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The digital shift in parental strategies for heritage language maintenance among expatriate families in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Around two-fifths of the population living in Saudi Arabia consists of expatriates. However, there is limited research on how these families maintain their heritage languages (HLs) in a digital world with limited institutional support. Maintaining HLs is important for identity, cultural continuity, and a sense of belonging across generations, especially for families living far from home. This qualitative study explores how expatriate parents in Saudi Arabia use digital tools to help their children maintain HLs, using Fishman's reversing language shift (RLS) framework and family language policy (FLP) theory. Researchers interviewed 36 expatriate parents from 15 different national and linguistic backgrounds and analyzed the data with reflexive thematic analysis in NVivo. The results show that families are moving from exclusively home-based language practices to a mix of digital strategies, such as apps, video calls, and online learning spaces, which help strengthen cross-border connections and increase language exposure. However, these new practices also increase mothers' workload, as they take on most of the planning, mediation, and emotional support. The study suggests policy and practical steps that fit with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, such as providing subsidized multilingual digital resources and family-focused support programs. The clear research design makes the study easy to replicate, and future research should include lower-income families, children's views, and long-term studies of digital family language practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia hosts a large expatriate population, with foreign residents accounting for a substantial share of the total population. As a result, multiple languages and dialects are used in everyday settings such as schools, workplaces, and commercial spaces [1]. While this multilingual environment reflects patterns of global mobility, it also presents challenges for families seeking to maintain heritage and community languages. Public schools primarily emphasize Arabic, while international schools serving expatriate children focus mainly on English, with limited institutional support for other heritage languages (HLs). Consequently, many minority and community languages remain marginal within formal education and are at risk of reduced intergenerational transmission as children increasingly shift toward dominant languages [2]. Under these conditions, families bear the primary responsibility for maintaining HLs, often in the absence of broader societal or institutional support. Accordingly, this study investigates how expatriate families in Saudi Arabia use both traditional and digital strategies to sustain the transmission of HLs amid limited institutional support.

Family language maintenance is shaped by everyday decisions that families make in response to social, educational, and institutional pressures. To explain how expatriate families sustain HLs under such conditions, this study draws on Spolsky's family language policy (FLP) and Fishman's reversing language shift (RLS) framework. FLP conceptualizes family language behavior as three interrelated components: ideology, management, and practice. Ideology refers to beliefs about the value of a language; management involves deliberate strategies, such as one-parent-one-language; and practice reflects actual language use in daily interaction. Among Saudi expatriate families, one-parent-one-language is often adopted to balance school-based demands in Arabic and English while preserving the home as a space for heritage-language use.

Fishman's RLS framework further explains how intergenerational transmission can be sustained through staged family and community efforts, beginning with parent-child interaction and extending outward [3]. In the Gulf context, however, short-term migration patterns and limited institutional support for minority languages constrain community-level engagement, placing greater responsibility on families. Within these conditions, RLS highlights both the risk of intergenerational language loss and the potential for gradual reinforcement through sustained family-level practices. Heritage language maintenance (HLM) supports family cohesion, transnational ties, and children's sense of belonging within diasporic and multicultural contexts [4]. In Saudi Arabia's diverse expatriate environment, continued use of HLs helps mitigate language attrition and supports identity development. When FLP strategies align with RLS principles and are supported by digital practices such as transnational communication, families are better positioned to sustain intergenerational continuity despite structural constraints [5]. Most studies using Fishman's RLS framework have examined long-term migrant or indigenous groups in Western countries, such as Native American or European minority communities, and have focused on community-wide efforts beyond the family [6]. In the Arab world, some research, such as studies of language shift among Saudi children in international schools, uses RLS to examine early disruptions caused by English in education. Still, there is little research on how RLS works for short-term expatriates in the Gulf. In these cases, short contracts make it hard for communities to get involved, leaving families to try to maintain their language on their own, with little outside support. Figure 1 presents the proposed hybrid digital FLP model that guides this study. The proposed model is used in this study as a conceptual lens to understand how digital tools, transnational communication, and unequal access to technological resources increasingly mediate family language ideology, management, and practice.

Figure 1. Model of hybrid family digital language policy

Technological developments can help preserve first languages and cultural traditions. For example, people can buy affordable mobile phones, go online, and use virtual tools such as personalized teachers, storybooks, grandma's dialect, and Gen-AI to help children with pronunciation [7]. Since expatriates account for about half of Saudi Arabia's population, these options align with Vision 2030's digital goals. Students can use e-portfolios at university or mobile phones designed to support English and heritage English [8], [9]. However, wage gaps among expatriate workers make it harder for low-income migrants to access advanced digital tools. At the same time, wealthier families may feel pressure, creating new language barriers on top of old technology divides [5], [10]. Gulf policies, which favor English for the shift from oil to tourism, continue to suppress HLs [11]. As a result, families have to navigate policy challenges on their own, without much support [12]. While all these studies show that digital tools help connect people across borders, they differ in the support available. Western countries often have educational technology in schools, but Gulf expatriates mostly depend on their families. There is still little research on how digital tools can exacerbate socioeconomic gaps for short-term expatriates in non-Western regions, where unequal access increases the risk of language loss in the absence of policy changes.

Maintaining a HL in expatriate families mostly depends on parents, who organize and support language use at home. Parents said that children are active participants, joining in HLs activities and learning alongside adults [13]. In Saudi expatriate families, mothers were usually responsible for managing HLs

exposure while also handling work, caregiving, and school tasks [14]. Digital tools helped families connect with relatives and receive more language input from abroad [15]. Still, rather than making things easier, digital tools often add to parents' workload, requiring more supervision, content selection, and encouragement. This increased the gendered division of language and digital work at home [16], [17]. In the end, adults led most HLs efforts, with digital tools serving as extra help rather than replacing parents.

The digital sphere is evolving rapidly, reshaping language practices across transnational contexts. Linguistic patterns associated with South Asian and Southeast Asian communities increasingly intersect, and parents reported that children move flexibly between home languages and classroom practices, often treating code-switching as a routine communicative strategy. Despite these shifts at the family and individual level, the broader linguistic system remains relatively inflexible, with Arabic and English occupying dominant institutional positions while other HLs remain marginal. Within this context, Fishman's RLS framework highlights the fragility of intergenerational transmission when sustained community support is absent, as family-based practices alone struggle to maintain continuity over time [6], [9]. Although small-scale initiatives such as local writing workshops and digitally mediated activities have been reported to support HLs use [18], these efforts remain fragmented and uneven. As a result, expatriate families are often required to develop individualized strategies for language maintenance, operating with limited institutional or community reinforcement.

Parents often described adopting FLPs, such as one parent one language, as a deliberate strategy to support children's HLs development and to structure language use within the household [19]. In this context, digital resources played a complementary role by expanding access to HLs input through audio recordings, e-books, cartoons, and communication with extended family members across time zones [20], [21]. Parents reported integrating these resources into both synchronous family activities and asynchronous learning tasks linked to schoolwork, including participation in online cultural or language-focused groups. Digital tools and translanguaging practices were perceived as facilitating more flexible multilingual engagement, particularly among older children who required less direct supervision. Parents reported integrating informal digital tools beyond institutional platforms to support language use in home settings [21], [22]. However, these practices remained largely home-centered and informal, reflecting the absence of sustained community or institutional support for HLM beyond the family domain.

In recent years, digital FLPs have become more prominent as technology has come to play a central role in shaping HLs practices within families. Rather than functioning as supplementary resources, digital tools were reported to actively structure interactions, support routine language use, and reduce uncertainty associated with implementing FLPs [23]. Across migratory routes linking South Asia and the Gulf, access to these digital resources remains uneven, with families from more affluent backgrounds better positioned to benefit from stable connectivity and sustained engagement. In contrast, others experience more limited access [5]. In this context, translanguaging practices reflect a shift toward flexible, integrated language use in everyday family interactions. Consistent with Wei's conceptualization, HLM is increasingly enacted through blended linguistic practices in which English and Arabic coexist alongside HLs in domestic settings, allowing families to negotiate multilingual identities without rigid separation of linguistic domains [24].

This study makes four contributions to research on FLP and HLM in expatriate settings. First, it is among the first to apply Fishman's RLS framework in the Gulf region, focusing on Saudi Arabia's transient expatriate communities [6], [11], [17]. In these communities, short-term contracts and limited public support make the family the primary site of language continuity [5], [11]. Second, the study introduces a new hybrid model of digital FLP, as in Figure 1. This model builds on Spolsky's FLP components, ideology, management, and practice, by adding digital mediation as a key element [5], [11], [12], [17]. Third, the research provides detailed insights into how digital tools and gender roles interact, showing that mothers often take on the majority of the emotional, planning, and mediation work in digital HLM. This situation both empowers and complicates language maintenance in non-Western settings. By focusing on middle-to upper-middle-class expatriate families in a fast-changing, digital society shaped by Vision 2030, this study fills important gaps in understanding how technology supports multilingual family resilience outside Western diaspora communities. Taken together, these contributions position the study as a theoretically grounded and contextually specific account of how digital mediation reshapes HLM in Saudi Arabia's expatriate communities.

Overall, the literature shows that family beliefs, household management strategies, broader language hierarchies, and access to communicative resources shape HLM. Recent work has increasingly drawn attention to digitally mediated family language practices, yet most of this research has focused on long-term migrant or diaspora communities in Western settings. Less is known about how digital tools operate in short-term expatriate environments such as Saudi Arabia, where multilingual families often have limited institutional support and rely heavily on home-based strategies. This study addresses that gap by examining how digital mediation intersects with FLP, parental labor, and HLs continuity in expatriate households.

2. METHOD

The sociolinguistic landscape of Saudi Arabia is unique and multifaceted. While Arabic is the primary language of social settings, English is also a language of socialization as it is the medium of instruction and the language of the workplace. Consequently, English is the key to professional growth. In the case of HLs, maintaining them is essentially a family and community effort, given limited institutional support. Parents, and especially mothers, assume a particularly central role. The increasing use of new digital tools, such as online tutoring, video calls, and mobile apps, has significantly changed the extent and ways in which families maintain HLs. To that end, this study aims to investigate the extent to which expatriate families in Saudi Arabia perceive and practice HLM.

2.1. Research design

A qualitative approach is most effective in capturing participants' lived experiences with language in digital family contexts. This approach is consistent with prior work in FLP and the technology-mediated management of language [5], [9]. Thus, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- What do expatriate parents in Saudi Arabia think about their role in maintaining their children's HLs? (RQ1)
- What is the blend of old and new (digital) methods used by families in HL transmission in multilingual settings? (RQ2)
- In what ways do digital interactions influence the emotional and educational aspects of maintaining HL? (RQ3)

2.2. Data collection and analysis

The study focused on parents' perceptions, beliefs, and routines, which were investigated through semi-structured interviews. Such interviews brought to the fore the parents' individual and collective family narratives. This study adopted an interpretivist approach, which is concerned with subjectivity, context, and meaning in the case of FLP. To capture the themes generated from the convergence of the traditional and digital practices, the data were examined meticulously and systematically. Parents reported that children appeared to exercise agency through choices of digital content and participation in online interactions. These observations reflect parental perceptions rather than children's self-reported experiences.

2.3. Sampling and participants

To achieve variety and adequate representation among participants, purposive and snowball sampling approaches were used. The study was conducted with 36 parents from various nations, cultures, and ethnicities, including India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Ethiopia. Participants, aged 29-52 years (M=38.7) and all holding at least a bachelor's degree, had lived in Saudi Arabia for an average of 8.4 years. The demographic sample matched middle- to upper-middle-class expectations for expatriates and included a range of 12 HLs: Urdu, Hindi, Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia, Malay, Amharic, Sinhala, Tamil, Yoruba, Pashto, Bengali, and various forms of Arabic (including Egyptian, Levantine, and Sudanese). Figure 2 illustrates the purposive and snowball sampling process used and summarizes the resulting diversity metrics of the study's participants.

2.4. Interview design and data collection

During the nine-month data collection period (January–September 2025), each semi-structured interview was conducted and recorded, lasting 60-90 minutes. The preferences and availabilities of different participants were considered in planning the interviews. Consequently, 25 interviews were conducted in person and 11 online. Interview focus areas included family language histories, ideologies, and use within the family, as well as engagement through digital media. The interview questions were modeled on the last reported FLP case study [25], modified to address the study's new context, and piloted with two participants to ensure clarity and consistency. While the interviews were primarily conducted in English, some participants opted to use Arabic and other ethnic vernaculars. Each interview was audio-recorded and fully transcribed, and participants were assigned a unique pseudonym.

2.5. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB/25/043). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained before each interview. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and identifying information was removed from transcripts. All interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team.

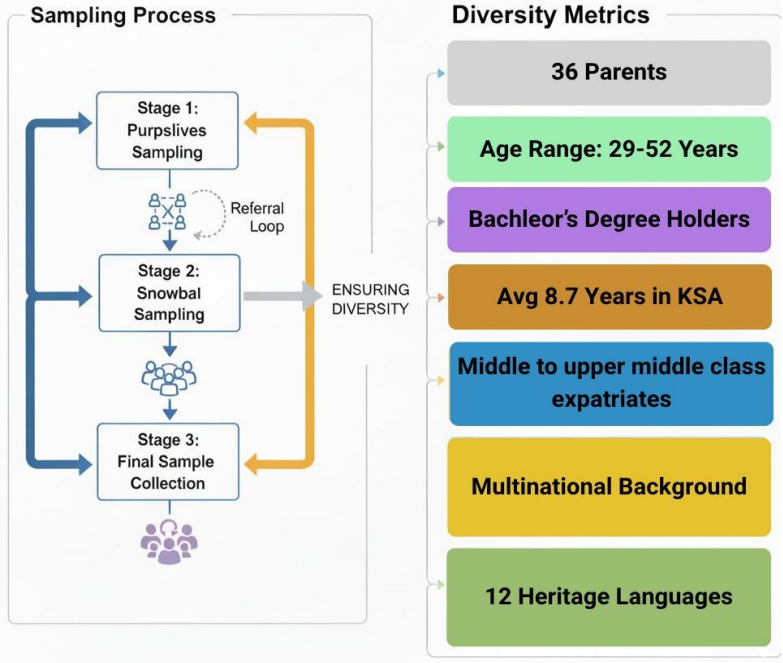

Figure 2. Purposive and snowball sampling process and participant diversity metrics

2.6. Trustworthiness and rigor

To enhance trustworthiness, the study followed the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba in Tong *et al.* [26], including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement with the data and repeated transcript review. Transferability was strengthened through detailed contextual descriptions and representative participant quotations. Dependability was addressed through an audit trail documenting methodological decisions, coding procedures, and NVivo analysis outputs. Confirmability was supported through peer debriefing with co-authors and external colleagues, which helped minimize potential researcher bias and ensured transparency in interpretation.

2.7. Analytical framework

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo 14 as an organizational tool. The coding process combined deductive and inductive approaches: deductive codes were drawn from Spolsky's FLP framework, particularly ideology, management, and practice, while inductive coding allowed new themes such as digital mediation, maternal emotional labor, and hybrid language practices to emerge from participant narratives.

- Familiarization: the transcripts were read and re-read in full while personally annotating and noting patterns in the transcripts (related to the heuristic learning model, digital tools, and family system) as they related to the tools and family systems.
- Initial coding: coding was performed line by line. For the deductive codes, some examples include "ideology" and "management strategies," while for the inductive codes, some examples include "maternal emotional labor" and "burden of digital mediation."
- Searching for themes: candidate themes were derived from the codes, such as "gendered labor," where the parental role and emotional labor were subsumed.
- Reviewing themes: this involved merging, retaining, splitting, or discarding themes to ensure alignment.
- Defining themes: the themes were consolidated to include management strategies, digital tools, emotional and identity work, and language and gender.
- Producing the report: the themes were reported along with direct quotes from participants for illustration.

Analysis was conducted primarily by the primary researcher. It used triangulation (multiple lenses, including the heuristic learning model, digital tools, and family system) and peer debriefing (with the co-author and colleagues) to verify its findings. Given the reflexive nature of the analysis, the inter-coder agreement was not calculated as a primary measure. NVivo's auditing features, peer coding reviews, and clear documentation provided assurances for the confirmability.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interviews revealed that HLM involves an adjusting, fluid practice shaped by mobility, gender, and techno-social integration, which is 'dynamic' within 'mobility, gender, techno-social integration, and transnational family arrangements.' According to parents, however, the practice involves a 'complex and sequential movement' that begins with 'intimate and resource-scarce' oral and print materials before culminating in 'global and digitally mediated' materials. The change in materials indicates a shift in practices and understandings in the construction of language, not only as a 'thread of emotional' connection to family in the face of the 'dominance of English schooling and public life' and 'Arabic-framed' public life, but also a 'complex and sequential movement.' The creation of language through practices such as handwritten flashcards and bedtime stories stands in stark contrast to modern practices of AI companions and virtual 'kin' calls. Emerging patterns indicate a burden of gendered labor that requires mediation due to the digitally augmented hybrid-learning gap and the extreme exposure within traditional practices. The extreme exposure gap is compounded by gendered labor. The presentation of the qualitative themes follows the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) guidelines [26] to enhance clarity and reproducibility.

3.1. Families, languages, and contexts

The participants represented fifteen nationalities and 12 HLs: Urdu, Hindi, Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia, Malay, Amharic, Sinhala, Tamil, Yoruba, Pashto, Bengali, and Arabic in its various varieties (Egyptian, Levantine, and Sudanese). The children (aged 3–12) of these participants attended international and private English-medium schools in Riyadh, Jeddah, Dhahran, and Yanbu, where Arabic was taught as a compulsory subject. The HLs, however, did not occupy the domains of use and were more a private tool of cultural identification. Households served as structured home-based learning environments in which regular language mediation and translation practices occurred. Within these spaces, intentional language choices were used to mediate the influence of dominant educational systems, although parents often recognized the structural limits of these efforts. During data collection, Table 1 serves as the transcript to provide participants with information on language family, educational background, and census information. It included the main details: country of citizenship, country of birth, and children.

Table 1. Participants in the study, HLs background, place of birth, and number of children

Pseudonym	Country of origin	HLs	Place of birth (parent)	No. of children	Current city (Saudi Arabia)
Maria	Philippines	Tagalog	Manila	2	Jeddah
Ricardo	Philippines	Tagalog	Cebu	3	Yanbu
Ravi	India	Hindi	Delhi	3	Riyadh
Anjali	India	Urdu	Lucknow	2	Dhahran
Siti	Indonesia	Bahasa Indonesia	Bandung	2	Dhahran
Fathima	Malaysia	Bahasa Melayu	Kuala Lumpur	2	Riyadh
Hassan	Egypt	Arabic (Egyptian)	Cairo	2	Jeddah
Nadia	Jordan	Arabic (Levantine)	Amman	3	Riyadh
Youssef	Sudan	Arabic (Sudanese)	Khartoum	3	Jeddah
Elsa	Ethiopia	Amharic	Addis Ababa	1	Yanbu
Lily	Sri Lanka	Sinhala	Colombo	2	Jeddah
Ramesh	Sri Lanka	Tamil	Jaffna	2	Riyadh
Adewale	Nigeria	Yoruba	Lagos	2	Yanbu
Irfan	Pakistan	Urdu	Lahore	3	Riyadh
Sara	Pakistan	Pashto	Peshawar	2	Dhahran
Arif	Bangladesh	Bengali	Dhaka	3	Jeddah
Tania	United Kingdom	Bengali	Birmingham	1	Riyadh
Rahma	Sudan	Arabic	Port Sudan	2	Yanbu
Noor	Indonesia	Javanese	Surabaya	2	Jeddah
Lina	Malaysia	Tamil	Penang	2	Riyadh

This variation shed light on the variety of multilingual family configurations in which parents navigate internal conflicts about their children's English fluency and the instrumental role of the heritage language in fostering warmth, identity, and faith. Many adopted more "structured" practices, such as the one parent–one language (OPOL) policy, to guarantee increased input, particularly in binational families. Maria, a Filipino mother, recalled, "*I speak only Tagalog with my daughters, and my husband uses English. At the beginning, they were resistant, but they have switched, and now, they are aware of which parent represents which could they are in and which linguistic world they are in*."

Such accounts depict HLM as a complex form of resilience, rooted in relational caring labor, yet unevenly balanced by inequities in time, literacy, and material resources. Regardless of the differences, families defended the HLs as a primary relational and faith language within the family, underscoring its significance to their identity. The first research question concerned changes in the FLPs of expatriate parents

in Saudi Arabia over the past decade. Consistent with findings in Australia, HLM's goals of preserving and transmitting a culture along with a language remained the same. Still, the means shifted from in-person to digital and hybrid.

Compared to Western host societies, Saudi Arabia's sociolinguistic configuration is characterized by the predominance of Arabic in the public domain and of English within international educational institutions. In the absence of institutional programs, expatriate families often self-directed the heritage education that they provided to their children, which is comparable to "micro-policy work" in the domain of private language planning [27]. These tensions reflect the diversity of multilingual settings, in which HLs function as covert instruments of cultural affiliation, rendering homes safe enclaves that isolate families from the broader global context.

3.2. Doing heritage language work before the digital turn

The following accounts first describe the pre-digital practices reported by participants and are then interpreted in relation to FLP and HLM scholarship. HLM relied heavily on oral history, had minimal literature, and was based on patchy social networks, which, as parents said, were close but tiring until 2017, when digital tools became popular. Most narratives centered on songs, riddles, and stories shared by relatives. Formal education taught by embassies and cultural centers was erratic and poorly executed, but tangible items, mostly books from the country of origin, were invaluable. Ravi, an engineer from India in Riyadh, said, "*we taught our kids Hindi through stories and simple grammar books. We wrote words on paper and stuck them on the fridge. It was slow, but personal, our voices were the classroom*." Anjali, an Indian mother in Dhahran, also said, "*when I came here in 2010, my children learned Hindi from me through bedtime stories. We pasted words everywhere; it felt like home in a foreign place*." Beyond home education, parents arranged for children to be informally included by recruiting family members, domestic help, and neighbors who spoke the home language. Anjali recalled, "*our housemaid speaks Urdu, so I asked her to converse with my children every day. When I am at work, it helps them attune to the natural rhythms*." As described by Elsa, an Ethiopian mother, community playgroups of expatriate compounds or mosques provided social reinforcement, "*in Yanbu, we found two other Amharic families. We gather every Friday for lunch, and the children play and converse, and it doesn't feel like they are out of practice*." "Language holidays" were periodic immersions from sojourning in home countries. An Ethiopian father, Ramesh, explained, "*in Jaffna every summer, they have to speak Tamil, and by the end of two weeks, they talk like the ones that have always lived there. It goes without saying*."

Respondents described strategies that drew on tools from previous research, such as OPOL, heritage storytelling, HL speaker recruitment, and HL media engagement [28], [29]. These pre-digital practices reflect HLM as analogue care, integrating sojourning and relational networks into domestic micro localities. In the distinct Saudi Arabian cultural spheres, these approaches managed to engender a certain degree of resilience against the English language and the use of Arabic in the public sphere, in alignment, of course, with Fishman's description of the maintenance of a language as cultural reproduction, in which the family is the micro domain of language policy [29]. But despite their efforts, the patchiness of their embassy activities and the extensive networks available to them revealed these resource inequities, and, as a consequence, families had to step in as primary educators. This evolution from close, intimate, and resource-conserving practices underscores HLM's role in preserving emotional continuity. Still, it becomes instrumental as a scaffold for other forms of educational practices without institutional support. This educational scaffolding from HLM would enable the introduction of digital resource support.

3.3. Digital tools and the reconfiguration of family life

Community-created resources like Duolingo Kids, Lingo Kids, Gus on the Go, YouTube Kids, and Zoom meetings helped support HLM. Parents from all backgrounds valued these digital tools, especially for keeping up with the OPOL approach, such as recording Hindi messages while traveling, and for enabling virtual travel after COVID. Fathima, a mother from Malaysia, shared, "*every Sunday, my daughter attends a one-hour virtual lesson from Kuala Lumpur*." She added that her daughter now reads Malay better than she expected. Virtual playgroups and networks grew, including WhatsApp groups like "Bahasa Kids Saudi," which shared worksheets and stories. Irfan described, "*my children attend a virtual Urdu school from Lahore every Sunday, twenty students from the Gulf on Zoom*." For less-common languages, peer-led groups on Facebook and Telegram provided support. Elsa talked about the Amharic mothers' group, "*it spanned Saudi Arabia, Canada, and Dubai. We exchanged poems and videos to make us feel we belong to a wider family*." Media use became more interactive, mixing passive and active activities. After a trip to Sri Lanka, Lily said, "*I brought Sinhala books from Colombo, but now there is an app that reads aloud, and my son follows along. It is very lively*." Siti pointed out, "*if I sit with them and discuss the cartoons, they use new words. Alone, it is just watching; there is the issue of mediation*." Without formal support, parents found creative solutions, such

as Adewale's Yoruba group, which posted weekly song videos. Parents liked the convenience of technology, but it also took time. As Fathima said, "*technology made teaching anytime possible, but I am the one responsible all the time: monitoring, guiding, checking*." For books, media, and imported materials, there were still few options for less-resourced languages like Yoruba. Digital tools helped bridge emotional gaps that were once hard to address. As one parent said, it was "*not a rupture, but a layering of new tools upon old routines*." Table 2 shows how strategies changed after digitalization, moving from oral and print to digital practices.

The digitalization of HLM has created a "nexus of practice," forming a digitally connected, family-centered multilingual community [30]. Through text and heritage voice messaging, families used language to build emotional bonds and stay close despite distance. Younger children practiced speaking skills with guidance, while older children became comfortable using their HLs online. For some, online interactions blended multilingual experiences, connecting home life to relationships across borders. Children showed agency by choosing content, starting conversations, and even correcting their parents, which demonstrates two-way digital FLP [6]. In Saudi Arabia, digital tools helped children maintain language ties and separate home identities from English-Arabic schooling. These practices show how digital technology is turning homes into "transnational hubs" where HLM plays a key role in the transmission of heritage [7]–[9]. For example, families from Pakistan and the Philippines used video calls to support literacy across generations. Still, without active guidance, learning was often passive and did not support the conversations needed for fluency. Many parents noticed these limits and the level of social interaction involved. These digital resources, added to existing HLM practices, show how HLM is evolving into hybrid networks and systems and highlight the need for multilingual systems in Saudi Arabia.

These results are similar to those found in other regions. For example, Curdt-Christiansen and Huang [11] showed that video calls and apps also helped children take initiative and build connections across countries. Palviainen [17] found that Nordic families used digital tools to support two-way FLP in their multilingual policies. However, there is an important difference: while Western countries often have community language programs, Saudi expatriates have few public resources. This makes family-led digital strategies even more important, but also more isolated.

Table 2. Parental HLM strategies before and after digitalization

Strategy type	Before digitalization	After digitalization/AI integration	Observed shift
Home conversation (OPOL)	One-parent-one-language policy; in-home only.	Family WhatsApp groups, voice notes, video calls.	Broadened beyond the physical home.
Storytelling and reading	Printed books, oral songs, memory-based tales.	E-books, YouTube channels, and AI reading apps.	Multimodal, interactive literacy.
Recruiting HLs speakers	Relatives/helpers for informal talks.	Online tutors, AI mentors from home countries.	Transnational, scalable access.
Community playgroups	In-person embassy/compound sessions.	Virtual groups on Zoom/WhatsApp.	From local to global participation.
Sojourning	Periodic home-country visits.	Virtual immersions via family video events.	Sustained, frequent ties.
Media and books	CDs, imported prints.	Streaming, interactive apps, digital libraries.	Endless, on-demand input.
Kinship/networks	Holiday calls/visits, local festivals.	Daily video calls, diaspora social media groups.	Daily emotional depth.

3.4. Gendered labor and the emotional weight of language work

It was primarily HLM's mothers who seemed to be the key designers, performing the planning, carrying out the implementation, motivation, emotional involvement, digital mediation, and staying home to handle housework, which was an "intensified workload" augmented by tech. "*After a full workday, I teach Arabic, upload apps, and oversee…it is my realm. My husband assists*," recalls Nadia during her time in Jordan. Fathers were described as logistical collaborators who configured devices or managed subscriptions, but were absent as the main trainers for the day. Ravi noted, "*I handle payments and internet; my wife has the patience for reading and identity talks*." This pattern held across nationalities, with mothers curating content, sustaining transnational calls (e.g., Fathima's daughters' weekly Urdu chats with Karachi grandparents), and organizing digital events. Adewale acknowledged, "*she carries the emotional load of Yoruba; I ensure the tools work*." Digitalization extended maternal oversight to screen management and communities, without redistribution. Siti captured the burden: "*tools eased learning, but now I manage screens and updates too, more work, not less*." Fathima added, "*HLs is a mother's legacy. Technology helps, but the hard work is ours*." Table 3 outlines gendered patterns, highlighting differences in roles within digital contexts.

Table 3. Parental strategies for HLM by gender

Strategy category	Maternal practices	Paternal practices	Gendered observation
Language planning	Sets goals, curates' digital content, and tracks progress.	Provides approval and technical/ financial support.	Women bear cognitive and decisional load.
Implementation	Leads lessons, moderates' apps/tutors.	Joins selectively for events.	Mothers sustain daily engagement.
Digital mediation	Manages schedules, groups, and devices.	Installs/troubleshoots.	Feminized facilitation and supervision.
Emotional work	Motivates, fosters pride, and sustains ties.	Offers symbolic encouragement.	Affective labor is primarily maternal.
Cultural continuity	Organizes virtual events/story sessions.	Attends as a supporter.	Women lead identity and continuity.

That HLM is a form of the domestically ascribed gender role was already theorized in previous studies [31], [32], and confirmed by this one. Resource construction, screen time management, class supervision, motivation, and all the primary responsibilities fell to mothers. Fathers, in their primary role as event coordinators, were left with the secondary responsibilities of managing devices, payments, and other peripherals. This imbalance was not only sustained but also compounded by the management workload of AI apps and groups introduced by digitalization. A Malaysian mother described it aptly, "*While technology was a time-saver, it was also a work generator. Now I am the tech support and the teacher*." The HLM framework, as "invisible work," is more traditional because of the sustained moral-affective framework, which remains primarily maternal. The prioritization of digital literacy and Vision 2030's empowerment of women in Saudi Arabia ignores this unrecognized work. It would be possible to humanize and digitally embroider support for multilingual sustainability to incorporate HLM in parent/community educational initiatives [30]. This explains the unrecognized emotional labor of the women in the work as legacy keeping. Centering the legacy on the children, these mothers aim to preserve the unruptured history.

Compared with other groups, this gendered imbalance aligns with Lyons [33] observations among Arab diaspora families in Europe, where mothers predominantly managed app-based HLM practices, thereby amplifying emotional labor through digital mediation. Similarly, Curdt-Christiansen and Huang [11] noted maternal burdens in digital FLP across multilingual settings. Yet, differences emerge in support structures: Western contexts often provide gender-inclusive community resources, whereas Saudi Arabia relies on individual family efforts amid limited institutional support.

3.5. Affordances, challenges, and social implications

Analysis of parent narratives indicates that HLM was frequently framed as a form of moral care and belonging, with digital tools playing a central role in supporting emotional continuity and intergenerational connection. Parents described using heritage-language applications, video calls, and digital storytelling as resources for maintaining relational ties, cultural identity, and linguistic continuity in predominantly English- and Arabic-dominant environments. These practices were often intertwined with religious and cultural values, particularly in households where language use was linked to faith-based routines and family rituals, as reflected in accounts of digitally mediated storytelling and shared religious content [34].

For Saudi expatriate families, HLM emerged as a form of personal, cultural, and digitally mediated labor rather than a purely instrumental linguistic practice. Parents reported investing sustained emotional and organizational effort to preserve relational care and resilience while navigating displacement and limited institutional support. Similar patterns have been observed in studies of translanguaging practices among Arab diaspora families and in virtual exchanges supporting minority language learning, where digital engagement is closely embedded in family culture rather than external policy structures [33], [35]. However, unlike Western diaspora contexts where minority language maintenance is often supported by community or policy initiatives, expatriate families in Saudi Arabia operate within an institutional vacuum, intensifying reliance on family-level and digitally mediated strategies. These interpretations are grounded in rigorously analyzed qualitative data and reflect established criteria for credibility and confirmability in qualitative research [36], [37].

These findings align with research on digital FLP in multilingual families, which shows that technologies such as video calls and language applications can foster identity formation and a sense of belonging when community-level support is limited [17], [38]. Taken together, the analysis highlights HLM as a form of emotional and cultural labor that remains largely unrecognized within educational policy frameworks. Acknowledging this dimension is essential for understanding how families sustain linguistic and cultural continuity under structurally constrained conditions.

3.6. Implications and future research

The findings show both the opportunities and challenges of digital FLPs in Saudi Arabia. Homes can serve as transnational classrooms, but these policies also highlight the gendered nature of heritage-language maintenance work. There is a clear need for community-based multilingual programs, grant-supported digital HLM resources, and ways to reduce the digital teaching burden on mothers. These findings also suggest the need for future research that includes children's perspectives, lower-income expatriate households, and a longitudinal examination of digitally mediated FLP practices.

3.7. Policy recommendations

These findings align with Vision 2030's emphasis on digital inclusion and human capability development, but they also reveal an unintended consequence. Vision 2030 is used here as an analytical reference point to interpret how digital inclusion and human capability agendas intersect with family-level language labor: the transfer of institutional language support responsibilities to families, particularly mothers. This highlights a policy gap between national digital ambitions and family-level linguistic labor. For policy and practice, several suggestions align with Vision 2030's digital and human capital goals. First, subsidize digital HLM resources, such as sponsored language-learning apps, to make them accessible to all socioeconomic groups and to close resource gaps. Second, include family multilingualism and support for mothers in digital literacy training and women's empowerment programs, offering workshops on digital tools and shared household responsibilities. Third, create heritage-language community hubs in expatriate areas or online, so community members can support one another and share resources.

3.8. Practice implications

Families may integrate OPOL, and such Families can use the OPOL approach to plan regular digital activities, such as video calls or app-based tasks, with reminders for fathers to share responsibility. International school teachers can focus on multilingual digital storytelling and sharing heritage with children to support families at home. School and community leaders can use storytelling and heritage sharing in digital activities to build informal networks and WhatsApp groups, helping to create child-friendly strategies that ease the burden on mothers. Research comparing GCC countries and Western diasporas could address the impact of digitalization on gender and mobility and the creative use of hybrid models in globalization by expatriate families. There is still work to be done on the complex relationship among digitalization, regulation, and cultural preservation in the GCC, particularly regarding the multilayered identities of Saudi expatriate children and the interplay among travel, masculinity, and technology.

3.9. Limitations

This study provides useful insights into HLM among expatriate families in Saudi Arabia, but it has some limitations. Purposive and snowball sampling primarily recruited middle- to upper-middle-class participants with higher education and stable jobs. As a result, the study focused on advanced digital tools such as premium apps (e.g., Duolingo Kids), virtual tutoring, and high-quality video calls, all of which require reliable devices, internet access, and paid subscriptions.

Lower-income migrant workers, who make up a large part of the expatriate population and often face wage gaps and technology barriers [5], [10], may depend more on basic or non-digital methods. Because of this socioeconomic bias, the study might overestimate the affordability and prevalence of digital tools in the hybrid FLP model. This limits how well the findings apply to the broader expatriate community, especially those in lower-income groups, where digital divides can increase the risk of language shift.

4. CONCLUSION

This research highlights how expatriate parents in Saudi Arabia adjust their HLM strategies in a rapidly digitalizing environment where cross-border connections continue to expand. The goals of HLs work remain tied to identity, belonging, and family continuity. What has changed is the way these goals are pursued. Approaches such as the one parent one language model, the use of native-speaker tutors, and informal community classes have gradually shifted to digital spaces. Families now rely on online lessons, video calls, and emerging AI tools to recreate linguistic contact that once depended on physical proximity. Such resources allow families to stay connected across distances and to their countries of origin. But they present a constellation of worries that parents have to manage. Some of these include screen time, varying resource quality, and the emotional and mental load required to sustain the routines. Many mothers identify as cultural caretakers and carry a disproportionate amount of the load. Families use these resources to maintain their multilingualism, but technology divides, expectations of mothers to provide the majority of caregiving, and a lack of resources work against them. These concerns are also connected to national

aspirations for cultural uplift and human capital, as articulated in Vision 2030, especially given the growing emphasis on technology.

Saudi Arabia's sociolinguistic context does not make this easier. The majority of public discourse is in Arabic, while schools teach both Arabic and English as a core subject. For expatriate families, this means they will have to create their own environments to sustain their HLs, including public structures. This, within these homes, is framed as micro-policy around the maintenance of HLs. This recognition of the value of micro-policy, especially in the context of digital tools, will position families at the center of policy dialogue on multilingualism. To support this, policymakers could implement targeted measures, such as subsidizing digital HLM apps to expand access, integrating multilingual support into Vision 2030's digital literacy and women's empowerment initiatives, and launching pilot programs for community-based heritage-language hubs in expatriate areas or online.

Considering the findings as a whole, the research underscores the importance of parents' roles as guardians of linguistic legacies. These parents' digitally distant parenting styles are a product of the changing technologies of family life. More research could focus on how children participate in such digital practices, and on how schools and families together support more inclusive settings for transnational communities. In the end, the retention of HLs is more than a cognitive exercise. It is a form of emotional and practical work directed towards sustaining feelings of identity, continuity, and belonging in a place, as is evident in the digital practices of the families in this research.

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C : **C**onceptualization
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Vi : **Vi**sualization
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P : **P**roject administration
Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no financial interests or relationships that could be perceived as potentially influencing their work, as stated in this paper. There is no political, religious, ideological, scholarly, or intellectual dispute associated with this research.

INFORMED CONSENT

Before data collection began, all individuals were informed about the study's aims and methodology. Participation was voluntary, and all individuals participating in this research study provided written informed consent. Participants were guaranteed no loss of confidentiality, no destruction of anonymity, and that the information collected would be used solely and exclusively for research purposes.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data about this study can be provided by the corresponding author, [MA], upon reasonable request.

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