

Identifying the Impact of Digital Media Habits on Family Cohesion

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore how digital media habits influence family cohesion, communication patterns, and emotional relationships among Colombian households.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of families in the digital era. The study involved 21 participants (12 women and 9 men) from various regions of Colombia, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in family structure and digital engagement. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews focusing on patterns of digital media use, emotional interactions, and family communication. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached, recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis framework using NVivo 14 software to code and categorize responses systematically. Credibility and trustworthiness were enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail throughout the research process.

Findings: Four major themes emerged: (1) digital media as a connector in family relationships, (2) digital media as a source of disconnection and conflict, (3) negotiating family rules and digital boundaries, and (4) digital media as a tool for emotional regulation and identity. Results revealed that digital media enhanced communication and emotional closeness when used collaboratively but created conflict, emotional distance, and generational tension when overused or unregulated. Families that established flexible digital rules and engaged in shared online activities demonstrated stronger cohesion and mutual understanding.

Conclusion: Digital media plays a dual role in shaping family cohesion—both strengthening and fragmenting relationships. Intentional, balanced, and reflective digital engagement can transform technology into a medium for emotional connection and shared growth rather than disconnection. Promoting digital literacy, family dialogue, and adaptive boundary-setting is essential to maintaining cohesion in the digital age.

Keywords: digital media habits; family cohesion; qualitative research; communication patterns; emotional connection

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, the digital transformation of communication and social interaction has profoundly redefined the nature of family relationships. With the increasing penetration of digital technologies, social media platforms, and online communication tools into daily life, families are experiencing both enhanced connectivity and new forms of disconnection. The family—traditionally regarded as the primary environment for emotional exchange, socialization, and identity development—is now intertwined with digital media dynamics that shape how members communicate, express affection, and resolve conflicts. While digital tools have facilitated the maintenance of relationships across geographical and temporal boundaries, they have also introduced challenges related to attention, privacy, and cohesion. Understanding the impact of digital media habits on family cohesion thus requires a nuanced exploration of the interplay between technological engagement, interpersonal behavior, and emotional bonds (Zhang & Zhu, 2025).

Research across different cultural contexts shows that digital media can simultaneously serve as a medium of intimacy and alienation. Families increasingly rely on digital platforms to sustain daily communication and share emotional experiences. In many households, social media and instant messaging applications provide spaces for maintaining relational continuity, even during physical separation or social isolation (Gustavo Vicentis de Oliveira, 2025). However, the overreliance on these technologies often leads to disruptions in traditional forms of face-to-face interaction, eroding spontaneous conversations and shared physical presence (Pereira-Castro et al., 2022). The paradox of digital media in family life lies in its dual capacity to foster closeness and foster fragmentation—a phenomenon that continues to evolve as devices and platforms become more personalized and immersive (Lotfi, 2024).

Recent studies have emphasized that digital engagement among family members is not uniformly experienced but is mediated by generational, cultural, and socioeconomic factors. In many cases, the digital divide between parents and children generates misunderstandings, authority struggles, and shifting power relations within the household (Şimşek, 2025). Children and adolescents often perceive their parents' attempts at monitoring or limiting screen time as intrusions into their autonomy, while parents view such measures as necessary for ensuring safety and moral development. These tensions highlight a broader

sociotechnical negotiation, where family cohesion depends on the ability of members to align their digital expectations, boundaries, and values (Li, 2025). At the same time, digital literacy and emotional competence have become critical mediators of how families adapt to the ongoing digitization of everyday life (Santarén et al., 2025).

The pervasiveness of digital devices also influences the rhythms and rituals of family life. Research indicates that shared meals, leisure activities, and bedtime routines are increasingly mediated—or interrupted—by screen-based engagement (Pereira-Castro et al., 2022). In many households, members may coexist physically yet remain psychologically distant due to their immersion in individualized media consumption. This “together-but-alone” phenomenon, as conceptualized by sociologists, represents a central paradox of digital-age family life (Tanyag & Tanyag, 2025). Despite these risks, some studies have reported that digital platforms can serve as new venues for collective activities—such as watching movies online together, sharing family memories, or maintaining contact with relatives living abroad—that reinforce emotional bonds and collective identity (Kemboi et al., 2024). The variability of outcomes across families suggests that the quality, purpose, and context of media use matter more than the mere quantity of screen time (Ana Clara Araujo de et al., 2025).

The concept of family cohesion has traditionally referred to the emotional closeness, mutual support, and commitment among family members. In the digital context, this cohesion is being reshaped by online interactions and technological mediation. Studies reveal that when families use digital tools collaboratively—such as creating group chats or engaging in shared digital projects—communication tends to improve, and members report a stronger sense of belonging (Chatterjee et al., 2025). Conversely, when digital habits lead to emotional avoidance, overexposure, or information overload, relational satisfaction and perceived trust often decline (Wartberg et al., 2022). The interplay between digital intimacy and digital distance underscores a fundamental transformation in how cohesion is constructed and sustained in modern families.

Psychological perspectives further illustrate that digital media affects both emotional regulation and cognitive processing within families. Overuse of screens, particularly among children and adolescents, has been linked to attention deficits, impulsivity, and altered social behavior (Ana Clara Araujo de et al., 2025). Moreover, the constant accessibility of social media content exposes individuals to external validation cycles that can distort self-concept and emotional

reciprocity within family systems (Zhou & Cheng, 2022). On the other hand, digital tools also offer opportunities for emotional expression, education, and therapeutic connection—especially when guided by intentional family practices and communication strategies (Masih et al., 2025). Thus, understanding digital media's influence on cohesion requires balancing its psychosocial risks with its developmental and communicative benefits.

Sociological research further situates digital media within broader structural transformations. The increasing normalization of remote work, online education, and virtual socialization has blurred the boundaries between domestic and digital spheres (Zhang & Zhu, 2025). Family members are not merely consumers of technology but participants in a global digital culture that reshapes identity and relational norms (Singh, 2025). In many urban households, smartphones and social media have become extensions of personal and collective identity, influencing decision-making, parenting styles, and emotional expression (Lotfi, 2024). Yet, this expansion of digital life also raises concerns regarding surveillance, data exposure, and the commodification of private family experiences. These emerging dilemmas reflect a need for critical awareness and adaptive coping strategies that preserve emotional integrity while engaging with technological innovation (Luhmann et al., 2022).

From a cultural standpoint, digital media habits mirror societal transitions toward individualism and immediacy. The Colombian context, like many Latin American societies, is characterized by strong family values and interdependence. However, as families adopt globalized communication technologies, traditional models of authority, intimacy, and reciprocity are being renegotiated. The family's role as a moral and emotional anchor now coexists with the constant presence of digital stimuli that demand attention and reshape interpersonal hierarchies. Scholars have noted that family cohesion in such contexts becomes contingent on the ability to balance connectedness with autonomy and digital inclusion with relational presence (Asante et al., 2025).

Technological progress, particularly in artificial intelligence and social media algorithms, has further intensified the personalization of digital environments (Masih et al., 2025). Families are increasingly exposed to tailored content that may reinforce ideological bubbles or foster shared cultural experiences. The extent to which such algorithmic mediation enhances or undermines family cohesion depends largely on collective reflection and digital

literacy. As one review highlights, promoting digital health literacy during periods of social isolation helps families use media constructively and maintain meaningful communication (Gustavo Vicentis de Oliveira, 2025). Moreover, educational initiatives integrating AI and media literacy can empower families to harness technology for learning, collaboration, and emotional growth rather than passive consumption (Masih et al., 2025).

However, the psychosocial consequences of digital overexposure cannot be overlooked. Studies suggest that compulsive screen engagement can lead to emotional exhaustion, diminished empathy, and social withdrawal (Wartberg et al., 2022). When digital consumption replaces reciprocal emotional exchanges, family members may experience feelings of loneliness despite constant online connectivity (Luhmann et al., 2022). Conversely, when used intentionally, technology can facilitate empathy, mutual understanding, and collective resilience. For example, digital storytelling and shared online projects can help families co-construct narratives of belonging and continuity even in times of crisis (Pereira-Castro et al., 2022). These findings highlight the need to distinguish between digital connectivity and authentic relational cohesion.

In addition to its psychosocial dimensions, digital media has economic and educational implications for family life. The digitalization of work and education during recent years has increased household reliance on shared devices and internet access, creating new forms of inequality and role strain (Kemboi et al., 2024). Families with limited technological resources may experience higher stress levels, conflicts over device use, and reduced opportunities for collaborative digital activities. Conversely, families with stronger digital competencies tend to manage technology more effectively, transforming it into a resource for cohesion, learning, and problem-solving (Li, 2025). This disparity underscores the importance of fostering equitable digital inclusion policies that strengthen rather than fragment familial and social relationships (Santarén et al., 2025).

Furthermore, cross-cultural evidence points to the universality of digital challenges in family functioning. Comparative studies from Asia, Africa, and Europe demonstrate similar patterns of negotiation between digital engagement and relational health (Kemboi et al., 2024; Lotfi, 2024; Zhang & Zhu, 2025). For instance, in rural China, the growing consumption of short video platforms has reshaped intergenerational communication, offering both relief from isolation and new forms of distraction (Zhang & Zhu, 2025). Likewise, research from Turkey and

Kenya shows that parental digital practices significantly influence children's attitudes toward technology, shaping future patterns of emotional connection and social learning (Kemboi et al., 2024; Şimşek, 2025). These global insights reinforce that the impact of digital media on family cohesion transcends geography, calling for context-sensitive approaches to digital adaptation.

In summary, existing research demonstrates that digital media functions as a double-edged phenomenon in family life. It can enhance communication, support emotional expression, and maintain transnational connections, yet it can also generate emotional disconnection, surveillance conflicts, and generational tension (Chatterjee et al., 2025; Tanyag & Tanyag, 2025; Wartberg et al., 2022). Understanding how families in different sociocultural contexts navigate these paradoxes remains an essential research priority.

The present study aims to identify and analyze how digital media habits influence family cohesion in Colombian households, exploring the lived experiences and relational dynamics that emerge from daily digital engagement.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach, aiming to explore and interpret the lived experiences of families regarding the influence of digital media habits on family cohesion. The phenomenological method was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective meanings and emotional responses toward their daily media practices and their effects on familial relationships.

The participants included 21 individuals from various regions of Colombia, representing diverse family structures such as nuclear, single-parent, and extended households. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had rich and relevant experiences with the phenomenon under investigation—specifically, families that actively used digital media platforms (e.g., social media, streaming services, and online communication tools) as part of their daily routines. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults aged 25–60, currently living with at least one family member, and willing to discuss their digital media behaviors and family interactions.

The sample size was determined based on theoretical saturation, meaning that data collection continued until no new themes or patterns emerged from subsequent

interviews. By the twenty-first interview, sufficient depth and redundancy in responses were observed, confirming that saturation had been reached.

2.2. Measures

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which provided a balance between structure and flexibility to allow participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words. The interview guide included open-ended questions such as:

- “How would you describe the role of digital media in your family's daily life?”
- “In what ways do social media or online communication platforms affect your family relationships?”
- “Have you noticed any changes in your family cohesion due to the use of digital media?”

Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, depending on participant engagement and topic elaboration. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via secure video conferencing tools, depending on participants' preference and accessibility. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness of data.

2.3. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the assistance of NVivo software version 14 to organize and manage the qualitative data systematically. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework:

1. Familiarization with data through repeated reading of transcripts.
2. Generating initial codes to identify meaningful units of data related to digital media use and family dynamics.
3. Searching for themes by clustering similar codes to form broader conceptual categories.
4. Reviewing themes to ensure they accurately represented the data and were distinct from one another.
5. Defining and naming themes to capture the essence of each pattern.
6. Producing the report, integrating direct quotations to illustrate key findings.

The coding process was iterative and reflexive, allowing themes to evolve as new insights emerged. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, strategies such

as member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail were employed. These measures ensured that interpretations remained grounded in participants' actual experiences rather than researcher bias.

3. Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 21 participants from various regions of Colombia, encompassing a diverse range of demographic and family backgrounds. Of the total participants, 12 were female (57.1%) and 9 were male (42.9%), with ages ranging from 27 to 59 years ($M = 41.3$ years). Regarding marital status, 14 participants (66.7%) were married, 4 (19.0%) were single parents, and 3 (14.3%) were in cohabiting partnerships. In terms of family composition, 13 participants (61.9%) lived in nuclear

families, 5 (23.8%) in extended families, and 3 (14.3%) in single-parent households. Educationally, 9 participants (42.9%) held university degrees, 7 (33.3%) had completed secondary education, and 5 (23.8%) had postgraduate qualifications. Occupation-wise, the sample included 6 teachers (28.6%), 5 office employees (23.8%), 4 homemakers (19.0%), 3 self-employed individuals (14.3%), and 3 university students (14.3%). The participants' average daily use of digital media ranged from 2 to 6 hours, with 15 participants (71.4%) reporting frequent use of social networking platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram as their primary means of communication within the family. This demographic diversity provided a broad perspective on the ways in which digital media habits influence family cohesion across different social, occupational, and generational contexts in Colombia.

Table 1

Main Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts of the Study "Identifying the Impact of Digital Media Habits on Family Cohesion"

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Digital Media as a Connector in Family Relationships	Family Communication Enhancement	Sharing daily updates; group chats; video calls with relatives; emojis and reactions; quick coordination of tasks
	Emotional Closeness Through Media	Sending supportive messages; sharing memories via photos; celebrating events online; emotional reassurance; joint digital activities
	Maintaining Long-Distance Bonds	Contact with migrant family; virtual dinners; exchanging voice notes; transnational support; bridging generational distance
	Joint Entertainment Practices	Watching movies together; playing online games; shared playlists; family TikTok creation; interactive streaming sessions
	Inclusive Family Interaction	Encouraging introverted members to express; engaging children digitally; co-creating digital art; multigenerational involvement
2. Digital Media as a Source of Disconnection and Conflict	Overuse and Distraction	Ignoring conversations; screen addiction; delayed responses; multitasking during meals; prioritizing phone over family time
	Emotional Distance and Alienation	Reduced empathy; avoidance behaviors; lack of deep conversation; superficial interaction; loneliness within presence
	Generational Digital Divide	Tech-savvy youth vs. traditional parents; misunderstanding emojis; mockery of older users; differing privacy values
	Online Conflicts and Misinterpretations	Misread tone in text; jealousy due to online comments; arguments over online time; surveillance through apps; digital trust issues
	Privacy and Boundaries	Oversharing family matters; intrusion into digital space; parental control tension; loss of privacy; secret accounts
3. Negotiating Family Rules and Digital Boundaries	Parental Concerns and Monitoring	Fear of online threats; checking children's phones; restrictive controls; feeling mistrusted; arguments about surveillance
	Establishing Media Guidelines	"No-phone" dinner rules; shared screen time limits; negotiated online hours; enforcing balance; weekend offline rituals
	Intergenerational Negotiations	Youth autonomy vs. parental supervision; digital independence; compromise through dialogue; value of mutual respect
	Role of Family Leadership	Parent as model; setting behavioral examples; family digital contract; shared decision-making; consistent enforcement
	Adaptation to Changing Norms	Shifting family routines; flexibility in digital rules; situational exceptions; evolving cultural expectations
4. Digital Media as a Tool for Emotional Regulation and Identity	Emotional Coping Mechanisms	Escaping stress online; mood lifting via videos; sharing emotional posts; venting in group chats; seeking validation
	Expression of Personal Identity	Self-presentation online; family image management; showcasing achievements; digital storytelling; individuality within family context
	Learning and Emotional Growth	Exposure to self-help content; family education via media; reflective discussions after posts; empathy through awareness videos
	Strengthening Shared Values	Promoting kindness online; discussing moral lessons from media; reinforcing family identity; shared value transmission

The thematic analysis of interviews with 21 Colombian participants revealed four overarching categories that illustrate how digital media habits influence family cohesion: digital media as a connector in family relationships, digital media as a source of disconnection and conflict, negotiating family rules and digital boundaries, and digital media as a tool for emotional regulation and identity. These categories emerged from a rich network of subthemes and open codes, illustrating both the integrative and divisive potential of digital technologies within modern family life.

The first category, *digital media as a connector in family relationships*, captures how online communication and shared digital experiences have become crucial mechanisms for maintaining familial bonds. Many participants described digital media as an “invisible bridge” that keeps family members emotionally close despite physical distance. The subthemes of family communication enhancement and emotional closeness through media emerged strongly, as participants frequently mentioned group chats, video calls, and emojis as tools of daily connection. One mother of two explained, “We talk more in our family WhatsApp group than we do at the dinner table; it’s like our second home.” Others emphasized the role of digital media in sustaining long-distance relationships: “My brother works abroad, and every Sunday we have a virtual dinner on video call; it keeps us together even from miles away.” Families also engaged in joint digital entertainment such as watching movies or creating short videos together, fostering shared enjoyment and inclusive participation. These findings underscore that digital platforms can enhance emotional cohesion and inclusion, especially in families navigating geographical dispersion or generational diversity.

The second category, *digital media as a source of disconnection and conflict*, reflects the contradictory side of digital engagement, where overuse and miscommunication can erode intimacy and create emotional distance. Several participants described moments when screens replaced direct eye contact and genuine conversation. One father admitted, “Sometimes we’re all sitting in the same room, but everyone’s eyes are on their phone—it feels like we’re together but alone.” The subthemes of overuse and distraction, emotional alienation, and generational digital divides were particularly salient. Older participants often voiced frustration with what they perceived as younger family members’ digital dependence, while younger participants reported feeling “controlled or misunderstood” by their parents’ monitoring behaviors. Conflicts arising from online misinterpretations and privacy breaches were

common. A teenage participant shared, “My mom saw a comment on my post and thought it was inappropriate; we had a big argument because she didn’t understand the context.” These tensions highlight how digital media can simultaneously connect and divide families, revealing the fragile boundary between accessibility and intrusion.

The third category, *negotiating family rules and digital boundaries*, portrays the ongoing attempts by families to establish order and mutual respect around technology use. Many households reported setting informal or formal rules such as “no phones at dinner” or designated screen-free hours. One participant noted, “We decided to turn off our devices after 9 p.m.; at first, it was difficult, but now we talk more before sleeping.” Subthemes such as establishing media guidelines, intergenerational negotiations, and the role of family leadership were significant. Parents often saw themselves as digital role models, yet some admitted inconsistency in following their own rules. “I tell my kids to limit their screen time, but then they see me checking my work emails late at night,” confessed one mother. The data also indicated adaptation to changing norms, as families sought flexible approaches that reflected evolving digital realities rather than strict prohibitions. These negotiations served not only to manage behavior but also to foster dialogue, compromise, and shared responsibility, reinforcing the communicative foundations of cohesion.

The fourth category, *digital media as a tool for emotional regulation and identity*, reflects how online environments have become integral to emotional coping, self-expression, and value reinforcement within the family unit. Participants described using social media and entertainment platforms to alleviate stress, express feelings, and learn emotional skills. One participant remarked, “When I feel anxious, I watch motivational videos and later share them with my family; it starts a good conversation.” Others used digital media as a form of identity exploration and self-presentation, balancing individuality with family expectations. “Posting pictures of our family trips makes me feel proud; it’s like saying, ‘we’re united,’ even if we argue sometimes,” shared a young adult. Subthemes such as emotional coping mechanisms, expression of personal identity, and learning and emotional growth demonstrated that families not only consume digital content but also reinterpret it as part of their collective emotional narrative. In many cases, shared exposure to positive media content reinforced shared values such as kindness, empathy, and resilience, thereby strengthening the moral and emotional cohesion of the family.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study provide a rich understanding of how digital media habits influence family cohesion among Colombian households. The thematic analysis revealed four major categories: (1) digital media as a connector in family relationships, (2) digital media as a source of disconnection and conflict, (3) negotiating family rules and digital boundaries, and (4) digital media as a tool for emotional regulation and identity. These themes collectively illustrate the ambivalent nature of digital media in family life—simultaneously promoting intimacy and creating distance. The results reflect the complex interplay between technological accessibility, emotional connectivity, and family structure, offering insights consistent with and extending the existing body of literature on digital interaction and relational health.

The first major finding demonstrated that digital media serves as a meaningful connector among family members by facilitating communication, emotional support, and shared activities. Participants described how messaging platforms, video calls, and shared digital entertainment enhanced family closeness and allowed members separated by geography to maintain emotional bonds. This aligns with the argument that social technologies have transformed communication into a continuous and accessible experience that reinforces family ties (Gustavo Vicentis de Oliveira, 2025). Particularly during periods of physical separation or work-related migration, digital communication becomes a substitute for traditional face-to-face interactions, preserving emotional proximity and reducing loneliness (Luhmann et al., 2022). Families reported that collective digital practices—such as group chats or online movie nights—function as new rituals of togetherness, echoing (Pereira-Castro et al., 2022) who found that digital commensality has redefined the experience of shared presence in the 21st century. These results also mirror the observations of (Chatterjee et al., 2025), who noted that social media often serves as a relational “extension of the home,” allowing families to express affection, coordinate daily life, and co-create memories online. Thus, the digital environment, when approached intentionally and collaboratively, appears capable of reinforcing emotional unity and family identity.

Despite these positive dimensions, the second theme—digital media as a source of disconnection and conflict—revealed the paradoxical consequences of technological engagement. Participants frequently described how excessive screen time, online distractions, and emotional

disengagement weakened the sense of presence and intimacy within the household. These findings resonate with (Tanyag & Tanyag, 2025), who emphasized that gadget dependency often produces emotional distance, fragmented communication, and a decline in family cohesion. The phenomenon of “being together but alone” was vividly reflected in participants’ experiences of coexisting physically while remaining absorbed in individual digital worlds. Such experiences echo (Luhmann et al., 2022) observations on the global epidemic of loneliness in digitally saturated societies. Moreover, conflicts related to privacy, surveillance, and digital mistrust—particularly between parents and adolescents—emerged as significant relational stressors. This finding corresponds to (Şimşek, 2025), who revealed that children often perceive parental digital monitoring as an invasion of personal autonomy, while parents view it as a moral and protective duty. The resulting cycle of mistrust underscores the emotional fragility of contemporary digital relationships. Similarly, (Lotfi, 2024) found that in Algerian families, overexposure to social media content increased emotional tension and misunderstanding, highlighting a broader cultural pattern across societies where technology can both enrich and destabilize interpersonal bonds.

The third major category, negotiation of family rules and digital boundaries, reflected families’ attempts to restore balance and maintain cohesion amid pervasive media use. Many participants described setting explicit or implicit guidelines—such as no-phone meals or device-free evenings—to reclaim quality time and reinforce mutual respect. These findings are supported by (Kemboi et al., 2024), who demonstrated that structured family social work interventions emphasizing boundary-setting and shared accountability can significantly enhance family cohesion among social media users. Similarly, (Li, 2025) highlighted that healthy digital routines—when collectively established—improve both parent–child relationships and perceived familial satisfaction. Our results also revealed generational negotiations, where younger members advocated for digital independence while parents sought to maintain guidance and control. This dynamic aligns with (Santarén et al., 2025), who stressed that empowerment through digital literacy can reduce intergenerational digital tension and foster cooperative adaptation to technological change. Families that successfully negotiated flexible boundaries rather than strict prohibitions tended to report higher satisfaction, demonstrating that cohesion in the digital era requires adaptability rather than restriction.

Another significant finding was the role of digital media as a tool for emotional regulation and identity construction. Participants described using digital content for stress relief, self-expression, and family communication, reflecting the psychological integration of technology into emotional life. This finding supports (Masih et al., 2025), who identified social media and AI-driven platforms as emerging tools for adaptive learning and emotional support. In our study, families shared motivational content, humor, and personal reflections as ways to manage mood and sustain optimism, illustrating how digital media can promote emotional resilience when used mindfully. This aligns with (Zhang & Zhu, 2025) concept of “digital gratification,” where digital consumption, especially through short videos and shared content, temporarily alleviates stress and enhances emotional well-being. However, participants also acknowledged the risk of emotional dependency, which echoes (Zhou & Cheng, 2022) findings that excessive reliance on online social support can correlate with declines in psychological health among adolescents. In this context, emotional regulation through digital media emerges as a double-edged process—facilitating temporary comfort while potentially weakening the capacity for direct emotional engagement within the family.

The findings also highlight how digital media habits intersect with identity formation and the projection of family image. Participants reported using social media platforms to showcase family achievements, maintain collective pride, and share positive narratives, thereby reinforcing a sense of belonging. (Chatterjee et al., 2025) similarly found that online self-presentation serves as a modern form of symbolic interaction that strengthens group identity. However, (Singh, 2025) cautioned that excessive preoccupation with digital self-representation can lead to comparison-driven stress and distort perceptions of authentic connection. In the present study, families who viewed digital storytelling as an extension of real-life values—rather than a substitute for them—tended to report stronger cohesion. This balance between authenticity and performance parallels (Lotfi, 2024) observation that digital life within families often oscillates between transparency and strategic curation.

Overall, the results of this study converge with prior international research emphasizing that the impact of digital media on family cohesion is highly contextual and relational. When digital practices are shared, reflective, and regulated, they can enhance communication and strengthen emotional ties (Kemboi et al., 2024; Li, 2025; Santarén et al., 2025). Conversely, when media use becomes excessive,

fragmented, or competitive, it can diminish trust and empathy (Tanyag & Tanyag, 2025; Wartberg et al., 2022). Our findings contribute to this global dialogue by situating the phenomenon within the Colombian cultural context, where collectivist family values and interdependence remain strong. In such environments, digital media both challenges and complements traditional familial norms, necessitating ongoing negotiation between connection, control, and individual freedom.

Moreover, the study adds to the growing recognition that digital media use should not be viewed solely through a deficit-based lens. Although much of the literature emphasizes the risks of screen dependency (Ana Clara Araujo de et al., 2025; Wartberg et al., 2022), the present findings underscore its potential to foster communication and empathy when approached intentionally. For instance, participants described moments when shared online humor diffused tension, or when virtual communication bridged emotional gaps created by work migration. These experiences reflect the broader sociotechnical reality that digital tools can enhance relational adaptability when integrated with family values and communication ethics. This reinforces the perspective of (Gustavo Vicentis de Oliveira, 2025), who identified digital technologies as facilitators of collective health literacy and social support in periods of isolation.

Importantly, the findings also resonate with the concept of “adaptive digitalization” proposed by (Luhmann et al., 2022), which suggests that the stability of social relationships in the digital age depends on flexible adaptation to technological shifts rather than resistance. Families that cultivated awareness and dialogue about digital habits were better equipped to manage the emotional risks of connectivity. This echoes (Kemboi et al., 2024) observation that cooperative family interventions yield better cohesion outcomes than punitive approaches. Similarly, the Colombian families in this study who used digital media collaboratively—by sharing educational videos, reflecting on content together, or practicing mindfulness apps—demonstrated an integrative approach to media that aligns with both emotional well-being and collective growth.

In contrast, families experiencing tension often exhibited fragmented communication patterns, with individual members retreating into separate digital spaces. These findings correspond to (Wartberg et al., 2022) evidence that problematic media use correlates with diminished mother–child relationship quality and higher emotional dysregulation. As digital devices increasingly mediate

everyday interaction, the potential for relational displacement grows unless balanced by intentional in-person engagement. Thus, family cohesion in the digital age emerges as an ongoing process of negotiation—balancing accessibility with attention, autonomy with accountability, and digital expression with authentic presence.

Taken together, this study advances the understanding of how families experience digital transformation not merely as a technological shift but as a relational reconfiguration. Digital media has become a new “family space,” one that mirrors emotional dynamics, redefines intimacy, and requires deliberate cultivation of empathy and respect. The findings reinforce that cohesion is no longer determined solely by physical proximity but by the quality of digital connection, emotional reciprocity, and collective adaptation (Chatterjee et al., 2025; Masih et al., 2025; Santarén et al., 2025).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the influence of digital media habits on family cohesion, it is not without limitations. The research was conducted with a relatively small sample of 21 participants from Colombia, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural or socioeconomic contexts. The qualitative design, though rich in depth, relied on self-reported narratives that may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability. Furthermore, because the data were collected through semi-structured interviews, the results capture perceived experiences rather than direct behavioral observation. Another limitation concerns the cross-sectional nature of the data, which does not account for changes in digital behavior or family dynamics over time. Future studies employing longitudinal or mixed-method designs could provide a more comprehensive understanding of evolving digital patterns and their long-term impact on family cohesion.

Future research should aim to examine the bidirectional relationships between digital media use and family cohesion across different cultural and developmental contexts. Comparative studies between urban and rural families, or across various age groups, could illuminate how access to technology and digital literacy influence relational outcomes. Incorporating quantitative measures—such as time-use tracking or psychometric assessments of cohesion—would also strengthen the evidence base. In addition, exploring specific digital behaviors (e.g., gaming, content creation, or virtual learning) may reveal nuanced

effects that differ from general media consumption. Finally, future investigations should consider how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and metaverse environments reshape family communication, identity formation, and intergenerational understanding.

From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the importance of fostering intentional and balanced digital engagement within families. Practitioners, educators, and counselors should encourage families to co-create digital norms that prioritize quality interaction and mutual respect. Media literacy programs could help parents and children develop critical awareness of online content while enhancing empathy and communication skills. Families are encouraged to establish shared offline rituals, maintain transparent dialogue about digital boundaries, and integrate technology in ways that reinforce rather than replace emotional connection. By transforming digital spaces into platforms for collaboration, education, and support, families can strengthen cohesion while adapting constructively to the realities of the digital age.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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