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Sabina Savadova

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Subterfuge: a parental strategy for mediating young children's digital media practices in Azerbaijan

Sabina Savadova

Moray House School of Education and Sport, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT

The present study introduces the ways in which parents mediate young children's digital media practices in Azerbaijan, a former Soviet country. This study reveals a new parental mediation strategy – subterfuge, which refers to parents' indirect communication about digital media restrictions with their children. With this approach, parents blame digital devices or internet connectivity for limiting children's access. Using the strategy, parents prefer indirect interference with their children's digital practices to avoid upsetting or confronting them. The strategy is explained through parental ethnotheories – parents' cultural beliefs and values about childrearing. The study calls for adding parental ethnotheories to research on parental mediation in digital environments. Findings presented here originated in a study involving five families with a five-year-old child through family visits and the living journals method developed specifically for this study.

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Introduction

Previous research conducted in the Global North shows that children are exposed to digital technologies from a very young age in various settings such as home, school, nursery, and museum (Chaudron et al. 2018). Despite the growing body of literature on parental mediation of young children's digital media practices in the Global North, there is little attention paid to how different cultural contexts influence parental mediation strategies. Such inattention is further accentuated in the Global South, where, besides this issue, the research in this area is also limited. As a result, there is an increasing need for further studies on an international scale to broaden the scope of research on children's digital media practices beyond the Global North, which can help better understand how parents mediate their children's digital media practices within home context (Marsh 2015; Shin and Li 2017). Heeding these calls, the current study aims to explore the ways in which parents mediate young children's digital media practices in a former Soviet country – Azerbaijan, with a focus on parental ethnotheories in parents' mediation of children's digital media practices. The study also calls for more research about parental mediation with a view of cultural context and parents' cultural beliefs, as well as views about childrearing as one of the important considerations influencing parents' mediation strategies.

In this article, I aim to reveal a mediation strategy employed by Azerbaijani parents, drawing on parental ethnotheories (Harkness and Super 1996) to provide insights into parents' motivations behind mediation strategies. Parental ethnotheories posit that the cultural beliefs and characteristics

CONTACT Sabina Savadova Sabina.Savadova@ed.ac.uk Moray House School of Education and Sport, The University of Edinburgh, 1.14 St John's Land, Holyrood, EH8 8AQ, Edinburgh, UK

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of parents and caregivers are critical components of the developmental environment in which children engage in their daily activities and lives (Harkness and Super 2006). Parental ethnotheories are a lens through which one can understand how parents' cultural beliefs shape their decision-making regarding the organisation of their children's daily lives (Harkness and Super 2006).

The study employs a qualitative approach that involves 15 family visits to five families, each with a five-year-old child and a participatory research method – the living journals method – specifically developed for this study. I use a multiple case study approach, acknowledging the existence of multiple realities and emphasising the significance of everyday activities (Thomas 2021). The study examines parents' mediation strategies within the context of family homes, with each home serving as a separate case. This approach allows for exploring multiple realities within the broader context of Azerbaijan. In the present study, the term 'digital media' encompasses a range of internet-connected devices, including TVs, computers, smartphones, and tablets, which are commonly available in Azerbaijani households.

Parental mediation

Parental mediation is broadly linked to Bandura's social learning theory (1977) and focuses on strategies parents use to mitigate the adverse effects of television on children (Clark 2011). Matsumoto et al. (2021)have expanded the concept of parental mediation to include strategies that parents use to manage their children's access to digital devices to reinforce specific behaviours. Parental mediation strategies can vary depending on parents' beliefs about the benefits and risks of digital technologies, their attitudes towards children's media use, and their parenting styles (Nichols and Selim 2022; Smahelova et al. 2017). Understanding these factors can shed light on why parents mediate their children's digital media practices in particular ways and how cultural and social factors may influence these strategies.

Several widely used mediation strategies have been identified in the literature, including *active mediation, restrictive mediation,* and *co-use* (Gentile et al. 2012; Warren 2001). *Active mediation* involves parents discussing the harmful effects of media with their children to help them understand potential risks, which can lead to children internalising media rules and following them willingly. *Restrictive mediation* involves parents limiting their children's use of digital technologies by controlling the time, location, and duration of media interactions. *Co-use* involves parents and children using digital media-sharing practices based on mutual interests. In addition to these three strategies, *participatory learning*, a learner-centred approach that encourages parents to listen and co-create experiences with their children, has also been proposed as a fourth mediation strategy (Clark 2011).

As digital media use continues to become more prevalent and diverse, research has been extended beyond the previously discussed mediation strategies, which were less effective in managing children's use of devices such as computers, tablets, and new smartphones (Matsumoto et al. 2021). Similarly, digital technologies have become more integrated into family life; as a result, research on parental mediation needs to go beyond studying factors influencing mediation strategies and explore potential relationships with parental ethnotheories (Plowman, Stephen, and McPake 2010; Zezulkova and Stastna 2018). This shift in focus can lead to an increased interest in understanding the ways in which parents mediate their children's use of digital technologies and the role of parental ethnotheories in shaping these mediation practices. Instead of confirming or denying the existence of previously identified mediation strategies, in this article, I am interested in Azerbaijani parents' mediation strategies influenced by parental ethnotheories, that is, their cultural beliefs and values about childrearing.

Parental ethnotheories

Harkness and Super (1996) suggest a theoretical framework – 'developmental niche' – to explore children's relations with their parents and demonstrate that children are members of a cultural system. The developmental niche comprises three key components: 1) a physical and cultural setting for children's lives; 2) traditions of childrearing; and 3) caregivers' characteristics and cultural beliefs, and they are referred to as parental ethnotheories. These components are interconnected and situated within a broader culture. The developmental niche construct emphasises that the child's environment is not a random collection of settings, customs, and parental beliefs, but rather, it is organised within a cultural system. The theory applies to various settings to understand young children's daily practices within their cultural context (Super et al. 2020).

Parental ethnotheories have a substantive place in shaping parents' actions and practices. Harkness and Super (2006, 62) define parental ethnotheories as:

> … cultural models that parents hold regarding children, families, and themselves as parents … . often implicit, taken-for-granted ideas about the 'natural' or 'right' way to think or act, and they have strong motivational properties for parents.

The term 'cultural model' refers to the shared ideas and beliefs within a cultural group (Harkness and Super 2006). Parental ethnotheories are a part of this system that connects actual parenting practices with various ideas about children. While parental ethnotheories themselves are not sufficient to define outcomes for children, they are essential in understanding the reasoning behind parents' actions. This study focuses on the role of parental ethnotheories in shaping parents' mediation strategies for young children's digital media practices. Parental ethnotheories can critically influence parents' mediation strategies for young children's uses of digital technologies. They are also valuable for identifying what influences parental choices in relation to their mediation strategies.

The present study

The present study was conducted in Azerbaijan with five participant families. Azerbaijan is a transcontinental country located between Western Asia and Eastern Europe. It is situated in the Caucasus region and has faced historical challenges, including a seven-decade-long occupation and rule by the Soviet Union. Azerbaijan is listed as an upper-middle-income country eligible for Official Development Assistance by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2021). The definition of Global South is often contested, and Azerbaijan is not geographically located within it, but since the term also refers to the regions which typically have low per capita income as measured by the World Bank, the country can be included in the Global South.

Research in the Global North shows that children across various countries are increasingly accessing digital media devices (Chaudron, Di Gioia, and Gemo 2018; Livingstone et al. 2015), but there is a lack of research on this phenomenon in Azerbaijan using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Given the growing recognition of the importance of cultural context in parental mediation strategies, there is a need to investigate parental mediation practices in different countries (Shin and Li 2017). Conducting research in Azerbaijan can enrich research in the Global South. It can also provide further insights into the links between parental ethnotheories and their mediation strategies of young children's digital media practices.

This study identifies the ways in which parents in Azerbaijan mediate their young children's digital media practices and the role of parental ethnotheories in shaping their mediation strategies. The study does not intend to validate established mediation strategies in existing literature but rather to address the following research question:

> How do parents mediate their young children's digital media practices in Azerbaijan?

Participants

I employed the snowballing sampling strategy to gain access to families with children aged five as reaching participants within the desired population for research proved difficult, and help was needed from the target population members (Bryman 2012). Families' homes were separate cases for the study, where children's digital media practices and parents' mediation strategies were the principal foci of the study within their everyday lives at home. All the families consisted of two heterosexual parents. When writing this article, homosexual marriages are illegal in Azerbaijan (Table 1).

Data generation

The study investigated parental mediation strategies within the cultural context of everyday life. To achieve this goal, the study utilised a multiple case study approach, examining five homes in Azerbaijan. The case study approach was a good fit for this study, enabling me to employ multiple methods (Yazan 2015). Thus, the data generation was divided into two phases: in the first phase, I used three family visits to each family in Baku, and in the second phase, I developed a living journals approach where mothers were asked to act as proxy researchers to generate data.

Family visits

I designed family home visits to delve into children's daily lives in their environment to identify young children's digital media practices and their parents' mediation strategies in a home setting. While my presence might have caused some intrusion in their daily activities, children and mothers soon became accustomed to my presence in their homes.

Each visit consisted of several methods to generate data with children and mothers. The table below details each visit, including participants, activities, duration, and generated data (Table 2).

Living journals

The primary purpose for conducting the living journals method was to find a research approach to explore young children's daily interactions with digital technologies while minimising my physical

Table 1. Demographic information on participant families.

Family	Person	Name	Age	Education	Occupation
Elcan Aliyev's family	Focus child	Elcan (M)	5y 1m	Preschool in English	
	Mother	Narmin	30y	Undergraduate	Homemaker
	Father	Ayaz	33y	Undergraduate	Entrepreneur
	Sister	Arzu	8y	English private school	
	Brother	Elay	3y	Mother looks after him at home	
Khumar Hajiyeva's family	Focus child	Khumar (F)	5y 3m	Russian preschool	
	Mother	Banu	32y	Postgraduate	Finance Analyst
	Father	Nazim	32y	Undergraduate	Procurement Specialist
	Brother	Mahir	1y	At home (Looked after by a childminder)	
Yasin Mammadov's family	Focus child	Yasin (M)	5y	Tutoring in Russian	
	Mother	Fatima	31y	Postgraduate	Translator/ Interpreter
	Father	Nadir	30y	Undergraduate	Self-employed
	Sister	Aydan	8m		
	Grandmother	Safayat	52y	Secondary school	Homemaker
Kamala Azadova's family	Focus child	Kamala (F)	5y	Russian preschool	
	Mother	Sara	26y	Postgraduate	School teacher
	Father	Murad	34y	Postgraduate	Sales Specialist
	Brother	Kamran	3y	Azerbaijani preschool	
Bilal Rzayev's family	Focus child	Bilal (M)	5y 1m	Azerbaijani private preschool	
	Mother	Amina	29y	Postgraduate	University teacher
	Father	Osman	33y	Undergraduate	Computer engineer
	Brother	Davud	3 m		

Table 2. Details of family visits.

Event	Participants	Activities	Duration	Generated data
Visit 1	Mothers and children	Creating trajectories with mothers	2–4 h	• Pictures, short videos • Trajectories made by mothers • Audio recordings of trajectory discussions
Visits 2	Children	Talk about daily routine and room tours with children	2–4 h	• Pictures • Short videos • Audio recordings of room tours • Audio recordings of daily routine talks
Visits 3	Mothers	Semi-structured interviews with mothers	2–4 h	• Pictures • Short videos • Audio recordings of interviews

presence in their settings as a researcher. For two-week periods at different times of the year – school term and holiday break – I asked mothers to send me pictures and/or videos of their children through WhatsApp application, which they were to capture at pre-arranged times and prompted at specific intervals. In addition to visuals, mothers were asked to answer four questions about their children's whereabouts, accompanying individuals, activities, and motivations for these activities (Table 3). I compiled those pictures and stills from videos to design journals in print and digital formats for each child. I later used them as prompts to obtain all family members' opinions on the activities described in their journals. This method borrows elements from Tobin and his colleagues' Video-Cued Ethnography approach (Tobin, Wu, and Davidson 1989), Plowman and Stevenson's (2012) mobile phone diaries method and the 'A Day in the Life' method by Gillen and Cameron (2010). The living journals led to the generation of multivocal, multimodal, metatextual and multifunctional data. I have detailed the method's rationale, procedures, challenges and benefits elsewhere (Savadova 2023).

Data analysis

Data analysis was closely integrated with the data generation process, following an iterative approach (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). Each stage of the data analysis process informed the subsequent stage and the research question was continually revisited to align with the study's aim (Table 4).

All generated data, including created living journals, were uploaded on Dedoose, a mixed-method analysis software for coding and analysis purposes. Dedoose allowed me to code textual and visual data and export charts generated from the codes and coding themes for the further analysis process. The family visits and living journals method yielded rich and multimodal data, as detailed in Table 5.

Table 3. Details of living journals approach.

1. Generating initial data	2. Creating living journals	3. Discussing living journals
Prompts sent to mothers at agreed times and days including weekdays and weekends. Prompts included five questions: • *Where is your child?* • *Who is your child with?* • *What is your child doing?* • *Why is your child doing that?* • *How is your child feeling?*	Online living journals were created. Print and digital versions of the journals were shared with the families.	Online discussions around the living journals with fathers separately and mothers and children together.

Table 4. Data analysis process.

Familiarisation	Deconstruction	Construction	Conclusion
Data organisation Transcribing and translating Gaining a general sense of the data	Coding Memo writing	Developing themes and categories Comparing and contrasting data	Developing family pen portraits Member checking Final narrative

Table 5. Details of the types of data.

Types of data	Total duration/count
Audio recordings of interviews	3 h 13 min
Living journals (created)	116 pages
Screen recordings of living journals discussions with fathers	5 h 30 mins
Screen recordings of living journals discussions with mothers and children	3 h 3 mins
Number of photos (living journals)	157
Number of text messages (living journals)	333
Total duration of voice messages	32 mins

Inductive thematic analysis was employed to systematically analyse the perspectives of all participants within their respective cases (Braun and Clarke 2021). The purpose of this analysis was to subsequently compare and contrast these perspectives across different cases. The overarching aim was to discern potential commonalities and distinctions in the approaches employed by parents in mediating their children's digital media practices.

This analysis adopted an inductive coding approach, devoid of preconceived codes or code groups (Thomas 2006). The coding process unfolded in two phases: open and focused coding. Open coding involved identifying emerging codes, which were consistently compared within and across cases to reveal variations and commonalities. The subsequent phase, focused coding, was designed to refine the coding process by selecting initial codes and structuring them into coherent categories and themes. Given that a sole researcher was responsible for this coding process, developing categories and themes necessitated an iterative approach conducted within and across cases. This iterative process involved three rounds of inductive coding. For example, during the open coding phase, certain codes such as 'turning off WiFi router' and 'lying about the functionality of phones' were initially identified within one family. Subsequently, I actively sought similar practices across other families throughout the coding process. This led to the identification of additional codes, such as 'hiding digital devices' and 'restricting phone use in public,' among others. These identified codes and their variations were further examined and documented during the focused coding phase. It was established that all participant families, to varying extents, employed a strategy which I labelled 'subterfuge' due to its deceptive nature. The subterfuge category was primarily derived through focused coding of transcriptions from family visit interviews, observations, and discussions within living journals.

Ethical considerations

All identities have been pseudonymised, and ongoing consent was obtained from all parents and children for using their images in publications or presentations related to this study. Adherence to ethical guidelines is crucial in research, especially when working with young children and their families, as ethical dilemmas and decisions may arise at any stage of the research process (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). Therefore, I paid due attention to observing power relations established in those households and acted accordingly.

Researchers face the challenge of ensuring that participants are fully informed about their participation in the study. To address this issue, I approached ethics as a continuous and complex process (Flewitt 2020), renewing mothers' and children's consent before each family visit. Children may not fully understand the concept of informed consent in the same way as adults do, therefore, their consent was sought with great care and attention, recognising the complexity and holistic nature of children's consent. I was aware of the complex power relations at home (Gallagher 2019) and therefore, I maintained ethical relationships with the children, continuously offering them opportunities to join or leave the activity without pressure (Arnott et al. 2020).

Results

Subterfuge: implementing restrictions by proxy

The present study revealed a new parental mediation strategy I termed 'subterfuge', which has not been previously discussed in the broader literature. Subterfuge is characterised by indirect influence placed on children's use of digital media devices, whereby parents attribute blame to the device or connectivity when restricting their access to digital media. Such a strategy often equates to misdirection or deception. Through subterfuge, parents employed various tactics to limit their children's access to digital devices, including lying about the availability of WiFi on their devices or at home, hiding devices such as remote controls and tablets, and inventing reasons for not allowing device use, such as lack of battery life or the unsuitability of the device for games. These strategies were motivated by a desire to avoid conflict or tantrums and to maintain harmonious relationships with their children.

'The phone monitors and blocks you.'

During the discussions of living journals, Bilal's father, Mr Rzayev, explained that he never directly restricted Bilal's use of digital media. Instead, he connected his phone to his notebook and turned off the phone remotely when he deemed his son's usage excessive. By doing so, he limited Bilal's device usage without his knowledge and transferred the blame onto the devices themselves. Mr Rzayev clarified that he refrained from openly confronting Bilal and asking him not to use devices, as he wanted to maintain open communication with his son and avoid damaging their relationship.

> I don't directly ask Bilal. I tell him that it is forbidden to play [games on the phone] for a *long time – the phone monitors you and blocks you* [my emphasis]. I don't tell him that I am the one stopping you. And when I see that he doesn't listen, I block the phone through my computer, and he puts it down. That's because if I say that I did it, he will demand that I unblock the phone, and I will get angry at him. I don't want him to be upset with me, and I *don't want to spoil our relationship* [my emphasis]. I can make him do what I want. But he will be upset with me in the future, and he won't share anything with me. It is better if he thinks that it is the phone blocking him.
>
> (Mr Rzayev, LJ discussion)

In addition to regulating the duration of Bilal's phone usage, Mr Rzayev also applied the same approach to controlling his activities on the device by limiting his game downloads. Bilal's father informed him that downloading more than one game a day would result in the phone blocking itself. Initially, Bilal did not believe this was true, but his father demonstrated the consequence when he noticed Bilal had downloaded more than one game. Following this demonstration, Bilal altered his behaviour and stopped downloading games, as reported by his father. Mr Rzayev's mediation approach towards Bilal's digital media practices appears to have been primarily driven by his desire to maintain a positive relationship with his son while still interfering with his digital media practices, albeit indirectly. Rather than directly communicating rules or strategies, he relied on shifting the responsibility onto the device by attributing invented autonomous properties to it. According to him, this approach proved effective and was also applied to address other challenges in using the device.

Although both parents implemented the subterfuge, the strategy was primarily initiated by fathers and supported by mothers. This strategy aligned with fathers' preference for evading confrontation with children to assert their authority and avoid spoiling their relationships. Fathers, using subterfuge, preferred to indirectly restrict their children's digital media use by blaming the devices or hiding them away rather than engaging in direct communication with their children.

'No internet connection here.'

Participant parents employed deceptive tactics to manage their children's digital media practices, particularly in public or while visiting grandparents. The earlier noted reasons, such as lack of WiFi connectivity or insufficient battery charge in their phones, were used to avoid potential conflicts. During family outings with friends at cafes or restaurants, children sometimes asked parents to use phones after seeing their peers using their parents' phones. In such cases, parents resorted to subterfuge to avoid yielding to their children's demands while adhering to their usual rules of not allowing children to use their phones. For example, Kamala's parents employed subterfuge to prevent their children from using their phones during outings.

> When we go somewhere, they see that other children play games on their parents' phones. But we tell our children that there is no internet connection here or our phones are almost out of charge.
>
> (Mrs Azadova, visit 3)

In spite of variations in the specific strategies employed to regulate their children's access to digital media, all participant parents shared a common objective of minimising their children's exposure to technologies. This objective was frequently driven by potential adverse effects of digital media on their children, such as eyesight problems and exposure to inappropriate content. Within the subterfuge strategy, tactics sometimes alternated, as illustrated by Khumar's family, who discovered that their daughter could access the tablet on the top of the shelf by using a small chair. In response, they resorted to a similar practice of concealing the charger. Prior research has also examined the concerns of parents with young children who want to keep their children away from digital technologies for health-related concerns (Kucirkova, Littleton, and Kyparissiadis 2018). Nonetheless, the findings of this study reveal that, in many instances, children were unaware of the controls imposed by their parents.

Children's response to subterfuge

As discussed above, Bilal's father implemented subterfuge to limit Bilal's access to digital devices. The family had recently moved into a new flat, and they had told Bilal that there was no WiFi connection in this flat. Although Bilal understood and believed it when his parents told him there was no connectivity, it was never explained to him what caused the internet connection loss in their new flat. Perhaps due to this ambiguity, he repeatedly checked the television to see if the connection had been restored.

Bilal:	There was internet before, but it is now gone.
Me:	What happened?
Bilal:	It disappeared here [in their new flat].

(Bilal, visit 2)

However, Bilal's parents would typically turn off the internet connection through the WiFi router during the day and only turn it back on in the evenings for personal use. Mr Rzayev recalled an instance when the family watched a football match and had unintentionally left the WiFi router on overnight. The following day, Bilal discovered that internet was working again. His parents let him watch YouTube videos on TV for a short while on that day, but the next day, they used a family outing to another city as an opportunity to turn off connectivity upon their return home, telling him that once again, there was no connectivity in the flat.

Several participant children were unaware that their parents had hidden their device or charger, while others were aware of their whereabouts. Either way, children accepted that they could not access them. During the second family visit, Yasin requested his tablet from his mother, who retrieved it from the top of the shelf where it was usually kept. When I asked about the tablet's location, Yasin's mother explained that they typically kept it there. Yasin also wanted to keep his tablet away from his toddler sister. At times when he did have access to it, he resorted to the same practice to prevent his toddler sister from playing with it. Yasin then revealed that his sister had nearly broken it when playing, prompting him to place it in another higher location outside her reach.

The study also revealed that the subterfuge strategy was not exclusive to digital devices and was also applied to children's belongings in the household, such as books and toys. In Yasin's family, I observed that his toys and books were on the top of the shelf or in other hidden places from the children, too. When I inquired about the reason, Yasin's mother explained that they were kept out of reach on the top shelves of wardrobes to prevent them from being damaged.

'Grandmother mode': grandparent's roles in subterfuge

Beyond children's digital media practices at home, they were also exposed to digital media in various external settings, including schools (Elcan), among peers (Yasin), and in the homes of grandparents (Khumar, Bilal and Kamala) and other relatives (Khumar, Yasin). The living journals employed in this study afforded a unique opportunity to gain insights into children's daily activities beyond the home environment, enabling the identification of digital media exposure in grandparents' households. The findings revealed that grandparents in Azerbaijan were extensively involved in the daily lives of their grandchildren, caring for them after school until their parents returned from work. During this time, children were permitted to watch television or use their grandmother's phone, thereby contributing to the development of their digital media practices.

The visits to grandparents' houses often involved significant changes in time and space, which signalled to children a shift in the rules that applied to them. One mother in the study referred to this phenomenon as transitioning between 'mummy mode' and 'grandmother mode', as returning home meant reversal to the set of rules established by the parents.

> Khumar is the first grandchild, so my mum allows her to do everything that I would normally forbid. When we are at her grandmother's, we are in 'grandmother mode', and she does not listen to me, but when we are home, we are in 'mummy mode', and everything changes.
>
> (Mrs Hajiyeva, visit 1)

Despite the recognition of different modes, consistency in rules across settings remained a primary goal, and one mother in the study took active steps to ensure this by asking her mother (her child's grandmother) to adhere to the rules established in their home. The study's findings demonstrate that grandparents significantly mediate young children's digital media practices in Azerbaijan. This study contributes to the growing body of research on mediation strategies for young children, expanding beyond parents and onto grandparents and other caregivers in young children's lives (Nimrod, Elias, and Lemish 2019; Pempek and Lauricella 2017).

The present study has found that grandparents did not employ subterfuge mediation strategies regarding children's digital media practices. Rather, they actively allowed children to use digital media devices during visits to their homes, as evidenced by the experiences of Kamala's, Yasin's and Khumar's grandparents. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that grandparents may use digital media to bond and strengthen their relationships with their grandchildren (Shin and Li 2017). Furthermore, the current study highlights that grandparents also allow digital media use as a form of entertainment for children during the absence of their parents.

The present study aligns with previous research (Smahelova et al. 2017; van Kruistum and van Steensel 2017) in showing that parents' mediation of their children's digital media use is not an inflexible, one-time rule. Instead, the findings reveal that parents engage in rule-bending practices, even when they are otherwise strict. The parents in this study were aware of the digital media use rules being relaxed at grandparents' houses but allowed it to continue as long as the children were unaware of the change, and it did not conflict with the overall digital media use guidelines set by parents.

Discussion

The findings uncovered numerous instances in which parents opted for indirect methods of influencing their children's use of digital media rather than directly communicating their intentions. These indirect tactics included removing access to devices, chargers, and remote controls and deceiving children about the availability of internet or battery charge on the devices. Two mothers also kept their children's toys and books away from them in a safe place to protect them from potential damage.

Azerbaijani parents' beliefs about childrearing heavily influence subterfuge; thus, it is closely aligned with the overarching parental ethnotheories, which are culturally shaped. Azerbaijani parents tend to apply similar strategies in childrearing practices. Parents may promise their child to acquire a toy later to circumvent a tantrum in a store without genuinely intending to do it. Parents might frequently adopt this strategy, with the underlying expectation that by employing deceit at that moment, the child will become distracted and eventually forget about the matter at hand. To illustrate, a straightforward scenario would involve a child expressing a desire to return home when outside with their parents, to which a parent might assert that they are leaving soon, even if their actual intention is to do so after a considerable span of time. Subsequent inquiries from the child, made minutes later, will result in the same response. This pattern persists until the parents genuinely intend to depart, which may occur several hours later. This preference for postponement appears to be a prevalent method, one that sidesteps direct confrontation with the issue in question while disregarding the desires of the children involved.

In the study, in the absence of a reference point in relation to the mediation of children's digital media practices, parents constructed their own mediation strategy – subterfuge – based on their established practices in other areas of their children's lives. Subterfuge was grounded upon parental ethnotheories – deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about childrearing held by parents. Parents also strove to ensure that their cultural values and beliefs regarding 'good parenting' remain unchallenged when implementing a mediation strategy. Revealing the interconnection of subterfuge practices with parents' cultural values in their childrearing practices necessitates closer scrutiny of the culture where parental mediation strategy is used (Kirwil 2009). This study contributes to the body of knowledge by examining how parental ethnotheories influence decision-making processes in parental mediation of children's digital media practices.

The subterfuge mediation strategy has the following identified features:

- Contextual;
- Temporal and spatial fluidity;
- Involvement of extended family members.

Contextual: The results of this study indicate that the subterfuge mediation strategy employed by parents was typically upheld with the same level of strictness as other rules in the family, such as mealtimes and bedtimes. However, unlike these other rules, subterfuge was not explicitly and consciously established, but it was contextual, remained in the parents' minds, and implemented as needed. While parents mostly upheld this strategy, there were instances when they compromised to avoid tantrums in different contexts beyond the home, such as at grandparents' homes or in public places like cafes and restaurants. Previous research suggests that research should examine the context, including the time and place, in which mediation strategies are employed (Smahelova et al. 2017). This study responds to this call by providing a more detailed examination of these contextual factors. In other words, the subterfuge strategy was not fixed or static but varied according to the circumstances and context in which it was applied. This aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of considering the situational and environmental factors influencing parental mediation practices (Zaman et al. 2016).

Temporal and spatial fluidity: This fluidity observed in the subterfuge mediation strategy was most evident when there were temporal and spatial changes, such as family outings or visits to grandparents. However, it should be noted that while the subterfuge strategy was subject to change, this did not necessarily mean that parents were constantly revising their approach. Instead, parents appeared to have a range of tactics they could readily switch, depending on the temporality and space of their activities.

Involvement of extended family members: In addition to spatial changes, the roles of adults exercising authority in specific situations also provided opportunities for temporary modifications to the subterfuge strategy. For example, children were often left under the care of grandparents, and rule changes were deemed acceptable in the absence of parents. However, the rules that apply at home were typically the most rigid and took priority, while those used during visits to grandparents' homes were often temporary deviations from the norm, even if they occurred regularly.

Children usually either negotiate their parents' mediation strategies (Schaan and Melzer 2015) or comply with parents' mediation (Chaudron et al. 2018). In my study, children were not always aware of the restrictions imposed on them, which presented a unique setting to observe what happened when neither negotiation nor compliance was an option. The analysis demonstrates how this mediation strategy influences children's practices with digital media and how they respond to subterfuge. Parents develop mediation strategies to regulate their children's use of digital media devices from a young age (Brito et al. 2017), and such strategies can significantly influence the extent of digital device access and the development of digital literacies of children (Livingstone, Mascheroni, and Stoilova 2023). The findings suggest that future research should investigate the impact of such strategies on children's perception of digital technologies, which may have broader implications for their digital practices in the future beyond the intended scope of parents' strategies.

The current study adds to the existing literature on parental mediation of young children's digital media use by identifying a mediation strategy heavily influenced by parental ethnotheories. The importance of this contribution lies in its originality, as it not only identifies a new mediation strategy but also highlights the significance of studying parental ethnotheories and family context in parental mediation research. Previous research (Plowman 2015; Zezulkova and Stastna 2018) started the discussion on the necessity of paying due attention to parental ethnotheories in parental mediation. By identifying a new parental mediation strategy and demonstrating influence of parental ethnotheories, this study reiterates the calls for exploring influences of parental ethnotheories on parental mediation of young children's digital media practices.

Conclusion

The present study introduces a new mediation strategy – subterfuge – heavily influenced by parental ethnotheories in Azerbaijan. This finding highlights the significance of exploring diverse mediation strategies under the influence of parental values and beliefs about childrearing in different cultural contexts. The study also emphasises the importance of understanding how parental ethnotheories can impact children's access to and uses of digital media through parents' strategies.

This study joins the previous calls (Marsh 2015; Piotrowski 2017; Shin and Li 2017) for researchers to broaden their focus to include family contexts outside the Global North. Identifying a new mediation strategy in the context of digital media use by young children was achieved through observing a cultural setting that diverges from the dominant norms of the Global North. For example, my study found that cultural beliefs and practices heavily influence parental mediation strategies in Azerbaijan and, therefore, cannot be assumed to be the same as those in the United

Kingdom or other countries in the Global North or vice versa. The dominance of knowledge constructed in the Global North might sometimes be problematic, and my research contributes to redressing this dominance by extending and enriching our understanding of parental mediation of young children's digital media practices beyond the prevailing perspectives.

Before the emergence of the notion of postdigital, the research in the area of children and technologies highlighted the disappearance of boundaries between digital and non-digital activities or their becoming blurred and reshaping the context (Plowman 2019). More recent research has centred this discussion around the concept of postdigital being of society, which views technology as already embedded in the existing social practices, as well as economic and political systems (Knox 2019). Postdigital is viewed as a philosophical or theoretical perspective in which digital and non-digital practices are no longer separated (Fawns et al. 2023).

Recently, Edwards has framed the concept of postdigital in research on young children and digital technologies, summarising decades of debate into three generations of approaches (Edwards 2023). In this study, the first generation of such debate around technology use summarises research as that centred around the question of whether or not to use technology, while the subsequent generations are closer to the concept of postdigital in that the technology is viewed as intertwined in daily life and activities. In the present paper, I argue that while the framework of generations of research and debate proposed by Edwards is undoubtedly of great importance and use, it is predominantly suitable for the context of the Global North and not universally applicable to all countries. Perhaps attributable to the lag in technology adoption or the difference in language (non-English speaking), both the debate and practices in Azerbaijan are at Generation 1, where consideration is given to whether or not children should be allowed to use technology. These daily practices may have moved to the third generation, or postdigital phase, in the Global North, but these experiences cannot be imposed on the Global South. In the cultural and regional context in which this study was conducted, the boundaries between children's digital and non-digital activities are still quite visible, and parents view technology as optional and separate rather than integral to children's daily lives.

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ORCID

Sabina Savadova http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5254-5921

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