

The role of the family in children's access to and use of social networks

El papel de la familia en el acceso y uso de redes sociales por niños

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to understand the role of families in children's access to and use of social media. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with eight key participants, experiences and perceptions related to this phenomenon were collected. Each participant provided consent for the use of information, respecting the ethical principle of personal autonomy. The results show that families exert a significant influence on children's use of social media. From imposing clear limits and rules to actively promoting digital literacy, parents play a fundamental role. Furthermore, they encourage open discussions about online interactions, thus contributing to critical and responsible education. Specifically, parents act as role models, taking responsibility for educating their children about the risks related to privacy and security in the digital environment. It is recommended that they be available to discuss any problems children may face online. Another relevant suggestion is to jointly develop a family plan for social media use, which includes time limits, screen-free zones, and clear rules about shared content. These guidelines should be adapted to the children's age and applied transparently, seeking an appropriate balance between supervision and autonomy. This comprehensive approach helps protect children and strengthen family communication in the digital context.

Keywords: family, children, social media, role.

Resumen

Este estudio cualitativo tiene como objetivo comprender el rol de la familia en el acceso y uso de las redes sociales por parte de los niños. A través de entrevistas semiestructuradas en profundidad realizadas a ocho participantes

clave, se recopilaron experiencias y percepciones relacionadas con este fenómeno. Cada participante otorgó su consentimiento para el uso de la información, respetando el principio ético de autonomía personal. Los resultados muestran que las familias ejercen una influencia significativa en el uso que los niños hacen de las redes sociales. Desde la imposición de límites y reglas claras hasta la promoción activa de la alfabetización digital, los padres desempeñan un papel fundamental. Además, fomentan discusiones abiertas sobre las interacciones en línea, contribuyendo así a una formación crítica y responsable. Específicamente, los padres actúan como modelos de comportamiento, asumiendo la responsabilidad de educar a sus hijos sobre los riesgos relacionados con la privacidad y la seguridad en el entorno digital. Se recomienda que estén disponibles para dialogar sobre cualquier problema que los niños puedan enfrentar en línea. Otra sugerencia relevante es el desarrollo conjunto de un plan familiar para el uso de redes sociales, que incluya límites de tiempo, zonas libres de pantalla y normas claras sobre el contenido compartido. Estos lineamientos deben adaptarse a la edad de los niños y aplicarse con transparencia, buscando un equilibrio adecuado entre supervisión y autonomía. Este enfoque integral ayuda a proteger a los menores y a fortalecer la comunicación familiar en el contexto digital.

Palabras clave: familia, niños, redes sociales, rol.

Introduction

In today's digital era, social media exerts a significant influence on social interactions and emotional development, particularly in children over three years old, who primarily find well-being through the guidance of parents, guardians, and close relatives such as grandparents, uncles, or older siblings. The popularity of these platforms has radically transformed the home environment, leading to important repercussions for children from an early age, a crucial stage for their emotional and affective development.

During these early years, children exhibit a range of emotions and face emotional challenges that, through familial contact, contribute to building their self-esteem and personal identity. However, this contact is gradually being replaced by the use of social media, where they interact with profiles, music, and digital games. In this regard, these platforms provide spaces for children to express and explore their emotions, receive lasting emotional support, and foster interpersonal relationships. Nonetheless, the increasing independence in these digital environments heightens their reliance on social media.

As Cervilla (2024) points out, excessive or inappropriate use of social media without supervision can negatively impact children's socio-emotional integrity, leading to dependency, isolation, and anxiety, which underscores the importance of social and emotional performance for their future integration. Moreover, interaction on social media not only involves social relationships but also the development of skills such as communication, time management, and problem-solving—abilities that are often limited in digital environments.

On one hand, social media offers educational resources and information; on the other, it acts as a distraction that affects concentration and increases control over children. In fact, Müller et al. (2021) highlight the growing concern regarding the negative impact these platforms can have on adolescents' mental health, stating that "the more time spent on a social network, the greater the risk" (Cervilla, 2024, p. 45).

The increase in children's participation in social media has led to issues such as cyberbullying, aggression, and familial estrangement, as warned by Barriales (2022), emphasizing the fundamental role parents play in managing and supervising the use of these technologies. The family functions as an integrated system that regulates children's relationship with social media; when this function is neglected, the toxicity of the digital environment can cause severe harm.

Furthermore, the family directly influences children's emotional and educational well-being, as habitual use of social media without family oversight is often linked to a lack of awareness and information about the associated risks (Müller et al., 2021). Therefore, early stimulation in these environments impacts multiple areas of child development: social, cognitive, affective, and motor.

The family's role in access to social media takes on particular relevance, especially for minors vulnerable to risks related to privacy and safety, as noted by Jiménez-Iglesias et al. (2022) and Garitaonandia et al. (2020). This vulnerability affects not only children and their families but also society at large, generating significant ethical and regulatory challenges.

Additionally, the rapid evolution of digital platforms necessitates a deeper understanding of these issues and the implementation of effective measures to protect young people. In this regard, the present study aims to qualitatively analyze the experiences, legal environments, and perceptions related to children and youth in Peru, to highlight the social and ethical implications of this reality, as well as to propose strategies that safeguard their rights.

Finally, social media represents fundamental spaces for sociability and identity construction during childhood and adolescence. Del Prete and Redon (2020) warn about the growing concern regarding these generations' ability to develop critical and appropriate learning in the use of digital tools. In the Peruvian context, children aged 10 to 15 have significant access to the internet and social media, where they utilize these platforms to maintain contact with friends and express their identity (García, 2022). According to Alhabash et al. (2024), although different social networks respond to various needs, the desire to interact with peers and feel part of social groups prevails.

Methodology

This research article adopted a qualitative approach to deepen the understanding of experiences and perceptions regarding the role of the family in children's access to and use of social media. This methodological approach was fundamental in giving voice to the involved families, ensuring not only the detailed collection of data necessary for a rigorous documentary analysis but also allowing for the valuation of the specific connotations of the studied phenomenon (Rojas-Gutiérrez, 2022). Thus, a comprehensive understanding of the impact social media has on daily life and children's social coexistence was achieved.

For participant selection, intentional qualitative sampling was employed, choosing a total of eight key participants. This strategy is justified by the need to obtain a deep understanding of the studied phenomenon. In this regard, the participants, who are directly responsible for children's access to and use of social media, provided diverse contextual perspectives that allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the underlying dynamics and effects of these platforms on minors.

It is important to note that the selected families belong to the working middle class of Metropolitan Lima, with relatively high incomes that facilitate access to electronic devices and high-speed internet. This group represents a significant sector of children exposed early and frequently to social media use, necessitating careful supervision and guidance from parents.

Additionally, the educational level of the parents was considered, as it is directly related to their understanding of the risks and benefits associated with social media; however, their multiple responsibilities sometimes limit the effective control they can exert.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, an essential technique for accessing the personal realities of subjects, particularly parents. Through their discourses and narratives, it was possible to glimpse the particular experiences and meanings that each actor attributes to the family role in the digital environment. This technique, endorsed by Rojas-Gutiérrez (2023), allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' intimacy, capturing specific thoughts and feelings.

Regarding ethical aspects, prioritizing respect for participants' autonomy was essential, ensuring their capacity to make informed decisions. Additionally, the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence guided the research, promoting well-being and avoiding any harm. Finally, all interviewees provided their informed consent and participated voluntarily by signing the corresponding document.

Results and discussion

The analysis of the family's role in children's access to and use of social media reveals a multifaceted and dynamic perspective. It is not merely about defining what is allowed or prohibited but understanding how parents accompany, educate, and mediate in this process. In this sense, the generational digital divide represents a significant challenge.

Often, parents are not as familiar with the latest trends or digital platforms as their children, which complicates their intervention. However, the willingness to learn and actively participate in their children's digital lives is essential.

It is crucial for families to recognize that, despite the risks, social media offers valuable opportunities for socialization, learning, and the development of new skills. An exclusively restrictive approach could deprive children of these experiences and inadequately prepare them for conscious and safe use in the future.

In households where both parents work, supervising social media use tends to be more complex due to a lack of time. On the other hand, single-parent families face additional challenges, as the sole caregiver must balance work responsibilities with parenting, including digital mediation.

Younger parents, commonly referred to as "digital natives," tend to have greater knowledge of social media and its dynamics, which can facilitate smoother communication with their children. However, they may also underestimate certain risks or struggle to establish clear boundaries. In contrast, older parents, while less familiar

with these technologies, often possess life experience and a focus on traditional communication, which can strengthen the establishment of norms and promote responsible use.

It is noteworthy that urban families, residing in densely populated cities with constant access to social media, typically exhibit structures and dynamics shaped by intensive use of these services. These families live at a fast pace and reflect cultural diversity. Nuclear families, consisting of parents and children, are predominant, although single-parent families, blended families, and cohabiting couples are also identified. In these latter cases, there is often less control over children's use of social media.

Table 1
Questions and descriptions from social actors

Questions	Descriptions from social actors
<p style="text-align: center;">Dialogue Exchange No. 1</p> <p>How would you describe your child's relationship with social media? (Usage, time spent, favorite platforms, purpose)</p>	<p>SA 1: My time to supervise my child's use of social media is limited, so I try to prevent excessive use that could affect my productivity or well-being. I've noticed that their favorite platforms are those that provide useful and quality information, such as Twitter and LinkedIn, in addition to Instagram, which they mainly use to enjoy visual content.</p>
	<p>SA 2: My time to supervise my child's social media is limited, so I try to prevent excessive use that could affect both their well-being and my productivity. I've observed that their preferred platforms are those that offer useful and quality information, such as Twitter and LinkedIn, in addition to Instagram, which they use mainly to enjoy visual content.</p>
	<p>SA 3: Managing my child's use of social media is a real challenge, mainly due to my time limitations. I actively try to prevent excessive consumption that could impact both their well-being and my productivity. I've noticed that their favorite platforms tend to be those that provide valuable and quality information, such as Twitter and LinkedIn, in addition to Instagram, which they use to explore and enjoy visual content.</p>
	<p>SA 4: Although my available time to supervise my child's social media is limited, I try to ensure that their use does not become excessive and does not affect their well-being or my productivity. Interestingly, I've noticed that their preferred platforms are those that offer valuable and quality content, such as Twitter and LinkedIn, in addition to Instagram, which they mainly use to enjoy visual content.</p>
	<p>SA 5: My child loves social media. They use Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, as well as apps like TikTok and Instagram. They often share information with their followers or friends, including text messages, photos, videos, and links to other online content. I don't have a clear idea of the exact time they spend on these platforms, but they could be on them all day. When I am present, I try to set limits, although I generally allow them some freedom.</p>

	<p>SA 6: My child is fascinated by social media; they use Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and apps like TikTok and Instagram. They enjoy sharing all kinds of content with their followers or friends, including text messages, photos, videos, and links to other online resources. It seems they are unaware of the passage of time and could spend hours connected. When I am present, I try to set certain limits, although I usually end up giving in.</p>
	<p>SA 7: My child is an avid user of social media, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, as well as TikTok and Instagram. Their main activity consists of sharing information such as messages, images, videos, and links with their contacts. Their perception of time on these platforms is limitless. Although I try to set limits, I often end up being flexible.</p>
	<p>SA 8: Social media is my child's world. From Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn to TikTok and Instagram, they use them all. They spend hours sharing messages, photos, videos, and links with their friends and followers, without realizing how much time they consume. Despite my attempts to set limits, they almost always end up doing what they want.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Dialogue Exchange No. 2</p> <p>What are your thoughts on the overall impact of social media on society, particularly regarding children? (Perceived advantages and disadvantages)</p>	<p>SA 1: The use of social media can strengthen relationships, foster creativity, and facilitate access to information; however, it also poses risks to mental health and children's development if not conducted with adequate supervision.</p>
	<p>SA 2: Children's digital lives are fundamental, but inadequate use can lead to negative consequences. Often, parents create accounts for their children on platforms like Instagram or TikTok before they reach the minimum age required, which can promote the onset of digital addiction.</p>
	<p>SA 3: Excessive use of social media among children can compromise their privacy and create a permanent digital footprint from a young age, over which they have no control. This information could be used in undesirable ways in the future, exposing them to risks such as identity theft, digital harassment, or loss of autonomy over their own image. While I try to control my children's usage times to minimize these risks, overexposure remains a concern that requires constant attention.</p>
	<p>SA 4: I acknowledge that I have not guided my children sufficiently to be aware of risks like cyberbullying, identity theft, or exposure to online predators. As a parent, I admit that I have not proactively addressed these issues, which could leave them more vulnerable to potential dangers in the digital environment.</p>

	<p>SA 5: Excessive use of social media by children can compromise their privacy and create a permanent digital footprint from a very young age, over which they have no control. This information could be used undesirably in the future. Although I may use them excessively myself, I strive to help my children manage their time on these platforms more responsibly.</p>
	<p>SA 6: It is crucial to understand that excessive social media use among children can jeopardize their privacy and create an immutable digital footprint at an early age, which they cannot manage. This information could be misused in the future. Despite my own intensive use, I try to ensure my children learn to control their consumption.</p>
	<p>SA 7: The excessive use of social media by children presents a clear risk: it can compromise their privacy and establish a permanent digital footprint over which they have no control. This information, created at a young age, could be unexpectedly exploited in the future. Paradoxically, although I use them excessively myself, my priority is for my children to learn to control their use.</p>
	<p>SA 8: The use of social media can strengthen relationships, foster creativity, and facilitate access to information. However, for children, if there is no adequate supervision, it also involves significant risks to their mental health and development.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Dialogue Exchange No. 3</p> <p>How do you monitor your children's use of social media? (For example: reviewing profiles, following your children, using parental control tools, discussions)</p>	<p>SA 1: Although I try to control device usage, I recognize that my supervision of the content my children access is limited. Often, I allow them access to devices without setting clear time limits and I rarely review the content they consume or the interactions they maintain online. This sometimes exposes them to inappropriate content and contact with strangers, which poses a risk to their safety and well-being.</p>
	<p>SA 2: I try to teach my children the importance of maintaining privacy and not sharing locations, personal data, or sensitive information with strangers or in public posts. However, I acknowledge that I do not actively supervise their online behavior and have allowed them to have their own digital space from a young age.</p>
	<p>SA 3: I strive to teach minors the importance of privacy; I explain that they should not share locations, personal data, or sensitive information with strangers or in public posts. However, I realize that I do not actively supervise them, having always given them their space since they were young.</p>

	<p>SA 4: My approach has been to educate my children about the importance of privacy, emphasizing that they should not share locations, personal data, or other sensitive information with strangers or on public platforms. However, I acknowledge that I do not maintain constant supervision, as I have allowed them to have their own digital space from the beginning.</p>
	<p>SA 5: I prioritize teaching my children about the importance of digital privacy so they understand the need to avoid sharing their location, personal data, or sensitive information with strangers or in public posts. However, I do not supervise them directly, as I have granted them autonomy in this aspect since they were very young.</p>
	<p>SA 6: We have not established specific screen-free or social media-free times, and I am aware that these constantly invade family time. Additionally, the children do not have adequate supervision, nor have I taught them the importance of maintaining a digital balance.</p>
	<p>SA 7: I feel that my child sees me spend most of my time on social media or in front of my phone screen, which makes them perceive this behavior as normal. In my case, I rarely check my child's device and do not set limits... although I know this is not correct.</p>
	<p>SA 8: I feel that my child constantly sees me on social media or in front of devices, which makes them perceive this behavior as normal and potentially develop a similar dependency. In my case, I do not usually check their devices or set limits, and I recognize that this is not the most appropriate approach.</p>

Reflective interpretation of the contributions from social actors

The information gathered regarding social actors reveals a complex and sometimes paradoxical family dynamic concerning children's use of social media. While the potential of these platforms to strengthen bonds, stimulate creativity and innovation, and expand access to information is clearly acknowledged, the associated risks are equally evident. These risks include privacy violations, constant online presence, and negative consequences for mental health and child development when adequate supervision is lacking.

There is a significant gap between parents' educational intentions and the actual implementation of supervision. In other words, while there is a desire to teach children about the importance of privacy and the protection of personal information, this intention does not always translate into concrete actions. This occurs because, on one hand, parents tend to trust their children's autonomy, and on the other, they wish to foster that independence from an early age. This approach is critical, as the lack of direct supervision increases the likelihood that the aforementioned risks will materialize.

The supervision of social media use among minors faces obstacles that vary according to family structure. In households with both parents working, the lack of time limits the capacity for constant supervision. Similarly, single-parent families face additional burdens, as the sole responsible adult must balance work obligations with the education and digital control of their children.

Regarding parental age, so-called "digital natives," generally younger parents, possess a deeper understanding of social media, which facilitates dialogue with their children; however, they sometimes underestimate certain risks or struggle to impose firm limits. Conversely, older parents, while less familiar with current technology, bring life experience and a more traditional communication approach, which can be valuable for establishing clear rules and promoting responsible and conscious use.

Concerning the environment, urban families located in densely populated cities have more direct access to social media. Their lifestyle is fast-paced and culturally diverse. Nuclear families predominate, although there is also a significant presence of single-parent and blended families. In these environments, it is common for children to have less control over their use of digital platforms, due to the complexities of urban life and their parents' tight schedules.

Conclusion

The previous analyses demonstrate that social media has profoundly transformed the way children and adolescents communicate. Current generations process large volumes of information in short periods, regardless of their geographical location. The term "social network" refers to any digital platform that facilitates interaction between people with similar interests, goals, or contexts, as well as those seeking to acquire specific knowledge. Today, these platforms empower users and their communities by promoting the exchange of conversations and the dissemination of various types of content, from text to images and videos. Moreover, social media expands opportunities to meet others, from close friends to strangers, thereby increasing the network of contacts, although this also exposes them to multiple risks.

It is clear that the impact of social media within the family context is often negative in many cases. Although these platforms were primarily designed to connect and empower individuals, including young people with their families, the effects can manifest as low self-esteem, deterioration of communication, and increasing digital dependency. Therefore, it is crucial for parents and adults in general to assume an active and contextualized role, understanding that digital education extends beyond the family environment and entails a broad social commitment.

A deep understanding of the challenges posed by social media facilitates the mitigation of their harmful effects. It is important to emphasize that it is not the platforms themselves that are responsible for the degradation of family interaction, but rather the inappropriate use to which they are subjected, which affects the quality of communication. Consequently, it is essential to analyze how individuals use these networks to minimize their negative impacts. Despite these efforts, the phenomenon remains complex and generates friction, particularly when confronting digital natives with digital immigrants, a situation that directly influences family relationships.

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