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**Parental Socialization of Children's Internet Use: A Qualitative Approach**  
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**Title**

Parental Socialization of Children's Internet Use: A Qualitative Approach

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**Abstract**

This study explores how parents feel about the Internet and its impact on children, how they manage children's Internet use, and how they view the role of various socialization agents in creating a safer Internet environment for children. In-depth interviews with parents of children aged 7-12 revealed that parents presumed more positive than negative influence of the Internet on their children and felt confident about their ability to manage their children's Internet use. This high confidence in their own management, however, seemed to lead parents to be less engaged in purposeful and communication-based parental mediation and be less interested in updating their Internet knowledge. Nonetheless, they argued that parents should be actively engaged in communication with their children and be equipped with Internet knowledge to promote a safer online environment for children. Implications of the findings are discussed and suggestions for future research are provided.

**Keywords**

Parental mediation, socialization, Internet, children's new media use

**Word count**

7963 words

**\*This manuscript has not been previously published elsewhere.**

## **Introduction**

As children spend more time engaged in various online activities, concerns regarding their Internet use have also increased. Concerns include, but are not limited to, easier access to child-inappropriate content, cyberbullying, Internet addiction, and online privacy (Livingstone et al., 2011; Mesch, 2009). As primary caregivers and socialization agents, parents are encouraged to actively monitor and supervise children's Internet use (Ho and Zaccheus, 2012). However, it is not easy for parents to monitor and supervise today's tech-savvy children whose Internet knowledge and skills often exceed those of their parents (Tripp, 2011). Moreover, Internet use is becoming more personal and mobile, making it harder for parents to know what their children do online (Clark, 2011).

The goal of this study is to explore how parents are coping with the new challenges posed by the Internet. Although interest in parental mediation of children's new media use is growing, the body of research literature on parental mediation in new media contexts is still small (Shin and Huh, 2011). Especially lacking is an in-depth understanding of how parents perceive the Internet and its impact on their children and how such perceptions affect the way parents socialize their children as Internet users.

Using socialization theory and parental mediation research as theoretical frameworks, this study examines parental socialization of children's Internet use. By exploring parental perceptions and behaviors through in-depth interviews with parents of young Internet users aged 7-12, this study aims to contribute to a richer understanding of the role of parents as socialization agents in the changing media environment. Positioning it within socialization and parental mediation research frameworks, this study hopes to add to how the existing theories, largely developed and tested in quantitative research (Clark, 2012), are useful in understanding and explaining parents' narratives of children and the Internet.

## **Socialization Theory**

Socialization theory focuses on how individuals are socialized as members of a society through interactions with surroundings in a social setting (Hastings et al., 2007). Socialization is defined as 'processes whereby naïve individuals are taught the skills, behavior patterns, values, and motivations needed for competent functioning in the culture in which the child is growing up' (Maccoby, 2007: p.13). It entails individuals' acquisition of important social learning properties such as social skills, social understanding, and social behaviors (Maccoby, 2007).

While socialization occurs throughout one's life, socialization research has heavily focused on children because profound and lasting socialization takes place during one's childhood (Maccoby, 2007). In socialization research, children are viewed as learners who are affected by frequent contact with 'socialization agents.' Socialization agents refer to individuals or organizations that pass on social norms and skills to the learners through modeling, reinforcement, and social interaction. Socialization agents are key components of socialization research because they directly influence the child's learning processes (Hastings et al., 2007).

Among various socialization agents, parents have received the most research attention as primary agents of children's socialization (Maccoby, 2007). Parents socialize children by teaching them what is acceptable in the society and how to deal with social demands. Parents also affect the way children are socialized by influencing children's interactions with external socialization agents, like media, to make sure children are protected from undesirable social influences (Grusec and Davidov, 2007). In the media context in particular, Rideout et al. (2010) found that 6 out of 10 parents in the USA have rules about what their children aged 8-14 can watch on television and do on computer. When it comes to the Internet, Livingstone et al. (2011)

reported that 70% of parents of children aged 9-16 in Europe talk to their children about what they do on the Internet and 58% of parents stay nearby when children use the Internet.

### **Parental Mediation**

Parental mediation research highlights the role of parents as primary socialization agents in regard to media influence on children. Parental mediation is defined as strategies employed by parents to mitigate negative media effects on children (Clark, 2011). The key premise of parental mediation research is that children can be affected by their exposure to media, but such media effects can be mediated by the extent to which parents are engaged in monitoring and supervising children's media use (Mesch, 2009). Three forms of parental mediation strategies have been identified in parental mediation research: Active mediation (i.e. parents' talking to and discussing with their children about appropriate media consumption behaviors); restrictive mediation (i.e. parents' setting rules to control their children's media use); and co-using (i.e. parents' sharing media experience with children without any purposeful discussion or instruction). Considering that parental mediation involves parental efforts to socialize children to become more competent media consumers through modeling (i.e. co-using), reinforcement (i.e. restrictive mediation), and parent-child interaction (i.e. active mediation), parental mediation is seen as a form of parental socialization (Youn, 2008).

Parental mediation research has examined how different parental strategies are associated with various media socialization. One consistent finding has been that active mediation is more effective than other types of parental mediation in reducing undesirable media effects on children. Researchers have demonstrated that active mediation is negatively, and as compared to restrictive mediation and co-using, more strongly associated with children's television-induced

aggression (Nathanson, 1999), ad-induced materialism and parent-child conflict (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2005), and online personal information disclosure (Lwin et al., 2008).

Research has suggested that active mediation works better than other types of parental mediation because active mediation which is based on conversation and critical discussion is more likely to cultivate critical thinking skills in children (Fujioka and Austin, 2003). Laible and Thompson (2007) stated that through parent-child dialogues parents can take children to 'a relational system of mutual reciprocity' where children experience positive responsiveness from their parents. This system of mutual reciprocity leads children to be more responsive to parents' initiatives and better internalize parents' expectations.

Although restrictive mediation and co-using have been found to be less effective than active mediation (e.g. Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2005; Lwin et al., 2008; Nathanson, 1999; Warren et al., 2002), it does not mean that these have no impact on children. Lwin et al. (2008) demonstrated that while restrictive mediation was less effective than active mediation, restrictive mediation worked better than non-mediation in reducing children's personal information disclosure online. Livingstone and Helsper (2008) and Mesch (2009) revealed negative associations between parents' restrictions on children's engagement in online interpersonal communication (e.g. email, online gaming, and instant messaging) and children's involvement in the prescribed online activities. In regard to co-using, researchers found that co-using of the Internet is positively associated with heightened concerns about online privacy (Youn, 2008) and educational use of the Internet among children (Lee and Chae, 2007).

Researchers have also examined factors affecting parents' involvement in parental mediation. Studies have shown that parents of younger children are more likely to implement higher levels and more restrictive types of parental mediation (Livingstone et al., 2011;

Nathanson, 2001; Warren et al., 2002). This can be explained by the fact that younger children, in comparison to older children, tend to conform more to parental authority (Grusec and Davidov, 2007), and thus, restrictive mediation works well on younger children, especially before they reach adolescence (Lwin et al., 2008).

Parents' perception of media content and effects is also an important factor in explaining the extent to which parents supervise and monitor children's media use (Lee, 2013). Studies have found that parents with negative attitudes or beliefs regarding a given medium, media content, or its effects on their children are more likely to mediate children's television viewing (Nathanson, 2001; Warren et al., 2002), game playing (Shin and Huh, 2011), and Internet use (Lee, 2013).

While parental mediation of children's media use has been explored in various media contexts, with both antecedents and consequences examined, what is lacking is an in-depth understanding of how parents view the new technology and perceive themselves as socialization agents. Clark (2011) asked how parental mediation theory, which is primarily oriented toward television research, can be applied to digital media. This seems to be a legitimate question to ask, given that parents today are dealing with unique challenges that previously did not exist.

### **Parenting in the Changing Media Landscape**

The Internet is a sea of information, but not all information on the Internet is child-appropriate. If not properly monitored, children can be exposed to contents unsuitable for them. In addition, the interactive nature of the Internet can make children more engrossed and spend prolonged time periods on the Internet, increasing their chances to be exposed to child-inappropriate contents.

Risks involved in Internet use make the Internet a somewhat more dangerous place than television. This places more responsibility on parents to actively monitor how their children use

the Internet (Shin et al., 2012). However, it is not easy for parents to be effectively engaged in parental mediation of children's Internet activities due to the unique nature of Internet use (Clark, 2011). First, Internet use typically takes place using a personal computer or mobile device. The very nature of Internet use makes it relatively more difficult for parents to closely monitor children's Internet activities. In addition, commenting on Internet use requires understanding of the Internet. However, today's children are savvy Internet users with sophisticated Internet knowledge. If parents lack technical knowledge of the Internet, it will be hard for them to effectively manage their children's Internet use.

Overall, today's parents are facing unique challenges that did not exist in the television era. Consequently, parents' perceptions of the Internet can be different from their perceptions of television. As mentioned earlier, research has suggested that parents' perception of media and its impact on children can affect the way they implement parental mediation. Hence, to better understand parental mediation in the new media context, it is important to understand how parents perceive the media.

As aforementioned studies (e.g. Livingstone et al., 2011; Rideout et al., 2010) have demonstrated, parents try to manage and regulate their children's experience with media, including the Internet. Researchers have also found that the extent to which parents monitor and talk to their children about the Internet is negatively associated with the likelihood of the children being bullied online (Mesch, 2009) and exposure to child-inappropriate online content (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008; Livingstone et al., 2011), and positively associated with educational online activities (Lee and Chae, 2007) and heightened online privacy concerns (Youn, 2008). This suggests parents play an important role in children's socialization into media use, even in the new media environment.

However, most existing studies on parental mediation of children's new media use, including the aforementioned studies, have been based on quantitative survey research methods, which heavily focused on how different types or levels of parental mediation are associated with children's media-related attitudes and behaviors. It is unclear what motivates parents to be involved in parental mediation of children's Internet use and how they feel about themselves as socialization agents in the new media context. Qualitative approaches will help to extend previous survey findings and to gain a deeper understanding of parents as socialization agents in the digital age.

### **Method**

In-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of parents whose children were attending primary schools (age 7-12) and using the Internet either at home or at school in Singapore. Singapore is a developed country with a high Internet penetration rate, and almost all children (98%) aged 7-14 have Internet access (IDA, 2011). Children's active use of the Internet in Singapore has raised a range of concerns such as children's exposure and easier access to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and privacy invasion (Ho and Zaccheus, 2012). Since these concerns are also growing in many other countries (Shin et al., 2012), findings from this study should offer meaningful insights.

Interviews took place at a time and location of each informant's convenience. Prior to beginning the interviews, the informants were informed of the purpose of the study, possible risks and benefits involved, and participant privacy and confidentiality. For consistency, all interviews were conducted by the same interviewer who has been trained in qualitative research and who is fluent in both English and Chinese (the most frequently spoken languages in Singapore). Since English is the official language used in business, education, and government in

Singapore, interviews were conducted in English with one exception of an informant who felt more comfortable with Chinese.

The interviewer used a semi-structural interview guide that was constructed based on a review of the socialization and parental mediation literature and studies on children and new media (e.g. Grusec and Davidov, 2007; Livingstone et al. 2011; Nathanson, 1999; Youn, 2008). The interview covered three key areas: (1) parents' perceptions of the Internet and its impact on their children, (2) strategies parents use to manage children's Internet use, and (3) parents' appraisal of various socialization agents. Each interview lasted about an hour. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Parents were recruited at first through personal contacts and then by requesting research participants to locate other parents who fitted the criteria for the study sample. To represent diverse voices and experiences, parents of children in different age and gender groups were purposefully recruited. Following the theoretical sampling procedure (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), parents were recruited and interviewed until sufficient information on the three key areas were gathered and new data added little or no meaningful insight to the three key areas and themes developed. The point of saturation emerged with analysis of the narratives of the 20<sup>th</sup> informant.

The final sample consisted of 17 mothers and 3 fathers aged 28-47. Each parent talked about one child attending primary school, and thus, 20 children's Internet use was discussed with 20 parent informants. Of the 20 children, 11 were older primary school students (Year 4–Year 6: 10–12 years old) and the rest were younger primary school students (Year 1–Year 3: 7–9 years old). Eleven were girls and nine were boys. All children had access to the Internet at home, with 15 children via their parents' computers or computers in shared places (e.g. living room), 3 via their own computers in their own rooms, and 2 via their own and also their parents' computers.

Fifteen parents said their children also used the Internet at school, whereas 2 were not sure and 3 did not mention anything about children's Internet use at school. Children's home Internet use was primarily for educational (e.g. school assignments and e-learning) and entertainment (e.g. game playing, video watching, and social networking) purposes. Playing online games and watching videos on YouTube were most frequently mentioned when parents talked about their children's favorite Internet activities.

The interviews were analyzed by the investigator (the author of the study) using a constant comparative method (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The investigator immersed into the data by listening to the recorded interviews and reading the transcribed interviews multiple times, line-by-line, to discover patterns and identify tentative 'themes'—consistent and recurring ideas found in the data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Next, the investigator returned to the data to evaluate whether each identified theme was sufficiently supported. Through this constant comparative process, themes were revised, modified, and elaborated. Then, axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) was conducted to organize the refined themes into broad groups of themes corresponding to the three aforementioned key areas.

## **Findings**

### ***Perceptions of the Internet and Its Impact on Children***

Parents in this study viewed the Internet as having a more positive than negative influence on their children. The key benefit of the Internet was its resourcefulness. Parents believed that the Internet made their children more knowledgeable as it provides an unlimited amount of information and enables the children to find information easily and quickly. The informants regarded the Internet as a useful information source, especially helpful when children worked on school assignments requiring information search.

I find that she has become more knowledgeable, more resourceful... She is more resourceful now because she knows that if she needs to know something, she can go to Google and find out herself. Then she learns the use of certain words sometimes... I think she has become smarter. [Father, age 40, with a 9-year-old daughter]

He relies on the Internet to do a lot of research (for school assignments). A lot of things he doesn't know and he does a Google search. All the answers come out. It is easier, faster, and saves time. [Mother, age 36, with a 9-year-old son]

While the informants' accounts for positive influences of the Internet on children converged on resourcefulness, their accounts for negative influences were rather diverse, with half of the informants not mentioning any negative aspects of it. Some parents thought the resourcefulness of the Internet had made children somewhat lazier ('everything is under fingertips'), but they indicated the benefits of the Internet (i.e. resourcefulness and convenience) outweighed its detriment (i.e. becoming lazier). Some informants indicated it was sometimes difficult to stop the children from using the Internet due to its addictive nature. However, they did not think their children were seriously addicted to the Internet because they regulated the amount of time the children use the Internet at home.

Overall, the informants presumed more positive than negative influences of the Internet on their children, and they were not greatly concerned about its detrimental impact. Still, some parents expressed concerns. The most common concern was children's exposure to child-inappropriate online content. Internet's resourcefulness can be 'a double-edged sword' as described by an informant. While the tremendous amount of information available on the Internet can keep children better informed and more knowledgeable, not all information found is suitable for them. Parents knew that a simple keyword typed in on a search engine could take young ones to less desirable websites. In the words of an informant:

You know these days, when you google, anything will come out. So sometimes certain things that he googles might come with some undesirable outcomes, adult websites and

stuff like that, especially since he is almost into the puberty stage. [Father, age 38, with an 11-year-old son]

Other concerns mentioned by the parents, but not as prominent as concerns pertinent to exposure to inappropriate content, include: the addictive nature of the Internet, contact risks on social networking sites and privacy issues. However, most concerns were about 'what might happen in the future' rather than 'how children currently use the Internet.'

In sum, parents in this study did not presume substantially negative influences of the Internet on their children and were not overly concerned about their children's Internet use 'at present.' Nonetheless, they recognized risks involved in children's Internet use and were concerned about 'what might come' in the future. If children's Internet use is not carefully monitored, they can be exposed to risks, as expressed by an informant:

(Searching information using a search engine) is a very good way of increasing general knowledge. But if it is not supervised, then I will tell her that the Internet is a big bad wolf, and you never know where the wolf is hiding behind the tree. [Mother, age 40, with an 11-year-old daughter]

### ***Mediation Strategies***

The most frequently employed parental mediation strategy was time restriction (i.e. limiting when and how much time children can spend using the Internet). Parents also controlled children's Internet use environment by requiring their children to use shared computers (e.g. family computers or parents' computers) in shared places (e.g. living rooms or parents' rooms) and to seek parents' permission before using the Internet at home. However, they rarely practiced active mediation or co-using. They rarely asked what specific things their children were doing online or checked the browsing history to track which sites their children had visited.

This lack of more proactive and discussion-based parental mediation (i.e. active mediation and co-using) was presumably because parents believed their regulation-based

parental mediation worked well. The informants indicated they regulated when and how long children could spend time online and their children were generally conforming to such regulations. They also said they 'roughly' knew what their children were doing online because children surf the Internet using shared computers in shared rooms.

Time restriction was more prevalent than content restriction (i.e. limiting types of websites that children can visit). Informants explained that they rarely imposed content restriction because they knew what their children did on the Internet. The informants indicated they implemented time restriction because children would not stop otherwise (e.g. 'she doesn't know when to stop') or too much Internet is not good for children (e.g. 'bad for eyes,' 'taking time away from other important stuff'). Diverse forms of time restriction were being imposed: While some limited the amount of time (e.g. '1 hour per day'), others regulated frequency (e.g. '2-3 times a week') or occasion (e.g. 'weekends only,' 'when parents are around in the evening'). Some parents had very specific rules about time (e.g. '2 hours per session, only during the school break or weekend'), whereas others simply told their children to stop using the Internet when they felt that children had spent too much time on the Internet.

Informants sometimes talked to their children about proper ways of using the Internet. However, discussions took place only when a need arose (e.g. a child was exposed to child-inappropriate content by mistake) or when a child asked a question. Parents rarely initiated a conversation to discuss Internet-related issues. Even if they initiated a talk, it was more of a one-way, top-down communication from parents to children (e.g. telling a child not to post any photos on Facebook because it is dangerous), without specifically explaining the reasons behind the directives (e.g. not explaining why posting photos on Facebook is dangerous). Regular and mutual conversation between parents and children on Internet-related issues was rare. Only one

informant said he regularly sat down with his child and talked about the Internet, believing it as the best way to understand the child.

We try to refresh her once in a while. Normally every two to three months, we will try to sit down and chit chat, talk to her, what she has been using, what is her feeling about using the Internet. Then she will share with us also...It is better because at least we can get some updates from her and she can get new information on what we expect from her. [Father, age 42, with a 12-year-old daughter]

Although the informants felt that their children's Internet use was well managed through control-based parental mediation, they had concerns regarding their mediation strategies. Key concerns were: (1) Parents cannot always be in control, and (2) What they do today to control children's Internet use may not work tomorrow. For today's busy parents, monitoring children's online activities can be fairly challenging. Although parents can set rules regarding the amount of time that the children can spend online and the types of websites that they can visit, it is not always possible for parents to know what exactly their children do online, because some online activities occur outside home or when parents are not around. As an informant remarked:

I guess the biggest challenge is not so much at home, but while he is in school because I am not beside him. So from the moment he leaves home all the way until he is back home about 2 o'clock, during this period of time, I won't know (what he does online). [Mother, age 39, with a 9-year-old son]

Especially for working parents, continuous monitoring is not possible. In the words of an informant:

I think it is the lack of time, especially during weekdays when I am not at home in the morning. Because I mentioned that my mom (the child's grandmother) is engaged with other activities, doing housework and things like that. So she wouldn't be able to monitor her for every single moment. So there is a time when no monitoring is done. [Mother, age 28, with an 8-year-old daughter]

For some parents, especially parents who strictly control and closely monitor their child's Internet use at home, an important question is, whether their intervention strategies would work

when the child grows older, as children will spend more time outside, pursuing more autonomy and becoming more resistant to parental authority. As an informant put it:

I think that when they grow older and their technological skills are much more advanced, I doubt I will be able to control them anymore. If they use the computer and the Internet at home, as parents, we still can check on what they are doing. However, if they venture out to use in the library or anywhere else, it is difficult for us to control. When they are young, we will fetch them home from school and never let go unsupervised for long period of time. So we are still able to monitor their usage. However, once they grow older like in secondary school, it is impossible to follow and supervise them around. [Mother, age 45, with a 9-year-old daughter]

Although the informants rarely initiate mutual conversations with their children to discuss issues associated with the Internet, they believed that parent-child communication was the most important factor in promoting a safer and healthier online environment for children. They thought parents should talk and explain to children about the Internet to help them be more aware of its pros and cons. While some thought it would not be easy for parents to catch up with technology, the informants in general believed it was still parents' responsibility to guide and teach their children.

It will be difficult to track everything if they grow up. I cannot say that parents must be on par, because sometimes technology comes in so many ways... For example, there are so many online games... Personally I am not into such games so I will never be interested. But I hope that if my kids are interested, we can talk about what is their interest and things like that. You have to tell them and equip them with knowledge. It is very much about communication and education. [Mother, age 36, with a 9-year-old son]

We should always guide the child and at the same time communicate and ask. [Mother, age 37, with an 11-year-old son]

The informants also believed parents should play a primary role in monitoring and supervising children's Internet use by keeping up with trends and having basic knowledge of the Internet. Nonetheless, only a few of them had actively looked into ways to update their Internet knowledge. The parents knew their children's schools offered cyber wellness programs, but they did not know precise details of the programs and had not paid close attention to educational

materials their child had brought home from school. With a few exceptions, the parents did not have much knowledge of cyber wellness programs initiated by the government and schools, and they did not eagerly seek to learn more about such programs. For instance, an informant said:

I think parents must also take responsibility...I think parents should go and take courses themselves...If they want to help their children, they must go and help themselves.  
[Mother, age 41, with an 11-year-old daughter]

The same informant, however, was not aware of government- or school-initiated cyber wellness programs. Even though she had been invited to cyber wellness talks by her daughter's school, she had never attended any. She was also unaware of filtering services provided by Internet service providers. The same pattern was observed among other informants.

Overall, there seems to be a gap between what parents were actually doing and what they believed they should do. While the informants did not actively incorporate 'communication' into parental mediation, they considered communication the most important ingredient in promoting a positive Internet environment for children. Moreover, the informants were not actively looking for ways to update themselves on Internet knowledge, even though they thought parents should be equipped with knowledge to better guide children on the use of the Internet.

### ***Roles of Various Socialization Agents in Children's Internet Use***

When the informants were asked to appraise roles played by various socialization agents, they strongly believed that parents should take a leading role in supervising and educating children on the Internet. However, they thought external socialization agents such as schools and government should also promote a positive Internet environment for children. They felt the importance of external socialization agents increases as children grow older and spend more time outside home.

At this point, I do not think I need any help or support (from the government and school) when it comes to supervising and educating my child's Internet use. But when she grows

older and when she is teenager, I think I will have to. [Mother, age 40, with a 10-year-old daughter]

As good as one day, the children spend more than eight hours in school, with their extra curriculum activities. It is a second home. The school and the government should work together to do something to educate children on what kind of sites should not be visited. Of course, the parents also have to play a part. [Mother, age 37, with a 7-year-old son]

The parents thought information and educational programs provided by the government or schools specifically targeted at parents would be helpful. They wanted to have more specific and detailed information on current trends pertinent to children's Internet use with real case examples. Some thought getting a list of websites appropriate for children would be useful. Free talks or educational courses would also be helpful, especially if they are offered during weekends when both stay-home and working parents can attend. Education programs that take parents' perspectives into account would be useful.

However, the parents were somewhat skeptical regarding what marketers could do to promote a healthier online environment for children because they thought marketers were driven by commercial interests—selling is their priority and they do not care much of consumer sovereignty. They wished marketers targeting children online be more thoughtful and truthful and refrain from collecting personal information from children.

They should ensure that the products or services that they sell are safe and suitable for children...Providing ways to monitor the children is also a good initiative. But their motive is to earn money, so this is probably something that they cannot really do. [Mother, age 45, with a 9-year-old daughter]

## **Discussion**

Using a qualitative interview method, this study explored parental perceptions and mediation strategies in the context of children's Internet use. Specifically, this study focused on how parents feel about the Internet and its impact on children, how they manage and control

children's Internet use, and how they view various socialization agents including parents themselves.

### *Confident Parents*

Findings suggest that parents recognized both pros and cons of using the Internet, but they tended to see more positive than negative points. In addition, they were not overly concerned about how their children used the Internet 'at present.' It was primarily because parents believed they had managed and regulated their children's Internet use well. The informants had their children use shared computers at shared rooms or required them to ask for parental permission to use the Internet at home. They walked by to see what their children were doing online and imposed time restrictions. As a result, parents in this study felt confident that their children were properly guarded against potentially harmful impacts of the Internet.

This feeling of confidence seems to account for the lack of more communication-based active mediation found in this study. Specifically, because parents believed their children were under their control in regard to Internet use, they were less concerned about their children's Internet use, and thus, they felt less need to engage in discussion/conversation-based active mediation.

A question is, whether such a feeling of control and competency is well grounded. Studies conducted with parent-child dyads have demonstrated that parents tend to underestimate their children's engagement in undesirable social behaviors and overestimate their control over children (Cho and Cheon, 2005; Liao et al., 2008). This can be explained by the fact that children's socialization also takes place outside home, and that it is possible for children to be involved in less desirable social behaviors without the parent's knowledge. Not knowing exactly what their child does outside and how he/she is affected by peers and other external socialization

agents, it is hard for parents to accurately assess their control over the child's social behaviors (Liau et al., 2008).

A self-serving bias may also come in to play a role. According to Hoffner and Buchanan (2002), parents are less likely to view their own children as vulnerable to negative social influences. This is because parents are motivated to maintain positive self-perceptions of being 'good parents' (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2002). Admitting that their children are susceptible to negative social influences and that they have little control over their children's social behaviors can be ego-threatening for parents.

The same might have happened among the informants in this study—overestimating their control and underestimating the amount of children's exposure to online risks. It could be due to the lack of parental knowledge of children's social behaviors. It could also have stemmed from parents' self-enhancement motivation. In-depth interviews with parent-child dyads would provide clearer insights into the questions—whether and to what extent parents' competency is legitimate, and whether such competency has any pitfalls.

### ***More Regulations, Less Communications***

Parents in this study preferred restrictive mediation to active mediation, and time restriction was more prevalent than content restriction. Parents knew what their children were doing on the Internet at home by having them use shared computers at shared locations and by walking by when children used the Internet at home. This seemed to decrease the need for content restriction as well as active mediation.

Restrictive mediation, whether it regards time or content, has its own merits: As compared to communication-based active mediation, restrictive mediation, especially time restriction, can be more straightforward and easier to implement since it does not require

extensive knowledge of the Internet. In addition, restrictive mediation based on rule making can be more salient than active mediation because 'children may have to deal with it on a daily basis' (Nathanson, 2001: 215). Finally, if a child complies with 'the rules,' it will, at least, decrease his/her chance to be exposed to less desirable media content. For these reasons, restrictive mediation can be more convenient for parents, and parents in this study seemed to know its merits.

Feeling satisfied with their current restrictive mediation strategies, parents in this study did not seem to be greatly motivated to incorporate communication into parental mediation. Nevertheless, they viewed 'communication' between parents and children as a key ingredient in promoting a safer online environment for children. There seems to be a gap between 'what parents currently do' versus 'what they think they should do.' Perhaps, parents understood the importance of communication in child socialization in general, but a need for communication on the issue of the Internet has not risen yet. As mentioned earlier, the informants were not overly concerned about their children's current Internet usage because they believed children's Internet use at home was well managed even without active mediation.

Then, should parents continue to rely on restrictive mediation for their growing children? Some informants were worried about their restrictive mediation strategies, mainly because children are growing up, and will spend more time outside home in the near future, and parents cannot always be with children to control their Internet use. This highlights the pitfall of restrictive mediation: It works best when children are young and obedient and spend more time with parents. However, its effectiveness is likely to weaken as children grow older. For growing children whose pursuit for autonomy increases, active mediation would be a better solution (Lwin et al., 2008), especially given that active mediation is likely to lead children to be more

responsive to parental requests and better internalize parental expectations (Laible and Thompson, 2007).

### ***Moving Together***

While active mediation is known to be more effective than restrictive mediation, active mediation requires more effort. Parents need to have knowledge and understanding of the Internet. They should also be keen to talk with their children in order to have a meaningful conversation about the Internet and its effects. In this study, parents acknowledged the importance of Internet education and updating Internet knowledge. However, they did not actively seek a way to increase their Internet knowledge. Few had attended workshops or seminars to learn more about trends in children's Internet use, and not many had adequate understanding of government- or school-initiated cyber wellness programs targeted to parents and children. The informants in general felt they did not need help 'at this point.' It is presumably because they did not see much problem in their children's Internet use 'now.'

However, as some informants mentioned, it is not easy for parents to be par with their children when it comes to new media. The knowledge gap is likely to widen as children grow older and expose themselves more to the Internet. Thus, what this study found—parents spent little time educating themselves on new media—is a cause for concern.

As Turkle (2011) discussed in her book *Alone Together*, kids today heavily rely on new media to develop identities and build relationships. They are eager to be 'connected' using online and mobile communication tools and consider face-to-face communication an 'obsolete' concept. In dealing with this new tech-dependent generation, the traditional methods of active mediation (i.e. sitting together and discussing issues face to face) or restrictive mediation (e.g. setting rules without providing proper guidance or rationales) may be insufficient, especially for

older children spending substantial time outside home with their own digital devices. Parents may need to consider updating Internet knowledge and harnessing the power of digital media to better resonate to their children.

New media technology has great potential to bring unconnected people together. It can provide parents with useful tools to connect with their children and build stronger ties. However, it can be challenging for parents to effectively harness digital media to connect with children. Here, external socialization agents may play an important role. Haythornthwaite (2005) argues that 'organizationally established means of communications' (p.139), provided by the government or pertinent organizations, can play a crucial role in creating and maintaining social ties. It is because such organizations have resources to provide and promote communication platforms where social members can exchange ideas and cultivate relationships. Following Haythornthwaite, it can be argued that influential organizations like the government and schools should play a proactive role in educating parents and fostering positive relationships between parents and children. They can develop and promote online communication platforms where parents and children can share their views on the Internet, learn more about Internet trends, and network with other parents/children. Such efforts could help parents understand the new generation better and become more strategic in implementing parental mediation on children.

Encouraging is that parents in this study understood children's socialization as a multi-faceted process involving multiple socialization agents and believed all socialization agents, including the government and schools, had their part in promoting a safer online environment for children. Although parents were not actively seeking for help at present, they were concerned about the future, and such concerns may lead them to be more engaged in information search and knowledge update in the near future.

In developing online communication platforms for parents and children, the government/pertinent organizations should understand the target's needs. For instance, parents in this study thought educational materials containing real examples and informing current trends would be helpful. Educational programs specifically targeted to parents and offered at a time convenient for both stay-home and working parents would also be beneficial. As suggested by Haythronthwaite (2005), the organizations should also consider providing multiple communication tools for both public and private conversations, and protect network members' privacy and free speech to encourage more active participation.

### **Conclusion**

The present study contributes to the body of the socialization and parental mediation literature by providing a qualitative understanding of parents in the changing media environment. By hearing from parents of young Internet users, it explored how parents felt about the Internet and their roles as socialization agents. Furthermore, this study not only examined how parents implement parental mediation, it also investigated factors accounting for parents' involvement in parental mediation. This study also explored how parents view various socialization agents and discussed how external socialization agents could help parents.

This study provides several practical implications. For parents, it provides an opportunity to re-evaluate their current mediation strategies and consider alternative parental mediation approaches (e.g. active mediation) for their growing children living in the rapidly changing media environment. It also encourages parents to harness digital media to facilitate more communication with children. For policy makers, it offers information on what specific needs parents have, and such information will be useful for the development of more effective guidelines and educational programs for parents. Insights gained from this study can also help

marketers to understand what parents think about current online marketing practices and what should be done to change negative perceptions parents have regarding marketers targeting children online.

As a qualitative study, this study sought transferability and extrapolations rather than generalizability of research findings (Patton, 2002). Considering that (1) the informants were recruited to represent diverse voices and experiences of parents in Singapore; (2) Singapore is a country with high Internet penetration rates where children actively use the Internet and their Internet use has raised a number of concerns; and (3) such concerns are also growing in many other countries, it can be argued that findings from this study provide insights potentially transferable to other similar contexts (e.g. countries with high Internet penetration rates among children aged 7-12). However, caution should be exercised to project findings from this study to different populations (e.g. older children) and settings (e.g. countries with lower Internet penetrations among children).

According to Corbin and Strauss, credibility in qualitative research 'indicates that findings are trustworthy and believable in that they reflect participants', researchers', and readers' experiences with a phenomenon' (2008: 302). By reflecting diverse voices of parents of children in different age and gender groups and taking rigorous measures in data collection and analysis, this study aimed to offer credible and balanced insights into parental perceptions of children's Internet use and parental mediation strategies.

However, this study is limited in that it was conducted with parents only, and thus, vulnerable to a social desirability and self-serving biases. To gain more accurate and balanced insights, future research should look into children's perspectives as well. Secondly, this study did not explore parents' perceptions of 'peers,' another important socialization agent in children's

acquisition of social attitudes and skills. Future research can examine how parents think about and intervene with children's interactions with peers online, in such contexts as social networking and online gaming. Furthermore, this study focused on a narrow age range of children (age 7-12). Future research should be more inclusive and examine a broader age range of children, since roles of parents as socialization agents change as children age.

Further research is also encouraged to: (1) explore the role of parental perceptions of the Internet, children, and parents themselves; (2) examine the role of digital technology in parental mediation practice and effectiveness; and (3) suggest more specific ways for parents and external socialization agents to work together to promote a safer and healthier Internet environment for children, in a broader and more diverse research context.

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