

Intersectional Dimensions of Digital Play: How Class, Gender and Morality Shape Postcolonial Childhoods in Pakistani Middle-Class Homes

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Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic research with middle-class mother-child dyads in Islamabad, this article examines digital play as a site where class, gender, religion, and colonial legacy meet in contemporary Pakistani childhoods. Combining Bourdieu's account of cultural capital with an intersectional framework, we argue that digital play in these households operates across a wider spectrum than the literature typically describes, from active imaginative engagement to adult-curated passive consumption to imaginative rehearsal of digital practice in the absence of devices. Across this spectrum, cultural capital is invested at the point of content curation: mothers select English-language channels, Western cartoons, and educational apps that align their children's futures with globally legible competencies. This labor is gendered, and the daily supervision of children's screen time is typically performed by domestic workers whose own classed educational trajectories make them unable to reproduce the capital they are hired to protect. The gap between maternal curation and caregiver supervision is not a flaw in these strategies but a mechanism of class reproduction. At the same time, mothers live with unresolved ambivalence, framing English-language exposure as protective of children's futures while recognizing much of the content as trivial, morally questionable, or culturally alien to Islamic family life. We conclude with implications for early childhood education and for research on digital childhoods in the Global South.

Keywords

digital play, cultural capital, intersectionality, Pakistan, postcolonial childhoods, maternal mediation

Introduction

“He responds with a Moo every time Ms. Rachel on YouTube asks what a cow says. It's so cute. But we make sure not to give him too much screen time. He only watches, and that too rarely, when it's time to eat - that's the only way he will eat something!”

Salma, mother of 2-year-old Musa

Salma's words capture a familiar scene in middle-class households in Islamabad, Pakistan, where young children engage with tablets, YouTube channels, and educational apps

under maternal supervision and curation. Marsh et al. (2016) define digital play as children's playful engagement with digital technologies; however, we use the term more broadly to include active engagement, adult-curated viewing, and the movement of digital ideas into offline play. We retain this broader definition because this spectrum is where class is reproduced, cultural capital is invested, and morality is negotiated. Recent scholarship documents diverse forms of digital play in early childhood (Chu et al., 2024) and shows that children's digital experiences are embedded in home routines and social contexts (Lewis et al., 2024). What digital play means, where it occurs,

and to whom it is accessible are therefore critical questions for understanding childhoods like Musa's, particularly given the dominance of Global North perspectives and limited attention to Global South epistemologies and contexts (Abebe et al., 2022; Fler & van Oers, 2018).

This study presents three interconnected arguments about digital play in postcolonial Pakistan. First, digital play is not simply entertainment or education but a strategic site where middle-class mothers invest in their children's cultural capital through English-language exposure shaped by colonial legacies. Second, these practices are structured by intersecting relations of class, gender, religion, and colonial history, producing contradictions mothers must continually navigate. Third, children are not merely passive recipients of adult strategies but active participants who negotiate, resist, and remake digital content in line with their social understandings.

In affluent households in Islamabad, domestic space becomes a site of glocal learning, where global digital cultures are embodied through local norms and routines, producing hybrid practices (Bird & Edwards, 2015; Robertson, 1995). Domestic workers are central to our analysis. In middle-class Pakistani homes, nannies and helpers are woven into daily life and, by extension, into the digital experiences of many children. While mothers often curate the apps, channels, and languages children encounter, domestic workers frequently feed, soothe, and supervise when screens are in use. We foreground this division of labor because it is central to our argument: the gap between maternal curation and caregiver supervision is not a flaw in mothers' strategies but a key mechanism through which class is reproduced across generations.

Our ethnographic inquiry was guided by the following questions:

- How do mother-child groups in Pakistani households engage in digital play at home?
- In what ways do class, gender, religion, and colonial legacies shape the practices and meanings of digital play?
- How do young children exercise agency in negotiating between global digital influences and local traditions?

This study is situated within Global South scholarship, a term often used for regions shaped by colonial histories and ongoing geopolitical inequalities (Kamal Pasha et al., 2024; Pinheiro, 2024). We recognize the limits of this framing: as Abebe et al. (2022, p. 256) note, "Global South" and "Global North" are socio-historically constructed terms that can reproduce static or dichotomous understandings of the world. Therefore, we use the term as a political and analytical shorthand rather than a fixed descriptor.

The article begins by locating the study within Pakistan's postcolonial, classed, and religious context and outlining a framework that combines Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital with an intersectional analysis. It then describes the ethnographic methods and presents four findings on cultural capital investment, classed mediation, Islamic moral negotiation, and children's agency, before concluding with implications for early childhood education and Global South scholarship.

Why Pakistani Mothers and Children? A Global South Imperative

Pakistan's place in debates about digital childhoods is shaped by its postcolonial history.

Following the Partition of India and the subcontinent's independence from British rule in 1947, the nation inherited English as the language of administration, higher education, and professional advancement, a colonial legacy that continues to shape middle-class life (Mustafa, 2012; Rahman, 2002, 2007). Fluency in English functions simultaneously as a marker of class belonging, a requirement for upward mobility, and a site of cultural ambivalence, associated on the one hand with opportunity and on the other with distance from local, Islamic, and familial worlds (Khurshid, 2015; Saigol, 2013). Middle-class Pakistani families raise young children within a contradiction that predates YouTube and tablets: English-language competence is necessary for the futures they imagine for their children, and it is also sometimes felt as an unwelcome intruder into a domestic life influenced by Islamic moral frameworks. Understanding digital childhoods in Pakistan is urgent because the nation's ongoing negotiation of colonial legacies, neoliberal pressures, and rapid globalization creates specific tensions around digital play that differ fundamentally from Global North contexts.

The Pakistani middle class is heterogeneous. Older, colonially educated, Western-oriented families exist alongside newer middle-class households whose political and cultural orientations are rooted in Islamic and nationalist idioms rather than Western ones (Amirali, 2022). Families in our study engage with global digital cultures from within this uneven terrain, and their practices cannot be read through Global North frames alone.

Our focus on mothers reflects the study rather than its recruitment design. Although both mothers and fathers were invited, only mothers enrolled in intensive home-based observation. In these households, the daily work

of deciding what children watch, which apps they use, and which caregivers may hand over a phone falls primarily to mothers, consistent with scholarship on intensive mothering as a gendered class project (Hays, 1998; Faircloth, 2014; Wall, 2010) and with its classed and religiously inflected forms in Pakistan (Khurshid, 2015). Fathers remain consequential, but they are not the primary curators of their children's digital content.

Conceptual Framework

Digital play intersects with multiple dimensions of children's lives, including gender, race, language, socioeconomic status, and ability. Consequently, digital play can either reinforce or reduce structural inequalities affecting young children and their mothers (Heaselgrave, 2023). We anchor our analysis in Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) theories of practice. *Habitus* refers to the internalized dispositions that guide families' choices (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72), while cultural capital encompasses the knowledge, tastes, and credentials valued in each society. Digital play in these households converts economic resources into cultural capital that mothers hope will translate into educational and economic success.

For example, using English-language apps signals both participation in global modernity and upward mobility aspirations (Bourdieu, 1986), while restrictions on screen time reflect Islamic values regarding morality. Religious markers and piety can and do function as forms of cultural capital (Franceschelli, 2016; Verter, 2003). Through digital play, families negotiate and accumulate multiple forms of capital while negotiating diverse value systems (Henward, 2015; Tobin & Henward, 2011).

An Intersectional Reading of Digital Play

Bourdieu's account of cultural capital illuminates how digital play functions as a classed investment, but it cannot fully capture the complexities of postcolonial Pakistani contexts. Therefore, we extend his concepts through an intersectional lens, drawing on Crenshaw's (1989) insight that systems of power operate not additively but through mutual constitution. This extension also allows us to examine how class, gender, religion, and colonial history are interconnected to produce distinct habitus formations and performances in these households (Bettie, 2003).

In our study, the most salient axes were class, gender, religion, and colonial legacy. Middle-class status makes English-language content legible as capital; intensive mothering norms place the labor of curation on women (Hays, 1998); Islamic commitments shape what content is judged morally acceptable; and Pakistan's postcolonial inheritance makes English simultaneously aspirational and alien. Although not a primary axis in our analysis, ability briefly surfaces as an important complicating dimension, suggesting that children whose communication, learning, or sensory engagement diverges from dominant developmental norms may encounter digital media in ways that prevailing "active play" frameworks fail to recognize. Intersectionality here is not a list of identities layered onto individual mothers and children, but an analytic tool for tracing how these axes jointly structure the practices, anxieties, and possibilities of digital childhood in Pakistan. It also illuminates how these forces compound and sometimes contradict each other, creating distinctive pressures on mothers' digital parenting decisions (Balles, 2022).

Digital Play in Postcolonial Contexts

Digital play offers opportunities for learning, entertainment, and social interaction (Dong & Henward, 2021; Livingstone & Pothong, 2022). It spans a wide range of practices that vary across regions in both available resources and their uses, reflecting different material conditions, cultural values, and social structures (Bird & Edwards, 2015; Holmarsdottir et al., 2024; Murcia et al., 2024). These practices range from iPad games to broken phones repurposed for pretend play and interactions with digital storybooks (Flint & Adams, 2023; Marsh et al., 2016). Postcolonial scholarship challenges the assumption that digital play has universal meanings, showing that technology adoption in the Global South involves complex negotiations between global flows and local meaning-making (Stoilova et al., 2020; Viruru, 2005). Pakistani families may have economic access to global technologies, but they navigate them through Islamic values, South Asian social norms, and colonial legacies in education (Tamim, 2021).

Digital play is structured by power relations that determine access, language prestige, and whose futures are valued (Edwards, 2013). In Pakistan, these are organized through colonial legacies that position English as superior, Islamic frameworks that define moral boundaries, and class hierarchies that govern access to "proper" education.

Maternal Labor and Cultural Capital

In South Asian families, the burden of children's digital socialization primarily falls on mothers (Bhatti et al., 2025). In Pakistan, mothers face dual pressures: the patriarchal expectation of sacrifice and neoliberal demands aligned with Western mothering ideologies (Hays, 1998; Sangha, 2014). For middle-class

women, motherhood becomes a form of intensive educational labor through which cultural capital is accumulated on behalf of their children (Henward, 2018; Lareau, 2003). Donner's ethnography (2006) shows how the "committed mother" is expected to devote extensive time to a child's academic development, while a Pakistani study identifies maternal education and involvement as significant predictors of children's grades (Riaz et al., 2010). English is central to this labor because colonial history has made it a marker of prestige, economic success, and modernity (Ashraf, 2008, 2022), helping to sustain a stratified educational system (Rahman, 2020; Zaidi & Zaki, 2017). Thus, when mothers select English-language digital content, they make strategic investments shaped by colonial legacies rather than simply choosing entertainment.

Children's Agency

While maternal mediation shapes children's digital environments, children are not merely passive recipients of these adult decisions. Although the gatekeeping role of parents and educators frequently restricts young children's ability to independently explore and creatively appropriate digital technologies (Murcia et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2023), contemporary scholarship demonstrates that they actively participate in shaping digital cultures (Henward, 2015; Livingstone, 2003; Yelland, 2018). Drawing on Rogoff's (2003) insight that culture emerges from daily practices, household digital engagement is continuously negotiated and shaped by broader anxieties, changing social norms, religious customs, shifting family relationships, and material constraints within each home (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Rather than being passive recipients, young children

interpret, adapt, and remix content in ways that resonate with their lived realities, creatively appropriating media according to their social contexts (Fantozzi et al., 2018; Shengjergji, 2024).

We argue that recognizing children's agency challenges reductive accounts that position them as mere products of adult strategies or structural forces. In their engagement with digital media, children exercise agency by altering narratives, negotiating meanings with peers, and exploring possibilities beyond adult expectations through lived experiences and local frameworks (Bird & Edwards, 2015; Yoon, 2023). This agency does not negate the constraints of maternal mediation and structural inequality; rather, it complicates the static understanding of childhood in postcolonial contexts. To examine how these intersecting dynamics unfold in everyday life, we used ethnographic methods.

Methods

Participants and Positioning

We draw on ethnographic interviews and observations with five Pakistani-origin families living primarily in Islamabad. The first author is a Pakistani early childhood researcher whose first language is Urdu but has lived and studied in international contexts. The second author is a white US-based researcher specializing in ethnographic studies of young children who collaborated on the study design, analysis, and dissemination. The first author recruited these women and their young children from existing personal and professional networks using a purposive sampling approach that granted access to families sharing similar socio-cultural positioning (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The data for this article are drawn from the first author's doctoral pilot study, an ethnographic case study project examining digital play in Pakistani middle-class families. The pilot study included seven mother-child groups. For this analysis, we excluded two transnational families (based primarily in the United States) because their lifestyles differed from those of families living in Pakistan. We selected the remaining five families for sustained cross-case analysis based on their geographical, linguistic and class similarities. All five families lived primarily in Islamabad and were solidly positioned within the Pakistani middle class. English and Urdu were the main languages spoken at home across all five families. Two families also spoke Pashto, reflecting ethnolinguistic diversity, but Urdu and English remained the dominant languages of the home, schooling, and digital media use across cases. One mother-child dyad, Salma and her son Musa, divides their year between the United States and Pakistan. We included them because their domestic life and practices in Pakistan, where all observations occurred, mirror those of the other families. Three of the five families were classified as middle class and two as upper-middle class, with class position operationalized through parents' educational attainment, household income, and observable consumption patterns (Lareau, 2003).

Table 1

Participant households included in the analysis

Mother	Child(ren)	Age(s) years	Class position	Maternal employment
Salma	Musa	2	Upper-middle-class	Works in the home

Rania	Ismail, Noor	5, 1.5	Middle-class	Works full-time outside the home
Anam	Mariya, Saif	5, 2	Upper-middle-class	Entrepreneur
Sehrish	Daud, Eesa, Pari	10, 4.5, 3.5	Middle-class	Works remotely full-time
Rabia	Haider, Ali, Zoya	5, 3.5, 2.5	Middle-class	Works in the home

Note. Children's ages are reported in years at the time of fieldwork.

, Despite varying employment and composition, the families share middle and upper-middle-class positioning, global parenting discourse exposure, and cosmopolitan educational trajectories.

Ethical Considerations

This study was exempted by the Pennsylvania State University Institutional Review Board in March 2024 (STUDY00024559). All names are pseudonyms. Mothers provided written informed consent for themselves and parental permission for their children. Per IRB determination, children under seven were not asked for assent, although Author 1 explained the recording process to them. Domestic workers present during the observations provided verbal consent as incidental participants. We note a tension worth naming: although the IRB framework positioned domestic workers as incidental, our findings revealed their labor to be analytically central to children's digital lives. We return to the

implications of this framing in our discussion of classed mediation (see Finding 2).

Data Generation

Ethnographic methods allow for sustained engagement with families in their homes, where digital play is situated within daily domestic life. Data generation occurred over four months, from May to August 2024, employing ethnographic methods within a case study framework (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Our key methods were participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

Author 1 conducted multiple home visits of two to four hours, observing digital play during routines such as mealtimes and transitions. Field notes were recorded immediately following each visit, documenting interactions, physical environments, language use, and the researcher's reflections and positionality (Emerson et al., 2011). These observations captured the texture of daily life: how mothers negotiated screen time during meal preparation, how children positioned themselves in relation to screens and caregivers, what languages were spoken during digital play, and how domestic workers participated in mediating children's media use.

Semi-structured interviews with mothers were conducted either during home visits or via video calls, lasting 45–90 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim (Seidman, 2019). The interview questions explored mothers' media selection criteria, their aspirations for their children's development, their concerns about digital content, their own childhood experiences with media, and their navigation of religious and cultural values in relation to technology.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative and inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We analyzed field notes, memos, and photographs from home visits, along with interview transcripts. The initial open coding (Charmaz, 2006) identified recurring patterns related to language preferences, religious and social pressures, maternal anxieties, class distinctions, and children's creative appropriations. Subsequent rounds of focused coding organized these patterns into broader themes: digital play as cultural capital investment, classed mediation dynamics, morality-modernity negotiations, and children's agency. Throughout the analysis, we attended to the multiplicities and contradictions between what mothers said in interviews and what we observed in their homes, as these gaps often illuminated habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72).

Findings and Discussion

The findings suggest that digital play in these households is shaped by four intersecting dynamics: cultural capital investment through English-language content and colonial legacies; classed mediation between mothers and domestic workers, making supervision part of class reproduction; mothers' negotiation of Islamic identity through selective filtering of global content; and children's agency across active play, imaginative rehearsal, and production, even without devices.

Digital Play as Cultural Capital Investment

Our central finding is that digital play in Pakistani households is organized as a form of capital investment, rather than simply

entertainment or education. Bourdieu's framework highlights how economic, social, and cultural capital are mutually constitutive: economic resources enable parents to purchase devices; this investment cultivates children's cultural capital through exposure to global media and English, which is expected to yield educational advantages, ultimately generating future economic capital (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). This investment plays out in intimate domestic scenes.

After spending some time with the children's grandparents, we moved to Rabia's living room in Islamabad. Beenish, the family's live-in nanny, is setting the coffee table with the children's lunch, chicken curry with parathas (fried flatbread). Before calling the children, Rabia opens a streaming app on the TV and plays *Smurfs*, an English-language cartoon that is currently her elder son Haider's favorite. She then called out to Zoya, "Do you want to watch Vlad and Niki?" as she opened YouTube to her daughter's favorite channel. "They won't eat otherwise," she explained, adjusting the volume. "I don't know why they like it. It is nonsensical. At least with other types of cartoons, children can learn some English." The screens flickered to life as the children gathered around their mother and nanny, eyes fixed on the bright animations.

Beenish and Rabia worked together to feed the three children. Beenish politely urged them to eat, while Rabia redirected through warning: "Finish quickly, Zoya, or I'll take the phone away." Ali, her middle child who is on the autism spectrum, circled his mother and siblings, intermittently glancing at the screens. Across visits, we noticed Ali's small utterances, "this is a sun," "It is a pumpkin," English vocabulary his mother attributed to the cartoons his siblings watched at mealtimes. For a largely non-verbal child, what might be classified as passive consumption was producing some of his

most audible linguistic engagement. The atmosphere was simultaneously chaotic and controlled. The devices served as both focus and mediator. The characters in both shows spoke in English, though no one translated or discussed what they were saying. The children absorbed language, humor, accents, appearances, and lifestyles that did not match their own. As lunch ended, Rabia wiped faces and hands while the devices still blared. "It's the only way," she repeated, more to herself than to me.

At first glance, Rabia's lunchtime routine appears to be YouTube as mealtime pacifier. Yet the investment lies less in the mode of engagement than in the content selected: an English-language channel over Urdu options, Western-produced cartoons over local programming, and a platform that subtly acculturates her children into particular aesthetic norms. Rabia's dismissal of Vlad and Niki as "nonsensical" suggests that English-language form carries more weight than substance. Even when a show fails her pedagogical standards, English remains the logic through which screen use is legitimized. Entertainment and distraction, then, are not outside cultural capital; they are part of how it is reproduced. Across our data, this Bourdieusian investment is made at the moment of curation and carried through the mundane rhythms of caregiving and domestic life.

Pakistani families cast digital media in binaries: either an English-learning tool or distraction from 'real' learning. These distinctions are not unusual, but English-language instruction takes on specific weight in postcolonial contexts where education remains a primary route to upward mobility. This binary produces parental guilt; mothers' discomfort with home media use signals presumed parental competence (Balleys, 2022). However, mothers channel social and economic aspirations through

their children's media habits. As Sehrish, a working mother of three, shared: "They've learned really big words from cartoons. My 4-year-old will say, 'this is outrageous!' They've learned concepts like firefighting. They know what a fire extinguisher is, even though they haven't been exposed to it by me." Sehrish's pride and satisfaction shine through when discussing her children's ability to use English vocabulary acquired from digital content.

In Anam's home, contradictions emerge more sharply. As Saif's nanny walked him to the garden, she showed him his favorite YouTube channel on the iPad. Despite relying on digital media, Anam shook her head: "It's such a waste of time, honestly. They should be doing something productive, not just sitting glued to the screens like this." Her critique extended to herself: "I don't want them to end up like us."

Moments later, Mariya returned from her room draped in a sparkly dress, tiara, and imitation jewelry. She struck poses and narrated an elaborate story in English, mimicking phrases and mannerisms from her favorite cartoon characters. Anam told me with pride, "Mariya has been speaking such good English, sometimes better than Urdu or Pashto even, it's probably because of all the cartoons she watches, and the school has had a good impact on her too."

Mothers' preference for English-language cartoons over Urdu reflects internalized colonial hierarchies that continue to structure Pakistani society. This preference is not about language learning per se, but about positioning children within social hierarchies where English signals class status, educational quality, and future opportunity. This opens global worlds while potentially distancing children from local linguistic and cultural resources, creating a form of cultural alienation.

Classed Mediation: Hidden Dynamics

Our second key finding exposes a contradiction: educated mothers often strategize digital content, while domestic workers mediate children's actual daily screen use. Class divisions therefore extend into children's digital experiences in overlooked ways. Mothers carefully curate English-language programming, yet nannies often spend more time with children, mediating screens without formal English education or knowledge of apps' educational value. This classed mediation becomes visible during everyday routines:

"Musa Sahab, dekho Rachel kia keh rahi hai (look what Ms. Rachel is saying)," Taj, the nanny, tried to get Musa's attention so he would eat. Musa was buckled into his highchair while Taj fed him paratha and egg by hand. Salma echoed Taj's words in English and Pashto, languages spoken in Musa's family. Taj, a middle-aged woman from the rural outskirts of Peshawar, speaks Siraiiki and a different dialect of Pashto than the family. She does not speak English, but in my presence draws on an emergent Urdu repertoire to communicate with me. Not understanding what Musa's favorite digital friend says, Taj mimics Ms. Rachel's actions and words as best she can to fulfill her childcare duties.

When domestic workers use devices to occupy children or manage their attention, such practices are often interpreted as neglectful. This judgment is deeply classed: identical practices are read differently depending on who performs them. When educated mothers use digital play, they frame it as scaffolding English literacy, whereas comparable practices by domestic workers are recast as irresponsible childcare. As Anam stated firmly:

The nannies are not allowed to show their phones to the kids, because I have no idea what they have on their phones, they have TikTok, they have YouTube, God knows what the content is, so they are not allowed to show their phones to the kids.

In the interview, she later linked this to worries about “polished” language, explaining that she prefers to curate media almost exclusively in English. This complicates accounts of maternal mediation: the gap between intention and practice is part of how class reproduction works. The ability to identify educational apps, interpret English accents and reading levels, and judge whether content fits middle-class aesthetic and moral expectations is itself embodied cultural capital. When screen time is supervised by someone without access to these resources, the gap between curation and consumption becomes the condition under which maternal cultural capital operates.

Negotiating Morality and Modernity

The third finding highlights the contradictory pressures mothers navigate as they use English-language content to position children as globally competitive while protecting them from Western values they perceive as threats to Islamic identity and practice. Islamic frameworks shape this engagement: mothers monitor and censor content that conflicts with religious or cultural values, including material depicting Western sexuality or consumerism (Dato, 2010). Digital curation thus becomes an act of both aspiration and protection, opening certain doors for children while deliberately closing others.

These tensions are not unique to Pakistan. Pham’s (2024) study of Vietnamese parents documents a comparable negotiation

between global exposure and cultural protection, suggesting that this balancing act is a broader feature of parenting in postcolonial societies. These mothers’ filtering decisions cannot be read through class, religion, or gender alone, but through their entanglement. An English-language YouTube channel is classed currency; Western depictions of sexuality activate religious anxiety; and deciding what stays or gets blocked is mothers’ work. Anam, who describes herself as “conservative” about her children’s digital media use, shared her dismay at something she deemed inappropriate:

I saw the mom wearing, like, a really low tank top, and her entire cleavage was showing... And for a minute, I was very uncomfortable, and I thought, okay, this will go away, but it wasn't going away, and it was on the kids' YouTube channel. Somehow, that really got to me, and I blocked that channel, because my kids kept watching, and I was feeling extremely uncomfortable.

Although Rabia often notes digital play’s positive effects on her children’s language skills, she remains disgruntled by the unwanted exposure that comes with it:

The biggest challenge for me as a Pakistani mother is how to tackle the exposure that children are getting from the media. We are a religious family and there is a lot of information; you know that I don't want my children to be exposed to. I want to guard them from the evils of society.

Rather than rejecting modernity or technology outright, mothers filter content through religious and cultural lenses, actively constructing Islamic identity. They may approve animated content teaching English or

mathematics while forbidding shows perceived as morally corrupting. This selective appropriation reflects Robertson's (1995) glocalization, where global technologies are transformed through local meaning-making. Yet selective filtering does not resolve conflict.

These accounts reveal tensions mothers live rather than resolve. In Bakhtin's (1981) terms, their negotiations are dialogic and heteroglossic: English signifies future-making capital, while the content through which it is accessed may appear trivial, morally suspect, or culturally alien. English thus legitimizes screen use even when a show fails mothers' pedagogical standards. Scholars of digital parenthood describe this coexistence of instrumental benefit and moral cost as maternal ambivalence (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). In our data, ambivalence is not transitional; it is the ongoing condition under which these mothers work.

Children as Creative Agents

Our fourth key finding challenges deterministic accounts by demonstrating children's active agency in negotiating digital spaces. While mothers curate content with aspirations in mind, children negotiate with, resist, and transform what they watch, becoming co-constructors rather than mere recipients. Young children draw on available resources to construct meaning from their lived experiences.

This sweltering May evening in Rania's home unfolded like a whirlwind. She darted between the kitchen and the living room, balancing Noor on her hip while hunting for clean clothes and warming up a bottle of milk. The bell rang, puzzling her. She was greeted by her friend who had received an unexpected invitation: five-year-old Ismail had asked the voice assistant on his mother's phone to dial his

number so he could come over to play. While this wasn't how she had envisioned wrapping up a long workday, she put the children's favorite cartoon on the television, hoping she could relax a little. As Noor and Ismail began to sing along to the familiar tune, she brought a tray of snacks and some juice for her guests. Her friend noted, "Ismail called me in English!" "At least he is learning something good from all those failed conversations with Siri!" Rania chuckled.

At Rania's home on another visit, Ismail demonstrates this negotiation through code-switching between English and Urdu. Ismail is jumping about on the bed in his room and the sofas in the living room, clutching his mother's mobile phone, his small fingers hovering over the screen. "Siri, tell me a joke," he demands, his English careful but determined. Siri complies with a knock-knock joke. Ismail's face lights up. "Kia keh rahi hai? (What is she saying?)," he asks in Urdu. His mother warns him from a distance to not call anyone by accident. "Call Baba," he says. Nothing happens. He frowns, turning to me, looking for an answer. I explain that the number is probably saved as something else. He nods, accepts this limitation, and asks Siri for another joke. This time, the joke is longer and more complex. The English is moving too quickly, the vocabulary unfamiliar. Frustrated, he turns to his mother, "Mama, kia keh rahi hai?" A few moments later, "Siri ko kaho ship ki story sunaye; Aap kaho. Aap ki baat samjhay gi." Ismail asks me in Urdu to tell Siri to tell a story about a ship; he has made an assessment that I might have better luck, possibly because adults speak English better.

This vignette demonstrates children's strategic navigation of multilingual digital environments. They are not passive consumers but active agents who recognize and capitalize on differential competencies among adults,

leveraging social hierarchies of language competence to access adult expertise.

Haider tumbles out of the car as soon as it pulls into the driveway. Before his mother can even unbuckle his younger siblings, he's already made his demand: "Give me my police car and my phone." It's a non-negotiable ritual. His mother reaches into her handbag and retrieves the battered police car and an old remote control- his mobile phone. Haider begins his performance. Within minutes, he's pressing buttons with theatrical precision, his small voice taking on a different tone, deep and authoritative. "Hello Humayun," he announces into the remote, addressing his grandfather's brother informally. "Yes, yes, the work is done." He pauses, listening to an imaginary voice; his face is serious with concentration. "Humayun, there's one problem," he continues. "Khala (his aunt) is having a wedding in the mosque, but she does not want to invite you. She says no." He holds the remote away from his ear, shaking his head with disapproval. "I'm telling her she must invite you. You have to come. I'm convincing her." His voice carries insistence, as if he alone holds the power to mediate this family conflict.

His intonation and the pauses he leaves for responses only he can hear suggest that he has mastered the mimicry and citationality of his grandfather's voice (Bakhtin, 1981). "He watches Abba (my father) on the phone every day," Rabia explains, "now he sounds exactly like him when he plays. It's like he has absorbed Abba's entire personality." Haider is rehearsing more than just a phone conversation. He is practicing authority and the subtle art of family negotiation. He is learning what it means to be listened to, to solve conflicts, to hold the threads of family obligation in his small hands. In this imaginative space, the problem of an invitation to a make-believe wedding illuminates how he has picked up social

events and their importance in his family setting.

This vignette sits at the boundary of what digital play means. The remote is not functioning as a digital device; it is a prop. Yet the play is saturated with digital logic: Haider reproduces the choreography of screen-mediated communication, the pauses for an unheard voice, the intonation, and the held-phone posture learned from watching his grandfather on actual calls. The digital is present as embodied practice, not active medium. This extends the spectrum we set out earlier: digital play includes active engagement, curated consumption, and imaginative rehearsals of digital practice without digital hardware. Children are learning not just content but complex social structures, practicing roles they observe in their environments (Henward, 2015).

Conclusion

Research on children's digital practices in the Global South, especially Pakistan, remains limited. Existing scholarship often focuses either on classed inequalities in access to technology (Lythreath et al., 2022) or on developmental concerns about screen time (Kerai et al., 2022), obscuring the social meanings and everyday practices surrounding media use. Drawing on participant observation and interviews with five families in Pakistani homes, we show that digital play is a site where multiple systems of power intersect and are negotiated. It functions simultaneously as cultural-capital cultivation shaped by colonial legacies, morality-modernity negotiation within Islamic frameworks, maternal identity performance under gendered expectations, and children's creative agency despite structural constraints.

Our intersectional analysis shows that these forces do not operate independently but compound and contradict one another. Mothers' judgments about children's digital engagement are shaped through the intersection of class, gendered caregiving, religion, colonial language hierarchies, and educational background. The reliance on domestic workers to supervise children's daily screen experiences produces a further contradiction: those strategizing cultural-capital cultivation are often not those implementing it. Digital practices thus become sites where class hierarchies are both reproduced and contested. At the same time, children's creative agency complicates adult strategies, demanding a more nuanced understanding of how they navigate between adult authority, global media cultures, and local meaning-making practices. Together, these findings show digital childhoods in postcolonial contexts as sites where global and local, modern and traditional, religious and secular intersect.

Implications for Early Childhood Education

This study challenges dominant framings of digital play in early childhood education in three ways. First, digital play cannot be understood separately from the social, economic, and historical forces shaping families' lives. In Pakistani homes, digital media bridges formal educational aspirations and informal play, with mothers scaffolding children's language, digital literacies, and cultural identities through media choices. Second, these practices challenge the view that screen time simply distracts from real learning (Heaselgrave, 2023). Instead, digital play can be a space where children build knowledge through multiple modes shaped by family values, economic aspirations, and everyday routines. Examining how screen use connects to family values,

economic goals, and daily life offers important insights for teachers, curriculum makers, and policy officials seeking to create learning environments that reflect children's lived realities. Third, recognizing children as creative agents rather than passive subjects deepens understanding of digital childhood as a site of contestation, learning, and hybrid cultural production (Garayova, 2024). Educational approaches must therefore attend both to children's agency and to the structural forces that constrain it.

Future Directions

Future research should examine fathers' perspectives, since only mothers enrolled despite the recruitment of both parents. Another important direction is to examine how digital play is shaped in working-class, rural, and otherwise differently situated Pakistani families. Finally, Ali's vocabulary acquisition suggests that neurodiverse children may encounter digital media in distinctive ways; although theorizing disability was beyond the scope of this study, this remains an important area for future research..

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