

Parental Technology Governance: Teenagers' understandings and responses to parental digital mediation

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ABSTRACT

Research on parental mediation of children's online engagements situate historically longstanding anxieties within the dynamics of present-day information communications technologies (i.e., concerns over new 'cyber risks' as well as opportunities). Yet, there remains a lack of emphasis on children's own reactions to and experiences with parental strategies and responses. In the current article, we highlight research involving semi-structured focus groups (n=35) with Canadian teenagers (n=115). We highlight themes directly related to parental digital mediation, including the role of ICTs in driving addictive behaviours, social connection, differences in parental responses between sons and daughters, and differences with respect to age and birth order. Our discussions reveal qualified support for parental efforts to restrict access and use of digital technologies, but illuminate multifaceted reasons for resistance: their vital role not only for social connection, but access to crucial information and knowledge.

Keywords: digital parenting, Parental online governance and mediation, information communications technologies, youth and teenagers, cyber-risk

INTRODUCTION

Since early 2020, the rapid shift to online schooling, increased time video gaming, use of social network sites, and so on has amplified risks and parental anxieties linked to young people's online activities (Livingstone 2020; Nagata, Abdel Magid and Gabriel 2020; Orgilés et al. 2020). The "limitless victimization risk" (Hinduja and Patchin, 2009:24) the internet promotes often produces anxieties in parents which are compounded upon other, more longstanding anxieties in relation to adolescence (Livingstone 2009; Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2021). Parenting practices and understandings need to be situated within wider shifts that have occurred at least in part due to moral panics over youth and technology (e.g., in relation to sexting, Marker 2011; Jeffery 2018), and changes in expectations regarding where children play and socialize; namely, a shift from unsupervised outdoor spaces to highly regulated spaces online (boyd 2014; Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016; Vickery 2017). Youth are also frequently understood as placing their own social and psychoemotional development at risk by engaging in inappropriate and harmful conduct online (Gabriel 2014; Jeffery 2020). However, often in stark contrast with media-hyped headlines about 'Facebook murders' and other sensationalistic cybercrimes perpetrated by youth, researchers frequently report most youth have not experienced direct victimization from cyberbullying or sexting, and most benefit from the *opportunities* information communications technologies (ICTs) enable for social connection, education, social activism, and 'digital citizenship' (Hinduja and Patchin 2014; Jenkins et al. 2018; Livingstone 2008).

The central concern of our research is teenage perceptions of parental mediation and surveillance strategies, with an emphasis on teenagers' agentic responses to parental mediation and surveillance of their technology use. Regardless of the 'irrationality' of moral panics and evidence regarding the positive draws of technology, many parents feel pressured from multiple sources to adopt a variety of governance practices to help protect the well-being of their children

as they navigate online spaces (Fisk 2016). The need for research on parental mediation strategies and understandings of the contexts of their use is obviated, with children spending more time at home, and online, for wide ranging pursuits in education, socialization, and entertainment in comparison to previous generations (Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2021). Scholars of parenting practices have long identified parenting ‘styles’ that are authoritative or restrictive. In addition to parenting ‘styles,’ there has also been more specific scholarship on more or less laissez-faire or evaluative parental mediation styles (i.e., involving active, open dialogue about online engagement), that are now increasingly applied to regulation of screen time and governance of internet use (Kirwil 2009; Livingstone and Helsper 2008; Mesch 2009). What is often less pronounced in research is *knowledge regarding how parental styles and practices are being received by children and youth themselves*. The research explicated in the current article highlights findings from qualitative interviews with Canadian teenagers regarding their experiences and perceptions of parental mediation and governance practices and strategies. The overarching questions are: What are youth’s perceptions of parental mediation and governance? What are their experiences when they first receive smartphones? What are youth perceptions regarding the influences of gender, birth order, and personality on being online? We proceed by highlighting literature related to parental mediation and surveillance, as well as concerns often centered on the addictive draw of ICTs, with particular attention to dynamics related to age and gender.

PARENTAL MEDIATION, SURVEILLANCE AND ONLINE ADDICTION ANXIETIES

Portability and early adoption of digital devices, sometimes from infancy, means children start to use mobile digital tools as part of their daily routines (e.g., homework, checking news, while

conversing or before bedtime) (Benedetto and Ingrassia 2020). For many families, the ubiquity of access to high-speed internet and an array of devices (e.g., smartphones, tablets, computers), coupled with anxieties about online dangers, incentivizes parents to surveil their children's online activities. Surveillance may be defined as "any collection and processing of personal data, whether identifiable or not, for the purposes of influencing or managing those whose data have been garnered" (Bruno 2012:344). Clearly, parental surveillance is grounded in the motive of 'steering' children's behaviours to instill both personal responsibility and digital citizenship; ideally with outcomes later in adolescence when children become more self-sufficient and, ultimately, 'steer themselves'.

Some teens may, grudgingly, accept the need for their parents to 'monitor' their online activities (see Authors 2021), though teens themselves and increasingly researchers distinguish between more and less intrusive forms of parental mediation. Use of the term "parental mediation" is most relevant to the context of our research because it not only refers to parental management of and restrictions on children's media use but also, as previous scholarship notes, encompasses the conversations, strategies (Nathanson 1999; Valkenburg et al. 1999), and monitoring activities (Kerr and Stattin 2000) that parents implement (Livingstone and Helsper 2008). For instance, parents may effectively monitor their children's online actions through verbal check-ins and active dialogue, or more intrusive and undisclosed surveillance like the use of 'cyber safety' applications which often trace social media posts and followers (Racz and McMahon 2011; Stattin and Kerr 2000). Perhaps unsurprisingly, teens abjure the latter, seeing parental reliance on intrusive 'spyware' as fostering distrust and besmirching open communication (Authors 2019a; 2019b).

Nevertheless, such techno-solutions are often appealing to parents; an appeal undergirded by the companies that produce and market cyber safety/monitoring software to parents (Fotel and Thomsen 2002). Parents have long been the targeted consumers of surveillance technologies, pitched as helping parents, particularly mothers, safeguard their children's online activities and thus serving to help protect them online. Underpinning the marketing of surveillance technologies is that parents should distrust their children and, as such, require surveillance tools (Marx and Steeves 2010). Moreover, the normalization of surveillance technologies may lead some parents, especially mothers, to experience shame and stigma if the technologies are avoided, perpetuating the assumption that *responsible* parents invest in surveillance tools (Taylor and Rooney 2016). Conducting focus groups with parents in the United States, Fisk (2016:126) discovered parents imposed upon each other a moral standard of 'good parenting', positioning parents who did not take up online surveillance of their children as "bad" and "disinterested". In similar Canadian research, focus group participants revealed parents often feel "pressured to take any steps they could to keep their children safe, including subjecting them to constant monitoring" (Johnson 2015:339; see also Steeves 2014).

Despite omnipresent concerns regarding cyberbullying, sexting, hacking and other forms of online harm and aggression, parents, researcher find, express relatively more (albeit everyday) concerns about the long-term behavioral and psychosocial impacts of addiction to ICTs (Authors 2021; Jeffery 2020). In response to concerns, parents may track their children's screen time, especially of younger children, to prevent excessive use and addiction to popular sites like YouTube and Tic Toc. A nationally representative survey in the United States of 2326 parents with children aged eight and younger revealed parental concern that ICTs, including television, computers, and mobile devices, all have a negative impact on their children's physical activity;

the most significant negative outcome attributed to technology in the study (Wartella et al. 2013). Shin's (2015) interviews with parents (largely mothers) in Singapore reveals largely positive views on the impacts of the internet, with some concerns over addictive use tempered by their view of the effectiveness of parental regulation.

Age. Studies examining the influence of age on parental mediation and reception from children, especially those that sample both parents and children, find younger children are more receptive to parental mediation (Cabello-Hutt, Cabello and Claro 2018). Parental active mediation tends to dissipate as their children age, especially into their late teens. Though surveillance and mediation are distinct, various parental mediation styles of children's media use involve some form of surveillance, whether overt or covert (Holloway 2017). Thus, in addition to decreased mediation, parents perceive there to be less need for surveillance given greater competencies among older children (Benedetto and Ingrassia 2020; Holloway 2017; Shin and Lwin 2017). Benedetto and Ingrassia's (2020:8) overview of research on digital parenting concludes that "active mediation strategies more often are adopted with younger children, whereas restrictive mediation fades with older [children] and adolescents." Sanders and colleagues (2016), who sampled 615 parents with children ranging from early childhood (3-7 years old), middle childhood (8-12 years old) and adolescents (13-17 years old), found the adoption of technology-related strategies was associated with less screen time for younger children, and to a lesser extent children in mid-childhood. They note "at least for young children, screen time may best be managed through rules and enforcement strategies around technology use in the home, guided by parents who utilize warmth and clear communication with their children" (2016:645). The general pattern, as children grow up, is most parents minimizing mediation strategies as their children enter their mid-teen years, suggesting the expectation is for

mid-teenage youth to be relatively independent and ‘self-steering’. The aforementioned perspectives all narrow in on the relationship between adolescent age and parental mediation. Our study advances that literature, focussing on adolescent perspectives on the different strategies they report that their parents employ to mediate their technology use, their views regarding how age impacts parental mediation strategies, especially in relation to siblings, and how youth respond to surveillance and mediation.

Gender. Some researchers have examined the relationship between gender dynamics and parental mediation of online activities. Although findings are largely inconclusive, some variance exists between those who do not find any differences in parental strategies between sons and daughters (Lee 2013; Livingstone and Helsper 2008), and others which find sons to receive restrictions more than daughters (Eastin, Greenberg and Hofschire 2006). The latter finding may relate in part to societal perceptions that male adolescents are more likely than female to engage in risky online behaviours, explained by individual characteristics such as sensation seeking (Lau and Yuen 2013; Notten and Nikken 2016). Some also argue that male adolescents are also more likely to be addicted to the internet than female, and children with internet addiction have lower positive parental support and higher negative parental control (Li et al. 2014). At the same time, parents are overall more concerned for daughters meeting strangers online than sons (boyd and Hargittai 2013). Likely influencing parental concerns is the gendered marketing of risks to parents. For instance, some mobile advertisements focus on father-daughter surveillance discourse, with daughters portrayed as at risk and parental monitoring the expected norm (Taylor and Rooney 2016). As we noted in our review of literature on the impacts of age, the previous studies mentioned here either lack or provide a limited account of teenage views on the impacts of gender on parental mediation and surveillance of their media use.

The vast majority of research on parental mediation of their children's online activities, understandably, centers on parents themselves. Our research builds on the emphasis on children's own reactions to and experiences with parental strategies and responses, especially qualitative research geared to unpacking the meanings and contexts of children's experiences from their own perspective (see Authors 2019; Bailey and Steeves 2015; boyd 2014; Fisk 2016; Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016). However, our review of the literature also notes some limitations. While Bailey and Steeves (2015) speak to the increasing "searchability, spreadability, and persistence" that social media offer to young people, particularly the new possibilities for re-conceptualizing gender and sexuality, there is a lack of discussion about children's own understandings of and experiences with parental mediation of their use of such media. Some research attends to parental perspectives and practices regarding digital mediation (e.g., Fisk 2016), but turning to explore youth experiences is still needed. The work of Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016) does capture the ways in which youth conceptualize various aspects of their identities, as well as the meaningful connections in their everyday lives – at school, at home, online, etc. Although they dedicate a chapter of their book to youth responses to parental practices as they cultivate relationships online and offline and maintain privacy from the public, there are analytic directions left to pursue, such as views regarding effective and ineffective practices, and questions regarding youth age and gender. The work of Catherine Jeffery (2020a; 2020b) makes significant contributions to parental mediation literature but lacks a focus on children's own views. The analysis focusses instead on media discourse (2018) and on parental perspectives on the knowledge, monitoring, and mediation of children's online presence (2020a; 2020b). Our research, therefore extends, in part, Taylor and Rooney's (2016) empirical study conducted with young people in the UK on their views on the impacts of modern-day

forms of surveillance on their daily lives. Yet we focus on Canadian teens' perceptions and responses to the impacts of age and gender on parental digital mediation and surveillance.

In the current article, we highlight research involving semi-structured focus groups with Canadian teenagers examining, in the wider project, their experiences with ICTs, cyber-risk, and parental, as well as school, responses. We highlight themes directly related to parental governance, including the role of ICTs in driving addictive behaviours, social connection, differences in parental responses between sons and daughters, and differences with respect to age and birth order. Our discussion reviews key findings with an emphasis on the context of social connection for teenagers, and includes reference to future directions and study limitations.

METHODS

Focus groups are still relatively rare in 'cyber'-based studies of teens when compared to large quantitative surveys, especially those centered on cyberbullying (Agatston, Kowalski and Limber 2007; Allen 2012; Vandebosch and Cleemput 2008). In the current study, we provide knowledge from teen's own words, which will be useful for parents, educators, teens themselves, and others interested in the role ICTs play in family dynamics.

Our sample emerged from a purposive, snowball sample design, drawing on initial contacts from participating schools and university undergraduate classes, as well as referrals made from these initial contacts. A total of 35 focus groups were held with 115 teenagers (aged 13-19; average age 15). The groups averaged 3.3 participants, with a minimum of two and maximum of five. We aimed to have groups of greater than two (akin more to a group discussion than focus group *per se*), however this was not always possible (e.g., some scheduled groups of students at a participating school occurred on a 'snow day', with fewer students showing up). We

also kept groups to a maximum of five to help prevent the problem of under- or over-participation among members (Morgan 1997).

The focus groups were between 30 to 120 minutes in length, conducted by both authors in addition to trained research assistants. Participating schools were located in an urban region of Western Canada as well as rural Atlantic regions. Ethics approvals from school districts were obtained before schools were approached (i.e., through school principals). Two ‘pseudo-regions’ will be referred to with respect to focus group locations: Cyber City, referring to the Western, urban location and Cyberville, referring to the rural Atlantic region. We conducted 15 focus groups in Cyber City, with the remaining 20 conducted in Cyberville. In total, 67 female and 48 male students participated in the study. While ethnic minorities were included in, the majority of participants self-identified as White. Most groups were held with teens of similar ages and gender (e.g., a group of male teens, 13 and 14 years old). The sampling stratification strategy was designed to mitigate problems with participants who may feel threatened by others older than themselves, or uncomfortable disclosing experiences in coed groups (Morgan 1997).

Analysis on focus group transcriptions applied an inductive, comparative approach that remained initially tentative regarding any substantive or theoretical conclusions (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Concepts and theories emerged from the focus groups’ dynamic discussions. Data analysis proceeded with the use of NVivo qualitative analysis software. Coding allowed for comparisons to be made both within individual focus group discussions as well as across groups, for example, to gauge differences between all male and all female groups, between Cyber City and Cyberville (Morgan 1997). Validity of the coding was assessed over time through regular research meetings between the investigators, which ensured thematic

development emerged consistently and reliably, as well as a hermeneutically attuned validity of the data (Twinn 1998).

RESULTS

In the current results, we highlight both parental mediation motivations from the perspective of teens and the different strategies teens report that their parents employ to regulate their technology use. We unpack how teens interpret the rules and regulations parents impose around technology (e.g., smart phones, ipads, ipods) as restrictive but well-intended (e.g., protecting eyesight, sleep considerations). We discuss ‘workarounds’ employed by our participants, referring to the different ways teens circumvent or adhere to their parents’ rules, as they use their technology for social connectivity and practical reasons as much as for entertainment. Next, we provide insight into how teens respond to parental restrictions on, or the removal of, their technological devices as a punitive response to youth behaviours. We continue by exploring teens’ views regarding how age (including birth order) and gender impacts parenting strategies, especially in relation to siblings. We conclude the results by featuring advice from our participants to parents regarding ‘best practices’ regarding mediation and governance over their children’s technology access and use.

PARENTAL MOTIVATIONS FOR ONLINE MEDIATION AND THE ROLE OF ‘ADDICTION’ AND SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY

In several of our focus group discussions with teens, participants discussed their interpretation of their parents’ motivations for restricting screen time. One group of four 15-year-old females from Cyber City were allowed devices in their bedrooms, but they recalled previous restrictions

based on parental concerns for their eyesight. Fatima says “it wasn’t so much a concern for me getting bullied or doing something inappropriate; it was more my mom doesn’t want me to ruin my eyesight.” Amber adds: “my parents were also worried that I wouldn’t be getting enough sleep if I kept my phone in my room, I think they, they trust me with it, they were just concerned with my health and my eyes as well.” Here parental restrictions were based less on overt concerns for ‘cybercrime’, cyberbullying or online predators, and more centered on anxieties regarding the health impacts of excessive device use, like the sleep patterns of their children.

For teens themselves, adhering to parental regulations of ‘being online’ is often challenged by the compelling draw to ICTs (see Authors 2021 for a more detailed explication of teen views on internet ‘addiction’). For instance, during one discussion with three 13-year-old females from Cyberville, Greta admits that she “stay[s] up on Facebook... even though I’m supposed to be off” after she goes to bed. Amelie adds her comparable experience: “and then I turn it off, hey I turn it on, I’m wide awake, falls asleep during the movie, turns it off, wide awake, and it’s me every night.” Amelie discloses that her bedtime is 9:30, but “I don’t get off my phone until 10:30.” All three participants distance themselves from strict adherence to their parents’ rules about when to remove themselves from their electronics for bed, demonstrating resistance against proscribed bedtimes.

Similar to strategies reported by Livingstone (2002) and Barron (2014), resistance often involves a series of subtle behavioural adaptations. Amelie, for instance, reports that “when [her parents] come, I turn my [phone screen] brightness down, when they come in.” The exchange continues:

Greta: That’s what I does, I hear someone walking...

Irene: ...Just chuck it across the room, falls on the floor it won't break

Amelie: Good night, by the time she comes in open the door, I'm like shut the door, pretending I was sleeping.

The excerpts here reveal that (especially younger) teens are not always compliant with their parents' rules; however, teens in our sample do not engage in blatant rule violation – they do it discretely, almost secretly, in hopes to avoid being 'caught' and thus the risk of having their devices removed as punishment. Irene, in the same group as Greta, mentions that in her home her "phone has to be off by 9, and then I can read until 10ish" but adds "I check [my phone] sometimes, I mostly read in like hard cover though." Amelie picks up on what Irene implies here: "hey read a book, I get a phone, get a book and put your phone beside the page eh!" Irene confirms this applies to her as well: "I did that once my mom got mad! ...I didn't ever do it again." Such creative resistance against parental rules demonstrates the agentic strategies some younger teens may engage in to resist restrictions on their online access. Teens, like Irene's words confirm, do not always 'get away' with their resistance as parental monitoring is not completely ineffective.

Technology is addictive in quality among teens foremost due to ICTs' mediation of *social connectivity* (boyd 2014); particularly given many social network sites serve to maintain relationships previously established with peer groups offline. In online spaces, teens check social media feeds to learn about relationships, and perhaps ultimately, how they are being perceived by their peers (Authors 2019; boyd 2008; Livingstone 2008). In our focus group discussions, participants often referenced having parents who 'just don't understand' the motivations and *modus operandi* of teens' that drives home their desire, often perceived as need, to stay near their devices—their need for connectivity. Gordan, age 15 from Cyber City, admits

what my parents are kind of crazy about is how many hours I'm online or something. I could sit in my room and text for 3 hours on Instagram, but that's just like, *it's just communicating* but, but *it's screen time for them* so they don't really want me to. [added emphasis]

Gordan notices that parents, often 'digital immigrants' who are unsure and skeptical about the allure of new technologies for teens, see their children's technology use as abstracted 'screen time' rather than as a medium for communication among peer groups. Social connectivity is a prominent theme among our participants, linked to addictive behaviours online and parental mediation of technology. During a discussion of parental monitoring, a coed group of five teens, aged 14 and 15, was asked what their response would be to their parents if they were "saying 'no' to social media for a week or so" in an attempt to manage their access and screen time.

Aidan responds "you lose connection", to which Ava agrees "yeah." Aiden continues:

I'm 15 now, I've probably had social media since I was 12, since I was in grade 6 or so, and that's 3 years of being used to seeing statuses and seeing what's going [on] around. It's kind of like turning on the TV, never watching the news for two years. What happens when you don't know that there was a shooting in Paris, you don't know all this stuff, you lose connection to what's actually going on, it's one can literally can access information is through social media. (see also Authors 2019: 31-32)

A few minutes later Isabella adds "not having my phone for two days, I don't get to access people, I can't do a lot of things, I can't get homework from someone else, I can't get help, yeah." The group suggests policies that are too restrictive, as well as punishments involving additional restrictions on technology, have detrimental consequences that arguably outweigh any 'productive' effects of parental efforts to control their children. Unintended consequences here

center largely on peer connections, but also the resultant inability of youth to check the news and keep informed, access schoolwork, and seek help or resources online.

CRITIQUING PARENTAL PUNISHMENT(S): DEGREES OF QUALIFIED EMPATHY

Teens expressed antagonism towards parental punishments involving restrictions on and/or the removal of their technology. Participants living in Cyber City and Cyberville made roughly the same number of references to restrictions in access, although self-identifying female participants expressed the majority of positive or negative views. However, while criticizing parental removal of technology may be anticipated among teens, our sample of teens sometimes expressed a degree of empathy – if not sympathy – for parental practices they deemed too restrictive regarding their technology access and use. Such empathy was certainly qualified, often with reference to how stressful the removal of technology is, particularly given the *consequences of severed connection* with peers – again reflecting the significance of social connection for teens. For instance, like many of the teens we interviewed, Kimberly's parents adhered to a 'no technology at the dinner table' policy. Asked how she felt about the policy, Kimberly replied "in some ways I find it's good and in other ways I get really annoyed with it... I find it like really stressful." Asked if the stress relates to not being able to know about gossip being spread about her, Valerie interjects with disagreement:

I don't feel like that ...I don't know, if I'm talking to someone about something and then my dad [will] be like '[Valerie] put your phone off' or something like that, and then I'll put it off, and be like honestly I was in the middle of a conversation.

Kimberly agrees with a quick reply: "What's going on?" Although Valerie did not agree that her stress related to a fear of missing out, her reply evidences annoyance at being cut off mid-

conversation from her friends. The significance of social connection appears to be a core source of tension brought forth through punishments and parental mediation practices that teens deem too restrictive.

Older teens offered the most nuanced and reflective responses, seeming to demonstrate their maturity when interpreting their parents' intention in their imposed restrictions on technology use. For instance, Denise, an 18-year-old undergraduate student from Cyber City, argued that parents taking away a smartphone would be justified in certain circumstances but not necessarily others:

I think it depends what they did ...like you found out they were bullying someone, or you found they were talking to some creep in person, I think that's the time to take away the phone, but like in my experience, like parents would just take it away over nothing and it would be like, it has to associate. Like, you just can't take away this thing [motions to the phone] because they didn't do the dishes, like there has to be a point to taking this away, 'cuz like, the way we are now, with phones and stuff, we're pretty dependent. When you take it away ...I can't text my friends and stuff ...you're taking away directions to get home ...you're taking away my schedule, you're taking away like me being able to get in contact with people, so I think, I think it depends. [added emphasis]

Denise, in her response, suggests she accepts that teens ("we") are dependent on technology, and central to the dependence are *social* consequences for removing access to the technology. The underlying reasons for youth antagonism toward punitive device restrictions as punishment is not just linked to 'addiction' *per se*, but to the *social exclusion* in which being 'offline' may result (Authors 2021; boyd 2014). Also of note in Denise's response is her degree of agreement with the need for removing technology (e.g., taking away a smartphone) in more serious cases of

cyberbullying, but not in more minor cases (e.g., not completing everyday chores). Parents must have appropriately considered, Denise argues, proportionate punishments in response to the particular behaviours of their children. The stress of severed social connections is also expressed by Janelle, 16 from Cyber City, who recalls one experience with parental punishment:

...every time they like, when I got my iPod taken away it's like, when I was at my friend's house and everything, it's like they were all on their phones, and I'm like 'k let's do something', and then they're like 'no we chilling here'. ...And they're like 'hey did you get my thing', it's like I don't have my iPhone on me, it's taken away, so I'm not going to get your Snapchat, I'm not going to get your message, don't ask me questions, like put down your phone and like ask me face-to-face.

Janelle's frustration comes from the feeling of social exclusion while hanging out with peers who still have access to their phones. Janelle thus experiences a form of *ex-communication* which results from her social exclusion. Removal of a device has consequences for teens extending well beyond not being able to listen to music, or surf the web; the devices are the tools they use to not only stay 'in the loop' with friends (often offline peer groups linked to school) and about events, but how they are being talked about by their friends. In short, they lose agency when punished; losing control over both how they are being represented and responded to online (Authors 2019; boyd 2014; Oberst et al. 2017; Przybylski, et al. 2013).

Not all of our participants, like Denise who supports restrictions for more serious transgressions but not minor ones, suggested taking away technology is necessarily a negative practice. Judy, 15 from Cyber City, for instance, offers her reflections on (perhaps unintended) benefits of her parents punishing her by taking away her smartphone:

it was a fair one to be honest, ...like I had more contact with my friends and like we hung out more because I didn't have it, and so like I actually did stuff so I like went out and like talked to people.

Judy valued the increase in face-to-face social interaction that resulted from the removal of her device. Similarly, a group of three students from Cyber City, ages 13 and 14, agreed when asked if threatening to take away technology is an effective strategy to promote better behaviour.

Alonzo here makes reference to some of the challenges of doing so for both parents and children:

“yeah, cuz, I actually had my phone taken away for like a long time too ...but then I got it back because I needed [it] for some school assignments.” Sidney adds “I use my iPod as an alarm.”

“Same” replies Alonzo. Sidney’s response, like Alonzo’s, demonstrates how the ‘do it all’ nature of many of the devices teens frequently use inhibits the effectiveness of removing the devices for purposes of punishment—teens depend on devices for practical needs tied to learning responsibilities (e.g., waking up for school). While not ‘addiction’ in the social sense as we highlighted prior, teens (alongside adults (see Authors 2021), are increasingly gravitating towards using their devices (e.g., smartphones, iPads, laptops) for multiple purposes, including work and school as well as entertainment. Similarly, Manuel, an 18-year-old undergraduate student, argues that the ‘tech punishment’ of phone removal

doesn't really motivate me to do my homework, ‘cuz again, I’m not doing my homework, they take my stuff away, ok, I’ll just sit there not doing my homework. It just makes me pissed off at them, right it makes me less motivated to do my homework ...and then I’ll get it back eventually anyway right, so.

A common response among our participants is that tech punishment “just made me really angry” (Seth, age 17, Cyber City). What our discussions revealed, however, are the contexts explaining

the anger and frustration, which extends well beyond not being able to play online games or use devices for distraction.

GAINING INDEPENDENCE: GENDER AND AGING OUT OF PARENTAL MEDIATION AND RESTRICTIONS

In wider discussions about their general use of technology and when participants were first introduced to various devices like tablets and social network sites, we also asked teens when they got access to their first smartphone. Most of our participants recalled receiving their first phone when old enough to begin using public transportation independently, often to and from school. Our teens often cited their parents' concern for their safety as the reason they first provided them with a cell phone. The school grades when participants received their first phone ranged from grade four (primary school) to grade 11 (high school). Almost all participants who reflected on when they acquired their first phone stated they received a 'flip' phone when younger, often in junior high school or middle school (e.g., "around grade seven") and, subsequently, received their first smartphone by high school (e.g., by "grade 9" (Yasmin, 18, Cyber City)). For some, female siblings received phones at a younger age than male siblings or themselves if they are an older brother. Saylee, age 16 from Cyber City, disclosed that her younger niece, who is four, already "has an iPad." Asked if girls are given devices at a younger age than boys, Saylee agrees, replying "safety issues." Asked about the fairness of this, Saylee elaborates:

It's not necessarily fair ...because what if like, if the female wants to go out and be out later than they're allowed ...but the guy's allowed to be out until whenever he wants to. Right how's that fair? She has to be home at a certain time and you [the guy] can do whatever you want, yeah that's not fair.

Some of our female participants pointed to heightened parental concerns over daughters' safety moreso than sons, e.g., for walking their dogs at night. Perhaps indicating a gendered double standard, this dynamic also applied to online engagement. When a group of three 17-year-old females from Cyberville were asked why parents are more concerned for girls than boys after they had confirmed possessing this view themselves, Ally responded

the way girls are sexualized these days is really, really, bad and they can, [people] can do anything on the internet; they can lie, they can get anything from you if you let them like, you can fake who they are or anything, like catfish, that's stuff's scary man!

A similar remark comes from Patricia, 15 from Cyberville:

Like using Facebook and stuff like that, people find you, and then try to add you, and then try to message you, and try to get your Snapchat so then they can get pictures, but it's just like, that's what my mom's worried about.

Similarly, some male teens expressed the same perceptions. For instance, Samson, age 17 from Cyber City, reflected on his parents' responses in relation to his younger sisters:

what really strikes me, my little sisters both of them are younger. When they were going to junior high, that's when they sort of got a shared cellphone, 'cuz it's a hand-me-down from my mother ...whereas I only got my cellphone as soon I started 10th grade, so they were going into 7th, they got their cellphone. *I think they're a bit more protected, or at least more concerned for my sisters.* [added emphasis]

The words of these participants confirm an awareness of gendered interpretations of cyber-risk and the presence of gendered double standards regarding parental governance of technological access and use (Stanko 1997). From the experiences of these teens, female children appear more regulated and restricted in comparison to males, suggesting females are thought to be more

vulnerable than males, and thus require more online regulation (Bailey and Steeves 2013; Bailey and Steeves 2015; Bailey et al. 2013).

Despite these findings ostensibly confirming a gendered double standard regarding parental mediation impacting daughters with greater restrictions than sons (see Authors 2019b), not all of our groups agreed with this differential treatment. One group of 14-year-old male teens from Cyberville, projecting into the future, felt that they would be more protective with a daughter than a son. Mark: “like if I had a son, I’d be kind of lenient with [him], but if I had a girl, I’d wanna see what she’s doing because it’s my little girl.” However, this view was not shared by others during the discussion. Trevor, replying to Mark’s comment, admitted to being “protective” over his future children, but “if I had two kids, one male, one female, I’d be the same amount of protection of both.” During some discussions, teens suggested that birth order and age played a larger role than gender in parental mediation practices. Donald, aged 19 from Cyberville, spoke about his sisters, who are three years younger, and how his parents were stricter with him. He explains: “but like, my sister’s smart, like she is super, like she’s a good kid right so like...” Interviewer: “they don’t have to worry as much?” “They don’t have to worry too much,” Donald agrees. The impact of birth order is unpacked in greater detail by Serena, speaking in a group of four female undergraduate students (ages 18 and 19) from Cyber City. Referring to two younger sisters, ages 15 and 12, she says:

they both got like iPod’s, and laptops, they both have MacBook Airs! Like I never had that, like *what?* And they’re like so young; like my sister got her iPod when she was in grade 3 or something, and like I didn’t know like that existed, I don’t think that existed when I was in grade 3, but I feel like they’re getting a lot more things at a younger age and my parents are way more relaxed with them because they’ve seen me go through it,

and they've seen so many other people's kids go through it, that like, now that it's at their age, it's like 'oh whatever, she's been on the iPod for like 13 hours, it's ok, it's normal'.

Our participants included those whose parents were more concerned about their daughters online than their sons. Yet, a fair number of participants felt their younger siblings are treated more leniently (e.g., given smartphones earlier with less active monitoring) simply because their parents have become increasingly accustomed to the technologies and arguably adjusting mediation in relation to both their experiences with their first born, but also the personality of their later child or children (i.e., rather than wider gender norms or gendered double standards *per se*). Gender likely plays a role alongside interacting factors such as age of the child and/or children, parental experience, child personality, and socioeconomic class as well as mobility.

DISCUSSION

In the current study, we held focus groups with teens to explore experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward parental governance of technology and practices of mediation. Finding teens do experience technology as addictive, particularly in the context of social connectivity, we unpacked how youth understand their parents' motivations for limiting screen time (e.g., in the name of health and wellbeing, for safety) and the stress they associate with being forced offline. Our discussions highlight, at times, teen frustration with parental mediation and governance over their use of technology but also, simultaneously, a degree of qualified empathy with the perspective of their parents regardless if they agree or disagree with said perspective. Our qualitative, focus group discussions helped to hear teen views in their own words, in conversation with each other, and helped bridge gaps in understandings from teenage standpoints, e.g., of parents just thinking of 'screen time' rather than the role it plays in teen

communication. True to research demonstrating a lack of effectiveness regarding restrictive parenting controls on children, especially older teens (Benedetto and Ingrassia 2020), many of our participants referred to strategies of resistance to efforts by their parents to control their access to and use of digital technologies. Excessive controls may contribute to a culture of fear, fuelling moral panics amongst parents regarding children's use of ICTs (boyd and Hargittai 2013; Marx and Steeves 2010). Indeed, teens in our sample were personally resistant to technology removal or restriction as a punitive measure or as part of their daily living regulations (e.g., having a phone use curfew). They described a variety of creative 'workarounds' to overcome the limitations imposed, but also indicated that such parental efforts are not completely ineffective.

Teens desire spaces where they feel their privacy or lived experiences are not impinged upon; e.g., when parents mediate or govern their device use and connectivity. Consistent with prior researchers, who expressed that "most youth are less disturbed by abstract invasions of privacy by government agencies and corporations than the very real and ever-present experience of trying to negotiate privacy in light of nosy-parents, teachers, siblings, and peers" (Marwick and boyd 2014:1056), our teens were focused on how their parents disrupted their social living. Significantly, excessive parental restrictions are deemed ineffective, our participants expressed, due to the collateral consequences on connectivity, including socialization with peers, but also connections crucial for education and accessing important news online (arguably all the more prescient during the present COVID-19 pandemic). Marx and Steeves (2010:218) recognize that the home as a traditional refuge is under siege by connectivity from all sides. As the lines between home, play and commerce become permeable the child in constant contact with friends and family is now also in constant play as a commodity.

The multifaceted and everyday embeddedness of technologies also makes unpacking the impacts of age and gender on parental online mediation difficult to discern. Some of our participants felt that parents are more concerned over daughters than sons due to wider gendered double standards in society. At the same time, others felt that birth order and personality, combined with the general exposure of parents to new technologies, are likely influential factors in determining parental practices. What does come across our discussions, especially those with older teens, is that older teens distinguish themselves as much apart from their parents (i.e., as digital immigrants) as their younger siblings (whom they sometimes refer as more addicted to digital technologies than themselves (see Authors 2021)). This also suggests the need for more nuanced examinations of generational divides which delineates patterns among younger and older children, but also dynamics of family size, child gender(s), and so forth.

Our qualitative focus group discussions help illuminate context and meaning, but it is crucial also to consider the wider contexts of structural inequalities that affects connectivity and the patterning of digital parenting practices linked to institutional and socioeconomic dynamics and changes (Livingstone 2020). Further research is required to build on understanding of gender variations in how youth interact or are granted access to technology, and mine questions further regarding the influences of age, birth order, personality as well as race and ethnicity and social class. Scholarship on parental styles and approaches to managing children's technology use have found important differences regarding socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Yardi and Bruckman 2012), including work in the Global South (Cabello-Hutt, Cabello and Claro 2018; Madianou and Miller 2011; Shin and Lwin 2017). Research is warranted that unpacks gender discrepancies in the age that youth receive cell phones due to perceived variations in safety need by gender as well as the influence of birth order (perhaps

juxtaposed with gender) in shaping parental technology mediation. Males may also have reservations about strategies of mediation, including surveillance, but brush these off and/or do not recognize these given the influence of gender norms, particularly those tied to masculinities (Connell 2005)—another area of necessary future exploration.

Despite our discussions often referring to parental governance over devices and mediation of ICTs, we did not probe our focus group participants regarding which of their caretakers (e.g., which parent) was more restrictive or concerned about technology and being online. Future research is warranted that unpacks 1) youth unique perspectives of each caretaker involved in their technological governance (e.g., who is more versus less concerned about the technology use), and 2) the ramifications of such concerns for how youth understand online safety, particularly within the context of gender and age. We also did not direct our focus toward the ‘second order’ digital divide, which requires future research attending to not only access to technology but also how technology is used between parents and children (Hargittai 2002; Keegan Eamon 2004). Prior researchers support that lower SES families are more likely to face challenges related to a parent-child digital generation gap (Lee 2013; Tripp 2011). Such research is also crucial for unpacking the structural inequalities influencing parenting and technology governance during the COVID-19 pandemic (Orgilés et al. 2020; Ramsetty and Adams 2020).

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