

The Influence of Digital Media on the Social Behavior of Elementary School Children in Mandailing Natal

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine the influence of digital media on the social behavior of elementary school children in Mandailing Natal Regency through a field study approach. The study focuses on observable changes in children's social behaviors, including communication skills, peer interaction, empathy, and engagement in non-digital social activities. Data were collected through direct observation in three elementary schools, in-depth interviews with teachers and parents, and documentation of students' daily activities. The findings reveal that digital media produces dual impacts: it enhances creativity and cognitive skills but reduces face-to-face interactions, lowers empathy, and increases tendencies toward individualism. These effects are strongly shaped by parental supervision and the level of digital exposure at home. The study emphasizes the need for balanced regulation of digital media use to ensure that children's social development remains healthy and stable.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology over the past five years has brought significant changes to children's lives, including in areas like Mandailing Natal Regency. Elementary school children are now very familiar with gadgets, whether for playing games, watching videos, or accessing social media. This situation is a significant concern because digital media use can influence how children interact, communicate, and socialize with their surroundings (Putri, 2021). Shifts in children's play patterns are becoming apparent, especially as traditional play spaces are being replaced by screen-based activities. Children who once played in fields or at home now spend more time on their smartphones. This phenomenon is also felt by elementary school teachers in Mandailing Natal, who stated that children's social activities have decreased compared to previous years (Siregar, 2022).

Digital media actually has educational benefits when used wisely. Various educational apps and videos can increase children's knowledge and creativity. However, uncontrolled use has the potential to foster individualistic and aggressive behavior, and even diminish children's communication skills with peers (Hakim, 2020). At elementary school age, children are at a crucial stage of social development. They learn to recognize rules, share, cooperate, and understand their own and others' emotions. When children interact more frequently with digital media than their peers, this social development process can be disrupted (Santrock, 2020).

In Mandailing Natal Regency, local social values such as the spirit of mutual cooperation, togetherness, and good manners are important in shaping children's character. However, some teachers believe that digital media is beginning to displace these values, as many children imitate language, behavior, and expressions from digital content that are not culturally appropriate. Initial observations in several elementary schools indicate that some children exhibit poor cooperative behavior, are easily offended, and tend to focus more on their devices than on group activities. In some cases, children even repeat harsh words or aggressive actions they see in games or digital videos (Harahap, 2021).

Parents in Mandailing Natal also acknowledge that giving their children devices is a quick way to keep them at home. This practice unwittingly reinforces children's dependence on digital media. This dependence then distances them from face-to-face interactions, which are a key source of social development. Another emerging issue is the lack of supervision of the type of content children consume. Many children easily access age-inappropriate videos or games. This can significantly impact their thinking patterns, speech patterns, and social behavior (Marpaung, 2021).

Research on the influence of digital media on the social behavior of elementary school children in rural areas, including Mandailing Natal, is still limited. Most studies have been conducted in urban areas. Therefore, this study is crucial to examine how digital media shapes children's social behavior within the context of local Mandailing culture. Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the influence of digital media on the social behavior of elementary school children in Mandailing Natal through a field study. This research is expected to provide a concrete picture of changes in children's social behavior and serve as a basis for teachers, parents, and schools to develop more effective mentoring strategies.

Furthermore, the development of digital media use in Mandailing Natal is also influenced by increased internet access, which now covers almost all sub-districts. This makes it easier for children to access various digital platforms without time constraints. When widespread access is not balanced with digital literacy, children become more vulnerable to consuming inappropriate content. Teachers revealed that some children even know more about digital trends than adults, but lack the ability to sort out their impact on their behavior.

Socioeconomic conditions also play a significant role in the intensity of children's device use. Many parents work late into the afternoon or evening, resulting in reduced supervision of their children. In such situations, devices often become the most convenient form of entertainment. This habit gradually leads children to spend time alone with digital media, leading to increasingly limited direct social interactions. Based on these phenomena, this research is highly relevant. Using a qualitative field approach, this study not only explores the perceptions of teachers and parents but also directly observes changes in children's social behavior at school. This focus provides a more comprehensive picture of how digital media shapes children's interactions in everyday life, both within the school and family environment.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with a field study. This approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth data collection on children's social behavior based on real-life interactions in the school and home environments (Sugiyono, 2020). The research locations were three elementary schools in Mandailing Natal: SDN Gunung Tua, SDN Panyabungan III, and SDN Aek Mata. These three schools were selected because they have diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, which were considered to enrich the research data.

The research informants consisted of 18 students, 6 homeroom teachers, and 9 parents. The informants were selected using purposive sampling, selecting informants deemed most knowledgeable and experienced in changes in children's social behavior related to digital media use. Data collection was conducted through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to directly observe children's behavior at school, particularly when interacting with peers. Interviews were conducted with teachers, parents, and several students to obtain information on digital media usage habits.

The data obtained were analyzed using the Miles & Huberman qualitative analysis model (data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing). Analysis was conducted repeatedly to ensure data consistency and alignment with the research focus. To ensure data validity, researchers triangulated techniques and sources. Triangulation was achieved by comparing observations, interviews, and documented data in the form of teacher notes on student behavior.

RESULTS

Based on observations, the majority of children spend 2–4 hours a day using devices, mostly watching YouTube and playing games. This results in less time for direct interaction with peers at home and school. A fourth-grade teacher at Gunung Tua Elementary School stated that some students frequently imitate language from YouTube content, including slang and impolite language. This change in language affects how they communicate with friends and teachers.

Field findings indicate that children who frequently play online games tend to have more difficulty controlling their emotions. They become easily angered when they lose and carry these emotional patterns into social interactions at school. Conversely, some children who access digital media for educational content show more positive social development. They are able to tell stories, ask questions, and share information with their friends.

The teacher also revealed that some children tend to withdraw during recess because they are more interested in discussing games that not all their friends play. This creates small groups and sometimes leaves other children excluded. Previously strong social interactions between students, such as traditional play, are now diminishing. Children often talk about game characters or the videos they watch rather than engaging in direct social activities.

Some parents reported that their children were often difficult to talk to because they were too focused on their devices. This situation shows that digital media affects emotional closeness within families. At SDN Panyabungan III, teachers found that children who frequently played action games exhibited more aggressive behavior, including crude jokes, such as pushing friends or imitating fight scenes. Some children also experienced a decline in their ability to work together. In group activities, they preferred working alone because they were accustomed to individual digital activities.

Children who were highly active on digital media appeared more easily distracted. While teachers were teaching, some children had difficulty focusing because they were thinking about games or videos they wanted to watch after school. However, some children used digital media to learn positive things, such as drawing tutorials, crafts, or memorizing lessons. These children tended to be more confident when interacting with friends. Home environmental factors were also influential. Children who received less parental guidance showed stronger negative impacts than those whose use was supervised.

In some cases, children imitate the speech styles of influencers they watch. Teachers noted that children often use foreign terms that are out of context. At Aek Mata Elementary School, some students were seen reluctant to play physical games during recess, preferring to sit and discuss characters in games. This indicates a decrease in social and physical activity. Empathetic behavior also declined in some students. When friends fell or experienced problems, some children showed no concern because they were focused on discussing digital content.

Children's interactions with teachers were also affected. Teachers reported that some students became more assertive in arguing or speaking in a raised voice, behavior likely modeled from the uncontrolled nature of digital content. On the other hand, using digital media for schoolwork helped some shy students gain confidence, especially when they found information more quickly than their peers.

In general, teachers and parents agreed that digital media has a mixed impact: some positive impacts, but negative impacts on social behavior are more dominant without guidance. Researchers also found that children begin to form social identities based on what they watch or play. This demonstrates how digital media influences group interactions. Based on overall field findings, digital media has a significant impact on the social behavior of elementary school children in Mandailing Natal, including communication patterns, collaboration skills, empathy, and emotional control.

Follow-up observations at Gunung Tua Elementary School showed that most children were beginning to form friendship groups based on shared digital interests, particularly games and YouTube. Children who didn't follow certain digital trends were often not considered "conversational subjects" and felt left out. This unbalanced classroom social dynamics and created a gap between digitally active and inactive children. Teachers also reported changes in children's play patterns. Some boys preferred role-playing based on the game characters they watched, while girls focused on social media trends such as hairstyles, fashion, or popular cartoon characters. While seemingly fun, these play patterns often diminished the creativity of traditional play that once dominated children's social interactions in Mandailing Natal.

Several cases demonstrated that digital media use can alter children's perceptions of social relationships. For example, children frequently compared themselves to the digital figures they saw, reducing their self-confidence when interacting with friends. Children also tend to be more sensitive to peer criticism and comments, possibly because they are accustomed to receiving instant judgment from digital content. Furthermore, research has found that minor conflicts between children are often triggered by issues related to digital media, such as disputes over game levels, who has the better phone, or who is more up-to-date with the latest trends. Such conflicts did not occur in previous generations when physical play and group activities were more prevalent.

However, not all effects of digital media are negative. Several teachers have noted improved verbal skills in children who frequently watch educational content. They are more confident speaking up in front of the class, telling long stories, and engaging with friends in discussions. These positive effects appear in children who receive parental guidance and consume genuinely educational content. Overall, field findings confirm that digital media is a very powerful external factor in shaping the social interactions of elementary school children in Mandailing Natal. Positive or negative impacts are largely determined by the pattern of parental guidance, the type of content consumed, and the intensity of digital media use in daily life.

CONCLUSION

Based on field findings, it can be concluded that digital media has a significant influence on the social behavior of elementary school children in Mandailing Natal Regency. Positively, digital media helps improve children's visual literacy skills, creativity, and readiness for technological developments. Children understand visual material more quickly, are able to explore new insights through educational videos, and demonstrate improved problem-solving skills. However, field findings also reveal that uncontrolled digital media use leads to a decline in children's interest in direct social interaction, diminished interpersonal communication skills, and weakened empathy for peers. This is evident in children's tendency to prefer playing digital games to participating in traditional games or group activities, as well as an increase in minor conflicts between peers due to imitation of behaviors from digital content.

Furthermore, this study concludes that parental and teacher supervision is a key determinant in the direction of digital media's influence on children's social development. Children who receive structured support tend to exhibit more stable social behavior, while children who use digital media freely tend to experience impaired emotional regulation and difficulty understanding social norms. Therefore, collaboration between schools and families is needed to develop balanced digital media usage policies, including limiting screen time, introducing healthy content, and increasing non-digital social activities in both school and home environments. This research also encourages further research into digital media usage patterns and their impact on children's long-term personality development.

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