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Title

A qualitative study into parental mediation of adolescents' internet use

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A Qualitative Study into Parental Mediation of Adolescents' Internet Use

Abstract

The vast majority of studies on parental mediation are quantitative by nature, which leads to a lack of in-depth understanding of how parents define and perform their role as socializing agents in this area. The present study offers new insights into how parental mediation is implemented on a daily basis with regard to adolescents' internet use. Therefore, six focus group interviews with parents of children aged 13 to 17 were performed (in total, 34 participants). Concretely, the study investigated (i) how parents perceive their adolescents' internet use, (ii) how parents define their own role as socializing agents, and (iii) how parents perform internet mediation on a daily basis. The results show that parental mediation is best conceived as a dynamic process that stems from the daily interactions between parents and their adolescent children, rather than as a preconceived set of rules and strategies that are implemented. Open communication and making a connection with the adolescent in terms of his or her internet use are parents' preferred strategies for performing parental mediation. The results have implications in terms of parental mediation research as well as in terms of the support directed at parents of adolescent children.

Keywords

Parental mediation; adolescence; qualitative research; internet use

Background

Throughout the Western world, almost all children and young people are active internet users. In Europe, nine out of every 10 young people aged 16 to 19 are online on a daily basis, and therefore, mobile devices are extremely popular (Eurostat, 2016). Research has identified various strategies that parents employ to ensure safe internet use (e.g., Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Sonck, Nikken, & de Haan, 2013). Because the vast majority of this research is quantitative by nature, an in-depth understanding of the mediation strategies that parents are using is largely lacking. We argue that, especially with regard to adolescents' internet use, such an in-depth understanding is needed. During adolescence, children seek more autonomy from their parents (Kruse & Walper, 2008). This potentially puts pressure on parents' opportunities to perform internet mediation. At the same time, young people are still vulnerable to possible negative online experiences. For instance, a number of cases have been reported concerning teenagers' taking their own lives in part due to being bullied online (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). The prevalence of cyberbullying peaks between 12 and 15 years old, whereas the risk of sex-related harassment increases during adolescence (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). Risks related to internet use generally refer to excessive use, content risks (e.g., violent and pornographic content), conduct risks (e.g., engagement in bullying), contact risks (e.g., becoming the victim of cyberbullying, or being contacted by strangers), and the risk of commercial exploitation (e.g., the gathering of personal information for marketing purposes, and related privacy risks) (e.g., Álvarez, Torres, Rodríguez, Padilla, & Rodrigo, 2013; Heirman et al., 2016; Lee, 2012; Livingstone & Haddon, 2008).

The aim of the present study was to contribute to an in-depth understanding of how parents engage in the parental mediation of their adolescents' internet use. To this end, data were derived from focus group interviews with parents of children aged 13 to 17. The study

was guided by insights from two research fields. On the one hand, use was made of parental mediation research indicating a range of strategies that parents employ to enhance safe internet use as well as obstacles to the implementation of such strategies due to the specific characteristics of the internet 2.0. On the other hand, use was made of insights on the changing parent-child dynamics during adolescence, which affect parents' perceived roles and opportunities with regard to influencing their children's internet behavior. Below, we provide more details on both research fields.

Literature Review

Parenting the Internet 2.0: Strategies and Obstacles

Research has identified a range of strategies that parents may deploy to manage their children's internet use. Distinction can be made among active mediation (parents' efforts to give their interpretations of media content and to convey their opinions about it), restrictive mediation (restrictions with regard to the time spent online as well as the media content that a child may consult), supervision and co-use (watching the child using the internet and using the internet with the child regardless of any discussions taking place), interaction restrictions (rules about with whom the child can communicate) and technological mediation (the installation of technical applications that enable parents to track their children's online activities or to limit their internet access) (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Sonck et al., 2013; Valkenburg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, & de Leeuw, 2013). Little is known about how parents implement these strategies on a daily basis. Such an understanding is warranted, however, considering that the parental mediation of internet use to date entails far more challenges as compared to the mediation of more traditional media.

First, internet use takes place in a more private setting, which makes it harder for parents to monitor it. In 2011, Livingstone and colleagues referred to the existence of a "bedroom" culture, based on the finding that, across Europe, 49% of children aged 9 to 16

use the internet in their bedrooms (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). The increased diversification of the devices on which children can go online, such as smartphones and tablets, and the increased personal ownership of such devices have further evolved into a situation in which children can go online anytime and anywhere. The family computer is no longer the sole or main internet access point, and the locations at which young people access the internet have diversified (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2013). Also, even when done in a public area of the home, “being online” is mostly considered an individual or solitary activity. Second, the range of online activities in which a child can engage is expansive and evolves continually. The internet can provide many opportunities for young people in the field of psychosocial development, such as self-exploration and relationship development (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), educational opportunities, and entertainment (Vincent, 2015). Qualitative research with young people shows that the internet has an impact on multiple domains of their lives (McMillan & Morrison, 2006). An awareness of the benefits and opportunities that the internet holds for their children might make parents reserved about limiting their children’s use of this medium. Finally, the “generational divide” in ICT knowledge is commonly seen as a factor complicating parental mediation (Valcke, Bonte, De Wever, & Rots, 2010), although it is also suggested that this ICT knowledge gap might be smaller than assumed (Sonck, Livingstone, Kuiper, & de Haan, 2011). Overall, it has been found that parents who use the internet less and who have less knowledge about the internet engage less in parental mediation (in terms of active co-use, technical restrictions, interaction restrictions, and monitoring; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Wang, Bianchi, & Raley, 2005).

Shifting Roles and Opportunities for Parental Mediation

Parents are socializing agents in the field of their children’s internet use, as they engage in practices that support their children in becoming competent internet users (Shin, 2015). As children grow older, however, parents become less likely to engage in such

practices. This was found, for example, in relation to monitoring and setting limits on online behavior (Rosen, Cheever, & Carrier, 2008) as well as the use of filter and blocking software (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2005). The decrease in mediation practices can be understood from the changing parent-child dynamics during adolescence. As such, parental mediation practices have been related to parents' perceptions of their children's ability to self-regulate (Mitchell et al., 2005; Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011). In a study on the parental mediation of adolescents' media use, Padilla-Walker and Coyne (2011) concluded that "parents who feel their adolescent has the ability to regulate his or her own behaviors appear to set fewer rules regarding media and actively allow adolescents to make their own decisions regarding media use" (p. 713). The decline in mediation practices during adolescence can also be understood from the adolescent's declining acceptance of parental mediation. Research suggests that children do not necessarily follow their parents' advice on safe internet use (Livingstone & Bober, 2004) and that children perceive less parental mediation (in terms of monitoring, supervision, and rule setting) as compared to what their parents report (Liau, Khoo, & Ang, 2008; Wang et al., 2005). It can be expected that the child's obedience and openness toward parental mediation declines with age. Adolescence is typically marked by a constant renegotiation and shifting of the boundaries that mark the personal jurisdiction of the young person versus the authority of the parents (Smetana, Crean, & Campione-Barr, 2005). Thus, although young children do not question the authority that parents have over them, older children will increasingly demand more self-jurisdiction.

The concept of the "legitimacy of parental authority" is useful for better understanding the active role that adolescents play in their own socialization processes (Darling, Cumsille, & Martínez, 2007). It refers to "the extent to which parents' assertion of control over an area is believed to be a natural appropriate extension of their role as parents" (Darling et al., 2007, p. 299). Adolescents' and parents' perceptions of parental authority

evolve with the adolescents' age, and furthermore, these perceptions are domain specific. In the studies by Smetana, Crean, and Campione-Barr (2005) and Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, and Campione-Barr (2006), parental authority is investigated from a domain-specific and developmental framework. A distinction is made among the moral domain (referring to acts that pertain to other people's rights and welfare), the conventional domain (referring to acts that are regulated by social norms, such as etiquette and manners), the prudential domain (referring to acts that affect the individual's comfort, safety, or health), and the personal domain (referring to issues that are regarded as having consequences for the actor only and outside societal regulation and moral concern). In addition to these four domains, multifaceted issues are distinguished as covering diverse domains (Smetana et al., 2005; Smetana et al., 2006). Parents as well as adolescents perceive parental authority to be most appropriate in the prudential domain (thus covering issues related to health and safety, such as drinking and smoking behavior) and least appropriate in the personal domain (thus covering issues that are considered private, such as whom the adolescent is friends with). Parents will grant increasing autonomy to the adolescent as the adolescent grows older, but overall, adolescents are found to claim more autonomy than parents are willing to give, which can give rise to conflicts over parental authority. The biggest conflicts over parental authority occur with regard to overlapping issues, covering multiple domains and issues that parents view as conventional or prudential while being viewed by teenagers as personal (for example, seeing friends whom the parents perceive as potentially harmful, or watching movies of which the parents disapprove; Assadi, Smetana, Shahmansouri, & Mohammadi, 2011; Smetana et al., 2005; Smetana et al., 2006).

Internet use is located at the intersection of various social-cognitive domains. Issues of safety refer, for example, to the adverse health effects of computer use or to risks related to online grooming. Issues on the social-conventional and moralistic domain refer, for example,

to the type of media content the child is consuming or producing, and to the type of communication in which the child engages. From the perspective of the young person, however, it can be expected that the internet is largely considered to be part of the personal domain. In sum, as the internet is at the intersection of various domains, it can be expected that adolescents' internet use is prone to conflicts over parental authority.

This Study

As discussed above, adolescence is a vulnerable period for experiencing harm related to internet use, and at the same time, parental mediation related to adolescent internet use is found to decrease during this period. For the latter, three possible explanations are suggested based on the literature. First, the internet might become an "increasingly uncontrollable" medium as children grow older, due to characteristics such as increased solitary use and the diversification of applications whose use may slip under the parental radar. Second, parents' role as socializing agents changes during adolescence, which goes hand in hand with changing perceptions among parents regarding their responsibilities as well as opportunities when it comes to the mediation of their children's internet use. Third, in light of the increasing uncontrollability of the internet and the changing boundaries of parental authority, parents might have developed new mediation practices that are so far not included in the research. To clarify these issues, in-depth knowledge is required on the parental mediation of adolescents' internet use. The present study is a contribution to this end, thereby using qualitative data derived from focus group interviews with the parents of adolescent children. Concretely, the goals of the study were to investigate (i) how parents perceive their children's internet use, (ii) how parents define their own role as socializing agents in this field, and (iii) how parents perform the mediation of their children's internet use.

Method

Qualitative data were gathered as part of the research project “Teenagers Online!” *[link to the webpage of the project removed for reasons of anonymity]*. This multi-method project was focused on parental mediation to reduce online contact risks among adolescents. Qualitative data were gathered by means of focus group interviews with parents who have at least one child aged 13 to 17. Focus group interviews were chosen as the research method for several reasons. First, using focus group interviews enabled us to gather information with minimal steering by the interviewer. Second, a dynamic interplay among the participants was expected to lead to the disclosure of more relevant information. During a focus group discussion, participants may seek clarification among one another, prompt others to reveal more information, and reconsider or sharpen their own answers (Finch, Lewis, & Turley, 2014). Third, preparatory discussions with professionals working in the field of parental support suggested that parents would welcome the format of a group discussion considering that parents do not have many opportunities to discuss this topic with other parents. The focus groups took place in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, between October 2015 and March 2016. Flanders is characterized by a high internet penetration rate, and 92% of the young people aged 12 to 18 possess personal smartphones (Mediaraven & Linc, 2016).

In total, six focus groups took place with varying numbers of participants. One focus group had three participants, one had four participants, two had six participants, one featured seven participants, and one featured eight participants. Altogether, 34 parents participated. As the subject of the group discussions was very topical and familiar to all parents, a dynamic group discussion could be achieved even in the smaller groups. Prior to the focus group interviews, the participants were informed of the goals of the study, the participants’ rights, and confidentiality. Each participant signed an informed consent form. The participants were each also asked to complete an information sheet to provide the following information: participants’ age and gender, age and gender of each child, and devices through which

participants' children can access the internet (multiple-choice format). The duration of the focus groups ranged from 43 to 70 minutes. The focus groups were held in different locations depending on where the participants were recruited. Focus groups one (FG_1) and three (FG_3) were held prior to an information session on the topic of media use among children, and the participants were recruited via the organizers of the information session. FG_1 took place at a community center, and FG_3 took place at a school. FG_2 was held at the Higher Institute for Family Studies, a research and education institution with a large group of adult students. The respondents were recruited among students and employees. FG_4, FG_5, and FG_6 were held at a center for parental support (called an "opvoedingswinkel," which is literally translated as "education shop"), where participants were also recruited. Such centers for parental support are organized at the local level and aim to inform parents about issues related to education. If needed, they also offer practical advice and support to individual parents. Each session was held in a different city.

The mean age of the participants was the same for fathers ($n = 9$) and mothers ($n = 25$), 43.6 years. The fathers were between 33 and 58 years old, whereas the mothers were between 37 and 52 years old. Ten participants had one child, 14 had two children, seven had three children, two had four children, and one had five children. The participants with more than one child were instructed to focus only on the child(ren) from the target age group, i.e., those between 13 and 17 years old. Almost all of the participants indicated that their children can access the internet through family laptops/computers, smartphones, and tablets. Personal laptops and laptops or computers elsewhere (e.g., at school) were marked by about two-thirds ($n = 22$) of the parents. No information was asked regarding the participants' ethnic backgrounds, educational levels, and employment. Asking such private information could have harmed the safe atmosphere we wanted to create, making the participants feel exposed and unwilling to reveal information. The participants completed the forms collectively

preceding the focus group discussions. Therefore, we could not guarantee full privacy. It can be harmful for a group discussion if social-economic differences among the participants are too apparent. This may induce feelings of discomfort and as such become an obstacle for open discussions (Finch et al., 2014). We do point out that the participants were very homogeneous in terms of ethnic background (all native Belgians). Due to the recruitment strategy used, the participants were rather homogeneous in terms of socio-economic background as well. The parents with lower levels of education were harder to reach for participation in information sessions and group discussions.

The focus groups were led by the first author of this article. The interviews were semi-structured, using broad, guiding questions. After introducing each question to the group, the interviewer intervened only to keep the respondents on topic, to probe for more details, and to assure the active participation of every member (while avoiding dominance by others). First, the parents were asked to discuss their perceptions of the importance of the internet and social media in their children's lives, as well as their perceptions of the associated risks and benefits. The other questions were developed following the completion of a review of parental mediation studies based on which the following key components of parental mediation were identified: parental knowledge of their children's internet use and exposure to risks, the implementation of different parental mediation practices, and the perceived effectiveness as well as obstacles of such mediation practices. It was left to the participants' own interpretations what "internet use" refers to. The participants themselves placed emphasis on social media, and the interviewer did not steer the discussions to focus on other aspects, such as gaming.

The discussions were recorded and data were transcribed by the lead researcher. The lead researcher also analyzed the data, making use of the qualitative data analysis software NVivo11. Data analysis was done by applying a combination of inductive and deductive

techniques. A cross-sectional method was followed whereby a common set of labels was applied across the whole sample, as opposed to applying labels across individual participating members (Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O'Connor, & Barnard, 2014). In a first step, the data were organized according to broad themes or categories that were set a priori in line with the research questions. Furthermore, the data were labelled or coded by searching for themes that emerged from the data themselves. This was done in consecutive rounds whereby recurring themes were identified, arranged, and re-arranged under higher-level categories. The coding process continued until no new themes emerged from the data.

Results

The results are discussed according to the three research goals as set out in the introduction of the study.

How do Parents Perceive Their Adolescent Children's Internet Use?

Parents perceive the internet to be a central part of their children's lives. In particular, the smartphone is an essential device for their children; as one parent stated, "It is an extension of their hand" (FG_1). Children's online activities may appear frivolous and unimportant to parents, and some described children's online activities in a pejorative way as such "a waste of time" or "nonsense" (sic.; FG_1 and FG_4, respectively). Parents may find it difficult to accept that the internet—especially social network sites—take up such a huge part of their children's lives. For example, as a father put it:

For a long time I had real difficulty with it. I find it [social media] very antisocial, and it took me a very long time to make that click, as a parent, and to accept that indeed it is such a big part of their life. I feel like 'go outside, come on, do anything but that.' I find it difficult to accept. (FG_4)

Parents have made efforts to understand why social media are so important to their children. Most benefits are perceived in terms of enhancing social contacts, such as having

the opportunity to discuss things with friends in an easy way, making new friends, sharing experiences, showing oneself to others, and comparing oneself with others. The parents acknowledged that receiving “likes” on Facebook is highly rewarding to their children. Apart from benefits in terms of social contacts, the parents also perceived many practical benefits of the internet, especially in terms of using the internet for schoolwork or for discussing schoolwork with fellow students. The parents believed that the internet is an integral part of their children’s daily lives and that it will continue to gain importance in the future.

The problematic aspects of internet use as perceived by parents were mainly related to their children’s behavior and experiences on social media. First, the continuous input of information and communication can be a source of emotional stress. Young people lack opportunities to retreat from the outside world, and they hardly have any space for letting things sink in. Especially when things go wrong and bullying occurs, it can be very harmful for children to have no “time off.” Second, being continuously online may interfere with life in the offline world. It may be a hindrance to engagement in alternative occupations, such as schoolwork or offline leisure activities. Some parents believed that intense online communication might also interfere with the development of offline communication skills. Third, parents expressed concerns about their children’s communication styles and language use. Communication on social media can easily become emotionally charged, leading to misunderstandings and emotional distress. An innocent remark may be interpreted negatively, leading to a “domino reaction” (FG_1) and eliciting further negative reactions. As one parent put it, bullying is something that has always existed, but in the era of social media, it may get out of hand a lot more quickly. The parents also believed that young people do not sufficiently understand the emotional impact of their words, as they are not directly confronted with the receivers of those words. Being behind a screen may make it easier to

write certain things that they would not dare to say in person. This is illustrated by the following quotation of a mother:

How do I communicate with others. That's what it's all about for me. What I don't dare to say in someone's face, I also won't write it down. It's a kind of respect that you need to have I think, also in that medium, and that's very difficult for them to grasp. (FG_2)

Furthermore, some parents perceived their children's online language use as inappropriate or disrespectful. For example, it is not uncommon for young people to use abusive words, such as "bitch," albeit in a friendly context. At the same time, the parents perceived this type of language as slang used by young people, much in the same way that young people also use slang in the offline world.

If I accidentally look at a Facebook page, and I see the comments, if I wouldn't know any better, if I wouldn't know those friends, I would think that they are abusing each other. But that's humor, that's the way in which they speak to each other. (FG_5)

Fourth, the parents questioned children's abilities to understand the blurry boundaries between the public and private spheres and to guard those boundaries. Young people may not fully grasp the reach and public character of what they share online, including pictures and information on their whereabouts. Young people's tendency to share a lot of personal information makes them vulnerable, for example, to reputational loss and bullying, and it may even interfere with future job opportunities.

Fifth, the parents expressed concerns about their children's online contacts. The need for popularity may lead young people to seek as many "friends" as possible, thereby being less selective. This is particularly a risk for younger adolescents who have just started using social media and want to expand their networks rapidly.

Finally, the parents expressed concerns about their children's exposure to harmful or inappropriate content. Depending on a child's age and maturity, there can be a lack of the critical thought necessary to put things into perspective and to interpret information with nuance. For example, a father explained:

I notice that there's a danger of sharing and liking things of which he doesn't understand well whether it's something ironic, or whether it comes from somebody who copy-pasted it from an ultra-left or ultra-right website. Those young guys don't see it yet, don't understand that not everything that's in the newspaper or on Facebook is the truth. (FG_1)

Concerns were also expressed with regard to exposure to advertising as well as violent and pornographic content. However, although the parents acknowledged that these are the potential risks of internet use, they did not consider them to be specific to internet use. The parents argued that children see the same things on television and that this is just something they have to learn to deal with. It is apparent from the results that the parents focused on their children's use of social networks and expressed less concern related to other internet contents. Also, the children's engagement in gaming was mentioned only in relation to concerns about excessive internet use. It is possible that the parents perceived gaming as something distinguished from internet use because the phenomenon of online games is relatively new.

How do Parents Define Their Role as Socializing Agents?

The parents were asked to discuss how they view their role in terms of mediating their children's internet use. In this way, different narratives could be distinguished regarding what parents use to position themselves as socializing agents. A recurring theme that emerged was the difficulty of finding a balance between parenting children's internet use versus granting children autonomy in this area.

Narratives for defining the parental role. Overall, the parents ascribed themselves a minimal role in terms of parenting their children's internet use. They shared the view that their role as a parent is to "guard from the sideline" (sic., FG_1). In this position, their most important task is to be there when needed, but without steering or restricting their children's internet use too much. The parents used the following three narratives to motivate this position. First, parents perceived social media to be a social space that shares characteristics with offline social spaces in which an adolescent needs to grow and develop in an increasingly autonomous way. Along the way, it is expected that the child will make some mistakes but also that he or she will learn from those mistakes. Drawing parallels to their own youth, parents found it important for children to have sufficient autonomy and privacy in this area. Being able to have secrets and being able to make mistakes is to some extent perceived as age appropriate. This is illustrated by the following quotation from a mother:

They should also be allowed to have secrets. If I think of what we used to hide from our parents when we were young, then I think I already know a lot. (...) Some things are more visible now than they used to be but you don't have to make a problem out of everything, some things will just pass. (...) Some things are just part of being a teenager. (FG_2)

Considering that adolescents need privacy and space to experiment and learn, intense parental involvement is perceived to be undesirable and even disrespectful toward these children. Being too close might also have adverse outcomes. It could elicit reactionary behavior in children and lead them to act more in secret, which would imply the further loss of opportunities for the parents to engage in mediation. As a mother explains:

It's not good to prohibit too much I think, they're teenagers, they will do it anyway so they will do it secretly and then you lose all control. (...) I just let it happen and I will check a bit from the sideline. (FG_3)

In the second narrative, the internet is seen as something that is a part of the child's daily life and as something the child needs to be successful in life. Especially the need to use it for school increases the perception that the internet is part of the child's personal decision-making. The parents found it important for their children to make use of all of the benefits the internet may hold and that they become confident internet users. As a mother explained:

I won't limit her internet use because I think it's just something that they grow up with and it will be important for the rest of their lives, including when they start working. (FG_4)

In the third narrative, parents refer to the limited need for parental intervention, as they believe the internet is an overall positive thing. They suggest that there might be too much emphasis on the negative aspects while in reality problems are an exception. This is illustrated by the following quotation from a father:

I try to put things into perspective. The things you read and see on television and in the newspapers, you hear things every now and then. But there's like a million children being online every day, sending text messages, and where nothing goes wrong. So then I think "ok". But you do have to be conscious about possible risks. (FG_6)

Finding a balance between parental intervention and granting autonomy.

Although the parents perceived that much parental intervention in their children's internet use is not desirable nor necessary, this does not imply that they dismiss any responsibility as socializing agents. On the contrary, the parents tried to find an optimal balance between parenting their children's internet use, on the one hand, and giving the children appropriate autonomy, on the other hand. Thereby, they evaluated the extent to which their children were ready to assume the responsibilities that come with a certain amount of autonomy. Typically,

children will request more autonomy than the parent is willing to give, and negotiations take place. Recurring themes of negotiation were the age at which a child can have a personal social network profile and the use of the internet in the bedroom. Parents may feel insecure about where to draw the line, as this quotation by a mother illustrates:

What do you do? Do you have to control or guard from a distance? How much distance, stay close, go far? It's a continuous search. (FG_5)

The autonomy that parents grant to their children is built around trust. For younger children, it is considered appropriate to closely monitor their online activities, especially when they start using social media. In this situation, respecting children's privacy is subordinate to protecting them from making mistakes with potentially far-reaching consequences. As children get older, the more important it becomes for parents to show trust in the children, and invading the children's privacy in the name of good parenting becomes less acceptable for both the children and the parents. This could lead to complicated situations when parents discover something by accidentally invading their children's privacy. This was, for instance, the case when a child used a shared computer and forgot to log off from his or her social network profile. Using that information to interfere would imply admitting that the parent had infringed the child's privacy, and this, in turn, could further deteriorate the child's relationship with the parent. If the parent does not use the information to interfere, however, the situation might become even more problematic. Furthermore, finding that the trust has been breached urges parents to intervene, but once a certain level of autonomy is granted, it becomes challenging to revoke that autonomy at a later stage. A mother explained this in the following quotation:

Looking back to it I regret that I have let her loose. (...) Now we feel like we should have put more boundaries. She is becoming a bit older now, so you want to give that trust, but it ran out of hand. (FG_5)

How do Parents Perform Mediation?

The third goal of the study was to understand how parents perform the mediation of their children's internet use. Two broad topics emerged from the group discussions. First, concrete strategies that the parents employ were discussed. Second, the parents discussed obstacles that they encounter as a result. Both topics are explained in depth below.

Parental mediation strategies. As discussed above, the parents showed a preference for guarding their adolescent children's internet use "from the sideline." To successfully perform this role, the parents referred to making connections and to having open communication with their children. Making connections implies that parents have some understanding of their children's online experiences. A way of enhancing these connections is by showing interest in the children's internet use and by engaging in digital media themselves. Especially using online media together with the children or using media to communicate with the children improved the parent-child connections in this field. The quotation below illustrates a mother's sentiment on this matter:

Personally I believe that as a parent you need to show interest in your children's interests, because it is their world and you have to try to go along with that a bit.
(FG_1)

In addition to making connections, children need to have the feeling that they can communicate with their parents on anything that is important to them. Having open communication characterizes the parent-child relationship in general, thus exceeding the context of internet use. As a mother explained:

I think it is important to talk. If they know that they can come to you in case of a problem, I find that important. (...) And if we can not provide an answer then we can still figure it out together. (FG_3)

Initially, the parents found it difficult to identify the specific mediation practices in which they engage, or they minimized the extent to which they engage in such practices. As a parent put it, rules and agreements on internet use become part of the daily family interactions, which makes it difficult to identify and name them (FG_6). Such rules develop naturally in response to children's behavior, rather than having a preconceived set of rules and practices implemented. Nevertheless, through the dynamics of the discussions with the parents, a range of parental mediation practices could be distinguished.

First, all parents engaged to some extent in instructing their children on the behavior allowed on social media. This implies giving instructions on the type of information that the children are allowed to share, the use of certain language, what photos they can post, and with whom they can be friends. With regard to the latter, the number of "Facebook friends" was a recurring theme, and several parents expressed their concerns to their children that having many Facebook friends could put them at risk of privacy infractions or of being approached by strangers with bad intentions. Some parents therefore demanded that their children "unfriend" certain numbers of contacts. Rule setting on behavior that is allowed on social media often went hand in hand with supervision and co-use because parents tend to respond to the things they see on their children's Facebook pages. For example, parents will set a maximum number of Facebook friends after noticing that their children have high numbers of contacts. In this study, rule-setting also went together with active mediation as the parents tried to explain why a certain behavior is not allowed rather than just prohibiting it. Below is the quotation of a mother who noticed that her daughter had shared a picture of somebody else on Facebook:

She had posted pictures from somebody else. So I say 'did you ask her whether it was ok for you to post those pictures?' So I said 'no, you can't post pictures from somebody else without asking it first. You can take them back off'. (FG_5)

Second, the parents have rules on when and where their children may access the internet. A prohibition on internet use during family dinner was most common in the current study. Access restrictions were also more common for younger children (under 16)—for example, a limitation placed on the use of smartphones or tablets in the bedroom. As a reason, the parents mentioned it would limit their opportunities to perform supervision, and also, their children would be distracted from doing the things they need to do, such as preparing homework or sleeping. As the mother of a 13-year-old girl explained:

She doesn't have any device in her bedroom with which she can go online because it is far more difficult for me to control what she is doing there. On other places [referring to downstairs] I walk through during the day, but I don't want it in the bedroom because there it's out of my sight. (FG_2)

Third, parents monitored their children's behavior on social media. With younger children, it was common to have access to the login credentials of social network profiles. Parents do not tend to make use of them, however, and they usually do not access their children's profiles without the children knowing it. Instead, parents make profiles themselves, as most parents were not social media users before their children accessed social media, and they become friends with their children. This needs to be managed carefully, as it may be a source of conflict—for example, when a parent comments on a child's Facebook wall, this can be perceived as an intrusion into the child's personal sphere. Finally, some parents in the current study made use of technical mediation, but this was rare. Practical difficulties were experienced when using this method, such as a lack of knowledge about how to install the software properly and being blocked from certain webpages.

Obstacles for parental mediation. A first obstacle is children's avoidance or questioning of their parents' authority. This makes it difficult for parents to assure compliance with rules and agreements. For example, several parents explained that their

children take their smartphones into their bedrooms even though they are not allowed to do so. Children may also be inventive in circumventing parental control—for example, by speaking in codes with their friends or by buying a second smartphone. To avoid parental monitoring, children may give parents restricted access to their Facebook pages, or they may erase the histories of their internet activities.

Second, parents may be hindered by a lack of knowledge. This may refer to a lack of ICT skills, as this mother explained:

My son, he's twelve now, and he knows more than I do. He knows more about smartphones and apps. And I'm sitting there like, pfff I don't know anything. I want to be more informed but actually he knows a lot more than I do and he can just make me believe anything, I wouldn't know anyway. (FG_1)

A lack of knowledge can also refer to not knowing what children are doing online and being out of touch with social media in general. For example, parents may not know in which social media networks their children are active, what characteristics these networks have, and what potential risks are involved. Without such basic knowledge, it is difficult to formulate clear expectations for their children. Making a social profile account for the very first time is usually elaborately discussed with the parents. The installment of subsequent applications, however, such as Instagram and Snapchat, is usually not discussed. Some applications are also easier to manage than others. A parent indicated it is very difficult to know what information a child has accessed online or what types of pictures the child posts on Snapchat, whereas activities on Facebook are still somewhat visible (at least the activities that do not take place in private groups). None of the participating parents made use of software for tracking their children's online activities.

Third, the multi-use of the internet, with multiple applications and multiple devices, makes it a medium that is difficult to manage. For example, if there are many devices with

internet access in the household, it becomes more difficult to assure that a child did not take any device into his or her bedroom. Several parents mentioned that children use their smartphones as alarm clocks or to play relaxing sounds for falling asleep, and therefore, they could not limit their use in the bedroom. Also, the fact that the internet has penetrated many domains of children's lives, including the need to use it for schoolwork, makes it difficult to set limits on its use.

Fourth, parents are often busy, and parental mediation can be time consuming and experienced as a burden. Especially if a child is not compliant with the rules, parental mediation requires constant control, which is not always possible or desirable. As a father put it, "I don't want to be a watchdog" (FG_1). Being in touch with social media also implies that parents access social media themselves, but they may lack the time and interest needed to do so. Having children of different ages also discourages some parents from assuring compliance with the rules. For example, younger children may not be allowed to take their mobile phones to their bedrooms, whereas older children can do so. Having a different set of rules for each child makes the implementation of these rules much more difficult.

Discussion

By making use of focus group discussions with the parents of children aged 13 to 17, the present study provides in-depth information on the parental mediation of teenage children's internet use. The study looked at how parents perceived their children's internet use, how they defined their role as socializing agents in this area, and how they performed this role.

Parents' Perceptions of Their Children's Internet Use and Their Role as Socializing Agents

The parents acknowledged that the internet—and, in particular, social media—are a central part of their children's lives, penetrating many domains. It is a platform through

which children share their personal information with peers, and in which the children need to grow and learn in an autonomous way. The internet is also perceived to hold many practical benefits, including in terms of schoolwork. At the same time, the parents expressed concerns regarding their children's online behavior, especially related to social media use. Concerns were expressed regarding the appropriateness of their children's language use, the type of information their children share, and the online contacts the children make. Parents also identified possible risks in terms of emotional stress, reputational loss, and distraction from offline activities. This implies that the internet covers multiple social domains as distinguished by Smetana et al. (2005). It is part of a child's personal domain but also covers issues from the socio-conventional and moralistic domain (what is appropriate and "correct" behavior, e.g., in terms of sharing somebody else's picture, cyberbullying, and the use of appropriate language) as well as the prudential domain (what behavior is safe, e.g., in terms of privacy or reputational loss and grooming). While shedding light on the diverse parental worries about their adolescent child's internet use, the present study did not investigate the factors on which these worries, in their turn, depend. For example, research shows that parents who believe that they have fewer ICT-skills than others, who believe that they use the internet less frequently than others, and whose child spends more time online, tend to worry more about their teenage child's internet use (Sorbring, 2014). It can be expected that also among the participating parents in the present study, concerns will depend on a range of parental and child characteristics.

The overlap between different domains may explain why parents experience difficulty in defining their role as socializing agents in this area. Research suggests that conflicts over parental authority between a parent and child typically occur with regard to issues that cover multiple domains (Assadi et al., 2011). Likewise, parents themselves may find it more difficult to define their own role when it comes to overlapping issues. Close parental

involvement in their children's internet use was perceived to be undesirable, potentially eliciting adverse reactions from the child, and not appropriate nor necessary. At the same time, the parents expressed concerns about adverse outcomes related to their children's internet use, motivating them to intervene. Therefore, the parents sought to find a balance between granting their children autonomy in their internet use versus mediating the children's internet use when needed. The parents labeled this position as "sideline parenting." In line with former research (Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011), the balance between autonomy and control was based on the parents' perceptions of their children's self-regulation skills. Difficult situations occurred, however, as soon as the child proved to be less "skilled" than what the parent had hoped.

Performing Parental Mediation

According to the parents, internet parenting is best achieved through an open communication style and through making connections with their children in the field of its media use. This strategy would allow parents to notice in time where and when their children need assistance. It can be asked, however, the extent to which parents are realistic in terms of their ability to detect potential problems. Studies show that parents are often unaware of their children's internet behavior and experiences. For example, among younger as well as older adolescents, studies found that parents tend to underestimate their children's own cyberbullying behavior as well as their children's experiences with cyberbully victimization (Byrne, Katz, Lee, Linz, & McIlrath, 2014; Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; Matsunaga, 2009). An in-depth study on parental mediation among younger children found that parents tend to be confident in their internet parenting, but the author suggests that this confidence is not always substantiated and may be biased due to the low actual parental involvement in children's internet use (Shin, 2015).

The emphasis that parents place on open communication and making connection with their children is in line with former research suggesting that open communication is essential in terms of safe internet use. For example, Liao, Khoo, and Ang (2005) found that parental control did not have any effect on the experience of online contact risks, but children who voluntarily disclosed their potentially high-risk online contacts showed less online risk behavior. A study by Law, Shapka, and Olson (2010) found that children who voluntarily disclosed their internet behavior to their parents were less likely to bully online. Parents also engaged in using strategies that fall under what is typically studied as parental mediation, namely active and restrictive mediation strategies. The results showed that these often occurred intermingled, and supervision and co-use went hand in hand with giving instructions on what behavior is allowed as well as information regarding interpretative mediation. Restrictions on internet access were related to parents' opportunities to supervise their children's internet use. Typically, parents would respond to their children's online behavior, and thus, more parental supervision naturally led to more parental mediation. Furthermore, the obstacles that parents reported when performing parental mediation suggest that a distinction should be made between *parental attempts to mediate internet use* versus *actual parental mediation*. Most research studies on parental mediation and its effectiveness make use of reports by either a parent or a child, which excludes the possibility of making such a distinction.

The present study offers in-depth understanding of how parents perform internet mediation on a daily basis, and in particular how the different mediation strategies relate to one another. When interpreting the results, it should be kept in mind, however, that only a select group of parents participated in this study. Hence, it can not be ruled out that different findings would emerge among a different set of parents. The parents in this study expressed a preference for "sideline parenting" and emphasized the importance of maintaining an open

communication style with their child. It can be expected that parents who grant less autonomy to their children or who are less focused on open communication, would perform internet mediation in a different way. Indeed, parental mediation practices are linked to broader parenting styles in terms of parental control and parental warmth (Eastin, Greenberg, & Hofschire, 2006; Valcke et al., 2010). Therefore, parents' preference for "sideline parenting" and the related mediation practices are likely to be contingent on the broader parenting style. Parental mediation practices are also typically linked with parents' ICT-knowledge and internet use, whereby more ICT-knowledge and a higher internet use are linked with a higher engagement in parental mediation (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Valcke et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2005). For the present study the data were analyzed on the level of the focus groups, and therefore such individual differences between parents could not be taken into account.

Implications

The present study offers an in-depth understanding of the parental mediation of adolescent children's internet use. In applying a qualitative design, i.e. making use of data retrieved from focus group discussions, we are not aiming to achieve the generalizability of its results. Instead, the study aims to offer new insights into those aspects of parental mediation that receive little attention in quantitative studies as well as to make suggestions for future research in this field.

First, the results suggest that more attention should be paid to the ways in which parents define their role in relation to their children's internet use. Defining their parental role in this regard is a crucial aspect of parental mediation because it shapes parents' actual mediation activities. Although parental mediation studies focus on the practices in which parents engage, they do not pay much attention to the question of what drives parents to do so. Research does show that parents who believe they can positively impact their children's

internet use also engage more in mediation practices (Sonck et al., 2013). It is warranted that future studies would pay more attention to the ways in which parents define their own role regarding their children's internet use.

Second, the parents in this study applied a wide range of practices that former research has labeled as internet mediation practices. Only technical mediation was considered to be largely irrelevant, and the few parents who had ever tried this gave up rapidly due to practical obstacles. The study also showed, however, that different types of practices occurred simultaneously, and these could change on a daily basis in response to the specific behaviors of the parents' children. Quantitative studies on parental mediation that focus on the practices in which parents do or do not engage often fail to grasp mediation as a dynamic process. Considering that parental mediation practices change continuously, it is also not clear how parents make sense of their practices when completing questionnaires for quantitative studies. Furthermore, the present study found that parents tried to avoid rule-setting and the imposition of restrictions, especially as the children get older. Parents in this study believed that the best strategy for improving their children's internet use was to maintain open communication with their children and to make connections with their children regarding the internet. With former studies on parental mediation focusing on rule-setting and on the imposition of restrictions (e.g., Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Sonck et al., 2013; Valkenburg, Piotrowski, Hermanns, & de Leeuw, 2013), such "softer" mediation practices remain under the radar. Future research should validate these types of parental practices more fully.

Third, the emphasis that parents place on maintaining open communication and making connections with their children as mediation strategies implies that parental mediation of internet use should be understood more from the broader family context. This refers, for example, to the quality of the parent-child relationship, the characteristics of the

parent-child communication, and parenting styles. Former studies suggest that the parenting style (in terms of parental warmth and control) is linked to both the children's internet behavior and the type of internet mediation practices that apply (Rosen et al., 2008; Valcke et al., 2010).

Finally, the results have implications in terms of the support that can be offered to parents. The study shows that parents may find it difficult to define for themselves what their role is in terms of mediating their adolescent children's internet use. Therefore, it is warranted that parents are supported more in terms of defining the role they can have in this area of their children's upbringing. Further, when they do engage in parental mediation practices, parents can be confronted with a range of obstacles. Although quantitative parental mediation studies focus on the strategies that parents use and the outcomes of such strategies, this study suggests that parents need more support in understanding how they can put certain strategies into practice.

Limitations

Some limitations need to be considered that have implications in terms of the generalizability of the study results. First, it is possible that the participants who were recruited were atypical in terms of their internet parenting. The recruitment strategy itself (e.g., via organized information sessions on media use and parental support centers) may have led to a disproportionate representation of parents who are well informed on adolescents' internet use and parenting practices. Parents who are not motivated to be involved in their children's internet use may feel less inclined to participate in a group discussion on the topic. Also, parents who experience particular difficulties in terms of parenting may feel less inclined to participate, as they may consider themselves to be "exceptional cases." For example, the parental mediation of internet use might become more challenging when children show emotional and behavioral problems. We also acknowledge

that the parents of children with developmental disabilities are likely to have different experiences. These children may have an increased vulnerability to experiencing online risks, including sexual predation (Katz, 2001). Future studies could focus more on parental mediation in the context of such challenging conditions.

Second, the sample that was used for this study was homogenous in terms of parents' ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Considering that our study did not focus on differences according to these characteristics, no measures were taken to recruit this harder-to-reach group of parents. We acknowledge that our participants stem from a relatively privileged group in terms of the resources they have for performing parental mediation. Alternatively, as lower-income families are characterized by higher levels of unemployment or part-time employment, there might be more time available for parent-child interactions. Apart from parents' ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, the study was not able to differentiate among parents according to their ICT knowledge and uses. Research suggests that this is a relevant factor in terms of parental mediation (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Valcke et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2005). The results did indicate that a lack of ICT knowledge was considered an obstacle to parental mediation by some, but in the setting of a focus group, it was not possible to differentiate the individual respondents' contributions according to their ICT knowledge.

Finally, the study included only parents' perspectives. It has been established repeatedly that parents and children may hold different views on the parental mediation that is done (Liau et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2005; Sonck et al., 2013). Parents and children may also have different perspectives on parental authority and the personal jurisdiction of children in the field of internet use. Therefore, it is warranted that the views of young people on parental mediation are studied in an in-depth manner and that research attention goes to parents' and children's different perceptions of parental mediation.

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Highlights

- Parents' perceived role regarding internet parenting defines what practices are applied
- Parents' mediation practices are dynamic and alter in response to the child's internet use
- Rule-setting and limiting the internet use are perceived as negative mediation practices
- Parents prefer open communication and connecting with their child as mediation strategies