarchy. Very few studies have focused on how children in such contexts internalize the content they

engage with digitally and social development within that framework. Within the last few years, mobile technology has become widely accessible in Pakistan, with smartphones rapidly emerging as the preferred device for communication and entertainment even among children (Gul & Zafar, 2022). Also, the COVID-19 pandemic hastened digital reliance worldwide, including in Pakistan. As schools were closed and physical movement was limited, children spent record time on screens for learning and play. The shift, apart from deepening digital use, also changed peer relationships, communication, and household relationships. Digital media for many ended up being the central vehicle of social interaction, frequently substituting face-to-face communication altogether (Livingstone et al., 2020). Children develop socially by learning to understand social signals, become empathetic, exchange reciprocal communication, and form relationships. Digital communication, though, tends to be poorer compared to face-to-face communication in terms of tone of voice, body language, and feedback (Uhls et al., 2021). Consequently, children who grow up dependent on digital communication tend to have delays or deficiencies in social-emotional learning. This is especially so in the case of younger children whose neurological and emotional development is at a sensitive point. In spite of these setbacks, digital media can also be an instrument of inclusion and empowerment. For youngsters with disabilities or those living in remote villages, online forums provide a space for engagement that might not be available in person. They can engage with like-minded communities, learn from educational content, and connect Trans locally beyond their immediate geographical setting. When applied deliberately and in the presence of

guidance, digital media can promote cooperation, problem-solving, and understanding of different cultures (Liu et al., 2021). Parental mediation has an important function in regulating the impact of digital media. According to studies, children whose parents are actively mediating talking through content, establishing guidelines, and demonstrating responsible use are likely to have healthier digital experiences (Baig & Khan, 2023). In contrast, the absence of parental control tends to result in unhealthy media usage, such as screen addiction, exposure to toxic content, and social isolation. In the Pakistani context, socio-economic inequalities and lower digital literacy among parents also worsen their capability to manage children's digital conduct effectively. The gendered aspect of digital media consumption is another essential area of inquiry. Research indicates that boys and girls tend to interact with varying content and utilize digital platforms in different manners. Boys will be more likely to participate in gaming and competitive-type activities, whereas girls are more likely to utilize social media for interaction and self-expression (Götz et al., 2022).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Recent studies have increasingly looked to the influence of digital media on socialization processes among children, specifically through mobile devices. Kardefelt-Winther et al. 2020) contend that outcomes of digital media depend upon context, content, and personality. Their work highlights that screen time is not an adequate measure of influence; instead, purpose and quality of digital engagement are more tellingly predictive of effects on social development. For example, time spent on

learning or shared platforms can have favorable social impacts, but passive social media scrolling can have social comparison and loneliness. Livingstone et al. (2020) added that digital media makes possible new forms of social interaction which are visual and asynchronous instead of physical or verbal. As much as this opens doors for communication, it also poses questions about decreased empathy and interpersonal skill acquisition. Children who heavily depend on digital interaction could be low in non-verbal communication cues, something that is crucial for emotional intelligence. Uhls et al. (2021) discovered that physical social interactions play a fundamental role in building empathy, trust, and conflict resolution skills in children. In their research, they found that those children that interacted less physically with their peers and interacted more using digital media had lower scores on social-emotional measures. These results are supported by Neophytou et al. (2021), who, in a multi-country study, showed that overuse of smartphones among children between the ages of 6 and 12 was linked to emotional dysregulation, lower self-esteem, and reduced bonding with peers. In Pakistan, Gul and Zafar, (2022) investigated how the use of digital media among urban children influences their social behavior. They discovered that children engaged in unsupervised online activity exhibited greater social withdrawal and emotional instability. In contrast, children whose parents exercised digital mediation showed stronger social behavior. This suggests that the cultural and contextual diversity in the way digital media affects children underlines the significance of parental influence on these processes. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021) has established that digital media can be both a bridge and a barrier to socialization. On one

hand, it provides platforms for learning, advocacy, and connecting, but on the other hand, it can be a source of worry, peer pressure, and diversion. They published a report asking for increased digital literacy programs through which children may safely and meaningfully explore online spaces. Götz et al. (2022) examined gendered trends of digital media consumption and concluded that girls were more likely to have body image issues related to social media, while boys showed increased aggressive behavior related to violent video games. This supports the claim that digital media is not isolated but interacts with society's norms and self-identity. Baig & Khan (2023) highlighted the role of parents' digital competence, maintaining that digitally literate parents can more constructively guide children's use of the media. From their work, it can be inferred that engaged parental participation is likely to counter many of the adverse social effects related to hyper-consumption or inappropriate use of media. Liu et al. (2021) had a more positive perspective, claiming that when used thoughtfully in educational environments, digital media have the potential to enrich collaborative learning, problem-solving, and peer interaction. They called for incorporating interactive digital tools into educational environments as a means of encouraging collaboration and creativity, both of which are critical elements of social competence. Apart from formal schooling and parental mediation, peer influence has become an important force shaping children's use of digital media. As noted by Rideout and Robb (2022), children usually emulate their peers in their digital behavior, such as in app selection, games, and online communication. Such peer behavior, at times, causes conformity and pressure to access risky or age-inappropriate content. Since socialization

revolves around peer dynamics, digital platforms' role in expanding such influences should be given critical scrutiny. Another new issue that has been raised in recent scholarship is the design of digital platforms themselves. Most games and apps apply persuasive design principles to enhance engagement, including bottomless scrolling, push notifications, and gamified rewards (Montag et al., 2021). These functions contribute to compulsive use and decrease chances for face-to-face social interaction. Such devices, when overused, can perpetuate addictive habits that are harmful to emotional and social development. Together, these research studies present the complexity of digital media's influence on children's socialization. The literature emphasizes that context matters, such as cultural norms, family makeup, and school life. It also calls for more localized investigations, especially in underrepresented areas such as Peshawar, to explore how global digital trends are translated in particular socio-cultural contexts. This research adds to that endeavor by providing a qualitative analysis of children's digital socialization processes in Peshawar based on theoretical and empirical understandings.

### **Significance of Study**

In this digital age, it is vital to comprehend how digital media affects children's socializing. This study attempts to examine both the beneficial and detrimental effects of gadgets like smartphones on children's social development, including their communication abilities, attitudes, peer connections, gender disparities, parental roles, social skills, and perceptions.

### **Objective of the Study**



This study aims to study whether digital media such as smart phones how does it affect children's socialization? It focuses on both the pros and cons of relying on mobile devices.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1:** How is children socialization affected by usage of digital media platforms?

**RQ2:** What advantages and disadvantages does smart phone addiction have when it comes to socializing with children?

### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

This study is based on Media Ecology Theory, a theory originally developed by Marshall McLuhan in his groundbreaking book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), and then further developed by Neil Postman in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969) and *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985). Media Ecology Theory holds that communication technologies are not simply passive vessels for the delivery of messages, but that they are living environments that essentially constitute and change human perception, cognition, interaction, and social structures. Within this research context, digital media specifically smartphones and mobile apps are seen as environmental forces actively mediating the way children come to understand social relationships and forms of communication. Media ecology proposes that with every new medium, human contact is reorganized by changes in sensory engagement, the formation of new norms of behavior, and the restructuring of social organization. For young

children, mobile digital media forms an ecological context that not only shapes the way they play and learn but also how they interpret social cues and engage in interpersonal communications. McLuhan's noted axiom, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964), is apt in this context not in terms of the particular content consumed by children, but as a function of the medium's ability to instill patterns like instant gratification, multitasking, and passive visual consumption. For children who are still in the process of developing cognitively and socially, these patterned reinforcements have the power to redirect developmental pathways in ways that more conventional media forms, like print books or exercise play, would not. Also, Media Ecology Theory offers conceptual bases for the analysis of how digital immersion reconstructs family life, learning processes, and peer relationships. In contrast to its predecessors such as television, mobile digital media are portable, personalized, and interactive, amplifying their ecological presence and embedding it more deeply in everyday life. This theoretical perspective allows the current research to investigate how digital media do not just affect what children do or say, but how the medium itself reconstructs social contexts, behaviors, expectations, and nascent identities.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research study uses qualitative research techniques to fulfill its aims. The study looks at four Union Councils in the district of Peshawar: Chamkani, Gulbahar, University Town, and Mattani. These Union Councils were chosen because they have a unique population and geographical distribution, which enables the study to obtain a diverse

group of voices and experiences. The study was also selected for these areas because they possess noteworthy socioeconomic and educational features, which are pertinent to the focus of the study (Zeb et al., 2021). It was estimated that the sample size was 64 respondents who were felt to be valid and sufficient enough for carrying out in-depth focus group discussions as per the financial constraints and length of the project. There were 8 focus group discussions organized, and all participants were categorized into two groups. The initial category was those aged between 4 and 10 years.

FGD 1 to FGD 4: Comprised children aged 4 to 10 years each group consisted of 4 boys and 4 girls.

FGD 5 to FGD 8: Comprised 6 mothers and 2 female schoolteachers per group.

Fathers and male educators were initially thought of but were unable to take part because of work commitments and the gender composition of schools in the vicinity. Each of the participants was given a code to ensure clarity and anonymity in the analysis of data:

FGD 1 (Children):

Boys: B1, B2, B3, B4, Girls: G1, G2, G3, & G4

FGD 2 (Children):

Boys: B5, B6, B7, B8, Girls: G5, G6, G7, & G8

FGD 3 (Children):

Boys: B9, B10, B11, B12 Girls: G9, G10, G11, & G12

FGD 4 (Children):

Boys: B13, B14, B15, B16 Girls: G13, G14, G15, & G16

FGD 5 to FGD 8 (Mothers and Teachers)

Mothers: M1–M24 (6 mothers per group) Teachers: T1–T8 (2 teachers per group)

**Table: 1. Age Distribution of Children Participants by Gender and FGD**

FGD	Participant Type	Boys (Age Range)	Girls (Age Range)	Codes (Boys)	Codes (Girls)
1	Children	7–10	6–9	B1, B2, B3, B4	G1, G2, G3, G4
2	Children	6–9	4–10	B5, B6, B7, B8	G5, G6, G7, G8
3	Children	6–8	5–10	B9, B10, B11, B12	G9, G10, G11, G12
4	Children	5–9	6–10	B13, B14, B15, B16	G13, G14, G15, G16

**Table: 2. Adult Participants in FGDs 5–8**

FGD	Mothers (Codes)	Teachers (Codes)
5	M1–M6	T1, T2
6	M7–M12	T3, T4
7	M13–M18	T5, T6
8	M19–M24	T7, T8

The interviews were done in Pashto and Urdu, the commonly spoken languages in the region, to ensure linguistic and cultural compatibility with the interviewees. All interviews were tape-recorded with the participants' permission, and their responses verbatim were transcribed for analysis. The information gathered from interviews and focus group discussions was analyzed through a qualitative method that sought to determine patterns and themes concerning the research questions. The recorded

discussions were transcribed, and the researcher became familiar with the data by reading the transcripts. Initial impressions and main ideas concerning electronic media use were jotted down. Second, the data were coded by highlighting important pieces of information that pertained to important topics like smartphones, social media, and communication shifts. For instance, whenever participants talked about their smartphone use or social media activity, these were coded. Finally, related codes were paired together to uncover larger themes, including the place of smartphones in everyday life or the influence of social media on relationships. The researcher analyzed these themes to see if they did indeed represent the data accurately. Once the themes were fine-tuned, the researcher described each one and provided direct quotations from participants to highlight the findings. This was a way to get a precise view of how electronic media had affected socialization, communication skills, and individual attitudes. The study was carried out while keeping in mind the investigation of gender variations in digital media usage, parents' intervention in controlling access to media, and the social influence of digital media on the social relationships of children. By employing thematic analysis, the study was able to reveal the constructive and destructive role of digital media usage in the lives of participants.

## **FINDINGS**

**Frequency and Patterns of Smartphone Use among Children in Peshawar**  
The utilization of smartphones by children in Peshawar has become a routine part of life, even among extremely young users. Even four years old children reported using mobile phones on a regular basis, though with

different levels of supervision. The majority of the younger children explained using smartphones to watch cartoons like *Motto Patlo*, *Veer*, *Krishna*, *Ghulam Rasool* or nursery rhymes. For instance, a five years old girl from FGD 2 described, "I watch *Motto Patlo* when mama gives me phone." This shows how the use of digital media has been integrated into the day-to-day lives of even preschool children. Among the children between 7 and 10, smartphones were used more on their own and out of habit. Children of this age group often responded that they used phones after homework, usually to play games or watch brief videos. B3 of FGD 1, aged nine, said, "I play car racing game after completing my homework." Urban Areas such as University Town and Gulbahar also had some children using phones while in transit or between classes. Mothers justified that smartphones were frequently used to calm children, with one saying, "He cries if I grab the phone, so I give it after dinner" (M4, FGD 5). One educator from FGD 5 highlighted the growing tech fluency even among the youngest users, saying, "Even 4-year-olds know how to unlock and go to YouTube." This customary access highlights how ubiquitous devices have become within contemporary childhoods in Peshawar's homes.

### **Types of Content Typically Accessed by Children on Smartphones**

The children's viewing preferences differed by age. The youngest children (4–6 years) mentioned their favorite programs were rhymes, cartoons, and alphabet videos, which were usually recommended by their parents. G14, a six-year-old from FGD 4, mentioned, "ABC song helps me count." Older children liked gaming videos, comedy clips, and shows like *Mr. Bean*. B6,

a seven-year-old from FGD 2, mentioned, "I like Mr. Bean.". It's funny." Such viewing patterns reflect a move from educational to entertainment-oriented media with age. Mothers pointed out that children often imitated the content they consumed, sometimes picking up gestures or words. "My daughter replicates dance moves she watches on TikTok," cited M9 from FGD 6. Teachers complained about such imitation, especially when children were exposed to inappropriate or excessively aggressive content. T4 from FGD 6 elaborated, "Some cartoons are violent they adopt those behaviors." This content influence illustrates how online media veil the distinctions between learning, recreation, and identity-formation, particularly in settings where filtering by parents might be hit-or-miss.

### **Effects of Smartphone Use on Socialization & Peer Interaction among Children**

Socially the children (7–10 years) appeared to incorporate the digital content into their peer relationships. Shared media became what they discussed and identified with at school. G3 from FGD 1, who was seven years old, disclosed, "I discuss cartoons with my schoolmates." B11 from FGD 3 concurred, stating, "We share turns in playing mobile games." Conversely, young children tended to use smartphones separately or with siblings but not friends. Mothers complained that outdoor activities are becoming a substitute for screen time. FGD 7's M13 complained, "They don't go out anymore; they just sit with devices." Teachers observed that most peer relationships are nowadays formed or reinforced through mutual interests in online materials. T6 from FGD 7 clarified, "They group together because of the games they play." This illustrates how

smartphones are influencing the development of peer networks, replacing more traditional playground interactions in many cases.

### **Effects of Digital Media on the Communication & Language Skills of Children**

Communication was perhaps the most visibly impacted domain. Some of the younger children picked up phrases verbatim from videos that they viewed. B14 from FGD 4, age seven, stated, "I say 'Hi guys!' like in YouTube." The phrases still did not carry contextual meaning, and some of the children started using digital communication more than face-to-face speech. G12 from FGD 3, age ten, stated, "I talk less. I like chatting more than talking. "While parents welcomed the fact that children were acquiring new words, especially English, they also feared comprehension and usability. M7 from FGD 6 recorded, "He repeats English lines but doesn't understand them." Teachers reported a reduction in face-to-face interactions. T8 from FGD 8 replied, "Some students' use English but they don't converse." These findings indicate that while online platforms encourage children to be exposed to language, they can prevent expressive and social communication from developing if left unmonitored.

### **Parental and Teacher Mediation of Children's Smartphone Use**

Children recognized the existence of explicit rules and supervision by their parents. G5 of FGD 2, age five, reported, "Mama allows me to watch cartoons only." B8, age eight, further contributed, "I first ask permission before using phone." Parents imposed constraints from time limits to co-viewing. M1 of FGD 5 clarified, "I sit with her while she watches." M17



of FGD 8 continued, "Just 30 minutes after lunch." These practices indicate a certain level of intentionality in digital parenting. Educators approved of these approaches, proposing that collective media viewing was an opportunity for learning. T3 from FGD 6 asserted, "Joint viewing helps children understand better." Throughout all the responses, it was evident that adult mediation continues to be a significant influence in constructing children's digital lives. Where mediation was more pronounced, results tended to be more equitable.

### **Emotional and Behavioral Consequences of Digital Media on Children in Peshawar**

Some of the children reported a sense of unease or anxiety linked with high levels of media consumption. B1 of FGD 1 acknowledged, "I feel nervous if I have to talk with strangers." G3 said, "I lose my sense of sensing what's around me." These are manifestations of increasing reliance on screen communication. But there were some teachers and mothers who found benefits in constructive uses of digital media. M6 of FGD 7 quoted, "Playing team games online teaches us to work together." T1 mentioned, "Gaming helps us learn how to talk." This shows the two-edged sword character of digital media able to erode social interaction but also facilitating new kinds of collaborative learning and creativity. In total, the results of these FGDs in Peshawar depict a digitally enabled childhood influenced by both exposure and direction. Children of different ages and contexts have differing perceptions, but the general story is one of change toward media-facilitated, frequently screen-drenched play and learning.

### **Shifts in Children's Attitudes and Beliefs Due to Exposure to Digital Media**

Children's exposure to digital media has resulted in observable shifts in their worldview and self-perception. Some of the individuals who took part in the study as older participants were apprehensive regarding idealized representations on the internet. "Every time I open Instagram, I look at perfect photos. It makes me feel that my life is uninteresting." B4 from FGD 2 said. "I want to resemble the girls whom I see on the internet," G3 from FGD 1 said. They are always cheerful and cute." These observations indicate developing body image concerns and internalized pressures to meet social media ideals. Conversely, virtual spaces presented exposure to nurturing networks as well. M4 of FGD 5 stated, "My son is part of an online drawing community where children exchange their art work. It gave him confidence." T1 underscored that "some students become more expressive after viewing positive material on emotions and mental health." These narratives stress the double nature of digital impact: it can lead to low self-esteem or empowerment based on content and counseling.

### **Effects of Digital Media on Peers among Children**

The participants explained both improved and strained peer relationships as a result of online interaction. Some children developed close relationships around mutual online activities. G4 from FGD 2 said, "I play online games with my friends from my previous school, and we talk daily." Others explained a degradation of in-person relationship. B2 from FGD 1 said, "When we encounter each other face-to-face, it feels strange now.

We just stare at our phones." Parents replicated the worry that virtual relationships could substitute for rich social experiences. M3 stated, "He talks to his classmates online all the time, but at birthday parties, he hangs in the corner." Meanwhile, T1 commented, "Children do work together more online, but they have trouble with teamwork in actual situations." These answers indicate that although online platforms broaden friendship beyond geographical constraints, they could get in the way of developing fundamental social interaction skills.

### **Gender Differences in Children's Use & Socialization through Digital Media**

Gendered trends of online participation manifested reliably throughout focus groups. Boys were more likely to engage in competitive games, whereas girls enjoyed communication-oriented websites. Likewise, B1 from FGD 1 stated, "We play mostly PUBG or football games. Girls don't play these with us." Conversely, G2 stated, "I enjoy chatting with friends and watching beauty tips videos." These variations tended to support conventional gender roles. T2 noted, "Girls do less tech-related work in class, and boys shy away from emotional discussion activities." M3 from FGD 6 lamented: "It would be better if boys and girls accessed more balanced content." These observations underscore the ways in which digital media tend to reflect and potentially reinforce dominant societal gender norms, unless explicitly counteracted through education or parental activity.

### **The Role of Digital Media in Determining Children's Social Skills**

The social skills of children were also determined to be dependent largely on their mode and intensity of digital participation. A number of participants admitted having problems engaging in face-to-face conversations. B3 in FGD 2 said, "It is difficult for me to speak in class now. I like texting." G3 said, "Sometimes I remember that I don't know how to begin a conversation without emojis." But there were positive effects as well. M6 from FGD 7 observed, "When they play together online in teams, they get to learn cooperation and patience." T1 supplemented, "Group work becomes simpler when children already have learned how to share and comment using apps." So, while communication technology can erode spontaneous interaction, purposeful use can create beneficial patterns of collaboration. These results underscore the need for guided, deliberate media use to enhance children's social development instead of hindering it.

## **DISCUSSION**

The research findings of this study are in line with the central tenets of Media Ecology Theory, which posits that media as technological environments influence not just the content of communication but also processes of socialization and behavior. In the context of the present research, the medium specifically the smartphone is a fundamental ecological force in children's lives, impacting their daily habits, cognitive processes, and relationships. Marshall McLuhan's (1964) original concept that "the medium is the message" comes into play with how children absorb smartphone use at a tender age. Instead of just passively consuming content, Peshawar children are being molded by the intrinsic nature of

mobile media its mobility, interactivity, and sensory overload. For example, the children's preference for video content compared to reading or talking to people in person illustrates how digital media's affordances reorganize the conventional ways of learning and social interaction. This is not a change in behavior but a change in perceptual and communicative milieu. The research also vindicates Neil Postman's in 1968 contention that technological milieus reshape the organization of human attention and language (Gencarelli, 2006). Children showed a preference for online formulations like emojis, memes, and YouTube- or game platform-learned catchphrases. Their increasing struggle with extemporaneous, verbal communication reveals how media ecologies reconfigure what constitutes "normal" engagement. In most instances, children were more at ease communicating in pedagogically organized virtual spaces than in pedagogically unorganized real-world settings a development Postman would have viewed as the erosion of oral tradition and interhuman discussion. Also, the decline of physical play and classic social gatherings for digital peer connection is an ideal manifestation of McLuhan's idea of a "global village" a community of digital closeness in place of geographic closeness. The capacity to have long-distance friendships and work together virtually was hailed as a development, but at what cost: anxiety, decreased eye contact, and social isolation. The medium thus expands and constrains human capabilities a paradox at the heart of Media Ecology Theory (Levinson, 2000). Digital practices coded as masculine or feminine further demonstrate how media worlds solidify social patterns. Boys' attraction to games of competition and girls' affinity for social spaces reproduce larger cultural norms. Unless mediated critically, such

patterns will reinforce traditional roles in new technological spheres. Again, here, the medium not only influences behavior but social identity as well, in alignment with McLuhan's opinion that media control "how we see ourselves and others." Last, the impact of adults' parents and teachers as brokers of the media environment cannot be overemphasized. Media Ecology Theory places a lot of importance on the responsibility to understand the biases inherent in each medium. In this research, when adults offered co-viewing, active discussion, and digital boundaries, children were more likely to report favorable outcomes, including learning, confidence development, and enhanced cooperation. This strengthens the theoretical postulate that settings can be made healthier through intentional human design.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research examined the effect of digital media most specifically, smartphones on children's socialization in Peshawar based on findings from children, mothers, and teachers throughout eight focus group discussions. The findings point toward an increasingly dynamic media environment where even the youngest children are everyday users of smartphones. Children are progressively exposed to digital spaces since the age of four, whereby they often merge educational and entertaining content. Smartphones were discovered to be the most used device, being woven into the daily routines of children and used, in many cases, under the supervision of parents. As children become older, though, their usage tends to become more self-sufficient and more engrossing. Cartoons, games, rhymes, and social media postings are most frequently visited

content, with older children being particularly drawn to comedies or game videos. Digital media profoundly influences children's communication and relationships. Some reported struggling with face-to-face communication, while others emphasized the use of online environments to sustain long-distance friendships and maintain peer group unity. Emotional impacts like anxiety, self-comparison, and decreased self-esteem were identified by children and adults alike, while some also saw potential for empowerment and creative expression. Gender distinctions were apparent in content choice and social interaction styles, tending to reinforce conventional norms unless consciously interrupted. Girls were inclined towards appearance-oriented and communicative content, whereas boys preferred competitive or action-based digital interactions. The impact of digital media on social competencies was complex whereas spontaneity and face-to-face confidence appeared to weaken, teamwork and structured interaction competencies were developed through online collaboration. Together, the children of Peshawar are not merely passive receivers of digital information they are being raised in a media-saturated culture that directly influences the way they speak, act, and interact with others. The digital environment promotes and subverts established socialization processes, and its net effect is for the most part dependent on parental engagement, quality of content, and use regime.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the evidence of this research, the following professionally informed recommendations are made in order to facilitate healthy social development for children in the digital age:

- Enact comprehensive digital literacy programs for parents and educators.
- Create localized, age-suitable digital learning material.
- Develop balanced digital habits through organized routines.
- Incorporate media education into primary school curricula.
- Foster gender-equitable digital access and involvement.
- Promote emotional communication for digital use in families.
- Facilitate ongoing research and localized monitoring.

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