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Parents' Influence on Children's Online Usage

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Abstract

Children nowadays has unlimited access to the Internet that possibly will harm them, thus parents' roles in mitigating their children online risks is crucial. Previous studies show a positive parent-child attachment may reduce the risks. A survey was conducted and a total of 387 participants aged 9 to 16 have been recruited to completed a 14-item questionnaire form. The instrument consists of three sub-scales, namely trust, communication and alienation. Results showed that almost 80% of children in this study trust their parents, feel their parents' concern (75%), and depend on their parents (74%). Malaysian children are actually very in need to be safe during online due the facts that they knew regarding the Internet effects. They also show a willingness to do the right things by letting their parents involve into their online live activities.

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1. Introduction

A decade ago, information and communication technologies (ICTs) has not been the priority of our society especially children and adolescents. Nowadays, children can engage with numerous online activities at one time such as chatting with friends, updating status, playing games and seeking information. According to a report by World Internet Project (2013), more than 90% of children in a range aged of 12 to 14 all over the world have been using the Internet widely. Additionally, Rideout, Foehr and Roberts (2010) has reported that children are the most fast growing Internet population in the world and also the most Internet users in terms of the amount of time they spent during online. Undoubtedly, Internet has conveyed the most important technological development to this very

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generation. While there are plenty of benefits from the internet in term of communication access, concurrently it is also an open access sites for potential exploitation and harassment. Therefore, threats and dangers of the technology are disturbingly increasing from time to time drastically (Byun, Ruffini, Mills, Douglas, Niang, Stepchenkova, Lee, Loutfi, Lee, Atallah & Blanton, 2009; The Star, 2009; The Strait Times, 2009).

1.1. Children and internet in Malaysia

As Internet usage increases, so does the incidence of risks, world nowadays witnessing children using the Internet more at younger ages, with more diverse platforms and devices (Livingstone, 2012). In Malaysia, more than 90% of children are using Internet around Klang Valley (Ramayah & Jantan, 2004) via high-speed broadband or smartphone to have an easy access almost anywhere (Zikuhr & Smith, 2013). From the percentage, Malaysian children are spending an average of 19 hours per week on online-related activities and almost 9 out of 10 children have been exposed to negative online experiences or threats from the Internet (Norton Family Online Report, 2010). Since the wide accessibility of the limitless information that can be gained from the Internet, plus the little censorship as well as the easy access from the most deviant people to the most naïve youths (Soh, 2011), numerous negative incidents had been reported to have happened to the unfortunates young youth such as, cyber grooming, rapes, pornography (Livingstone & Bober, 2005), and recently the cyberbullying (Walden & Beran, 2010).

1.2. Parent's dilemma

Parents or guardian in Malaysia has different reactions upon their children's online activities and behaviours, whereby only 4 out of 10 parents know what their children are doing and what they are accessing during online time (Ismail, 2011). While Malaysian parents are generally aware of the online activities of their children, they are also aware of the dangers they may encounter, there is a disconnecting gap between what parents think and what children knows, whereby 92% of parents said that they have established rules for their children's online activity, nonetheless 34% of children said their parents have not set any formal rules or policies concerning their Internet accessibility (Norton, 2010). However, when it comes to the Internet, parents may have ambivalent approaches towards their children's usage. Most parents perceived the Internet to be good for their children, helping with homework, and facilitating self-discovery (Pew Internet & American Life Projects, 2005). Yet at the same time, many parents are deeply concerned about their children's exposure to the risks and dangers of the Internet (Livingstone & Bober, 2004). The findings of the study undertaken by Cho and Choi (2005) have revealed that a positive parent-child attachment can reduce children's exposure to the risky Internet content.

1.3 Parental attachment

A significant large body of literature have stated that parents are the provider of secure foundation towards their children development and have huge influence on their children's behaviour and attitude (Goodman & Gregg, 2010; Ainsworth, 1989; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). According to the attachment theory, children will formed attachments in their early formative years with their caregivers that will shapes their underlying patterns of thought, feeling, and motivation in their future adulthood (Bowlby, 1969). Armsden and Greenberg (1987) revealed that strong parental attachments are significant predictors of self-esteem and life-satisfaction. Similarly, a study conducted in Norway and Australia (Wilkinson, 2004) evaluated samples of high school students and reported that parental attachment contributed to the psychological wellbeing of children in these two countries. While parents' perception of the new technology can be beneficial for their children (e.g seeking information for homework purposes and enhancing their online skills) the same technology could also take their children to the dark side of the Internet (Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009).

For that reason, majority of parents are terrified about the online dangers that may threaten their children's safety (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005). Despite the profound worries of parents on children's Internet usage there are scarcely research conducted on this subject (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). One of the few studies which focused on parental attachment was performed in Beijing, China that involved more than 700 youths and the findings of the study revealed that close ties with parents negatively predicted leisure-time (Internet use) and social online activities (Lei & Wu, 2007). Several studies have revealed that quality of parent-child attachment has been

overlooked in the literature as a potentially important factor in identifying the problems that already or may have been occurred among children (Liu et al, 2013; Harakeh et al, 2004; Van der Vorst et al, 2005). A large-scale study conducted in Netherlands with 4,483 samples has stated that parents is a medium to facilitate their children ICTs development through a parenting practices they may choose (Van den Eijnden et al, 2010).

Currently in Malaysia, there is little research conducted concerning the risks of internet usage among children and parental attachment (Soh, 2010). Therefore, this study is an attempt to fill the gap in the literature that may exist between those lines.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

A sample of 387 children was selected using stratified sampling method around Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Eight schools were contacted and agreed to participate in the study, comprising 4 primary schools and the other 4 were the secondary schools. The sample was divided into two age-groups for the data analysis. The first group was 'younger group' aged between 9, 10 and 11 years and comprised a total of 155. The second group was 'teen's group' aged between 13, 14 and 16 years and comprised a total of 232 participants. Overall, participants were between 9 to 16 years old ($M=12.51$), with more than two-thirds of them are aged 13 and 14 years (60.1%). From the total sample, 136 respondents (35.1%) were boys and 251 respondents (64.9%) were girls.

The Inventory of Parents and Peer Attachment (IPPA) (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) items were reviewed and revised for simplifying wording purposes. This stage is important to promote children and younger adolescents' comprehensions during the data collection process. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the Ministry of Education and the Selangor Department of Education. Following this, the principals and headmasters of the selected schools were contacted to inform them of the study. All parents of children in nominated classes were provided with consent letter and consent form, via their children. Only participants who had returned the parental consent letter are allowed to answer the survey forms. The questionnaires were completed on a small group basis under the researcher's supervision during the school hours. For the younger group (aged 9 to 11) the directions for questionnaire completion and the questionnaire items were read aloud to them by the trained enumerators in an assigned classroom. On average, 15 minutes were required to complete the survey, but it is also depend on the participant age groups. Younger group however, took around 30 to 40 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

2.2. Measures

This study has adopted the reduced 14-item parent attachment scale from Vignoli and Mallet (2004). The scale was originated from 28-items of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA, by Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). The scale consists of three sub-scales, namely Communication, Trust and Alienation. All 14 items were measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 to 5 in frequency level (strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat agree, agree and strongly agree). The research instrument was prepared in a dual-language, both English and Malay. Each of the 14 items assessed children attachment towards their parents. Respondents are required to rate the degree to which each item is true for them on a five-point scale. This instrument is comprised of three subscales that measure parental trust, communication and alienation. For the analysis purpose, descriptive analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22.

3. Results

Demographic data of the study revealed, 65% of the sample were girls and 35% of the sample were boys with the mean age of 12.50 ($SD=2.27$). Majority of the sample were Malay ethnic origin and Muslims (74%), followed by Chinese (13%) and Indian (12%). The findings of the study also revealed that a total of 236 children aged between 6 to 10 years old have already been exposed to the Internet. Sixty five percent ($f=220$) of children were consuming 1 to 5 hours of time daily to go online. During non-school days 83% ($f=308$) spent around 5 hours to go online, an increase of almost 20% as compared to the Internet consumption during the weekday. In terms of the frequency of internet usage, 56% of the respondents have indicated that they accessed the Internet daily, 28.5%

indicated accessing the Internet weekly and only 15.5% indicated accessing the Internet monthly or less often than a month. The most popular devices that were used during respondent's online activities are Laptop (31.3%, $f=121$) and Smartphone (20.5%, $f=79$).

IPPA measurement result shows that the highest construct answered was from the Trust sub-scale for the item of 'I trust my parents' (78.3%, $f=303$). It indicates that children still have a highest confidence level towards their parents though they spend lots of time online with their friends. Overall, the Communication sub-scale showed the higher level of attachment between children and their parents as compared to the other two scales (Trust and Alienation). Around 75% of respondents agreed that their parents will immediately know if they are in trouble. Meanwhile, 288 of the respondents (74.4%) have an agreement that they can rely on their parents during any situation, another two items from Communication sub-scale that also have the highest score were 'parent help me to understand myself better' (71.3%, $f=276$) and 'parent respect my feeling' (70.5%, $f=273$). The Alienation sub-scale also shows that 72% children of the 387 sample have disagreement towards the item of 'I feel that no-one understands me'. Hitherto, this study has shown that Malaysian children have a positive attachment in term of sharing their feelings, taking care of their well-being and having a faith towards their parents. The frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation of responses are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, Std. deviations, frequency, and percentage of IPPA scale (n=387)

Parental Attachment Items	5-Likert Scale (%)					Mean	S.D
	1	2	3	4	5		
Communication						3.91	.78
My parents respect my feeling	7 (1.8%)	14 (3.6%)	93 (24%)	160 (41.3%)	113 (29.2%)	3.93	.91
My parents help me to understand myself better	8 (2.1%)	24 (6.2%)	79 (20.4%)	153 (39.5%)	123 (31.8%)	3.93	.98
I tell my parents about my problems and troubles	13 (3.4%)	34 (8.8%)	109 (28.2%)	132 (34.1%)	99 (25.6%)	3.70	1.05
My parents encourage me to talk about difficulties	30 (7.8%)	26 (6.7%)	88 (22.7%)	121 (31.3%)	122 (31.5%)	3.72	1.2
I can count on my parents	4 (1.0%)	13 (3.4%)	82 (21.2%)	124 (32%)	164 (42.4%)	4.11	.92
My parents ask me if something bothering me	7 (1.8%)	21 (5.4%)	69 (17.8%)	127 (32.8%)	163 (42.1%)	4.08	1.0
Trust						3.79	.80
My parents sense when I'm upset about something	14 (3.6%)	42 (10.9%)	97 (25.1%)	121 (31.3%)	113 (29.2%)	3.72	1.11
My parents always consider my point of view	10 (2.6%)	44 (11.4%)	129 (33.3%)	127 (32.8%)	77 (19.9%)	3.56	1.01
My parents trust my judgment	14 (3.6%)	30 (7.8%)	117 (30.2%)	134 (34.6%)	92 (23.8%)	3.67	1.03
I trust my parents	8 (2.1%)	14 (3.6%)	62 (16.0%)	100 (25.8%)	203 (52.5%)	4.23	.98
Alienation						2.26	.95
I get upset a lot more than my parents know about	81 (20.9%)	82 (21.2%)	100 (25.8%)	71 (18.3%)	53 (13.7%)	2.83	1.32
I don't know whom I can depend on these days	156 (40.3%)	90 (23.3%)	75 (19.4%)	40 (10.3%)	26 (6.7%)	2.20	1.26
My parents don't understand what I'm going thru	166 (42.9%)	89 (23%)	77 (19.9%)	35 (9.0%)	20 (5.2%)	2.11	1.20
I feel that no-one understand me	190 (49.1%)	88 (22.7%)	72 (18.6%)	22 (5.7%)	15 (3.9%)	1.93	1.12

Note: 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: somewhat agree, 4: agree and 5: strongly agree
S.D: standard deviation

4. Discussion and conclusion

Result shows that the rate of Internet usage among adolescents and school children in Malaysia is alarming. More than half of the children that took part in the survey used the Internet intensively almost every day. This occurred due to the unlimited and unsupervised internet access, let alone the most cutting-edge technologies such as laptops, smartphones and tablets are within their grabs. According to Nickerson, Mele and Princiotta (2008), the

lack of attentiveness from parents as the primary agents of socialization for their children can lead to undesired negative impact on children. If there is no safety measures taken, children might come across serious dangers and become the targets of the internet misdemeanors.

As shown in Table 1, almost 80% of children need their parents to trust them. Consequently the present study proposes that parent's mutual attachment-trust towards their children is the main indicator of how they can mitigate the danger and threats that their children may encounter during online. Furthermore, the results also showed that the quality of communication parents spend together with their children is a higher indicator after the mutual trust they shared. Armsden and Greenberg (in Pearson & Child, 2007) defined communication in parental attachment construct is an aspect that will help generate a strong emotional bond between parents and children. That is why poor emotional bonds with parents will certainly explained the reasons children and adolescents more often involved in a risky behaviour. However, this study shows that children in Malaysia still have a resilient emotional bond towards their parents. As could be expected, the attachment-alienation or a dimension that is related to avoidance and rejection in parental attachment construct showed a lower indicator on children attachment towards their parents. Although children spend most of their time using Internet and might be less socialized with family and parents particularly, result revealed that mostly Malaysian parents are focus on their children safety and wellbeing. In spite of this, a total of 116 children, comprising of 30% of the total population of the study agreed that their parents show a lack of responsibility. This number should be the main concern of parents these days, otherwise it is going to be a major issue in future. Applying a wise method in handling such deficiency should be a duty to all stakeholders in concerned not just the parents.

As being mentioned in early development of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1944), a poor relationships to parents will increased the causes of delinquency behaviour is supported by the present study. Therefore, higher internet usage among children will potentially distance them from their parent's affection. Abundance of previous literature has proposed that parental attachment is capable in reducing risky behaviour among children. Likewise, numerous studies have shown that a little diversion to keep children and adolescents safety will surely change the whole setting of parental attachment positive purposes. As the technology of information and communication is evolving rapidly, it is quite challenging for parents to monitor and regulate their children's overall activities, whether online or otherwise. The willingness of parents to learn more about the technology which their children are having access to is one approach which may minimize online risks and threats involving children. In conclusion, this study has found supportive evidence on how parental attachment may influence children in Malaysia in terms of their Internet usage.

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