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## Negative Impact of Unsupervised Exposure to the Digital World: Is Your Child Living a Digital Life? (A Case Study of Asian Countries)

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**Key words:** Children, digital world, parents, behavioural issues, physical risks

**Abstract:** We live in an era where we use several multimedia devices concurrently all day long. The landscape of the digital world has been expanding so quickly that it has made connections all over the world. This digital world is full of ideas, opinions, learning, experiences, opportunities as well as danger and harmful content too where some parents are completely unaware of their children’s digital activities. Children these days are growing in a media saturated surrounding where they are more into the technological stuff rather than physical activities. The aim of this study is to explore the role of non-supervision of parents towards their children’s digital activities. The research is quantitative in nature, since, data collection has been done through online survey with the help of structured questionnaire. Out of 1000,964 parents responded and they were all from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Results show that children are attracted towards digital world owing to the unsupervised role of their parents. The study discovers that children are exposed to the behavioural, physical and academic risks owing to their excessive usage of digital media. Hence, it can be said that parent’s supervision plays a vital role in upbringing of their children in such digital era of bombarded content.

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### INTRODUCTION

In this advanced society children are seemed growing in a media saturated surrounding where they are more into the technological stuff rather than physical activities. Instead of doing any other activity except sleeping, children are spending more and more time on digital world and they are exposed to this world without any pros and cons. In this high-tech, social surrounding where gadgets are found in several forms such as mobile phone, laptops, ipads, computer, DVD, LED, etc. and so the

youngsters as well as children are also found more attracted towards these gadgets while they seem habitual of these gadgets. Individuals of this generation, especially the younger one is known as digital generation or digital natives due to their heavy usage of digital devices as they are heavily surrounded by digital technologies and internet. This digital world is the result of influence of many new innovations and advanced technologies that make the entire world get connected. Children’s digital footprints often begin at birth with unknown consequences. Children’s exposure to digital media is the

possibility that they might mislead towards inappropriate content and other harmful websites. Children learn a lot from their surroundings by observing their siblings and parents. Nowadays every single individual at home is busy in their personal mobile phones and that they are so much busy in their own gadgets that they do not even know what is happening around them.

Children's contact with digital tools starts with their homes by getting into contact with huge ranges of digital tools while getting habitual in the long run. Children are not aware about what digital world actually is and what benefits and risks they will encounter from their everyday usage. Parents do not even check how much time their children are spending with media and are totally unaware of the type of content they are exposed to. Vittrup *et al.*<sup>[1]</sup> indicated that this is the main outcome of the daily routines of most of the parents these days and the fact that kids have a lot of media technologies present in their house. Holloway *et al.*<sup>[2]</sup> depicted that children's media usage takes place from their early age. Most of the parents have the habit of writing blogs and both husband and wife and even grandparents have the habit of posting pictures of their children and babies on a regular basis. He also pointed that young parents between the age of 25 and 45, who are themselves too experienced digital media users, they themselves provide ways to their children to have greater access to the variety of digital media tools. This created the actual digital (media) footprints for kids who are not young enough to understand or consent<sup>[2]</sup>. One of the main risks of children's unsupervised exposure to the digital media is video sharing sites like: YouTube, children are just one click away from the most adult oriented content which is present in the playlist. Children while watching the videos of their choice suddenly switch towards adult oriented videos because numbers of choices are given on these websites which often upset the minds of children and their behaviour is also affected. Young children spend their most of time on their parent's mobile phones.

While accessing through internet they get a reach to a number of devices through variety of digital tools. However, these digital technologies or media tools which are required to be private or disconnected from the reach of wifi or internet (such as video games, virtual pets, TV, etc.) are directly connected through online forums. With these complex access and huge amount of increasing technologies it is pretty much difficult for the parents of today's era to thoroughly monitor their children's media involvement. Some parents have lack of knowledge about the level of exposure digital gadgets should be given to the children who are at their early years.

One of the main reasons for children's switch towards digital games and cartoons rather than outdoor games is because of working parents who often have less time to supervise their kids during outdoor activities

therefore, they somehow push them towards indoor activities. The access of digital world and its impact on children has different effects on the children of different age groups. The most common effects seen on these children are eating disorders, aggression, hyperness, academic difficulties and so on. Strasburger *et al.*<sup>[3]</sup> also emphasized on further study on this topic and suggested that parents, policy makers, media, practitioners and all other concerned people should find out the ways to get rid of the harms of media while working on the enhancement of its benefits for children as well as adolescents and for the future generation too<sup>[3]</sup>. Findahl<sup>[4]</sup> also stated that those parents which are more attracted towards these gadgets are more likely to provide access to the latest technologies such as laptops, ipads, touch screens and so on. This study also mentioned that due to huge amount of exposure to digital world, children these days have a variety of technologies in their surroundings than the past generation.

This research examines the relation between digital media tools and children while exploring the main causes of increasing habit of children using digital tools. Also, the study aims at finding the consequences of children's unsupervised exposure to the digital media since technology has become an integral component of our lives. This study will add to the literature on children and technology since not enough work is done on the said issue. However, it is of prime concern to study the impact of technology on children's life.

**Literature review:** Vittrup *et al.*<sup>[1]</sup> suggested that in order to identify the psyche of the kids under the age of 7 years, it is highly important to consider the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of the parents towards the usage of these media tools (technology). Prior studies identified lack of parental awareness regarding technology and their usage by their kids. This research indicates that there is unsupervised behaviour of parents towards their children's usage of media technology. Some parents are completely unaware of their children's digital activities. The main reason behind this is the busy schedule of parents owing to their jobs; lack of time and energy make them unable to keep an eye on their children's digital use. They do not consider this issue important and forego their activity very easily<sup>[1]</sup>. Similarly, Teuwen *et al.*<sup>[5]</sup> highlights the potential influence on the children is from their older siblings' usage of internet, digital media tools and new technological devices. Having an elder brother or sister creates more chances for children to learn using digital devices and internet. Children learn a lot from their environment, surroundings and the happenings around them. They pick things quickly, especially from their older siblings and parents. Sometimes parent's habit of excessive usage of mobile phones gets converted to their kids<sup>[5]</sup>.

Montgomery<sup>[6]</sup> pointed out that many firms supply filtering, blocking and observation of computer coding to safeguard youngsters from harmful content or predators. Because online world is quite big that one can go far away through just one click. This study depicted that due to vast level of exposure to the digital world, children these days have a huge variety of technologies in their surrounding than the past generation<sup>[6]</sup>.

Roberts and Foehr<sup>[7]</sup> discussed that children's exposure to digital world starts at their early age and it keeps on increasing till the age of 11-12 years wherein they actually get habitual of using it for over 8 h<sup>[7]</sup>. Vandewater *et al.*<sup>[8]</sup> highlighted that in most of the houses in the USA more than one fifth of 0-2 years old and one third of children from the age group of 3-6 years old have their own personal televisions in their rooms. The common reason for this is that other family members of the house can enjoy their favourite shows of their own choice and it frees up the television for them. This study shows that 75% of kids watched television while other 25% watch videos and DVD's for approximately >1 h. This study also shows that children from age group of 5-6 years old use computer on a typical day for approximately 1 h<sup>[8]</sup>.

Additionally, Strasburger *et al.*<sup>[3]</sup> depicted that today's youth spends >7 h in front of television and computer using internet, also playing video games and using mobile phones which badly impact their health and well being. The most common effects seen in these children are eating disorders, aggression, hyperness, academic difficulties and so on<sup>[3]</sup>. Martellozzo<sup>[9]</sup> stated that by nature, the lives of children and young people have turned digital and so what they encounter online ultimately impacts their lives and vice versa. Children and young people are likely to be at risk of online harm (from gambling to exposure to pornographic content) and are adversely impacted by the effect they may have on their mental health<sup>[9]</sup>. Thus, Hatch<sup>[10]</sup> highlighted that a great security from children's risks can be parental supervision over how children engage with the technology.

This study also emphasized on further research on this topic and suggested that parents, policy makers, media practioners and all other concerned people should find out ways to get rid of the harms of media and they should try to increase its benefits for children and adolescents and for future generation too.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted on the basis of Cognitive Dissonance theory and Cognitive Development theory to find out the impact of unsupervised exposure to the digital world on children. This co-relational study is based on the Survey method, so, a questionnaire was designed on the basis of few elements to collect data from the parents who

have kids under the age of 7 years. Moreover, while using convenient and snowball sampling, 1000 questionnaires were sent to the parents via email and other social media platforms out of which 964 parents responded. Following are the assumptions made in this research study.

- H<sub>1</sub>: the experience of children with the new media is likely to be unsupervised
- H<sub>2</sub>: children's unsupervised exposure to the digital media is likely to affect their physical health
- H<sub>3</sub>: children's unsupervised exposure to the digital media is likely to affect their mental health
- H<sub>4</sub>: children's unsupervised exposure to the digital media is likely to affect their academic life

## RESULTS

Following themes were made from the survey.

**Usage of gadgets by children:** In a response to gadgets usage, 36.3% respondents have one child in their home who use gadgets while 35.6% respondents said that there are two to three children in their house who use gadgets and 20.6% parents said that they have more than three children in their home who use gadgets. On the other hand 8.1% respondents said that no child in their home use gadgets.

**Kinds of gadgets used by children:** About gadgets usage, 59% parents said that mobile phone is the most preferred gadget while 28% children prefer laptops and tablets. On the other hand, 7% parents stated that their children prefer video games on television whereas 6% parents said that their children use different gadgets other than mobile phones, laptops/tablets and video games.

**Preferred content:** According to the survey 41% parents said that their children prefer to watch cartoons more than anything while 23% children prefer to watch poems. Out of remaining respondents 19% parents cited that their children like to play video games instead of watching poems and cartoons whereas 17% parents said their children do not like to play video games nor do they watch cartoons and poems, they prefer something else.

**Personal belongings:** While talking about personal belongings, 75% respondents said that their children use their gadgets to watch cartoons, video games, poems or any other thing which is a source of entertainment for them. On the other hand 25% respondents told that their children have their own personal gadgets.

**Risks of using gadgets:** While talking about risks of using gadgets, 51% respondents answer was behavioural

issues are the most possible risk for children these days while 29% parents think that health issues are the major possible risks. According to 12% respondents, academic issues are also the risks, on the other hand 8% respondents think that their children are facing issues other than behavioural, health and academic issues.

**Behavioural changes in children:** In a question to change in their children's behaviour after using gadgets, 44% parents answer was yes while 23% respondents answer was no. Remaining 33% respondents were uncertain about the change in their child behaviour.

**Kind of behavioural changes:** About behavioural changes in children, almost all parents feel irritable behaviour, rude behaviour and aggressive behaviour in their children. On the other hand, some parents consider that their children become ill mannered and they speak abusive language and they do not actively respond to them.

**Keeping an eye on children:** Around 50.6% parents told they watch their children's activities intermittently, while 41.3% respondents said that they always keep an eye on their child's gadgets activity which is a positive step towards saving children from not letting them get engaged in inappropriate activities. Remaining 8.1% respondents said that they never check their children's activities.

**Unsupervised role of parents causes change in behaviour:** Among all respondents, 29% respondents agreed that their unsupervised behaviour is the cause behind their such behaviour, on the other hand 25% parents deny that their such behaviour is because of their non-supervision. While 46% people were not sure that their children's changing behaviour is because of their non-supervision.

**Access to the digital world:** While answering to the question if children should be given access to the digital gadgets, 63.75% parents agreed that children should not be provided access to these gadgets at such an early age. On the other hand, 15% parents think that children should have access to these gadgets while 21.9% respondents were uncertain about the said access.

## DISCUSSION

First hypothesis states that the experience of children with the new media is likely to be unsupervised. While conducting survey following themes fall under the hypothesis.

- Keeping an eye on gadgets activity
- Unsupervised behaviour towards children causes behavioural change

**Keeping an eye on gadgets activity:** As per H<sub>1</sub> it was suggested that the experience of parents towards their children with regards to the new media is likely to be unsupervised. So, under this theme it was found that 41% parents try to keep an eye on their child's gadgets activity which is a very positive step towards not letting their child fall into something harmful content. As the study surveyed parents who have kids under 7 years, so it is the huge responsibility of parents to give them healthy environment because these early years of a child's life are very important. Children learn a lot at this age from their surroundings, because these starting years are learning years. Besides, 50% parents told that they supervise their child's gadgets activity intermittently. While 8% parents responded that they never keep an eye on their child's gadgets activity which further create lots of problems for these parents. Their children start behaving like characters they watch on mobile phone or any other gadget. Their behaviour changes, they misbehave with their parents and do not even pay proper attention towards their studies. Some parents feel physical issues in their children also, so just because of not keeping an eye on their gadgets activity lots of issues emerge among children.

**Unsupervised behaviour towards children causes behavioural change:** As per H<sub>1</sub> it was suggested that the experience of children with the new media is likely to be unsupervised. So, under this assumption when parents were asked about the reasons of their child's changing behaviour, they agreed it is all because of their unsupervision. It was found that 46% parents were not even sure about the actual reason of their child's changed behaviour. They were completely in a state of uncertainty, whereas 29% parents agreed that their unsupervised behaviour is the actual cause behind their child's such behaviour. On the other hand, 25% parents denied that their child's changed behaviour is not because of their non-supervision and they are not responsible for this change. It was found in the demographic questions of the survey that most of the parents are doing jobs. They are unable to properly watch the activities of their children and they found it easier to give their children mobile phones instead of allowing or letting them go outside the home to play. That is the reason their children are attracted towards cartoons and other activities of their own choice.

Second hypothesis states that children's unsupervised exposure to the digital media by parents is likely to affect their physical health. While conducting survey it was found that 29% parents responded that they think that health issues are the possible risk for their children which include so many problems like eye sight weakness, headache, laziness, poor listening skills and also tiredness whenever they do physical activities or play.

Third hypothesis states that children's unsupervised exposure to the digital media is likely to affect their mental health. As per H<sub>3</sub> it was found that mostly parents believe that behavioural issue is the possible risk for their children owing to the usage of gadgets which means more than half percent parents agreed on behavioural issue. Increase in behavioural issues can be due to several reasons, one of the main and commonly seen reasons is watching cartoons. These days children learn a lot from watching cartoons since they like to adopt their favourite characters and stunts due to which they start fighting with their siblings and other children and as a result they get violent with time. Children start using abusive language and so aggressive behaviour is found most common among these children who are habitual of using gadgets. Those who use gadgets excessively are seen more aggressive than the ones who are less habitual of using gadgets.

Some of the other behavioural changes are also seen among children such as they do not respond quickly until and unless their parents yell at them, they turn talkative, they cannot sit at one place for a longer period of time, they get bored quickly and want new activities or things to play, they do not have patience in their attitude, they argue a lot in everything, they do not understand whatever their parents try to address them regarding anything because they just want whatever they want at any cost, due to which they become ill mannered and annoying at times. Also, they live in an imaginary world far away from realistic world.

Fourth hypothesis states that children's unsupervised exposure to the digital media is likely to affect their academic life. While citing the role of digital media in academic life of children, 12% parents believed that academic issues are the possible risk for their children for using gadgets. They think that due to excessive usage of gadgets their children are facing several academic issues like low grades; children find difficulty in doing their homework, they cannot concentrate on their studies properly, also due to weak eye sight they make a lot of mistakes in their note books. Additionally, language is the basic asset for every nation, in the same way when children watch cartoons, they learn different languages due to which they almost start speaking different words which does not sound good and it creates negative impact on children in the long run. In this study, parents were asked questions related to their supervision towards their children related to gadgets usage. It was found that in every home at least a single child uses gadgets and a maximum of 3 children are habitual of using gadgets. Only 8.1% parents said that no child in their home uses gadgets which means around 90% parents accepted that their children are habitual of using gadgets. Parents were

also asked about the kind of gadget usage by their children in which they told mobile phones are at the top list whereas tablets and laptops as well as TV are at second, third and fourth ranks, respectively. Around 59% parents responded that their children use mobile phone for their gadgets needs. In this survey it was also found that most of the parents are working parents and so, they are unable to watch their children's activities. Also, in a question to the usage behind these gadgets respondents told that their children prefer to watch cartoons on these gadgets. However, poems were on second whereas playing video games and other things were least preferred. In this study, parents were also inquired if their children have gadgets of their own, the study found that majority of children have their own gadgets. Only a minimal number of parents let their children use their personal gadgets which are 25%.

## CONCLUSION

According to the survey conducted in this research, the ratio of male and female parents was 30 and 70% respectively, out of which 55% parents were graduated, 35% were above graduation and only 9% parents were Intermediate or less than that. This means most of the parents were educated and they know the pros and cons of the digital world and their usage also. Most of the parents surveyed in the study were not in favour of providing gadgets to their children whereas 15% were in favour of providing them gadgets and some were not sure even whether to give them or not. Children these days are exposed to all sort of digital gadgets on a daily basis. The access to digital world and its impact on children has different effects on children of different age groups. Along with children parents also suffer, so parents attitude and activeness towards their child play a pivotal role in raising them in a healthy environment. Hence, the study discovered that most of the parents agreed that their children should not have access to the digital world since it creates a lot of issues for children along with their changed and irritable behaviour to health issues and low academic grades. The hypothesis is proved that the experience of children and parents with new media is likely to be unsupervised as most of the parents agreed that they do not watch their children's activities. It was also proved that parent's non-supervision towards their children affect their physical, mental and academic health since 61% parents said that behavioural issues are at the top whereas health and academic issues are on second and third respectively.

Hence, it was concluded that children are addicted towards digital world owing to the unsupervised behaviour of their parents.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Some recommendations to parents are as under:

- Parents themselves should limit their contact with their gadgets because children of such less age learn from their parents
- If parents are allowing their children to use gadgets, they must allocate some time duration for them, after that time children should not be allowed to use those gadgets
- While children are busy with gadgets, parents must supervise their activity from time to time
- Parents should encourage their children to do outdoor activities instead of making them habitual of digital gadgets
- Parents should replace gadgets with some attractive and creative toys and activities or story books

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