UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AMONG CHILDREN AND POTENTIAL RISKS: A REVIEW STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The advent of social media platforms and the widespread availability of smartphones have significantly affected children's digital engagement. However, alongside social media's numerous benefits and contributions, research also highlights concerns regarding children's online safety. This study is based on reviewing the literature to investigate social media use among children, associated risks, and parental mediation as a potential source of these risks. The reviewed literature revealed that social media use has become a part of children's everyday lives. However, this technology usage among children can lead to exposure to age-inappropriate content, which can have adverse psychological and physical impacts. The cited literature underlines the significant role of parental mediation, which involves parents providing guidance and supervision to ensure the healthy development of their children. Understanding the relationship between parental mediation and children's exposure to online threats is important for ensuring cybersecurity and promoting safer child development. It is concluded that parents should understand the various purposes of social media, remain aware of potential risks, implement effective parental mediation strategies, tailor approaches to individual children, and promote collaboration and digital literacy education. As central figures in children's lives, parents can play a pivotal role in supporting children to navigate the digital world of social media safely. Further, practical implications are discussed, and limitations are also highlighted.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms and mobile applications have become important tools for individuals to create an online presence, connect with others, and base social networks. Approximately 92% of individuals aged

14-22 use social media daily (ActforYouth, 2022). Although Facebook remains the most popular platform, teenagers often engage with multiple social media sites, creating a "social media portfolio" that includes platforms like Twitter and Instagram. Besides, mobile apps offer various functions, i.e., photo sharing, gaming, and video chatting (Hill et al., 2016). However, this use further increased during the Covid-19 pandemic due to social isolation and restriction measures. Social media platforms have become integral to children's and young people's lives, particularly by incorporating digital technologies into their daily routines. While the internet has always offered interactivity and content sharing, the emergence of social media platforms and the accessibility provided by smartphones have greatly affected children's digital engagement. Over the past two decades, these platforms have contributed enormously to the digitalization process among young individuals, exceeding many other aspects of adoption (Habes et al., 2018). With constant evolution and deep integration into various aspects of daily life, social media and the underlying concept of social networking resume to shape and redefine the experiences of billions of users worldwide. The pervasive nature of social media platforms has changed how children and young people interact, communicate, and navigate the digital landscape, facilitating connections and influencing their online behavior (O'Neill, 2023).

However, despite the utmost uses and contributions of social media, existing research also raises some concerns regarding children's online safety. While the internet provides children with multiple beneficial experiences, it also exposes them to risks and possible harm, indicated by the existing literature on social media and risks against children (Livingstone et al., 2014). The relevant research has shown that as children's access to online opportunities increases, so does their exposure to probable harm (Ali & Pasha, 2022; Livingstone et al., 2017; Livingstone & Ólafsson, 2017). Several studies have been conducted to address these risks to comprehend the prevalence and dispersal of online risks, informing public policy, awareness campaigns, and the development of tools for child protection and empowerment online. The EU Kids Online survey involving 25,000 European children indicated that 30% of internet users aged 9 to 16 had encountered someone online whom they had not met in person, and 9% had engaged in face-to-face meetings with individuals they had initially met online. Besides, 21% of 11 to 16-year-olds had experienced potentially detrimental user-generated content, while 15% had encountered or received sexual messages online. Other risks determined included 14% of children aged 9 to 16 encountering sexual images on websites in the past year and 6% receiving hurtful or offensive messages online. Among these risks, online bullying had a robust effect on children's emotional well-being, while 'sexting' and pornography were also distressing. Meeting online contacts offline was considered the least upsetting (Garmendia et al., 2012). Consequently, it is assumed that the existing use of social media platforms for children poses certain risks, demanding safe cyber environment for them. Existing literature also emphasizes certain strategies and accountability of caretakers, parents, and other individuals in ensuring safe internet use for children and affirm their physical and psychological wellbeing and development (Caivano et al., 2020; Livingstone & Ólafsson, 2017).

STUDY OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

According to Livingstone et al. (2014), the child-centered and effects research practices focus on comprehending children's social media usage and emotional reactions within social contexts. Studies have also highlighted various examples of how children confront certain threats and exposures on social media. For instance, research has shown that children may intentionally seek out sexual content to explore and learn about topics that adults generally consider unsuitable for them to know. Also, children sometimes attempt to watch films rated for an older audience, but they may cover their eyes during explicit or shocking scenes. These instances illustrate how children actively use social media and get exposed to content that is age inappropriate for them. Consequently, this research also explored the relevant phenomenon by reviewing the studies published during the past six years. The primary focus is examining social media usage for different purposes, exposure to inappropriate content, and further the effectiveness of parental mediation witnessed by existing literature. Thus, this study aims to answer the following three questions to propose the practical implications for parents and guardians.

RQ1: Why do children use social media?

RQ2: What are the types of online risks children faced during online media usage?

RQ3: What are the mediation strategies parents prefer to ensure children's one line safety?

RESEARCH METHODS

Review studies play a critical role in research by providing reliable and empirically witnessed information on certain phenomena. They aim to improve understanding by analyzing existing literature and guiding discussions and conclusions accordingly. The current research also employed a literature review approach to determine research studies addressing the questions (Ali et al., 2021). They meticulously gathered peer-reviewed articles from online platforms, including Sage, Springer Journals, Wiley, Taylor & Francis, and others. The selected research studies encompassed various study designs (e.g., cross-sectional, review articles, case studies, policy reports), paradigm models (quantitative, mixed methods, and qualitative), and methodologies. Furthermore, the impact factor and indexation of articles were also considered, obtaining them from the 2018 ISI Web of Knowledge Journals Citation Reports indexed journals in social sciences, psychology, media studies, humanities, and sociology. The selected journals included Mass Media and Society, Children and New Media, International Review of Social Sciences, CoreUK and Social Sciences International Journal, Critical Studies in Media Communication, Psychology of Popular Media Culture, and Children (MDPI) social media and Society. It is important to note that some articles focused on research essays and perspectives on new media and child wellbeing and development. Overall, n=24 articles were selected based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria (See Table 2.1).

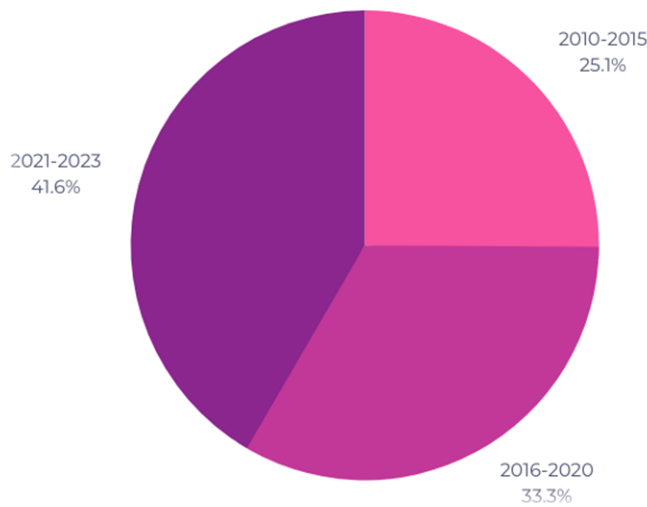**Table 2.1** *Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria Regarding Literature Selection*

S/R.	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
1.	Journals indexed in Scopus/Web of Sciences/DOAJ.	Journals not indexed in Scopus/Web of Sciences/DOAJ.

2.	Articles investigating parent-child online media usage.	Articles not investigating parent-child online media usage.
3.	Articles focused on social media usage among children.	Articles focused on traditional media usage among children.
4.	Articles published from 2010 to 2023.	Articles published before 2010.

Figure 2 briefly overviews the frequency of selected research articles published from 2010 to 2023. The researchers scrutinized a total of n=24 peer-reviewed and published research articles. The figure demonstrates that the most suitable research articles (n=10 or 41.6%) were published from 2021 to 2023. This is important because social media usage among children is rudimentary areas of study for research scholars. It underlines the important role of social media in political communication and indicates the increasing dependence of children on social media platforms for different purposes. Further, n= 8 (33.3%) articles were published from 2016 to 2020, and n= 6 (25.1%) articles were published from 2010 to 2015 (See Figure 1).

YEARS OF PUBLICATION

2010-2015 25.1%
2021-2023 41.6%
2016-2020 33.3%

Figure 1 *Frequency of Articles According to Years of Publication*

Table 2 concisely overviews the research design and paradigm models utilized in the cited research articles. Examining the study design, it is evident that the articles contained a variety of methods, including case studies, cross-sectional design, review studies, and others. However, most articles (*n*=14 or 56.0%) were based on cross sectional designs, *n*= 6 (25.0%) articles were based on case study approaches, *n*= 3 (12.5%) were based on review approach. Finally, *n*= 1 (4.1%) article based on research perspective and the same number (*n*= 1, 4.1%) was based on other (policy report). Concerning the paradigm models, most of the articles were based on quantitative methodology (*n*=15 or 62.5%), while *n*= 5 (20.8%) of the studies utilized qualitative methods. Only a small percentage (8.3%) of the studies employed a mixed methods approach. The remaining (*n*=2, 8.3%) of the cited literature consisted of research essays and perspectives in general.

Table 2 *Design and Paradigm Models of Selected Literature*

Study Design	**Case Study**	**Cross Sectional**	**Reviews**	**Perspective**	**Others**	**Total**
	6	14	3	1	1	
Paradigm	**Qualitative**		**Quantitative**	**Mixed Method**	**Others**	24
Models	5		15	2	2	

Table 3 summarizes the studies categorized based on their data-gathering techniques. The majority of articles (n= 11, 45.8%) relied on the survey method for data collection. N= 5 (20.8%) articles were based on interview method, n= 3 (12.5%) articles were based on literature review approach, and n= 3 (12.5%) articles were based on other methods (research reports, essays, policy briefs, general discussions, and research persecute/essays) Finally, n= 2 (8.3%) articles were based on content analysis approach.

Table 3 *Data Collection Methods in the Selected Literature*

Study Design	Survey	Literature Review	Interview	Content Analysis	Others	Total
	11	03	5	2	3	24

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social Media Usage among Children

Children use social media for various reasons, driven by their developmental and social needs. According to the literature, social media provides a platform for children to connect and sustain relationships with their peers (Kaban, 2021). It helps them to stay in touch, share experiences, and immerse themselves in social interactions, even when physically diverged. Children can strengthen friendships, make new connections, and extend social networks through social media. A study by Susanty et al. (2022) examined social media use among young users, specifically individuals below eighteen. The results revealed that users benefit from social media as it improves their communication skills, helps them access information, develops a sense of belonging, and efficiently utilizes the latest technology. Respondents also revealed that social media platforms play an important role in the daily lives of young users, offering opportunities to improve their communication skills, socialize with friends and family, access information on different topics, including health and education, and improve their technical expertise using cutting-edge technology. (Habes et al., 2023) argued that children also use social media for learning and information sharing purposes. This use is accompanied by their learning needs that also has positive impacts on critical thinking skills, providing equal educational opportunities, having positive impacts on their educational performance. Aziz and Amin (2022) further validated this phenomenon and analyzed social media usage in students' education, mainly focusing on school-level students who utilize social media to create content and foster relationships within educational communities. Data gathered from 160 students revealed a significant and positive relationship between academic performance and the amount of time students spent using social media for academic purposes, with a strong association observed. The study also highlighted a positive correlation between students' use of social media platforms and their academic performance. Similarly, video games are now highly popular among families, with four out of five households owning a gaming device. Boys, in particular, show strong engagement with video games, with 91% having access to a gaming console and 84% playing games online or on mobile devices (Radesky & Hutchinson, 2016). Social media expose individuals to new ideas and information, raising understanding of current events and critical issues. Interactive media platforms also facilitate community participation and civic engagement, allowing students to collaborate with others on assignments and projects, mainly for e-

learning purposes (Habes et al., 2023). According to Nelissen and Van den Bulck (2018), social media facilitates communication among geographically diverged families and friends, bridging distances. Abbasi and Huang (2020) argued that social media can offer valuable support networks, especially for individuals with ongoing illnesses, conditions, or disabilities. For example, many young adults have found benefits in seeking health information online and through social media, considering them additional information sources alongside healthcare visits. Research also highlights the positive impact of social media in promoting social inclusion for individuals who may feel excluded or are searching for an accepting community. Further, social media can promote wellness and healthy behaviors, including smoking cessation and sustaining balanced nutrition.

Online Risks against Children

According to Savoia et al. (2021), it is important to have a comprehensive knowledge of children's online media usage and the associated risks to ensure their psychological well-being and development. Numerous studies have classified and identified these risks, underlining their detrimental effects. For example, (Madigan et al., 2018) highlighted the prevalence of online risks, including sexual solicitation and sextortion, affecting one in five children. Ali et al. (2021) further expanded on these risks, identifying indecent content, cyber grooming, and child pornography as major issues attributed to online media usage among children. Levine (2022) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic had further exacerbated these risks. The closure of schools and the enactment of social distancing measures led to a substantial increase in children's reliance on online media worldwide for education and socialization. This increased exposure has heightened their vulnerability to sexualized exposure to inappropriate content. UNICEF (2021) reported that the surge in online activity during the pandemic has resulted in a rise in the sharing and receipt of sexualized content. According to Orcid and Orcid (2013), the accessibility of pornography has increased remarkably, especially for children, due to widespread internet usage and dependence on online platforms. Disturbing and highly sexualized content, including violent acts such as rape, molestation, bestiality, and sexual torture, can be easily accessed with just a click. The preponderance of personal devices like mobile phones, tablets, and computers and unsupervised internet access further aggravates concerns about children's exposure to online indecent content. Accidental exposure to sexually explicit content (pronephra) is another preceding concern, raising questions about the practicality of the internet for children. As highlighted by González-ortega and Orgaz-baz (2013) the availability and exposure to sexual content have increased immensely. Users know online pornography is readily available and accessible, offering obscurity and portability through online devices. Yet, children's exposure to online pornography has risen greatly due to increased usage, sparking their curiosity to explore further. Children's exposure to online pornography usually occurs unexpectedly and unintentionally. This accidental exposure can happen through pop-up advertisements, emails, websites, web searches, and other online avenues. Moreover, cyber-porn includes not only explicit images and videos of nudity and sexual activity but also highly violent and bizarre sexual acts, such as child sexual abuse, sadism, and rape (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011).

Nash et al. (2016) explored the different pathways through which children experience accidental exposure to online pornography. The researchers employed a case study approach, focusing on individuals under eighteen in the United Kingdom. The findings revealed several sources, including online gaming platforms accessed through personal computers, laptops, Xbox, and PlayStation, emerged as one significant source of exposure. Despite age restrictions and warnings on games and websites indicating that they are intended for adults, children still engage with them, increasing their risk of encountering online pornography. Besides personal mobile phones and laptops, exposing children to potential pop-up advertisements, sexualized emails, and other explicit content while accessing online platforms. Finally, social networking sites (SNS) constitute another influential source of accidental exposure to online pornography. These platforms host advertisements and user accounts that knowingly showcase pornographic images and videos. Children's exposure to such accounts, their posts, and personal attributes further exacerbate the risk of accidental exposure to online pornography, posing a substantial concern.

Parental Mediation and Children's Online Safety

According to Garmendia et al. (2012), children may have a different awareness and ability to navigate online risks than adults. This indicates the importance of parental mediation and various strategies that can play a crucial role in ensuring children's online safety. Ho et al. highlighted the importance of parental mediation in ensuring children's online safety. Research has shown that parental mediation, emotional intelligence, and empathy protect children against online risks. By monitoring and managing their children's online activities, parents can identify these risks, take appropriate action, and provide support and guidance to their children. Exposure to indecent and pornographic content strongly highlights the need for parental mediation as online content, being largely unregulated and efficiently accessible, can expose children to sexualized and inappropriate material. By ensuring children's online media safety, parents can become aware of any exposure to such content and provide the necessary support. Lee (2013) argued that parental mediation, directly and indirectly, supports children by encouraging open communication and addressing their well-being and online safety concerns.

Here Laczniak et al. (2017) cited an example of active mediation. As noted, active mediation involves taking assertive actions to ensure safe internet usage among children. It includes engaging in conversations with children about their internet activities, providing details on safety measures, guiding them in practicing accountable online behavior, and assisting them in dealing with potentially harmful situations. Zhu et al. (2021) parental mediation as a pliable and friendly approach, emphasizing positive parent-child interactions to discuss and guide children on appropriate online media content and usage. Active mediation fosters children to analyze online content critically and provides additional information when needed. Restrictive mediation involves establishing rules and limitations for children's media usage. It includes setting constraints on their time spent on media and restricting access to certain content or websites (Symons et al., 2017). Lee (2013) studied South Korean parents to determine the main predictors of restrictive parental mediation. The findings revealed four predictors, including parents' concerns about

their child's self-control, the child's age, the internet skills of the parents, and their perceptions of the adverse effects of the internet. The study also showed that restrictive mediation was linked with reduced online risks and decreased online time, leading to decreased internet addiction among children.

Aljasir and Alsebaei (2022) focused on cyberbullying, parental mediation, and children in Arab societies and found consistent results supporting the advantages of restrictive mediation. They observed that a lack of parental concern and mediation raised the occurrence of cyberbullying. Therefore, restrictive mediation has benefits, mainly when parents are concerned about children's lower self-regulation and effectiveness in managing online media usage. The third aspect of parental mediation involves monitoring children's internet usage, including checking their social media profiles, computers, mobile phones, and personal chatrooms. According to Bayraktar (2017), monitoring is a critical component of parental mediation and is sometimes considered a sub-type of restrictive mediation. Researchers view monitoring as a distinct dimension that involves vigorously supervising children's online activities, checking their email accounts, and controlling their content consumption and usage. A study conducted by Caivano et al. (2020) focused on parental awareness and perceptions of cyberbullying, specifically cyberaggression, cyber victimization, and monitoring online media usage in Canada. The study investigated parents with children at the elementary and secondary school levels. The results showed that parents of elementary-level children were less concerned about cyberbullying and monitoring their children's online activities. While parents of secondary-level children expressed greater concern about cyberbullying and monitoring. The advantages of monitoring include a decrease in risky behavior and online victimization. Increased monitoring indicates increased parental concern and the promotion of safer online media usage among children.

DISCUSSION

Children are the most enthusiastic and regular technology users today. They have grown up when digital advancements have taken center stage and resume to evolve rapidly. Unlike older generations, children have more exposure and familiarity with various technological tools and devices. This increased use and adoption of technology can be attributed, in part, to the fear of getting exposed to content that is age inappropriate to them and accompanied by certain psychological and physical impacts (Livingstone et al., 2021). Current research has also witnessed similar concerns under the cited studies published from 2010 to 2023. While technology is vital in encouraging communication with family, friends, and peers, it has also substituted conventional communication between children and their parents. As a result, when social media widely replace parent-child communication, parents can still play an influential role in ensuring their children's online safety. According to Froment et al. (2017), is a concern for parents as they strive to ensure their children's healthy growth and development. Besides physical development, cognitive development also needs careful attention to factors that positively impact this process. The rise of technology usage has raised several issues for parents, especially concerning their relationship with their children. Research indicates that online media consumption among children often leads to strained parent-child relationships. In this regard, cited literature witnessed that parental mediation can be of greater significance as it

involves the guidance and supervision provided by parents to ensure the healthy development of their children (Shin & Li, 2017). It encompasses physical and psychological aspects, highlighting its crucial role in child healthcare and overall well-being (Wu et al., 2014). Regarding children's use and social media safety, parental mediation plays a significant role. Parents are primary influencers in shaping their children's socialization, particularly in the context of new media. They adopt various behaviours and strategies to improve their children's digital competence. However, as children grow older and become more autonomous in choosing their own media platforms, parents' attention and concern sometimes decrease. In relation to the importance of parental mediation, Rosen et al. (2008) cited an empirical example as they investigated the utilization of website blocking and content filtering software while observing parents' involvement in observing their children's online media usage and enforcing rules and limitations. The relevant phenomenon is also discussed in the current research as restrictive mediation is influential in ensuring online safety pf children, showing parents' active role in regulating and guiding their children's new media consumption.

Here Wolak et al. (2007) argued that exposure to risky online content also raises the risk of negative consequences. Despite parental concerns about their children's online, this issue needs even more awareness and consideration. Parents are accountable for creating a safe online environment for their children, and functional approaches are necessary to minimize the possible psychological and physical effects on them. Hence, understanding the relationship between parents and children's exposure to online threats can be of great importance to further ensure cybersecurity and safer child development in the best possible manner.

Practical Implications

Based on the literature published during the past thirteen years, this study proposes some primary implications for children to ensure children's safety, well-being, and healthy development. Parents and caretakers must have open and ongoing discussions with their children about social media usage. Encourage children to share their experiences, concerns, and any indecent content they may come across. Creating a non-judgmental environment will help encourage trust and enable parents to better understand their children's online experiences. Further, parents should recognize that different age groups have varying levels of maturity and understanding. Set clear guidelines and boundaries for social media usage based on the child's age, i.e., the platforms they can access and time limitations. Consider using parental control tools and privacy settings to control content exposure and protect a child's online privacy. Besides, parents should stay informed about the latest trends and potential risks associated with social media platforms. They should teach children about the importance of privacy, the possible dangers of interacting with strangers online, and how to identify and report inappropriate content. Encourage them to think critically and question the authenticity of the information they encounter. Parents should also monitor their child's social media accounts and online interactions. This does not imply invading their privacy but staying aware of their online behavior to ensure their security. Consider friending or observing them on

social media platforms to stay updated on their online presence. It is also essential to keep a positive and supportive relationship with children to create an environment where they feel comfortable discussing their online experiences. Encouraging them to seek guidance and support whenever they encounter inappropriate content or face challenges online can be of greater significance. Be non-judgmental and provide constructive feedback to help them navigate the digital world effectively. Notably, children usually learn from observing their parents' behavior. In this regard, parents should set a good example by exhibiting responsible social media use, i.e., respectful online communication, avoiding sharing indecent content, and balancing screen time with offline activities. Show them the significance of using social media for positive interactions and learning. Finally, parents should stay informed about the latest research and recommendations regarding parental mediation strategies. Understand the different methods, such as restrictive mediation, instructive mediation, and co-use mediation. Adapting mediation approaches based on a child's age, individual needs, and the evolving digital landscape should be considered.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed literature concerning social media usage among children, risks, and the potential role of parental mediation in ensuring children's online safety. Based on the cited literature, it remains evident that children use social media for several purposes. This use ranges from entertainment and communication learning, information gathering, and educational purposes. However, the relevant literature also indicated several online risks against children, particularly exposure to indecent, sexual content. The relevant content is age-inappropriate and contains elements that may adversely affect a child's mental well-being and development. It is further evident that the effectiveness of parental mediation in mitigating the adverse effects of social media usage is evident from the existing literature. Parents can adopt different mediation tactics to ensure safe social media usage among children. These mediation strategies can improve their children's digital literacy, critical thinking skills, and online safety. Thus, it is concluded that parents and guardians should understand the diverse purposes of social media, be aware of potential risks, enforce effective parental mediation strategies, tailor approaches to individual children, and encourage collaboration and digital literacy education. As one of the central figures in children's lives, parents and guardians can better support them in safely navigating the digital world of social media.

Limitations

This study came up with certain limitations that future studies can nullify. First, this research is based on a review approach, indicating the absence of any first-hand data. , this research does not involve human participants providing primary data. Second, this research needs more geographical generalizability as the literature is collected from studies conducted in different regions worldwide. Finally, the third limitation is based on the fact that this does not highlight the extensive impacts associated with online risks, particularly psychological consequences. Future researchers can overcome these limitations by focusing on the potential risks associated with children's online media usage and ensuring their cybersecurity.

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