

Children's Use of Digital Technology and the Right to Play in Nigeria: A Rights-Based Analysis of the NCC Report

Olufunmilola Lovelyn Oyibokure

University of south-eastern Norway, Drammen, Norway

Accepted March 20, 2026

The rapid expansion of digital technology has significantly transformed children's experiences of learning, communication, and social interaction in Nigeria. While digital engagement provides important opportunities for access to information, educational advancement, and participation, it also raises critical concerns regarding excessive screen exposure, developmental imbalance, and the gradual erosion of traditional play. This study critically examines the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) report on children's digital technology use through a rights-based theoretical perspective, with particular attention to the underrepresentation of the child's right to play within Nigeria's digital policy framework. Adopting a qualitative research design based on thematic analysis of secondary data, the study identifies key gaps in the policy framework, particularly its dominant emphasis on protection from online risks at the expense of children's holistic developmental needs. The findings reveal that although digital technologies are increasingly embedded in children's lives, insufficient attention is given to balancing digital engagement with physical, social, and imaginative play. The study therefore proposes the Trado-Digital Play-Based Learning (TDPL) framework as an integrated approach that aligns digital participation with the preservation of traditional play, emphasizing the need for policies that support children's cognitive, emotional, and social development within a rapidly evolving digital environment.

Keywords: Digital childhood, Right to play, Children's development, Digital technology, Nigeria, NCC report, Trado-digital play

1.0 Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technology has fundamentally reshaped childhood experiences across the globe. In both developed and developing societies, children's engagement with digital devices has become increasingly pervasive, influencing how they learn, communicate, socialize, and interact with their environments. In Nigeria, the growing penetration of smartphones, internet connectivity, and digital platforms has significantly altered the landscape of childhood, creating new opportunities for access to information, educational engagement, and social participation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2023). However, these transformations also raise important concerns regarding children's developmental well-being, particularly when digital engagement begins to displace traditional forms of play and face-to-face interaction.

Digital technologies have been widely recognized for their potential to enhance learning outcomes and support children's cognitive development when appropriately used. Research demonstrates that digital play and interactive media can foster creativity, problem-solving skills, collaborative learning, and digital literacy (Marsh et al., 2019; Livingstone et al., 2023). In contexts where educational inequalities persist, digital technologies may also provide alternative pathways for learning and access to educational resources. In Nigeria, where disparities in educational infrastructure remain significant across regions, digital platforms increasingly serve as supplementary tools for learning and communication.

Despite these opportunities, emerging scholarship has raised concerns about the developmental consequences of excessive and unregulated digital engagement. Studies suggest that prolonged screen exposure may contribute to reduced physical activity, weakened social interaction, shortened attention spans, and increased emotional and behavioural challenges among children (Twenge, 2023; Haidt, 2024). Jonathan Haidt (2024), in particular, argues that contemporary childhood is increasingly shifting from a "play-based" model to a "phone-based" model, in which screen-mediated interactions gradually replace physical exploration, outdoor activities, and direct social engagement. These developments have intensified global debates regarding the long-term implications of digital technology for childhood development and well-being.

A critical dimension often overlooked in discussions of digital childhood is the child's right to play. Play is widely recognized as a fundamental component of healthy childhood development, contributing to cognitive growth, emotional regulation, creativity, resilience, and social competence. Classical developmental theorists such as Jean Piaget emphasize that play serves as a central mechanism through which children construct knowledge and interpret their social worlds (Piaget, 1962). Similarly, Gray (2013) argues that free and unstructured play enables children to develop autonomy, self-confidence, and social negotiation skills essential for psychological and social development. The gradual reduction of opportunities for such play, therefore, raises significant developmental concerns.

Within the Nigerian context, traditional play has historically functioned not only as a recreational activity but also as a means of cultural transmission, identity formation, and communal socialisation (Ogunyemi & Henning, 2020). Indigenous games, storytelling practices, outdoor group activities, and imaginative social play have long contributed to children's moral education and integration into community life. However, the increasing dominance of digital engagement has altered these patterns of interaction, reducing children's participation in physically and socially grounded forms of play. This transformation carries implications not only for individual development but also for the preservation of cultural practices and social cohesion.

The right to play is formally recognised under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which affirms children's entitlement to rest, leisure, play, and participation in recreational and cultural activities appropriate to their age. Nevertheless, policy responses to children's digital engagement have largely focused on protection from online harms, including cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, digital exploitation, and online abuse (UNESCO, 2023). While these concerns are important, an overly protection-oriented approach risks neglecting broader developmental rights, particularly the need to maintain a healthy balance between digital participation and traditional play experiences.

In Nigeria, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) has undertaken important efforts to address issues relating to children's digital technology use through its national report on children and digital technology. The report provides valuable insights into patterns of digital access, online behaviour, and associated risks among Nigerian children. However, the report appears to adopt a predominantly risk-focused orientation, with limited engagement with the developmental implications of declining play opportunities and insufficient attention to the broader rights-based framework that encompasses participation, well-being, and holistic development.

Although growing scholarship exists on digital childhood and online safety, limited research has critically examined how Nigerian digital policy frameworks address the child's right to play within the broader context of holistic development. Existing policy approaches tend to prioritise digital safety and online protection while giving comparatively little attention to developmental, cultural, and participatory dimensions of childhood. This represents an important gap in both digital childhood scholarship and policy analysis within the Nigerian context.

Against this background, this study critically examines the NCC report through a rights-based theoretical lens. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how the NCC report conceptualises children's digital technology use in Nigeria, identify gaps in its treatment of children's developmental and intellectual needs, evaluate the extent to which it balances digital participation with traditional play, and propose a balanced Trado-Digital Play-Based Learning (TDPL) framework for policy and practice.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to critically examine children's use of digital technology and its implications for the right to play in Nigeria. The methodology is designed to provide an in-depth interpretive analysis of policy content, with particular focus on the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) report on children's digital technology use.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena and generating rich contextualised insights (Bryman, 2021). Specifically, the research utilizes qualitative document analysis as its primary methodological strategy. Document analysis enables the systematic examination and interpretation of policy documents, institutional reports, and scholarly literature to identify underlying assumptions, policy orientations, conceptual gaps, and thematic patterns.

Qualitative document analysis is particularly suitable for policy research because it facilitates critical engagement with both the explicit and implicit meanings embedded within official texts. In this study, the approach allows for a detailed evaluation of how children's digital technology use and the right to play are framed within Nigerian digital policy discourse.

2.2 Data Sources

The primary data source for this study is the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) report titled *Children and Digital Technology in Nigeria* (NCC, 2021). The NCC report was selected because it represents one of the most comprehensive national policy-oriented documents addressing children's digital engagement in Nigeria. The report contains substantial

information on patterns of digital access, online behaviour, internet usage, digital risks, and policy concerns affecting Nigerian children, making it highly relevant to the objectives of this study.

Secondary data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports, and publications from international organisations relating to digital childhood, child development, digital rights, and play-based learning. These include publications from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and other scholarly sources addressing digital childhood and children's rights. The inclusion of these materials provides both theoretical and empirical grounding for the analysis.

2.3 Analytical Approach

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis was considered appropriate because it allows for the systematic organisation and interpretation of policy themes emerging from the NCC report and supporting literature. The analytical process involved several stages. First, the researcher conducted repeated readings of the NCC report and related literature to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were generated based on recurring concepts and policy concerns identified within the text. These initial codes included:

- Digital access and connectivity
- Online safety and protection
- Educational opportunities
- Screen exposure and behavioural concerns
- Developmental implications
- Cultural dimensions of childhood
- Absence of play-related provisions
- Policy emphasis on risk mitigation

The coded data were subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories through an iterative interpretive process. This process resulted in the development of six major themes that structure the findings and analysis section of the study. The study further adopted the READ approach (Ready materials, Extract data, Analyse data, and Distil findings), which provides a structured framework for qualitative document analysis in policy research. During the "Ready materials" stage, relevant policy documents and scholarly sources were identified and organised. The "Extract data" stage involved selecting relevant sections, policy statements, and thematic evidence from the NCC report. The "Analyse data" stage focused on coding, categorization, and thematic interpretation, while the "Distil findings" stage involved synthesising the findings into broader analytical conclusions and policy implications.

In addition, the study applied the context–text–consequences model to guide policy interpretation. This model enabled the analysis to consider:

- The socio-cultural and policy context within which the NCC report was developed;
- The textual framing and representation of children's digital engagement within the report; and
- The broader developmental and policy consequences arising from the report's priorities and omissions.

This combined analytical framework strengthened the depth and rigor of the study by integrating thematic interpretation with contextual policy analysis.

2.4 Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

Given the interpretive nature of qualitative document analysis, reflexivity was considered throughout the research process. The researcher acknowledges that the analysis is informed by a child rights and developmental perspective that prioritises holistic childhood well-being, participation, and the preservation of play as a fundamental right.

To minimise interpretive bias, the study adopted systematic coding procedures, engaged with multiple scholarly perspectives, and cross-referenced findings with established literature on digital childhood, child development, and play theory. This approach enhanced the credibility and consistency of the analysis.

2.5 Theoretical Orientation

The study is grounded in a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), which emphasizes the principles of universality, participation, accountability, and non-discrimination. The HRBA is particularly relevant for assessing policies affecting children because it extends beyond protection from harm to include the promotion of holistic development, participation, and well-being.

The study also draws on insights from developmental psychology and sociology, particularly theories relating to play, cognitive development, and digital engagement. These perspectives provide a conceptual framework for evaluating the balance between digital technology use and children's developmental rights within contemporary digital environments.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This study relies exclusively on publicly available documents and secondary data sources. Consequently, it does not involve human participants and does not require formal ethical approval. Nevertheless, the study adheres to established standards of academic integrity, including accurate representation of sources, proper citation, and avoidance of plagiarism.

2.7 Limitations of the Study

Although qualitative document analysis provides valuable insights into policy frameworks and conceptual issues, it is limited by its reliance on existing textual materials and the absence of primary empirical data. As a result, the findings are interpretive and may not fully capture the lived experiences of children, parents, educators, or policymakers within Nigeria's digital environment.

Additionally, the study focuses primarily on the NCC report and therefore does not provide a comprehensive analysis of all Nigerian policies relating to children and digital technology. Despite these limitations, the methodology remains appropriate for critically evaluating policy content and identifying conceptual and practical gaps in Nigeria's digital childhood framework.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates developmental psychology, sociological theory, digital childhood studies, and child rights perspectives. The framework provides a conceptual basis for understanding how children's digital technology use intersects with developmental needs, social experiences, cultural practices, and the fundamental right to play. By combining these perspectives, the study critically evaluates the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) report and its treatment of children's digital engagement within the broader context of holistic childhood development.

At the core of this framework is Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which emphasizes the central role of play in children's intellectual growth and learning processes (Piaget, 1962). Piaget argues that children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment, and play serves as one of the primary mechanisms through which this construction occurs. Symbolic, imaginative, and exploratory play enable children to experiment with ideas, develop problem-solving skills, and internalise social experiences. From this perspective, play is not merely recreational but a critical developmental activity that contributes to cognitive maturation and social understanding.

Building on this developmental perspective, Gray (2013) highlights the importance of free and unstructured play in fostering emotional resilience, autonomy, creativity, and social competence. According to Gray, play allows children to negotiate social relationships, manage risks, and engage in self-directed learning experiences that are essential for psychological well-being. The decline of such play opportunities, particularly within increasingly technology-driven environments, therefore raises concerns regarding children's emotional and social development.

Contemporary scholarship on digital childhood further contributes to this framework by examining the changing nature of children's interactions in digitally mediated environments. Research by Marsh et al. (2019) and Livingstone et al. (2023) acknowledges that digital technologies can support learning, creativity, communication, and collaborative engagement when appropriately used. Interactive digital play and educational technologies may enhance cognitive development, digital literacy, and problem-solving abilities. These studies suggest that digital engagement is not inherently detrimental and may provide meaningful developmental opportunities under supportive and balanced conditions.

However, scholars have also raised concerns regarding the developmental implications of excessive or unregulated digital engagement. Twenge (2023) argues that increased screen exposure is associated with declining physical activity, reduced face-to-face interaction, and behavioural challenges among young people. Similarly, Haidt (2024) conceptualises contemporary childhood as increasingly shifting from a "play-based childhood" to a "phone-based childhood," in which digital interactions gradually replace physical exploration, outdoor activities, and direct social engagement. According to Haidt, this transformation may contribute to anxiety, social isolation, reduced attention spans, and weakened interpersonal relationships among children and adolescents.

From a sociological perspective, Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance provides additional insight into the implications of digitally mediated childhood experiences (Rosa, 2019). Rosa argues that meaningful human development depends on resonant relationships characterized by responsive and reciprocal interactions between individuals and their social and physical worlds. Excessive engagement with algorithmically curated or screen-mediated environments may weaken these resonant connections, potentially leading to experiences of alienation, detachment, and reduced social connectedness. For children, diminished opportunities for embodied interaction and communal play may negatively affect emotional development and social integration.

The study also situates these theoretical perspectives within a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA), particularly the right to play as articulated in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). The HRBA emphasises that children are rights holders entitled not only to protection from harm but also to participation, development, leisure, recreation, and well-being. International organisations such as UNICEF (2023) and UNESCO (2023) increasingly stress that children's rights in digital environments must extend beyond online safety concerns to include broader developmental and participatory rights.

To integrate these perspectives, the study adopts the Trado-Digital Play-Based Learning (TDPL) framework as its central conceptual orientation. The TDPL framework emphasises the need for a balanced coexistence between traditional play and digital engagement. Rather than rejecting digital technologies, the framework advocates their integration with culturally grounded, physically interactive, imaginative, and socially collaborative forms of play. The framework recognises that digital tools can enhance learning and participation while simultaneously acknowledging that physical, social, and imaginative play remain indispensable for holistic childhood development.

Within the Nigerian context, the TDPL framework is particularly relevant because traditional play practices continue to serve important developmental and cultural functions. Indigenous games, storytelling traditions, communal activities, and outdoor social play contribute to identity formation, socialization, and cultural continuity (Ogunyemi & Henning, 2020). The increasing displacement of these practices by screen-based engagement, therefore, raises concerns not only about developmental outcomes but also about the erosion of cultural experiences associated with childhood.

The integration of developmental theory, sociological perspectives, digital childhood scholarship, and child rights principles provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the NCC report. It enables the study to critically assess whether current digital policy approaches adequately address the balance between technological participation and the preservation of children's developmental, social, cultural, and recreational rights.

4.0 Findings and Analysis

This section presents the findings and analysis derived from the thematic examination of the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) report on children's digital technology use in Nigeria. Using thematic analysis, the study identified major patterns, policy priorities, conceptual gaps, and developmental implications embedded within the report. The findings are organised into six interrelated themes that reflect both the opportunities and challenges associated with digital childhood in the Nigerian context.

4.1 Expanding Digital Access and Opportunities

One of the dominant themes emerging from the NCC report is the increasing accessibility of digital technologies among children in Nigeria. The report highlights the growing penetration of smartphones, internet connectivity, digital applications, and social media platforms among young people. This expansion reflects broader global trends in digital transformation and children's increasing integration into technologically mediated environments (OECD, 2024).

The NCC report acknowledges that digital technologies provide important educational and informational opportunities for children. Access to online learning platforms, educational videos, communication tools, and digital resources has the potential to enhance learning outcomes, improve digital literacy, and expand access to knowledge. This is particularly significant within the Nigerian context, where disparities in educational infrastructure and learning resources continue to affect many communities.

The report further indicates that children use digital technologies for communication, entertainment, educational activities, and social interaction. These findings align with studies by Marsh et al. (2019) and Livingstone et al. (2023), which demonstrate that interactive digital environments can support creativity, collaborative learning, and cognitive development when appropriately used.

However, while the NCC report recognises these opportunities, it provides limited critical engagement with the conditions under which digital benefits can be realised. For instance, the report pays comparatively little attention to issues such as digital literacy, parental supervision, socio-economic inequalities, and infrastructural disparities that shape children's experiences of digital technology. The report also does not sufficiently examine how unequal access to digital resources may reproduce existing educational and social inequalities among Nigerian children.

In addition, although the report highlights increased digital participation, it offers limited discussion of how digital engagement should be balanced with other developmental needs, including physical activity, social interaction, and play. As a result, the opportunities associated with digital technologies are presented largely in functional and educational terms without adequate consideration of broader developmental implications.

4.2 Digital Risks and Developmental Vulnerabilities

A second major theme emerging from the analysis relates to the risks and vulnerabilities associated with children's digital engagement. The NCC report identifies several concerns affecting Nigerian children within digital environments, including exposure to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, online exploitation, privacy violations, and excessive screen time. These

concerns reflect broader global anxieties regarding children's safety and well-being in digitally mediated spaces (UNESCO, 2023).

The report places significant emphasis on online protection and digital safety, portraying children primarily as vulnerable users requiring safeguarding from harmful online experiences. This protection-oriented framing is evident in discussions surrounding internet regulation, parental monitoring, online behavioural risks, and digital security measures.

While these concerns are valid and necessary, the findings suggest that the report adopts a predominantly risk-management perspective that prioritises immediate online harms over broader developmental considerations. The analysis indicates limited engagement with the long-term psychological, emotional, and social implications of excessive digital engagement.

Contemporary scholarship suggests that prolonged screen exposure may contribute to reduced physical activity, weakened interpersonal relationships, shortened attention spans, and behavioural challenges among children (Twenge, 2023). Haidt (2024) similarly argues that excessive dependence on screen-mediated interaction may reduce opportunities for social exploration, resilience-building, and emotional development associated with traditional childhood experiences.

The NCC report briefly references concerns relating to screen exposure and online addiction, but does not critically examine how digital engagement may reshape children's developmental environments over time. For example, there is limited discussion regarding the displacement of outdoor play, face-to-face interaction, and imaginative activities by screen-based entertainment. This omission restricts the report's ability to fully address the broader developmental consequences of children's digital technology use.

Furthermore, the report pays limited attention to the psychological and emotional dimensions of digital childhood, including anxiety, social isolation, and dependency associated with excessive digital immersion. Consequently, the policy focus remains largely reactive and protective rather than developmental and preventative.

4.3 Decline of Traditional Play and Cultural Implications

One of the most significant themes emerging from this study is the gradual decline of traditional play resulting from increased digital engagement among children. The findings indicate that growing dependence on smartphones, digital games, and online entertainment reduces opportunities for physical, imaginative, and socially interactive play experiences. This shift is particularly important because play constitutes a fundamental aspect of healthy childhood development.

Developmental theorists such as Piaget (1962) emphasise that play supports intellectual growth, creativity, experimentation, and social learning. Similarly, Gray (2013) argues that free and unstructured play enables children to develop resilience, self-regulation, independence, and social competence.

The findings suggest that the NCC report pays insufficient attention to the developmental implications of declining play opportunities. While the report extensively discusses online risks and digital access, there is limited recognition of how increased screen engagement may reduce participation in physically interactive and socially grounded forms of play.

Within the Nigerian context, this issue extends beyond developmental concerns to include cultural implications. Traditional play practices in Nigeria historically function as important mechanisms for cultural transmission, identity formation, and communal socialisation (Ogunyemi & Henning, 2020). Indigenous games, storytelling activities, group play, and outdoor communal interactions contribute significantly to children's integration into social and cultural life.

The increasing displacement of these practices by screen-based engagement, therefore, represents not only a developmental shift but also a cultural transformation. Reduced participation in communal and traditional play may weaken intergenerational cultural learning and diminish opportunities for embodied social interaction within communities.

Despite the significance of these implications, the NCC report does not substantially engage with the relationship between digital technology and the erosion of traditional play cultures. The absence of this perspective represents a critical conceptual gap in the policy framework, particularly within a society where communal interaction and culturally grounded play remain important dimensions of childhood.

4.4 Policy Emphasis on Protection Over Development

Another prominent theme identified in the analysis is the report's strong emphasis on protection at the expense of broader developmental considerations. The NCC framework primarily approaches children's digital engagement from the standpoint of online safety, risk mitigation, and regulatory protection.

This orientation is reflected in the report's focus on cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, online exploitation, and internet safety practices. Children are largely represented as vulnerable users requiring monitoring, supervision, and protection from digital threats.

While protection constitutes an essential component of child rights policy, the findings suggest that the NCC report (HRBA) requires a more comprehensive framework that incorporates not only protection but also participation, development, recreation, and well-being (UNICEF, 2023).

The findings reveal that issues relating to children's emotional well-being, social development, creativity, play, and participatory experiences receive comparatively limited attention within the report. Consequently, the policy framework appears heavily oriented toward preventing harm rather than promoting holistic childhood development.

This imbalance is significant because child rights in digital environments cannot be reduced solely to online protection. Children's developmental needs require policies that support balanced lifestyles, healthy social interaction, imaginative engagement, and opportunities for physical and recreational activities.

The findings, therefore suggest that the NCC report reflects a predominantly regulatory and risk-management approach that insufficiently integrates developmental psychology, sociological perspectives, and child rights principles into digital policy discourse.

4.5 The Missing Integration of the Right to Play

Perhaps the most important finding emerging from this analysis is the limited integration of the child's right to play within the NCC report. Although the report extensively addresses digital access, online risks, and internet safety, it pays minimal attention to play as a developmental and human rights issue.

The right to play is formally recognised under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which affirms children's entitlement to leisure, recreation, and participation in cultural and play activities appropriate to their age. International child rights frameworks increasingly emphasise that play is essential for cognitive, emotional, physical, and social development.

Despite this recognition, the NCC report does not substantially engage with how digital technology may affect children's opportunities for play or how digital policy can support balanced developmental experiences. Play is largely absent as a policy concern, suggesting that it occupies a peripheral position within the broader digital governance framework.

The omission of play reflects a wider conceptual limitation within digital childhood policy, where technological participation and online safety are prioritised while developmental and recreational rights receive comparatively limited attention. This narrow framing risks overlooking important dimensions of childhood well-being and holistic development.

The findings therefore indicate the need for a more integrated policy framework that recognises play not as an optional recreational activity but as a fundamental developmental and human right. Without such recognition, digital policy interventions may inadequately address the broader implications of children's changing experiences within technologically mediated environments.

4.6 Analytical Implications: Toward a Balanced Trado-Digital Framework

The preceding themes collectively demonstrate the need for a more balanced and development-oriented approach to children's digital engagement in Nigeria. While digital technologies provide important educational, informational, and participatory opportunities, the findings reveal substantial policy gaps relating to developmental well-being, traditional play, and holistic childhood experiences.

In response to these gaps, the study proposes the Trado-Digital Play-Based Learning (TDPL) framework as an analytical and policy-oriented approach for balancing digital participation with traditional play experiences. The framework does not reject digital technology or digital forms of play. Rather, it advocates a complementary relationship between digital engagement and culturally grounded, physically interactive, imaginative, and socially collaborative forms of childhood play.

The TDPL framework recognizes that digital technologies can support learning, creativity, and communication when appropriately integrated into children's developmental environments. At the same time, it emphasises that physical activity, outdoor interaction, imaginative exploration, and communal play remain indispensable components of healthy childhood development.

This balanced perspective aligns with recommendations by UNESCO (2023) and UNICEF (2023), which emphasise that children's rights in digital environments should extend beyond protection from harm to include participation, well-being, development, and meaningful social engagement.

The findings therefore suggest that future digital policies in Nigeria should adopt more holistic and child-centred approaches that integrate technological participation with developmental, cultural, and recreational rights. Such an approach would better reflect the complex realities of contemporary childhood within increasingly digital societies.

5.0 Discussion

This study critically examined the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) report on children's digital technology use through a rights-based theoretical framework, with particular focus on the underrepresentation of the child's right to play within Nigeria's digital policy landscape. The findings reveal that although the NCC report recognises both the opportunities and risks associated with children's digital engagement, its overall orientation remains predominantly protection-focused, with comparatively limited attention given to developmental, participatory, and recreational rights. The findings reinforce existing scholarship on digital childhood, particularly arguments that excessive screen-based engagement may alter the developmental conditions of childhood by reducing opportunities for physical exploration, social interaction, and imaginative play (Haidt, 2024; Twenge, 2023). Consistent with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, the study demonstrates that play remains central to children's intellectual and social development because it enables experimentation, creativity, symbolic thinking, and social learning (Piaget, 1962). Similarly, Gray's (2013) conception of

free and unstructured play highlights its importance for emotional resilience, autonomy, and self-regulation. The limited recognition of these developmental dimensions within the NCC report, therefore, reflects a significant conceptual gap in Nigeria's digital childhood policy framework.

The discussion further reveals that the NCC report approaches children primarily as vulnerable digital users requiring protection from online risks such as cyberbullying, inappropriate content, and digital exploitation. While these concerns are important, the findings suggest that this regulatory orientation narrows the understanding of children's rights within digital environments. A Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) requires a broader conceptualization that integrates protection with participation, development, well-being, and recreation (UNICEF, 2023). Consequently, digital policy should not focus exclusively on preventing online harm but should also promote environments that support healthy developmental experiences.

An important contribution of this study lies in its emphasis on the cultural implications of declining traditional play within the Nigerian context. The findings indicate that digital engagement increasingly displaces communal and culturally grounded forms of play that historically contributed to identity formation, moral socialisation, and intergenerational learning (Ogunyemi & Henning, 2020). Traditional games, storytelling practices, outdoor group activities, and imaginative social interactions have long served important developmental and cultural functions within Nigerian communities. The gradual erosion of these practices, therefore, represents not only a developmental concern but also a broader cultural transformation associated with digital modernisation.

At the same time, the findings acknowledge that digital technologies are not inherently harmful or incompatible with healthy childhood development. Existing scholarship demonstrates that digital play, educational applications, and interactive online environments can support creativity, collaborative learning, communication, and digital literacy when appropriately moderated (Marsh et al., 2019; Livingstone et al., 2023). This perspective challenges deterministic narratives that portray digital technology solely as a threat to childhood development.

Rather than positioning digital engagement and traditional play as mutually exclusive, this study argues for a balanced and integrative approach. The proposed Trado-Digital Play-Based Learning (TDPL) framework reflects this perspective by emphasising the complementary coexistence of digital participation and traditional play experiences. The framework recognises that digital technologies can enrich educational experiences and social participation while simultaneously affirming that physical, imaginative, socially interactive, and culturally grounded forms of play remain indispensable for holistic childhood development.

The findings also suggest that current digital policy approaches in Nigeria insufficiently integrate developmental psychology, sociology, and child rights principles into policy formulation. The emphasis on online regulation and protection tends to overshadow broader questions relating to children's emotional well-being, developmental balance, social connectedness, and recreational rights. This imbalance may limit the effectiveness of digital policies by addressing immediate online risks while neglecting long-term developmental consequences associated with changing childhood experiences.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of adopting more context-sensitive digital childhood policies within African societies. Much of the existing global discourse on digital childhood is shaped by Western experiences and policy frameworks. While these perspectives provide useful insights, the Nigerian context requires greater consideration of local cultural practices, communal forms of socialisation, infrastructural realities, and socio-economic inequalities that shape children's digital experiences. Integrating these contextual realities into policy discourse would strengthen the relevance and effectiveness of child-centred digital governance in Nigeria.

6.0 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study have significant implications for digital policy development, educational practice, and child welfare frameworks in Nigeria. Central to these implications is the need to move beyond a predominantly protection-oriented approach toward a more holistic rights-based framework that integrates children's developmental, cultural, and participatory needs.

First, digital policy in Nigeria must be reframed to explicitly incorporate the right to play as a core component of children's well-being. While existing policies, including the NCC framework, emphasize protection from online harms, they insufficiently address the developmental consequences of excessive digital engagement. A more balanced policy architecture should integrate protection, participation, and development, thereby situating play as a fundamental right rather than a peripheral concern.

Second, there is a need for the institutionalisation of the Trado-Digital Play-Based Learning (TDPL) framework within educational systems. Schools should adopt pedagogical models that integrate digital tools with traditional play-based learning strategies. For example, primary schools in Nigeria could combine digital literacy activities with outdoor collaborative games, storytelling sessions, and culturally grounded creative play practices.

Third, policymakers must address structural inequalities that shape children's digital experiences. Access to digital technologies in Nigeria remains uneven due to socio-economic disparities, infrastructural limitations, and geographic inequalities between urban and rural communities. Targeted interventions such as community digital learning centres and affordable internet initiatives would help reduce these disparities.

Fourth, parental and community engagement is critical in mediating children's digital experiences. Public awareness campaigns should promote healthy digital routines while reinforcing the developmental value of traditional play within Nigerian cultural contexts.

Fifth, interdisciplinary collaboration is necessary for effective digital childhood policy development. Policymakers, educators, psychologists, sociologists, technologists, and child rights advocates should work together to ensure that policy responses are evidence-based, culturally relevant, and developmentally informed.

Finally, monitoring and evaluation frameworks should include indicators related not only to digital access and online safety but also to children's developmental well-being, participation, and play opportunities.

7.0 Conclusion

This study critically examined children's use of digital technology in Nigeria through a rights-based theoretical lens, with particular focus on the Nigerian Communications Commission report. While digital technologies present significant opportunities for learning, communication, and participation, the findings reveal substantial gaps in policy frameworks, particularly regarding the recognition and protection of children's right to play.

References

- Bryman, A. (2021). *Social research methods* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Gray, P. (2013). *Free to learn: Why unleashing the instinct to play will make our children happier, more self-reliant, and better students for life*. Basic Books.
- Haidt, J. (2024). *The anxious generation: How the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness*. Penguin.
- Livingstone, S., Stoilova, M., & Nandagiri, R. (2023). Children's digital practices and well-being: Global perspectives. *Journal of Children and Media*, 17(2), 123–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2023.2173456>
- Marsh, J., Plowman, L., & Yamada-Rice, D. (2019). Digital play and learning in the early years. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 44(3), 245–260. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2019.1616845>
- Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC). (2021). *Children and digital technology in Nigeria: Opportunities, risks and policy implications*. Nigerian Communications Commission.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2024). *Children in the digital environment: Revised policy framework*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1d44c782-en>
- Ogunyemi, F. T., & Henning, E. (2020). Traditional learning and play in African contexts: Implications for child development. *South African Journal of Education*, 40(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v40n2a1732>
- Piaget, J. (1962). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*. Norton.
- Rosa, H. (2019). *Resonance: A sociology of our relationship to the world*. Polity Press.
- Twenge, J. M. (2023). Digital media use and youth development: Trends and implications. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 38(4), 567–589. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07435584221132145>
- United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2023). *Children in a digital world: Opportunities and risks*. UNICEF.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). (2023). *Rethinking learning in the digital age: Global education monitoring report*. UNESCO Publishing.