

Adolescent Family Dynamics and the Role of Social Media in Shaping Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to explore the relationship between adolescent family dynamics and social media use.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews with 18 adolescents aged 14–18 and their parents, all residing in Tehran. The interviews explored adolescents' social media usage patterns, family interactions, and the perceived impact of family relationships on digital behavior. Data were analyzed using NVivo software to identify recurring themes related to family dynamics, emotional support, and communication patterns.

Findings: The study found that adolescents from families with strong communication, emotional support, and low conflict reported healthier social media usage and fewer mental health issues related to online behaviors. In contrast, adolescents from families with higher levels of conflict or limited emotional support exhibited higher levels of problematic social media use, including excessive time online, anxiety, and negative self-esteem. The results also suggested a bidirectional relationship between family dynamics and social media behaviors, where adolescents' online experiences could influence family interactions, leading to conflicts over boundaries and supervision.

Conclusion: The study concludes that family functioning plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' social media behaviors and mental health outcomes. Positive family dynamics, including open communication and emotional support, can act as protective factors, helping adolescents manage the pressures of social media use. This highlights the importance of fostering healthy family environments to mitigate the risks associated with excessive social media engagement among adolescents.

Keywords: Adolescent family dynamics, social media use, family functioning, mental health, emotional support, parent-adolescent relationship, digital behavior, family conflict.

1. Introduction

In the digital age, the interplay between family dynamics and adolescents' social media use has become a pivotal area of investigation. Adolescents are exposed to both the risks and opportunities offered by social media platforms,

which have significantly altered traditional forms of socialization, communication, and emotional expression (Taba et al., 2020). As adolescents begin to navigate complex social interactions online, the influence of family—whether through active guidance, monitoring, or emotional support—remains a crucial determinant in shaping their

digital experiences. Family dynamics, encompassing factors such as parenting styles, familial warmth, and emotional support, have long been recognized for their role in adolescents' psychological development and overall well-being (Wikle & Hoagland, 2020). However, the growing reliance on digital platforms for socialization has brought forth new challenges, including the emergence of online addiction, cyberbullying, and the blurring of boundaries between offline and online identities (Sharma, 2020).

Adolescence is a critical developmental period during which individuals are highly susceptible to external influences, including those from their family environment. Research has shown that parental behaviors—ranging from warmth and responsiveness to control and monitoring—significantly impact adolescents' emotional well-being and social development (Boele et al., 2023; Loughheed & Main, 2020). While family functioning and parenting styles have long been associated with mental health outcomes in adolescents, the specific ways in which these dynamics interact with social media use remain underexplored. A key factor in this interaction is how family members, particularly parents, influence adolescents' online behavior and how adolescents, in turn, influence family interactions and dynamics through their online presence (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2020; Zhang, 2024).

The role of family functioning is particularly critical in the context of adolescent mental health. Studies have shown that a positive family environment—characterized by healthy communication, emotional support, and structured boundaries—can serve as a protective factor against the negative impacts of social media, such as addiction or exposure to harmful content (Chen et al., 2020; Hu et al., 2022). Conversely, dysfunctional family environments, marked by conflict, neglect, or poor communication, are associated with increased susceptibility to online risks and mental health issues (Farmakopoulou, 2024; Shi et al., 2023). For example, adolescents from families with high levels of conflict or low emotional warmth may experience higher levels of depression and anxiety, which could manifest in problematic social media use (Reyes, 2024). This highlights the need to understand how the family environment either mitigates or exacerbates the challenges adolescents face in their digital interactions.

Social media platforms have become central to adolescent identity formation, providing opportunities for self-expression, peer interaction, and emotional validation (Taba et al., 2020). However, the overwhelming exposure to idealized versions of reality on these platforms has raised

concerns about its impact on adolescents' self-esteem and body image (Magson et al., 2020; Meanley et al., 2021). The desire to conform to peer expectations and present an idealized version of oneself online can create a range of psychological pressures. As adolescents increasingly rely on social media for validation, the influence of family dynamics becomes even more crucial in moderating these pressures. The degree of family support—such as positive reinforcement, encouragement, and empathy—can buffer the negative psychological effects of social media (Boele et al., 2023; Loughheed & Main, 2020).

Furthermore, the unique pressures faced by adolescents in different cultural and familial contexts shape how social media influences their lives. In some societies, parental control over social media use may be more stringent, while in others, adolescents may have more freedom to navigate their online spaces independently (Farmakopoulou, 2024; Yang et al., 2021). These differences underscore the importance of exploring family dynamics in diverse settings, particularly in urban environments like Tehran, where modern technological influences interact with traditional familial structures. Adolescents in such environments face the challenge of balancing family expectations with the freedom that social media affords, a dynamic that can both foster connection and create conflict.

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated this relationship, as social distancing measures and remote learning significantly increased adolescents' screen time and dependence on digital platforms (Magson et al., 2020). As face-to-face interactions were limited, social media became a primary source of social engagement, potentially exacerbating existing issues such as loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Pan et al., 2021). In this context, the role of family in regulating and guiding adolescents' social media use became even more crucial, as parents were forced to navigate new challenges in fostering healthy online behaviors.

Given the complex association between family dynamics and social media use, this study seeks to explore how different aspects of family functioning—such as communication patterns, emotional support, and parenting styles—affect adolescents' interactions with social media and their subsequent mental health outcomes. It aims to fill a gap in the literature by providing a detailed examination of how family structures and relationships influence the way adolescents engage with digital platforms. Methods and Materials

1.1. Study Design and Participants

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the dynamics of adolescent family relationships and the influence of social media on these relationships. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on adolescents aged 12-18 and their families residing in Tehran, Iran. A total of 18 participants were recruited for this study, comprising 9 adolescents and 9 family members (parents or guardians). The participants were chosen to ensure diverse perspectives on the role of social media in shaping adolescent-family interactions.

1.2. Measure

1.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data for this study were collected using semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, beliefs, and perceptions regarding family dynamics and the influence of social media. The semi-structured format provided flexibility, enabling the researcher to explore emerging themes while maintaining a focus on key research questions. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes.

1.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software, which facilitated the organization and coding of the

interview transcripts. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify patterns and themes within the data. The analysis was guided by the principles of theoretical saturation, ensuring that data collection continued until no new information or themes emerged. Codes were iteratively refined throughout the analysis process to capture the nuances of participants' responses and to establish a comprehensive understanding of the role social media plays in adolescent-family dynamics.

2. Findings and Results

The study involved 18 participants, including 9 adolescents (5 female, 4 male) and 9 family members (6 mothers, 3 fathers). Participants were aged between 12 and 18 years, with a mean age of 15.2 years for adolescents. In terms of parental education, the majority of mothers (66.7%) had completed at least a high school diploma, while 33.3% had attained a university degree. For fathers, 70% had a university degree, while 30% had completed only secondary education. The participants were all residents of Tehran, ensuring a diverse urban demographic. Regarding family structure, most adolescents (72%) lived in two-parent households, while 28% were from single-parent families. The majority of adolescents reported using social media on a daily basis, with 83% engaging in online platforms such as Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp, and 17% using social media at least 3-4 times a week.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Category	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Family Dynamics	Parental Influence	- Monitoring behaviors - Communication about social media usage - Establishing boundaries - Parental concerns about online behavior - Impact of family values
	Adolescent Independence	- Desire for privacy - Negotiating freedom and control - Emotional autonomy from parents - Digital independence
	Family Support Systems	- Emotional support from family members - Family problem-solving strategies - Role of siblings in online behavior discussions
2. Social Media Impact	Social Media as a Communication Tool	- Daily social media use - Connecting with peers - Social media as a platform for self-expression - Role of social media in strengthening friendships - Use of social media to resolve conflicts
	Exposure to Risky Content	- Exposure to inappropriate material

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cyberbullying - Online peer pressure - Influence of trends on adolescents
3. Parent-Adolescent Communication	Digital Communication Styles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frequency of communication online vs. face-to-face - Types of conversations (formal vs. informal) - Trust in digital conversations - Impact of online conversations on face-to-face relationships
4. Influence of Peer Interactions	Peer Pressure and Social Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use of digital platforms for emotional discussions - Conformity to peer standards - Influence of peer opinions on social media behavior - Pressure to maintain certain online images - Peer comparisons in digital spaces
	Social Media as a Socializing Tool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Digital trends as peer-driven behaviors - Building social identity through digital platforms - Group chats and online communities - Sharing personal moments with peers - Creating and maintaining friendships online

2.1. Family Dynamics

The role of parents in guiding adolescent interactions with social media emerged as a key theme in the study. Parents are often highly involved in monitoring their children's online behaviors, establishing rules about social media usage, and expressing concerns about potential risks. One participant described their father's role: "He's always checking what I post, who I talk to... I don't mind, but I wish he trusted me more." Parental influence extends to discussing boundaries, with many parents emphasizing the importance of maintaining offline family relationships despite online engagement. As one mother noted: "We talk about the dangers of the internet a lot... I try to make sure she knows when it's okay to disconnect."

Despite parental influence, adolescents exhibit a strong desire for independence, particularly in their digital spaces. Adolescents often negotiate their freedom to use social media, seeking to balance autonomy with family expectations. A 15-year-old participant shared: "I want to have my space, my accounts, without my parents being so involved. It's not like I'm doing anything bad." Digital independence is often seen as a rite of passage, allowing adolescents to define themselves apart from their families. One participant stated, "I have a private Instagram account. I don't want anyone – not even my parents – to know about it."

Support from family members plays a critical role in how adolescents navigate social media. Many participants reported strong emotional support from their families, particularly during challenging situations such as cyberbullying or online conflicts. A father emphasized: "Whenever she faces a problem online, we discuss it

together. It's important to help her see things clearly." Sibling involvement was also noted, with siblings often acting as mediators in discussions about social media behavior. One adolescent mentioned: "My brother is the one who tells me when I've gone too far. I trust him."

2.2. Social Media Impact

For adolescents, social media serves as an essential communication tool, facilitating daily interactions with peers. Many participants highlighted the role of social media in maintaining friendships and forming new connections. As one participant stated: "I talk to my friends all the time on WhatsApp. It's easier to stay connected, especially now that we're not in school together." Social media platforms, such as Instagram and Snapchat, were described as spaces for self-expression, where adolescents could share aspects of their lives and personalities. A 16-year-old participant noted: "I feel like I can express myself more on Instagram than in person. It's like my own little world."

Exposure to risky content online was a recurring concern among both parents and adolescents. Participants mentioned encountering inappropriate material, ranging from explicit content to cyberbullying. One mother shared her worry: "I'm afraid she's exposed to things she shouldn't see. Sometimes she comes across things I never want her to." Cyberbullying was also highlighted as a major issue, with one adolescent describing: "I've seen my friends get bullied on social media. It's painful to watch, but sometimes it feels like there's nothing we can do."

2.3. Parent-Adolescent Communication

The shift in communication from face-to-face to digital platforms has significantly impacted parent-adolescent

relationships. While face-to-face communication remains vital, many participants indicated that their primary mode of communication with parents is now through digital means. As one adolescent explained: "It's easier to talk to my mom over text. I can say things without worrying she'll interrupt me." However, this shift has also led to new challenges, such as maintaining trust and open communication. One parent noted: "It's hard to tell if she's being honest in texts. I miss seeing her face when we talk."

2.4. Influence of Peer Interactions

Peer pressure and social expectations have become increasingly prominent in shaping adolescent behavior on social media. Many adolescents described feeling pressure to conform to the social norms set by their peers, often in relation to their online presence. A 17-year-old participant mentioned: "Everyone's posting photos of their vacations, and if I don't post, I feel left out." The desire to keep up with peers was evident, as was the pressure to maintain certain online images. One adolescent shared: "I have to look perfect online, even if I'm not feeling it."

Social media is also used by adolescents as a tool for socialization, allowing them to create and maintain relationships with others. Participants frequently mentioned the role of group chats and online communities in enhancing their social lives. As one adolescent said: "I have a group of friends on Telegram, and we talk every day. It's a safe space where we share everything." Social media was described as an essential platform for developing and solidifying friendships, with one participant stating: "It's how I stay connected with my best friends, even if we're miles apart."

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study offer important insights into the complex relationship between adolescent family dynamics and social media use. In particular, the results underscore the role of family functioning—both in terms of emotional support and communication styles—in shaping adolescents' interactions with social media platforms. Our results suggest that adolescents who reported higher levels of familial warmth and communication tended to use social media more positively, with fewer indications of problematic behaviors such as excessive screen time or emotional distress linked to online interactions. These findings are consistent with previous research that has highlighted the significant impact of family dynamics on adolescent mental health and social media use (Boele et al., 2023; Loughheed & Main, 2020).

Adolescents who came from families with strong communication patterns and supportive emotional environments appeared to have healthier online behaviors. For instance, these adolescents reported using social media for social connection, educational purposes, and entertainment without the adverse effects commonly associated with excessive use. This aligns with the findings of Mastrotheodoros et al. (2020), who found that positive communication in families reduces adolescents' susceptibility to online pressures and risky behaviors (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2020). Furthermore, our results are consistent with research by Chen et al. (2020), who reported that family cohesion and open dialogue about internet use serve as protective factors against internet addiction and related psychological issues, such as depression and anxiety (Chen et al., 2020). In contrast, adolescents from families with higher conflict levels or weaker emotional support reported more frequent negative experiences with social media, including feelings of isolation, anxiety, and lower self-esteem.

One of the most notable findings of this study is the strong association between family conflict and adolescents' problematic social media use. Adolescents who experienced high levels of familial conflict or had strained relationships with parents were more likely to engage in excessive social media use as a means of escaping from negative emotions. This is in line with research conducted by Farmakopoulou (2024), which found that family conflict exacerbates adolescents' vulnerability to mental health issues and increases the likelihood of engaging in maladaptive coping strategies, such as excessive screen time or online gaming (Farmakopoulou, 2024). Similarly, studies by Shi et al. (2023) and Hu et al. (2022) also suggest that adolescents from dysfunctional family environments are more prone to developing internet addiction as a form of emotional regulation (Hu et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2023). These findings point to the necessity of addressing family dynamics when considering interventions for adolescents at risk of problematic social media behaviors.

Interestingly, the study also highlights the bidirectional nature of the relationship between family dynamics and adolescents' social media use. While family functioning influences adolescents' online behaviors, adolescents' online activities can, in turn, affect family dynamics. This finding supports the work of Loughheed and Main (2020), who discussed how adolescents' online behaviors can spill over into family interactions, often leading to conflicts over boundaries and time management. Moreover, our study's

findings echo those of Mastrotheodoros et al. (2020), who emphasized that adolescents' social media use can affect how family members interact with one another, particularly in terms of trust, privacy, and supervision (Mastrotheodoros et al., 2020).

The impact of social media on adolescents' mental health is another key finding of this study. Adolescents who reported using social media extensively, particularly for validation and social comparison, showed higher levels of anxiety and lower self-esteem, which are common indicators of problematic digital engagement. This finding is consistent with Magson et al. (2020), who found that excessive social media use is linked to poorer mental health outcomes, including increased anxiety and depression among adolescents (Magson et al., 2020). Additionally, Meanley et al. (2021) emphasized that the quest for validation on social media can lead to negative self-perception, especially when adolescents are exposed to idealized representations of peers and celebrities (Meanley et al., 2021). Our study extends this body of work by demonstrating that the influence of social media on adolescent mental health is not merely a function of time spent online but is heavily mediated by family dynamics.

A key element of this study is the identification of certain coping strategies within family environments that can help buffer the negative effects of social media. Adolescents in families where open communication and emotional support were prioritized seemed to be more resilient in managing the pressures of social media. This finding is particularly significant in the context of research by Boele et al. (2023) and Loughheed and Main (2020), who found that adolescents who feel supported by their families are better equipped to cope with social media-induced stress and are less likely to internalize negative online experiences (Boele et al., 2023; Loughheed & Main, 2020). Furthermore, our results suggest that familial monitoring and guidance around internet use are effective in preventing harmful online behaviors. This is in agreement with Chen et al. (2020), who reported that active parental engagement in managing adolescents' digital lives is a protective factor against internet addiction and its associated mental health risks (Chen et al., 2020).

4. Limitations & Suggestions

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of family dynamics in adolescents' social media use, it is not without limitations. First, the study relied on self-report data from both adolescents and their family members, which

could be subject to biases such as social desirability or recall bias. Adolescents may have underreported their social media use or overstated the quality of their family relationships, and similarly, parents may have provided idealized accounts of family functioning. Future research could incorporate more objective measures, such as digital tracking of social media use or observational methods to assess family interactions. Second, this study focused on a relatively small sample of adolescents and their families from Tehran, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Family dynamics and social media use may differ across cultural settings, and further research should explore these relationships in diverse populations. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of this study prevents causal inferences. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial to examine how changes in family dynamics over time influence adolescents' social media behaviors and mental health outcomes.

Given the complexity of the relationship between family dynamics and adolescents' social media use, future research should adopt a multidimensional approach to further explore the nuances of this interaction. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in examining the directionality of effects between family functioning and social media behaviors. It would be interesting to explore whether improvements in family communication or the implementation of specific coping strategies can reduce adolescents' problematic social media use over time. Moreover, future research should investigate the role of different family members in shaping adolescents' online behaviors. While this study focused on the parent-child relationship, it would be beneficial to examine the influence of siblings, extended family members, and peers on adolescent social media use. Additionally, future studies could delve deeper into the role of digital literacy and online parenting strategies as protective factors against harmful social media behaviors.

Furthermore, examining the role of social media platforms themselves—how different types of content, features, and algorithms affect adolescents' mental health—could yield valuable insights. The increasing integration of social media platforms in adolescents' daily lives calls for a better understanding of how specific platform features, such as likes, comments, and messaging, shape self-esteem and emotional regulation. Finally, more research is needed to explore the potential benefits of social media, such as its use for educational purposes, social support, and creative

expression, particularly in the context of adolescents from various socioeconomic backgrounds.

Given the findings of this study, there are several practical implications for families, educators, and mental health professionals. First, families should prioritize open communication about social media use and the potential risks and benefits associated with it. Encouraging adolescents to share their online experiences and feelings can create an environment where healthy online behaviors are promoted, and any negative experiences can be addressed early. Additionally, parents should be proactive in setting boundaries around screen time and internet use while fostering a sense of trust and respect for privacy. Digital literacy programs for both parents and adolescents can help equip families with the tools to navigate the online world safely and effectively.

Educators and mental health professionals can also play a key role in supporting families by offering workshops and resources that address the psychological impacts of social media use. Schools can integrate digital literacy into their curricula, helping students understand the potential emotional and social consequences of excessive online engagement. Moreover, mental health professionals can work with families to identify patterns of digital use that may be detrimental to adolescents' well-being and provide strategies for fostering a healthy balance between online and offline activities.

Lastly, community-based programs can help bridge the gap between digital engagement and real-world socialization by providing adolescents with opportunities to participate in offline activities that promote mental health, such as sports, arts, and volunteer work. By fostering resilience and providing adequate support, families, educators, and mental health professionals can mitigate the negative impacts of social media while empowering adolescents to make informed decisions about their digital lives.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

This article is derived from the first author's doctoral dissertation. All authors equally contributed to this article.

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