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# THE IMPACT OF THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT ON SOCIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN IN THE EMIRATI SOCIETY. A FIELD STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examined the impact of social media on social relations between parents and children in Emirati society. Using the Parent Mediation theory, this study analyzed how the digital environment affects parent-child communication and emotional bonding. Data gathered using structured questionnaires from 361 respondents revealed the overall positive effects of the digital environment on parent-child communication and emotional bonding in the UAE. It was found that parents regularly engage in open discussions with their children about online activities to promote a sense of trust and comfort. They frequently talk about online safety, leading to meaningful conversations, often focusing on how digital technology can support their children's educational goals. It is also indicated that children confidently share their online experiences, strengthening parent-child communication. Respondents felt that their children value emotional support when navigating the digital world. Altogether, these results indicated an overall positive effect of the digital environment on creating and sustaining social life among children. However, the negative impacts cannot be overlooked, highlighting the importance of parental mediation. Finally, study limitations and theoretical implications are discussed.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Parental Mediation, Parent-Child Communication, Digitalization, Quantitative Approach, United Arab Emirates.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have become crucial to children's everyday lives and experiences. They frequently use digital technologies to stay a part of the virtual world for different purposes (Ante-Contreras, 2016). According to Ali and Pasha (2024), the increasing use of digital technologies among children is marked by the enhanced usefulness in different dimensions, including education (Farhi et al., 2022), entertainment, information, communication, and others (Jeljeli et al., 2022) and also witnessed this use of digitalization among children, stating that children regularly engaged with digital devices and environments, whether at home or even in early education environments. Here, Lewis et al. (2024) cited an example of the launch of the iPad as the reformatory shift in the technology revolution that equally attracted children to become a part of the virtual world. Initially, this use was based on games and applications designed only for treatment. However, with time, its uses increased to the extent that they became a part of their necessities. Today, these digital technologies provide a pathway to education and information besides entertaining children about the world. Also, they help young users develop socialization and communication skills in the best possible manner.

Nevertheless, some studies also indicate negative aspects of digitalization on children besides the positive impacts, i.e., education, communication, and information gathering (McDool et al., 2016; Prakash et al., 2024; Steventon, 2021). As noted by Livingstone et al. (2021), there are some prevailing concerns about digitalization usage and adoption among children despite the prominent benefits. For example, online risks, i.e., exposure to indecent content, online bullying, and others, need careful consideration and strong parent-child bonding to mitigate the negative impacts of digitalization on children (Ali et al., 2025; Aljasir & Alsebaei, 2022a; Beyens & Valkenburg, 2018). As a result, these opposing perspectives about children's digital presence further highlight the importance of parent-child relations to ensure that this digital presence is safe and ensures the well-being of children.

According to Anderson et al. (2024), the use of digital platforms has drastically increased during the past five years. Conventional sources of communication, including face-to-face conversations or phone calls, have largely been substituted by digital platforms that do not need any physical presence. Notably, children spend a significant amount of their daily time on these digital platforms, aiming to share personal experiences, stay connected,

and exchange information. Studies also show that increased reliance on digitalization has affected parent-child relationships in both a positive and negative manner. For example, Abel et al. (2021) highlighted dependence on digital platforms further diminishing the communication between parents and children, adversely affecting the social fabric of child development and well-being. On the other hand, this technology also draws parents and children closer. As children seek guidance, discuss their experiences, and expect support and supervision from their parents, social media positively affects their social life and parent-children relationships. Ante-Contreras (2016) highlighted that strong parent-child attachments are crucial for their social and physical development, which is also a central focus of this study. A parent who continuously supports and guides their children regarding digital platforms can nurture robust relationships with their children, ensuring healthy social relations.

### 1.1. Research Aims and Significance

Based on the role and influence of digitalization on parent-child relationships (Everri & Messena, 2025), this study also aims to examine these impacts on children in the United Arab Emirates (Farhi et al., 2023). Here, social relations among parents are further categorized into two types: parent-child communication and emotional bonding. This paper analyses the effect of digital platforms on parent-child communication and emotional bonding from the perspective of parental mediation approaches. Notably, while studies (Aljenaibi, 2015; Gjylbegaj & Abdi, 2019) on social media use among children in the UAE acknowledge the effects of digital technologies on their communication and emotional well-being, the emphasis appears to be more on the positive aspects of these technologies. There is limited in-depth analysis of the negative consequences, such as online risks (cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content), and how these specifically affect the social and emotional development of children in the UAE context. This creates a gap in understanding the full spectrum of digitalisation's effects in Emirati society. Besides, previous studies have highlighted both the overall effects of digital environments on children (Ahmad et al., 2018; Dilci & Erani, 2022; McDool et al., 2016). However, there is a lack of research that systematically investigates how parental mediation strategies influence these effects. This study fills this gap by analysing how parents' guidance and discussions about digital use promote trust,

emotional support, and communication with their children. Thus, this study is significant as it highlights and provides an overview of the role of digital platforms in enhancing and sustaining family values in Emirati society. It also gives parents in-depth insight into how they can build emotional resilience among their children by acquiring maximum benefits from the technology.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Conceptualizing Parental Mediation

This research is supported by parental mediation theory, which emphasizes the effective role of parents in shaping their children's online presence and usage (Livingstone et al., 2017). This theory initially focused on children's exposure to television and the role of parents in guiding them. Later, researchers (See Clark, 2011) expanded the scope of this theory and guided aid use and support to analyze children's exposure to digitalization and social media platforms, especially in the current era. Clark (2011) suggested an updated understanding of the role of influencing and ensuring a positive, constructive use of digital platforms among children. It is also noted that conventional platforms like television and motion picture exposure among children are alternative means of social and psychological development. However, while the theory assumes that parental guidance inherently promotes positive outcomes, it does not fully consider the subtle cultural, technological, and relational contexts that influence its effectiveness.

Similarly, today, digital platforms are widely playing this role, further shaping children's social communication and interaction, serving as critical tools that are readily accessible (Beyens & Valkenburg, 2018).

According to Ali et al. (2025), parents are the supervisors and influencers concerning their children's online presence. To ensure constructive digitalization and healthy family-child relationships, parents bear the responsibility to ensure that the children use digital platforms in a balanced manner. Besides, it also helps ensure that children develop responsible and safe online habits (Youssef et al., 2024). However, parents are also accountable for affirming that children are not overly immersed in online environments, which can potentially harm family relationships, trust, and independence (Scorsolini-Comin & Grizólio, 2021). This paper is also based on examining what parents perceive about using digital platforms among their children and how this usage affects their family bonding and social relations.

This study critically applies the theory to the Emirati context, where cultural norms, family values, and rapid digital adoption intersect, to examine whether parental mediation strategies effectively support communication, emotional bonding, and overall social relations (Cabello-Hutt et al., 2018; Chng, 2015; Livingstone et al., 2021). By focusing on both the positive and negative impacts of digitalisation, this research tests and expands the theoretical assumptions of Parental Mediation Theory, providing evidence for its relevance in highly digitalised, culturally diverse family environments.

### 2.2. Digitization And Parent-Child Communication

According to Harris and Jacobs (2023), parents are accountable for guiding their children concerning their online presence and Internet usage, especially through the lens of cultural capital. This concept of cultural capital in the digital age suggests that success relies on having specific online skills and understanding how children navigate their online presence. These competencies are typically transferred and developed through parental influence, indicating the significance of parental mediation today. A study by Ali et al. (2025) further witnessed the effect of digitalization on parent-child communication and confidence building among children in Pakistan. The relevant study was based on exploring the parent's perceptions of online media users about their children. Data gathered from 12 individuals having children below 18 years of age revealed that parents preferred open communication and confidence-building approaches to ensure constructive and safe online presence among children. Besides, they also indicated concerns about online risks that children may encounter, highlighting communication as a critical technique to ensure positive online socialization experiences among their children. Another study Harris and Jacobs (2023) explored what type of communication and guidance approaches parents use to regulate their children's online presence. Data gathered using interviews and content analysis indicated that while parents mostly applied restrictive mediation techniques, communication remained among the most preferred approaches.

Study participants indicated that the most frequently discussed topics related to online privacy, the importance of limited screen times, and overall online safety. These participants also revealed that they discussed the role of digitalization with children and its usefulness for their further education and professional development.

### 2.3. Digitization And Parent-Child Emotional Bond

Emotional bonding is a biological process that remains in the development stages. It is significantly shared by communication between parents and children. The quality of socialization experiences further shapes and determines the strength of this emotional bonding between parents and children. This process is not detached from a child's digital experiences as technology has become a crucial part of their everyday life. Today, socialization intrinsically includes communication, and parents can improve its effectiveness by actively interacting with their children. In their study, Nguyen et al. (2022) examined the relationship between Internet use among children and parent-child interactions in Vietnam. Data gathered from the mixed-method approach revealed that digital platforms indicated three impacts: stability, improvement, and deterioration. Study participants highlighted common discussion topics, including housework, education, and plans. Positive debates, including

parents helping children with internet use, were associated with strong family-child relationships. Overall, these results indicated digitalization is improving and sustaining bonding between parents and children. However, Fayazi and Hasani (2017) argued that excessive parental control could also undermine family relationships, affecting children's self-esteem, instilling anti-social behaviors, and leading to decreased parent-child communication. In contrast, children who sustain a positive, strong relationship with their parents tend to show stronger emotional stability, improved online and offline social skills, and few behavioral problems. Hence, considering the study aims and cited literature, this study proposes the following hypotheses, while Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of current research.

**H1:** The digital environment positively affects parent-child communication in the UAE.

**H2:** The digital environment positively affects the emotional bonds between parents and children in the UAE.

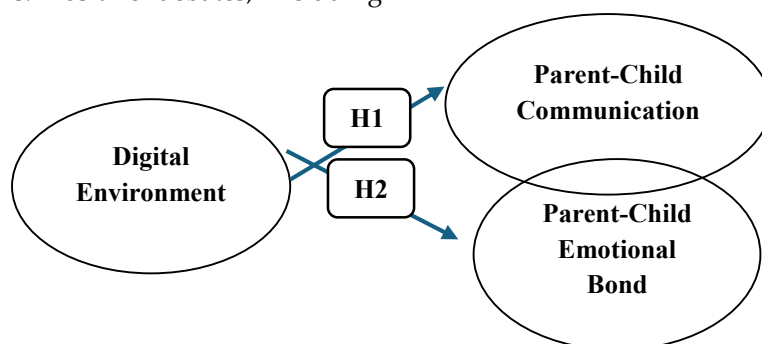


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Study Design and Data Gathering

This study involves a cross-sectional design as the quantitative data were gathered in a shorter time with a greater generalizability of results (Abbott & McKinney, 2013). A structured questionnaire was designed for data collection, while the items were employed by existing studies, implying their reliability and validity for the current research. The

first section of the survey examined respondents' personal data, including their gender, age, educational level, and the Emirate in which they currently reside. The preceding three sections involved items based on examining the use of digital environment among children and its effects on parent-child communication and emotional bonding. However, some primary editing of these items was done to match the current study objectives. Table 1 shows the study questionnaire items and their sources.

Table 1: Study Questionnaire (Items and Sources).

Variables	Sources	Items
Digital Environment	(Blumross & Livingstone, 2020; Youssef et al., 2025)	How frequently does your child use digital platforms?
		How many digital platforms does your child use?
		My child uses digital platforms for personal development.
		My child learns social behaviors from digitalization.
		Using digital platforms helps my child acquire information from across the globe.
Parent-Child Communication	(Morris, 2015; Shensa et al., 2017)	I regularly have open discussions with my child about their online activities.
		My child feels comfortable talking to me about their online concerns.

Parent-Child Emotional Bond	(Nguyen et al., 2022)	I regularly talk to my child about how to stay safe while using digital platforms.
		We have meaningful conversations at home about how digital technology can help my child's educational goals.
		My child confidently discusses their online experiences with me.
		Our relationship has strengthened as we share digital activities.
		I feel that my child values the emotional support I offer concerning their online interactions.
		Spending time together in a digital environment helps improve our emotional bond.

### 3.2 Population and Sampling

Data shows that 36,760 people residing in the UAE currently have one or more children below 18 years of age (Statista, 2024). Based on this data, a sample of 395 respondents was selected using Yamane's sample size calculation. Further, a simple random sampling approach is applied together with data from the respondents. Notably, a simple random sampling approach helps deter the possibilities of any sample selection bias, providing every individual in the sample with an equal chance of selection (S. Ahmad et al., 2023). The data were gathered from March 2025 till March 2025, using online survey services You.Gov UAE as a popular digital poll to acquire data for research purposes (YouGov, 2022). Once the data were gathered, the acquired questionnaires were carefully calculated. It was found that 34 responses were missing or not submitted by the respondents. Consequently, 361 responses were finalized, indicating a final response rate of 91.3%.

### 3.3. Sampling Frame

To further ensure the reliability of the study findings, the sampling frame was constructed to accurately reflect the demographic characteristics of the UAE population, especially those with children under the age of 18. Particular attention was given to distributing the survey across the seven Emirates, as well as accounting for variations in parental age, gender, and educational attainment, in order to capture diverse household contexts. This approach strengthens representativeness by ensuring that respondents reflect the broader population rather than being concentrated in a single Emirate or socio-

demographic group. Although the study utilised simple random sampling, care was taken to align with the proportional distribution of families in the UAE, improving the generalizability and reliability of the results.

### 3.4. Data Analysis Approaches

The data gathered was added to the SPSS and coded for further analysis using Smart-PLS for structural equation modeling (SEM). The analysis involved calculating both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics was mainly applied to calculate the frequencies and percentages of respondents' demographics. Inferential statistics was applied to examine the study hypotheses.

### 3.5. Analysis And Findings

The analysis of acquired data comprised first calculating the frequencies and percentages of respondents' demographics. As shown in Table 1, most respondents (70.4%) were females, and 29.6% were males. Concerning age, 43.8% of respondents were less than 25 years old, 23.8% were 36 to 45 years old, 17.2% were 46 years old or above, and 15.2% were 26 to 35 years of age. Calculation of respondents' qualifications revealed that most of them (48.5%) had graduated, 35.6% of respondents had a graduation, 10.8% had a doctorate, and 7.2% had post-graduation. Finally, 33.8% of respondents were residing in Ajman, 20.2% were in Dubai, 13.3% were residing in Ras Al Khaimah, 7.2% were from Abu Dhabi, and the same percentage (7.2%) were in Sharjah. Lastly, 5.3% of respondents were residing in Umm Al Quwain.

*Table 2: Descriptive Of Respondents' Characteristics.*

Variables	Constructs	N	%
Gender	Female	254	70.4
	Male	107	29.6
Age	Less than 25 years	158	43.8
	26-35 years	55	15.2
	36-45 years	86	23.8
	46 years or above	62	17.2
Qualification	Under Graduate	119	35.6
	Graduate	175	48.5
	Post Graduate	26	7.2
	Doctorate	39	10.8
Emirate	Dubai	73	20.2
	Ajman	122	33.8

	Fujairah	48	13.3
	Abu Dhabi	26	7.2
	Sharjah	26	7.2
	Ras Al Khaimah	47	13.0
	Umm Al Quwain	19	5.3

The second process involved testing the reliability and validity of the research instrument further to ensure its suitability for the structural model analysis. The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was first conducted in this context (Al Zarooni et al., 2022). Results of CFA indicated that all the loading values related to each questionnaire item exceed the threshold value of 0.5. Also, the average variance extracted values remained higher than the threshold value of 0.5 (Digital Environment 0.746, Paren-Child Communication 0.892, and Parent-Child Emotional Bond 0.860). The reliability analysis of the measurement instrument further indicated that all the Cronbach Alpha (Digital Environment 0.791, Paren-Child Communication 0.788, and Parent-Child Emotional Bond 0.709) and Composite Reliability values also exceed the threshold of 0.7 (Digital

Environment 0.800, Paren-Child Communication 0.853, and Parent-Child Emotional Bond 0.783). These results indicated that internal consistency between variables texts and measurement instruments is reliable (Amirrudin & Nasution, 2021).

Similarly, the findings from goodness of fit also indicated the suitability of the measurement model for the structural model (Chwialkowski et al., 2018). With the Standardized Root Mean Square (SRMR) value of 0.0042 (<0.08), Non-Fit Index value of 0.983 (b/w 0-1), Chi-square value of 0.5423 (<3.0), the results indicated a good fit for the final model. These results indicated that the observed values fit well with the expected values (Mérigot et al., 2010). Figure 2 shows the final measurement model, demonstrating the goodness of fit.

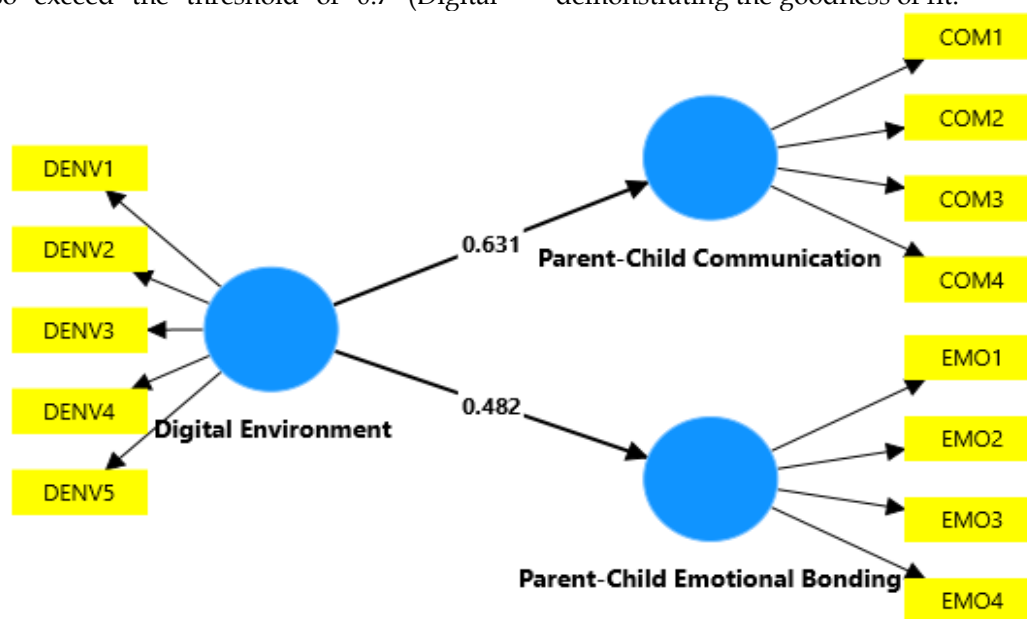


Figure 2: Measurement Model Testing.

Further, discriminant validity was tested using a two-criterion approach (Cheung & Wang, 2017). First, the Fornell-larker criterion was assessed. As shown in Table 3, all the squares of the average variance extracted values remained discriminant and not correlated. They were greater than the other correlation values given in the relevant table.

Besides, the Heterotrait-Monotrait criterion showed that (Table 4) the HTMT values related to each variable also remained lower than the threshold of 0.85 (Ali et al., 2021; Voorhees, 2016), suggesting discriminant validity exists in the measurement instrument.

Table 3: Fornell-Larcker Criterion.

	Digital Environment	Parent-Child Communication	Emotional Bonding
Digital Environment	0.557		
Parent-Child Communication	0.450	0.796	
Emotional Bonding	0.256	0.449	0.740



*Table 4: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio Scale.*

	HTMT
Digital Environment <-> Parent-Child Communication	0.451
Emotional Bonding <-> Parent-Child Communication	0.156
Emotional Bonding <-> Digital Environment	0.449

Before assessing the final structural model, the predictive power ( $R^2$ ) and effect size ( $f^2$ ) of the independent variable on the dependent variable were tested (Nakagawa et al., 2018). First, the Digital Environment on Parent-Child Communication indicated 46.5% (moderate) predictive power and 63.3% on Emotional Bonding (strong). The effect size

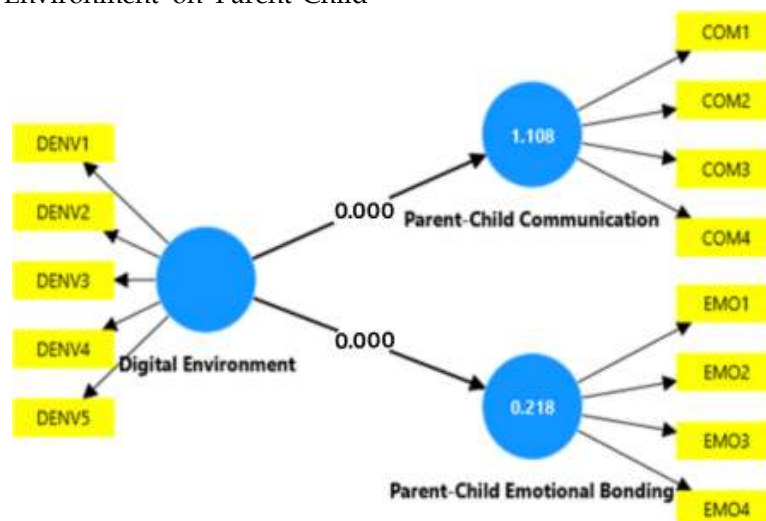
of the Digital Environment on both variables remained large, according to Cohen's criteria (Cohen, 2020) (Parent-Child Communication 0.361, Emotional Bonding 0.590). Table 5 shows the predictive power ( $R^2$ ) and effect size ( $f^2$ ) assessment results.

*Table 5: Results Of Predictive Power and Effect Size Assessments.*

Variables	R-square	f-square
Parent-Child Communication	0.465	0.361
Emotional Bonding	0.633	0.590

Finally, the structural model was tested by applying path analysis (Kelcey et al., 2021) and regression weights (Novak et al., 2021). Figure 2 shows the results of path analysis, showing the significant values. The results from the first hypothesis testing revealed the path value of 0.631 and the t-value at 18.970 (M: 3.865, SD: 0.769). Besides, the significance value also remained consistent with the p-value of 0.000, suggesting that the effect of Digital Environment on Parent-Child

Communication remained positive. The second hypothesis also remained significant, with a path value of 0.482 and a t-value of 13.871 (M: 3.991, SD: 0.555). The significance value of 0.000 also supported the acceptance of the second hypothesis. Also, the path between the Digital Environment and Parent-Child Communication remained strong compared to the path between the Digital Environment and Parent-Child Emotional Bonding.

*Figure 2: Results Of Structural Model Testing.*

#### 4. DISCUSSION

This study deepened my understanding of the digital environment as a crucial part of everyday life. Particularly, their importance and role in children's lives remained significant as parents indicated their wider usage among their kids and played an important role in their social development and well-being (Sampasa-Kanyinga, 2019). According to the

study respondents, their children use digital platforms daily, suggesting regular usage for different yet probable reasons, including education, communication, information gathering, and others. Besides, the respondents indicated that their children have accounts on more than three platforms, further implying that these resources cater to the young users' needs. The respondents strongly agreed that their children use digital platforms for personal

development, as they learn social behaviors from digitalization. According to the respondents, using digital platforms helps their children acquire information from across the globe. These findings indicated the strong usefulness of these digital platforms in children's everyday lives, indicating consistency with the existing literature (See Ali et al., 2025; Harris & Jacobs, 2023; Youssef et al., 2025).

The first study hypothesis proposed a **positive impact of the digital environment on parent-child communication**, and it remained significant. According to study respondents, they regularly have open discussions with their children about their online activities, and their children feel comfortable talking to me about any online concerns they may face. They further agreed that they regularly talk about how to stay safe while using digital platforms. Residents also revealed that they have meaningful conversations at home about how digital technology can help their children's educational goals. These results are consistent with the study by (Symons et al., 2020). Children accept their parents' authority on their digital media use, leading to the positive use of digitalization among children in the United Kingdom. These results also showed that parents' authority further affects communication and confidence levels among children, implying a positive side of digitalization in children's lives. Other studies (See Matsuda et al., 2023; Procentese et al., 2019) also support this notion and are consistent with the current study results.

Finally, the second hypothesis also remained significant as the proposed **effects of the digital environment on parent-child emotional bonding** in the UAE also remained significant. According to the study participants, their children confidently discuss their online experiences and their relationship has strengthened due to the sharing of digital activities. The respondents agreed that they feel their children value the emotional support they offer concerning their online interactions. Also, they indicated a stronger agreement that spending time together in a digital environment helps improve their emotional bond. These results indicate stronger consistency with the study by Kumar and Manikandan (2023), as they examined the effect of digital media use on parent-child relationships in India. However, the study Sampasa and Goldfield (2020) emphasized the need for psychological assistance for children using these platforms to ensure that this usage's negative effects and risks are effectively navigated. Existing studies also indicated a strong necessity to guide young users regarding their digital presence to ensure the positive influence of digitalization and

possibly nullify the negative impacts.

## 5. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The current research findings have significant theoretical implications, mainly focusing on parental mediation theory. The results suggest a positive influence of the digital environment on parent-child communication and emotional bonding, expanding the application of the relevant theory within the digital age, especially in the socio-cultural context of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The current study also affirms the applicability of parental mediation theory to the current use of digital platforms. It highlighted that parental mediation is about content control and encouraging digital engagement that supports emotional relationships and open communication between parents and children. This extends beyond the scope of theory to include digital literacy, emotional intelligence, and co-engagement in online spaces as key components of effective mediation.

Furthermore, this study adds to the growing body of literature (Aljasir & Alsebaei, 2022b; Beyens & Valkenburg, 2018; Bozzola et al., 2022), suggesting that digital technologies can be instrumental in strengthening familial bonds rather than eroding them, particularly with the help of parental support and guidance. It challenges the predominantly risk-focused narrative around children's digital use and emphasizes the constructive potential of technology when integrated thoughtfully into family life. This research study contributed to the theoretical understanding of digital parenting, cultural adaptation of mediation strategies, and evolving family communication dynamics in a digitalized society.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Digital platforms have become integral to children's lives in today's rapidly digitalizing world. They offer access to entertainment, education, and social interactions, providing several opportunities to children. However, with these opportunities come inevitable risks, including exposure to obscene content and interaction with harmful individuals and others, which further necessitate parental involvement. This study also emphasized digital platforms' crucial role in shaping and improving parent-child communication, finally contributing to stronger emotional bonds and improved confidence among children. When parents engage with their children's digital experiences through open communication and supportive mediation, it leads to healthier relationships and better social



development. Focusing on the context of the United Arab Emirates, this study highlighted how the digital environment influences familial relationships in a culturally specific setting. The results affirm the positive potential of digital engagement when managed constructively. Nevertheless, future research can analyze more complex dimensions of the relevant phenomenon, considering diverse age groups, parental roles, and socio-cultural dynamics.

## 7. LIMITATIONS

This study fills an important gap in the literature but has some limitations that cannot be overlooked. First, this study is conducted in the United Arab Emirates, which limits the generalizability of results in other regions. The second limitation is that this

research did not focus on any specific digital platforms; rather, it covered the overall effect of these networks. The third limitation involves using an single-method, quantitative approach that narrows its scope. Future researchers can consider these limits and replicate the current study by enriching the scope to acquire more in-depth insights. Finally, another important limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which may be susceptible to social desirability bias. Parents may overstate the positive aspects of communication and emotional bonding, or underreport negative experiences, to present themselves in a reassuring light. This potential bias should be taken into account when interpreting the results, as it may impact the accuracy of the reported behaviours and attitudes.

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