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Parental mediation and adolescent screen time: A brief overview

The amount of time that children and adolescents now spend in front of a screen (watching television, social media use, online gaming, etc.) has become a big issue both socially and academically. While such technologies have both positive and negative consequences, it is clear that parents have a responsibility in attempting to control the amount of time that their children spend online and in front of various screen-based devices (i.e., smartphones, tablets, laptops, personal computers, gaming consoles, and television). Consequently, this article briefly examines the empirical research relating to the use of parental mediation strategies.

Research has consistently shown that parents utilize different measures and strategies to regulate and control their children's internet use and screen time (Nikken and Jansz, 2006). Such strategies have been applied to maximize the benefits and minimize the difficulties of adolescents' internet use (e.g., social media use, online gaming, etc.). Earlier research studies suggested (and later empirically validated) three main types of parental mediation (i.e., restrictive mediation, active mediation, and co-use of media) and all these three types of parental mediation have been shown to be applicable for controlling child and adolescent screen time whether they concern television, video gaming, and/or Internet use (Nikken and Jansz, 2006). More specifically:

- Restrictive mediation is defined as a set of rules that intend to limit the amount of time that adolescents spend on online media.
- Active mediation refers to discussing the negative effects of the media content with adolescents.
- Co-using mediation refers to parents sharing media experience with their children without any purposeful instructions or critical discussions.

Research has begun to evaluate which are the most effective mediation strategies that increase benefits and decrease threats of internet exposure among youth. In addition to the issue of online addiction, online content itself may be violent and/or sexual in nature and gives rise to further issues of concern for many parents (Griffiths and Kuss, 2015). This issue necessitates further understanding on the factors that contribute to adolescents' growing positive attitude towards online use. Studies show that the time spent online has significantly increased over the last decade (Pontes, Kuss and Griffiths, 2015). Given that adolescents are increasingly spending longer hours of their time online and in front of various screen-based devices, parents have started to be more concerned about this issue. Nevertheless, by applying parental mediation strategies, researchers hope to come up with a practical solution to minimize the disadvantages of online use.

From a media studies perspective, many research studies propose the necessity of parental assistance in guiding their children's media use (e.g., Lee, 2012; Nikken and Jansz, 2011). Furthermore, there has been increased concern about the negative effects of media on a minority of users including social networking (Griffiths et al., 2014) and online video gaming (Király et al., 2014). Historically, television was the preferred topic of discussion and investigation in relation to parental mediation. Newer studies still consider traditional parental mediation styles to

be applicable for Internet use, but it is much more difficult to monitor online activities with traditional strategies, therefore new strategies need to be investigated (Benrazavi, Teimouri and Griffiths, 2015).

More recently, the role of parental mediation in adolescents' online usage has begun to be studied by scholars (e.g., Daud et al., 2014; Nikken and Jansz, 2011; Shin et al., 2012). However, researchers employ different scales and dimensions to assess the parental mediation role within adolescents' online media use. Historically, the most traditional style of mediation that parents applied (in relation to television viewing by their children) was restrictive mediation (Bybee et al., 1982; Atkin et al., 1991; Nathanson 1999). Here, parents simply set rules for viewing certain content. For instance, parents decided upon the specific number of hours for their child's television viewing, or forbid them to watch particular television programmes (Valkenburg et al., 1999). Shek (2005) suggested that parental control strategies should include parental monitoring, knowledge, discipline, and psychological control. Parental monitoring is primarily defined as parental knowledge rather than active parenting strategies for obtaining that knowledge (Stattin and Kerr 2000). Dishion and McMahon (1998) also defined parental monitoring as a set of correlated parenting behaviours that involve paying attention and monitoring adolescents' media adaptations.

Parental mediation of screen use by their children is rooted in social and psychological media effects. Within this perspective, two types of parental control have been identified: 'psychological control' and 'behavioural control'. Psychological control refers to "parents' attempt to control the adolescents' activities in ways that negatively affect the adolescents' psychological world and thereby undermines the adolescents' psychological development" (Smetana and Daddis, 2002; p. 563) (e.g. invalidating feelings, personal attack, guilt induction, and erratic emotional behaviour). Behavioural control refers to "rules, regulations, and restrictions that parents have for their children" (Smetana and Daddis, 2002; p. 563). However, as stressed by Shek (2005), there is little research assessing psychological controls for adolescent media usage.

Following all the attempts made to classify various styles of parental mediation within adolescents' online use, active mediation and restrictive mediation are considered as the two broad dimensions of parental mediation discussed by some scholars (e.g., Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 1990; Shin et al., 2012). As noted above, active mediation occurs once parents' explain and discuss media effects with their children. On the other hand, restrictive mediation is an attempt to control adolescents' media use by setting rules based on appropriateness of media content (e.g., content restriction) and media exposure time (e.g., time restriction). These two dimensions (in addition to co-viewing, which refers to the sharing of online experience with adolescents without any critical discussion) have been noted in a number of studies (e.g., Nathanson, 1999, 2010; Shin and Huh, 2011; Valkenburg et al., 1999). Typically, active mediation involves verbal communication between parents and children, co-viewing involves nonverbal communication, and restrictive mediation requires parent-to-child communication in the form of rules.

Research findings suggest that active mediation is more effective in reducing undesirable media effects on adolescents, compared to other parental mediation strategies (e.g., Buijzen et al., 2008; Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2005). Likewise, Fujioka and Weintraub, (2003) believed that active mediation is the most effective strategy since it is built upon conversation and critical discussion between parents and their children, and leads adolescents to develop critical thinking skills. Active mediation has been found to be associated with various positive socialization outcomes in new (online) media and also use of the Internet for educational purposes (Lee and Chae, 2007). However, there are contradictory findings concerning restrictive mediation. Buijzen and Valkenburg, (2005) consider restrictive mediation to be less effective compared to active mediation, but other scholars have found it to be more effective in reducing specific negative online influences and behaviours among adolescents, such as exposure to inappropriate content (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008), cyberbullying (Mesch, 2009), privacy invasion (Lwin et al., 2008), and younger adolescents' information disclosure on the internet (Shin et al., 2012).

Although Lwin et al. (2008) found that restrictive mediation was less effective compared to active mediation, it was applied by parents significantly more often compared to active mediation, and it is still more effective than non-mediation in reducing negative effects of online use among adolescents. Research has found that parents are less likely to apply the restrictive mediation policies in the long run as they are generally believed to affect only the immediate behaviours of adolescents, provided that they abide their parents' rules (Shin et al., 2012). If parents strictly limit the amount of time that adolescents can stay online then the adolescent may be less likely to encounter online risks such as marketers requesting personal information. However, such parental restriction strategies that limit adolescents' online use in general will also reduce their online opportunities for participating in educational, social, and entertainment activities as well as productive online communication (Benrazavi et al., 2015). In order to motivate parents to take a more active part in mediating their children's online activities, Livingstone and Helsper, (2008) assert that parents should be more involved in guiding their children's screen time because they found an association between mediation and various positive socialization consequences, in both traditional and new media.

Products of the online media – such as online games – are among the fastest growing and most profitable leisure activities among online media (Király et al., 2014). However, teens and young adults are often perceived as the prime audience of the Internet and related industries such as online gaming. In a study by Azim et al. (2011), it was reported that nearly 39% of the respondents used the Internet for non-interactive activities, such as playing video games. In an American study by Shin and Huh (2011), the effectiveness of parental mediation strategies on controlling teenagers' video game playing and other types of gaming behaviours, was investigated. The three forms of parental mediation policies that were examined in that study were co-playing, game rating checking, and stopping adolescents from playing games. The results showed a weak and negative correlation between teenagers' age and parental mediation. In addition, the findings showed that parents who presumed video games had a negative influence were more likely to restrict video game playing. Parental mediation strategies – particularly on game rating – were significantly related to teenagers' game playing and gaming behaviours (Shin and Huh, 2011).

For most adolescents, playing online games causes no problems whatsoever, and many parents may share this view (Benrazavi et al., 2015). However, when adolescents engage in it excessively it can become a risky and potentially addictive behaviour that causes problems educationally (e.g., poor grades), socially (e.g., family dysfunction), psychologically (e.g., negative mood states), and physically (e.g., lack of sleep) (Griffiths et al. 2014). However, there is much research showing the educational and therapeutic benefits of video game playing (Griffiths et al. 2013). For instance, in Malaysia, a study by Latif and Sheard, (2009), found in a study of 341 public school students that video game playing has benefits such as improving students' communication skills and social skills. Another issue is that some studies (e.g., Benrazavi et al., 2015) have found that adolescents' knowledge and experiences of new media often surpass that of their parents, and therefore traditional parental mediation methods may not be as effective in mitigating the potentially negative effects of new media on their children.

Taken as a whole, empirical research has demonstrated that parental mediation activities (whether active and/or restrictive) have been successful in regulating adolescents' online behaviour and mitigating the negative effects of using media compared to parents who do nothing (Benrazavi et al., 2015). However, further research on parental mediation is needed in respect to specific online applications that children and adolescents use and there is also a need for further research on how to involve teachers with such mediation strategies as they may provide a different level of observation and mediation with adolescents' online activities and their subsequent social interaction.

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