

Evaluating the Legal and Ethical Implications of Social Media Use for Children's Mental Health, Academic Performance, and Behavioural Development

Rahul Jain¹, Dr. Khushboo Natholia²

¹Research Scholar, School of Law, Bennett University

²Assistant Professor, School of Law, Bennett University

ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the ethical and legal aspects of children's social media use and its effects on mental development, academic performance, and behaviour. Social media has several advantages, including opportunities for self-expression, building peer relationships, social support, and education. However, it can also produce negative effects, such as addiction to social networking and internet-related problems that contribute to stress, anxiety, sleep disorders, and interpersonal and educational difficulties. The evidence obtained in the course of this study does not provide clear proof that social networking negatively affects the mental health of children. A comparative legal analysis provided insight into differences in legislation regarding children among countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), China, Australia, the United States (US), and India, concerning children's privacy, age assurance, platform responsibilities, content moderation, and regulatory oversight. Instead of ranking different national legal systems, this study highlights the varying ways in which they operate and their limitations. The study advocates for age verification through privacy-preserving age assurance, child-centric safety by design, minimisation of data use, transparent recommendation systems, accessible complaint and remedy systems, digital literacy, and effective oversight by regulators. An adapted Technology, Organisation and Environment (TOE) framework is proposed to help organise these recommendations, combined with a child rights and best interests approach.

Keywords: Social media, children, psychological well-being, academic performance, social behaviour, cyberbullying, digital literacy

INTRODUCTION

Social media refers to numerous online platforms where users can create profiles, interact with others, build social networks, post content, and participate in online communities (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Although social media was built on earlier Internet-based communication services, it became very popular in the 1990s and 2000s. It

changed social interactions by making communication more immediate, visible, enduring, and data-driven.

Modern social media platforms display recommendatory structures, personalisation algorithms, Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications, and heavy use of data in advertising. These mechanisms can be advantageous for children and adolescents, as they facilitate communication and information search (Best et al., 2014; Naslund et al., 2020). At the same time, they can bring about adverse consequences such as social comparison, cyberbullying, the possibility of seeing illegal materials, lack of privacy, persuasive design elements, and addiction (Nesi et al., 2018; Véronneau & Schwartz-Mette, 2021). Thus, while the consequences of social media are not identical for everyone, they depend on age, developmental level, mental health, and the type of platform used (Beyens et al., 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Therefore, it cannot be conclusively established from current evidence whether the overall impacts of social media platforms are positive or negative. Literature reviews have indicated connections between social media use and depression, anxiety, and mental distress in some cases (Keles et al., 2020; Cataldo et al., 2021). However, most of these studies were cross-sectional and did not provide evidence of causality. Similarly, umbrella reviews also show that the extent of the effects that social media use has on adolescent mental health is relatively low (Valkenburg et al., 2022). On the other hand, recent studies indicate that the effects of social media can vary from one adolescent to another, even having a counteractive effect (Beyens et al., 2020).

Several meta-analytic studies have produced negative correlations between certain forms of social media networking and academic performance (Liu et al., 2017; Marker et al., 2018). However, the effects will vary according to the kind of social media used, usage frequency, and context of utilisation. Even so, social media represents a revolutionary element in peer relations and communication, used to connect people and increase interactions; it can facilitate the process of forming their own identity and, at the same time, intensify peer pressure, increasing their vulnerability to being victimised in cyberspace (Nesi et al., 2018; Véronneau & Schwartz-Mette, 2021).

There are challenges not just legally but also ethically associated with these developments. Children's privacy and information collection, targeting and influence with the help of technologies, age verification, accountability regarding cyberbullying, harmful content, etc., are some of the legal issues for which international comparison cannot be done unless criteria are set beforehand. For instance, the UK has passed a Children's Code, which is combined with other national regulations on Internet safety. At the same time, the government of Australia decided to set the minimum age for online services, and the United States adopted a law that protects children below 13 years. India has also enacted new legislation concerning how the code is applied to digital information, called the Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023, thereby ensuring the protection of children's data (DPDP Act, 2023).

The current research explores how social use affects the psychological health, academic achievement, and behaviour of children. The study looks at all the positive as well as negative aspects of social media usage, ranging from psychological well-being and educational aspects to cyberbullying, online harassment, and behavioural issues. It also compares the regulatory and legal systems of countries such as India, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), China, and Australia, pertaining to child online safety, privacy protection, age verification measures, platform accountability, regulatory institutions, etc. The scholarly articles are drawn from various disciplines, including law, psychology, education, public health, and digital ethics, to highlight problems within regulatory systems, shortcomings of regulatory bodies, and difficulties faced by policymakers. The evaluation does not merely highlight regulatory systems across countries; it evaluates approaches employed by different jurisdictions and assesses their advantages, gaps, and disadvantages.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative doctrinal research methodology to examine the legal and ethical aspects associated with children using social media and how such usage affects their mental health, educational achievement, and behaviour development. The study uses both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are represented by statutory laws, delegated legislation, and regulatory frameworks. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government reports, and policy documents. A comparative analysis was employed to assess the implementation of various regulatory regimes concerning children's online safety and mental health protection across different selected jurisdictions. This approach facilitates the essential assessment of the benefits, drawbacks, and emerging challenges associated with the existing legal and policy framework concerning children's utilisation of social media.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social Media and Children's Psychological Well-being

The reviewed literature indicates that, over the years, children's and adolescents' exposure to social media has become multifaceted, with both positive and negative consequences. There are many opportunities through which children and adolescents can express themselves, socialise with one another, receive social support, and gain knowledge about mental health. For those who are marginalised or have difficulty accessing mental health services, the medium can also be used. (Best et al., 2014; Naslund et al., 2020). Even so, realising such gains is conditional; it may depend on various factors, e.g., age, educational/financial level, usage style, and types of interaction among users in digital space.

Such evidence about mental health outcomes cannot be read as direct evidence of causality; rather, it is merely a correlation. Systematic reviews have reported associations between social media use and depression, anxiety, psychological distress, and sleep problems, but much of the available evidence is cross-sectional and susceptible to reverse causation and confounding (Cataldo et al., 2021; Keles et al., 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022). In addition, effects are not uniform across users. Experience-sampling research found that some adolescents experienced improved well-being after social media use, some experienced no measurable change, and a smaller group experienced negative effects (Beyens et al., 2020).

Appearance-based social comparison is one possible pathway to harm. For example, Fardouly et al. (2015) examined young women's exposure to Facebook-related social comparison and body-image concerns. As the study did not focus on children, its findings should be presented as evidence concerning young women rather than generalised to all children.

Cyberbullying is a more specific form of online victimisation. Research among middle-school students has identified an association between cyberbullying experiences and lower self-esteem (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Systematic reviews and meta-analyses reveal associations of cyberbullying with mental health outcomes, such as depressive symptoms and self-harm. However, prevalence estimates vary depending on how cyberbullying is defined and measured. (John et al., 2018; Kowalski et al., 2014).

Social media and academic Performance

Social networking sites can help learners access educational materials, collaborate with classmates, and communicate with peers during educational disruptions. This positive influence needs to be distinguished from contradictory evidence on students' academic performance. A meta-analysis has shown a negative association between various categories of social networking and academic success. However, the strength and reliability of the correlation depend on

how, why, and to what extent social networks are used (Liu et al., 2017; Marker et al., 2018).

Problematic or distracting use may affect academic outcomes through task-switching, reduced concentration, poor time management, and sleep disruption. Rosen et al. (2013) found that students frequently shifted away from study tasks due to technological distractions, including social media. Research with middle- and high-school students has also reported that heavier social media use was associated with lower school connectedness and weaker academic performance. However, the cross-sectional design precludes firm causal conclusions (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2019).

The evidence therefore does not support the claim that social media inevitably reduces academic performance. A more accurate conclusion is that intensive, distracting, or poorly regulated use may be associated with weaker academic engagement, whereas purposeful educational use may confer learning benefits.

Social media and children's social behaviour

The use of social media reshapes interpersonal relationships by enabling quicker, more visible, permanent, and far-reaching forms of social communication. It fosters friendship-making, personal identity, peer support, and involvement in communities that are not available offline (Nesi et al., 2018; Véronneau & Schwartz-Mette, 2021). However, the public and permanent nature of online communication heightens peer conflicts, social comparisons, ostracism, cyberbullying, and pressure for social status. It has been suggested that social comparison and feedback-seeking correlate with symptoms of depression in teenagers; this is especially true when online status and looks become the main points of self-evaluation (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Nevertheless, the claim that social media use decreases empathy or undermines face-to-face contact requires more precise evidence and should not be presented as a fact. Likewise, Crone and Konijn (2018) characterise adolescence as a period of heightened sensitivity to peer distress, and their review does not establish that social media use impairs brain development.

The idea that technology use at an early age, before 11 years old, makes others vulnerable needs to be excluded unless reliable longitudinal studies strongly support it. To put it in another way, age should not automatically be seen as a reason for adverse effects; instead, the consequences are determined by aspects like social support from the family, ability to use digital tools, personal encounters with material, how the interfaces are built, the networks one has, and the level of mental well-being in the child.

Live incidents

According to recent newspaper reports from India, several incidents have indicated the impact of cyberbullying on children who are exposed to these forms of harassment, whether academic or psychological. For instance, a doctor from King George's Medical University in Lucknow revealed that there was a 16-year-old girl who was ridiculed for her looks on Facebook and, as a result, developed a serious eating disorder alongside her weight loss. Another incident in the same report was when a 13-year-old boy faced a case of cyberbullying through WhatsApp chats, and the consequence of that was that he left school altogether. These two incidents suggest that being embarrassed online might lead to severe problems like becoming socially isolated, eating disorders, and even dropping out of school. However, these cases by themselves cannot be taken as evidence of any causal relationship, nor do they describe how often these sorts of events happen (Chauhan, 2025).

In Lucknow, it has been reported that a report has been issued about a 13-year-old female student of Class 8 who was accused of suffering a long period of harassment, blackmail, and cyberbullying at the hands of her schoolmates. According to her mother's police complaint, the alleged perpetrators accessed the girl's Instagram account, sent inappropriate messages under the girl's name and threatened to expose the private communications with her. As a result, the girl stopped going to school and even underwent therapy sessions for her state of depression and other related health issues (The Times of India, 2025).

4. Broader Legal and Ethical Considerations

Broader legal and ethical considerations	India	United Kingdom (UK)	United States (US)	China	Australia
Age verification & data protection	No uniform statutory age-assurance system applies to all social-media accounts. The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code)	The Age Appropriate Design Code (Children's Code), 2020 applies to online services likely to be accessed by children and establishes 15 age-appropriate design standards. The	The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), 1998 requires covered services to obtain verifiable parental consent before collecting personal information from children under	The state uses real-name authentication in specified services, particularly online games and some live-streaming services. The framework should not be	The Privacy Act, 1988 provides general privacy protection. A Children's Online Privacy Code is being developed under the Privacy and Other Legislation Amendment Act, 2024. Age-

	Rules, 2021 provide intermediary duties and grievance mechanisms. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 contains child-specific protections, but their commencement is phased.	Online Safety Act, 2023 requires child-access and child-risk assessments.	13. It does not create a general age-verification rule for all social-media users.	described as a universal social-media age-verification system.	restricted platforms are expected to take reasonable steps to prevent under-16 accounts under the social-media minimum-age framework.
Psychological harm and addiction	No comprehensive statutory duty specifically regulates addictive social-media design or children's mental health. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 contains protections against processing likely to harm children, but the relevant provisions are subject to phased commencement.	The Online Safety Act, 2023 requires risk assessment and proportionate safety measures for harmful content. The Children's Code, 2020 promotes best-interests and privacy-by-design principles.	The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), 1998 focuses on children's personal information rather than addiction or mental-health harms. Broader platform-safety proposals remain distinct from enacted federal law.	China regulates online addiction through platform controls, youth-management functions, content governance, and strict limits on online gaming. These controls raise questions concerning privacy, autonomy, surveillance, and proportionality.	The Online Safety Act, 2021 addresses harmful content and cyberbullying, while the social-media minimum-age framework seeks to reduce exposure to online risks. These measures should not be described as a comprehensive mental-health statute.
Cyberbullying and harassment	Cyberbullying is addressed through a combination of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, general criminal law, and, where sexual abuse is involved, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 and the Information Technology Act, 2000. India has no single comprehensive cyberbullying statute.	Platform duties arise under the Online Safety Act, 2023, while criminal communication offences and school safeguarding obligations operate through separate legal frameworks.	There is no single federal law specifically addressing bullying. States have differing laws, policies, and regulations addressing bullying and cyberbullying.	The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors, 2020 (effective 2021) and cyberspace regulations address harmful content, cyberbullying, privacy violations, and online protection within a highly centralised regulatory system.	The Online Safety Act, 2021 gives the eSafety Commissioner powers to receive complaints and issue removal notices concerning serious cyberbullying and other harmful content directed at Australian children.

Platform accountability	Significant social media intermediaries must appoint compliance and grievance officers and follow due diligence requirements under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. These duties are not exclusively child-specific.	Regulated services must assess risks to children, implement protections, maintain records, and comply with Ofcom oversight under the Online Safety Act, 2023.	Accountability is divided among the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), state authorities, schools, and private litigation. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), 1998 provides a limited federal privacy framework for children under 13.	Platforms operate within extensive identity, licensing, content governance, and state supervision requirements. Regulation is extensive, but this does not eliminate non-compliance.	The eSafety Commissioner administers the Online Safety Act, 2021 through online-safety complaints and regulatory schemes. Platform obligations include compliance with safety codes, reporting duties, and the social-media minimum-age framework.
Ethical challenges	Key issues include balancing child protection, autonomy, privacy, parental consent, cultural diversity, and limited institutional capacity.	The principal ethical tension concerns protecting children while preserving participation, privacy, autonomy, and access to lawful content.	Major concerns include data collection, targeted advertising, weak protection for teenagers, free expression, and fragmented enforcement.	The central ethical tensions involve state surveillance, real-name systems, content control, privacy, and children's autonomy.	Key concerns include privacy-preserving age assurance, proportionality, access to support, and the risk that protective restrictions may exclude children from beneficial online participation.

Figure 1 - "Comparative Analysis of Legal and Ethical Frameworks for Child Online Safety Across India, the UK, the US, China, and Australia"

The comparison should not rank national systems as simply “strong” or “weak,” because the selected jurisdictions represent different regulatory models. The UK combines privacy-by-design standards under the Age Appropriate Design Code (Children’s Code), 2020, issued under the Data Protection Act 2018, with child-risk assessment, platform accountability, and online-safety duties under the Online Safety Act 2023. Australia combines online safety regulation and eSafety enforcement under the Online Safety Act 2021, privacy protections under the Privacy Act 1988, the developing Children’s Online Privacy Code under the Privacy and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2024, and social media minimum-age measures introduced through the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024. The main source of online safety legislation in the US is the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) of 1998. State laws against bullying, school guidelines, the application of consumer protection laws by the Federal Trade Commission, and federal suggestions for online safety reform often complement COPPA.

India has relevant legislation through the promulgation of the Information Technology Act 2000, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act 2012, the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021, and the DPDPA Act, 2023. However, as these pieces of legislation fall under different regulatory domains, the provisions concerning children in the DPDPA Act can be implemented in phases. Thus, India cannot be said to lack the relevant legislation. However, the actual criticism should concern the absence of a unified framework for children in an online context, as well as difficulties in properly executing the current legislation.

China represents a highly centralised regulatory model based on identity authentication, platform supervision, content governance, youth-management functions, and strict online-gaming restrictions. This framework is reflected in the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Minors (revised 2020, effective 2021), the Personal Information Protection Law 2021, and related cyberspace regulations. While this model may reduce certain forms of harmful exposure and excessive online use, it also raises significant ethical questions concerning surveillance, privacy, freedom of expression, proportionality, and children’s autonomy.

5. Cross-National Comparison of Child Mental Health and Digital Safety Mechanisms

Governance indicator	India	United Kingdom (UK)	United States (US)	China	Australia
Mental-health governance	Governed through the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Central Mental Health Authority, and State Mental Health Authorities (SMHAs).	Mental-health governance is devolved. NHS bodies provide Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), while the Care Quality Commission (CQC) regulates health and social-care services in England.	The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides federal policy leadership, while service delivery is largely organised through state, local, Medicaid, and private systems.	The National Health Commission provides national health policy leadership, with mental health and child services delivered through national, provincial, and local systems.	The National Mental Health Commission provides independent advice, monitoring, reporting, and reform support; service delivery is shared between federal, state, and territory governments.
Child and adolescent services/oversight	Child and adolescent services operate within broader health and mental-health systems; no dedicated national digital mental-health review board exists.	CAMHS and school-based mental-health services are established service pathways, supported by child-protection and safeguarding frameworks.	Child and adolescent services operate through state, local, school, and healthcare systems; no single national child digital mental health oversight body exists.	Pediatric and child mental-health services are expanding through National Health Commission initiatives, but no single national digital mental health review board has been identified.	Youth services and national advisory programmes exist, but the National Mental Health Commission is not a service regulator or child mental-health review board.
Digital grievance and redress	The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 require grievance officers and intermediary complaint mechanisms.	Ofcom administers online-safety duties under the Online Safety Act, 2023, while the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) handles data-protection complaints.	The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) enforces COPPA (1998); cyberbullying complaints and school responses vary across states.	Complaints and platform controls operate within a centralised state-regulatory framework involving content governance and platform supervision.	The eSafety Commissioner operates complaint, investigation, and removal mechanisms for serious cyberbullying, harmful online content, and image-based abuse.
Online safety and platform regulation	The Information Technology Act, 2000, the IT Rules, 2021, and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 regulate intermediaries, data processing,	The Online Safety Act, 2023 imposes child-risk assessment, safety, record-keeping, and compliance duties on regulated online services.	COPPA (1998) regulates children's online privacy for users under 13; broader online-safety regulation	Online regulation includes the Law on the Protection of Minors (2020, effective 2021), the Personal Information Protection Law	The Online Safety Act, 2021 creates enforceable platform obligations, supported by the eSafety Commissioner and the social-

	and child-related digital protections.		remains fragmented across federal and state systems.	(2021), real-name requirements in specified services, and youth online protections.	media minimum-age framework.
Integration of mental-health and online-safety law	Integration remains partial: mental-health, child-protection, data-protection, and intermediary regulation operate through separate statutory instruments.	The Children's Code (2020) and Online Safety Act (2023) complement health and child-protection systems but do not constitute a single integrated mental-health framework.	The system remains fragmented across privacy law, state anti-bullying laws, education policies, and separate mental-health systems.	The model is more centrally coordinated, but raises important questions concerning surveillance, privacy, proportionality, and children's autonomy.	Online safety, privacy, and mental health governance interact through multiple institutions but remain institutionally separate rather than fully integrated.

Figure 2- “Cross-National Comparison of Child Mental Health and Digital Safety Mechanisms (as of 2023) Across India, the UK, the US, China, and Australia”

The cross-national comparison shows that child mental health governance and digital safety regulation are organised through distinct institutional and regulatory models. India relies on a combination of the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017; the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021; the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012; and the DPDP Act, 2023. However, these legal instruments operate through separate administrative and regulatory systems, and India does not currently have a single national mechanism dedicated to addressing the relationship between children's mental health and digital-platform risks.

The UK combines NHS-delivered CAMHS with data-protection safeguards under the Age Appropriate Design Code (Children's Code), 2020, and platform-safety obligations under the Online Safety Act, 2023. Through SAMHSA, the US combines federal policy leadership with children's privacy protection under COPPA, 1998; however, cyberbullying regulation and the provision of mental-health services remain significantly decentralised across federal, state, and local levels. In contrast, China's regulatory framework is much more centralised, with the national health administration playing a crucial role, alongside real-name registration on certain online platforms, content governance, youth management systems, and strict regulations on online gaming. Australia combines the advisory and monitoring functions of the National Mental Health Commission with the regulatory powers of the eSafety Commissioner, as defined in the Online Safety Act 2021, and privacy protection measures in accordance with the Privacy Act of 1988 and the emerging social media minimum-age framework.

These systems cannot be classified as either “strong” or “weak”. Rather, this comparison must include other regulatory aspects, such as the availability of child-oriented mental health services, data protection mechanisms, age verification systems, the obligation of an online platform to evaluate messages, the grievance and removal process, the independence of regulatory authorities, enforcement activities, and access to mental health services. It is pertinent that the serious problem India faces is not caused by the absence of proper legislation, but rather by the fragmented distribution of regulatory authority, the gradual implementation of particular legal provisions, the varying capacities of various institutions, and the absence of a mechanism for connecting the harms caused by digital platforms with the process of governing mental health services for children and adolescents.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

According to the findings of the study, social media usage cannot be unequivocally categorised as either negative or positive for children and young people. Instead, the effects of social media depend on various factors, including the user's purpose for using social media, how much time is spent on social media, the types of social media content consumed, the quality of the specific platform, and the developmental age and social context of the person using social media. While social media may facilitate communication, learning, identity formation, and connecting with other people, its problematic use and harmful online experiences are usually linked with psychological distress, sleep disturbances, cyberbullying, social comparison and a reduction in academic engagement. However, due to the limited and mainly correlational nature of the evidence available, the findings cannot be seen as proof of direct causation.

The comparative legal analysis further indicates that no jurisdiction has fully integrated children's mental

health protection with digital safety regulation. Existing systems differ in their treatment of privacy, age assurance, platform accountability, content moderation, complaint mechanisms, and regulatory enforcement. An adapted Technological, Organisational, and Environmental framework may help organise policy implementation. However, it should operate within a rights-based approach centred on the child's best interests, dignity, privacy, autonomy, participation, and protection from harm.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promote rights-based safety by design. Platforms must employ default privacy-protective configurations, practice data minimisation, implement suitable measures of age verification, limit the use of behavioural profiling, and establish evident safe practices for children.

2. Strengthen algorithmic accountability. Platforms must perform impact assessments concerning children prior to any significant modifications in the recommender system, conduct independent audits of algorithmic risks, reveal the possibilities of content dissemination, and show the steps taken to prevent problematic engagement.

3. Improve reporting, redress, and referral systems. Children must have access to reliable and efficient complaint mechanisms to report any cyberbullying and image-based abuse, including feedback mechanisms for preserving evidence, appeal procedures, and referrals to schools, caregivers, mental health professionals and law enforcement authorities.

4. Integrate digital literacy with mental-health support. Educational institutions and family units should be trained on how to address cyberbullying, social comparison, privacy, emotional stability, appropriate technology use, and help-seeking. Policies on digital safety should be merged with counselling and mental health care services for children and adolescents.

5. Ensure inclusive and culturally responsive moderation. Moderation systems for identifying discriminatory abuse should include an understanding of the following: 1) language; 2) caste; 3) gender; 4) religion; 5) disability; and 6) other types of discrimination. Automated tools will need to be used along with trained human reviewers and a meaningful way to appeal decisions made using automated tools.

6. Improve institutional coordination and research. Indian authorities should enhance cooperation across data protection, child protection, education and health, as well as cybercrime institutions. Future studies must employ longitudinal designs and objective measures of social media use among a range of Indian populations, including children and adolescents.

Central policy in this area should focus foremost on promoting safe participation of children in the digital domain rather than restricting children's access within this sphere. Thus, a proper child-centric policy framework should not only include the use of technological solutions, but also accountable organisations, the availability of appropriate support services, and the provision of enforceable rights to protect children's mental health, education, dignity, and development.

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