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Physically Present, Socially Absent: The Shifting Function of the Family Within the Indonesian Social System in the Era of Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

The development of digital media has transformed how family members communicate, foster closeness, engage in parenting, and distribute their attention in daily life. While digital devices allow family members to stay connected even when apart, unmanaged use can diminish the quality of interaction when they are in the same physical space. This article analyzes the shifts in family functions within the Indonesian social system during the digital media era—specifically regarding the functions of affection, socialization, protection, communication, and supervision. A narrative literature review was conducted, drawing on research in family sociology, network society, parental mediation, and the impact of technology-related disruptions on family interactions. The analysis indicates that digital media does not automatically weaken the family unit; its impact depends on usage patterns, family agreements, digital literacy, and the ability of family members to maintain meaningful face-to-face communication. These changes are best understood as a renegotiation of family functions: some functions are expanded through technology, while others risk a decline in quality when attention becomes fragmented and communication turns superficial. This article emphasizes the importance of mutually agreed-upon digital rules, parental modeling, age-appropriate guidance, and the preservation of device-free interaction time.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The family is one of the most fundamental social institutions in human society. It is through the family that individuals are first introduced to values, norms, language, customs, responsibilities, and the ways in which one relates to others. The family also serves as the primary space for receiving affection, protection, and emotional support, as well as for the formation of personal identity. Consequently, changes occurring within a family do not merely affect private life; they are also linked to broader shifts in the social system. In recent years, digital media has become an integral part of daily life. Smartphones, messaging apps, social media, video services, and various online platforms enable rapid communication, unconstrained by distance. Parents can reach their children while at work, family members living far apart can share updates, and information regarding education or health can be accessed with ease.

Technology also provides families with the opportunity to maintain ties with relatives living in other cities or abroad. However, this convenience brings new challenges. Within a single household, family members may sit together, yet each remains focused on their own screen. Face-to-face conversations may be interrupted by notifications, shared meals punctuated by the act of scrolling through social media, and leisure time spent consuming digital content individually. This situation gives rise to the phenomenon of being "physically present, yet socially absent"—where individuals occupy the same space, but their attention and social engagement are not fully directed toward those around them. This term is not intended to suggest that all use of digital devices is detrimental to family relationships.

Digital media can also foster closeness, particularly when used to share experiences, coordinate household activities, learn together, or maintain communication over long distances. The core issue lies in how technology is utilized and how families establish boundaries between digital connections and direct, in-person interactions. In the Indonesian context, families take on diverse forms and embody a wide range of values. Intergenerational relationships, responsibilities toward parents, participation in shared family activities, and the involvement of the extended family remain significant aspects of many social environments. At the same time, shifts in work patterns, education, urbanization, and internet usage have influenced how families manage their time and communication. Consequently, any discussion regarding digital media must account for the diverse social, economic, and cultural conditions as well as the varying levels of technological access found across Indonesia.

This article addresses three questions: (1) how does digital media affect the performance of family functions; (2) why can the use of digital media create social distance despite physical proximity; and (3) how can families adapt so that technology supports, rather than replaces, social relationships? The objective of this article is to explain these changes through the lenses of family sociology and the "network society" perspective, and to formulate practical steps that can be applied within family life.

2. METHODS

This article employs a narrative literature review method. This approach was chosen because the objective is to construct a conceptual understanding of how the functions of the family evolve due to the use of digital media, by synthesizing sociological theory with findings from previous research. As this article does not involve the collection of primary data such as through interviews, observations, or questionnaires—the discussion is not intended to provide a statistical overview of all Indonesian families. The materials reviewed were selected based on their relevance to four key themes: (1) the family as a social institution and a space for socialization; (2) shifts in communication within a networked society; (3) technological disruptions in interpersonal interactions; and (4) parental mediation and children's use of digital media. The sources utilized include academic books, scholarly journal articles, and accessible institutional reports. Priority was given to sources with clear bibliographic information, those published by academic presses, or those assigned a DOI. Sources were selected purposively based on their direct connection to the article's focus and the verifiability of their bibliographic identity. Given that this is a narrative review, the article does not specify a fixed timeframe, rely on a single database, or follow a rigid, systematic selection protocol; this distinction is noted to ensure the review process is not misconstrued as a systematic review.

The analysis was conducted through thematic reading. First, the core ideas from each source were identified. Second, these ideas were categorized according to various family functions: affection, socialization, protection, communication, education, and supervision. Third, findings across sources were compared to identify the opportunities, risks, and conditions that influence the relationship between technology and family life. Fourth, the results of this comparison were synthesized into an argument tailored to the context of the Indonesian social system. The final synthesis was developed by evaluating the applicability and limitations of ideas from various sources, specifically by distinguishing research findings often rooted in specific contexts from the author's own conceptual interpretations regarding the context of Indonesian families. As this review is narrative in nature, the selection of sources does not

follow the rigorous protocols of a systematic review, nor does it claim to encompass all previously published research. This limitation should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings. Future studies could employ a systematic review methodology, with a detailed account of the databases used, search terms, timeframes, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the article selection process.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The shifting function of family communication

Communication serves as the primary means for coordinating household activities, expressing needs, resolving problems, and fostering emotional closeness. Digital media has expanded the channels available for family communication. Parents can reach their children while they are at school, family members can quickly share updates on their well-being, and those living apart can connect via video calls. In certain situations, digital communication helps maintain a sense of social presence when face-to-face interaction is not possible. Observations by Radesky et al. (2014) regarding the use of devices by caregivers and children during mealtimes highlight how everyday routines—such as eating together—can serve as a significant context for observing digital interruptions. However, an increase in the volume of messages does not necessarily equate to higher-quality communication. Conversations conducted through text messages often lean toward practical matters, such as checking on someone's location, coordinating schedules, or discussing shopping needs. In contrast, conversations that require empathy and deep understanding often demand more time and undivided attention. If face-to-face interactions are frequently interrupted by the checking of notifications, family members may feel unheard. This evolution represents a shift from communication based entirely on in-person encounters toward a hybrid model combining face-to-face and digital interaction. The challenge lies not in returning families to a pre-technological state, but in establishing a healthy balance. Families must determine when digital communication aids coordination, and when devices should be set aside to allow for uninterrupted, direct conversation.

The function of affection and emotional closeness

The affection function relates to the provision of love, a sense of security, appreciation, and emotional support. Digital media can serve as a means to convey care through messages, photos, video calls, or the sharing of experiences. For families whose members work or study in different locations, such tools help maintain relationships and mitigate a breakdown in communication. On the other hand, emotional closeness is not determined solely by the frequency of contact. A prompt response that fails to account for the content of a conversation does not necessarily make a person feel understood. When family members become more engaged with digital activities than with an ongoing conversation, others may perceive this as neglect. Research by Przybylski and Weinstein (2013) suggests that the mere presence of a phone during a conversation can alter the perception of closeness, particularly when the discussion involves meaningful topics. Therefore, families need to distinguish between staying connected and being truly present. Digital connectivity is useful for maintaining contact, whereas social presence requires attentiveness, a willingness to listen, and appropriate responses. The two can complement each other, provided that family members establish mutually agreed-upon communication habits.

The function of socialization and value formation

Families play a role in introducing children to the values, norms, language, responsibilities, and customs prevalent in society. In the digital era, the socialization process no longer occurs solely through parents, relatives, schools, and the immediate environment. Children also encounter content creators, online communities, advertisements, games, and information originating from various countries. The sources of values have become more diverse, and not all of them align with the values taught within the family. This situation should not be viewed merely as a threat; the internet can broaden horizons, help children understand cultural differences, and provide learning resources. However, children require the ability to assess the credibility of information, understand communication ethics, recognize manipulation, and respect the privacy and rights of others. The role of the family has shifted from being

the sole source of information to acting as a guide that helps children interpret the information they encounter. Livingstone and Helsper (2008) highlight the importance of viewing parental mediation as a multifaceted practice. Active guidance through discussion can help children make sense of their online experiences, while rules regarding usage—tailored to a child's age and specific circumstances—remain necessary. In the context of Indonesian families, such guidance can also link digital ethics with the values upheld within the household, such as responsibility, politeness, honesty, and concern for others.

Protective and supervisory functions

The protective function of a family encompasses efforts to safeguard the physical, psychological, and social well-being of its members. Digital devices present both opportunities and risks. While they allow parents to stay connected with their children, they also expose children to potential dangers such as scams, cyberbullying, age-inappropriate content, privacy breaches, and contact from strangers. Consequently, supervision should be focused on safety and learning, rather than mere control. Overly strict supervision, lacking open dialogue, may lead children to conceal their digital experiences. Conversely, granting total freedom without guidance can leave children ill-equipped to recognize risks. A more balanced approach involves building trust, establishing agreed-upon rules, explaining the rationale behind restrictions, and creating a safe space for children to share problems without the fear of immediate blame. Rules can be tailored to a child's age, learning needs, and level of independence. Radesky et al. (2015) emphasize the importance of understanding how device use fits into the parent-child relationship, rather than simply tracking screen time. Factors such as the quality of content, the purpose of use, the family context, and the level of parental involvement are equally significant. Therefore, digital supervision should go beyond asking "how long a child spends on a device" to also consider "what it is used for, who the child interacts with, and how these experiences are discussed at home."

Shifts in roles and intergenerational relationships

Digital media can influence the distribution of roles across generations. Children or adolescents, who are often more accustomed to using specific applications, may help their parents understand various technological features. In such situations, the flow of knowledge does not always move from parent to child; children can also serve as a source of knowledge for their parents. This phenomenon suggests that authority within a family can be renegotiated, particularly in the realm of technology. However, technical proficiency is not synonymous with maturity in evaluating information. While parents may be less familiar with the latest applications, they possess greater experience in decision-making, understanding social consequences, and guiding behavior. Conversely, while children may learn to navigate digital features more quickly, they still require guidance to grasp long-term implications. A healthy relationship acknowledges the strengths of each generation and fosters a two-way learning process. Differences in perspectives regarding screen time, privacy, and the type of content consumed can lead to conflict. Such conflict does not necessarily indicate that a family is failing to fulfill its functions; rather, it can serve as an opportunity to reach more equitable agreements. Rules established collectively are generally easier to understand, as family members are aware of the underlying rationale, the boundaries, and the consequences.

The digital divide within Indonesian families

Families' experiences with digital media are not uniform. Variations in income, network quality, device ownership, education levels, geographic location, and digital literacy skills result in diverse circumstances. Some families possess multiple devices and stable internet access, while others must share devices or contend with limited connectivity. Consequently, discussions regarding "digital families" should not assume that all households have equal opportunities. A UNICEF report (2017) on children in the digital world highlights access, opportunities, and digital risks as critical issues within a child's environment. As this report provides a global context, it is not used here to draw conclusions about specific figures or the circumstances of all Indonesian families. Furthermore, the digital divide is not merely a matter of whether or not internet access is available; the ability to use technology safely,

productively, and critically is also a significant component of this divide. Families with access to technology do not necessarily have the time or knowledge to guide their children. Parents who work long hours may struggle to supervise device usage, even though children often use the internet for both learning and entertainment. Given the diversity of Indonesia's social landscape, digital literacy policies and educational initiatives must account for local contexts. Schools, community groups, the government, and civil society organizations can support families by providing training on digital safety, offering parental education, ensuring access to information that is easy to understand, and creating spaces for consultation. An approach that blames families without considering structural conditions risks overlooking the economic and social factors that limit their choices.

Understanding the paradox of being "physically present, yet socially absent."

The expression "physically present, socially absent" captures a paradox in family life, where spatial proximity is not always matched by meaningful interaction. Family members might share the same dining room, yet their attention is fragmented across various digital conversations. While they may be quickly informed about events in the outside world, they might remain unaware of the feelings of the person sitting right next to them. This paradox illustrates that the quality of social relationships cannot be measured solely by physical distance or the frequency of communication. However, this concept should be applied with caution; checking one's phone occasionally does not automatically mean a person is neglecting their family. There are instances where devices are necessary for work, study, health-related matters, or emergencies. Problems arise when such interruptions become habitual, occur without communication, and repeatedly leave family members feeling overlooked. Therefore, any assessment must take into account the context, established agreements, and the overall impact on the relationship. McDaniel and Coyne (2016) suggest that technological interruptions can be linked to relational strain. While their findings underscore the importance of attentiveness during interactions, they cannot be broadly generalized to all Indonesian families, as research contexts, respondent characteristics, and the nature of relationships may vary. This article uses that research as a foundation for understanding the mechanisms of technological disruption, rather than as evidence that every family experiences the same consequences.

Strategies for maintaining family function in the digital age: First, families can agree on device-free times and spaces for example, putting away phones during shared meals, family conversations, or other agreed-upon activities. Such rules should apply to both parents and children to avoid the perception of a one-sided restriction. Exceptions can be made for essential needs or emergencies. Second, parents should lead by example. Children are more likely to understand and accept these rules when parents also limit their own device use while talking or spending time together. Setting an example demonstrates that managing technology is a collective responsibility shared by all family members, not just the children. Third, foster open communication regarding digital experiences. Parents can ask their children about the content they enjoy, experiences that made them feel uncomfortable, or information that seems questionable. The goal is not to interrogate, but rather to build trust and foster critical thinking skills. If a problem arises, a calm initial response can make a child feel more comfortable seeking help. Fourth, use technology for shared activities. Families can watch educational content, look up health information, plan trips, or make video calls to relatives. Using technology together turns digital media into a tool for interaction, rather than an activity that completely isolates family members from one another. Fifth, improve the digital literacy of all family members. This includes topics such as personal data protection, password management, online scams, digital footprints, communication ethics, fact-checking, and how to report harmful content or behavior. Digital literacy is not just about the ability to operate applications; it also involves understanding the social consequences of their use. Sixth, tailor rules to the specific needs and developmental stages of each child. Younger children require more intensive supervision, while adolescents should be involved in establishing rules to help them develop a sense of responsibility.

An important distinction emerges between the present article and previous research. Studies such as Przybylski and Weinstein (2013), McDaniel and Coyne (2016), Meeus et al. (2021), and Annisa et al.

(2024) primarily examine technological interruptions, relationship quality, family attachment, or parental device distraction. Purboningsih et al. (2025) focus more specifically on parental mediation strategies in Indonesian families. These studies provide important empirical explanations of particular dimensions of digital family life. However, the present article brings these dimensions together within a broader conceptual analysis of the transformation of family functions in the Indonesian social system.

Accordingly, the central argument developed in this article is that digital media produces a process of functional renegotiation rather than the automatic disintegration of the family. Communication becomes hybrid, affection is expressed through both physical and digital interaction, socialization involves multiple sources of influence, protection requires digital competencies, and supervision increasingly depends on negotiation and mutual trust. These transformations indicate that family functions remain relevant but require new forms of adaptation.

The concept of meaningful social presence is therefore proposed as an important analytical distinction for understanding family relationships in the digital era. Physical co-presence refers to the condition in which family members occupy the same geographical space, whereas meaningful social presence involves active attention, emotional availability, reciprocal communication, and participation in shared activities. The two conditions may occur simultaneously, but they are not necessarily equivalent. A family can maintain physical proximity without meaningful interaction, just as family members living in different locations can preserve emotional closeness through intentional digital communication.

The practical implication is that strengthening family relationships should not be measured merely by reducing screen time or increasing face-to-face encounters. Instead, attention should be directed toward the quality of interaction, the meaningfulness of communication, the fairness of household digital rules, and the ability of family members to maintain emotional responsiveness. This approach avoids technological determinism, which assumes that technology inevitably damages social relationships, while also avoiding technological optimism, which assumes that increased connectivity automatically strengthens family bonds.

Ultimately, the transformation of family functions in the digital era should be understood as a sociological process involving the continuous negotiation of technology, relationships, and social values. The family remains an essential institution within Indonesian society, but its ability to maintain affection, socialization, protection, and solidarity increasingly depends on how its members manage the boundaries between digital engagement and direct interpersonal relationships.

4. CONCLUSION

Digital media has brought tangible changes to how families carry out their functions—namely communication, affection, socialization, protection, education, and supervision. Technology extends family relationships beyond physical boundaries, facilitates coordination, and provides learning resources. At the same time, unmanaged use can fragment attention, diminish the quality of face-to-face conversations, and lead to feelings of being neglected. Therefore, the transformation of family functions should not be interpreted as the loss of these functions, but rather as a shift in how they are performed and negotiated. Consequently, the primary contribution of this article is to offer a conceptual framework for understanding these changes in family functions, rather than quantifying the magnitude of digital media's influence or establishing a direct causal relationship. The phrase "physically present, socially absent" describes a situation where family members are in the same space yet lack meaningful interaction. This is not an automatic consequence of the mere presence of technology; rather, it is linked to patterns of usage, context, established rules, and the quality of communication. Families that use digital media mindfully can leverage technology to strengthen their bonds, whereas those lacking clear usage agreements risk experiencing disrupted interactions.

In the Indonesian context, strategies to strengthen families must account for social diversity and the digital divide. Implementing device-free times, parental modeling, active guidance, open communication, and digital literacy are practical steps that can be taken. Furthermore, support from

schools, communities, and the government is essential so that the responsibility of navigating digital transformation does not fall solely upon the family. This study has limitations, as it employs a narrative literature review approach and does not present primary data from Indonesian families. Future research could involve interviews or surveys with families from diverse social, economic, regional, and household backgrounds. Such empirical research is necessary to understand how digital media usage patterns are actually experienced and negotiated within Indonesian families.

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