

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS IN THE PURPLE ELEPHANT SAMAKEE, NONTABURI, THAILAND IN MANAGING PRESCHOOLER'S SCREEN TIME: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored how parents understand and practice digital literacy in mediating young children's screen exposure and digital engagement within early childhood contexts. With the increasing presence of digital devices in family life, parents play a central role in guiding children's interaction with digital media while balancing its educational benefits and potential risks. The study aimed to examine parents' lived experiences, perceptions, and strategies in managing children's screen use. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed, and data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews with parents of children under five years old. The interviews focused on participants' understanding of digital literacy, their concerns regarding screen exposure, and the strategies they use at home to regulate or guide digital media use. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings across participants' experiences. The findings revealed that parents view digital literacy as responsible guidance and decision-making rather than technical skill. They demonstrate awareness of both benefits and risks of screen use and attempt to balance learning opportunities with screen time limitations. Parents employ strategies such as co-viewing, setting boundaries, communication, and guided use to support children's digital habits. However, their practices are influenced by contextual factors such as caregiving responsibilities and household dynamics. The study highlights the importance of parental involvement and emphasizes the need for collaboration between families and educators. These findings contribute to understanding parental digital literacy and inform context-sensitive approaches to supporting healthy digital media use in early childhood.

Keywords: *Parental digital literacy, screen time management, early childhood education, phenomenological study, digital mediation.*

INTRODUCTION

Context of the Study

The increasing integration of digital technology into early childhood environments has significantly changed the learning and daily experiences of young children. Preschool children are now frequently exposed to digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, and online media both at home and in educational settings. While these technologies provide opportunities for early learning and engagement, they also raise concerns regarding excessive screen exposure and its possible effects on children's development. In this context, parents play a central role as primary mediators of children's digital experiences by making decisions about when, how, and what type of digital media children are allowed to access.

Summary of Related Literature

Existing literature highlights the importance of parental mediation in shaping children's digital behavior. Parents commonly apply strategies such as restrictive mediation, active mediation, and co-use to guide children's engagement with digital media (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Nikken & Schols, 2015). Research further indicates that the quality of digital content and the level of parental involvement may have a greater influence on children's developmental outcomes than screen time duration alone (Oswald et al., 2020). These studies emphasize that digital parenting involves not only limiting screen exposure but also guiding children's interpretation and use of digital media in meaningful ways.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in parental mediation theory as developed by Valkenburg et al. (1999) and further expanded by Livingstone and Helsper (2008) and contemporary perspectives on digital mediation in early childhood contexts. These theories provide the scholarly foundation for understanding how parents regulate, interpret, and guide their children's digital engagement while attempting to balance screen time and early learning.

Alkenburg et al. (1999) explain that Parental Mediation Theory, originally developed in the 1990s in response to children's television exposure, explains how parents influence children's media experiences through various mediation strategies. Livingstone and Helsper (2008) further argue that as digital technologies evolved, the theory expanded to include interactive media environments. It identifies several forms of mediation, including active mediation, restrictive mediation, co-use, and technical mediation. These approaches reflect how parents set boundaries, discuss content, participate in shared digital experiences, and manage access to technology. Livingstone (2017) emphasizes that parental involvement significantly shapes how children engage with media.

In more recent years, digital mediation perspectives have emerged to address the complexities of interactive digital platforms such as smartphones, tablets, and applications. Unlike traditional broadcast media, digital technologies are dynamic, personalized, and algorithm-driven. As a result, effective mediation increasingly requires digital competence. Parents must evaluate content, assess developmental appropriateness, manage privacy and safety, and adapt to rapidly changing digital environments. These perspectives

emphasize that mediation is not solely about limiting screen time but about guiding meaningful and developmentally supportive digital engagement.

From a phenomenological perspective, this study applies these theories to understand how parents experience and interpret their roles as mediators in their children's digital lives. Rather than examining mediation as a fixed set of strategies, this study explores how parents perceive, adapt, and make meaning of these practices within their everyday contexts. This includes how they navigate challenges, make decisions about screen time, and balance digital use with early learning activities.

Together, these theoretical perspectives frame parental digital literacy as a critical foundation for effective mediation. Parental Mediation Theory explains the strategies parents employ, while digital mediation perspectives highlight the competence required to apply those strategies effectively in contemporary digital contexts.

Conceptual Framework

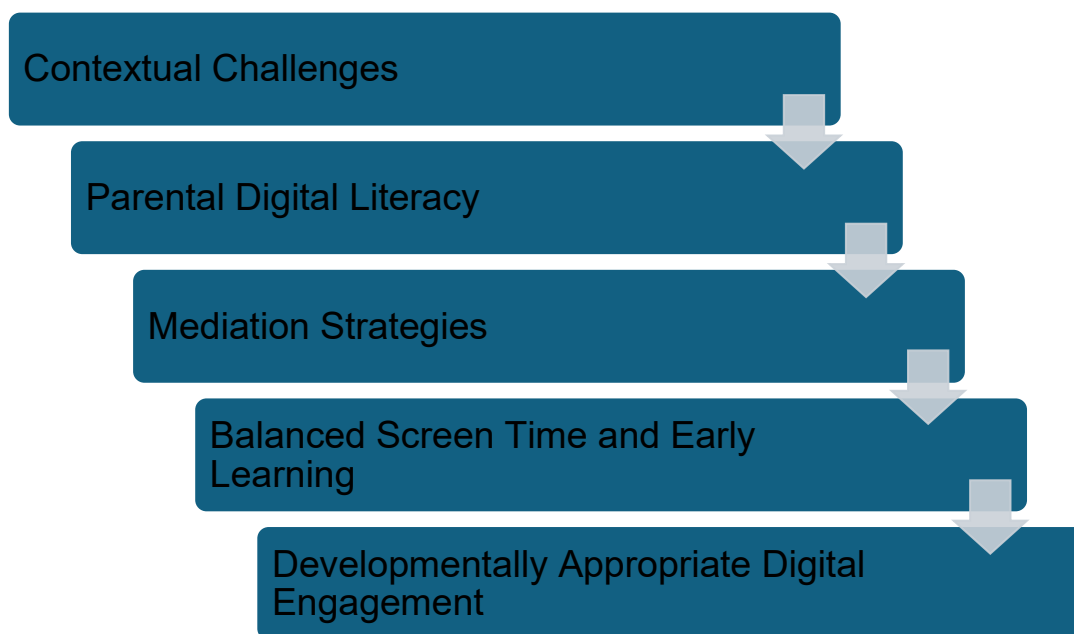


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Guided by the theoretical foundations of parental mediation and digital literacy, as informed by Valkenburg et al. (1999) and Livingstone et al. (2017), this study develops a conceptual framework that illustrates the structural relationships among the key constructs explored in the research. In the visual model, contextual challenges are positioned at the top of the framework. This placement does not imply causality but highlights the context within which parents experience and enact digital literacy. Contextual challenges, such as social pressures, time constraints, family expectations, and digital accessibility, shape how parents perceive, interpret, and apply their digital literacy in everyday parenting situations. At the center of the framework is parental digital literacy, which refers to parents' knowledge,

evaluative judgment, skills, and confidence in navigating digital technologies. Positioned as the core phenomenon, parental digital literacy reflects how parents make sense of and respond to digital environments.

Parental digital literacy informs the mediation strategies parents employ, including setting boundaries, engaging in co-use, discussing digital content, and implementing technical controls consistent with the mediation strategies identified by Valkenburg et al. (1999). These strategies represent how parents translate their understanding into practice within their daily experiences. These mediation strategies shape the process of balancing screen time and early learning activities. As emphasized by Livingstone et al. (2017), effective digital mediation requires not only strategies but also digital competence. When guided by informed digital literacy, parents perceive screen engagement as a tool that can be meaningfully integrated to support developmentally appropriate learning among preschoolers.

Thus, the placement of contextual challenges at the top of the framework emphasizes environmental influence rather than hierarchical dominance. The conceptual model, influenced by these theoretical foundations, reflects how parental digital literacy is experienced, negotiated, and enacted within real-world constraints, ultimately shaping how parents balance digital exposure and early learning in preschool contexts.

Rationale of the Study

Despite the availability of general guidelines on children's screen use, many parents continue to face difficulties in applying these recommendations consistently in real-life situations. In early childhood contexts such as The Purple Elephant Samakee in Thailand, parents and educators have observed increasing concerns about balancing the benefits of digital learning with the risks of excessive screen exposure. Parents often struggle with consistency due to work demands, caregiving responsibilities, and varying household routines. These challenges highlight the need to understand how digital parenting is practiced within actual family contexts rather than only in theory.

Research Gap, Problem, and Innovation of the Study

Although existing studies provide useful frameworks on parental mediation, most focus on general patterns of behavior or measurable screen time usage rather than the lived experiences of parents. There is limited understanding of how digital literacy is interpreted, negotiated, and practiced in everyday family life within specific community contexts, such as The Purple Elephant Samakee in Thailand. To address this gap, the researchers of this study explore the lived experiences of parents in managing preschool children's screen time and digital engagement using a phenomenological approach. The study is timely as digital devices have become deeply integrated into young children's daily lives, leading to increasing concerns among parents and educators regarding appropriate screen time management and balanced digital engagement in early childhood.

The study contributes to innovation by shifting the focus from technical skills and screen time measurement to meaning-making processes, contextual influences, and real-life challenges that shape parental digital literacy. In doing so, it offers a more grounded and context-sensitive understanding of digital parenting in early childhood education.

Research Questions

This study examined parental digital literacy in balancing screen time and early learning among preschoolers in Thailand. Specifically, it answered the following questions:

1. How do parents of preschoolers in Thailand describe and understand their digital literacy in balancing screen time and early learning activities?
2. What challenges do they encounter when applying digital literacy to mediate their preschooler's screen use while supporting balanced development?
3. What coping mechanisms do they employ to manage these challenges in everyday contexts?
4. Based on their lived experiences, what contextually grounded strategies can be proposed to strengthen parental digital literacy and promote developmentally appropriate digital engagement?

Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses on parental digital literacy in balancing screen time and early learning among preschoolers at The Purple Elephant Samakee School in Nonthaburi, Thailand. Data were collected between August and December through interviews with parents, with supporting input from teachers to contextualize parental experiences. The primary focus is on parents, as they serve as the main mediators of children's digital exposure and early learning experiences, regardless of employment status. Centering on parents allows for a deeper understanding of everyday decision-making related to digital tools in the home environment. The study includes children aged 18 months to five years, a developmental stage during which foundational habits related to technology use and learning are formed. This age group was selected to better understand how parental digital literacy influences early routines and learning practices.

Socio-economic conditions and parental employment status are considered as contextual factors that may shape parents' digital literacy, availability, and mediation practices. While these factors are acknowledged, they are not examined as primary variables, as the study focuses on parents' lived experiences and meaning-making processes. This study does not examine causal relationships between socio-economic status, employment, and children's developmental outcomes. The findings are limited to parents within the selected school context and may not be generalizable to other populations or family structures.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study aimed to explore and understand parents' lived experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes regarding digital literacy and screen time management. Rather than relying on numerical data or statistical analysis, the study focused on rich, descriptive accounts gathered through interviews to capture the complexity of participants' real-life contexts.

According to John W. Creswell (2018), phenomenology seeks to understand

individuals' shared lived experiences of a particular phenomenon by describing both what they experience and how they experience it. Accordingly, this design was appropriate for the present study as it enabled an in-depth exploration of the meanings parents assigned to their digital literacy, mediation practices, and the challenges they encountered in balancing screen time with early learning, rather than testing hypotheses or generalizing findings to a wider population.

While the study was guided by a phenomenological approach, thematic analysis was used to systematically examine participants' narratives. Accordingly, a phenomenological thematic analysis was applied to interpret parents' lived experiences in managing children's screen time and early learning. To ensure methodological rigor and analytic transparency, the study explicitly adopted the six-phase thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). This framework was selected for its systematic yet flexible approach in identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data, while remaining consistent with the phenomenological orientation of the study. The use of this framework allowed for a clear and structured process in deriving themes from the data, thereby strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis.

Locale of the Study

This study was conducted at The Purple Elephant Samakee, one of the ELC branches, located at 44 Soi Samakee 20, Tha Sai, Mueang Nonthaburi District, Nonthaburi, Thailand. Welcoming children from over 40 countries since 1991, The Purple Elephant Samakee is designed for children aged 18 months to five years. After this foundational stage, children continue to benefit from the rich experiences gained during their early years.

As a community school with a countrified ambience similar to ELC's early childhood centers in Bangkok, The Purple Elephant Samakee maintained limited enrolment and small class sizes. This cozy environment fostered the intimacy essential to young children's development and was staffed by highly qualified international teachers committed to holistic growth through inquiry and play.

Participants

The participants in this study included parents of preschoolers enrolled at The Purple Elephant International School. The study focused on parents who, regardless of employment status, spent the majority of their time at home with their children and were actively involved in their daily care and learning activities. There was equal gender representation, consisting of four mothers and four fathers. All parent participants held at least a bachelor's degree to ensure informed and gender-neutral responses.

Additionally, all participants were from intact families in which both parents were present in the household, in order to help reduce bias associated with single parenting or varied custody arrangements. The purpose of involving these parents was to gain a deeper understanding of how they managed and balanced screen time with other daily activities during the early years of their children's development.

In addition to the parents, the study also included two early childhood teachers from The Purple Elephant International School at Samakee. The number of teacher

participants was limited due to the small sample size and the scope of the school setting. Their inclusion aimed to provide professional insights and observations regarding children's screen time and learning behaviors, thereby enriching the study with perspectives from educational practitioners.

Sampling Technique

The participants in this study were intentionally selected using purposive sampling, specifically criterion sampling, to ensure that they possessed characteristics relevant to the research. The sample comprised the following participants:

1. Parents who spent at least 2–3 hours per day, on average, with their child and were actively engaged in caregiving, daily routines, or learning activities. A total of eight parents (four mothers and four fathers) were included.
2. Parents from intact families, where both parents were present in the household, can help reduce bias associated with single parenting or varied custody arrangements.
3. 2 Early childhood teachers who were selected based on their experience teaching children aged 0–5 years at The Purple Elephant Samakee campus.
4. Parents provided insights into their attitudes, behaviors, and practices related to balancing screen time and early learning activities, while teachers offered supporting perspectives on fostering digital literacy within early learning environments.

Research Instruments

This study utilized a semi-structured interview guide for parents and early childhood teachers. The instrument consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and practices related to digital literacy, screen time management, and early learning among preschool children.

The parent interview protocol focused on digital practices at home, strategies for managing screen exposure, challenges encountered, and coping mechanisms applied. The teacher interview protocol explored professional perspectives on technology integration, observed digital behaviors among preschoolers, and the role of educators in supporting children's early digital experiences. The interview guide questions were developed based on the Research Questions and were subjected to expert validation prior to data collection.

1: How do parents of preschoolers in Thailand describe and understand their digital literacy in relation to balancing screen time and early learning activities?

- a. How would you describe your understanding of digital literacy in relation to parenting young children?
- b. How does your digital knowledge influence the way you manage your child's screen time?
- c. How do you usually use smartphones, tablets, or computers in your daily life?
- d. What makes you feel confident or uncertain when using digital tools together with your child (e.g., apps, games, websites)?

- e. How do you determine whether digital content is safe and appropriate for your child's learning?
 - f. What digital devices does your child use, and how frequently does your child use them?
- 2: What challenges do parents of preschoolers encounter when applying their digital literacy to mediate children's screen use while supporting balanced development?
- a. Can you describe your child's typical daily routine in relation to screen use?
 - b. What challenges do you experience when setting limits on screen time?
 - c. Based on your observation, how does screen use affect your child's emotional, social, or cognitive development?
 - d. What difficulties do you encounter when monitoring or selecting digital content?
 - e. What challenges arise when balancing screen time with activities such as outdoor play, reading, or creative play?
 - f. Are there situations where your child uses screens more than you prefer? What usually causes this?
- 3: What coping mechanisms do parents employ to manage these challenges in everyday contexts?
- a. What rules or routines do you implement at home regarding screen use?
 - b. How do you support your child during screen use (for example, co-viewing or discussing content)?
 - c. How do you model digital behavior for your child?
 - d. When screen-related conflicts occur, how do you typically handle them?
 - e. What strategies do you use to encourage learning and play without screens?
 - f. Have you sought advice or guidance from others (e.g., teachers, friends, online sources)? What has been helpful?
- 4: Based on parents' lived experiences, what contextually grounded strategies can be proposed to strengthen parental digital literacy and promote developmentally appropriate digital engagement for preschoolers?
- a. What kind of support would help you better guide your child's screen use?
 - b. What knowledge or skills do you think parents need to strengthen their digital literacy?
 - c. If a parent support program were developed, what should it include?
 - d. How can schools and families work together to promote balanced digital engagement?
 - e. What advice would you give to other parents who want to use digital tools in a safe and meaningful way with young children?

Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection began after obtaining ethical clearance and official permission from the participating school and learning center. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was secured before data collection proceeded. Participants were selected based on the established purposive (criterion) sampling

criteria and were approached individually by the researcher. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using the validated interview guide. This approach allowed the researcher to follow prepared questions while also probing further based on participants' responses to gain deeper insights into their lived experiences.

Interviews were conducted individually at a time and setting convenient for the participants to ensure comfort and openness during the discussion. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in capturing their responses. Field notes were also taken to document key observations during the interviews. Following data collection, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. The transcripts were then organized systematically in preparation for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). This approach provided a systematic yet flexible process for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within the data. In addition, while thematic analysis provided the analytical procedure, this study was guided by Husserlian phenomenology, particularly the concept of phenomenological reduction or epoché as proposed by Edmund Husserl (1970). In this study, phenomenological reduction was applied through bracketing, wherein the researcher consciously set aside prior assumptions, beliefs, and experiences related to digital literacy and screen time to focus on participants' descriptions.

In this context, lived experiences refer to parents' firsthand and everyday experiences in managing children's screen time and supporting early learning within their home environments, including their decisions, challenges, and strategies. The analysis followed six interrelated phases.

First, in the familiarization phase, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. The researcher engaged in repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve deep immersion and a holistic understanding of participants' narratives, while noting initial impressions and significant statements related to the research questions. During this phase, bracketing was practiced by focusing on participants' verbatim accounts and avoiding the influence of the researcher's prior interpretations.

Second, in generating initial codes, meaningful units of data were systematically identified and labeled. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing patterns to emerge from the data rather than being pre-determined. Each code represented a meaningful aspect of parents' experiences related to digital literacy, screen time management, and early learning. Initial codes included recurring ideas such as content selection, intentional screen use, co-viewing, screen time limitation, parental modeling, developmental awareness, parental responsibility, use of screens for educational purposes, reliance on screens due to work demands, influence of grandparents and other caregivers, structured routines, and challenges in managing children's screen exposure and strategies to mitigate challenges. These codes were developed through repeated patterns observed across participants' responses and were continuously refined throughout the analysis to ensure clarity and consistency. In this process, codes were derived directly from participants' expressions to maintain alignment with their described experiences.

Third, in searching for themes, codes were then compared, and related codes were grouped and organized to form broader themes that reflected shared patterns across participants. The researcher examined relationships among codes and organized them into meaningful clusters that reflected shared patterns across participants' responses.

Fourth, in reviewing themes, the initial themes were refined to ensure coherence and consistency. This involved checking whether the themes accurately represented both the coded data extracts and the entire dataset. Themes that lacked sufficient supporting data were revised, merged, or discarded to ensure analytical clarity. In this phase, themes were reviewed against the dataset to ensure they accurately reflected participants' accounts.

Fifth, in defining and naming themes, each theme was clearly described by identifying its main idea. Each theme was then given a clear and relevant name that reflected participants' experiences.

Finally, the themes were organized in relation to the research questions. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity. Credibility was established through expert validation, wherein two external specialists in early childhood education and qualitative research reviewed the themes and interpretations.

Dependability was ensured by maintaining a systematic and well-documented research process, including keeping detailed records of data collection procedures, coding decisions, and theme development to ensure consistency and transparency. Confirmability was achieved by grounding interpretations in participants' verbatim responses, minimizing researcher bias. Reflexivity was practiced through continuous self-monitoring of the researcher's assumptions throughout the analytical process.

Definition of Terms

The following are the important terms used in the study and are defined as follows:

Preschoolers

Children aged 18 months to five years who attend early childhood education settings. This period represents a sensitive developmental stage during which early learning foundations and digital habits begin to form.

Early Learning Activities

Developmentally appropriate experiences that support cognitive, emotional, physical, and social growth in early childhood through interaction, play, exploration, and guided engagement.

Screen Time

Children's exposure to screen-based digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, televisions, or computers, whether for entertainment or educational purposes

Balancing Screen Time

The practice of guiding children's screen use in age-appropriate and intentional ways, avoiding both unrestricted use and total prohibition. This includes moderation, purposeful content selection, and integrating screen use with non-digital learning experiences.

Digital Literacy

Parents' perceived knowledge, confidence, and ability to make informed decisions

regarding digital tools for young children. In this study, digital literacy emphasizes judgment, mediation, and intentional guidance rather than technical skills.

Parental Digital Literacy

Parents' perspectives on their role as primary mediators of their children's digital experiences. This includes evaluating digital content, regulating screen use, managing external influences, and aligning digital exposure with early learning goals. This is the central focus of the study.

DISCUSSION

In this study, parental digital literacy refers to parents' perceived knowledge, evaluative competence, confidence, and decision-making ability in guiding their children's screen time engagement. Screen time refers to children's exposure to digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, and televisions. Early learning refers to developmentally appropriate experiences that support cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth.

Theme 1: Parents' Conceptual Understanding of Digital Literacy in Supporting Early Learning

This theme addresses Research Question 1 and explores how parents understand digital literacy in relation to screen time and early learning. Across participants, digital literacy was consistently described as responsibility, guidance, and decision-making rather than technical ability. Parents emphasized their role in regulating and directing children's use of digital devices. One participant explained, "It's not about the technical skills but the efforts you take in learning how to guide its use," reflecting a sense of continuous adjustment in parenting. This suggests that parents see digital literacy as practical judgment embedded in everyday caregiving. Many parents described that they actively decide when, how, and why children use digital devices.

A common pattern was the recognition of both positive and negative effects of screen use. Parents acknowledged that children may learn from digital content, but also expressed concerns about possible negative effects such as overuse or health-related issues. This created a sense of internal tension when making decisions. Another pattern was the emphasis on purposeful use. Parents repeatedly distinguished between using devices for learning and using them for entertainment. Some explained that screens are only allowed for specific learning-related activities, such as songs or research, rather than unrestricted viewing.

Age also influenced decision-making. Parents applied rules based on children's developmental stage, such as delaying screen exposure until a certain age and gradually increasing use over time. Some parents also expressed intentional resistance to screen use despite its presence in daily life. They described choosing to limit or avoid screens and instead engaging children in other activities. Overall, digital literacy was experienced as an ongoing process of decision-making shaped by children's needs, daily routines, and parental judgment.

Theme 2: Contextual and Relational Challenges in Balancing Screen Time and Early Learning

This theme addresses Research Question 2 and explores challenges parents face in managing screen time. Parents reported that maintaining consistent screen time rules is difficult due to work and household responsibilities. Many shared that screens are sometimes used out of necessity when they are occupied or unavailable. Another challenge was inconsistency in caregiving practices. Parents noted that other caregivers, especially grandparents, sometimes apply different rules regarding screen use, which leads to inconsistency in children's routines.

Fatigue was also identified as a factor influencing screen use. Parents described using screens during moments of exhaustion or stress as a way to manage immediate caregiving demands. Some parents also expressed uncertainty in choosing appropriate digital content for their children. They mentioned difficulty in distinguishing suitable from unsuitable materials, especially when time and guidance are limited. Overall, these challenges show that screen time management is influenced by daily responsibilities, caregiving dynamics, emotional strain, and limited decision-making confidence.

Theme 3: Parental Adaptation and Reflective Approaches to Digital Mediation

This theme addresses Research Question 3 and explores how parents respond to challenges in screen time management. Parents described adjusting their strategies based on the situation and experience. Many engaged in co-viewing, where they watch or interact with children during screen use instead of leaving them unsupervised. Some parents explained that they monitor content closely and guide children during digital activities to ensure appropriate use.

Others described replacing screen time with alternative activities such as play, interaction, or shared family tasks. These alternatives were used to reduce dependency on digital devices.

Parents also showed flexibility in applying rules. While they may set limits on screen use, they adjust these rules depending on context, such as travel, waiting periods, or household demands.

Several parents mentioned learning from experience or external advice and gradually adjusting their practices over time. Overall, parents demonstrated adaptive and reflective approaches that respond to changing situations and children's needs.

Theme 4: Strengthening Parental Digital Literacy through Guided and Contextual Support

This theme addresses Research Question 4 and explores what parents need to strengthen their digital literacy practices. Parents expressed a need for clearer guidance in managing screen time, particularly in deciding what content is appropriate and how to set effective boundaries.

Many participants described digital literacy as decision-making rather than a technical skill, emphasizing the need for practical support in everyday parenting situations. Parents also preferred balanced approaches instead of strict restriction, highlighting the importance of moderation and guided use rather than complete avoidance.

Several participants emphasized the importance of collaboration with schools and educators to ensure consistency between home and school practices. Overall, parents indicated that stronger support systems are needed to help them make informed and consistent decisions regarding children's digital engagement.

Summary of Findings

Across all themes, parental digital literacy is experienced as a lived, evolving practice centered on decision-making and everyday judgment. It is shaped by children's developmental needs, household routines, caregiving responsibilities, and emotional demands. While parents attempt to regulate screen time and guide children's digital use, their practices are influenced by contextual pressures such as work demands, shared caregiving arrangements, fatigue, and uncertainty in content evaluation. These factors contribute to variations in how screen time is managed in daily life. Despite these challenges, parents actively engage in guiding children's digital experiences through monitoring, co-viewing, and adjusting rules based on situation and need. Over time, their practices reflect flexibility and ongoing adaptation. Overall, digital literacy in parenting emerges as a continuous process of balancing guidance, responsibility, and lived realities rather than a fixed set of rules.

DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Parents' Conceptual Understanding of Digital Literacy in Supporting Early Learning

The findings indicate that parents interpret digital literacy as evaluative judgment, responsibility, and decision-making rather than technical competence. This suggests that in real parenting contexts, digital literacy is experienced as practical reasoning embedded in daily caregiving rather than as a technical skill. This interpretation reflects how parents actively construct meaning around digital use based on children's developmental needs and everyday situations. Their role is not limited to controlling screen exposure but extends to deciding how digital tools should be meaningfully used.

This finding aligns with Lazonder et al. (2020), who described digital literacy in terms of operational skills, but it is expanded in this study to include decision-making and contextual judgment. It is also consistent with Veresov and Veraksa (2023), who emphasized that digital learning becomes meaningful only through guided adult mediation.

The result is consistent with Choy et al. (2024), who highlighted the importance of parental involvement in shaping children's digital experiences. However, this study extends their findings by showing that mediation is not always structured or planned but often situational, shaped by daily parenting realities and immediate decision-making demands.

Theme 2: Contextual and Relational Challenges in Balancing Screen Time and Early Learning

The findings suggest that parental digital mediation is strongly influenced by contextual pressures such as work demands, fatigue, and shared caregiving

responsibilities. This indicates that screen-time management is not always a deliberate action but is often shaped by situational constraints. Parents also described using digital devices as a coping mechanism during exhaustion, showing that emotional and physical fatigue directly affect parenting decisions. This highlights that screen use is sometimes reactive rather than planned. This interpretation is consistent with Cino et al. (2020), who argued that digital mediation is deeply embedded in family systems and influenced by everyday constraints. It also supports Vadakkemulanjanal Joseph et al. (2022), who emphasized that screen exposure is often linked to routine pressures rather than a lack of awareness.

However, this study extends previous findings by showing that inconsistency in screen-time regulation is not only structural but also emotional and relational, particularly when caregiving responsibilities are shared across family members.

The difficulty in evaluating digital content aligns with Choy et al. (2024), but this study further shows that the challenge lies in real-time decision-making uncertainty rather than access to information alone.

Theme 3: Parental Adaptation and Reflective Approaches to Digital Mediation

The findings reveal that parents actively adapt their digital mediation strategies through co-viewing, monitoring, and replacing screen time with alternative activities. This indicates that parental mediation is not fixed but continuously adjusted based on lived experiences and situational demands. Parents also demonstrated reflective decision-making, where past experiences, advice, and observation influence how they regulate digital use. This suggests that digital parenting develops gradually through learning rather than formal instruction.

This interpretation aligns with Nikken and Schols (2015), who emphasized active mediation and co-use as important strategies in guiding children's media engagement. It is also consistent with Muliati et al. (2024), who highlighted parental monitoring and awareness as key components of mediation.

However, this study extends these findings by showing that mediation strategies are not always intentionally designed but are often developed through experience, trial-and-error, and adaptation to daily caregiving demands. Flexibility in screen-time rules is consistent with Griffith et al. (2020), who emphasized contextual influence in digital engagement outcomes. This study further clarifies that flexibility is not inconsistency but a deliberate strategy for managing unpredictable family conditions.

Theme 4: Strengthening Parental Digital Literacy through Guided and Contextual Support

The findings indicate that parents need structured, practical, and context-sensitive support to strengthen their digital literacy. While parents are aware of screen-time concerns, they often struggle with decision-making, particularly in evaluating content and setting consistent boundaries. This suggests that the main gap is not awareness but confidence in applying digital judgments in real-life situations. This interpretation is consistent with Choy et al. (2024), who emphasized the need to strengthen parental mediation competencies. It also aligns with Irzalinda and Latifah (2023), who recommended balanced digital engagement rather than strict restriction.

However, this study extends their findings by showing that parents are not seeking technical training but practical decision-making frameworks that can guide everyday parenting choices. The emphasis on collaboration with schools is consistent with Griffith et al. (2020), who highlighted the importance of guided digital engagement. This study extends this idea by positioning schools as essential partners in ensuring consistency between home and educational environments.

Synthesis of Discussion

This phenomenological study explored how parents practice digital literacy in managing preschool children's screen use and early learning. Guided by four research questions, the findings reveal that parents understand digital literacy as a responsibility involving awareness, evaluation, and intentional decision-making rather than technical competence. They position themselves as active mediators who guide how and when children engage with digital media.

However, applying this understanding is challenged by contextual realities such as competing responsibilities, shared caregiving arrangements, environmental exposure to screens, and differing beliefs within households.

These factors create inconsistencies in how screen use is managed, showing that digital literacy is shaped by everyday conditions rather than knowledge alone. In response, parents adopt adaptive and reflective strategies, including co-engagement, modeling appropriate behavior, providing non-digital alternatives, and adjusting practices based on situational demands. These strategies highlight that digital parenting is not fixed but a dynamic and responsive process shaped by ongoing negotiation and reflection.

The findings further show that strengthening parental digital literacy requires practical and context-sensitive support. Parents need guidance in evaluating content, setting boundaries, and aligning digital use with developmental goals. They favor balanced and moderated approaches and emphasize the importance of collaboration between families and educators to support consistent and meaningful digital engagement.

Conclusions

Parental digital literacy is enacted as practical judgment rather than technical skill, grounded in intentional guidance, moderation, and decision-making in children's screen use. This implies that digital literacy in early childhood should be understood as a lived and situated practice shaped by everyday parenting realities, rather than a fixed set of technical competencies.

Consistency in digital parenting is shaped and often constrained by contextual and relational factors, including family dynamics, caregiving structures, and everyday demands. This implies that effective digital mediation cannot be fully separated from the social and environmental conditions in which families operate.

The impact of digital engagement depends on its quality, context, and level of parental involvement rather than the mere presence of technology. This implies that meaningful learning outcomes are driven more by guided interaction and parental engagement than by access to digital devices alone. Effective digital parenting is characterized by balance, adaptability, and continuous reflection. Strengthening parental digital literacy, therefore, implies the need for structured, practical, and collaborative

support systems that extend beyond individual parents to schools and broader caregiving environments.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from the study's findings and are designed to address the gap between parental awareness and consistent practice, while integrating Educational Technology (EdTech) interventions that promote quality-focused digital engagement.

For School Administrators: Establish a Digital Parenting Support System

Schools should institutionalize a Digital Parenting Workshop Series within the PTA program. These workshops should focus on strengthening parents' evaluative judgment, content selection, and mediation strategies rather than technical skills. The program may be anchored on mediation and co-engagement frameworks, with practical demonstrations of guided screen use. Schools can also introduce tools such as Google Family Link to support parents in monitoring children's digital exposure and focusing on quality rather than duration. This responds directly to parents' expressed need for structured and practical guidance.

For Teachers: Implement Media-Lite and Guided Digital Practices

Teachers should adopt a Media-Lite Homework Policy that prioritizes play-based and experiential learning over screen-based tasks. When digital tools are used, they should be limited, purposeful, and supported by adult guidance. Platforms such as Seesaw may be used to guide parents on co-viewing practices and provide suggestions for non-digital activities, ensuring alignment between home and school environments. This supports consistency and reinforces guided digital engagement observed in parental practices.

For Parents: Apply Digital Contracts and Mediation Tools

Parents are encouraged to establish simple Digital Use Agreements (Digital Contracts) that define boundaries for screen use, content selection, and co-engagement expectations. To support implementation, parents may use tools such as Qustodio and Kaspersky Safe Kids. These tools enable parents to guide children's digital experiences more effectively by emphasizing supervision, interaction, and content quality. This addresses the gap between intention and consistent practice.

Strengthen Home -School Collaboration

Schools and families should develop shared digital guidelines through regular communication, parent briefings, and collaborative discussions. This ensures consistency across environments and reduces confusion caused by differing expectations. Digital literacy should be approached as a shared responsibility, reinforcing coherence between classroom practices and home routines.

Address Intergenerational and Contextual Influences

Schools may facilitate discussions that include extended caregivers, particularly grandparents, to promote shared understanding of children's digital use. Clear communication of developmental goals can help align caregiving practices across different household members. Support systems should recognize that digital parenting occurs within complex social contexts, not in isolation.

Applicability Across Different Family Structures

The recommendations in this study are designed to be practical and flexible, recognizing that families are not all structured in the same way. While some children live in two-parent households, others are cared for by single parents, grandparents, or extended family members who take on primary caregiving roles. Because of this diversity, the suggested strategies are not intended for one specific family setup but are meant to be adaptable to different caregiving contexts.

In single-parent households, these practices may be implemented by one primary caregiver, while in extended family settings, responsibilities may be shared among several members. Strategies such as setting boundaries for screen use, co-viewing with children, and guiding content selection can still be applied regardless of family structure. What matters most is not the number of caregivers, but the consistency of guidance and the shared understanding of how children engage with digital media.

Promote Balanced and Context-Sensitive Digital Engagement

Parents should be encouraged to adopt balanced approaches that combine guided screen use with active engagement, play, and interaction. Digital engagement should remain purposeful, supervised, and developmentally appropriate. The effectiveness of digital learning does not depend solely on the availability of advanced technologies, but on the quality of interaction and parental involvement. In this sense, similar developmental outcomes may be achieved through storytelling, play-based learning, and direct interaction, reinforcing that meaningful learning is grounded in engagement rather than technology alone.

Contextual Adaptation of Digital Parenting Strategies

To ensure the applicability of the proposed digital parenting strategies across diverse contexts, it is important to emphasize flexibility in their implementation. While strategies such as video calls and the use of realistic documentaries support guided digital engagement, their effectiveness depends on available resources and situational conditions. In cases where such digital tools are not fully accessible, parents and educators may adapt by using alternative forms of communication and learning, such as audio-based interaction, offline educational materials, storytelling, and guided play. This flexibility ensures that the core principle of digital literacy quality parental engagement remains achievable across varying family contexts.

Theoretical and Practical Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to the evolving understanding of parental digital literacy in early childhood by situating it within the lived experiences of families in the Thai and

Philippine contexts. Unlike existing studies that often frame digital literacy as a set of technical skills or measurable competencies, this research demonstrates that digital literacy is a relational, context-dependent, and decision-driven practice shaped by family dynamics, cultural expectations, and everyday caregiving realities in Southeast Asian settings.

The study extends existing perspectives on parental mediation by showing that digital parenting is not solely an individual responsibility but a shared and negotiated process influenced by intergenerational caregiving, environmental exposure to digital media, and institutional support systems. This provides a more localized understanding of digital literacy, where practices are shaped not only by knowledge but by social structures and cultural norms.

Methodologically, the use of a phenomenological approach offers a significant contribution. While survey-based studies typically capture patterns of screen use, frequency, or parental awareness, this study reveals the lived tensions, emotional negotiations, and real-time decision-making processes that parents experience. It uncovers how parents navigate uncertainty, adapt strategies, and make compromises in response to practical constraints, insights that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures. Practically, the study highlights the need to move beyond general parenting advice toward structured Educational Technology interventions, including digital parenting workshops, mediation frameworks, and guided monitoring tools. It emphasizes the importance of aligning home and school practices and positions digital literacy as a collaborative responsibility among parents, educators, and institutions.

Overall, this study advances a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of digital literacy, offering both theoretical refinement and practical direction for early childhood education in Southeast Asia.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The authors of this study affirm that all ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and they were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their role, and how the data would be used. Participants were assured of their right to voluntarily participate and to withdraw from the study at any time without any form of consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality of all respondents were strictly maintained by ensuring that no identifying information was disclosed in any part of the study. Data Privacy principles were observed in the collection, storage, and handling of all research data to protect participants' information. The well-being of respondents was prioritized throughout the research process, ensuring that no harm, discomfort, or undue pressure was experienced during interviews. The authors also declare that no conflict of interest influenced the conduct or outcomes of the study. Furthermore, all sources of information were properly cited to avoid plagiarism, and the interpretation of findings was carried out with objectivity and without bias. The results of this study were used solely for academic and research purposes.

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