

DIGITAL PARENTING PRACTICES AMONG SINGLE MOTHERS IN EARLY ADULTHOOD IN MADURA

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2nd ICOERESS
25th September
2025

Submission:
20th September
2025

Published:
31st December
2025)

ABSTRACT

The development of digital technology has a significant impact on parenting patterns, including for single mothers in early adulthood who face the dual challenges of being breadwinners and caregivers. This phenomenon also occurs in Madura, which has a high divorce rate. The risk of gadget dependency in children highlights the importance of digital parenting in child-rearing. This study aims to describe the digital parenting model applied in childcare practices by single mothers in early adulthood in Madura. The method used is qualitative with a case study approach, with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews. The research subjects consisted of single mothers aged 18–40 years in Madura who were raising children without the presence of a husband, either due to divorce or the death of their spouse. Data analysis used pattern matching, which compares field findings with predicted patterns to strengthen validity and draw research conclusions. The results showed that most early adult single mothers in Madura tended to apply active mediation, while others used restrictive mediation in digital parenting practices. These findings are expected to contribute to early adult single mothers in improving their literacy regarding digital parenting and supporting the effectiveness of parenting patterns in the digital era.

Keywords: Digital Parenting, Single Mother, Early Adulthood, Parenting, Madura

BACKGROUND

Marriage fundamentally aims to establish a harmonious and enduring relationship between spouses, which necessitates maturity and well-developed responsibility (Wibowo, 2023). However, the expectation of perpetual harmony does not always materialize. Marital conflict is a common occurrence, often triggered by ineffective communication (Prayogo, 2020). In some instances, these protracted disagreements can ultimately lead to separation.

The phenomenon of divorce appears to be notably prevalent in the Madura region. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2025, out of a total of 27,499 recorded marriages, there were 6,383 divorce cases. This figure indicates that nearly a quarter of all marriages in Madura end in divorce (BPS, 2025). The increasing rate of divorce petitions filed by wives, which now exceeds those initiated by husbands (talak), signifies a shift in women's mindset towards a greater awareness of their rights and responsibilities within the household (Maimun, 2022).

The high divorce rate involving early-adulthood women compels them to navigate life under the status of single mothers. A single mother refers to a woman who raises her children without a spouse, whether due to divorce or bereavement (Mishra et al., 2021). A mother who becomes a single parent is compelled to assume a dual role: that of both a breadwinner and a primary caregiver who must fulfill the psychological needs of her children. This situation renders single mothers more vulnerable to difficulties in educating and nurturing their children compared to intact families (Baxter, 2015; Faizah & Zaini, 2021).

Amidst this dual role burden, single mothers are also inevitably affected by the influence of digital technology developments in child-rearing. Advancements in information technology present a dual impact, offering positive benefits as a tool for learning and entertainment, yet posing negative consequences when used excessively (Chatlina et al., 2024; Kusnandar & Pribadi, 2022). The challenges of parenting in the digital era are notably complex; children are often reluctant to confide in their parents, while the rapidly evolving nature of the internet makes it difficult for parents to keep pace with its developments (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018).

In this context, the concept of digital parenting has emerged as a vital approach. Digital parenting is not limited to restricting children's use of technology; it also involves active guidance, open communication, and the cultivation of digital literacy skills to ensure that children interact with online content safely, critically, and responsibly (Livingstone & Blum-ross, 2018). Livingstone and Helsper (2008) identify three dominant strategies of parental mediation: active mediation, in which parents discuss and interpret media with children to enhance understanding; restrictive mediation, which sets boundaries on the duration, timing, or type of media content; and co-using, where parents share media experiences with children, fostering supervision and bonding without necessarily engaging in critical analysis. The choice and effectiveness of these strategies are shaped by parents' digital skills, family communication patterns, and children's developmental stages.

For single mothers, the challenge of digital parenting is further intensified by limited time, economic constraints, and emotional burdens. Their dual responsibilities often make sustained active mediation difficult, leading some to rely on restrictive strategies, while others attempt to balance by combining supervision with meaningful engagement (Baxter, 2015; Mishra et al., 2021). Moreover, the stage of early adulthood (approximately ages 18–40) represents a period of multiple transitions involving career development, relationships, and the assumption of parenting roles (Hurlock, 1999; Santrock, 2011). These simultaneous demands create additional complexities for single mothers as they negotiate the demands of work, childcare, and personal growth while raising children in a digital environment.

However, despite the increasing relevance of this issue, studies focusing on single mothers' digital parenting practices in the Madura context remain scarce. A study by Astuti et al. (2021) found that gadget use in Madurese families was often associated with transmitting values to children, but their research did not address the specific models of digital parenting employed by single mothers. This gap is particularly significant because, within families, digital parenting responsibilities often fall disproportionately on mothers (Heaselgrave, 2025).

Based on this elaboration, the present study focuses on single mothers in early adulthood in Madura to understand the digital parenting practices they apply. This research aims to explore the models of digital parenting, the challenges encountered, and the factors shaping these practices. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically, by enriching the literature on parenting in the digital era, and practically, by supporting single mothers in raising children who are adaptive and responsible in navigating digital technology.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the practices of digital parenting among single mothers in early adulthood. A case study was considered appropriate because it allows an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena within their real-life context (K. Yin, 2015).

The participants consisted of four single mothers aged between 18 and 40 years who have children and reside in Madura. Each participant was selected from a different district (kabupaten) in Madura in order to capture variations in local contexts. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling, based on the criteria of being single mothers in early adulthood who are directly involved in raising their children. Although the number of participants is small, it was deemed adequate for qualitative inquiry since the focus lies in obtaining in-depth insights rather than statistical generalization.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. The interviews explored participants' experiences, challenges, and strategies in digital parenting, while observations were used to complement and validate the findings by directly viewing parent-child interactions in digital contexts. Data analysis followed a pattern matching technique as described by Yin (2015), in which empirical findings from the field were compared with existing theoretical propositions. This approach facilitated the identification of convergences, divergences, and new emerging patterns. To ensure data trustworthiness, triangulation of techniques was applied by combining interviews, observations, and documentation, along with member checking to validate the interpretations.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Digital Parenting Among Single Mothers

The findings of this study revealed diverse strategies of digital parenting among single mothers in early adulthood in Madura. These strategies reflected not only the developmental needs of their children but also the mothers' limited time, emotional resources, and reliance on extended family support. Three main models of mediation were identified: restrictive mediation, active mediation, and co-using. Although all three models were observed, restrictive and active mediation emerged as dominant patterns, while co-using appeared particularly relevant for mothers with very young children.

Restrictive Mediation

Restrictive mediation was adopted when mothers had limited time and relied heavily on other caregivers. SM a 29 years old widow with two daughters aged six and four, described how she prohibited smartphone use and encouraged her children to watch television instead. She explained: *"I prefer them watching television because at least I know what programs are on. When they use phones, I cannot control what they see, especially since I am at work most of the day"*. This decision was also influenced by the fact that her children were under the care of their grandmother during working hours. SM further added: *"If they keep using phones, I worry they will open things they should not. Television feels safer because my mother can help keep an eye on it"*. Restrictive mediation here reflects an attempt to reduce risks in situations of limited supervision, consistent with Zhao et al. (2023), who argue that parents often impose strict rules when unable to directly monitor their children.

Another participant echoed a similar sentiment, stating: *"Sometimes my daughter cries because she wants to use my phone, but I stand firm. I tell her the phone is only for calling, not for playing. It is better she plays outside or watches cartoons on TV"*. Such statements demonstrate how restrictive mediation, while limiting children's digital exploration, was perceived by mothers as the safest solution to protect their children within constrained parenting contexts. These practices highlight the tension single mothers face between their dual responsibilities as breadwinners and caregivers. The lack of adequate time and resources often forces them to choose preventive control over active engagement.

Active Mediation

Active mediation appeared in cases where mothers made deliberate efforts to accompany and discuss their children's media use. L a 31 years old divorced mother of two daughters, aged six and three, explained: *"Even though I'm tired after work, I still ask them about the shows they watch. Sometimes I watch with them and say which ones are good or not good. I want them to learn something useful, not just random cartoons"*. Despite the demands of employment and the challenges of single motherhood, she prioritized maintaining communication and engagement during media use. L also shared: *"Sometimes my daughters ask me about a cartoon character, and I try to explain the difference between real and make-believe. It is important they understand, not just watch blindly"*. This illustrates Livingstone and Helsper's (2008) concept of active mediation, which emphasizes dialogue and interpretation. It also supports Üstündağ's (2024) view that children benefit when parents remain actively involved in their everyday digital practices, even under time and resource constraints.

Co-Using

Co-using with young children was practiced by mothers of toddlers who were not yet able to navigate digital devices independently. SB a 24 years old widow with one year old child described how she always sat with her baby during digital activities: *“My baby cannot use the phone alone, so I sit with her and show cartoons. Sometimes I play animal sounds or Arabic letters. I hope she learns while watching”*. She elaborated: *“I see it as a chance to teach her. When the sound of a cat or dog plays, I repeat it so she remembers”*. This reflects how mothers of very young children rely on co-using, both to ensure safety and to introduce basic educational content. This reflects how mothers of very young children rely on co-using, both to ensure safety and to introduce basic educational content. Similarly, IT a 23 years old mother of a three years old explained: *“I usually give her YouTube Kids because it is safer, but I still sit with her. We watch videos about animals together, so she learns while I guide her”*. She also noted: *“If she asks about something in the video, I pause it and explain. That way she doesn’t just watch but also understands”*. Such practices illustrate the importance of parental presence at early developmental stages, echoing Livingstone and Blum-Ross (2018), who emphasize that co-using fosters bonding and safeguards children’s media experiences.

Taken together, these findings suggest that digital parenting among single mothers in early adulthood in Madura is highly adaptive and situational. Restrictive mediation was the most practical approach for mothers with limited time and reliance on extended family support. Active mediation was practiced by mothers who prioritized communication and engagement despite fatigue and work demands. Co-using, although less dominant, played an important role in households with very young children. These variations highlight that digital parenting is not a one-size-fits-all model but a flexible set of strategies shaped by the realities of single motherhood, the availability of support systems, and the developmental needs of children.

DISCUSSION

This study provides insight into how single mothers in early adulthood in Madura practice digital parenting within the constraints of their dual roles as caregivers and breadwinners. The findings indicate that their strategies are not uniform but instead adaptive, reflecting both the opportunities and limitations of their circumstances. The three key strategies identified restrictive mediation, active mediation, and co-using demonstrate that digital parenting is a flexible process that cannot be understood in isolation from social, cultural, and developmental contexts.

The use of restrictive mediation illustrates how limited supervision and work responsibilities affect parenting decisions. Mothers who spent long hours outside the home often prohibited their children from using smartphones and instead allowed television viewing, which they perceived as more predictable and easier to control. This resonates with Zhao et al. (2023), who highlight that parents with limited availability tend to adopt stricter rules to minimize exposure to harmful content. For single mothers, this reliance on restriction can also be understood as a coping mechanism in managing the tension between providing economic support and ensuring their children’s safety. While such strategies may reduce immediate risks, they may also limit opportunities for children to develop digital literacy, which is a crucial skill in today’s society.

In contrast, active mediation emerged as a more dialogic and engaged form of digital parenting. Despite fatigue from work and the challenges of raising children alone, some mothers intentionally monitored and discussed the content their children consumed. This reflects the argument of Livingstone and Helsper (2008) that active mediation enables children to develop evaluative skills and critical awareness of media. It also supports Üstündağ (2024), who found that children benefit significantly from parents’ active involvement in daily digital practices. These findings suggest that even under conditions of economic and emotional strain, some single mothers prioritize educational and moral guidance during digital interactions. Such practices highlight resilience and commitment to balancing caregiving responsibilities with the need to prepare children for the digital world.

The strategy of co-using was most evident among mothers of toddlers and very young children. Since these children could not yet operate devices independently, mothers described sitting with them,

showing cartoons, playing animal sounds, or teaching basic knowledge such as Arabic letters. This approach aligns with the developmental needs of early childhood, where learning occurs through shared experiences with caregivers. Livingstone and Blum-Ross (2018) argue that co-using strengthens emotional bonds while ensuring safety in digital contexts. In this study, co-using also functioned as an educational tool, allowing mothers to integrate early learning with entertainment. This demonstrates how digital parenting for very young children is less about restriction and more about scaffolding early exposure in safe and meaningful ways.

The variation in these practices also reflects broader challenges faced by single mothers. As Mishra et al. (2021) and Baxter (2015) emphasize, single mothers must manage both caregiving and financial responsibilities, often with limited time and support. This study confirms that these dual roles shape digital parenting strategies: restrictive approaches were more common when mothers relied on extended family members, while active and co-using practices were adopted when mothers could be physically and emotionally present. Such findings underscore the importance of considering social support structures, such as the role of grandparents, in discussions of digital parenting within single-parent households.

From a developmental perspective, the participants in this study exemplify the challenges of early adulthood, a life stage characterized by multiple transitions in work, family, and identity (Hurlock, 1999). Balancing the responsibilities of employment, personal adjustment after marital dissolution, and childrearing requires adaptive strategies. The findings show that digital parenting in this life stage is not simply a matter of applying universal models but is instead a situated practice shaped by the intersecting demands of early adulthood and single motherhood.

Taken together, these findings suggest that digital parenting among single mothers in early adulthood in Madura should be viewed as a dynamic and context-sensitive practice. Restrictive, active, and co-using strategies are not mutually exclusive but reflect adaptive responses to varying constraints and opportunities. This reinforces the argument that digital parenting must be analyzed not only in terms of strategies but also in relation to life-course development, gendered caregiving roles, and socio-cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the digital parenting practices of single mothers in early adulthood in Madura and found that their strategies were shaped by the dual demands of caregiving and breadwinning, the availability of family support, and their children's developmental stages. The findings revealed three main approaches: restrictive mediation, active mediation, and co-using. Among these, restrictive and active mediation emerged as dominant, while co-using was observed primarily among mothers of toddlers who required constant accompaniment.

Restrictive mediation reflected mothers' attempts to safeguard their children from harmful digital content, particularly in situations where they could not provide direct supervision due to work responsibilities. In contrast, active mediation highlighted mothers' resilience and commitment to maintaining communication, fostering critical awareness, and integrating digital media into learning despite fatigue and time constraints. Co-using, though less common, demonstrated the importance of parental presence for very young children, showing how digital tools can be used for bonding and early education.

Overall, the study underscores that digital parenting among single mothers in early adulthood is not a rigid model but a flexible and adaptive practice shaped by socio-cultural context, life stage, and family structure. These findings emphasize the need for supportive interventions such as digital literacy programs, community-based support, and safer digital environments to empower single mothers in navigating the challenges of raising children in the digital age.

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