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**Berlin Sachu**  
Research Scholar, Department  
of Journalism and Mass  
Communication, PSG College  
of Arts & Science, Bharathiar  
University, Coimbatore, Tamil  
Nadu, India

**Dr. Kadeswaran S**  
Department of Visual  
Communication & Electronic  
Media, PSG College of Arts &  
Science, Bharathiar  
University, Coimbatore, Tamil  
Nadu, India

**Dr. Jayaseelan R**  
Department of Visual  
Communication & Electronic  
Media, PSG College of Arts &  
Science, Bharathiar  
University, Coimbatore, Tamil  
Nadu, India

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Berlin Sachu**  
Research Scholar, Department  
of Journalism and Mass  
Communication, PSG College  
of Arts & Science, Bharathiar  
University, Coimbatore, Tamil  
Nadu, India

## Shaping childhood in the digital age: Parental insights into social media's personal, behavioral, and environmental impacts

**Berlin Sachu, Kadeswaran S and Jayaseelan R**

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### Abstract

This study investigates the influence of social media on children from a parental perspective, using Social Cognitive Theory as the guiding framework. Data were collected from 156 parents in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, through a structured questionnaire designed to measure perceived changes in children's personal, behavioral, and environmental domains due to social media use. The findings revealed significant associations between increased social media exposure particularly among adolescents aged 14-19 and changes in attention span, emotional well-being, behavior modeling, and peer influence. Urban children were more affected than their rural and semi-urban counterparts, indicating contextual variability in digital experiences. The study also found that parental beliefs, modeling behaviors, and household digital practices play a key role in shaping children's online engagement. While the results underscore the growing impact of digital environments on child development, they also highlight the importance of parental involvement and the need for responsible media practices. Limitations include the use of self-reported data, a geographically limited sample, and the exclusion of children's perspectives. The study concludes with a call for longitudinal and mixed-method research to explore the evolving nature of social media's impact on children and to inform interventions that promote healthy digital habits.

**Keywords:** Social media, children, parental perspective, social cognitive theory, behavioral change, digital wellbeing

### Introduction

In today's digital age, social media has rapidly transformed from a mode of communication to an integral aspect of everyday life, especially among children. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are not only shaping how children interact with the world but also influencing their social, emotional, and cognitive development. With smartphones becoming more accessible, children are often introduced to social media before fully understanding its implications. According to Rideout and Robb (2019) <sup>[3]</sup>, eight-year-old children spend, on average, five hours a day on the screens, much of that time being on the social media platforms, thus, raising the concerns of parents, educators, and scholars. With its positive use, social media may provide children with unprecedented freedom of expression, learning, and connection with the rest of the world, as characteristics of social media, including educational influencers, video tutorials, and collaborative communities, support learning, knowledge sharing, and building of digital literacy skills. In line with empirical studies, regulated use of social sites has the potential to increase self-expression and identity formation (Uhls et al., 2017) <sup>[4]</sup>. Furthermore, children are getting more and more dependent on online communities to get peer support and emotional affirmation particularly when they are facing problems in the real life. Such a positive potential, however, goes hand in hand with the quality of supervision and the nature of content that is being watched or read. Nevertheless, this notwithstanding, the adverse effects of social media use among children have been captured in an emerging body of literature. Spending too much time on the screen, viewing inappropriate materials, online bullying, and social comparison can have a harmful effect on the mental health of children. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2016) reports that it is believed that excessive media use has been linked to attention issues, school troubles, sleeping and eating disorders, and obesity.

This is intensified during early adolescence when children are highly susceptible to peer pressure and validation-seeking behavior on the Internet. Moreover, the addictive use patterns of using social media can also be attributed to the fact that social media platforms are often algorithmic and, thus, subject children to the harmful effects of detached emotional experiences and decreased social interactions offline.

The parental viewpoints play a critical role in the way children find their way around such digital surroundings. Parents have a crucial role to play in mediating the activity of their children online and this is especially seen in cities like Coimbatore where digital access is growing across all socioeconomic classes. Their perceptions do not only play a role in the awareness of risks and benefits, but also affect the regulation of screen time, communication of values, and formation of digital habits at home. However, the perception and control of the use of social media among children by their parents can be influenced considerably by cultural and contextual influences such as their education level, their digital literacy, and their exposure to threats online.

It is important to note that against this background, the proposed study will examine the impact of social media on children through the prism of parental experiences and views in Coimbatore. This study aims to find out the social, emotional and behavioural effects of social media by concentrating on how parents perceive their children in their interaction with platforms. This knowledge is crucial to the development of locally contextually relevant media literacy interventions and the creation of more healthful digital spaces in which children operate. As Livingstone and Byrne (2015) [2] stress, children in the digital era have their rights depending not only on their personal capabilities, but also on the knowledge and help of the adults surrounding them.

### Objective of the Study

The main aim of this study is to investigate how social media affects children in the view of parents, that is, using Social Cognitive Theory. The research will examine the effects of social media use on the personal development, behavioral trends, and relationships with the environment in children with reference to the differences based on age groups, time spent on a screen, and the residence (urban, semi-urban, and rural). It is aimed at determining how much the other factors like trend imitation, attention span, academic performance and peer influence are perceived to have been influenced by social media exposure by parents. The study also examines the influence of the parental beliefs and modeling behaviors as well as the digital environment of the households in online participation among children and how these perceptions vary with demographics and time spent online. Finally, the goal is to offer a subtle insight into the multidimensional impacts of social media to the development of children and to inform future plans of digital parenting, policy action, and educational aid in the development of responsible social media use among children in the digital era.

### Review of Literature

The social media has become an irreplaceable part of the daily lives of children across the globe and a growing body of literature has investigated its impacts in various aspects. One of the most critical regulatory frameworks that determine the way young persons implement digital

platforms is the Children Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) that prohibits the gathering of personal data on the parties under the age of 13 without parental consent. However, as empirical research has shown, even under such restrictions, children under the age of 12 are actively using services like TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube, of which 78% of parents are against such early use (Children at Risk, 2021). This regulatory lapse produces significant issues about the privacy of data and safety on the Internet by younger generations.

It has been shown that the psychosocial consequences of social media communication are especially significant. Richards, Caldwell, and Go (2015) [19] identified the most serious effects that occur in the spheres of self-esteem, cyberbullying, and general well-being, with such phenomena like Facebook Depression being closely related to online exposure. Similarly, McDool *et al.* (2016) [16] used the combination of UK longitudinal data to demonstrate that the more time was spent on social sites, the lower satisfaction levels were with school, appearance, and family life, yet the quality of friendships was still positively rated. The effect was more negative among female participants as compared to males. In another systematic review conducted by Bozzola *et al.* (2022) [9], the risks such as anxiety, addiction, diet-related issues, and even physical sequelae, such as sleep problems and vision issues were also highlighted, thus demonstrating the multidimensional effects of excessive media use.

Although the negative effects are more prevalent in the discussion, a number of studies recognize the dichotomous aspect of social media. Dilci and Eranil (2011) [11] argue that when digital platforms are properly moderated, they will promote communication, offer educational opportunities, and give children better access to health information. Mustafa Ersoy (2021) [12] also notes that social media can be used as the means of learning and entertainment, but only when proper supervision is established. This view was shared by Salma Fadilah (2018) [13], who also revealed that social media could have a positive effect on socio-emotional and linguistic development, and that parental guidance and moderation were critical at an early age.

Parental involvement is one of the most important moderating factors that are always evident in the digital engagement of children. According to Prakaash *et al.* (2022) [18], the widespread excess use of social media in the context of the Indian population led to the change in the parenting style and a range of child-related health issues, such as sleep disorders and a low level of physical activity. In a study conducted by Badri *et al.* (2016) [8], more than 31,000 students in Abu Dhabi were studied; the authors found out that even though they had widespread access to digital media, parental awareness regarding social media practices among their children was poor, thus undermining the ability of parents to intervene in meaningful ways. Gopal Vasanth *et al.* (2021) [15] have reiterated the need to have families take an active role in filtering the content they encounter on the internet and initiate the conversation about digital behaviour, and a cultural shift to informed digital citizenship is needed.

Self-esteem and body image are themes that are recurrent in a number of longitudinal studies. Steinsbekk *et al.* (2021) [20] showed that passively using or other-directed social media negatively impacted self-esteem based on appearance in the girls during the developmental window of 10 to 14 years,

whereas using social media actively or self-directed had no similar impact. Empirical evidence was presented by Goodyear *et al.* (2018) <sup>[14]</sup> and showed that social media affects the health behavior of adolescents in terms of their diet and physical activity levels; however, it also raises the concern of uncontrolled content that broadcasts unrealistic standards of health. This two-sided nature of the effects that social media has supports the importance of digital literacy programs targeting children and those caring about them.

Besides the psychological and sociological implications, media coverage also has education implications which can be measured. In their research with children aged 612, Wahyuni *et al.* (2024) <sup>[22]</sup> discovered that despite the potentially enriching learning experience that social media may trigger when properly used, it simultaneously creates distractions and decreases attention spans in case of the lack of parental or pedagogical mediation. Similarly, Trevino and Morton (2019) <sup>[21]</sup> noted that the brand interaction and the consumer behavior of children are progressively being influenced by the user-generated content in social media, thus also establishing social media more deeply into their cognitive and social development.

Finally, the further discussion located by Anderson (2022) <sup>[5]</sup> and Yadav (2022) <sup>[23]</sup> supports the decisive impact media has on shaping the modern childhood. The authors promote the use of a balanced approach utilizing the educational potential of digital media and, at the same time, dealing with the possible risks of digital addiction, cyberbullying, and privacy violations.

Ahandani (2015) <sup>[6]</sup> and Alinia (2015) <sup>[7]</sup> also emphasize that parents need to adopt mindful practices of media consumption, thus contributing to the growth of healthy habits in children. With the ongoing increase in the amount of time children spend in front of the screen, the role of families, educators, and policymakers grows even more crucial to developing safe and positive media experiences.

### Theoretical Framework

One of the most thorough explanations of human behavior in terms of dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental determinants is Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) developed by Albert Bandura, who described this phenomenon as reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1986) <sup>[24]</sup>. According to the theory, people do not learn through the direct experiences only but they also learn through observing other people, which is called the observational learning or modeling. The Bobo doll experiment as developed by Bandura demonstrated this mechanism in which children imitate aggressive behaviors as observed in adult models (Bandura, Ross, and Ross, 1961). SCT is a continuation of principles that are established under Social Comparison Theory, which incorporates the importance of social influence on behavior and perception of the self. It also builds on these premises by adding to them the construct of self-efficacy, which could be described as the conviction in personal ability to perform tasks successfully (Bandura, 1997) <sup>[25]</sup>. This construct plays a key role in motivation, survival and control of behavior. An example is that a child who has high academic self-efficacy will have a higher likelihood of continuing to persevere in spite of difficulties as compared to a child whose confidence has been lowered.

### The theory identifies three core factors influencing behavior

1. **Personal Factors:** Cognitive abilities, beliefs, attitudes, and self-regulatory skills influence how individuals interpret experiences and regulate behavior.
2. **Behavioral Factors:** Individual actions are shaped by both reinforcement and observational learning, often based on modeled behavior and its consequences.
3. **Environmental Factors:** Social influences, family context, cultural expectations, and resource availability impact behavior by providing cues, feedback, and modeling opportunities.

Learning and behavior are not linear processes but involve continuous feedback loops among these factors. For example, children's behavior on social media may be influenced by parental attitudes (environment), their self-efficacy in handling online interactions (personal), and their prior experiences and actions online (behavioral).

SCT has significant implications for research on children's media use. It explains how children adopt behaviors by watching influencers, peers, or family members on digital platforms. Moreover, it helps to identify how interventions can be designed by modifying the environment, enhancing self-efficacy, and promoting positive role models to guide healthier behavioral outcomes in the digital age.

### Research Methodology

The current study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to examine how social media affects children as viewed by their parents and guardians. The cross-sectional approach enabled obtaining data at one point in time, thus, providing a contemporaneous picture of the prevailing views of the participants. A sample of 156 parents and guardians domiciled in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, was recruited using purposive sampling because they have direct participation in controlling the social media usage of their children. The information was collected via the online survey with Google Forms as well as paper questionnaires that were handed out in schools and homes. The instrument has items of the Likert scale based on the Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes the mutuality of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors of behavior. As a result, the variables were operationalized into three areas personal (beliefs, attitudes, and self-efficacy), behavioral (actions learned or changed through observation and modeling), and environmental (influences gained in the context of the family, peer, and cultural environment). Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyze quantitative data with the aim of outlining relationships among variables and testing hypotheses that were made about the effects of social media on children. Strict ethical guidelines were followed, including obtaining informed consent, protecting the confidentiality of the participants and providing full disclosure of the study objectives and the use of study data.

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

The empirical research was based on the data of 156 parents, who lived in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. Chi-square tests were run on these responses, so as to explore the correlations between the parental monitoring levels and the perceived role of social media as an impactor on personal, behavior, and environment domains.

**Table 1:** Chi-Square Test Results Showing Personal, Behavioral, and Environmental Impacts of Different Variables

Variable Compared (What vs What)	Personal Impact $\chi^2$ (p-value)	Behavioral Impact $\chi^2$ (p-value)	Environmental Impact $\chi^2$ (p-value)
Parental monitoring (monitoring involvement vs level of personal change)	9.000 (.029)*	6.328 (.097)	1.589 (.662)
Academic performance (impact on academics vs change type)	56.844 (.000)*	26.305 (.000)*	31.958 (.000)*
Cyberbullying exposure (cyberbullying experience vs change type)	49.693 (.000)*	26.371 (.000)*	13.647 (.009)*
Mental well-being (parental perception of child's emotional health vs change)	85.938 (.000)*	29.314 (.000)*	30.587 (.000)*
Social skills (effect on social interaction vs change type)	21.942 (.000)*	8.356 (.079)	13.542 (.009)*
Parental control tools (use of controls vs observed changes)	52.607 (.000)*	17.792 (.001)*	11.533 (.021)*
Trend imitation (following trends vs changes)	15.522 (.004)*	59.914 (.000)*	37.857 (.000)*
Attention span/focus (impact on focus vs changes)	30.075 (.000)*	60.953 (.000)*	38.664 (.000)*
Inappropriate content exposure (viewed unsuitable content vs impact)	31.284 (.000)*	72.385 (.000)*	29.973 (.000)*
Decision making (independence in decisions vs observed changes)	27.469 (.000)*	83.202 (.000)*	39.647 (.000)*
Positive interactions (online socializing quality vs observed changes)	16.224 (.003)*	40.345 (.000)*	29.757 (.000)*
Peer influence (impact of peers on online behavior vs changes)	14.183 (.007)*	46.620 (.000)*	62.265 (.000)*
Online trends shaping behavior (following trends vs changes)	21.481 (.000)*	33.945 (.000)*	76.548 (.000)*
School environment influence (school support vs behavior/environment change)	29.253 (.000)*	30.930 (.000)*	73.136 (.000)*
Technology access (access to devices vs observed impact)	21.385 (.000)*	18.662 (.001)*	48.040 (.000)*
Family attitude (home environment openness vs change)	36.366 (.000)*	28.411 (.000)*	70.916 (.000)*

### Personal Impact

Significant associations were observed between parental perceptions and personal-level changes in children due to social media, especially in areas like academic performance ( $\chi^2 = 56.844$ ,  $p < .001$ ), mental well-being ( $\chi^2 = 85.938$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and exposure to inappropriate content ( $\chi^2 = 31.284$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This shows that parents who observed greater personal impacts in their children reported stronger negative outcomes like anxiety, reduced self-esteem, and poor academic focus.

### Behavioral Changes

The behavioral domain also showed strong associations in multiple variables. Parental reports showed significant behavioral consequences related to trend imitation ( $\chi^2 = 59.914$ ,  $p < .001$ ), attention/focus issues ( $\chi^2 = 60.953$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and cyberbullying ( $\chi^2 = 26.371$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This indicates that excessive screen time and social media trends are strongly influencing behavioral patterns, including reduced attention spans and imitation of online challenges.

### Environmental Influence

A significant environmental influence was also reported, especially regarding online trends ( $\chi^2 = 76.548$ ,  $p < .001$ ), school interactions ( $\chi^2 = 73.136$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and family attitudes ( $\chi^2 = 70.916$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This suggests that peer behaviors, home digital environments, and societal norms heavily shape children's social media use and its outcomes.

### Parental Monitoring

The analysis found that parents who were "very involved" in monitoring their child's social media use were significantly more likely to perceive high personal changes in their children ( $p = .029$ ). However, the relationship with behavioral ( $p = .097$ ) and environmental changes ( $p = .662$ ) was not statistically significant, indicating monitoring alone may not be sufficient unless complemented with digital literacy and open communication.

The findings confirm that social media significantly affects children across personal, behavioral, and environmental dimensions. Variables like academic performance, emotional well-being, peer influence, and digital exposure are deeply impacted. The key factors that should help prevent negative consequences are parental awareness, the home environment, and school support systems. These

results embrace the importance of teachers, policy makers, and parents to promote safer and healthier online behavior among children.

### Discussion

The current study aimed at a quantitative measurement of the impact of social media exposure on children in personal, behavioral, and environmental aspects using a convenience sample of 156 parents who lived in Coimbatore and whose information was collected during January to March 2024. It was analyzed that half of the children had spent one to three hours daily on social media platforms, where adolescence (1419 years) showed the highest level of use. Parents who said they spent more than three hours a day exposed to these showed more significant personal changes such as reduced concentration, mood and behavioral disruptions and more emulation of online trends.

These findings are compatible with the recommendations provided by the U.S. Surgeon General according to which teenagers who spend over three hours a day in social media are two times more likely to have mental issues like anxiety and depression (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). A joint study by the Oxford University established notable links between screen time and declining well-being in teen groups. Young people of ages 1419 also experienced the most rates of behavioral and environmental changes, which included peer pressure, cyberbullying, and exposure to inappropriate material. The American Academy of Family Physicians supported these conclusions by stating that the risk of depression doubled because of online harassment (AAFP, 2023). The youngsters in urban areas became the most impacted subgroup in all the domains assessed, a finding that is consistent with other studies that showed increased behavioral and emotional consequences of improved digital availability and exposure among urban adolescents (Anderson, 2022) [5]. Family relations, peer contacts, and institutional settings were environmental determinants that were largely linked to changes in children behavior and cognitive paradigm. These tendencies support the Social Cognitive Theory developed by Bandura, which emphasizes observational learning and the influence of the modeling behavior, especially at the adolescent stage of development. The empirical data consequently underlines the urgency of effective digital parenting interventions, appropriate support systems in urban areas, and age-related



education programs aimed at helping navigate safely in digital space. The suggested interventions include reducing time spent in front of the screen, encouraging family conversations about internet use, developing digital literacy, and creating positive online environments in the home and the classroom (Goodyear, 2018; Time, 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2024) [14, 32, 31].

### Limitations of the Study

Although the current research offers valuable information on the effect of social media on children, there are methodological limitations that should be considered. First of all, the use of purposive sampling, i.e., choosing the subjects based on the pre-determined inclusion criteria, limits the external validity of the results. The study was limited to Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, and where 156 respondents were used, which might not be sufficient to capture regional and cultural differences that affect both social media use and parental attitudes. The use of self-reported survey data by parents and guardians, also, causes subjectivity and is prone to recall bias or social desirability effects (Paulhus and Vazire, 2007) [36]. The analysis did not take into account gender or more extensive heterogeneity of the parents in terms of their demographical background, thus, some significant variation in attitudes and beliefs might have been missed. Furthermore, such an approach of only providing the parental perspective leaves out the perspectives of children, which are invaluable to make a full evaluation of their digital behaviours and experiences. Another constraint is related to the inclusion of Likert-scale items that are based on the Social Cognitive Theory; they can be informative but cannot reflect the overall range of impact of social media use, such as privacy issues, cyberbullying, and subtle emotional responses. The cross-sectional design does not allow establishing causal relationships or observing the development of alterations in behaviours over time. Lastly, although the study adopted the Social Cognitive Theory, the lack of other or parallel frameworks such as Uses and Gratifications Theory or Ecological Systems Theory is an oversight that could have further advanced the insights into the digital behaviour of children (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) [35, 34].

### Conclusion

This paper has explored the various impacts of social media on children through the eyes of a parent using constructs of Social Cognitive Theory as a conceptual framework. Real-world evidence showed strong associations between social media use and personal, behavioral, and environmental changes, especially in teenagers and individuals exposed to long-term screen time. Urban children were said to experience heightened levels of influence with all dimensions that were investigated. The beliefs of parents, role model behavior, and family digital behavior became key agents in shaping the online behavior of children. These findings demonstrate the critical importance of parental self-efficacy and media literacy in reducing the risks associated with the use of social media among children (Bandura, 1997; Goodyear et al., 2018) [25, 14]. Moreover, peer relationships and dominant cultural practices were found as environmental determinants, and thus, empirically supported principle of reciprocal determinism as a fundamental idea in

Social Cognitive Theory. Although there were efforts to guide the digital behaviour, parents expressed long-standing concerns about online security, confidentiality, and mental health. These issues shed light on the pressing need of combined interventions that should combine parental involvement, classroom teaching, and policy enforcement, which are aimed at creating responsible and developmentally appropriate usage of social media among children. Future research projects could use longitudinal and mixed-methodological design to clarify the changing trends and include the views of children to generate a whole picture. On the whole, the results emphasize the necessity of a moderate approach including individual and situational factors to foster healthier digital behavior in the ever more interdependent life of children.

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