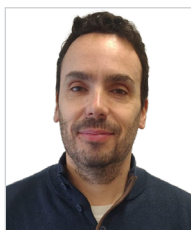



The Use of Social Media in Childhood and Adolescence from the Perspectives of Psychology Professionals in Spain

El uso de las redes sociales en la infancia y adolescencia desde la mirada profesional de los psicólogos en España



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Abstract:

Young people are spending more and more time connected to the Internet and are receiving their first mobile device at an early age. Part of this time is spent on social media, media that are a fundamental part of their lives. The aim of this research is to find out, through in-depth semi-structured interviews, the professional opinion of sixteen Spanish psychologists, in contact with young people, on the effects of the use of digital platforms on young people in a context in which there is increasing talk of the deterioration of mental health. The results reveal emotional problems such as dissatisfaction, constant comparison, dependence, overexposure that they are not prepared to assimilate as a whole, lack of preparation to discern between true and false information, as well as other deficiencies in social and personal relationships derived from excessive contact with media and a lack of prior training. Although it cannot be said that the only reason for mental health problems in children and adolescents comes from the digital universe, we can conclude that it is one of the main causes.

Keywords:

Social media; childhood; adolescence; communication; psychology.

Resumen:

Los menores cada vez pasan más tiempo conectados a Internet y reciben su primer dispositivo móvil a edades tempranas. Parte de ese tiempo lo destinan a las redes sociales, soportes comunicativos que forman una parte fundamental de sus vidas. El objetivo de esta investigación es conocer, mediante la realización de entrevistas en profundidad semiestructuradas, la opinión profesional de dieciséis psicólogos españoles, en contacto con la juventud, sobre los efectos del uso de las plataformas digitales en los jóvenes en un contexto en el que cada vez se habla más del deterioro de la salud mental. Los resultados ponen de manifiesto problemas emocionales como la insatisfacción, la continua comparación, la dependencia, una sobreexposición con la que no están preparados para asimilar en conjunto, la falta de preparación para discernir entre información veraz y falsa, así como otras carencias en las relaciones sociales y personales derivadas de un contacto excesivo con las redes y de una falta de formación previa. Si bien no se puede afirmar que el único motivo de los problemas relacionados con la salud mental en niños y adolescentes proceda del universo digital, sí que podemos concluir que es uno de los causantes principales.

Palabras clave:

Redes sociales; infancia; adolescencia; comunicación; psicología.

1. Introduction

The rise and consolidation of social media since the late 2000s have transformed personal, social, business, commercial, and political relationships (Staab & Thiel, 2022). This transformation emerged from a premise that especially concerns us citizens: That learning how to use social media –and everything that usage entails– has developed on an individual basis through observation of a user’s immediate environment (Martín-García, 2022). Additionally, the ease of opening an account and beginning to use it without prior experience, thanks to intuitive and free platforms, facilitated the rapid growth of Facebook, Twitter (now called X), Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp. However, as digital platforms continue to evolve and new ones such as TikTok, Twitch, and BeReal appeared, along with continuous usability changes and increasingly complex algorithms that decide which content users see (Clapp, 2022; Swart, 2021), individuals must undertake an ongoing and autodidactic adaptation process that is never fully completed.

Daily Internet use continues to rise, reaching five hours and forty minutes in 2023. Contact with close social circles, information seeking, instant messaging, entertainment, buying and selling products, forming new romantic relationships, and interacting with brands or institutions are among the main reasons people go online (IAB, 2023). But what happens when this digital immersion begins in childhood and adolescence? Minors –already digital natives– face numerous challenges in managing vast

amounts of information and content during a critical stage of personal development. This is especially true when considering the problems that arise on social media, many of which are anything but sporadic, as we will demonstrate (Al-Samarraie *et al.*, 2022; Khalaf *et al.*, 2023).

1.1. Social Media and Minors: An Unequal Relationship where Conflict Arises

There are many advantages to social media for young people, such as socialization, interactive and educational learning, broadened access to a wide range of cultural content or entertainment, among others (Buenestado-Fernández, 2023). However, because they have not yet reached maturity, “the lack of skills to manage adult content may lead to inappropriate attitudes and behaviors and may even result in psychological distress for some of them” (Besolí *et al.*, 2018, p. 37). Studies indicate that young people also spend more than five hours a day online (Qustodio, 2024), a time investment that varies among individuals, but which suggests a potential correlation between excessive use and some level of dependence on social media. Factors such as insufficient parental supervision, the unsupervised use of mobile devices (Solera-Gómez *et al.*, 2022), and the belief that children know more about social media than their parents do (Castro & Rodríguez, 2016) –a digital divide that can be difficult to bridge–, make it necessary to address recurring negative patterns among youth in the digital realm. It is a mistake to assume that being born into a technologically rich environment automatically makes someone digitally competent.

Among the numerous harmful situations identified in the results section, four stand out due to their increasing frequency and the need to eradicate them through education (Rubio-Hernández *et al.*, 2024) and strong supervision at home, in schools, and even through police involvement: 1) Cyberbullying (Cuesta-Sáez de Tejada *et al.*, 2018; García-Martínez & García-Zabaleta, 2024; Shohoudi-Mojdehi *et al.*, 2019), which many minors suffer online and which is often invisible to teachers or parents; 2) Sexting (Doyle *et al.*, 2019; Alonso-Ruido *et al.*, 2017), cases of which, linked to extortion and non-consensual sharing of intimate content, usually involving female victims, have multiplied in recent years in Spain; 3) The creation of false stereotypes and 4) a culture of perfectionism that leads to dissatisfaction (López *et al.*, 2024).

Furthermore, multiple studies (Cheng *et al.*, 2021; Fabris *et al.*, 2020) have proven that social media addiction produces serious consequences such as lack of self-control, increased anxiety, reduced attention span, and social isolation, among others, during what we insist is a crucial stage of growth and development. Along these same lines, an additional concern is that negative public reactions to users’ own content can deeply affect self-esteem (Casanova-Garrigós *et al.*, 2025), as this demographic tends to rely heavily on external validation in the form of likes, positive comments, and other reactions (Martín-Critikián & Medina-Núñez, 2021).

1.2. Mental Health, Social Media, and Youth: A Difficult Coexistence

The detection and definition of the problem have been going on for years. Corporations have teamed up with foundations to promote responsible technology use (such as Cola Cao’s campaign against bullying; Orange’s “Use love” campaign with the ANAR Foundation in Spain), and brands overtly encourage corporate social responsibility (i.e. UNICEF and the AEPD with their campaign “More than a cell phone”). Public institutions (such as ongoing awareness campaigns by the National Police and the Civil Guard, or the 2023 State Pact promoting appropriate social media use) and multiple efforts in schools

(Goodyear & Armour, 2021) also raise awareness of potential dangers. These instances collectively demonstrate that concern about children's technology use and social media participation is widespread.

Universities are also engaged in ongoing R&D projects worth highlighting, such as the University of Málaga's "Informational Use of Social Media by the Spanish Adult Population: Incidental News Consumption, Technological Factors, and Credibility of Journalistic Content" (PID2023-151698OB-I00), and the recently completed "Truth and Ethics in Social Media: Educational Perceptions and Influences among Young Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube Users," pioneered by the University of Valladolid (PID2019-104689RB-100).

Given that minors in Spain spend more than five hours a day online, essential questions arise: Who is influencing young people? Who is becoming a negative role model (Ruedas-Caletrio *et al.*, 2023)? What role do they play in youth development? And, perhaps most importantly: What negative effects do these negative role models have on mental health (Garrido-Antón & García-Collantes, 2022)? When asked, young people typically acknowledge that there is indeed harm induced from social media use (Giménez-Gualdo *et al.*, 2021), but they tend to attribute it to only affecting others rather than recognizing themselves as potential victims (O'Reilly, 2020).

A dominant stance in the scientific literature affirms that rising mental health problems among adolescents are directly related to social media use and the conflicts it generates (Bezerra *et al.*, 2023; Shannon *et al.*, 2022). However, some studies add nuance: While minors face higher risks online, mental health problems cannot be attributed solely to social media (Livingstone & Third, 2017), as multiple non-digital factors are involved (Keles *et al.*, 2020), and some publications even suggest that the social networking opportunities that social media can provide may serve as effective means for detecting depression or anxiety (Michikyan, 2019).

The perspectives shared above illustrate the issue's inherent complexity. However, there is a dearth of scientific literature focused specifically on the viewpoint of psychologists, the professionals who encounter these issues at the final stages, when minors already present more serious symptoms requiring support unavailable at home or in schools (Shannon *et al.*, 2022).

2. Objectives

The aim of this study is to give voice to Spanish psychologists and gain first-hand insight into their views on how minors use social media and the consequences, both positive and negative, of such use that these professionals identify through their experiences. To achieve this objective, we set one general objective (GO) and three more specific ones (SO1, SO2, SO3), defined below:

GO: Understand, based on psychologists' experiences, the most harmful elements of the relationship between social media use and adolescents/children.

SO1: Identify the types of problems related to social media use experienced by minors who seek psychological treatment.

SO2: Determine which of the problems identified by the psychologists are linked to gaps in minors' training and education as they enter the digital ecosystem.

SO3: Propose, from the psychologists' perspectives, potential multifactorial solutions to reduce the negative effects of social media use.

3. Methodology

We used a qualitative methodology based on Grounded Theory (Gibson & Brown, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 2008), aimed at explaining a social phenomenon within its natural context by drawing from individuals directly involved in it. We conducted 16 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Spanish psychologists using the criteria detailed in subsection 3.2. Overall, seven interviews were conducted in person while the other nine were completed via telephone. After transcription, all interviews were coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti. Interviews took place during the third quarter of 2024. Psychologists were contacted via their LinkedIn, professional email, or by phone in the cases of those whose contacts were made through a third party, with the goal of verifying that each met the four selection criteria explained in subsection 3.2.

3.1. Interview Design

To fulfill the established objectives, we created an interview guide consisting of thirteen main questions, while allowing for input from participants that arose organically during the interview process. Questions were organized into three groups: a) context, b) diagnosis (causes and consequences), and c) proposed solutions. This classification structure aligns with the understanding that “scientific research involves an original, creative proposal within a specific area, demonstrated through experimentation or logical reasoning, contributing to scientific and technological development” (Quezada, 2021, p. 65).

a) Context:

Q1. Do you perceive an increase in the number of minors who require professional psychological care? **Q2.** If so, what specific causes do you believe are contributing to this increase? **Q3.** Do you observe that the amount of time young people spend on social media is excessive? On which factors do you base that opinion?

b) Diagnosis (causes and consequences):

Q4. Do you believe that social media is playing a positive role in the mental health of minors? **Q5.** Delving deeper on this topic, which aspects of social media use among minors do you consider to be the most harmful for them? **Q6.** What affective deficiencies and shortcomings in the quality of social relationships do you observe in minors? **Q7.** Do you think these potential deficiencies have increased with the emergence of social media? **Q8.** Does the culture of image, perfection, photo filters, comparison, etc., generate dissatisfaction, anxiety, or depression among young people? **Q9.** In educational terms, do you perceive that young people receive adequate training regarding social media use that would help prevent mental health problems in the future? **Q10.** Regarding the previous question, what training deficiencies related to social media do you identify in young people? For instance, affective, usability-related, respect-related, understanding how to interact with others, or any other potential deficiencies.

c) Proposed Solutions

Q11. Who do you believe should take the lead in providing such training? **Q12.** Do you consider minors to be aware of the most negative aspects of social media use? **Q13.** With respect to the most problematic aspects of social media use among young people, where do you believe the solution lies in order to reduce its negative impact on mental health?

3.2. Selection Criteria for Interviewees

To determine who would be selected as interview subjects, we first established a set of criteria aimed at ensuring a professional perspective suitable for meeting the objectives of the research. These criteria were:

- a) University graduates in Psychology, holding either a bachelor's degree or a licentiate degree, from a public or private Spanish institution.
- b) A minimum of five years of professional experience in their field of practice. This criterion ensures a sufficiently mature perspective that enables the interviewee to draw broader conclusions.
- c) Direct contact with minors in their professional environment.
- d) Required daily use of at least three of the most widely used digital social platforms in Spain: Facebook, X, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, or YouTube (IAB, 2023). This criterion is necessary because our aim is for our subjects' perspectives to be based on first-hand knowledge of the digital environment beyond the anecdotal information provided by their patients.

Given that this profession is of particular relevance when working with minors, and that their work requires strict confidentiality, our interviewees' anonymity was guaranteed to them when making their perspectives available through publication.

3.3. Codebook for the Qualitative Analysis

To ensure maximum reliability in the development of the findings, we followed a process based on a threefold reading of the interviews, already transcribed in Atlas.ti. The first reading served to familiarize ourselves with the content offered by the participating psychologists. The second reading involved writing memos to identify common elements associated with emerging trends. Finally, the third round involved coding the quotations based on a general category, one of four thematic families. This process led to the creation of a codebook containing twenty-two codes, in which the quotations were grouped (see Table 1). It is important to clarify that some quotations, due to their multiple relevancies, were classified under two different codes, and, in the final review, others were regrouped when the research team determined they were more appropriately placed elsewhere.

Table 1. Codebook Created in Atlas.ti

Family	Code	Brief Description
Convenience of Social Media Use (USO)	USOpos	Interviewees who consider social media to be net positive for young people
	USOneg	Interviewees who consider social media to be net negative for young people
	USOtie+	Interviewees who believe that the amount of time spent on social media is not harmful
	USOtie-	Interviewees who believe that the amount of time spent on social media is indeed harmful
	USOper+	Interviewees who think young people are aware of the risks of social media use
	USOper-	Interviewees who think young people are not aware of the risks of social media
Effects (EFE) of Social Media on Youth Mental Health (SAL)	EFE+	Quotations in which interviewees assert that social media has positive effects on young people
	EFE-	Quotations in which interviewees assert that social media has negative effects on young people
	SAL-	Quotations in which interviewees state that minors' mental health is worsening
	SALred+	Quotations in which interviewees do not identify social media as a cause of mental health deterioration
	SALred-	Quotations in which interviewees identify social media as a cause of mental health deterioration
	PROrel	Quotations in which interviewees state that the overall quality of social relationships is negatively affected
Harmful Factors (PRO) for Children and Adolescents	PROent	Quotations in which interviewees assert that problems arise from the relationship with their environment
	PROcom	Quotations in which interviewees state that comparison and the belief that everything is real are harmful
	PROdist	Quotations in which interviewees state that social media use creates a harmful distancing from real life

	PROauto	Quotations in which interviewees assert that the root of the problem arises from an autodidactic approach to navigating social media
Education (EDU) and Training as Both the Root of the Problem and the Solution (SOL)	EDU-	Mentions in which psychologists state that young people are not adequately educated for the free use of social media
	EDUhog	Mentions in which psychologists state that education should be grounded at home
	EDUcen	Mentions in which psychologists state that education should be grounded in schools
	SOLcont	Mentions in which psychologists state that part of the solution lies in greater parental control
	SOLsen	Quotations in which psychologists state that part of the solution lies in stronger and more effective awarenessraising and prevention initiatives
	SOLleg	Statements in which psychologists believe that part of the solution lies in adapting legislation to the issue and improving access controls for minors

Source: Authors' original elaboration

4. Results

After transcribing, coding, and analyzing the interviews, we present the results of our work. Our focus centers on the fundamental aspects that represent recurring trends and help to situate the professional opinions of Spanish psychologists regarding how they assess social media use among minors in the present moment, what consequences that work entails, and which mentalhealthrelated problems they face. In this section, we also include quoted excerpts that exemplify those elements we consider most noteworthy.

4.1. Multifactorial Causes in the Deterioration of Young People's Mental Health

Before examining the specific aspects of social media, we consider it appropriate to contextualize issues related to the mental health of young people. In recent years, it has become common to encounter news reports describing an increase in psychological problems of varying severity, but is this a reality clearly perceived by our interviewees? Fourteen of them (93.3%) respond emphatically in the affirmative and identify multiple consequences, among which anxiety, insecurity, ADHD (attentiondeficit/hyperactivity disorder), stress, and difficulty relating to others are predominant:

INT1/ Yes, there is greater psychopathology. Mood disorders such as anxietydepressive disorders, and in some cases, suicide risk. Also, I notice a lack of parental skills for managing behavioral problems. **INT15/** Based on the families I see around me, I notice, for example, problems related to frustration management –children who struggle when they must wait to get what they want and who find it very distressing when a situation does not unfold as they expect. **INT14/** I would especially say that there is an increase in selfharm problems, eating disorders, insecurity, socialrelationship difficulties, and low selfesteem.

Without claiming that these disorders originate exclusively from social media use, a prominent current of opinion again points toward the certainty that, when weighing positive and negative aspects, the latter outweigh the former (86.6%), contributing decisively to the increase in psychological problems which, we reiterate, have multiple origins. The experience of the sample in this study positions digital platforms so that their benefits are often overshadowed by the gravity of the more harmful effects that psychologists routinely observe when diagnosing and treating young patients:

INT5/ From my point of view, they do not know how to be bored, and they do not realize that staring at a screen for so many hours is already boring –and this happens to adults as well. The amount of time they spend on it [social media] is excessive because it becomes a tool for comparison, insecurity, and dissatisfaction. They often seek companionship and entertainment there. **INT15/** Social media takes away time that is necessary for activities related to learning how to socialize. I would also say that it eliminates the apparently idle time that is essential for fostering creativity and managing frustration. And even more so, what they grow accustomed to seeing becomes the worldview they ultimately consider real, yet social media is demonstrably biased. **INT16/** The negatives it generates –especially with regard to mental health– are, in my opinion, much greater than the positives.

However, psychologists also identify certain positive components in social media use for young people, particularly regarding socialization. That being said, this minority viewpoint coincides with the opposing one in judging the amount of daily screen time as excessive:

INT8/ They [social media platforms] may help with selfknowledge and are very positive for fostering critical thinking. **INT3/** It depends on the case and on what is understood as excessive. It is a new way of relating to both their immediate and distant environments; They have made social media their space for communication, socialization, and entertainment.

Regarding whether minors are aware of the responsibility and consequences associated with social media use, we once again find broad agreement among psychologists: 86.6% conclude that young people do not possess a clear awareness that would lead them to be more cautious or to channel their efforts into constructive use of these platforms. In the two cases (13.4%) in which psychologists believe young people *are* aware of potential risks, they also agree that such awareness does not necessarily translate into better behavior, as they do not attribute sufficient importance to the issue and do not perceive themselves as potential victims:

INT6/ Many, I believe, are indeed aware, but they do not take the risks as seriously as they really should. **INT14/** Most probably only evaluate the most positive side: the fun, the speed, the accessibility, the reinforcement of a like, a photo, a nice comment...

INT7/ They only perceive the negative consequences if something happens that they can empathize with—something occurring in their immediate environment or directly to them.

4.2. Overexposure, Lack of Parental Control, and the Creation of False Stereotypes: A Combination Harmful to Young People's Mental Health

The already mentioned excess of daily hours that young people spend on social media implicitly leads to an increase in *overexposure*, that is, in the creation of content in which they themselves are the protagonists. They are not merely passive spectators who consume videos and other content. Instead, they show themselves openly and become dependent on the feedback from their audience. In this regard, psychologists identify decisive factors influencing their mental health, such as the constant need to appear perfect, the negative comments they receive, or the belief that the perfection displayed on social media actually reflects others' real lives, thereby generating a comparative effect in which adolescents end up placing themselves consistently in a position of inferiority:

INT13/ Among the most harmful things I see, I would highlight the constant need to show one's body, comparison with others, creation of unrealistic lives, glorification of money, or dangerous trends that even put physical health at risk. **INT4/** Setting aside the lack of real life social interaction, I observe a great deal of concern about the image they present on social media, emotional problems, personal dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and negative self-image. **INT7/** They seek to achieve an unrealistic image and, in many cases, lie about how they look, which leads to anxiety and depression.

The damage caused by social media use gives rise to long-term behaviors when approaching the issue from an affective perspective. This is not a short-term problem that can be corrected quickly. When delving into the mental health consequences, the psychologists interviewed unanimously concluded that all those challenges and problems that arise from social media lead to a reduction in children's and adolescents' emotional skills and, consequently, an increase in affective deficiencies that are essential during these stages of personal development, as much within the families as in their friendships as well as in their wider communities:

INT16/ A deterioration in face-to-face interactions can be observed, both in quantity and quality. They have fewer tools to manage direct contact, and even the expression of emotions has been trivialized –reduced to a single emoji– and it is increasingly difficult for them to put into words what they feel and to resolve conflicts at their root. **INT15/** We are living with a generation of hyperscheduled children who go to English class, piano, paddle tennis, swimming, chess... yet they do not dare play ball with others in the park, because they lack the experience. On the other hand, it has been shown that even in early childhood, children whose parents spend time on their phones in front of them receive less linguistic stimulation. These parents talk to them less simply because one cannot do two things at once.

As we show, parental figures already appear in the comments as a decisive element. Minors' full autonomy coupled with the absence of adult supervision, not merely as passive overseers but as active guides accompanying children through the learning process, both come up organically in conversations with these psychologists, even though they were not explicitly asked. The fact that young people turn to the Internet as their preferred place for advice about what concerns them, bypassing the natural process of receiving support from their elders, contributes neither to the development of optimal nor responsible media literacy:

INT13/ Affective deficiencies stem from the nuclear family. Minors use mobile phones because there is no supervision. Methods of relating to others have changed, and that reality can be both positive and negative at the same time. **INT12/** Affective deficiencies

begin with the lack of communication and real presence of parents. This lack pushes them [children and adolescents] to rely on unhealthy role models they encounter through social media. There, they feel heard and understood by their peers or by others. Their lack of inperson social skills and their selfesteem issues make them vulnerable and easily manipulated by certain online entities. On social media, kids feel safer and less exposed.

To conclude this section, it is important to highlight the severity associated with the dissatisfaction that adolescents and children experience when the content they consume becomes the standard against which they compare themselves. We reiterate the phenomenon of comparison as one of the main factors leading kids to believe that their lives and their bodies could be much better, and that what they see on social media represents a reality to which they must aspire:

INT7/ In therapy, I see many young people who are frustrated with their boring lives and dissatisfied with their appearance. Additionally, a high degree of selfdemand arises regarding issues such as their body, hobbies, travel... **INT14/** Repeated exposure to unrealistic bodies and lives makes this appear to be the norm, and comparison generates dissatisfaction. Scrolling becomes addictive, and the more frequently certain types of content are viewed, the more they appear -repeatedly reinforcing the perception that those plump lips, competitionready muscles, or enormous buttocks are what is normal.

4.3. Educational Shortcomings as a Potential Breeding Ground for the Emergence of MentalHealthRelated Problems

Throughout our analysis, we found various points of view that produced nearunanimous agreement among our participating psychologists. To these we must add the one fully unanimous point of agreement: All sixteen interviewees (100%) warn that the training and education young people currently receive about responsible social media use is insufficient to remain safe given the unfettered access they have to all kinds of digital content:

INT13/ As digital natives, they usually navigate without supervision. Families do not have sufficient knowledge to help them, and within educational environments, kids do not give much value to what adults recommend. **INT16/** In many cases, there are no clear limits that promote rational use, and they are not taught about the consequences of excessive technology use. **INT3/** Training in the use of social media and the Internet should be just as important as schooling in math, history, and other academic subjects.

Yet the question remains: Who should be held responsible for this educational gap? When asked, our interviewed psychologists diverge somewhat between two lines of thought that ultimately merge into one: Responsibility must be shared between what happens in the home and what is taught in educational settings. This distribution of responsibility is thus seen as a shared obligation that cannot be successfully realized without the participation of both parties:

INT12/ It is a joint effort between bettereducated families and educational centers that teach, encourage proper use, and provide training. Public institutions must also support this joint work and provide the necessary human and material resources to carry it out. **INT2/** It must be a team effort between school and family. If one promotes a message and the other invalidates it, no educational consensus will be reached, and no progress can be made. **INT9/** A combination between families, through example, and schools, through technical instruction and safetyrelated guidance.

Although research like the present study often focuses on diagnosing a problem -in this case, through the perspective of psychology professionals- we believe it is essential to also devote effort to identifying solutions or at least realistic attempts to improve the situation addressed in these pages. For this reason, one of the specific questions in our interview centered on

identifying those proposals which, according to the participants, could offer ways to educate and train children and adolescents to more safely, responsibly, and critically use social media. What our participants offer are multidisciplinary solutions that involve not only training but also control and restriction:

INT1/ The solution may lie in trying to assess social media from a perspective closer to reality, as in most cases social relationships and the information shared on social media lack an emotional component—one that allows us to feel and behave accordingly without avoiding more negative emotions such as fear, sadness, or anger. **INT15/** Raising the legal minimum age for social media use in the country. Reinforcing this from schools and secondary institutions and prohibiting mobile phone use during the school day, as done currently in many secondary schools in Ireland. Also, delaying the use of Internetconnected devices for as long as possible, including in education. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for planning, is not yet mature at these ages. **INT4/** Conducting awarenessraising sessions and talks in schools where the negative aspects and consequences of misuse are presented or even featuring young people currently receiving psychological treatment speaking firsthand about their experiences.

Nevertheless, the experience of the interviewed psychologists and their continuous close contact with young people provide a realistic perspective. No matter how many proposals might emerge from different institutions, the solution is not simple and unfortunately may never be complete:

INT7/ Eradicating it completely is impossible, but I believe that good training from a younger age could prevent much of the negative impact. **INT16/** I do not think it comes down to a single solution, nor do I think it is simple. A joint plan that takes into account families, users themselves, teachers, and society as a whole could help shift the current trajectory, but it will take time and effort. I do not believe there is a magic recipe to resolve what is currently taking shape.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The mental health of children and adolescents has deteriorated in recent years. This is a conclusion on which there is complete unanimity among the subjects interviewed for this research. Identifying social media use as the sole cause would not align fully with reality, but in the opinion of our study sample, it is indeed part of the set of causes of this problem (Bezerra *et al.*, 2023; ShohoudiMojdehi *et al.*, 2019) and is by no means insignificant. However, given the amount of time young people spend plugged into social media, we are far from achieving a collective consensus that could improve what we can clearly define as a problem.

From **SO1**, we conclude that personal and physical overexposure, the cult of perfection, the low quality of social relationships, constant comparison, dissatisfaction, the pursuit of external validation, excessive time spent on social media, distraction, and the inability to process the large volume of information they receive, among others, are recurring problems identified as contributing to the decline in children's and adolescents' mentalhealth quality.

Regarding **SO2**, the interviewees state that the balance between the time dedicated to social media and the training received for its use is inadequate, since much of the learning occurs autodidactically. There is no continuous parental control to identify where conflicts occur, and by the time these kids seek psychological help, these behaviors have already become deeply ingrained. Currently, contact with specialists only occurs once kids have reached an advanced stage of psychological distress or behavioral difficulty.

With respect to **SO3**, we observe that the proposed solutions involve a combination of education, training, and stricter parental control (RuedasCaletrio *et al.*, 2023). All three areas are viewed as clearly improvable, and the tools currently used are not considered effective. A supposed lack of time and interest is perceived within households, while educational institutions lack a clear strategic approach. Added to this is a sense of realism—notably not unwarranted pessimism—from these psychologists, who assert that full eradication of the various problems that emerge on digital platforms will never be achieved. Proposing a solution based on the idea that more education equates to the elimination of the problem is simply not realistic. This perspective, grounded in their professional training and experience, points to the need for a continuous state of alert and warns against overestimating kids' ability to responsibly handle social media. According to our interviewees, minors' ability to safely navigate social media is far from reality and rooted in two factors: their dangerous overconfidence stemming from having grown up with the technology (Castro & Rodríguez, 2016) and their inherent vulnerability that the minors themselves do not perceive (MartínCritikián & MedinaNúñez, 2021).

The quality of mental health in minors is a topic of great societal interest and one that is widely reflected in scientific literature (Campodónico, 2022; GarcíaGil *et al.*, 2022; MateoMartínez *et al.*, 2022). From this literature, and from the present article—which we believe fulfills the objectives set forth—it is clear that, as a whole, we must place greater emphasis and expediency on addressing the harmful effects that kids experience as a result of spending so much time connected to the Internet and, by extension, to social media (RubioHernández *et al.*, 2024). Understanding these psychologists' professional opinions, who often receive minors only once the problem has already progressed significantly, and who have a broader and more objective perspective, is essential. Because of their expertise, these psychologists are able to identify origins and causes in order to address them through their practices.

In these pages, we have provided a professional perspective on a problem characterized by numerous perspectives and nuances, as evidenced through the interviews we conducted. The authors are aware of the limitations of our work: Our sample could have been larger or even subdivided into results differentiating between the effects of social media on children and on adolescents, as their patterns of use are not identical. Nevertheless, we consider that despite these limitations, our study contributes to progress in the search for solutions and in framing the ever-evolving problem, from the presentday reality of a group whose professional perspective has seldom been solicited within communicationrelated scientific literature. This article does not respond to an isolated circumstance but forms part of a broader aim: To give voice to various actors connected to childhood and adolescence, such as educators, psychologists, and social workers, in order to ensure that young people's experiences with social media are as positive and as constructive as possible.

6. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

7. Specific Contributions of Each Author

	Name and Surname(s)
Conception and Study Design	Alberto Martín García
Methodology	Alberto Martín García, Álex Buitrago, and Noemí Martín García
Data Collection and Analysis	Alberto Martín García, Álex Buitrago, and Noemí Martín García
Discussion and Conclusions	Alberto Martín García, Álex Buitrago, and Noemí Martín García
Writing, Formatting, and Revision	Alberto Martín García, Álex Buitrago, and Noemí Martín García

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