An analysis on the impact of social media on the children's minds in modern Sri Lankan society

Uma análise sobre o impacto das mídias sociais nas mentes das crianças na sociedade moderna do Sri Lanka

Un análisis sobre el impacto de las redes sociales en las mentes de los niños en la sociedad moderna de Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT
Today, the number of children spending their daily time on social media in Sri Lanka has grown exponentially. Therefore, this research was conducted with the aim of analytically studying the impact of social media on the minds of Sri Lankan children. The research problem focuses on what kind of impact social media has on the minds of Sri Lankan children. Data analysis used a mixed methodology of qualitative and quantitative methods with a sample of 180 children from the Colombo, Gampaha, and Kalutara districts in the Western Province. Questionnaires, observation, and semi-structured interview methods were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Based on the results of the data analysis, it was found that children use different social media platforms at different stages, and imitating the characters and activities of social media content creates a dependent personality in the child. It was clear that 46% of the respondents indicated that social media affected the child in a positive way, 27% indicated in a negative way, and 26% of the respondents did not have an idea about the kind of effect of social media on their children's minds. Accordingly, by verifying the research hypothesis and research problem that social media affects the mind of the Sri Lankan child, it was concluded that social media affects the mind of the Sri Lankan child. The research provides an in-depth study of the child's daily routine changes, the new social and human contexts that are formed due to the mental change in the child, and measures for the control and prevention of negative effects.

Keywords: child's mind, personality, social media, sri lanka, virtual society.

RESUMO
Hoje, o número de crianças que passam o tempo diário nas redes sociais no Sri Lanka cresceu exponencialmente. Portanto, esta pesquisa foi conduzida com o objetivo de estudar analisadamente o impacto das mídias sociais nas mentes das crianças do Sri Lanka. O problema de pesquisa centra-se no tipo de impacto que as redes sociais têm nas mentes das crianças do Sri Lanka. A análise dos dados utilizou uma metodologia mista...
de métodos qualitativos e quantitativos com uma amostra de 180 crianças dos distritos de Colombo, Gampaha e Kalutara, na Província Ocidental. Questionários, observações e métodos de entrevista semiestruturados foram utilizados para coletar dados quantitativos e qualitativos. Com base nos resultados da análise dos dados, constatou-se que as crianças utilizam diferentes plataformas de redes sociais em diferentes fases, e a imitação dos personagens e atividades dos conteúdos das redes sociais cria uma personalidade dependente da criança. Ficou claro que 46% dos entrevistados indicaram que as mídias sociais afetam a criança de forma positiva, 27% indicaram de forma negativa e 26% dos entrevistados não tinham ideia sobre o tipo de efeito das mídias sociais em suas vidas, mente das crianças. Assim, ao verificar as hipóteses de investigação e o problema de investigação de que as redes sociais afetam a mente da criança do Sri Lanka, concluiu-se que as redes sociais afetam a mente da criança do Sri Lanka. A pesquisa fornece um estudo aprofundado sobre as mudanças na rotina diária da criança, dos novos contextos sociais e humanos que se formam devido à mudança mental na criança e das medidas de controle e prevenção de efeitos negativos.

**Palavras-chave:** mente infantil, personalidade, mídias sociais, sri lanka, sociedade virtual.

**RESUMEN**

Hoy en día, la cantidad de niños que pasan su tiempo diario en las redes sociales en Sri Lanka ha crecido exponencialmente. Por lo tanto, esta investigación se realizó con el objetivo de estudiar analíticamente el impacto de las redes sociales en las mentes de los niños de Sri Lanka. El problema de investigación se centra en qué tipo de impacto las redes sociales tienen en las mentes de los niños de Sri Lanka. El análisis de datos utilizó una metodología mixta de métodos cualitativos y cuantitativos con una muestra de 180 niños de los distritos de Colombo, Gampaha, y Kalutara en la Provincia Occidental. Se utilizaron métodos de cuestionarios, observación, y entrevista semiestruturada para recopilar datos cuantitativos y cualitativos. Según los resultados del análisis de datos, se encontró que los niños usan diferentes plataformas de redes sociales en diferentes etapas, y que imitar los personajes y actividades del contenido de las redes sociales crea una personalidad dependiente en el niño. Estaba claro que el 46% de los encuestados indicó que las redes sociales afectaban al niño de manera positiva, el 27% indicó de manera negativa y el 26% de los encuestados no tenía idea sobre el tipo de efecto de las redes sociales en las mentes de los niños. En consecuencia, al verificar la hipótesis de la investigación y el problema de investigación de que las redes sociales afectan la mente del niño de Sri Lanka, se concluye que las redes sociales afectan la mente del niño de Sri Lanka. La investigación proporciona un estudio en profundidad de los cambios en la rutina diaria del niño, los nuevos contextos sociales y humanos que se forman debido al cambio mental en el niño, y las medidas para el control y prevención de efectos negativos.

**Palabras clave:** mente infantil, personalidad, redes sociales, sri lanka, sociedad virtual.
1 INTRODUCTION

Social media represents one of the most significant influences of the digital age on children's mental health ("Navigating Children’s Mental Health in the Digital Age," 2024). According to the study by McCrae, Gettings and Pussell (2017) and Vannucci, Flannery and Ohannessian (2017), in recent years, the excessive use of technologies and social networks has been directly associated with mental illnesses. This background provides an analytical study of the impact of social media on children's minds, using data reports and research papers to provide a rough evaluation of the psychological impact of social media on children globally. After that, focusing more on Sri Lanka, the use of social media by children, the psychological impact of social media, and the changes and context that have occurred in social and human existence due to that impact are highlighted in the introduction.

1.1 GLOBAL NATURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT ON CHILDREN’S MIND

One of the recent most impactful technological phenomena was the emergence and spread of social media (Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014). In today’s world, social media can make a difference in the minds of people across the world. It has not only become the source of information but also a part of human’s life (Adhikari, 2022). There were 5.04 billion social media users globally in January 2024 (Hootsuite and We Are Social, 2024). Children are prominent among them. Children and teenagers widely use social media, and recent studies have shown that they spend the majority of their time daily on social media pages (Tartari, 2015). A recent report surveyed 3,154 families and showed that 80% of children aged 0-7 use YouTube, and 59% use YouTube Kids (Neumann & Herodotou, 2020). Most of the teens report ever using YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat (Vogels, & Watnick, 2023). Using digital technologies, going online, and connecting through social media is something that research shows is deeply integrated into children’s daily lives (Smahel et al., 2020).

As reported in successive EU Kids Online studies, social media use has changed consistently over time, the number of children aged 9–16 who report using social network sites daily or more often ranges between 38% (Spain) and 73% (Serbia). Social media use is also strongly structured by age, with most 15- to 16-year-olds (77%) reporting doing so daily. At the same time, 28% of 9–11-year-olds and 63% of 12- to 14-year-olds use...
social media daily, despite the minimum age of 13 years for most platforms. Watching video clips, mainly through video-sharing platforms, remains the most popular online activity and is taken up by two-thirds of children in most countries daily (Smahel et al., 2020, p. 26). As per Mediakix (2018), 210 million people are estimated to suffer from internet and social media addictions worldwide, and teens who spend an average of 5 hours a day on social media are twice as likely to exhibit depressive symptoms. An increase in digital and social media use relates to physical and mental status impairment in children, including depression, anxiety, cyberbullying, sleep disturbance, behavioral problems, sexting, and myopia (Bozzola et al., 2022).

1.2 SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT IN SRI LANKAN CHILDREN’S MIND

Sri Lanka has a population of 21.92 million, with 7.50 million social media users. It is 34% of the total population (Hootsuite and We Are Social, 2024). The population of children between the ages of 0 and 14 in this country is 22.4% (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [ESCAP], 2023). The use of digital media tools and social media in Sri Lanka, a developing low-income country, is at a lower level than the global situation. In the COVID-19 epidemic situation, due to conducting education through the online method, households without smart telephones or other digital tools to access the internet bought new smart mobile phones and digital tools for children's education. In such a background, children's use of social media took high screen time in an unprecedented manner, and children were newly covered by the digital screen, including infants and toddlers. A few years have passed since then, and today the majority of the country's child population (including infants) has become social media users. Using social media Web sites is among the most common activities of today's children and adolescents (O'Keeffe & Pearson, 2011). According to research by Ito, Horst and Bittani., et al (2008), engaging in various forms of social media is a routine activity that benefits children and adolescents by improving communication, social relationships, and technical skills.

81% of 13- to 18-year-olds access social media to get updated information. The majority of those children are in the Western Province. Children in this age group check their phone notifications 15 times per hour. 30% update their social media status more than once a day, and 24% update their social media status at least once a day. 43% upload photos to social media once a month and 22% upload photos to social media at least once
a week. 25% upload videos to social media at least once a month. 14% share content from other Facebook pages on their wallpaper several times a day, and 11% share it several times a week (Asia Pacific Institute of Digital Marketing [APIDM], 2021). Social media had a significant impact on adolescents’ education, communication, attitudes, and personal skills (Wickramanayake, 2021). This shows the extent to which the Sri Lankan generation of children is intertwined with social media for the purpose of fulfilling various tasks.

Research has been done globally and in Sri Lanka through various approaches to the impact of social media on children. Those researches analyzed general effects and do not provide a theoretically and logically conducted in-depth study of the psychological effect on a child's mind, and the conditions resulting from the effect. However, there was a lack of sociological research conducted through a psychological and sociological approach in accordance with scientific methods, specializing in the effect of social media on a Sri Lankan child's mind alone. Accordingly, this research was conducted with the aim of analytically studying the effect of social media on a child's mind in the current Sri Lankan society through the research problem "Social media influences the minds of Sri Lankan children." The objectives of the research were: studying conceptually and theoretically the concept of the child, social media, and its historical background; observing the child's use of social media in Sri Lankan society and its nature; studying how the nature of the child changed from the past to the present due to the advent of social media in Sri Lanka; and investigating trends that social media has built in the child and socio-culture.

2 MATERIALS AND METHOD

A sample of 180 parents and children was randomly selected, covering the urban, semi-urban, and rural areas of the three districts of Colombo, Gampaha, and Kalutara in the Western Province. The Western Province was chosen as the geographical limitation of the research because it is the province with the highest digital and computer literacy and the highest household use of digital media tools (Department of Census and Statistics [DCS], 2021). Also, the province where the largest number of children use social media is the Western Province (Telecommunications Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka [TRCSL], 2021). Factors such as residence, age level, education level, cultural background, digital use, and screen time were given more attention in the sample.
The questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and observation methods were mainly used to collect qualitative and quantitative primary data. In addition, books (printed and online), research papers, journal articles, data reports, etc. were used to study the theoretical and literary background.

### 2.1 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The questionnaire method was primarily used in obtaining quantitative data, and the online survey was equally distributed to ninety parents (90) randomly in the three districts. A 21-question questionnaire was addressed to parents of children of different age groups (between 8 months- 5 years, 6-12 years, 13-15 years, and 16-18 years). Mainly, the questionnaire was designed to collect personal data, social data, and environmental data. The questionnaire was addressed to parents with the idea of avoiding the practical difficulties of obtaining data on children under five years of age and indirectly measuring the awareness of parents about their children's digital use behavior. The data obtained through questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS statistical software.

Data were collected from two university lecturers in the field of media and psychology and three people, including a social media expert, under the structured interview method. Face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted focusing on how social media behaves in the child's mind, the sociological and psychological aspects of the effect on the mind, and the possible conditions that may arise in society and humanity through that effect. By

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### Table 1. The population of the sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Nature of residence</th>
<th>Questionnaire Method Population relevant to the sample (male/female)</th>
<th>Observation Method Population relevant to the sample (male/female)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombo</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semi-urban</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gampaha</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semi-urban</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalutara</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semi-urban</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Created by Author, 2023.
collecting data through semi-structured interviews, it was possible to obtain reliable and comparable qualitative data.

Through the observation method, the interaction between social media and children, the ability to observe people's behavioral profiles live, and the ability to collect more qualitative data for research. Accordingly, ninety children of different age groups of both genders were observed covering the rural, semi-urban, and urban areas of the three districts of Colombo, Gampaha, and Kalutara. To preserve the balance of the research, 30 children each from one district were selected with different social, economic, and educational levels. In the empirical field, there are many practical difficulties and limitations encountered in observing children of all age groups. Due to problems such as time and money, as well as crises in contemporary society, various forms of acceptance and rejection by some residents when going home, the child not being in the house during the day or evening due to going to school and extra tuition classes, the child not engaging in his normal behavior in front of a stranger, etc. are a few problems. By communicating the information about the research, most of the residents had the space to give answers and observe the child's behavior, and it was possible to observe the child's normal use of social media in the absence of distance by having a good conversation with the child. The child's social media activity in cyberspace was also monitored. In particular, children's YouTube channels, Facebook groups created for teenagers, children's Facebook accounts and activities, TikTok accounts, WhatsApp, Instagram, children's video content on YouTube channels, etc. Actions and interactions were observed.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the results of the data analysis, out of the ninety respondents to the questionnaire, the highest number of children (87) access social media through smartphones. Most children access social media using a digital device owned by their parents or a digital device commonly used at home.
As shown in Table 2, the majority of children (44.4%) spend between 1 and 3 hours daily on social media. 43.3% of children spend less than an hour a day on social media. 8.9% of children spend about five hours a day on social media, and 3.3% spend more than five hours on social media daily. By spending much time in the virtual space daily, an addiction to accessing social media has been created in children, becoming an automatic habit. Social media has become the most popular media genre among children. Among social media, children prefer YouTube, WhatsApp, game apps, Facebook, and other applications, respectively.

Children of different age groups use different social media platforms. YouTube is the most popular social media site among children aged 8 months to 12 years, where they are willing to watch children's songs, cartoons, entertaining videos, etc. Teenagers are commonly using TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp apps, regardless of gender. Adolescent boys are addicted to game applications. Adolescent girls are more inclined to use media like TikTok and Snapchat because of the application's special effects. Popular uses of social media such as Zoom, Google Teams, and the text messaging medium WhatsApp are used in education activities. A majority of children access social media for communication, educational, game, and entertainment purposes.
In the data analysis of the impact of social media on the Sri Lankan child's mind, as shown in Figure 1, it has been shown that 46% of respondents indicated social media has affected the child in a good way, and 27% indicated social media has affected the child in a bad way. The factor that needs attention is that a significant percentage of parents (26%) have no idea about the impact of social media on their children's minds. The qualitative effect on the child through these quantitative values is strong. Through this, it is clear that the relationship between child and parent is gradually diminishing due to social media. The child who is in the stages of mental development is not receiving proper parental care and guidance, and the child is psychologically affected again.

Whether parents are digital media users 97.78% of parents are digital media users in the data analysis. 93.3% access social media daily. In this way, by accessing social media daily, parents have to avoid the roles and responsibilities they have to fulfill for their children. The majority of Sri Lanka’s parents are busy with both parents working, so children are tempted to spend time on social media even when they are alone and with their parents.

In the analysis of the data on the positive impact of social media on children, it was clear that social media itself has been a good support for educational activities and updating about unknown facts. Also, by creating content in the social media space, especially teenagers have the ability to get the attention and attraction of others that they do not have in real society. The data shows that their self-esteem has grown through it. It has become an exclusive platform for educational content, creative entertainment content,
and innovative creations. Social media is used as a powerful communication tool among children, especially to express their ideas, feelings, acting, singing skills, etc., and to report daily events.

Table 3. Negative impact on the child's mind

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Valid percentage</th>
<th>Cumulative percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest and attention to</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>matters like love and sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simulates social media content</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>50.3%</td>
<td>50.3%</td>
<td>61.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sense of inferiority arises</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>68.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffering from mental stress,</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>depression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid violent behavior</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emerges from the child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author developed based on survey data, 2023.

When examining the negative impact on a child's mind, 50.3% of children imitate social media content, as shown in Table 3. 8.6% of children feel mental stress and depression due to social media, and 7.3% of children have low self-esteem. A percentage of 11.3% paid more attention to things like love and sex, and 22.5% showed violent behavior in children. Due to constantly acting and interacting on social media platforms, the child unconsciously imitates and absorbs the characters, concepts, behaviors, activities, new trends, etc. contained in the texts he associates with. By doing so, a dependent personality has been formed in the current children’s focus on building their self-image and personality. Due to being built with a dependent personality, others can control these children. It is directly related to the future of the whole nation and the country. A child who is prepared in accordance with the real socio-cultural values and systems of their country, including culture, religion, and history, is not created and socialized by individuals and groups in the virtual space. The child assimilates the media reality created by social media texts with false consciousness and false relationships through a screen as a social reality. The development and learning of the child's mental and physical activities take place through that false consciousness. Through that, the creation of a social person with a strong foundation is hindered. The child is alienated from the objective world. Those conditions are evident in the behavior of current children.

Through that, the creation of a social child is not seen, and it is clear how a technical human being is gradually created mentally. In the context of the COVID-19
epidemic, the environment necessary for the fulfillment of the aforementioned conditions was gradually created by transforming the use of social media into a mandatory use for children in the online education system in this country.

Also, by seeing the world through the contexts in the virtual space that children constantly deal with, their ability to successfully face problems and challenges in the real world is minimal. This is because they are less exposed to real people, experiences, challenges, and opportunities in real life. Therefore, children are unable to control their thoughts, ideas, and behaviors in light of the problems and challenges that occur in real society. As children who fail to control their thoughts and behaviors become adults, crisis situations also arise in the family corporations they build. This proceeds as a cyclical process. Factors such as the use of exciting violent game applications by adolescent boys in particular and the lack of patience due to the ability to receive immediate answers and responses in the social media space have led to the rise of such mental states.

Parents are used to feeding lunch and dinner to toddlers and preschoolers by giving them social media like YouTube, and when they take the smartphones away from the child, they show refusal to eat and violent behavior. Sometimes the child refuses to sleep with the parents at night. In Sri Lanka, factors such as romantic relationships, sexuality, and unwanted online sexual solicitation are not openly discussed within the cultural boundaries, so children are interested in searching about them on social media. There, many boys and girls become victims of romantic and Unwanted online sexual solicitation. Under the influence of those contents, adolescent boys and girls perform unethical behavior in school through actions and signs. A significant number of children in this country are affected by cybercrime and cyberviolence such as cyberbullying and stalking, and through this, mental stress, depression, and anxiety arise in children. Despite working to raise their image and status by creating content on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, children, especially adolescents, are under stress due to the lack of response and attraction expected. An inferiority complex has also been created.

As shown in Figure 2, 39.4% of the children of respondents reduced their relationship with society in the country where social media has become common. That is the number of 41 children. 26 parents (25%) indicate that the relationship between their child and the family is decreasing. A total of 37 (35.6%) of the parents indicated that their child prefers to be alone. The child who has learned social matters by interacting with peer groups and neighbors maintains mental and physical well-being by playing together
with friends from the neighborhood, but by spending a high amount of screen time on social media, the child is missing a balance of mental and physical well-being.

Figure 2. Social media effect on children’s relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect on Relationships</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The child's relationship with the family diminishes</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The child's contact with society diminishes</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefers to be alone</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author developed based on survey data, 2023.

By dealing with the screen daily, the child's daily routines are built around the digital screen, and the child's imagination, creative thinking, and critical thinking are lost, and the whole existence is arranged according to an algorithmic pattern. Although the process is carried out out of necessity or desire in the first instance, it becomes a child's psychological chemical process. The images, text, audio, and visuals that the child hears distort the mental developmental stages of the child's cognitive process in a meaningless manner. These motivational behaviors become fixed in the child's ID as a daily routine, and the child perceives this process as a conscious process. Accordingly, the child's cognitive process is automatically technologicalized based on the child's addiction to using the screen cyclically. Based on this silent mental influence led by social media, a technical man is born without human qualities based on that technical process. Children of Sri Lanka live in its transitional situation.

The child operates with an egocentric zone of consciousness through the egocentric addressing of social media to the individual "I." It creates a child who is nurtured with selfish characteristics and only thinks about himself, and the child avoids the social duties and responsibilities assigned to the child by society. But in reality, by
following the social media texts created and distributed at the need of the superstructure, the individual I is negated, and the child is formed as a screen-dependent individual. This psychological impact on the child is a situation that not only Sri Lanka but globally has to face.

4 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It was concluded that social media has both positive and negative effects on Sri Lankan children's minds after the data analysis revealed that 46% of the respondents favorably impacted their child and 26% adversely influenced their child. The need to use social media daily has become an addiction. Although the level of literacy is high, the tendency to use it effectively is low due to the lack of literacy in the use of social media by children and parents. To reduce and control the negative impact of the use of social media on the child, measures that can be taken personally and within the family framework are mandatory. The child should be used consciously with self-control, and parental guidance is essential. It is important to implement a divisional and national program to develop the critical thinking and media literacy of parents and children.
REFERENCES


