

PARENTAL REGULATION OF INTERNET USE: ISSUES OF CONTROL, CENSORSHIP AND CYBERBULLYING

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ABSTRACT

The attraction of the internet continues to grow, mobilising the attention of many users, and impressing especially adolescents globally. Whilst the internet has provided adolescents with many benefits, such as academic support; cross-cultural interactions; social support; and exposure to the world at large, there are serious risks associated with the internet. The parents' role in this regard becomes pivotal in ensuring the safety of their children. The mechanisms used by parents in controlling their children's use and access to the internet were



Mousaion
Volume 34 | Number 2 | 2016
pp. 15–30

Print ISSN 1006-7438
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the focus of this study. For this reason, the study aimed to determine the role parents play in regulating their adolescent children's use of and access to the internet and how issues of control, censorship and cyberbullying are addressed. The study was based on Baumrind's (in Grobman 2008) parenting styles which formed the theoretical framework. A quantitative approach was used to gauge the responses of parents who have adolescent children. Through convenience sampling, the respondents were selected to answer a questionnaire made up of closed-ended questions. The key findings that emerged from the study revealed that parents applied the permissive style of parenting when it came to male adolescents, whilst they applied the authoritative style of parenting to female adolescents.

Keywords: internet, adolescent, parenting, control, regulation, cyberbullying, censorship

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid adoption and frequent use of the internet by adolescents from many societies should be flagged as an area that needs to be regulated by parents mainly because of the dangers it poses. According to Van den Eijnden et al. (2010, 77), the rising popularity of the internet and the ever-increasing amount of time adolescents spend online pose challenges to parents who want to protect their adolescent children from excessive internet use as well as the dangers that the internet presents.

There has been an acceleration in the amount of the time spent on the internet over the years, especially by adolescents. A survey conducted in 1999 found that children with access to computers spent an average of 4 hours 48 minutes per day in front of either a television visual display unit or computer monitor (Subrahmanyam Kraut, Greenfield and Gross 2000). Lenhart, Madden and Hitlin (2005) found that domestic internet use has become more commonplace, even overtaking time spent in front of the television. In a study conducted by the Pew Research Centre between 2014 and 2015 in the United States (US) (Lenhart 2015), it was reported that 92 per cent of teenagers went online daily, whilst 24 per cent went online 'almost constantly'. Lenhart (2015) found that much of the hype of access is facilitated by mobile devices as nearly three-quarters of the adolescents either own or have access to a smartphone. In the United Kingdom (UK), the use of the internet by young people has trebled over the past ten years (Anderson 2015). Anderson (2015) further reports that young people between the ages of 16 and 24 spend more than 27 hours per week on the internet. In South Africa, the results of a study conducted by World Wide Worx (2012 in Van der Merwe 2013) revealed that the South African internet user-base had grown from 6.8 million in 2010 to 8.5 million at the end of 2011. It is evident that the internet has provided adolescents with increased social support, academic enrichment and worldwide cross-cultural interactions (Moreno et al. 2013).

However, underlying all of these benefits is the need for control and censorship by parents to protect their children against the many dangers that may prevail.

Some protection parents can offer their adolescent children is by implementing control measures on the use of the internet. However, the easy availability, accessibility and affordability of the internet makes control difficult. Issues of control should not be seen as a means to detract children from internet usage, but as a means to guide and regulate their use of the internet. Whilst parents may be cautious about with whom their children associate, the lure of the internet, with its unrivalled borderlessness, provides adolescents with the opportunity to do otherwise. Therefore, the aim of this study was to determine the role of parents in regulating their adolescent children's use of the internet and how the issues of control, censorship and cyberbullying are addressed.

2. THE CALL FOR REGULATION BY PARENTS

Teenagers' need for autonomy from direct parental supervision is a sign of independence (Goldstein 2015; McElhaney et al. 2009; Zimmer-Gembeck, Ducat and Collins 2011). They would like to engage in their own decision-making thereby freeing them from the jurisdiction of their parents. The problem parents face is to find the balance between 'just enough autonomy' and freedom to satisfy the adolescents changing needs for self-direction without placing their children at risk (Goldstein 2015; Goldstein, Davis-Kean and Eccles 2005; Tilton-Weaver et al. 2013).

Part of the decision-making that parents ought to reserve is control of the use of the internet. Moreno et al. (2013) advise that internet safety is highly salient for today's youth as they spend up to 10 hours a day using various forms of media through the internet. Lenhart and Madden (2007) found that the ever-increasing popularity of social media, including websites such as Facebook and Twitter, has contributed to youth's time investment in the internet. Goldstein (2015) supports this by saying that internet-based socialisation (e.g. social networking, text messaging) has become a crucial part of many adolescents' peer relationships. Liu, Kitchen and Moskovos (2009) found that in the twenty-first century, the internet has started to become 'unavoidable' in every aspect of human life. Criddle (2006 in Livingstone and Helsper 2008) highlights that the bewildering array of online content available and accessible to young people creates concerns amongst parents, academics and policy-makers.

There are two distinct categories of dangers the internet poses: one is internal – Problematic Internet Use (PIU) is defined by Beard and Wolf (2001 in Li, Li and Newman 2013) as the use of the internet that creates psychological, social, school and/or work difficulties in a person's life. According to Li et al. (2013), PIU is common and can have serious immediate and long-term ramifications. In a similar vein, Van den Eijnden et al. (2010) warn against Compulsive Internet Use (CIU) by

children. They advise that parents' reactions to excessive internet use and parental rules regarding the content of internet use may help prevent CIU. Tsitsika et al. (2014) also refer to Internet Addictive Behaviour (IAB) which is defined as a behavioural pattern characterised by loss of control over internet use. This behaviour potentially leads to isolation and neglect of social, academic and recreational activities and personal health.

The other category is external – these dangers are identified in a broad class where adolescents are vulnerable to threats outside of their environment. These can range from cyberbullying to identity theft. The frequent updating of personal details by adolescents on the internet is an invitation to awaiting predators who prey on unsuspecting teens. Divulging home location, revealing photographs or descriptions of sexual behaviour and substance abuse on a platform, makes adolescents a prime target. In light of this, the importance of parental censorship on the access of certain websites cannot be emphasised enough.

3. PARENTAL CENSORSHIP

Murdoch and Roberts (2013) explain that internet control mechanisms – including technical, legal, political and social tools – have been imposed by governments due to a perception that self-regulation is no longer sufficient to deal with the challenges increasingly posed by the internet. They identify these challenges as the rapidly growing number and diversity of users, intensifying criminal activity as well as the role of the internet as a core social infrastructure.

Generally, internet censorship as a control mechanism is widely seen as a futile effort (Murdoch and Roberts 2013). However, many governments have learned from their mistakes and today's censorship techniques are increasingly effective and widespread. Murdoch and Roberts (2013) mention that some of these techniques range from interfering with internet traffic to pressuring content providers to remove offensive material. The motivation for censorship includes political control, child protection and protection of revenue for copyright holders. Liu, Kitchen and Moskovos (2009) explain the concerns about harmful, unethical, illegal and undesirable content on websites, in particular, protective action focused on children. They further highlight the importance of a plan introduced by the European Committee, called 'Safer Internet Plus' which aims to promote the safer use of the internet and new online technologies, particularly for children. At the same time, it has been used to fight against illegal content and content which was unwanted by the user as part of an initiative by the European Union. Despite the many efforts by countries to protect children from 'unsafe' content, Liu et al. (2009) iterate that the responsibility and onus to do so rests heavily on parents. In a study conducted by Goldstein (2015) of 110 adolescents, few youth believed that their parents placed any limits on the amount of time that they spent on the computer (5.6%) or on their cell phones (3.6%).

Furthermore, the majority of the sample believed that their computers (53.6%) and their cell phones (81.7%) did not have software installed to filter, block or monitor internet use. In terms of direct parental monitoring of internet use, 91.8 per cent of the sample indicated that their parents did not keep track of their internet use on the computer and 85.3 per cent reported that their parents did not keep track of their internet use on the cell phone. Goldstein (2015) reported in his findings that, despite perceptions of parental leniency, many of the adolescents in the sample disagreed with their parents' lack of supervision and limitations regarding their cell phone and computer use. Whilst Goldstein's study looked at the adolescents' view on the issues of regulation, control, censorship and cyberbullying, the current study focused on the parents' perspective of these key areas.

In a study conducted by Livingstone and Helsper (2008), where the focus was on parental mediation of children's internet use, it was found that parents applied similar types of strategies which were previously used to control the children's use of television and video games. However, these control mechanisms were not successful, as the study reported that of 12–17 year olds ($n = 789$), 44 per cent ended up on a porn site accidentally when looking for something else; 41 per cent received pornographic junk mail; 28 per cent received pornographic material from someone they knew; 9 per cent visited a porn site on purpose; 46 per cent would give out their personal details to win a prize; and 36 per cent knew someone they only talked to online. Given the alarming nature of these statistics, the call for a more proactive approach by parents to encourage the filtering of websites in order to protect their children from similar occurrences is understandable.

4. EXPLORING CYBERBULLYING

Goldstein (2015) states that bullying implies a repeated, frequent record of perpetrating aggression against an individual where there is a power imbalance between the victim and the perpetrator. Rice et al. (2015) explain cyberbullying as the wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones or other electronic devices. Rice et al. (2015) state that cyberbullying disproportionately affects youth who are already vulnerable to mental health and behavioural health disparities, including members of sexual minorities (i.e. gay, lesbian, bisexual), girls and racial and ethnic minorities. Mishna et al. (2012) found that female students are significantly more likely to be cyberbully perpetrators/victims than their male peers. According to Slovak, Crabbs and Stryffeler (2015), the speed at which the internet and social media materialised unintentionally created a cyberspace platform for harmful behaviours to occur among youth with rapid ease, relative anonymity, and rare consequences. In contrast to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is often anonymous; can occur at any time and without regard to geographical barriers; occurs outside of school; and can involve potentially millions of people with rapid

distribution (Kowalski and Limber 2007; Patchin and Hinduja 2006; Slonje and Smith 2008; Williams and Guerra 2007).

According to a report by EurekaAlert (2015), the digital age has given adolescents a new platform for cruelty such as a social media prank meant to embarrass a fellow student. These acts of embarrassment could be posting unflattering photographs, spreading online rumours or even posting a video that might be offensive to those in it. Inadvertently these can cause harm to those affected by its online presence. Hinduja and Patchin (2014, 3) state that 'cyberbullying is a growing problem because increasing numbers of children are using and have completely embraced online interactivity'. Avoiding the internet altogether is by no means a strategy to deal with cyberbullying as a person does not need to be on the internet or part of a social network site to become a target for cyberbullies. Parents' role, especially with adolescents, should be proactive rather than to react to a situation. This will potentially save children from potential psychological harm. Whilst Hinduja and Patchin (2009) state that parents cannot protect their children from everything wrong, bad or evil in this world, the focus should shift to what can be done. Hinduja and Patchin (2009) offer that parents can engage their children in a dialogue about the relevant issues, venture into cyberspace with them and keep a close track of their online activities. Essentially, there must exist a crystal-clear understanding about what is appropriate and what is not with respect to online activities. Ultimately to combat this social evil, it rests upon parents' readiness to help guide their children through potential situations. Other key stakeholders in children's lives can also play a role in protecting them from cyberbullying. These include caregivers, schools and universities.

5. A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON PARENTAL CONTROL – BAUMRIND'S PARENTING STYLES

Parents' responsibility for their children's upbringing includes supervising the use of the internet in the most effective way. Parents' efforts to balance the educational and social advantages of the internet with its negative effects are defined by Livingstone and Helsper (2008 in Larrañaga, Del Río and Martínez 2015) as a 'constant battle'. For this reason their style of parenting must be examined within the context of the study. Baumrind (in Grobman 2008) looks at the relationship between freedom and control through three different styles of parenting. She is not referring to freedom of the internet but to the autonomy the adolescent thrives after; whilst control is in direct reference to the regulation of the adolescent's behaviour by the parent. To grasp this understanding within the context of the study, it is important to briefly examine each of the parenting styles she discusses. The parenting styles discussed are examined against the actual control parents have over their adolescents' use of the internet, the parenting style that would best work for this situation and why the others will fail.

In doing so, it will provide a frame of reference for the recommendations that are made in the study.

Baumrind (in Grobman 2008) begins by exploring the *permissive* parent who attempts to behave in a non-punitive manner, acceptant and affirmative towards the child's impulses, desires and actions. This type of parenting makes few demands for household responsibility and orderly behaviour; it is presented to the parent as a resource to use as they wish, not as an ideal to be emulated. This parenting style does not engage in regulation of the child's duties or activities and leaves the child to engage in self-regulation. In a study conducted by Li et al. (2013), it was found that parental behaviour was negatively associated with PIU. This implies that a lack of control measures or restrictions contributed towards the child's PIU. The study findings suggested that parenting intervention may be effective in reducing adolescent PIU. In the study by Goldstein (2015) mentioned above, it was found that the majority of participants did not believe that their parents established limits with regard to the time that they spent on their electronic devices, nor did they believe that restrictive/monitoring software had been installed on their devices. These participants perceived that they were left to self-regulate their internet use.

The second style identified as the *authoritarian* parent is based on the premise that these parents are rigid and controlling and demand a lot from their children with very little reward in return (Esplin 2013). Baumrind (in Grobman 2008) observes that this style of parenting relies strongly on punishment or harsh discipline. This removes the autonomy children seek as adolescents and they have very little control over their lives. This rigidity is enforced in accordance with a set standard of conduct. The parent enforces punitive measures which are sometimes forceful to curb self-will at points where the child's actions or beliefs conflict with what is considered right conduct. Grobman (2008) looks into the quality of the child under this style of parenting which is defined by anxious, withdrawn, antisocial, unhappy types of behaviour displayed by the child. In a study conducted by Van den Eijden et al. (2010) which investigated associations between internet-specific parenting practices and CIU among adolescents, it was found that their parental rules about time spent on the internet were positively related to CIU, indicating the more rules enforced by parents about time spent online, the higher the risk of CIU. According to Yao et al. (2014), numerous previous studies have indicated that low self-esteem is associated with internet addiction (Chen, Chen and Yang 2008; Yang and Tung 2007).

The third parenting style identified by Baumrind (in Grobman 2008) is the *authoritative* parent who attempts to direct the child's activities but in a rational manner. There is constant communication between the parent and child. Esplin (2013) explains that this style of parenting, unlike the authoritarian parent, sets high expectations and is responsive to the child's needs. Baumrind states that children of authoritative parenting are the most likely of the three styles to have positive outcomes. These children are self-reliant and have a high self-esteem. Grobman (2008)

interprets Baumrind's view of this style of parenting as one who exerts firm control at points of parent-child divergence, but does not hem the child in with restrictions. The child is recognised as an individual with his or her own interests. According to Nieuwboer, Fukkink, Hermanns (2013), parenting has been changed by the internet. Internet pioneers have developed web-based programs that provide information to enhance parents' knowledge, easy access to peers with whom to share experiences, and professional consultation and training. Parents can now find a huge amount of information and support on the internet that is accessible, anonymous, cost-effective and convenient. More and more parents are opting to use this information as it saves time and money, especially if expert advice or direction is needed.

6. METHODOLOGY

The objective of the study was to ascertain what control measures are imposed by parents from Durban, South Africa, on their adolescents' use of the internet. The issues of cyberbullying and censorship were explored to investigate the extent to which parents engage themselves with their children's use of the internet. The study was cross-sectional in nature and followed a descriptive research design. The target population represented parents of adolescents who were selected through convenience sampling. Bryman and Bell (2011) state that a convenience sample is one that is available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility. The sample size was 37 participants who engaged in the study. A quantitative approach was used to glean responses in a quick and efficient manner.

7. THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The research instrument was a closed-ended questionnaire which was made up of 27 items and one open-ended question which provided the participants with an opportunity to express their opinion on internet control, censorship and cyberbullying. The questions were laid out in a manner that addressed each construct of the study. The demographics of the participants formed Section A of the questionnaire, which was made up of three items. Section B dealt with issues of control and the way in which parents controlled their children's use of the internet. This was made up of eight items which were broken down further to extract data-rich responses from the participants. Section C was made up of four items which looked at issues of censorship by parents, whilst Section D addressed the issue of cyberbullying. This section was made up of seven items. The questionnaires were coded and captured using the Statistical Programming for Social Sciences v 23 (SPSS). A thematic and content analysis was carried out on the remaining item which was qualitative in nature.

8. FINDINGS

Prior to capturing the data, it was screened for entry errors and missing values using SPSS. The results of the study are explicated according to the constructs of the study, namely: issues of control; issues of censorship; and issues of cyberbullying. Upon analysis of the demographic data, the study found that 67.6 per cent (25) of the respondents were fathers, whilst 32.4 per cent (12) were mothers of adolescents.

8.1. Issues of control

Descriptive statistics was used to provide an understanding of the data. Table 1 represents a cross-tabulation of the number of children the respondent has with the amount of time the adolescent is allowed to spend on the internet. Respondents with two to three children restricted the amount of time their children spent on the internet compared with those who had one adolescent who did not prescribe a time limit.

No. of children 0–1 hours		Time on internet			Total
		1–2 hours	I do not prescribe a time limit		
	0–1	7	3	8	18
	2–3	8	4	6	18
	4	0	0	1	1
Total		15	7	15	37

Table 1: Cross-tabulation of time spent on the internet with number of adolescents

The study also revealed that 64.9 per cent (24) of the respondents did not monitor their child's usage of the internet. This data was cross-tabulated with those parents who visited the websites their children accessed. The result was that 13 of the respondents who monitored the usage of the internet reported that they actually visited the websites their children accessed, while 56.8 per cent (21) did not browse through the history tab. Accessibility to the internet was also examined through the number of devices the adolescents had available for their use, to which 48.6 per cent (18) reported that their children had between two and three devices to access the internet. This question was followed by how many of these devices were actually monitored, to which 70.3 per cent (26) of the respondents indicated 'No'. There was no correlation between 'father/mother' and 'monitoring of devices'. As a punitive measure, 27 per cent (10) of the respondents indicated that they would restrict internet access for a week, whilst the same number of respondents would stop the purchase of airtime.

		Monitor usage	Female gender adolescent
Monitor usage	Pearson's correlation	1	.295*
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.038
	N	37	37
Female gender adolescent	Pearson's correlation	.295*	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.038	
	N	37	37
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)			

Table 2: Pearson's correlation of female gender and monitored usage

The association between gender and monitored usage of the internet was explored using Pearson's correlation. The association was significant at the 5 per cent level with $p = 0.038$ and $r = 0.295$. From this it may be concluded that parents' monitoring depends on the child's gender. Both results were significant (male gender = .063); however, there was a greater association between the female adolescents and monitored usage of the internet than their male counterparts. Table 2 depicts the female adolescents as the results were significantly higher than for the male adolescents. This finding resonates with a study conducted by Yao et al. (2010, 108) which also looked at whether parental behaviour towards male and female adolescents was the same. The study found that for each gender the parental influence was different, with a greater association of parental behaviour towards the female gender.

8.2. Issues of censorship

The respondents were asked if they ever restricted their children from accessing certain websites. This generated a result of 67.6 per cent (25) of the respondents answering in the affirmative. A similar response was generated for the question: 'Have you ever restricted your child from posting photographs on the internet?' However, more respondents (29) restricted their children from sharing vital information on the internet. A significantly higher response was generated for the question: 'Do you think censoring your child's usage is important?' to which 83.8 per cent (31) responded 'Yes'.

		Male gender adolescent	Restrict photo
Male gender adolescent	Pearson's correlation	1	-.275*
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.050
	N	37	37
Restrict photo	Pearson's correlation	-.275*	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.050	
	N	37	37

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Table 3: Pearson's correlation between male gender adolescent and 'Have you ever restricted your child from posting photographs on the internet?'

Table 3 shows a negative association between gender and restricting the adolescent from posting photographs on the internet, which implies that parents are less strict with imposing restrictions on male adolescents on posting photographs on the internet compared to their female counterparts ($r = 0.58$ and p -value = 0.368). This produced a more significant result which showed a strong association between the female gender and restricting the adolescent from posting photographs on the internet.

8.3. Issues of cyberbullying

The respondents were asked if they made their child aware of what cyberbullying is, to which 89.2 per cent (33) answered 'Yes'. With regard to the monitoring of email accounts, 59.5 per cent (22) confirmed they had never monitored their child's email account to locate acts of cyberbullying. Furthermore, 24.3 per cent (9) confirmed that mean things were said to their child on the internet whilst 5.4 per cent (2) confirmed that embarrassing photographs of their child were circulated on the internet.

9. DISCUSSION

The study focused on three main areas, namely: issues of control; issues of censorship; and issues of cyberbullying which parents of adolescents had to report on. The respondents shared the extent to which they regulated the use of and access to the internet especially with adolescent children. All the respondents indicated that they were computer literate and showed some understanding of the internet which implied that their participation in the study was legitimate.

Baumrind's (in Grobman 2008) parenting styles became clearly evident through the responses received from the participants. The *permissive* style of parenting became evident when respondents confirmed that 40.5 per cent ($n = 15$) never

prescribed a time limit for access to the internet; neither did they (64.9%) monitor their children's usage of the internet. Furthermore, 70.3 per cent of the parents did not monitor the devices their children used to access the internet and 59.5 per cent of the respondents did not possess the password to their child's cell phone which was used to access the internet. The findings of the study indicated that the permissive style of parenting was applied more to the male adolescents compared to the female adolescents. The more preferred style of parenting recommended by Baumrind is the *authoritative* parent. This study revealed some indication of parents' concerns by implementing some restrictions: 40.5 per cent allowed access for up to one hour on the internet; and 67.6 per cent of the respondents restricted their child from accessing certain websites. The Pearson's correlation tests on two variables revealed the authoritative style of parenting being applied to the female adolescents for both control and censorship. These results are significant concerning how parents apply control and the way in which they regulate their adolescents' use of the internet. The roles of parents in this regard are worth noting.

The participants revealed that the study actually brought to light how important it is to have their children's internet access under reasonable control. Many expressed their feelings in the last question which required their opinion on the issues of control, censorship and cyberbullying. This generated a plethora of responses from the participants. A few themes were generated from these responses, such as: controlling the adolescents' internet access is a very important issue which must be taken more seriously by parents; schools playing an active role in reaching out to parents dealing with cyberbullying; sharing more information with adolescents on the issue of cyberbullying; and educating older adolescents rather than enforcing restrictions. Another prevalent response from parents was 'trust' which they say was the reason why control measures were not imposed. Parents' responses suggested a mutual trust relationship was shared which they felt was an adequate control mechanism.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study set out to examine how parents regulate their adolescents' access to and use of the internet as well as how issues of censorship and cyberbullying are addressed. The findings indicated a fragmented and disconnected type of parenting style applied to different genders of adolescents. There are difficulties attached to monitoring children's usage of their cell phone or any other device which is not used at home. Baumrind's (in Grobman 2008) ideal parenting style, which she identified as the authoritative style, is something parents ought to consider when imposing restrictions, setting rules and guiding their children's use of the internet. Whilst trust remains to be earned on a regular basis, it becomes a very fine line which can easily be blurred by the temptation or the coerciveness of the internet.

Adolescents' desire for autonomy and self-jurisdiction should be curtailed by proper boundaries set together, by both parents and adolescents. The involvement of the adolescent in setting control mechanisms will create a more responsive and rational environment for the adolescent to thrive in. The parent's involvement and presence should be more visible to the adolescent through frequent communication; early detection of withdrawal from family gatherings and a proactive approach towards their children's online behaviour.

11. CONCLUSION

The data in the study is limited to the views of parents and the way in which they regulate their children's use and access of the internet. This study brings to light the different levels of regulation that is gender based. Whether this is based on the cultural make-up of the respondents has not been explored, however other studies resonate with the findings of this study in this regard (Livingstone and Helsper 2008, 591; Yao et al. 2010), which point to rules and risks which are stratified by the child's gender. Still it remains that without imposing control measures, whether they are strict or relaxed, this will leave the door open to cyberbullying and other dangers that the internet poses.

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