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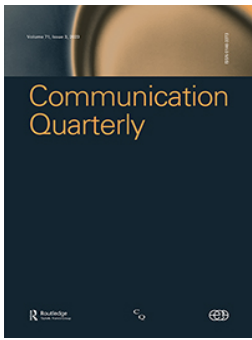
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**To cite this article:** Aimee E. Miller-Ott, Lynne Kelly & Samantha Schultz (2023): Understanding parents' sense-making of their role in adolescent daughters' social media use through the lens of relational dialectics theory 2.0, *Communication Quarterly*, DOI: [10.1080/01463373.2023.2228868](https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2023.2228868)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2023.2228868>



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Published online: 26 Jun 2023.



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## Understanding parents' sense-making of their role in adolescent daughters' social media use through the lens of relational dialectics theory 2.0

Aimee E. Miller-Ott , Lynne Kelly , and Samantha Schultz

### ABSTRACT

With the development of social media, parents must figure out how to guide their children's use or even whether to allow it. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 30 parents of daughters aged 12–18. Relational dialectics theory 2.0 was used to analyze how parents' talk revealed their sense-making of their role in adolescent daughters' social media use. Analysis revealed that parents voiced competing discourses pertaining to “bad” versus “good” parents and monitoring versus trusting daughters. Discourses that take place at the distal level compete with those at the proximal site of the utterance chain, challenging parents to engage in sense-making. Findings suggest that the advice of open communication between parent and adolescent addresses only the proximal level and not the distal level of societal expectations for monitoring and close involvement required of the “good parent.” To make sense of and manage competing discourses, parents appear to couple conversations with daughters with voicing discourses of daughter uniqueness as a way to favor trusting over monitoring and still maintain a “good” parent identity.

### KEYWORDS

family communication; social media; daughters; relational dialectics theory; sense-making

Being a parent in the digital age is hard. A Pew study indicated that almost 70% of U.S. parents think parenting is more difficult today than it was twenty years ago (Auxier et al., 2020). Technology and specifically social media top the list of parenting challenges. Nearly 40% of children ages 8 to 12 and 84% of teens use social media (Common Sense Media, 2021). Parents must “possess multiple knowledges: those pertaining to digital media devices, platforms, apps, and software; the risks and the range of opportunities afforded by digital media, and also their own child's digital media activities” (Jeffery, 2021, p. 205). Parents are also expected to safeguard their children from harm (Cino, 2022) by “harness[ing] these multiple modes of communication to keep watch over and keep in touch with their children wherever they may be” (Lim, 2018, p. 33). Parents' need to protect their children from potential harms of social media, the social media literacy required to do that, and the lack of

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clear guidance as to how to oversee their children's use, create a challenge for parents.

When faced with difficulty, people often engage in sense-making, a process through which they interpret and try to understand their experiences (e.g., Horstman, 2019). Sense-making occurs as Weick et al. (2005) argued, through "language, talk, and communication" (p. 409) that helps people give new meaning to something that has occurred. Given expectations of parental responsibility for overseeing children's social media use, the purpose of this study was to understand how parents make sense of their role in adolescent daughters' use of social media. Understanding their sense-making can help to illuminate how parents experience and respond to the challenges of these expectations.

### Parenting expectations of children's social media

Parents are faced with high expectations as their children use digital media. The notion of a "good parent" emerges in research on expectations of parents whose children are online. Being a good parent requires parents to prioritize protecting their children (Willett, 2015) by not letting them spend too much time online or become addicted to technology (Aarsand, 2011). Media messages shame parents who appear to lack control over their children's technology use (Sandberg et al., 2021). If unsure of how to best oversee children's social media use, parents may compare themselves to other parents (Yardi, 2012). Krmar and Cingel (2016) reported that if parents learned that other parents were allowing their children to use social media but were restricting their usage, they were more likely to follow suit. Parents may also avoid sharing parenting struggles because they believe that others are judging their parenting identity (Shirani et al., 2012).

Parents express concerns about not knowing how to use social media platforms although they are expected to do so (Cranor et al., 2014; Erickson et al., 2015; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011). Savic's (2022) parent type labeled *watchdogs* lacked confidence in their own abilities to navigate social media and considered their children to lack critical thinking skills online. Watchdogs made decisions about children's social media use without children's input, an approach Savic described as ineffective because it diminished children's autonomy development.

Parents are also expected to teach children critical thinking skills to help them navigate the online world, even though we know little about how parents instill values associated with healthy social media use (Savic, 2022). Parents that Savic labeled the *chaperon* and the *collaborator* aimed to facilitate open communication about social media as they did in their offline parent-child relationship. Parents may situate lessons about responsible media use within

larger family conversations about teaching right from wrong, building trust, and being available to help and support their children (Jeffery, 2021).

Parents have options for the role they play in their children's social media use and how to help children navigate its unfamiliar and often changing landscape (Chen & Shi, 2019; Ho et al., 2020). For years, scholars have studied parental mediation of children's media use (see Chen & Shi, 2019; Ho et al., 2020). Parental mediation strategies specifically related to social media include *restrictive* (e.g., setting rules, monitoring or limiting usage), *active* (e.g., having conversations with children), *authoritarian surveillance* (e.g., logging into children's accounts to check behavior), and *non-intrusive inspection* (e.g., adding children as friends or followers to observe posts) (Ho et al., 2020). Although parents have options responding to adolescents' social media use, Fletcher and Blair (2015) suggested that parents should engage in "clear and explicit communication" with them (p. 154). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommended parents facilitate "open family communication" to manage children's social media use (Hill et al., 2016). These prescriptions of open communication do not reflect the complexity of being a parent of children who are online. Erickson et al.'s (2015) research suggested there is no one way to oversee a child's online space – some parents in their study were hands off and trusted children to manage their own use, while other parents were actively involved and focused on their children's safety. In Yardi and Bruckman's (2011) study, some parents required children to share social media passwords or give account access to parents. Others occasionally asked children what they were doing on social media but not in an invasive way.

Parents lack guidelines and norms that could help them facilitate a child's use of social media (Yardi & Bruckman, 2011), which is challenging given, as Ho et al. (2020) argued, "social media communication is much more complicated than the simpler acts of watching television or viewing online content" (p. 680). Parents believe they must have conversations with their children about social media, gain knowledge about the platforms children are using, and lower the risks of social media to be considered a good parent (Jeffery, 2021). At the same time, parents are expected to trust their children and enable them to develop autonomy (Savic, 2022). Research has not examined how parents make sense of these competing expectations to enable them to choose behaviors to manage children's social media use.

Adolescent girls' parents in particular may have heightened concerns about daughters' social media use. Parents, particularly mothers, are a significant source of support for daughters throughout their lives (Miller-Day, 2019). Daughters feel close to mothers who talk to, listen, and support them during difficult experiences (Miller-Day, 2019). In turn, daughters face several familial expectations. Specific to relationships with mothers, daughters must show

respect (which may include avoiding conflict, silencing a disagreement, and supporting their mothers' power), provide mothers protection (from emotional harm or from disrespect by siblings), seek mothers' emotional support, and be available for connection (Alford & Harrigan, 2019).

Daughters also tend to receive more talk from parents about risky behaviors when compared to sons (e.g., Evans et al., 2020). For instance, parents talk more frequently with their daughters about sex and focus on the negative consequences of sex when compared to talk with sons (Widman et al., 2016). Specific to online safety, girls are the target of tremendous moral panic (Tsaliki, 2015), and publication of "The Facebook Files" by the *Wall Street Journal* in 2021 increased concerns about the effects of social media on girls. "The Facebook Files" is a series of reports based on a *Wall Street Journal* investigation into Facebook Inc. (now called Meta) that owns Facebook and Instagram. Their investigation revealed that Facebook Inc. had collected empirical evidence substantiating that Instagram was causing widespread harm to users, primarily teenage girls. About a third of teen girls said that Instagram makes them feel worse at those times when they feel bad about their bodies, and the girls blame Instagram for increased rates of depression and anxiety (Wells et al., 2021). Other research indicates that, compared to boys, girls tend to place more value on social media and on the feedback they receive (e.g., Vogel et al., 2014) and to compare themselves to others and judge their appearance more (e.g., Fardouly et al., 2017, 2020). In their study of body images on social media, Mahon and Hevey (2021) found boys selected more positive content that aligned with their own image of self, while girls viewed content that included pervasive unrealistic beauty standards and idealized images. Girls reported that social media has a mostly negative impact on their body image because of comparisons between themselves and others online. Research identifies social comparison as an important mediator of the relationship between Instagram use and well-being indicators like depressive symptoms and disordered eating attitudes (Stefana et al., 2022). Girls' greater propensity for making social comparisons on Instagram may lead to poor psychosocial outcomes. Rightfully so, then, parents of adolescent girls may be particularly concerned about how their daughters are using social media and what role they should play in helping daughters navigate it. Although research has pointed out negative consequences of social media for girls especially, studies have not to this point looked at how parents understand their role in navigating social media with their daughters.

### ***Social constructions of expectations versus real life***

Parents experience conflicts between realities of everyday life and social expectations when children join the digital world (Sandberg et al., 2021). Parents understand it is impossible to control their children's social media

use (Yardi, 2012; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011) and are often unable to maintain as much control as they want over information children share online and what others share about them (Erickson et al., 2015). Some parents enact rules, some talk to children, and others do nothing (Erickson et al., 2015). Parents in Jeffery's (2021) study believed they needed to monitor and talk about their children's social media usage, but, in practice, being that involved was time-consuming and difficult, some referring to monitoring as "completely unsustainable" (p. 212).

Aiming to control a child's use of social media can also affect the parent-child relationship. Teenagers feel trusted, respected, and independent when parents provide them privacy online but also understand that parents may violate privacy when concerned for their safety (Cranor et al., 2014). Parents in the Cranor et al. study also said they trust their children to make the right decisions when they are unable to constantly monitor them. Similarly, parents in Lwin et al.'s (2021) study explained that they were less likely to monitor their children's social media if the children earned good grades and completed schoolwork on time. In addition to relying on child characteristics to justify lowered monitoring, parents may also strive for a manageable balance of children's protection and their autonomy (Symons et al., 2017). Children may be less likely to share information with parents who monitor their internet use (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018); instead, parents should aim to have their children willingly disclose about their lives (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Gabriels (2016) warned parents that close monitoring can hinder children's autonomy and self-reliance. So while "good parents" are those who monitor and control their children's social media, parents acknowledge that these goals are unattainable, and parents and researchers alike posit that control can hurt children's development and openness with parents.

Both societal-level expectations and relationship dynamics related to navigating adolescents' social media usage are complex and may be contradictory; thus, parents' process of sense-making is likely complicated. As Taylor and Van Every (2000) explain, "sensemaking, to the extent that it involves communication, takes place in interactive talk and draws on the resources of language in order to formulate and exchange through talk symbolically encoded representations of these circumstances" (Communication as co-orientation section, para. 2). Relational dialectics theory (RDT) 2.0 offers a valuable lens for understanding how parents of adolescent daughters engage in sense-making of their role in daughters' use of social media. Existing literature has identified social expectations for good parents, practical difficulties associated with monitoring adolescents' social media use, and types of parental mediation including open communication, but has not yet examined how parents make sense of these disparate elements to manage their adolescents' use of social media. The present study contributes to the existing

literature by examining this sense-making process and by illuminating the competing demands from relational and societal expectations that indicate contradictory behaviors for parents to enact as they navigate their daughters' social media use.

### ***Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT)***

RDT helps scholars “understand the ways relational partners create, sustain, or reshape identities and make sense of the world around them” (Sahlstein Parcell & Baker, 2018, p. 674). Weick et al. (2005) argued that “sensemaking is central because it is the primary site where meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action” (p. 409). Scholars using RDT aim to identify a “system of meaning” in people’s talk as they engage in sense-making of their experiences (Baxter, 2011, p. 2). Thus, sense-making focuses on organizing one’s experience into meaning. As such, the theory is well-suited for providing insights into how parents make sense of their role in their daughters’ social media use.

According to the theory, people understand their social worlds through contradictions they experience (Baxter, 2011, p. 2). Baxter and colleagues argued that the term “contradiction” implies a choice between two meanings, and people may make sense of their experiences by looking at the interplay of competing discourses (i.e., “competing meaning systems,” Baxter et al., 2021, p. 7). RDT positions the interplay of discourses as the site of meaning making as people aim to understand their social worlds (Baxter, 2011). Some meanings are centripetal (dominant/vocal and accepted) and others are centrifugal (marginal/alternative). For instance, foster adoptive parents in Suter et al. (2014) voiced competing discourses of Biological Normativity (centripetal) and Constitutive Kinning (centrifugal) that informed their sense-making of their family identity. People like the parents in Suter et al.’s study drew upon these systems of meaning at both the relational and cultural levels that often competed with one another (Baxter, 2011). Related to the present study, a parent may believe that becoming an Instagram follower of their daughter would be overstepping and overparenting (i.e., cultural level meaning), but they may also believe that they should follow the daughter’s social media account because she is young and needs monitoring (i.e., relational level meaning).

According to Baxter (2011), when people talk (an utterance), scholars need to consider what they are saying within a larger sequence of words (an utterance chain). Utterance chains are the building blocks of meaning making and should be analyzed to identify competing discourses. In trying to understand how parents make sense of their role in their daughters’ social media use, identifying



competing discourses may help uncover why parents express difficulty and view parenting as harder today than in the past (Auxier et al., 2020). Baxter argues that meaning can be identified at four levels or sites. The *distal* site refers to meanings or discourses at the cultural level (e.g., societal expectations for good parenting) whereas *proximal* site refers to the interpersonal relationship level (e.g., parents speaking with or about their own children). The *not-yet-spoken* site of the utterance chain is the anticipation of utterances, either at the distal site (i.e., how would society evaluate what the parent is doing?) or the proximal site (i.e., how will the teen respond to the parenting behavior?). The *already-spoken* site refers to utterances that have been made at the cultural (distal) level (e.g., parents need to protect their children) and at the proximal site (e.g., what parents have already said to their children).

Parents have expressed systems of contradictory meanings related to children's use of technology. Sandberg et al. (2021) acknowledged contradictory mediated messages directed toward parents in Sweden that digital media use is both positive and negative for their children; children thrive using digital technologies, but their cognitive and emotional development is also stunted through technology. They concluded that “[parents] must constantly negotiate their standpoints and handle contradictory information” (p. 62). Beyond receiving contradictory information, parents experience contradictions in their own feelings about their children's social media use. Parents feel pulled between the need to control daughters' usage and the desire to maintain open lines of communication and trust by not controlling (Gabriels, 2016). Clark (2011) concluded that parents experience and strive to manage competing discourses around certainty/uncertainty, autonomy/restriction, and maintaining closeness to parents/encouraging connection with peers. Parents in general feel that it is difficult to determine the best way to help their children navigate social media (Cranor et al., 2014). Through the lens of RDT 2.0, we aimed to understand how parents make sense of their role in adolescent daughters' social media use. The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ:** How does parents' talk about their role in adolescent daughters' social media use reflect sense-making?

**RQa:** What, if any, competing discourses do parents voice in their talk about adolescent daughters' social media use?

**RQb:** How, if at all, do parents manage competing discourses related to their role in adolescent daughters' social media use?

## Method

### Participants

Participants had to be at least 18 years old. They had to have at least one daughter who was between the ages of 12 and 18 and with a social media account. The parent had to have lived with the daughter during the time she was between 12 and 18 and had at least one conversation about social media with her during that time.

Thirty parents (27 mothers, 3 fathers) with the average age of 44.93 ( $SD = 5.67$ , ranging from 32 to 55), participated in the study (see Table 1 for participant pseudonyms and descriptors). The majority of parents were White ( $n = 25$ ), 2 were Black, 1 was Hispanic, 1 was Asian, and 1 identified as both White and Hispanic. The majority of parents ( $n = 23$ ) had 1 daughter between 12 and 18, while 7 reported on experiences with more than 1 daughter currently in the required age range. Their daughters' current average age was 14.92 ( $SD = 1.74$ ) and ranged from 12 to 18. Daughters' average age when first joining social

**Table 1.** Participants and descriptors.

Pseudonym	Parent Age	Parent Race	Parent Role	Daughter(s)	
				Current Age(s)	Daughter(s) Age(s) First Joining Social Media
Marla	51	White	Mother	17	10
Amanda	43	White	Mother	14	13
Suzanne	40	White	Mother	14	11
Marcus	52	Black	Father	15	14
Ginny	43	White	Mother	13	13
Chloe	50	White	Mother	14	11
Shannon	40	White	Mother	13	10
Christine	41	White	Mother	17	11
Rachel	42	White	Mother	14	11
Angela	37	Hispanic	Mother	14 & 16	14
Jennifer	48	White	Mother	14 & 16	13
Kelly	47	White	Mother	14	13
Molly	46	White	Mother	15	12
Laura	49	White	Mother	15 & 18	13
Carmen	32	White & Hispanic	Mother	13	11
Andrew	51	White	Father	15 & 18	13
Tara	47	White	Mother	16	12
Pamela	49	White	Mother	16	12
Sara	34	White	Mother	14	10
Troy	44	White	Father	17	14
Melanie	51	White	Mother	15	13
Deborah	47	White	Mother	12 & 14	11
Maya	48	Asian	Mother	17	15
Kristen	37	White	Mother	17	9
Robin	47	White	Mother	18	13
Heidi	42	White	Mother	12	11
Alicia	49	White	Mother	14 & 17	Did Not Answer
Renee	38	White	Mother	13 & 14	11
Alana	48	Black	Mother	12	11
Valerie	55	White	Mother	15	13

media was 12 ( $SD = 1.42$ ), ranging from 9 to 14 years old. The average time between the daughters opening their first social media account and the date of the interview was 2.8 years ( $SD = 1.86$ ), ranging from 0 to 8 years.

### **Procedure**

After receiving university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we recruited participants through university listservs and social media. One member of our research team conducted all one-on-one interviews with participants via Zoom. We used a semi-structured interview guide (see [Appendix](#) for list of interview questions). The first set of questions focused on demographics, including parents' age and race and daughters' current age and age when opening their first social media account. The majority of the remaining questions focused on specific conversations that parents could recall having with daughters about social media (including questions about how conversations begin, who begins the conversations, how daughters respond to conversations, what they talk about) and any efforts parents make to monitor or regulate daughters' social media usage. We then asked parents "What positive things do you think your daughter gets from being on social media?" and "Overall, do you have concerns about her using social media? If so, what are they?" Lastly, we asked parents if they had any advice for other parents of adolescent girls about the girls' social media usage, rules, or conversations with the girls.

We audio recorded and transcribed each Zoom interview and changed all identifying names to ensure confidentiality. Transcribing yielded 213 pages of single-spaced text.

### **Data analysis**

We first met with the researcher who conducted and transcribed the interviews to ascertain her understanding of the data gleaned through data collection. Then the other two members of the research team began to use Braun and Clarke's (2006) process of thematic analysis to uncover "experiences, meanings, and the reality of participants" (p. 81). We first divided the transcripts in half, with each author reading 15 transcripts and taking notes on their initial thoughts about the data. We used open coding to view the data. After we each read our initial sets of transcripts, we met to discuss emerging patterns in the data. During this first meeting to discuss data, we both shared our observations that parents' talk about their role in daughters' social media use revealed a process through which they were trying to make sense of their experiences, and that their sense-making process seemed to be full of contradictions. We then agreed to reread our set of transcripts and in doing so, use relational dialectics theory 2.0 to understand parents' talk. At that point we

engaged in a three-stage contrapuntal analysis (Baxter, 2011). Stage one involved locating texts rich in competing discourses (the interview transcripts). In stage two, we used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify competing discourses. We again divided the transcripts in half and focused our attention on identifying competing discourses by looking at single utterances as well as utterances across the interviews. In the third stage, we identified the interplay of competing discourses by noting where participants voiced both or multiple discourses simultaneously.

To ensure credibility of our analysis, we used crystallization and relied on thick description to illustrate our data (Tracy, 2013). In place of theoretical saturation, we chose to stop interviewing at the point at which we were able to answer our research questions (Tracy, 2019). We used crystallization, which Tracy (2013) explained as “making use of multiple data points and researcher points of view” (p. 236) to “construct a multi-faceted, more complicated, and therefore more credible picture of the context” (p. 237). Multiple researchers read through and analyzed the data, engaged in numerous conversations about their view of the data, and together constructed the picture of the data. We used thick descriptions in the form of exemplars to demonstrate the complexity of parents’ experiences with daughters’ social media use (Tracy, 2013).

## Findings

Parents’ responses reflected a complex process of sense-making in which competing discourses emerged in their talk about daughters’ social media use. In the following section, we illuminate the sense-making process by describing the discourses focusing on good and bad parenting and monitoring daughters’ behavior while simultaneously trusting them. We also address parents’ attempts to manage the contradictions.

### *Process of sense-making*

Participants struggle to make sense of their role in adolescent daughters’ social media use. They remarked that parents have to sort this out as there are no clear-cut guidelines. Alicia noted, “There’s a lot of parenting things that you, like, have really dogmatic ideas about, and then you get there. You’re like, oh, this is muddier than I thought it would be.”<sup>1</sup> Deborah’s experiences illustrate specifics of the sense-making challenge facing parents:

I think before, when she was younger, I talked to my husband and we were like, well, how are we going to limit? Are we going to like, make it so they don’t, they don’t have access and stuff like that? One, that takes a lot of work and then two, it’s kind of the expectation here, um, are we limiting them from not being able to, to be in a conversation where other people are? And I, again, I don’t know, can’t since I don’t know it and I might be afraid, does that mean I don’t let my kids do it?

Her remarks reveal the difficulty for parents in trying to figure out how they should approach adolescent daughters' social media use. Should they set limits or deny access? Would that be isolating their daughters from the social spaces where their friends are? What are the expectations for parents? These questions were at the core of participants' sense-making efforts. Alicia expressed it this way: "And so figuring out like a way of like, navigating that without totally isolating your kids, um, then is a really interesting dance." This excerpt from Marcus reinforced that parents have to try to figure this out on their own:

I don't feel like there are clear guidelines on those for parents, right? I am in, there is a group on Facebook . . . it's like parenting in a technological world or something . . . I kind of thought it was stupid to join it, but I was trying to figure out how to actually use the software well, so I joined it and it's interesting on there because they have a lot of conversations about like, well, what would you do with this? Or in this situation, what would you do with your kid?

These excerpts establish that participants struggle to make sense of their role in adolescent daughters' social media use. Parents are aware of the complexities they face with no clear guidelines. Nevertheless, what emerged in their interviews was their attempt to construct meaning from the interplay of competing discourses, which we describe in the next section.

### ***Good versus bad parents***

As participants talked about the uncertainties and lack of guidance around their role in daughters' use of social media, discourses regarding how to be a "good parent" as opposed to a "bad parent" emerged primarily at the distal already-spoken site of the utterance chain. Although they voiced that there are no guidelines for parents and it is a difficult sense-making task, their utterances defined the bad parent as uninvolved and unwilling to do the work of monitoring their daughters. Chloe stated: "Well, I don't understand why any parent that has a child, and isn't that like part of their account, but what do I know? I don't know. Maybe it's too much for them if it's like pinging and stuff all the time." Alicia expressed frustration about other parents not limiting their children's social media use:

I will say hands down, one of the things I struggle the most is I cannot tell you how, a few of my kids have found friends to have no boundaries on their phones. Whether it's like downtime or time limits, it baffles my brain. Parents I have immense respect for, and I'm friends with, it like, it blows my mind and it just, it baffles me, the kids that have zero boundaries and it's really easy to be like, oh, it's like the parents whose kids are uninvolved or whatever. And it isn't, my kids are like, abnormal minority and that like, it's really sad to me and definitely makes it harder.

Her remarks and those of other participants suggest that being a good parent is one who sets boundaries, is involved, and monitors the daughter's social

media, while the bad parent does not and is uninvolved. Troy talked about how, if his daughter is doing well in school, “maybe it makes me a bad parent, but I’m not going to monitor how much time you spend on, on the internet,” clearly equating bad parenting with not monitoring. The “badness” of not monitoring daughters’ social media was reinforced by utterances that it is dangerous to not monitor. For instance, Laura said:

I know a couple people where the situation has become dangerous because they don’t monitor them. Um, and, you know, monitor them out with their friends. See what everyone’s posting. And, you know, you can’t control everything, but you can keep your eye open and see, you know, the comments, the messaging, you, you just have to, it’s such a scary platform as much as it’s good.

As reflected in participant excerpts like these, bad parents as those who put their daughters at risk by not keeping an eye on what they do on social media.

Given the greater focus of utterances on the bad parent, it appears to be a centripetal (i.e., dominant) discourse whereas the good parent is an alternative, centrifugal discourse. The discourse around being a good parent is more complex, however, as it appears to mean a parent who protects their teens and, at the same time, allows them some privacy, independence, and the social opportunities afforded by social media use, particularly as the daughter matures. Daughters need to be able to act on their own because that is how they learn, so being a good parent enables that at the same time that it protects them. Utterances regarding “good parent” shifted to the proximal site in the utterance chain, as parents consider ways that their past and anticipated future interactions with daughters reflect their attempts to be a good parent. As Andrew explained:

I mean, it’s definitely an area that I feel I could easily get away from me or something like that. But for us, it has worked to bring a lot of respect to the table, like giving them acknowledgement that we respect them in their hearts and their choices that they make. And we are relying and we have confidence in, yeah, to continue to do healthy things, you know, they’re smart.

Similarly, Molly anticipated telling her daughter:

You’re going to make decisions and you need to make decisions. You are your own person, but we want to guide you. And we want to make sure we do it safely. And I can’t not let you do certain things because that’s how you learn.

These two examples highlight that parents also make sense of “good parent” at the proximal site – inside the family relationship – by looking back and reflecting on how they handled past conversations with daughters (i.e., distal already-been-spoken site) as well as anticipating future interactions with daughters about their social media use (i.e., not-yet-spoken site).

### ***Monitoring versus trusting***

The discourse of monitoring appears to exist as a centripetal discourse in juxtaposition to a centrifugal discourse of trust. Monitoring social media use emerged very frequently in the interviews at distal and proximal sites in the utterance chains and appears to be the primary defining characteristic of the good parent in this context. However, as noted in the previous section, the good parent monitors to protect daughters but enables them to have independence and privacy, which requires a degree of trust that daughters will enact smart social media behaviors. The interplay of these competing discourses is evident as participants voiced both in their interview responses. Rachel phrased it this way:

You know, I do try to give them the benefit of the doubt because you know, they know, like I do trust you and I do want to make sure that I trust you and you have that autonomy. Um, it's more of a security thing. So monitor in other ways without having to actually open it [the daughter's social media account].

Similarly, Robin advised:

So if your child, if you don't trust them as much, or if you know that they're not as mature than that, that might change things a little bit. So I guess just know your own kid. And I definitely also would, you know, say check it, know what's being posted and I don't do it nearly as much as I should.

Neither of these utterances said straightforwardly that if you trust, you do not have to monitor. Instead, Rachel illustrates the interplay between the competing discourses of monitoring and trusting in that she said: trust and give autonomy, but since this is about the daughter's security, find a way to monitor without actually looking at her account. Robin also reflects the interplay between competing discourses framed in the negative: if you do not trust, check what they are posting (i.e., monitor), but I do not do that as much as I should. It is unclear if Robin did not monitor as much as she thought she should because of trust issues or some other reason, but her comments indicate the competing discourses inherent in the solution of monitoring daughters' social media.

Participants' struggles with tension between monitoring and trust were evident throughout interviews as they contradicted their own decisions and actions. For instance, Andrew initially was clear that he has trust and does not monitor his daughter's social media use:

I trust her. Um, we've never really monitored . . . I think it would be really unfair to her because that is their, that's their outlet. And it's what they, you know, they need . . . And so I feel like if I were to monitor her, because her use is more on the social end, then that would not be fair. So we don't monitor it.

However, later in his interview, he recommended monitoring social media use:

So I think, you know, parents just need to really think about, you know, when they let their kids have social media, especially when they're really young, like to really, I would monitor it, you know? ... I would definitely get on and check and, you know, I go through all of her Instagram posts, and see who's commenting and liking, as well as liking her TikTok videos.

Contradictions between trusting and monitoring were apparent in the interview with Andrew and the interviews overall. Participants' discourse defined monitoring as what a good parent does and a bad parent does not do. Yet monitoring seems unfair or intrusive and suggests a lack of trust, and they trust their daughters. Similarly, an excerpt from Troy's interview shows how the discourse of trusting daughters to use social media responsibly is also complex and contradictory and is tied up in the identity of a good parent:

I look at what she's posting ... Yeah, I mean, every once in a while, I'll pick up her phone and see what is actually on her, but it's maybe once every two months or so ... You know, I think that's really hard because I think as parents, we always think the best of our kids. And you, you think they're never going to do anything wrong ... We know in our heart of hearts that that's not always true. Our kids are gonna make mistakes and do stupid things sometimes ... It's not social media that's the problem. It's the larger problem of, do you trust your kid enough to do what needs to be done and to make correct decisions and right decisions? And so I think that's hard for parents because I think that's a reflection on your parenting sometimes.

He monitors his daughter's posts, yet he described the need to trust her to make good decisions. At the same time he recognized that parents think "the best of our kids," but he knows they can make mistakes. His final comment illustrates that this is hard and reflects on them as parents, an utterance at the distal not-yet-spoken site. Much of the sense-making observed in these interviews takes place at the distal not-yet-spoken site as participants' utterances indicate a concern with how society and others in their social networks may evaluate their choices around this issue.

### ***Attempting to manage the competing discourses***

Through their talk, participants attempted to manage competing discourses in two ways. First, they espouse open communication, noting that they and their daughters talk directly about social media. Second, they view their own daughter as unique (e.g., mature for her age, a perfect child) and/or as good (e.g., good student, follows the rules),



and therefore as worthy of trust. Open two-way communication and defining their daughters as unique and good enable participants to privilege trusting over monitoring, in spite of monitoring's place as the centripetal discourse. However, trusting seemed to be complicated by how daughters react to conversations, as we explain in the next section.

### *Two-way open communication*

Many participants advocated open communication, thus making it a centripetal discourse. As Ginny advised, "Yeah, just open communication with everything. It's just like everything as a parent, you've got to always talk . . . I think my biggest advice would be communication. Talk, talk, talk about everything." The underlying assumption among participants seemed to be that open communication about social media allows them to trust daughters. Participants also described how their daughters approach them to talk about social media too, thereby increasing the trust they have for daughters. Christine shared that her daughter initiates about half of their conversations about social media by asking, "has something like this ever happened to you or, or what would you do in this kind of situation?" Christine reflected:

I'm really lucky. It's pretty unique. And she has said to me a couple of other times that her friends, like, not that her friends are jealous, but like her friends are scared to talk to their parents sometimes or tell them about things. And she's like, oh, I just tell them. And like, we talk about it . . . So I don't feel like, I don't think I'm being naive. I, you know, I feel like she pretty much tells us about things that are happening for her.

Christine not only indicated that there is open communication about social media, but that her daughter often starts their conversations. This reassures her that she knows what is going on with her daughter and, therefore, can trust her. Note that she also refers to her situation as "unique" (see next section) and how she implies that she is a good parent because her daughter can talk to her while her friends are afraid to talk to their parents. Hence, she is a good parent with a good daughter who can be trusted, rendering it less necessary to monitor her social media use.

Open two-way communication enables participants to favor trusting their daughters over monitoring them, although this is to some degree dependent on how the daughters react to parental advice and questions. Laura's comments were typical: "She responds fairly well, you know, I'd say some days she doesn't want to talk, but she was just like, 'okay, mom, I'm good. Please stop.' But other days she'll listen too." Parents seemed to be aware that they can come on too strong, shutting down conversation, which may then diminish trust and require having to monitor. Pamela exemplified this with her comments: "I start probably the majority of the conversations, but she does bring,

usually it's a concern . . . Yeah, I would say that I am always guarded in my responses because if I come off as judgmental, I get much less information." So while participants view open communication as imperative in their role as a parent, some parents also fear that trying to force communication or give advice in response to what daughters share may result in daughters' closedness about their social media experiences. However, overall, in spite of occasional resistance, participants' talk seemed to indicate that open two-way communication provides a partial means to manage competing discourses of trusting versus monitoring.

### *Daughter as unique and/or Good*

It was common for participants to describe their own daughters as unique, special, or good in some way, rendering the daughter as someone who can be trusted to behave appropriately on social media. Most of these utterances are at the proximal, already-spoken site of the utterance chain and constitute the second way in which parents are able to manage competing discourses; because the daughter is unique/good, the parent can favor trusting over monitoring. Amanda illustrated this approach: "She is super responsible. She's a super good kid. And so we are, we should pay more attention to what she has on her device, but we don't." Similarly, Laura explained:

I don't really have a screen time limit just because she's actively involved in sports and clubs. She gets all A's and B's, and I try and like, I don't want to have her not do anything, but I think she spends an equal time outside with friends.

Several participants (e.g., Amanda, Chloe) described their daughters as "rule-followers" who, therefore, can be trusted to do the right thing on social media and do not need monitoring. It was clear from the discourse defining daughters as unique and good, as evident in their good grades and extracurricular activities, participants were able to find meaning in the interplay of competing discourses to some degree by privileging trusting daughters over monitoring them.

## **Discussion**

Findings from these interviews shed light on parents' sense-making as they navigate their role in adolescent daughters' social media use. To begin, as parents struggle in their sense-making, they voice discourses in which the dominant (centripetal) discourses seem to be around "bad parents" and the need to monitor daughters' social media use, competing with alternative (centrifugal) but complex discourses of "good parents." Much of the interplay of these competing discourses occurs at the distal site in the utterance chain, reflecting what parents perceive as societal expectations for their role in adolescent daughters' social media; thus, their identity as parents is threatened

if they do not get this right, as Shirani et al. (2012) suggested. Previous research has found that parents develop expectations in part by comparing themselves to other parents (Krcmar & Cingel, 2016; Yardi, 2012). These comparisons undoubtedly shape the discourses of bad and good parent voiced by the current study's participants. Bad parents do not monitor or get involved directly in daughters' social media use; thus, to avoid being bad parents they need to be good parents who monitor social media use. Parents in Jeffery's (2021) study also believed it was necessary to monitor children's social media. However, the discourse of good parents is not straightforward as it means being involved yet trusting daughters, allowing them independence so they learn and can take advantage of social interaction opportunities on social media. Rachel's advice, "So monitor in other ways without having to actually open it," attempts to solve the dilemma of needing to monitor use while trusting and giving autonomy in order to be a good parent.

Monitoring daughters' social media use to avoid being a bad parent and to be a good one presents other problems beyond competing with discourses of trusting and allowing independence. It is time-consuming and difficult for parents (Cranor et al., 2014; Jeffery, 2021) and, thus, drives parents to privilege discourses of trusting. Parents in Cranor et al.'s (2014) study explained that they would trust their children to make the right decisions when they found it too difficult to monitor. Given that monitoring and trusting emerged as competing discourses and their connections to good versus bad parents in the current study, parents found ways to manage the interplay through discourses of open communication and daughter uniqueness/goodness. That is, they discussed how, through multiple conversations, they are able to trust their daughters, particularly when daughters respond with open communication, and also voiced that their daughters are unique and/or good in some way (e.g., mature, rule-following, earning excellent grades). These discourses enable them to be good parents without all of the monitoring because they justify being able to privilege trusting over monitoring. These discourses of open communication and daughter uniqueness took place largely at the proximal level; thus, their immediacy may help support parents' adoption of them as a means to manage the interplay of competing discourses, particularly those around bad versus good parents, which occur primarily at the distal, less immediate site. It is likely, therefore, that parents do not monitor social media use as much as they report they do on surveys (e.g., Anderson, 2016). When completing surveys they may be aware of the societal expectation that good parents monitor their children's use of social media, and closed-ended survey formats do not provide the opportunity to voice competing discourses that justify not monitoring. In addition, they tend to find monitoring to be hard and time consuming to do.

It is clear from these interviews and previous studies that parents struggle with sense-making around their role in daughters' use of social media.

Relational dialectics theory seems particularly useful for examining this experience. By identifying and illuminating competing discourses, RDT highlights the complexity of this sense-making task made challenging by multiple layers of societal expectations (distal sites), interactions with daughters (proximal sites), and identities of parents and daughters. The oft-advocated prescription of open communication as the solution to parent children's use of social media (e.g., Common Sense Media, 2021), although well intentioned, may be over-simplified and not sufficiently precise to enable parents to know what to do. Although parents should have conversations with their children about social media, doing so does not appear to be sufficient to make sense of how to manage this issue. Findings suggest that the advice of open communication between parent and child addresses only the proximal level and not the distal level of societal expectations for monitoring and close involvement required of the good parent. To manage competing discourses, parents appear to couple conversations with daughters with voicing discourses of daughter uniqueness/goodness to favor trusting over monitoring and still maintain a "good parent" identity.

### ***Implications and future studies***

This analysis using RDT 2.0 illustrates the complexity of parents' sense-making about their role in daughters' use of social media and, thus, the challenge of providing simple, straightforward advice to parents. One implication of these findings, however, translates to potentially useful advice: parents should concern themselves less with societal and social network expectations (the distal level) and focus more on their own daughters and the interactions and behaviors appropriate given who their daughters are, their characteristics, and their needs (the proximal level). Worrying about expectations of others and definitions of "good" versus "bad" parents seemed to overwhelm participants because these discourses, to some degree, contradict their experiences with and preferences toward how to oversee their daughters' social media use. Although it is unlikely parents can completely ignore societal expectations, they can choose to privilege their knowledge and experiences with their own daughters.

Undoubtedly, parents will continue trying to make sense of their role in their children's use of social media as platforms proliferate and change. Future research is needed to understand how parents view their role with sons' social media use as there are differences in how boys and girls use and experience social media (Common Sense Media, 2021). Additionally, studies should employ more diverse samples of parents in terms of race and socio-economic status to gain a broader understanding of how parents of varied backgrounds make sense of their role. Finally, in families with multiple children, it is likely that siblings talk with each other about social media (Siibak & Nevski, 2020).

Research should look at the potentially important role siblings play in family communication about social media use by tweens and teens.

### **Limitations**

These results need to be considered in light of the study's limitations. Although sufficient for an-depth interviews, the sample size was modest and most participants were mothers; fathers were clearly underrepresented. This limitation is offset to a degree by the fact that previous research finds mothers to do more of the parenting pertaining to social media use (Robards & Lincoln, 2020). In addition, participants may have been influenced in their responses by societal expectations of being involved in their daughters' social media use. Using RDT, however, enabled social desirability in participants' responses to become apparent as it was voiced quite consistently across participants in the discourse of good versus bad parents.

### **Conclusion**

Parents clearly struggle in their sense-making around their role in daughters' social media use. Their identities as good parents are at stake as the discourses of bad versus good parents taking place at the distal level illustrated. The centripetal discourse of the bad parent invoked discourses of monitoring daughters' use of social media, while the centrifugal discourse of the good parent invoked discourses of trusting daughters and granting them autonomy. To avoid being deemed a bad parent, participants engaged in conversations with their daughters and voiced discourses of their daughters' uniqueness or goodness, enabling them to trust rather than rely on monitoring.

### **Note**

1. Interview excerpts were marginally edited to enable more clarity and readability.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **Funding**

This work was supported by a College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) University Research Grant (URG) at Illinois State University

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## Appendix

### Social Media Parent Interview

#### Demographics

- (1) How old are you?
- (2) What is your race?
- (3) Are you the mother or father?
- (4) How old is your daughter? If you have more than one in this age group, how old are they? (and if you have more than 1 feel free to talk about them all in your interview)
- (5) What age did daughter first get a social media account?
- (6) Which platform was the social media account on?
- (7) How did you find out that she was getting an account?
- (8) Are you friends or a follower on the social media account(s) she has?
- (9) Do you have your own social media account(s)? If so, which one(s)? If so, how often do you check or post on your social media account(s)?

#### Interview Questions

- (1) Please think of any conversations you have had with your daughter about social media usage. Please explain what you have talked to her about regarding social media.
- (2) How often do conversations about social media occur?
- (3) Who starts these conversations?
- (4) Does she ever approach you to talk about social media? If so, what does she want to talk about? If not, do you have any sense of why she doesn't start conversations about social media with you?
- (5) How has your daughter responded to conversations you have had with her about social media? How do her responses make you feel?
- (6) How, if at all, do you think that your conversations with her about social media has influenced her social media use?
- (7) [If the parent says he/she has had lots of conversations, ask] As you think about the conversations you've had with her, can you describe one that sticks out to you in some way? Perhaps it was the first or the most recent or one where you felt like she was really listening?
- (8) Do you or have you set rules about social media with your daughter? For instance, some people might set rules about how much time she can be on social media, when or where she can be on it, that you have to see her posts before making them, or if she can have social media at a certain age. If so, what rules have you set and how did you communicate those rules to her?
  - (i) What are/were her responses to these rules?
  - (ii) If you haven't set rules, what are the reasons you haven't?
- (9) Do you or have you monitored her social media use in any way (e.g., logged into her account? Require that she "friend" you on social media so you can see her posts?) If yes, in what ways have you monitored her use?
- (10) Overall, what positive things do you think your daughter gets from being on social media?
- (11) Overall, do you have concerns about her using social media? If so, what are they?
- (12) Do you have any advice for other parents of young girls about the girls' social media usage, rules, or conversations with the girls?
- (13) Anything else you would like to add before we end?