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E-SAFETY IN THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING APPS BY CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS, AND YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	Following the widespread use of social networking applications (SNAs) by children, adolescents, and young adults, this paper sought to examine the usage habits, sharing, and dangers involved from the perspective of the children, adolescents, and young adults. The research question was: What are the usage habits, sharing, drawbacks, and dangers of using SNAs from the perspective of children, adolescents, and young adults?
Background	Safety has become a major issue and relates to a range of activities including online privacy, cyberbullying, exposure to violent content, exposure to content that foments exclusion and hatred, contact with strangers online, and coarse language. The present study examined the use of social networking applications (SNAs) by children, adolescents, and young adults, from their point of view.
Methodology	This is a mixed-method study; 551participants from Israel completed questionnaires, and 110 respondents were also interviewed.
Contribution	The study sought to examine from their point of view (a) characteristics of SNA usage; (b) the e-safety of SNA; (c) gender differences between age groups; (d) habits of use; (e) hazards and solutions; and (f) sharing with parents and parental control.
Findings	Most respondents stated that cyberbullying (such as shaming) happens mainly between members of the group and it is not carried out by strangers. The study found that children's awareness of the connection between failures of communication in the SNAs and quarrels and disputes was lower than that of adolescents and young adults. It was found that more children than adolescents and young adults believe that monitoring and external control can prevent the dangers inherent in SNAs, and that the awareness of personal responsibility increases with age. The SNAs have intensified the phenomenon of shaming, but the phenomenon is accurately documented in SNAs, unlike in face-to-face communication. Therefore, today more than ever, it is possible and necessary to deal with shaming, both in face-to-face and in SNA communication.

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Recommendations for Practitioners	Efforts should be made to resolve the issue of shaming among members of the group and to explain the importance of preserving human dignity and privacy. The Internet in general and SNAs in particular are an integral part of children's and adolescents' life environment, so it can be said that the SNAs are part of the problem because they augment shaming. But they can also be part of the solution, because interactions are accurately documented, unlike in face-to-face communication, where it is more difficult to examine events, to remember exactly what has been said, to point out cause and effect, etc. Therefore, more than ever before, today it is possible and necessary to deal with shaming both in face-to-face and in the SNA communication, because from the point of view of youngsters, this is their natural environment, which includes smart phones, SNAs, etc.
Recommendations for Researchers	The study recommends incorporating in future studies individual case studies and allowing participants to express how they perceive complex e-Safety situations in the use of social networking apps.
Impact on Society	Today more than ever, it is possible and necessary to deal with shaming, both in face-to-face and in SNA communication.
Future Research	The study was unable to find significant differences between age groups. Further research may shed light on the subject.
Keywords	e-safety, social networking apps, WhatsApp, shaming, cyberbullying, privacy

INTRODUCTION

Following the widespread use of social networking applications (SNAs) by children, adolescents, and young adults, The study sought to examine from their point of view (a) Characteristics of SNA usage; (b) the e-safety of SNA; (c) gender differences between age groups; (d) habits of use; (e) hazards and solutions; and (f) sharing with parents and parental control.

SOCIAL NETWORKING APPS (SNAS)

Safety has become a major issue and relates to a range of activities including online privacy, cyberbullying, exposure to violent content, exposure to content that foments exclusion and hatred, contact with strangers online, and coarse language. Cyberbullying is defined as an activity aimed at harming another person by means of verbal or visual messages, using video, audio, and software programs (Genachowski, McDowell, Copps, Clyburn, & Baker, 2009; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014; Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill & Livingstone, 2013). The common forms are harassment, flaming, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion, cyber stalking, cyber threats, the spreading of viruses, attacks against websites, breaking into computers, and more (Genachowski et al., 2009; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014; Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013; Zilka, 2017, 2018a, 2018b).

Social Networking Apps (SNAs), such as WhatsApp and Facebook, are the most popular online apps used by Children and adolescents (Alexa Internet Inc., 2011; Knight & Weedon, 2014; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Miller, 2008; Stevens, Gilliard-Matthews, Dunaev, Woods, & Brawner, 2016; Zilka, 2016). The fabric of our social interactions has recently extended to integrate SNAs, which are now widely used as a medium for communication and networking (Boyd, 2014; Brettel, Reich, Gavilanes, & Flatten, 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). SNAs allow people to connect with each other and to form new connection interactions (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Sheldon, 2008). According to estimates, 81% of online teenagers use social media sites (Madden et al., 2014).

The number of children and youths using social networks is on the rise. Children report spending about 39 hours/month online (Norton Online Living Report, 2009), and although young people use the Internet for both instrumental and communication purposes, the latter is particularly salient in their lives (Dowdell, Burgess, & Flores, 2011; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Zhang & Leung, 2014). By 2006, more than 90% of American teenagers (ages 12 to 17) were using the Internet, and 55% of them reported that they surfed social networking sites (Lenhart, Madden, & Smith, 2007).

Children's and Adolescent's Social World and the SNAs as an Arena for Satisfying Their Needs

Do children supplement face-to-face communication with online communication? Livingstone (2008) invited children to compare communication online and offline, finding that, for 50% of 11-16 year old internet users across Europe, it is a bit or even much easier to be themselves on the internet than face-to-face; further, 45% say they talk about different things on the internet than when speaking to people face-to-face, and 32% say that on the internet they talk about private things which they do not share with people face-to-face. For most children, then, face-to-face and online communication are not especially distinct, but for up to half, the internet offers possibilities for more varied, intimate or authentic communication – something qualitative research shows that teenagers especially can find difficult to manage in face-to-face situations.

As social creatures, individuals aspire to a sense of belonging to a social group, in order to gain recognition and affection from others. Interpersonal relationships play an important role in satisfying these basic human needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943). Friendships satisfy several essential psychosocial needs for children and adolescents, which are not satisfied by other types of relationships. Friends allow individuals to develop intimacy, empathy, and perspective-taking skills, as well as skills for conflict resolution. They also provide companionship, emotional acceptance, and a sense of connectedness, inclusion, and affiliation (Buhrmester, 1990). Studies show that adolescent friendships are reliable predictors of overall wellbeing, self-esteem, and social adjustment (Berndt, 1996; Hartup, 1992).

The present study examined the use of social networking applications (SNAs) by children, adolescents, and young adults. The study sought to examine the following from their point of view:

(a) characteristics of SNA usage;
(b) the e-safety of SNA;
(c) habits of use;
(d) hazards and solutions;
(e) sharing with parents and parental control.

The research question was: What are the usage habits, sharing, drawbacks, and dangers of using SNAs from the perspective of children, adolescents, and young adults?

METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed-methodology. The data were collected in 2016.

Sample

The study sample included 551 respondents from Israel, of whom 71.1% were female and 28.9% were males. For the purpose of the study, the respondents were divided into three research groups: children (up to age 15; 31%), adolescents (ages 15-18; 34%), and young adults (ages 18-24; 35%), with a median age of 18.4 (SD = 3.7). Participants in the study, the adolescents and the parents of minors, signed a written consent to participate in the study. Those who did not sign, and minors who parents did not sign the written consent, did not participate in the study.

Tools

This study used a quantitative mixed-methodology with a qualitative element. 551 participants completed questionnaires, and total of 110 children, adolescents, and young adults were interviewed. The media preference tools were based on previous studies: Ofcom (2010, 2016); Livingstone, Haddon, and Görzig (2012); Livingstone and Bober (2005); Livingstone, Mascheroni, and Murru (2014); Millwood-Hargrave and Livingstone (2009); and Livingstone, Ólafsson, and Staksrud (2013).

Below is the description of the research tools:

1. **Socio-demographic questionnaire**. Such as gender, age, country of birth and economic situation.
2. **Habits of use and fulfillment of needs in SNAs**. Fourteen items, such as: "Why do you think so many children, adolescents, and young adults use SNAs?" "What needs do SNAs satisfy for you?" "What do you like about SNAs?" "What you don't you like about SNAs?" "In how many groups do you participate in SNAs?" "How many messages, on average, do you send per day?"
3. **Effects and characteristics**. Fifteen items assessed on a 5-point scale: 1=not at all, 5=to a very large extent. For example: "Do SNAs help you solve problems in your daily life?" "Do SNAs create problems in your daily life?"
4. **Comparison between face-to-face and SNA communication.** Responses to these eight questions: (a) Where do you feel that there is more feedback; (b) Where do you feel that it is easier to communicate with others; (c) Where do you feel that there are more problems in understanding messages (d) Where do you feel that there is more cooperation; (e) Where do you feel that there is more planning activities and events; (f) Where do you feel that there is more pleasure; (g) Where do you feel that there is more mutual help; (h) Where do you feel that there is more responsibility for and control of the conversation.
5. **Personal interviews.** A total of 110 were interviewed: children (15 male+27 female), adolescents (20 male+20 female), and young adult (11 male+17 female). Interviewees were asked questions to clarify the quantitative findings and to help us understand the reasons behind the findings. The semi-structured interviews covered all the subjects included in the research topics, but the order of questions was determined by the dynamics of the interview. The interviewees wanted to share events they lived through, positive and negative experiences, and some gave detailed descriptions.

Findings

The findings are presented in the following order: patterns of usage of SNAs; the effect and characteristics of SNA usage; hazards associated with SNA usage; solutions for avoiding the risks associated with SNAs; comparison of hazards and solutions in SNAs; and parental control.

Patterns of SNA Usage

Extent of various activities in the course of a week: Distribution indices, connections, and differences. The activities were divided into five main groups, as detailed in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Extent of various activities in the course of a week: Distribution indices, connections, and differences (M=hours per week; Members = face-to-face meetings)

	Distribution ind.			Correlation coef. (Pearson)				t-Test for the row-column difference			
	M	SD	Cronbach α	SNAs	Members	Phone conversations	Independent digital activity	SNAs	Members	Phone conversations	Independent digital activity
SNAs	10.21	5.75									
Members	6.06	4.84		0.260**				14.27**			
Phone conversations	5.69	4.72		0.420**	0.241**			17.89**	1.34		
Independent digital activity	5.50	3.67	0.750	0.428**	0.221**	0.466**		20.18**	2.33*	1.01	
Reading	1.82	2.22	0.493	0.062	0.084	0.032	0.055	31.81**	18.83**	17.20**	20.14**

** p<.01 , * p<.05

Analysis of the connections between the various activities reveals that there are positive and significant correlations between the use of SNAs, meeting with members, telephone calls, and independent digital activity on the Internet. The relationships indicate that these activities are interrelated and reinforce each other. Comparing the amount of time devoted to the various activities shows that the time spent on SNAs (10.2 hours) is significantly higher than the time devoted to all other activities. There was no significant difference between time spent on phone calls (5.69 hours) and time spent meeting friends (6.06 hours), nor between the time spent on phone calls and independent digital activities (5.50 hours), but the time dedicated to friends was significantly higher ($t = 2.33$, $p < .05$) than the time devoted to digital network activity.

Table 2. Scope of engagement in various activities by age group (hours per week)

Activities	Children	Adolescents	Young adults	Total	F Differences between groups
SNAs	8.52	11.06	10.26	10.38	5.564**
Members	5.16	6.64	5.94	6.13	2.441
Phone conversations	4.55	6.06	5.70	5.70	3.475*
Digital activity	5.82	5.91	5.16	5.56	0.157
Reading	0.89	1.71	2.21	1.83	7.557**

** p<.01 , * p<.05

As shown in Table 2, a significant difference was found ($F(2,482) = 5.564$, $p < .01$) in the extent of use of SNAs among children (M = 8.52), adolescents (M = 11.06), and young adults (M = 10.26). Comparison of the amount of time devoted to phone calls revealed that there was a significant difference between children (M = 4.55), adolescents (M = 6.06) and young adults (M = 5.70).

Effect and Parameters of SNA Usage

Characteristics of participants in SNA and face-to-face communication by age group are shown in Table 3 and Figure 1. In some of the tables below, respondents could indicate more than one answer, so that percentages may add up to more than 100%. The questions asked: How old are your friends at SNA? How old are your face-to-face friends?

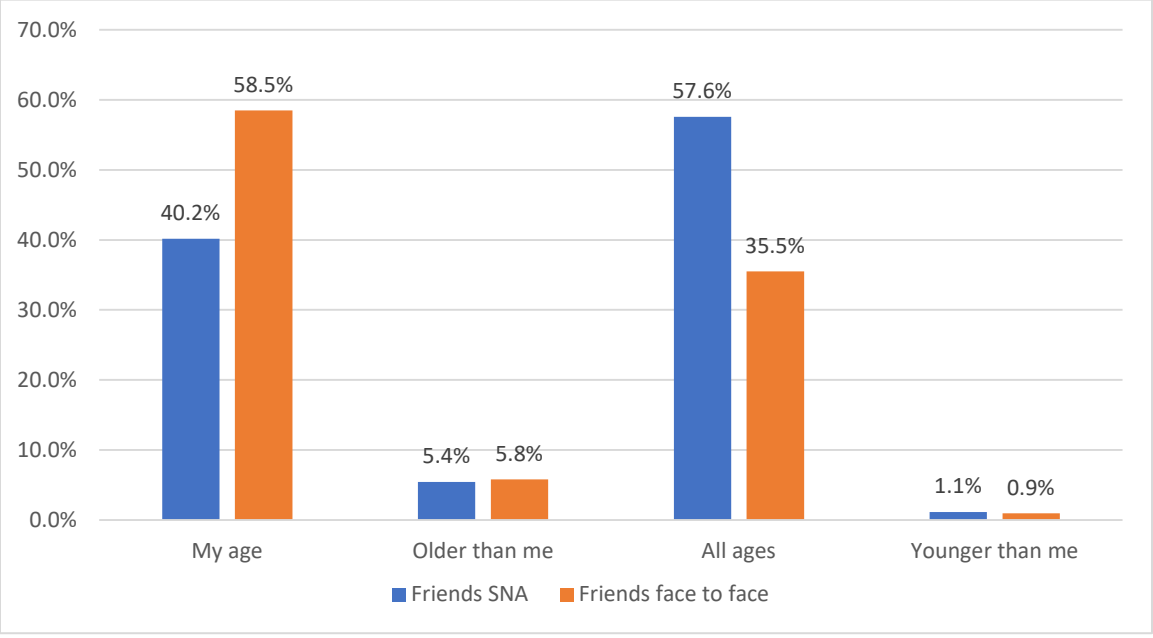
Table 3. Characteristics of participants in SNA and face-to-face communication by age group

		Children	Adolescents	Young adults	All respondents	F Differences between groups
Characteristics of participants in SNAs	My age	50%	38%	39%	40%	6.285**
	All ages	47%	61%	57%	58%	4.683**
Characteristics of participants in face-to-face	My age	79%	69%	51%	59%	8.674**
	All ages	16%	36%	40%	36%	5.805**

**p<.01 *,p<.05

It was found that the percentage of children (50%) who reported that their friends in SNA are of the same age was higher than that of adolescents (38%) and young adults (39%). Examination of the characteristics of respondents who reported that they have friends of all ages in the SNAs shows age differences: 47% of the children reported that their friends in the SNAs were of all ages, compared with 61% of the adolescents and 57% of the young adults.

A survey of the distribution of friends in SNAs and face-to-face is illustrated in Figure 1 below. Respondents could specify more than one answer, so that percentages may add up to more than 100%.



*Respondents could indicate more than one answer

Figure 1: Distribution of SNA Members and Face to Face*

HAZARDS OF SNA USAGE

Table 4 presents the results of the qualitative analysis of the aspects reported by participants when responding to the question regarding what, in their opinion, are the hazards inherent in the use of SNAs.

Table 4. Hazards of SNA usage by age group
(Multiple responses were possible, so the sum of the responses need not total 100%)

	Children	Adolescents	Young adults	All respondents	F Differences between groups
Bullying and offending	47%	43%	38%	41%	3.024*
Exposure to inappropriate content	13%	20%	26%	22%	3.955*
Invasion of Privacy	29%	37%	45%	40%	2.716
Damage to Interpersonal communication	6%	17%	23%	19%	5.366**
Disputes and quarrels	20%	15%	4%	10%	8.357**

** p<.01 * ,p<.05

It was found that the percentage of children who perceived exposure to inappropriate content in the SNAs as a danger (13%) was lower than that of adolescents (20%) and young adults (26%). The percentage of children who believe that the possible damage caused by SNAs to interpersonal relationships of is a risk (6%) is lower than that of adolescents (17%) and young adults (23%).

SOLUTIONS TO SNA-RELATED HAZARDS

Table 5 details the results of the qualitative analysis of the aspects mentioned by the respondents regarding the question about how to avoid the dangers inherent in SNA usage.

Compared to children (19%), a higher percentage of adolescents (36%) and young adults (36%) believed that risks in SNAs can be prevented by assuming personal responsibility. Compared to children (14%), a smaller proportion of adolescents (5%) and young adults (10%) believed that risks in SNAs could be avoided by reducing use. It was found that 30% of the children believed that external enforcement and control can prevent the risks association with the SNAs. This rate is higher than that of adolescents (13%) and young adults (16%) who hold the same opinion.

Table 5. Preventing SNA-related hazards by age group

	Children	Adolescents	Young adults	All respond-ents	F Differences between groups
Personal responsibility	19%	36%	36%	34%	6.031**
Reduced use	14%	5%	10%	9%	7.477**
External enforcement and control	30%	13%	16%	17%	7.855**
Publicizing and awareness	3%	25%	25%	22%	2.766
Technological monitoring	4%	8%	12%	9%	0.898

** p<.01 * ,p<.05

Comparing the SNA-Related Hazards and Solutions

The qualitative analysis of the perception of the problems and dangers associated with the use of SNAs in relation to the perceived solutions of SNAs is summarized in Table 6.

Respondents gave examples of problems and solutions in SNAs. Respondents could specify more than one answer,

Parental Control

An absolute majority of parents use SNAs. As shown in Figure 2, 94% of mothers and 89% of fathers use the applications. Two percent of the parents check their children's phone, the rest do not.

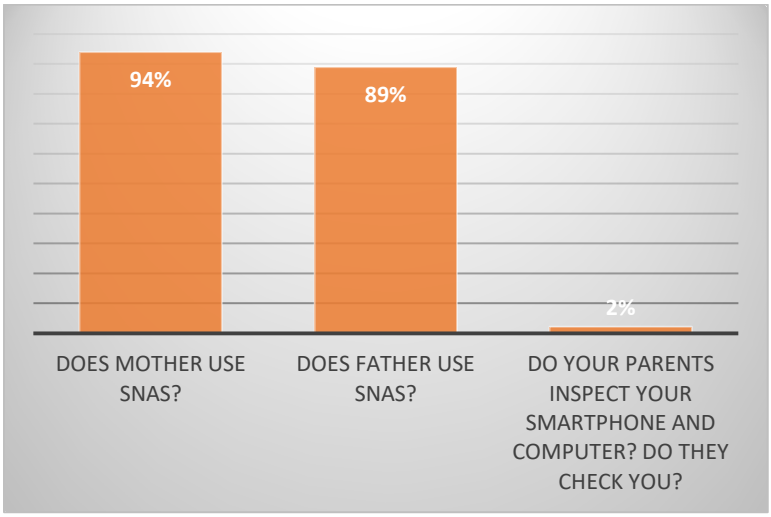


Figure 2. Parents' use of SNAs and supervision of children

The qualitative analysis of the respondents' explanations of the reasons why their parents do not check their phone, by age group, summarized in Table 6. Respondents could specify more than one answer, so that percentages may add up to more than 100%.

Table 6: Analysis of the respondents' explanations of the reasons why their parents do not check their phone, by age group

	Children	Adolescents	Young adults	All respondents	F Differences between groups
Preserving privacy (I do not let them)	14%	16%	15%	15%	3.066*
Openness and mutual trust	10%	19%	16%	16%	0.954
They have no reason / I have nothing to hide	17%	7%	4%	7%	7.132**
I am an adult	0%	6%	12%	8%	6.334**

** p<.01 * ,p<.05

There were no age differences in openness and mutual trust between parents and children regarding parental supervision of phone use. The percentage of children who provided this reason was higher than that of adolescents (7%) and young adults (4%). Most of the respondents who opposed parental supervision were young adults.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine the issue of e-safety in the use of social networking applications from the perspective of children, adolescents, and young adults.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SNA USAGE

Analysis of the correlations between the scope of the various activities shows that there are positive and significant correlations between the use of SNAs, meeting with friends, telephone calls, and independent digital activity on the network. These correlations indicate that the activities in question are interrelated and largely augment each other. A similar finding was reported by Livingstone et al., (2012). The researchers used the concept of "interdependence": the more children use SNAs, the wider the range of opportunities that opens up to them, but they are exposed to higher risks than those who do not use SNAs.

Examination of SNA membership (Figure 1) reveals that it is "cross-age." Most respondents (57.6%) stated that their peers in the SNAs belong to all age groups. By comparison, only 35.5% of respondents indicated that their counterparts in face-to-face communication are of all ages. Only a minority of respondents stated that their counterparts in face-to-face communication are older (5.8%) or younger (0.9%). The findings revealed that, for respondents, the discourse between friends in SNAs and friends in face-to-face interaction is similar, but communication through social networks allows them to connect without restriction of time and place. For example, a 15-year-old girl said she and her cousin shared a hobby; they live in different cities, therefore most communication, information exchange, information sharing, finding of solutions, etc. is carried out through SNAs.

SNA-RELATED HAZARDS

The findings (Table 4) show that 41% of respondents believe that the hazards associated with SNAs are related to shaming, bullying, and harming others, including the distribution of offensive content

or exposure to it. Analysis by age group indicates that the percentage of young adults (38%) who believe that bullying and injury to others constitute a hazard in the use of SNAs is lower than that of children (47%) and adolescents (43%). The findings suggest that the two most significant dangers inherent in the use of SNAs pertain to the possibility of harming others and being harmed by them, and to invasion of privacy. Privacy-related issues are manifest in the fear of invasion of private content or installation resulting from visible presence on the network (such as disclosure of name, telephone number, location). This fear also reflects the distress resulting from lack of control over various possibilities of unauthorized spreading of posts (text, images, recordings, and videos) sent through SNAs. The findings revealed that the most significant hazard mentioned by the respondents is shaming originating from fellow members of an SNA group, rather than hazards originating from strangers. A similar finding was reported by Livingstone, Haddon, Vincent, Mascheroni, and Ólafsson (2014), who discovered that children learned to protect themselves from alien actors (not members of their groups), and that most cyberbullying was happening between group members. It follows that education toward preservation of privacy and refraining from contact with strangers succeeds. A similar result was reported in Zilka's study (2017), which found that the level of children's and adolescents' awareness of safe surfing is medium-high, and that the issue that worries children and adolescents most is cyberbullying by friends, and especially shaming. Therefore, efforts should be made to resolve the issue of shaming among members of the group, and to explain the importance of preserving human dignity and privacy. In the interviews, children and adolescents pointed out the issue of shaming as ever-present and ongoing. For example, they were photographed in embarrassing situations, they took pictures of those who photographed them in embarrassing situations, and so on. Some respondents said they had not read the "usage agreement" of any of the networks they used, but believed that they knew how to act. They thought that shaming was a powerful tool that could be used to convey important messages in a clear and direct way. For example, a lesson was conducted in a class of 15-year-olds on "smart consumption" in various fields. Children gave examples of sensible consumption of food, types of food, and quantity of food, and began to giggle and made offensive remarks about one of the students. The student did not respond to the offensive comments. At the end of the lesson, the student recorded in the SNA used by the class each of the offensive comments, with the name of the student who said it. When the comments were said in class face-to-face, the students giggled, but when they saw the notes posted in the SNAs, the class was outraged. Some were stunned by the abusive remarks addressed to the student, and others accused her of shaming. The students' comments were recorded in the exact language spoken in the classroom. SNAs are a powerful tool, and therefore the effect they create is strong.

The Internet in general and SNAs in particular are an integral part of children's and adolescents' life environment, so it can be said that the SNAs are part of the problem because they augment shaming. But they can also be part of the solution, because interactions are accurately documented, unlike in face-to-face communication, where it is more difficult to examine events, to remember exactly what has been said, to point out cause and effect, etc. Therefore, more than ever before, today it is possible and necessary to deal with shaming both in face-to-face and in the SNA communication, because from the point of view of youngsters, this is their natural environment, which includes smart phones, SNAs, etc.

Nineteen percent of the respondents (Table 4) stated that the difficulty in interpreting messages may cause problems in interpersonal communication and therefore lead to shaming. More young adults (23%) and adolescents (17%) admitted having problems related to interpersonal communication in the SNAs than did children (6%). At the same time, it was found that the percentage of young adults who cited SNAs as a cause of quarrels and arguments (4%) was lower than that of adolescents (15%) and children (20%). In other words, the children's awareness of the connection between failures of communication through SNAs on the one hand, and quarrels and arguments on the other is low. Increasing awareness of the difficulties in interpersonal communication in this environment may reduce arguments, quarrels, and shaming among children.

Thirty-four percent (Table 5) of the respondents believed that the hazards can be avoided through the personal responsibility of the users, who should be aware of the risks and dangers of using the SNAs and must use the applications in a controlled and intelligent manner. Twenty-two percent of respondents believed that it was possible to reduce the hazards by publicizing and raising public awareness of the issue, among others, through educational activities in schools and other frameworks. In addition, 17% believed that external control—for example, through the supervision carried out by other companies or organizations, and the use of censorship and blocking measures—can help prevent hazards. Nine percent of respondents believed that the hazards can be prevented by means of technological control, i.e., by developing measures that prevent certain users from behaving in certain ways, and at the same time enable the victims to use tools within the application against the dangers to which they are exposed. Thirty percent of the children believed that external enforcement and control can prevent the hazards of SNAs, which are higher than the rate of the adolescents (13%) and of young adults (16%) who believed so. As the age increases, awareness of personal responsibility increases as well, as does the understanding of the Internet environment as one in which restrictions are difficult to enforce, as was found in previous studies on the nature of the Internet (Zilka, 2017, 2018b; Livingstone, Haddon, & Görzig, 2012; McGonagle, 2011; Van Dijk, 2006).

Children, adolescents, and young adults felt that they were aware of the negative potential, as well as of the hazards inherent in the use of SNAs. These findings corroborate those of previous studies (Clark, 2013; Duerager & Livingstone, 2012; Lim, 2016; Zilka, 2014, 2016, 2017) that examined the awareness of the hazards to users of SNAs and of the Internet in general.

Parental Control

The study found that no parental control is usually exercised. Only 2% of respondents reported that their parents checked their smartphone and computer and monitored them (Figure 2); 15% of respondents (Table 6) said they would not allow parents to look at their smartphone and computer, usually because such monitoring was perceived as an invasion of their privacy. In contrast, 16% of respondents stated that there was openness and mutual trust between them and their parents, as well as some cooperation. They exposed and shared with their parents content and issues related to the use of social networks, and their parents limited the monitoring to this exposure, and exercised ethical control, by emphasizing their trust in their children's ability to use the SNAs appropriately. There were no age differences with regard to openness and mutual trust between parents and children in the process of parental supervision of SNA usage.

Conclusion

Today more than ever, it is possible and necessary to deal with shaming, both in face-to-face and in SNA communication. Therefore, efforts should be made to resolve the issue of shaming among members of the group, and to explain the importance of preserving human dignity and privacy. The Internet in general and SNAs in particular are an integral part of children's and adolescents' life environment, so it can be said that the SNAs are part of the problem because they augment shaming. But they can also be part of the solution, because interactions are accurately documented, unlike in face-to-face communication, where it is more difficult to examine events, to remember exactly what has been said, to point out cause and effect, etc. Therefore, more than ever before, today it is possible and necessary to deal with shaming both in face-to-face and in the SNA communication, because from the point of view of youngsters, this is their natural environment.

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