AN EXPLORATION OF GREEK PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY ADOLESCENTS' SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract: Although the impact of social media on early adolescents is a global concern, research on this topic in Greece—particularly from parents' perspectives—is limited. This study addresses this gap by exploring Greek parents' views on early adolescents' social media usage. Using an exploratory, qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 parents in western Greece, and the data were thematically analysed. Our results indicate that while parents acknowledge some benefits of social media, they are concerned about its effects on early adolescents' behaviour, mental health, academic performance, and linguistic skills. The parents viewed early adolescents as being highly impressionable. They felt unprepared to manage their children's exposure to social media influences due to a lack of relevant information and education. Understanding these parental perspectives can help guide the development of support services to enhance digital well-being among families.

Keywords: social media use, early adolescents, parents' perceptions, Greece, qualitative research

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The proliferation of social media (SM) platforms over the past two decades, coupled with the prevalent availability of smartphones, has profoundly reshaped daily life. SM platforms enable interaction and communication among their users, bringing them together to create their own content: they participate in activities and events and share their own opinions, thereby curating an online identity (Dhir et al., 2021). The impact of SM is particularly salient among the current generation of early adolescents who find themselves immersed in a digital milieu where SM is an integral aspect of their everyday routine, communication repertoires, and entertainment sources (Chassiakos & Stager, 2020). The popularity of SM in this age group is demonstrated by their propensity to adopt novel SM applications (Hofstra et al., 2016), and the rapid global uptake of SM platforms like YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat by children and adolescents (Vogels et al., 2022), as well as the daily engagement with SM of almost all adolescents in the European Union (Smahel et al., 2020)

While research on the benefits and disadvantages of children and early adolescents' engagement with SM is growing internationally, studies in Greece are scarce, especially those investigating parental perceptions. Greek parents may face distinct challenges in supporting and managing their children's engagement with SM, such as the influence of traditional values, economic constraints, and varying levels of digital literacy. Additionally, Greece has experienced significant sociopolitical and economic transformations over the past decade that have impacted public funding and the continuity of educational initiatives, including parental education programmes. These factors, combined with the rising use of SM among Greek children (Greek Safer Internet Centre, 2018), highlight the need for studies like ours, which aims at exploring how parents perceive their children's SM engagement. This has also been reflected in recent international studies, according to which parental attitudes significantly affect how teenagers use social media, including how much time they spend online, which platforms they prefer, and whether they engage in risky behaviours, highlighting the value of balanced parental involvement in encouraging safer and healthier digital habits (e.g., Sharma & Gera, 2024).

SM Engagement by Children and Adolescents in Greece

Some of the studies on the impact of SM on children and adolescents within the Greek context have focused on digital practices (Tsaliki & Chronaki, 2012), usage patterns (Tsitsika et al., 2014), and associated risks and opportunities (Tsaliki, 2012).

According to the Greek Safer Internet Centre (2018), 86% of Greek children had created SM profiles, with 70% having done so before age 13, 34% without parental knowledge. The Centre also found high rates of early SM use among primary (96%), secondary (65%), and high school (43%) students. Around 34% of Greek adolescents show intense SM engagement, with nearly 10% reporting problematic use (Boer et al., 2020). Most children spend less than 2 hours daily on SM, with increased usage on weekends and higher engagement among girls (Greek Safer Internet Centre, 2018). Similar patterns have been observed among adolescents, with most accessing SM

daily and 11.6% exceeding 3 hours of use (European School Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs, 2015). Excessive SM use in Greek young adults has been linked to loneliness, decreased life satisfaction, and depressive symptoms (Giota & Kleftaras, 2013; Vasilikou, 2016), while moderate Facebook use boosted self-esteem and lowered depressive symptoms (Leimonis & Koutra, 2022). Among adolescents, Facebook use has been correlated with extraversion and peer pressure, driven by communication and trend adherence (Botou & Marsellos, 2018; Vlachopoulou & Boutsouki, 2014).

A study of Greek adolescents revealed that 53% had sacrificed sleep and study time for engagement with SM; encouragingly, the same study observed that most adolescents still allocate time for social activities (Botou & Marsellos, 2018). However, worrisome findings emerged from the report of the Greek Safer Internet Centre (2018): a significant proportion of children had compromised their safety online, manifested by accepting friendship requests from strangers, meeting in person individuals they had encountered online, and sharing personal photos online without considering potential consequences.

Support systems that can enable safe SM engagement for children and adolescents include educational, peer, and family environments, which Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified as critical microsystems in child development due to their immediate and direct interactions with the child. This study focuses on the family microsystem, the primary system influencing a child's development. Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological model highlights that individuals shape and are shaped by their environments, implying that both children and parents influence their interactions. Thus, a child's digital competence is significantly affected by family support and guidance. To effectively support parents, relevant stakeholders and institutions must understand parents' attitudes towards their children's SM usage, which is the primary aim of this study.

Parents' Perceptions in Greece

Factors that can influence parents' attitudes towards and perceptions of SM usage by their children include personal experiences, culture, the generation they belong to, and awareness of the potential risks and benefits associated with using SM platforms (Procentese et al., 2019). The international literature illustrates that parents tend to express ambivalent opinions about the effects of SM on their relationship with their children, from fostering strong ties and parent–child interactions (Coyne et al., 2014) to creating isolation and distance within the family (Williams & Merten, 2011). Within the Greek context, however, it has been observed that most parents lack awareness regarding the complexities of SM and fail to grasp the importance of early-age boundaries and restrictions on their children's internet use (Greek Safer Internet Centre, 2018).

As discussed, there is a gap in the literature on parental attitudes towards SM usage by early adolescents in Greece, with existing research focusing mainly on general attitudes towards the internet and digital technology. For instance, a study by Floros et al. (2012) found that Greek parents with negative attitudes towards the internet tended to discourage their children from engaging in online activities while expressing concerns about potential computer addiction. They

noted that the parents' concerns did not necessarily align with their children's actual experiences, nor did they influence the security measures parents implemented at home. Also, parents with limited understanding of online security and uncertainty about their children's online activities were more likely to believe their children were prone to computer addiction, a perception corroborated by the children's self-reports.

A recent study conducted in Greece by Papadakis et al. (2019) that involved 293 families found that most parents hold positive attitudes toward digital technologies and actively support their children learning with the aid of these tools. Nevertheless, parental responses varied depending on factors such as socioeconomic background, age, and level of education. They found that older and less-educated parents struggled to adapt to rapid technological changes, thereby limiting their ability to effectively utilise mobile learning technologies for their children. Conversely, younger and more-educated parents demonstrated greater proficiency in integrating digital tools into the home learning environment.

Rationale

Children often start using SM at an early age, during critical developmental phases, and frequently create profiles without their parents' knowledge, exposing themselves to potentially harmful content (Greek Safer Internet Centre, 2018). Educating children about SM risks and benefits is crucial, which necessitates the education and support of their parents and caregivers. To achieve this goal, it is vital to explore parents and caregivers' perceptions of their children's SM engagement.

The limited existing research on the impacts of SM in Greece is predominantly focused on adolescents and young adults (e.g., Leimonis & Koutra, 2022). However, due to children's early access to smartphones and SM platforms, and the consequent greater risk of exposure to inappropriate content, this study focuses on the perspectives of the parents and caregivers of children aged 11 to 13 (6th grade of primary school, and 1st and 2nd grades of secondary school). Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that in order to understand children's behaviour, it is necessary to attend to the multiple systems with which the child interacts. In order to advance our understanding of the factors contributing to children's SM use, we focus on a key component of Bronfenbrenner's "microsystem" — the family. This is particularly relevant to the Greek context, as most (82%) primary school children in Greece turn to their parents if something goes wrong online (Greek Safer Internet Centre, 2018). However, most parents/caregivers did not experience SM during their youth and may not be confident in their ability to give appropriate guidance. It is thus essential to explore parents' perceptions of early adolescents' SM use. This exploration can inform evidence-based guidelines and support services, which are currently lacking in Greece due to funding cuts and the discontinuation of parental education initiatives like the Schools for Parents. This highlights the need to generate updated, context-specific insights.

Considering the rising use of SM among Greek early adolescents, combined with the limited existing research on this demographic, the research question this study aims to explore is, "How do parents perceive SM engagement by early adolescents in Greece?"

Method

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative, exploratory approach was employed to allow participants the opportunity to substantially discuss their perceptions. This method offers researchers an in-depth understanding of human action and behaviour, acknowledging that social processes and conditions determine human behaviour (Cohen et al., 2007). Specifically, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions were utilised. This approach is flexible, enabling participants to offer clarifications and discuss emerging topics during the interviews. The recorded interviews were transcribed and translated from English to Greek. The translation process was carried out with great care to ensure that the original meaning and nuances were preserved. This process involved multiple researchers who collaboratively reviewed and refined the translations to maintain accuracy and consistency across all materials. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethics approval was given by the Ethics Committee at the University of Patras.

Participants

The participants in this study were parents of early adolescents aged 11 to 13 residing in a rural town located 300 km southwest of Athens in Greece. The sample consisted of 14 parents, comprising 13 mothers and one father, all of whom had at least one child within the specified age range. The gender imbalance in the sample reflects a typical pattern for parents' engagement in their children's education in Greece: mothers tend to be more actively involved in educational matters concerning their children than do fathers, mainly due to time constraints (Angelopoulos et al., 2020.

Data collection was carried out from August to December in 2022. Initially, two pilot interviews were conducted in order to anticipate and resolve any problems or misunderstandings in the interview process. Both purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed. Participants were first recruited from existing networks, aligning with the concept of purposive sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017); these participants then referred the researchers to additional potential participants via snowball sampling (Vogt, 1999). Although the number of participants in this study is small, limiting the diversity of perspectives, in-depth interviews allowed for rich descriptions of the participants' views, perceptions, and ideas. Following the principle of data saturation, interviews ended after gathering sufficient data; that is, when it appeared unlikely that further interviews would reveal new themes.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed thematically to facilitate a clear understanding of the perceptions held by parents. The six-step process set out by Braun and Clarke (2013) was followed: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the report.

From the interview data with parents, three thematic categories with various subthemes (cross-validated by the researchers) were generated. These are presented in Table 1, followed by a supporting narrative analysis. The participants' anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms.

Table 1. *Themes Based on Parents' Perceptions*

Thematic category / Subtheme	Illustrative quote
Purpose and importance of SM	
Entertainment	They use them to exchange photos and videos with friends or play online games.
Communication / interaction	We live in the countryside, in a village, where there aren't many kids. The fact that she can communicate with a friend, talk on the phone, or exchange messages is the only positive thing. Otherwise, it only harms them.
Staying informed / increased social awareness	My daughter had a whole conversation with me about what's happening in Iran, questioning why they operate like that, why girls are treated this way. In other words, information and the transmission of information often have their positives.
Social influence	
Current trend	When a trend, a fashion, is created that "Facebook is trendy", and they follow Facebook, Instagram, and all these platforms, children tell you, "That's how it is, everyone is doing it. I will do it too."
Modelling	They are influenced even in their clothing by the videos on YouTube, by the behaviours they see, those silly things with the foods, and then they come and tell you, "Come, let's make this", which is not actually edible. I mean, all these things are copied from there.
Fitting in	Because all his friends have it, and they discuss it, and since he hasn't seen it, he is tempted to play this game that all his friends are playing and talking about, so that he can fit in.
Parental concerns and considerations	
Mental health and behavioural changes	Sometimes he is aggressive. He has definitely become more "intense". He shouts more and has bursts of anger.
Socioemotional development	In his relationships with peers, I believe it has helped him gain more friends.
Academic achievement and vocabulary limitations	He doesn't pay attention to his studies. He doesn't want to study, doesn't have time to study. He doesn't allocate time for studying. I might have noticed that her way of verbal expression sometimes was different, that she didn't have the range of expressions and vocabulary that I would want for her age.

Results and Discussion

Purpose and Importance of SM

The first thematic category is related to parental beliefs regarding the purpose and importance of SM in early adolescents' lives, from which three subthemes were developed. Parents felt that their children used SM for *entertainment*, for *communication/interaction* with their peers, and for *staying informed/increased social awareness*.

Entertainment

Research highlights SM as a tool offering both entertainment and information, which can impact early adolescents both positively and negatively (van der Wal et al., 2024). While some parents recognised SM's benefits for personal growth, connectivity, and education, they generally viewed it as mainly used for entertainment rather than educational purposes. The parents noted that adolescents spend substantial time on SM platforms engaging in activities like gaming and watching videos, leading to concerns about a "dazed mental state" and social isolation from peers. A parent explained, "Their friends are only online, meaning they communicate through SM apps and play the same games online."

When asked how they attempt to introduce other forms of entertainment into their children's lives, or mitigate what they perceive as "isolation", parents mentioned the need to establish a healthy balance, so that children do not feel isolated, and parents do not feel fearful. As a participant offered: "I believe all parents should be informed on how to approach their children, what social platforms to engage in, which games are suitable for their age. Overall, I think there needs to be an education for everyone on everything."

Many parents discussed implementing time restrictions for SM use or replacing SM with outdoor pursuits and activities, highlighting the significance of responsible and balanced usage. Their perspective suggests that it is not SM itself that inherently entertains or benefits early adolescents, but rather the manner in which technology, including SM, is utilised. As articulated by one participant, "SM does not really entertain him, but engagement with technology does, as he is very curious about it, and he gets pleasure just by being on screen."

Evidently, these parents viewed SM as a tool that can enrich early adolescents' engagement with technology "as long as it is used properly" (as another participant put it). The insistence on proper usage underscores the importance of educating children about responsible digital behaviour and the importance of maintaining a balance between online and offline activities, and between entertainment and more serious purposes.

Communication/interaction

The parents appeared to understand and support early adolescents' need to use SM to connect with their friends and peers, regardless of location, as a means of fostering communication and

nurturing relationships. When discussing the importance of SM in communication and interaction with others, some parents referred to the COVID-19 pandemic, which lead to increased screen time (Pandya & Lodha, 2021). Parents mentioned that early adolescents' need for communication with their friends became more pronounced during the lockdown, with some highlighting how SM helped compensate for the lack of physical contact with friends and peers:

> The need for communication increased during the Covid period. The children were talking to each other; they had formed a group on Viber and were even having video chats, so it had its benefits. They couldn't go to the cinema, so they would share and watch a movie together.

However, other parents argued that excessive usage of SM during the COVID-19 lockdown had detrimental effects on early adolescents, a view that is consistent with research on the adverse effects of prolonged screen time on children's social and physical development (e.g., Kostyrka-Allchorne et al., 2017). According to one participant, "The children were adversely affected on multiple levels as they spent too much time in front of the computer, both in terms of their social interactions and physical well-being."

Many parents observed a heightened impact of SM on their children during the COVID-19 pandemic, with some noting significant behavioural changes that one participant described as "devastating". However, these changes may not be solely due to SM, as the pandemic's social isolation could have led children to use SM as a coping mechanism. The observed negative effects might reflect the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic rather than the long-term impact of SM.

Staying informed/increased social awareness

The third subtheme within this category pertains to parents acknowledging that SM can also have beneficial effects, by enhancing awareness of current global issues and exposing early adolescents to diversity and inclusive practices. One parent stated, "He will discuss something interesting that he saw in some video, some photo. For example, on TikTok he had seen this boy who put makeup on himself. We started a relevant conversation that is now our daily routine."

Discussing interesting topics from SM can foster meaningful family conversations, enabling parents to engage with their children's digital lives and guide their online decisions. This aligns with international research showing that SM usage can promote open dialogue between parents and children, allowing for the sharing of views on important, sensitive, or educational topics, which is beneficial to children's development (Coyne et al., 2014).

How family members perceive the impact of SM, and their confidence in managing everyday challenges, influence their ability to foster positive interactions and open dialogues within the family. Procentese et al. (2019) suggested that families confident in handling daily stressors view SM more positively, seeing it as an opportunity for growth rather than as a threat. This positive

mindset can enhance family cohesion, adaptability, communication, and relationships, contributing to a nurturing environment and beneficial developmental outcomes for children and young people (Chelsey & Fox, 2012; Coyne et al., 2014).

Social Influence

Parents participating in this study believed that SM exerts a significant influence on early adolescents, impacting various aspects of their lives. This second thematic category, social influence, comprises three interrelated subthemes reflecting parental perceptions regarding the mechanisms through which SM influences early adolescents: *current trend*, *modelling*, and *fitting in*.

Current trend

The current trend subtheme encapsulates parental viewpoints regarding one of the primary motivations for early adolescents' engagement with SM: its status as a prevailing trend in modern society. Numerous parents expressed the view that early adolescents are susceptible to peer influence and readily adopt prevailing norms among their peers, including the trend of engaging with the latest SM platforms. This was very concerning for most parents, who perceived early adolescents as conformists lacking agency, whose behaviours and values could be easily moulded. One parent stated, "Unfortunately, we have reached the point of saying that fashion determines people. This is very unpleasant. It doesn't determine opinions; it determines characters, it determines values."

Social influence encompasses how individuals affect others' thoughts, emotions, and behaviours (Turner, 1991). Children and adolescents are more susceptible to social influence than adults are, with adolescents particularly prone to conforming to peer behaviours without reflection (Coultas & van Leeuwen, 2015; Knoll et al., 2015; Song et al., 2012). Although adolescents often adopt conformist attitudes to fit in with their peer group, they may also embrace certain trends to express individuality, while still belonging to a broader social context (Roberts et al., 2004).

Modelling

Modelling, as described by Bandura (1977), involves individuals acquiring behaviours through observation of significant figures like parents, siblings, and peers. The influence of modelling, particularly imitation, increases with the similarity of the individuals (Bandura, 1986). Research indicates that early adolescents often imitate peers, which can lead to negative outcomes such as risky health behaviours (van Hoorn et al., 2016). Greek parents in this study believed that their children's imitation of peers and popular SM content significantly impacted their identity, interests, and behaviour:

> I see that there is a trend there. It fluctuates in clothing, in music, in fashion in general. I see a continuous flow of these things, which are negative. They can cause, they can provoke very great and deep damage to these ages. They will not be able

to create their own character, they will be influenced by factors that are not familiar, they are fake.

Parents in this study tended to focus on the negative behaviours early adolescents model, with no mention of any positive ones. This focus on negativity reflects their primary concerns in this regard, but also portrays their children as lacking agency with limited capabilities to make informed decisions. A couple of parents expressed this view, with one stating:

> What we see on SM is not true. All of us can understand it. Children cannot understand it, children think that's how it is. That's it. Is this how I dress? Oh, that's very nice. Is this how I sing? It's very good, I am successful! They cannot do this; I can handle it. You can. Children cannot understand it.

Parental perceptions of early adolescents as lacking in agency — the "capability to originate and direct actions for given purposes" (Zimmermann & Cleary, 2006, p. 45) — are influenced by early adolescents' cognitive and emotional immaturity (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015) and by a view of parents as the primary transmitters of societal norms (Grusec & Hastings, 2015). In Greece, cultural factors such as hierarchical family structures may reinforce this perception, emphasising adult authority and minimising the perceived autonomy of children (Koivula et al., 2019).

Greek parents' perception of early adolescents as dependent and lacking agency may account for their concerns about SM usage. However, recognising children's agency can improve communication and trust within the parent–child relationship (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). Valuing children's perspectives encourages open dialogue and mutual respect between parents and children, strengthening their bond. Additionally, research indicates that decision-making opportunities help children develop critical thinking, emotional regulation, and social competence, fostering confidence and a strong sense of self (Bernier et al., 2010).

Fitting in

Parents participating in this study felt that early adolescents use SM for the purposes of "fitting in", the final subtheme of this category. Parents believed that even when early adolescents are not particularly interested in the content on SM platforms or related activities (e.g., online gaming), they will engage in them to avoid feeling excluded. As one parent commented:

> All his friends have it, play it and they talk about it, but he was never interested in this game … but he played this game, because all his friends are playing and talking about it, and he was not even participating in the conversation.

Changing the way they present themselves — for example, by adopting a new clothing style or listening to a specific type of music just to fit in with their peers on SM — was also mentioned by some parents. For example, one said, "I am not sure I can call this 'dressing' — she just copies others' style on SM because all her friends are doing so, and I am afraid this impacts her character."

"Fitting in" is directly linked to identity development among early adolescents, which is often closely tied to how they present themselves on SM and is also a significant influence on their well-being (Meeus et al., 2019). Timeo et al. (2020) found that the number of "likes" preadolescents received from peers on their social media posts played an important role in how accepted or excluded they feel, which in turn affects their emotional well-being. As one parent commented:

> It is difficult to set boundaries, like tell them you won't dress like this, when you know they are acting this way because they want to fit in … you do not want to make them feel excluded and miserable, when everybody else is doing it, but you also want to protect them.

Striking a balance between allowing early adolescents to explore their identity on one hand and setting limitations to protect them on the other seemed to be challenging for many parents, who often felt their children's well-being was affected by efforts to fit in. Görzig et al. (2023) noted that family support has the potential to mitigate the impact of perceived discrimination and diminished life satisfaction resulting from cybervictimization. Therefore, parents need to stay updated and promote transparent communication to effectively fulfill their responsibilities as guardians and mentors in the digital era.

Parental Concerns and Considerations

The Greek parents in our sample demonstrated a good understanding of the motivations behind early adolescents' engagement with SM platforms. However, their perceptions predominantly revolved around their concerns, which included *mental health and behavioural changes*, effects on their children's *socioemotional development*, and *academic achievement and vocabulary limitations*. These represent the respective subthemes of the fourth and final theme: parental concerns and considerations.

Mental health and behavioural changes

One primary concern highlighted in the study was the potential impact of SM on mental health and behavioural changes among early adolescents. Parents expressed apprehension about the development of addictive behaviours and the excessive screen time that is often associated with SM use. For example, some mentioned that constant scrolling, liking, and sharing may lead to a disconnect from the real world, affecting overall well-being and potentially leading to addiction. As one parent stated, "It's an addiction … it's a drug, it's a drug! Exactly the same influence. The drug doesn't harm you when you take it, only when you crave it…. You don't think about anything else."

Andreassen et al. (2012) found that the addictive nature of SM is linked to increased stress and psychological distress and can disrupt emotional regulation in young users. Participants in this study observed significant behavioural and emotional changes in their children, including

increased fear, introversion, lack of self-confidence, irritability, anger, and conflicts with parents. One mother stated:

> No matter what you say to him any more … even when you say, "Let's eat," he gets annoyed because you're interrupting what he's watching! And I must admit that we became very, very concerned. To the point where I recorded him on my mobile phone to show him his behaviour, saying, "Look at yourself!"

The participants believed that newly formed online friendships and the amount of time spent online, sometimes exceeding four hours daily, played a role in transforming their child's behaviour. This is in line with research indicating that spending over four hours per day on social media is linked to declines in emotional well-being and a rise in behavioural challenges, including lower self-esteem and more frequent issues with attention, hyperactivity, and conduct (McNamee et al., 2021).

Participants reported significant changes in their children's mental health due to SM engagement. For instance, a mother observed her daughter engaging in self-harming behaviours but struggled to address it effectively, reflecting a broader issue where parents lack resources and tools to manage such serious concerns. This difficulty in communication and support is concerning, given that global research links excessive SM use with increased mental distress, self-harming behaviours, and suicidality (e.g., Ulvi et al., 2022).

Wallace (2022) showed that parents who have reservations about their children's engagement with SM often cite concerns about the dangers of the online world, including online bullying, exposure to inappropriate content, and the potential for SM to foster addictive behaviours. Indeed, one participant in this study stated:

> The child was in the bathroom and chatting through a social networking application with friends, believing that the camera was off; he received, shortly afterward, personal images from their time in the bathroom and threatening messages in English. The messages stated that if they didn't send the money requested, these images would be sent to their family and all of their friends via the email addresses that everyone has on Google.

Many parents focussed primarily on the dangers of SM, which limited their recognition of SM's positive uses for personal growth and skill development (Ziv & Kiasi, 2016). This narrow perspective highlights a gap in parental education on SM, as many parents lack the knowledge and tools to guide their children effectively. The absence of comprehensive education programmes regarding online platforms, privacy settings, and digital etiquette leaves parents struggling to effectively supervise their children's SM use, potentially increasing their children's vulnerability to online risks.

Nevertheless, when asked how they supervise their children's SM engagement to monitor their safety, parents reported using both direct approaches, like asking for passwords and sharing

devices, and indirect approaches, like using their own accounts to check activity and limiting screen time. Opinions on screen time vary, with some parents expressing confusion about their role. This is consistent with the findings of Chong et al. (2023), whose meta-analysis showed that parents of children aged 0 to 12 perceived screen time as having both educational benefits and risks related to overuse. The approaches those parents used — such as setting boundaries and encouraging a mix of screen-based and offline activities — closely resemble the strategies described by parents in this study. Some parents mentioned that they struggle to find offline activities to help manage children's altered moods and irritability:

> I'm trying to get us to go out, to socialise, to have children come over to the house, so that they are not online for so many hours when they come home. We are trying, to the best of our ability, to engage in other activities.

Findings like these highlight the necessity for additional research to address parental concerns regarding early adolescents' engagement with SM. This need is particularly crucial considering international research demonstrating that parents' proactive involvement in their child's media consumption, such as openly discussing media usage or engaging in media use alongside their child, can effectively mitigate risks associated with SM (Chen & Shi, 2018).

Socioemotional development

Parents expressed concerns regarding the impact of SM usage by early adolescents on their socioemotional development, as they have observed children becoming increasingly isolated. Some parents reported:

> They don't want to talk to us, they want everything to happen through a platform.

> First of all, he didn't even know what day it was! The day would go by, he would sit in one spot … he could get a cramp, for example. He would only get up to go to the bathroom, with their mobile phone and tablet in hand.

Several parents also reported that SM platforms had altered their children's social relationships: they were less likely to have face-to-face interaction with other children and when they did, they still communicated with each other on SM platforms. According to one parent, "When they have physical contact with others, they might just sit there. I see it in cafes, at the same table, with everyone on their phones, communicating with each other through their mobiles."

A study by Primack et al. (2017) revealed that young adults who exhibit higher SM use perceive themselves to be more socially isolated than their peers. They noted that this reduced in-person interaction can hinder the development of essential social skills, such as empathy and effective communication, which aligns with concerns raised by the parents participating in this study. However, as previously discussed, some parents spoke about the positive impact of SM on children's social lives, as it allowed them to stay connected with friends and interact with like-minded people.

Academic achievement and vocabulary limitations

The third subtheme of this category is associated with parental concerns and considerations regarding the impact of extensive SM use on early adolescents' academic achievement and their vocabulary. Parents feared that the time spent on these platforms might distract their children from studying and other productive activities, potentially resulting in lower academic performance. According to one parent, "I don't think children can concentrate, I mean, they have essentially diverted their attention because when they hear the beep of an incoming message, their focus immediately shifts in that direction."

The temptation to procrastinate on homework and assignments because of SM engagement was also raised by some participants. For example, one parent commented:

> In his school performance, it's the same; it's just that there is difficulty in sitting down to study. I mean, whereas we could have discussed it once or twice before [before joining an SM platform], now it will be discussed five times, that you should do your homework first and then get on SM.

Parents often struggle to see SM as a tool that provides educational and creative opportunities, focusing instead on its potential drawbacks. However, when used thoughtfully, SM can positively impact academic performance by facilitating collaboration, resource sharing, and coursework discussions. For instance, Junco et al. (2011) found that college students using Twitter for academic purposes exhibited higher engagement and better grades, while Hew and Cheung (2014) noted that SM can enhance critical thinking by exposing university students to diverse perspectives.

Additionally, parents in our sample expressed concerns about the evolving language and communication skills of early adolescents in the digital age. They observed a shift towards more informal and abbreviated forms of communication, driven by the shorthand and emojis commonly used on SM platforms, noting that early adolescents "don't know how to talk or express themselves". According to one parent, "Her vocabulary is really limited, whereas when I was her age, I had a very developed vocabulary because I was not on screen all day long. I am worried this will affect her grades as well."

Concerns about the development of language and writing skills, which are vital for academic success and effective communication, are growing due to the prevalence of casual digital communication. Researchers such as Merchant (2012) have long highlighted the need for educational interventions to provide added support in these areas, and more recent studies (e.g., Pöntinen et al., 2023) argue that flexible use of digital tools can strengthen parent–teacher partnerships by providing a better understanding of students' learning and development.

When asked about the resources they use to address concerns regarding their children's engagement with SM, many parents appeared unaware of any relevant services or organisations

they could turn to. As a result, they tended to rely on other parents and parental groups to obtain both information and support. According to one participant:

> I ask other parents how they are trying to limit the time their children spend online, and I inquire with the parents of my child's friends if they have noticed anything concerning. We discuss the possibility that, at some point, a parent might become aware of an issue, and we agree to alert other parents in the group if something is amiss.

Some other parents stated that they get advice and information from doctors or turn to online resources and seminars:

> I've attended some seminars on the topic, and I seek advice from various sources. I also consult with a paediatrician.

> There's a webpage, I believe it's run by the police, that provides guidance on the use of digital media.

The strategies used by Greek parents in this study reflect approaches similar to those reported by parents in other countries (Duggan et al., 2015). However, participants appeared uncertain about how to effectively manage social media use alongside offline activities and were often unaware of available support resources. These findings highlight the need for professionals and stakeholders to create and communicate clear, accessible digital guidelines in a consistent and effective manner.

In summary, parents recognised the benefits of SM for their children but expressed concerns about its effects on behaviour, mental health, socioemotional development, academic performance, and linguistic skills. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological model highlights the importance of reciprocal interactions between children and their environments, underscoring the need for open, informed discussions about responsible SM use.

Implications

The widespread concern among parents about SM's impact on their children's well-being and development may hinder their ability to recognise its potential benefits. This issue underscores a broader problem: a lack of parental education regarding effective SM use. Many parents in this study lacked guidance on navigating the digital world and instead relied on their limited personal experiences to form opinions about SM. To address this, there is a need for educational programmes on online safety, privacy settings, and how to have constructive parent–child discussions about SM use (Family Online Safety Institute, 2025), which can enhance children's agency and critical thinking. Such programmes could help parents implement effective online protection measures and inform policymakers in Greece to develop regulations and guidelines for SM platforms, focusing on children's privacy and digital well-being (Duggan et al., 2015).

Encouraging positive perceptions of SM among parents can lead to open, constructive dialogues with their children about online experiences. Knowledgeable parents can engage in non-judgemental conversations, fostering trust and making children more likely to seek their guidance, which can help address potential negative impacts of SM on mental health (Madden et al., 2012). Furthermore, parents must model healthy online behaviour, as their actions and attitudes towards SM significantly impact their children's behaviours and attitudes (Vaala & Bleakley, 2015). By demonstrating digital etiquette, critical thinking, and media literacy, parents can help children recognise signs of harmful SM use (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). Collaborating with schools to develop strategies for safe and responsible SM use will also support parents in adapting to evolving challenges and opportunities (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021).

Generally, parental concerns, as expressed by the participants in this study, indicate a need for better awareness and knowledge about SM's impact and functionality. Interventions, like the ones mentioned above, can focus on providing parents with evidence-based information about both the benefits and risks of SM use. Workshops, webinars, and digital literacy programmes can help parents distinguish between unfounded fears and genuine risks, fostering a more balanced and proactive approach.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The present research contributes to the Greek research literature by addressing a critical gap; nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge and address certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results.

One notable limitation of this study pertains to the sample size of just 14 parents, predominantly mothers, residing in a rural area; significant time restraints did not allow for the collection of more data from other areas. Although according to qualitative research standards smaller sample sizes can be acceptable, they often limit the scope of understanding, especially when the topic is broad and pervasive (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A more substantial sample could enhance the robustness of the data and provide a more comprehensive view of parental attitudes and concerns regarding SM in Greece, a topic which affects a broad spectrum of families. Given the significant lack of this type of research in Greece, future studies in this area should collect data from mothers, fathers, and other caregivers living in both urban and rural areas, with varying socioeconomic statuses and educational levels to enhance the applicability and robustness of the results.

Parental attitudes towards SM are influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by broader cultural and generational factors. Older generations, often less familiar with SM and more concerned about privacy, may have more reservations compared to younger, more "tech-savvy" generations (McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). Cultural and religious values in Greece might influence parental attitudes toward SM, and future research should examine these generational and cultural factors to address parental concerns and develop targeted support interventions. Additionally, understanding parents' general attitudes towards SM, including their personal usage and views,

could offer insights into their specific parenting practices and effectiveness in guiding their children's online activities.

Conclusion

This study attempted to explore parents' perceptions of SM engagement by early adolescents in Greece. Parents discussed the role that SM can play in their children's lives, mental health, behaviour, education, and social relationships. They also reflected on their own role in supervising and guiding their children's engagement with SM platforms. While this study did not aim to make generalisations, the exploration of the parents' beliefs provides insights that can inform specific implications for practice.

As SM evolves, parental attitudes will need to adapt to new challenges and opportunities, highlighting the importance of ongoing dialogue and research. Addressing the limitations of current studies will enhance understanding of parental attitudes towards early adolescents' SM use, aiding educators, researchers, and policymakers in supporting Greek families effectively in the digital age.

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