

Digital Media Exposure and Social Skills Development among Primary School Pupils in Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Digital media is rapidly transforming childhood experiences globally. While its potential for learning is widely acknowledged, concerns persist about its impacts on children's social skills development especially among primary school pupils whose social competencies are still forming. This qualitative article examines how digital media exposure influences social interaction, communication, empathy, and peer relationships among primary school pupils in Cross River State, Nigeria. Drawing on recent empirical research, developmental psychology frameworks, and evidence from both local and international studies, the article contends that digital media's effects are multidimensional - fostering new forms of communication and empathy when used constructively, but potentially undermining in-person social skills when exposure is excessive or unmoderated. The paper concludes by highlighting key mediating factors including parental guidance, school integration, and digital literacy education essential for maximizing positive outcomes.

Keywords: digital media, social skills, development, pupils, counselling

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed a dramatic shift in the everyday lives of children as digital media becomes woven into the fabric of childhood. In many Nigerian homes today, it is no longer unusual to see a primary school pupil skillfully navigating a smartphone, watching animated videos on YouTube, participating in online games, or communicating with peers through messaging platforms. In Cross River State, both in urban centres such as Calabar and in semi-urban communities, digital devices are increasingly present in households and even in school environments. While digital media provides opportunities for learning, creativity, and global exposure, it also raises pressing questions about how sustained screen engagement shapes children's social development. Social skills such as

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empathy, cooperation, effective communication, and conflict resolution are foundational competencies developed primarily through face-to-face interaction and guided social experiences in early childhood.

Developmental scholars such as Albert Bandura have long emphasized that children learn behaviours through observation and imitation, suggesting that media content may serve as a powerful model for social conduct. Similarly, Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective underscores that children's development is shaped by interacting environmental systems, including technological environments that now form part of their daily microsystem.

Empirical research presents mixed outcomes: moderate, supervised digital engagement can enhance language development and collaborative skills, while excessive or unsupervised use has been associated with social withdrawal, reduced peer interaction, and behavioural imitation of aggressive content (Twenge & Campbell, 2018; World Health Organization [WHO], 2019). Teachers in some primary schools in Cross River State informally report pupils struggling with patience during group work, preferring solitary screen activities over playground interaction - a subtle but telling shift in social patterns.

Despite growing access to digital devices in Nigeria, there remains limited qualitative evidence capturing how pupils, parents, and teachers in Cross River State perceive the influence of digital media on children's social behaviours. Understanding these live experiences is essential, not to demonize technology, but to provide culturally grounded insights that can guide balanced digital practices. It is against this backdrop that the present study explores digital media exposure and social skills development among primary school pupils in Cross River State, Nigeria, with the aim of contributing context-sensitive knowledge to ongoing discussions about childhood development in the digital age.

Concept of digital media exposure among primary school pupils

Digital media exposure refers to the extent and nature of contact that children have with digital technologies, including television, smartphones, tablets, computers, and other screen-based devices (Sina et al., 2023; Domoff et al., 2019). In the contemporary era, digital technologies are deeply embedded in children's everyday lives, shaping not only learning and entertainment but also the ways they communicate, socialize, and interpret the world. Children today often begin interacting with digital media at very early ages; for instance, research among preschoolers in Malaysia found that almost all young children

(95.9%) used digital devices, with the average age of first exposure being about 3.9 years, and smartphones being the most commonly used device for both educational and entertainment purposes (Nathan et al., 2022). Although digital exposure may be lower among preschoolers, trend observed in many contexts indicates that digital media engagement starts early and becomes progressively more prevalent as children grow older.

Among primary school pupils, typically ranging from about 4 to 12 years old, exposure to digital media continues to expand in both frequency and diversity. In many households, children are now more likely to have access to multiple devices, including smartphones, tablets, smart TVs, and gaming consoles. These technologies serve as tools for watching cartoons and videos, playing games, accessing educational content, and increasingly engaging with social media and online communities. A systematic review of digital media uses among children up to the age of 10 years noted that screen media use has grown significantly in all age groups, including primary school children, and that excessive exposure can interfere with daily social and emotional functioning (Rega et al., 2023). The nature of digital media exposure thus ranges from active use such as playing educational games or interacting with interactive applications to passive exposure, such as watching videos or being in the presence of media usage by others.

Digital media and social skills development in children

The development of social skills in children during the primary school years is foundational to personal, academic, and future professional success. Social skills are defined as the abilities that enable effective interpersonal interaction, including communication, cooperation, empathy, and emotional regulation (Khasanova, 2025). These competencies transcend academic knowledge and contribute to psychosocial adjustment, school engagement, and the capacity to navigate diverse social environments. In modern educational theory, social and emotional learning (SEL) is recognized not only as beneficial but as essential; UNESCO and the World Economic Forum highlight that social skills play a critical role in lifelong learning, adaptive responses to sociocultural demands, and the labour market (Jones et al., 2015). Furthermore, evidence suggests that early social competence is predictive of later academic achievement and emotional wellbeing across varied settings.

Primary school children are expected to develop core social skills that enable effective peer interaction and cooperative behaviour. These include communication skills (verbal and non-verbal), active listening, empathy and perspective-taking, cooperation and teamwork, conflict resolution, and self-regulation of emotions (Khasanova, 2025). Communication

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skills allow children to express needs clearly and understand others, while empathy fosters respect and sensitivity toward peers' feelings. Cooperation and problem-solving are especially vital within classroom group tasks, where children negotiate roles, share resources, and collectively address challenges. Self-regulation, often cultivated through guided play and structured routines, supports children in managing impulses and adjusting behaviour in social contexts.

While social interactions with peers and adults are primary drivers of such skill acquisition, contemporary digital media exposure has emerged as an influential factor, both positively and negatively. Research specific to Cross River State has traditionally examined play rather than digital media as a key driver of social skills among primary school pupils. A 2025 study investigating forms of play (cooperative, imaginative, physical, solitary) among primary six pupils in Calabar found significant positive relationships between diverse play activities and social skills development, with cooperative and physical play exhibiting the strongest associations (Odey et al., 2025). This study highlights how interactive engagement fosters social competencies through direct interpersonal interaction; this means that digital exposure may complement or interfere with social skills development, depending on usage.

Also, study on early childhood digital exposure reported that digital media may enhance cooperation skills by facilitating interactive group activities and collaborative digital tasks, though its effects on emotional engagement were more limited (Huang & Lajoie, 2023; Srivastava, 2025). Such findings suggest that digital experiences encouraging joint participation, dialogue, and shared problem-solving can support elements of social skills. Conversely, cross-national health literature warns that heavy digital exposure can displace opportunities for real-world social learning. Increased screen time is associated with reduced parental interaction, diminished play opportunities, and delays in social-communicative milestones - particularly in early childhood (Kim, 2023). It also notes potential associations with loneliness and reduced emotional regulation when screen use replaces in-person connection.

The development of social skills in primary school children is essential for effective functioning in educational, interpersonal, and future occupational contexts. Core social skills such as communication, empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation should be intentionally cultivated through classroom practices, peer interaction, and structured activities. Although media exposure can contribute positively when content is enriching and accompanied by dialogue, unmoderated screen use may undermine opportunities for natural

social learning. Therefore, educators and caregivers must balance media engagement with active social experiences to foster holistic development.

Theoretical perspectives on media exposure and social development

Developmental theories emphasize that social skills emerge from dynamic interactions between the child and their environment. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory explains that social interaction underpins cognitive and emotional development (McLeod, 2025). Learning occurs within a zone of proximal development guided by interaction with more experienced others. This framework suggests that digital media (when interactive and socially engaging) can function as a scaffold for social learning.

In contrast, research grounded in media effects theory highlights that passive or excessive screen exposure may displace real-world interactions essential for social competence. Media exposure may reduce time spent in cooperative play, joint attention tasks, and conversational exchanges, which are critical components of early social development (Kim, 2023). Furthermore, over-reliance on digital communication may limit pupils' opportunities to practice nonverbal cues and emotional regulation. These competing perspectives underscore that digital media's impact is not inherently positive or negative but contingent on context, content, and usage patterns.

Ways children are exposed to digital media

Children are exposed to digital media through multiple avenues. At home, parents or caregivers may use screens as a tool to occupy children, support learning, or facilitate communication. In families where parents themselves frequently use digital media, children often learn by observing and imitating those behaviours, a pattern that has been linked to early and sustained media engagement. Several studies highlight that parental media behaviour strongly influences children's digital exposure; mass media usage by caregivers has been associated with aspects of early childhood development, and the cumulative effect of exposure to multiple forms of media increases developmental outcomes in both urban and rural contexts (Cong-Lem et al., 2023; Madigan, et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022).

At school, digital media exposure may occur through supervised computer classes, educational software, and instructional videos integrated into the curriculum. While these applications aim to enhance learning, they also contribute to children's overall screen time. Additionally, extracurricular use, such as games and online videos, further increases the duration and intensity of exposure.

Moreover, the peer environment plays a significant role: children often share content, discuss games, new animated movies and videos with classmates, and adopt popular digital trends that circulate within their age group. Such peer influences can normalize higher levels of screen engagement and shape the types of content consumed.

Major causes of children's digital media exposure

The increasing exposure of primary school pupils to digital media is driven by several inter-related factors. Firstly, technological accessibility has improved markedly, with smartphones and internet connectivity becoming more affordable and widespread (UNICEF, 2021). Even in low-resource settings, basic digital devices are often present in many households, facilitating early exposure. Secondly, the perception of educational benefits motivates parents and teachers to encourage technology use for learning and skill development, especially as digital literacy becomes a valued competency in modern education. Thirdly, entertainment demand is a powerful driver: children are naturally drawn to games, cartoons, and interactive media that digital devices provide, often preferring these to traditional forms of play.

Another important cause is the role of parents and caregivers in mediating media use. In contexts where parents use screens frequently for work, social interaction, or leisure, children are likely to be present during media use, resulting not only in direct engagement but also passive exposure. Parental attitudes toward technology, whether protective, indifferent, or permissive may significantly influence how and when children interact with digital media.

General impact of digital media exposure on child development

This is multifaceted, affecting their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Some of the impacts of digital media exposure on child development include:

1. Cognitive and academic impact: While digital media supports learning through educational platforms and interactive content, and enhances problem-solving skills and digital literacy when guided, excessive exposure can reduce concentration span and academic performance.

2. Social skills development: Digital media can influence how children interact with peers through educational games, collaborative online learning and exposure to diverse cultures and ideas. On the reverse, excessive screen time may reduce face-to-face interaction and children may struggle with interpreting non-verbal social cues such as facial expressions and body language.

3. Emotional and behavioural effects: Some children develop emotional regulation challenges when exposed to violent or highly stimulating content as repeated exposure to aggressive media may influence behavioural patterns. However, age-appropriate educational content can promote empathy and positive moral reasoning.

4. Physical health impact: This may include reduced physical activity, increased risk of obesity and eye strain and sleep disturbance.

5. Language and communication development: Educational media can improve vocabulary and reading skills, while interactive storytelling platforms support language acquisition. Conversely, over-reliance on digital communication may slow conversational skill practice.

6. Risk of addiction and attention problems: This may include uncontrolled exposure which may lead to screen dependency and reduced attention control.

Implications of digital media exposure for education

a) Curriculum and instructional practice

Modern education must respond to children's increasing interaction with digital technology. Schools are expected to integrate technology-supported learning such as interactive lessons, educational games, and digital storytelling. This aligns with the constructivist learning philosophy of Lev Vygotsky, which emphasizes learning through social interaction. The implication of this is that teachers should balance traditional teaching with guided digital learning activities.

b) Social skills development in school environment

Primary school is a critical stage for developing communication and interpersonal behaviour. Excessive digital media exposure may reduce pupils' participation in group discussion, cooperative play, classroom interaction, among others. Schools should encourage collaborative learning activities that promote empathy, sharing, and peer communication.

c) Teacher professional development

This has to do with teachers using educational digital resources effectively and integrating social skill-enhancing activities into lessons. Without adequate teacher training, technology may become a distraction rather than a learning tool.

d) School policy and child protection

Educational institutions must develop clear guidelines on children's digital media use. Such policies should regulate screen time during school hours, content accessibility, and cyber safety education. This is important because childhood behavioural development is sensitive to environmental influences.

e) Parental involvement in education

Education is not limited to school alone; parents must monitor children's media exposure at home. Home-school partnership programmes should be strengthened because this collaboration is important for child development and academic success.

f) Behavioural and moral development

Exposure to inappropriate content may influence pupils' behaviour. Schools should include digital ethics and character education in early schooling.

Implications of digital media exposure to counselling

Significant implications of digital media exposure among primary school pupils for guidance and counselling practice, especially in child behaviour management, emotional development, and preventive mental health support include the following:

i. Role of school counsellors in behavioural monitoring

School counsellors must help identify pupils who may be experiencing social withdrawal, communication difficulty, or behavioural problems associated with excessive digital media use. Counselling interventions can focus on early detection of screen-related behavioural issues and promotion of positive social interaction among pupils including behaviour modification counselling.

ii. Promotion of healthy digital media use

Counsellors should educate pupils on responsible digital behaviour by organizing digital literacy and safety talks, teach pupils time management for screen use and encourage participation in group activities.

iii. Social skills enhancement counselling

Primary school pupils need guidance to develop effective communication skills, emotional expression, peer relationship building, empathy and cooperation. Counsellors can use play therapy and group counselling approaches to strengthen social interaction abilities. This is important because early childhood social behaviour is shaped by environmental and observational learning processes.

iv. Prevention of digital media addiction

Excessive exposure to digital media may lead to behavioural dependency therefore, counsellors should provide preventive counselling programmes and behavioural self-control training which may include parent-child counselling sessions.

v. Parental counselling and home guidance

Counsellors should work with parents to create supportive digital environments by educating children on the dangers of over exposure to the digital media and by monitoring children's media exposure, and encouraging alternative social activities such as sports and

group play. Family guidance is important because the home environment strongly influences child development.

vi. Emotional and mental health support

Children exposed to inappropriate digital content may experience anxiety, fear, reduced real-life social confidence. Therefore, counsellors should use child-friendly counselling strategies to build emotional resilience.

Conclusion

Digital media exposure is neither entirely harmful nor beneficial. Its impact on primary school children depends on supervision, content quality, and usage time. Balanced integration of digital media into learning environments supports child development, while unregulated exposure may hinder social and emotional growth.

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