

Digital Parenting Strategies in Low Socio-Economic Contexts: Evidence from Ghana

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Abstract

The rise of digital technologies poses complex challenges for parent–child relationships; however, parents' experiences in low-socioeconomic contexts remain underrepresented in digital parenting research. Drawing on Parental Mediation Theory (PMT), this study explores the digital parenting practices of parents of adolescents in New Fadama, a low-income suburb in Ghana. Using a qualitative single-case study design, the study collected data through in-depth interviews with twelve parents and analysed them thematically. The findings indicate that parents are anxious and cautious about their children's digital media use and adopt a range of strategies, including overt practices such as monitoring children's social media use and covert practices such as checking their browsing histories. However, restrictive mediation, characterised by rigid rules and limited dialogue, dominates their approach, in contrast to parents in high-income countries who are increasingly moving towards guidance-based mediation. This suggests that the parenting styles identified by PMT may be constrained by structural conditions, including digital inequality, and may not be equally accessible across socio-economic contexts. The traditional, control-oriented approach prevalent in low-socioeconomic contexts contributes to parent-child conflict and limits adolescents' opportunities to develop the autonomy and critical digital literacy skills required in a digital society.

Keywords: *Digital parenting, adolescents, children, low socio-economic context, digital media*

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Introduction

The proliferation of media technologies has challenged the spatial organisation of social life, giving rise to new forms of activity and interaction. Mediated interaction impinges on social and intimate experiences, including parenting (Dalsgaard et al., 2006; Nichols & Selim, 2022). In many parts of the world, parents and their children regularly use digital technologies such as the internet, computers, and smartphones for various purposes, leading to the emergence of digital parenting. Digital parenting refers to how parents incorporate digital media into their parenting practices and daily lives, and how they regulate their children's relationships with digital media (Mascheroni et al., 2018).

Parental relationships with digital technologies and young children range from using smartphones or tablets when caring for children, using devices with children, to employing them to babysit children (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021; Fidan & Olur, 2023; Grossbart et al., 2002; Pratiwi et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2018). Parents of adolescents (10 to 19 years old) or young adults, by contrast, usually interact with their children through digital technologies (Osei et al., 2023). The use of digital technologies is beneficial for children and parents. Digital technologies enhance learning opportunities, improve communication, and increase access to information and educational resources. They can also develop children's problem-solving skills, foster creativity, and enhance digital literacy (Osei et al., 2023; Odgers et al., 2020; Odgers, 2019; Urbanova et al., 2023).

While digital technologies such as the internet and smartphones or tablets offer parents and children many tangible benefits, they could also harm children and make parenting more difficult (Barry et al., 2017; Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021). These concerns have intensified over the past five years as digital technologies have been adopted more rapidly in response to COVID-19-related restrictions on physical interactions (Nichols & Selim, 2022; Willett, 2024). Digital technologies have taken up significant amounts of parents' and children's time and have insidiously crept into family life. Family life today is mediated, and parenting and childhood have become intertwined with media culture (Savadova & Plowman, 2024; Willett, 2024).

The growing dependence of parents and children on digital media has attracted considerable scholarly attention (Jensen et al., 2021; Livingstone, 2009; Modecki et al., 2022; Odgers et al., 2020). Existing research on digital parenting has largely examined parents' online mediation practices and behaviours (Law et al., 2010; McAloon & Armstrong, 2024; Willett, 2024), as well as the challenges and risks of raising children in digital environments (Dawson et al., 2022; Fidan & Seferoğlu, 2020; Lau & Yuen, 2013). Despite these contributions, the evidence base remains heavily concentrated in European countries and other digitally and economically advanced countries, such as the United States of America, Australia, and China. Consequently, the literature remains underexplored on digital parenting practices in developing countries, including Ghana. This geographical imbalance has resulted in a limited body of context-specific evidence to support parents in low- and middle-income countries as they navigate the opportunities and challenges of raising children in an increasingly digital world.

The digital experiences of parents and children in low socio-economic settings, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, differ substantially from those in more technologically advanced regions. In this study, a low socio-economic context is conceptualised as a multi-dimensional condition encompassing both material deprivation and structural digital inequalities. These contexts are

characterised by low household income, limited parental educational attainment, insecure or informal employment, and inadequate digital infrastructure, all of which shape families' opportunities to access and benefit from digital technologies (Fauziah et al., 2023; Lou et al., 2024).

Although Africa still accounts for a significant share of the world's digitally excluded population, the continent also shows considerable variation in digital development (International Telecommunication Union, 2024; Malephane, 2022). According to the GSM Association (2024), approximately two-thirds of the population in sub-Saharan Africa remains offline despite being within mobile Internet coverage. At the same time, digital access is rapidly expanding in several countries. In Ghana, for example, 83.2% of the population has access to a functional ICT device, predominantly mobile phones. Furthermore, 68.2% of Ghanaians aged six years and above use mobile phones to access the Internet (Ghana Statistical Service, 2022). These developments underscore the need to better understand how Ghanaian parents manage their children's digital engagement in a context characterised by expanding digital access alongside persistent inequalities.

Amid the rapid uptake of digital technologies and their potential influence on parents' relationships with their children, this study explores the digital parenting experiences of parents in low socio-economic contexts. This research specifically sought to 1) investigate how parents perceive adolescents' exposure to digital media, 2) examine how parents mediate adolescents' digital media use, and 3) determine the challenges parents encounter during digital parenting. Understanding parents' digital parenting experiences in low socio-economic contexts matters because digital parenting styles vary with digital skills, digital parenting readiness, and parents' resourcefulness (Zhao et al., 2023). Furthermore, exploring digital parenting practices and challenges in a developing country like Ghana could provide a basis for developing evidence-based support for parents in low socio-economic contexts raising children in a fast-changing digital environment. The remainder of the article reviews empirical and theoretical literature, the research methodology, the study's findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Digital parenting practices and challenges

Parents from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds worry that their ability to guide and regulate their children's behaviour is waning because of the pervasive use of digital technologies such as smartphones and tablets (Fidan & Olur, 2023; Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021). In some instances, children begin using digital mobile devices as infants. Over time, such children integrate these technologies into their daily routines, making it difficult for parents to monitor and regulate adolescents' online activities (Fidan & Olur, 2023; Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021). Nevertheless, adolescents need support in developing critical mindsets to use digital media tools productively and cautiously (Trejo-Quintana et al., 2025).

Benedetto and Ingrassia (2021) warn that the fluidity of digital environments can reverse the relationship between parents and their children. Ordinarily, parents are expected to be more competent than their children; however, children (Generation Z) may be more competent than their parents in virtual environments because they begin using digital technologies at an early age. When children become more competent than their parents in using digital technologies, the socialisation

process is reversed, as children tend to support their parents online, thereby challenging the role of parents (Grossbart et al., 2002). Grossbart et al. (2002) argue that reverse socialisation is more prevalent in families from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, such as low education and low income (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021).

Again, adolescents' Internet use, especially social media, offers some benefits but also serious drawbacks. While social media may boost teenagers' cognitive and affective empathy and self-esteem, it is also easy for them to become addicted (Maftei & Diaconu-Gherasim, 2023). Some adolescents may develop mental health problems because of frequent social media use (Barry et al., 2017; O'Reilly, 2020). There are also concerns that adolescents may befriend strangers or join the wrong company online (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). Adolescents may thus face health risks and 'stranger danger' when parents allow excessive internet and social media use.

The burden of digital parenting is heightened among parents in low socio-economic contexts. Parents of low socio-economic status (SES) (low income and low education) lack the digital literacy skills to monitor and supervise their children's online activities (Fauziah et al., 2023; Lou et al., 2024). Such parents are often on the wrong side of the digital divide because they lack the basic skills to use the internet productively, which affects their digital parenting self-efficacy (Huang et al., 2018; Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). For example, parents who lack digital literacy are unable to check their children's browsing history or use software applications to monitor and manage their children's screen time. Such parents often apply restrictive mediation styles but do not communicate with their children to help them understand the reasons for the restrictions (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Parental Media Theory

Parental mediation theory is a media effects theory that strongly emphasises the role of interpersonal communication between children and their parents in mitigating the effects of media on children (Clark, 2011; Jiow et al., 2016). The theory posits that parents use interpersonal communication to intervene and reduce the potentially harmful effects of mass media in their children's lives. It further argues that such communication between parents and children about media helps integrate young people into society (Clark, 2011; Nimrod et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2023).

The foundational work on mediated parenting and parental mediation theory traces back to Valkenburg and colleagues' research on styles of television parenting (Nimrod et al., 2019; Modecki et al., 2022; Lee, 2012; Nicholas & Selim, 2022; Zhao et al., 2023). Valkenburg et al. (1999) proposed three mediation strategies parents use to intervene in their children's television viewing: instructive mediation, restrictive mediation, and social co-viewing. These three strategies have become the most commonly reported forms of parental mediation in the context of television viewing and Internet use (Nathanson, 2001; Ren & Zhu, 2022; Modecki et al., 2022).

Restrictive mediation, commonly referred to as "rulemaking", occurs when parents limit young people's exposure to the media, such as restricting screen time and setting boundaries on the types of content they can access (Nathanson, 2001; Chen et al., 2023). Parents practise restrictive

mediation by limiting their children's media use or the content they are allowed to access. Instructional mediation, also known as "active" or "interpretive" mediation, involves discussing media content with children (Nathanson, 2001; Chen et al., 2023). Active mediation involves providing children with supplementary information about media content, enabling them to view it more critically (Ren & Zhu, 2022; Chen et al., 2023). The third strategy, social co-viewing, refers to parents watching television (or using digital media) with their children while refraining from discussing the content. While feelings of closeness between children and their parents are enhanced during co-viewing, it also increases young people's ability to be sceptical about media content (Nathanson, 2001; Clark, 2011).

Parental Mediation Theory offers a relevant framework for examining digital parenting strategies in low socio-economic contexts, as it moves beyond traditional media effects to encompass the dynamics of parental involvement in children's digital media use in the contemporary digital era. As the theory has evolved alongside the growth of media and digital technologies, more mediated parenting strategies have emerged. For instance, Clark (2011) identified participatory learning as an emergent parental mediation strategy. Nonetheless, researchers avoid arguing which strategy is best, as each serves a different purpose. In addition, parents are significantly influenced by their demographic background, socio-economic status, and perceptions of the media when adopting parental mediation strategies. The emotional and behavioural characteristics of children also influence parents' approach to mediation (Iqbal et al., 2021; Rudnova et al., 2023; Griffith, 2023).

Research Methodology

This study explored digital parenting practices from the perspective of parents of adolescents in low socio-economic contexts. The researchers employed a qualitative methodology and a single case study design, suitable for examining social phenomena in depth and holistically (Yin, 2009). The study was conducted in New Fadama, a community in the Okaikoi South Sub-Metropolitan District in the Greater Accra region of Ghana. New Fadama is a densely populated suburban area inhabited by people of diverse ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Based on the 2021 Population and Housing Census (PHC) and the Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (MPI), New Fadama exhibits characteristics associated with low socio-economic status. Although it is located within the Greater Accra Region, which records lower poverty levels than the national average, communities such as New Fadama remain vulnerable due to multi-dimensional deprivations, including poor living conditions, high population density, widespread informal employment, and low household income (Ghana Statistical Service, 2022; Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2025). These socio-economic conditions are typically associated with limited access to digital technologies, low digital literacy, and reduced digital engagement. Consequently, New Fadama was selected as the study site for its socio-economic characteristics. Examining this community offers an opportunity to investigate digital parenting practices in an urban yet digitally disadvantaged setting, a context that remains underrepresented in the digital parenting literature (Huang et al., 2018).

Using snowball sampling, the researchers selected 12 parents of adolescents for the study. We focused on parents of adolescents because adolescence is a crucial developmental stage (Odgers et al., 2020). Adolescents consume substantial amounts of digital media content. According to the

World Health Organisation (WHO), adolescents are at high risk of developing unhealthy digital media habits (WHO, 2024).

Before data collection, we obtained ethical clearance from the Directorate of Research Innovation and Development (DRID) at the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC). The first parent was identified with the help of our field assistant, who lived in the community and studied at UniMAC, where we work. After contributing to the study, the first respondent recommended the next participant, and the process continued. By the 12th interview, data saturation had been reached, as no substantially new information or themes relevant to the study objectives were emerging from participants' accounts. Data collection was therefore concluded at that point. A total of 12 participants were sampled for the study, which is adequate for a single study (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), and data saturation was reached. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were used to gather data from selected parents of adolescent children. Data collection was conducted over two weeks in August 2023. The interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes and were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The researchers explained the purpose of the study to participants and informed them of their right to withdraw at any time. The interviews were conducted in Twi, the most widely spoken indigenous language in Ghana. All members of the research team were fluent in Twi; however, two native Twi-speaking researchers led the transcription and translation of the interview recordings from Twi into English to ensure linguistic accuracy and preserve contextual meaning. To ensure accurate and consistent translations, the two native Twi-speaking researchers independently reviewed the English transcripts and compared them with the original audio recordings. Any discrepancies in meaning, terminology, or contextual interpretation were discussed and resolved through consensus. This process was particularly important in verifying the accuracy of the participant quotations presented in the findings. The interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic data analysis technique. The themes that emerged from the data analysis are presented in the next section to address the study's objectives.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 shows that all respondents were over 30 years old, and eight of the 12 respondents were women. Their educational backgrounds varied from no formal education to post-secondary education. Response codes R1 (Respondent 1) to R12 (Respondent 12) were used in place of respondents' identities.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

S/N	Sex	Age	Level of education	Code
1	Female	45	No formal education	R1
2	Female	33	Post Secondary	R2



3	Female	33	No formal education	R3
4	Female	40	Junior High School	R4
5	Female	32	Junior High School	R5
6	Female	35	Senior High School	R6
7	Female	32	Junior High School	R7
8	Male	50	Post Secondary	R8
9	Male	37	Post-secondary	R9
10	Female	34	Basic	R10
11	Male	35	No formal education	R11
12	Male	46	Senior High School	R12

Source: Field Data (2023)

Objective One: How parents perceive their adolescent children's exposure to digital media

Adolescents consume vast amounts of media content and spend significant parts of their day surfing the web (WHO, 2024). The first objective of this study was to determine how parents of adolescents in New Fadama perceive their children's exposure to digital media, particularly smartphones. The analysis of the interview results revealed two main themes: anxious scepticism and cautious optimism.

Anxious Scepticism

Parents of adolescent children are deeply concerned about what their children do with smartphones, especially when they are online. Some of the parents' views are presented below.

The internet can destroy children, you know. They are children; their minds are not mature. So, some of them engage in bad behaviour only because they saw it online. (R5)

Left to me, children must not have access to smartphones, especially when they are teenagers. If a child would use a phone, they should be twenty years and above. At that age, they would have completed second cycle education (R4).

Another respondent, a mother, stated:

I fear that sometimes they would do something bad when they are online or that they would become so engaged they [adolescent children] would not want to leave the phone and go and pray or attend to house chores (R1).

Parents' views on their adolescent children's exposure to digital media, especially smartphones, reflect deep distrust and worry. Parents are concerned about what their children do on smartphones. They fear that children will learn negative behaviour from the internet or become addicted to it. However, some parents are optimistic about their children's exposure to digital technology.

Cautious Optimism

Some parents held positive views about their children's exposure to or access to the internet. However, their optimism is tempered by caution, reflecting low confidence in children's ability to use digital technologies, especially smartphones, safely and responsibly.

A parent remarked that:

Children benefit from using smartphones when you keep an eye on them, if not they download bad things on the phone (R7).

I know her, she's my daughter, we sleep in the same room, she'll never watch something negative on the internet (R9).

Another parent explained:

In my view it [the internet] helps them [adolescents] a lot in terms of learning. There are some questions my son will not ask me. He will ask the internet, and it will give him some idea about the issue (R10).

Few parents had positive views on adolescents' access to the internet. Despite their positivity, they were concerned about putting measures in place to ensure that children are not adversely affected by their exposure to the internet and other digital technologies.

Objective Two: How parents mediate adolescents' digital media use

The second objective of this study was to examine how parents intervene in their children's exposure to digital technologies and the forms of support they provide to their adolescent children when they use the internet and digital technologies. Analysis of parents' interview responses revealed that they rely on a range of digital parenting behaviours, such as conversations with their children about appropriate digital media use, rule setting, and monitoring and controlling adolescent technology use.

Conversations about appropriate digital media use

Some parents discussed the opportunities and dangers of Internet use with their children. Conversations often revolve around smartphone and social media use.

Parents of adolescents intimated:

Before I even gave him the phone, I sat him down and explained to him that there are both benefits and disadvantages to using a smartphone. I explained to him that there are some bad people on the internet. But you know kids no matter what you tell them try to explore themselves (R10)

I talk to them [adolescent children] a lot about posting things on social media like Facebook and TikTok. I tell them that it is Okay to post things such as birthday messages or liking a friend's comment but not bad things (R1).

You know upbringing of the female child is not easy, especially in communities like ours. So always I talk to them, and I tell them that the internet is good but there are also bad things. I tell them that I am guiding them now but soon when they grow, they can go anywhere because their mind will be mature. (R8)

The responses showed that parents offered general advice to their children about the opportunities and drawbacks associated with Internet use. However, some parents preferred to set and enforce stricter rules.

Rule setting and enforcement

Parents intervene in their children's digital lives by setting and enforcing strict rules about when children can use digital devices and the internet. The predominant rules and enforcement strategies that emerged from the analysis of the interviews are presented below.

She is on Facebook, I don't really know what she does but when I feel she is spending too much time on the phone I protest to her and then she'll stop (R3).

They [adolescent children] have phones that they use, but once they finish doing their homework their father takes the phone from them (R5).

I once seized my child's phone because she was using it to do bad things (R7)

The responses show that parents prefer to set rules about physical access to digital devices, especially smartphones. The enforcement strategies for these rules range from physical restraint to whining.

Monitoring and controlling adolescent technology use

Parents indicated during the interviews that they liked to intervene in their children's use of the internet and digital technologies by monitoring and controlling what adolescents do online.

I follow them [adolescent children] on TikTok sometimes; I am not happy about their posts. I don't like how they dress and make TikTok videos when I am not in the house. I am not happy about that as a Muslim (R3).

I check through the search history, but he doesn't know that's how I get to see the things that he does online. I have put a lock on some websites that he cannot visit. It is just like DSTV parental control (R10).

I ask them to delete their TikTok videos that I find offensive (R4).

You know once they are on the internet they see everything, both the positive and the negative. You know children when they are teenagers, they think they are grown. So, if you don't control her,

your dream for her will not come true. So, I do not allow her to use the internet often. It is only when it is critical like when she has homework from school even when I sit beside her whilst she is searching (R8).

The responses showed that parents use a range of strategies to monitor and control their children's online behaviour. These range from overt strategies, such as 'following' them on social media and asking them to delete posts, to covert strategies, such as checking browser history and setting limits on the sites children can visit.

Objective Three: Challenges Parents Encounter During Digital Parenting

The third objective of this study was to determine the challenges parents of adolescents face when intervening in their children's use of digital technology. Thematic analysis of the interview responses showed that parents faced four main challenges. These included parent-child tension from strictly applying digital parenting rules, parents' inability to effectively regulate their children's digital technology use, low digital literacy among children, and the need to balance trust with control.

Parent-child tension resulting from the strict application of digital parenting rules

Strict application of digital parenting rules, such as restricting children's access to digital technologies, often leads to disagreements and tension between parents and their adolescent children. In many instances, parents explained that they had to seize their children's smartphones or tablets because of disagreements over usage.

I seized the phone from them (adolescent children) because when you call, they don't even pick up. They claim the phone was in a 'do not disturb mood'. However my elderly daughter resisted, and the father could not collect the phone from her (R3).

They used to have a phone, but we have seized it from them because we don't want them to use it to do bad things. If they want to check something they can come for our phones (R4).

I once seized my child's phone because she was using it to do bad things (R7)

The responses depict parent-child conflict over smartphone use. The resulting tension can strain the overall parent-child relationship.

Inability to effectively regulate the use of digital technologies

Parents admitted that their efforts to regulate adolescents' use of digital technology were ineffective. Parents of adolescents explained that their children could circumvent monitoring and control mechanisms.

A helpless parent remarked:

Children of today can only be controlled by God and through prayers (R3)

Other parents remarked:

If you seize the phone, you do not know what they will do next. For example, they can be lured into sexual relations because of the desire to own a smartphone (R4).

I am unable to monitor what they do with the phone because I am often busy. But sometimes their father would ask for the phone and go through it. (R7)

The responses show that parents acknowledge the limitations of their digital parenting approaches. This is problematic because it suggests significant gaps in digital parenting.

Low digital literacy among parents

Another major challenge identified is the parents' low levels of digital literacy. Parents with low ICT knowledge and skills find it challenging to guide and support their children online learning.

A father explained:

In the use of the devices they [adolescent children] are highly smarter than us parents. Sometimes there are aps [applications] on the phone that I cannot access I call them to help me, and I wonder where they learnt all that from (R8).

Another parent quipped:

As I am speaking to you if you have any problem with your phone especially with your iCloud account, he can help you to fix it. He knows more about the technology than me (R10).

Parents' responses indicated that they were challenged in regulating their children's technology use because the children were more tech-savvy.

Balancing trust with control

Parents also find it difficult to determine the right balance of control to exert over their children, how much trust to repose in them to do the right thing online, and when to intervene.

When I see your phone and I suspect that you are doing something bad I will take the phone to check. If I am already in the room, you cannot lie to me (R1).

When she is around me, I can stretch my neck and look on her screen to see what she is doing on the phone (R11).

These responses show parents' lack of confidence in their adolescent children's ability to use digital devices responsibly and effectively.

Discussion of Findings

This study sought to 1) investigate how parents perceive adolescents' exposure to digital media, 2) examine how parents mediate adolescents' digital media use, and 3) identify the challenges parents encounter in digital parenting. Consistent with Parental Mediation Theory, parents' beliefs about the risks and benefits of digital media shape the mediation strategies they adopt (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018; Valkenburg et al., 1999). The present study revealed two overarching perspectives: anxious scepticism and cautious optimism. Anxious scepticism was the dominant orientation, characterised by distrust of adolescents' digital engagement, particularly smartphone use. Previous studies have reported similar concerns (Fidan & Olur, 2023; Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021), showing that parents often worry about online risks such as exposure to inappropriate content,

cyberbullying, and excessive screen time among children. However, this study extends these findings by demonstrating that, among parents from low socio-economic backgrounds, anxiety is not driven solely by perceived online risks but also by limited confidence in their ability to guide and supervise adolescents' digital activities. This supports Huang et al. (2018), who argued that lower digital parenting self-efficacy contributes to greater parental anxiety.

Unlike in high-income European countries, where parents are moving away from restrictive mediation towards guiding adolescents' Internet use (Kalmus et al., 2022), the mediation practices reported by parents in low socio-economic status environments closely reflect the restrictive mediation dimension of PMT. Parents commonly impose rules regarding smartphone ownership, screen time, Internet access, and online content. Parents' communication with their children about digital media primarily consists of warnings and moral instruction rather than collaborative discussion. These practices align with restrictive mediation, in which parents seek to minimise children's exposure to perceived online risks through rules and control (Nathanson, 2001; Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). Although PMT recognises restrictive mediation as one of several parental strategies, this study shows that parents in New Fadama relied on this approach almost exclusively, suggesting that PMT's strategy typology may not be equally accessible across socio-economic contexts.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that parents of low socio-economic status adopt a predominantly traditional or conservative approach to digital parenting. This is characterised by rigid restrictions and limited engagement with their adolescent children. Rather than fostering open dialogue, parental communication about Internet use tends to consist of unilateral instructions and moral guidance that emphasise the dangers of digital technologies, supporting Benedetto and Ingrassia's (2021) assertion that parental beliefs and value systems shape digital parenting behaviours. The exchanges between parents and their children, while often framed as "conversations," are typically one-sided, leaving little space for adolescents to ask questions, express opinions, or negotiate together. This approach reflects a broader pattern of asymmetrical communication that undermines the development of a shared digital understanding between parents and children.

In addition, parents frequently regulate physical access to digital devices, particularly smartphones, by imposing rules enforced through various methods, ranging from physical restraint to emotional appeals such as scolding. The enforcement of such rules underscores the reactive, rather than dialogic, nature of parental control in digital contexts. Parents employ a spectrum of overt and covert monitoring strategies. Overt methods include "following" children on social media platforms, requesting the removal of specific content, and engaging in visible oversight. Covert strategies involve more discreet surveillance, such as checking browsing histories or using content filters to restrict access to certain websites. These practices are often informed by deeply held religious and cultural values that serve as normative frameworks for guiding children's online behaviour.

Taken together, the findings show that parents from low socio-economic backgrounds in Ghana adopted restrictive or rule-based digital parenting strategies, in sharp contrast to high-income countries, where parents are moving away from restrictive mediation towards guiding adolescents (Kalmus et al., 2022). Restrictive digital parenting is the most traditional strategy. Parents practise

restrictive mediation when they limit the time their children spend on media or the content they are allowed to access (Nathanson, 2001; Chen et al., 2023). Overly restrictive digital parenting can hinder children's opportunities for exploration, decision-making, and self-regulation in digital spaces. This may also lead to feelings of resentment, anger, and rebellion among adolescents.

Regarding the challenges of digital parenting, the findings confirm that digital media have crept into family life to the point of impinging on parent-child interaction (Savadova & Plowman, 2024; Willett, 2024). However, unlike earlier studies, this study revealed that smartphone use is a major source of tension between parents and their adolescent children, often leading to conflicts that strain the overall parent-child relationship. While parents recognise the educational value of smartphones and other digital media for their children, they worry about their children's excessive or inappropriate use of these technologies and feel ill-equipped to intervene effectively. This tension underscores a deeper challenge in digital parenting: parental strategies are inadequate for managing adolescents' engagement with digital technologies (Fidan & Olur, 2023; Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2021). Parents acknowledge significant limitations in their approaches, suggesting systemic deficiencies in digital parenting capacity. A critical factor contributing to this inadequacy is the technological asymmetry between parents and children (Huang et al., 2018; Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). Adolescents, often more digitally literate and adaptable, can navigate online spaces with ease, while many parents struggle because of low digital literacy. According to Benedetto and Ingrassia (2021), this reverse socialisation and digital divide not only hinder effective monitoring but also erode parental authority in the digital realm. Parents of low socio-economic status are often on the wrong side of the digital divide because they lack digital literacy skills, which affects their digital parenting self-efficacy (Huang et al., 2018; Lou et al., 2024; Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). Compounding this issue is the lack of parental confidence in children's ability to engage responsibly with digital content. As a result, parents find it difficult to strike a balance between granting autonomy and enforcing control, further complicating efforts to foster responsible digital citizenship among adolescents.

Implications for Theory, Practice and Policy

The findings of this study show that digital parenting is shaped by both parents' digital competencies and the socio-economic contexts in which parenting takes place. This has practical, policy and theoretical implications. Practically, Civil Society Organisations working in Media and Information Literacy (MIL) should partner with other literacy-focused organisations to implement community-based digital literacy programmes that strengthen parents' digital competencies in underserved communities such as New Fadama. Schools can also reinforce these efforts through PTA meetings and other parent-engagement platforms that promote and model balanced digital parenting practices.

In policy terms, the findings make it imperative to strengthen parents' digital competencies in Ghana as part of efforts to promote child online protection, as provided for under the Cybersecurity Act, 2020 (Act 1038). Additionally, national strategies to promote digital literacy among young people should extend beyond the classroom to include parents, particularly those in low-socioeconomic settings, so they can better support their children's digital engagement. Digital

literacy should therefore be integrated into adult and non-formal/complementary education programmes as part of Ghana's broader digital transformation agenda.

Theoretically, the study pushes PMT beyond its traditional psychological framing. PMT theory has largely treated mediation style as an outcome of parental attitudes and communication practices, but this study shows that digital inequality operates as an antecedent structural condition that constrains the mediation strategies that are practically available to parents in low-resource settings. The study therefore extends PMT by proposing that parental mediation should be conceptualised not solely as a set of strategies parents select based on their beliefs about media, but as a socially and economically embedded process, in which access to technology, digital literacy, and socio-economic context jointly determine the range of mediation practices available to a parent.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations and Future Studies

This study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study included only one parent per household. This limits the extent to which the findings capture the dynamics of joint parenting, as mothers and fathers may hold different beliefs, adopt different mediation strategies, and assume different roles in managing adolescents' digital media use. Future studies should therefore include both parents to provide a more comprehensive account of how parental perspectives and roles interact to shape digital parenting practices.

Second, the study was conducted within a specific low-socioeconomic community, which may limit the transferability of its findings to parents in other socio-economic and geographic contexts. Future research should examine digital parenting across diverse communities in Ghana to determine whether the identified patterns are consistent across settings.

Finally, the study's design does not allow conclusions about the extent to which socio-economic conditions, parental digital competence, and access to technology predict digital parenting practices. Future studies could use quantitative or mixed-methods designs to examine these relationships and provide a broader understanding of the factors shaping digital parenting.

Conclusion

This study assessed the digital parenting practices of parents in low socio-economic status contexts through a single case study design involving parents of adolescents in the New Fadama suburb of Accra, Ghana. The study concludes that parents of low socio-economic status view their adolescent children's exposure to digital media with a mix of anxious scepticism and cautious optimism. This situation highlights a central difficulty in digital parental mediation: the tension between promoting digital literacy among children whilst simultaneously maintaining protective boundaries. In terms of digital parenting style, parents of low socio-economic status adopt a predominantly traditional and authoritarian approach to digital parenting. This is characterised by rigid control and limited engagement with their adolescent children. However, restrictive digital parenting is ineffective and creates tension between parents and their children. Digital parenting

practices among parents from low socio-economic backgrounds also limit adolescents' opportunities to develop autonomy and critical digital competencies. Finally, the prevailing digital parenting style points to a system of rules that prioritises control over collaboration and regulation over relational engagement, raising important questions about its capacity to promote responsible and autonomous digital citizenship among adolescents.

This study presents evidence of digital parenting practices in low socio-economic contexts, providing a basis for developing interventions to improve digital literacy and balanced mediation strategies. The study also extends Parental Mediation Theory by demonstrating that parental mediation in low-income urban communities is shaped not only by parents' perceptions of digital risks but also by structural conditions, including digital inequality and low digital parenting self-efficacy. The study concludes that parental mediation should be conceptualised as a socially and economically embedded process rather than solely as a set of parental strategies for regulating children's media use.

AI Use Statement

Generative AI was used solely for limited language editing, including grammar and clarity. The authors retain full responsibility for the content and conclusions of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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