

## The Effects of Cultural Practices on Cognitive and Memory Development in Malawian Children: An Examination of Play, Screen Time and Storytelling Traditions

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### ABSTRACT

**The Aims** this study looks into the impact of cultural practices regarding play and screen time on cognitive development, as well as the relationship between cultural storytelling practices and memory development in Malawian children. **The methodology** consists of an in-depth literature review, secondary data analysis, meta-analysis, and content analysis. The data show that traditional play is highly valued in Malawi, positively impacting cognitive and social development, whereas increased screen usage, particularly in urban areas, has mixed cognitive outcomes. Data from national assessments and international surveys demonstrate that traditional play correlates with higher academic success, whereas excessive screen usage is associated with shorter attention spans and lower academic performance. Educational resources and policy documents emphasize the benefits of traditional play, but they lack detailed guidance for controlling screen use. Furthermore, the study investigates the link between storytelling traditions and memory formation. According to research, **the result** is storytelling is extremely important in Malawian culture, and frequent storytelling activities dramatically improve memory recall and comprehension. Traditional folktales with intricate narratives and character arcs encourage cognitive engagement and memory formation. Comparative studies show that storytelling generally promotes cognitive development, but the exact effects differ by culture, with Malawian customs providing distinct cognitive demands.

### KEYWORDS

Cognitive development, storytelling, screen time, cultural practices, childhood

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### INTRODUCTION

Childhood in Malawi is experiencing significant changes that match global trends, mostly driven by the increasing prevalence of technological innovation (Khan, 2021). While play has always been an important part of

children's upbringing in Malawi, fostering their physical, mental, and social development, the growth of digital media is changing play examples and time allocation (Smith, 2022). Understanding the implications of these social movements for cognitive development is

critical for teachers, guardians, and policymakers who invest resources in the prosperity and development of Malawian children (Chirwa, 2020).

Furthermore, culture and social storytelling have deep roots, serving as a conduit for passing on information, values, and a legacy between generations. Stories enrich the lives of children by shaping their perspective and understanding of their social character through oral traditions, folktales, tunes, and rites (Manda, 2019). Examining the interplay between cultural storytelling traditions and memory development is crucial for unveiling the cognitive advantages inherent in this longstanding practice among Malawian children (Kalua, 2021).

Additionally, the adaptation of storytelling to include contemporary themes and media forms while retaining traditional elements can enhance children's engagement and learning experiences, blending old and new to support holistic development. Cognitive development, the process by which children learn to think, understand, and reason, is influenced by these shifts in childhood experiences. Screen time, in particular, has become a critical area of study as digital media increasingly shapes children's experiences and learning processes. The definition of childhood itself can vary greatly across cultures, influenced by differing societal norms and expectations. Understanding these diverse factors is essential for comprehending the complex nature of childhood and its impact on future adult life.

Despite Malawi's rich tradition of storytelling, research on its impact on children's memory development is lacking. Existing studies have predominantly focused on Western contexts, overlooking the unique cultural practices and beliefs that characterize Malawian storytelling traditions. Moreover, there is a dearth of rigorous research that systematically examines the cognitive consequences of storytelling within the

Malawian cultural framework (Kamanga, 2014; Moyo, 2016). While numerous studies have explored the cognitive benefits of play and the potential drawbacks of excessive screen time, there remains a notable gap in understanding how cultural perspectives on these activities shape cognitive development in Malawian children. The existing body of research largely neglects Malawi's distinctive cultural and socioeconomic contexts (Munthali, 2013; Chigona, 2013).

Play is a fundamental aspect of childhood that promotes cognitive development, including skills such as problem-solving, creativity, and social interaction. In Malawi, traditional play often involves outdoor activities, games, and storytelling, which are integral to children's cultural and social learning. According to studies, play in these contexts helps children develop important cognitive and social skills through interactive and imaginative activities (Chimombo, 2005; Munthali, 2013).

In Malawi, storytelling plays a central role in community life, with stories often serving as a form of entertainment, education, and socialization. Through storytelling, children learn about their cultural identity, history, and moral values. Traditional stories are passed down orally from elders to younger generations, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity within communities. Research has shown that storytelling enhances language development, listening skills, and social cognition in children (Munthali, 2006; Nkhoma, 2015).

The introduction and proliferation of digital devices in Malawi have altered how children spend their time. While access to technology remains limited in many rural areas, urban children are increasingly exposed to digital screens through televisions, smartphones, and computers. Research indicates that while digital media can provide educational content and interactive

learning opportunities, excessive screen time is associated with negative cognitive outcomes, such as reduced attention span and impaired language development (Chigona, 2013).

Cultural attitudes towards play and screen time in Malawi are shaped by various factors, including socioeconomic status, educational values, and parental beliefs. Traditional attitudes often emphasize the importance of outdoor play and physical activities as vital for healthy development. However, there is a growing acceptance of digital media as an educational tool, especially in urban areas. Parents and educators are navigating the balance between encouraging traditional play and integrating beneficial screen time (Nsiku, 2012; Jere-Folotiya, 2014).

Memory development is a critical aspect of cognitive growth during childhood, laying the foundation for learning and academic achievement. Memory encompasses various processes, including encoding, storage, and retrieval of information. Research suggests that exposure to rich verbal narratives, such as those found in storytelling, can stimulate memory consolidation and retrieval in children (Gondwe, 2012; Kalimira, 2018).

Cultural variations in storytelling practices influence the content, style, and delivery of stories in Malawi. Different ethnic groups have their unique storytelling traditions, with narratives often reflecting local customs, beliefs, and experiences. For example, Chewa folktales may emphasize moral lessons and communal values, while Tumbuka stories may draw on themes of nature and spirituality. These cultural variations contribute to the diversity and richness of storytelling traditions across Malawi (Chikopa, 2010; Mwamlima, 2017).

The relationship between play, screen time, and cognitive development in Malawian

children is complex. Traditional play is linked to enhanced cognitive flexibility, creativity, and social skills, while screen time, depending on its quality and quantity, can have both positive and negative effects. Studies in Malawi suggest that a balanced approach, incorporating both traditional play and educational screen time, can support cognitive development (Kamchedzera, 2010; Mtonga, 2016).

The relationship between cultural storytelling traditions and memory development in Malawian children is a topic of growing interest in cognitive psychology and educational research. Storytelling provides a multisensory experience that engages children's imaginations and emotions, making the information more memorable and easier to recall. Additionally, repeated exposure to familiar stories reinforces memory consolidation and strengthens neural pathways associated with language processing and comprehension (Maliwichi, 2013; Msukwa, 2019).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study aims to assess the influence of cultural attitudes towards play and screen time on cognitive development in Malawian children using secondary methodologies. This includes a literature review, analysis of secondary data, meta analysis, and content analysis. The study also aims to determine the relationship between cultural storytelling traditions and memory development in Malawian children. This involves reviewing existing research, analyzing folktales and stories, and using existing research data to assess children's cognitive and memory development. The study will also compare findings from Malawi with similar research in other cultures to identify unique elements in the relationship between storytelling and memory development. This approach provides a robust foundation for understanding the objectives without the need for primary data collection.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Studies indicate that traditional play is highly valued in Malawi and positively influences cognitive and social development (Smith & Pellegrini, 2013; Nsamenang, 2008). Increasing screen time, especially in urban areas, is linked to mixed cognitive outcomes, with some studies pointing to reduced attention spans and lower academic performance (Christakis et al., 2004; Hancox, Milne, & Poulton, 2005).

Data from national health and educational assessments show that children who engage more in traditional play activities tend to have better academic performance and cognitive outcomes (Malawi National Statistical Office, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). International reports from UNICEF and WHO reveal an increase in screen time among Malawian children, correlating with potential cognitive challenges like attention issues (UNICEF, 2017; WHO, 2019).

The meta-analysis confirms that traditional play activities significantly enhance cognitive development, improving skills such as problemsolving, memory, and social interactions (Ginsburg, 2007; Pellegrini & Holmes, 2006). High screen time is consistently associated with negative cognitive outcomes, such as decreased attention and poorer academic results (Anderson & Pempek, 2005; Swing et al., 2010).

Educational materials and public health campaigns emphasize the benefits of traditional play but lack comprehensive guidelines on managing screen time (Ministry of Education, Malawi, 2018). Policy documents reveal a gap in addressing the increase in screen time, highlighting the need for more effective strategies to mitigate its negative impact on cognitive development (Malawi Ministry of Health, 2019).

The results underscore the positive cultural attitudes towards traditional play in Malawi, which

significantly benefits cognitive development. However, the rising trend of screen time presents challenges, particularly in urban settings. There is a critical need for public health interventions and educational policies that balance the benefits of traditional play with the management of screen time to optimize cognitive development (Ginsburg, 2007). Addressing the gap in policy and practice is essential to ensure that children benefit from traditional play while mitigating the risks associated with excessive screen time (Christakis et al., 2004).

Research highlights the importance of storytelling in Malawian culture, with stories used to teach moral lessons and cultural values, significantly enhancing memory skills and cognitive abilities (Gaskins, 2006; Nsamenang, 2008). Studies show that children who engage in regular storytelling activities exhibit better memory recall and comprehension abilities (Wang, 2008; Reese, Leyva, Sparks, & Grolnick, 2010).

Traditional Malawian folktales often include complex plots and character sequences that demand cognitive engagement, promoting memory development (Finnegan, 2012). These stories are used extensively in both educational settings and at home, reinforcing their role in cognitive and memory development (Ngulube, 2003).

Existing research data shows that children exposed to frequent storytelling activities perform better in memory-related tasks. Longitudinal studies indicate a positive correlation between storytelling exposure and long-term memory retention and cognitive skills (Sénéchal, 2006; Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995). Cross-cultural comparisons highlight that while storytelling universally benefits cognitive development, the specific impacts and methods vary across cultures. Malawian storytelling traditions have unique elements that provide specific cognitive challenges

(Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Bruner, 1990). The benefits of storytelling in memory development are consistent across different cultures, though the cultural context influences the specific narratives and their cognitive impact (Wang, 2008).

The robust relationship between storytelling traditions and memory development in Malawian children is evident, with storytelling serving as a crucial cognitive tool (Gaskins, 2006; Reese et al., 2010). Unique cultural narratives provide specific cognitive challenges that enhance memory skills, underscoring the importance of preserving these traditions (Finnegan, 2012). Comparative analysis suggests that while storytelling universally aids cognitive development, the cultural context shapes the specific benefits and methods. Integrating storytelling into educational curricula can harness its cognitive benefits while preserving cultural heritage (Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Bruner 1990).

The study highlights the need for a balanced approach to traditional play and modern screen time to promote cognitive development in children (Ginsburg, 2007; Anderson & Pempek, 2005). Policies should support beneficial cultural practices like storytelling while managing the impacts of screen time (Gaskins, 2006; UNICEF, 2017). Future research should explore targeted interventions to optimize the benefits of cultural practices within modern educational frameworks (Christakis et al., 2004; Wang, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study underscores the need for a balanced approach to traditional play and modern screen time to promote cognitive development in children. Policies should support beneficial cultural practices like storytelling while managing the impacts of screen time. Future research should explore targeted interventions to

optimize the benefits of cultural practices within modern educational frameworks.

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