

Parental Technology Governance: Teenagers' Understandings and Responses to Parental Digital Mediation

Michael Adorjan 
University of Calgary, Canada

Rosemary Ricciardelli 
Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

Tina Saleh 
McGill University, Canada

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Abstract: Research on parental mediation of children's online engagements situate historically long-standing 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 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 behaviors, social connection, differences in parental responses between sons and daughters, and differences concerning age and birth order. Disrupting cultural discourses of young people who lack agency in relation to their use of ICTs, our discussions with teens reveal qualified support, even degrees of sympathy, 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.

Dr. Michael Adorjan is an Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Calgary. His research examines youth and cyber risk, including perspectives and experiences of youth, parents, and educators, with a focus on issues

of privacy, surveillance, and digital citizenship. Adorjan has also published in the areas of youth "crime" in Canada and Hong Kong and public perceptions of police in Hong Kong.
email address: madorjan@ucalgary.ca

Dr. Rosemary Ricciardelli is a Professor of Sociology and Criminology, and Research Chair in Safety, Security, and Wellness, at Memorial University's Fisheries and Marine Institute. Elected to the Royal Society of Canada, her research centers on evolving understandings of gender, vulnerabilities, risk, and experiences and issues within different facets of the criminal justice system.

Tina Saleh is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. She conducts philosophical research on the legal and ethical dimensions of K-12 education in the US and Canada, examining jurisprudence on teachers' free speech rights. Her research contemplates how policy may foster equity and inclusion for teachers and students in increasingly diverse classrooms.

Since early 2020, the rapid shift to online schooling, increased time of 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 and guardians, which are compounded upon other, more longstanding anxieties concerning 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., concerning sexting, see: 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 social and psycho-emotional development at risk by engaging in inappropriate and harmful conduct online (Gabriel 2014; Jeffery 2021). However, often in stark contrast with media-hyped headlines about cyberbullying's ubiquity (Wall 2021), "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" (Livingstone 2008; Hinduja and Patchin 2014; Jenkins et al. 2018).

Societal discourses of new digital technologies often feature paradoxical representations of young people as both agentic creators and technologically savvy digital citizens, and vulnerable to a plethora of risks entailed through accessing ICTs (sometimes with the same sources, see: Wall 2021; cf. Spencer 2005). That applies especially to social media platforms and includes risks from access to wide, anonymous, and invisible audiences, the reproducibility and permanency of what is posted online, and potential privacy breaches, aggression, and harm that may ensue (boyd 2014).

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; Wall 2021). The emergence of what has been called "intensive par-

enting” involves pressure on “good” parents (especially mothers) to be perpetually vigilant with their children; a pressure reinforced through a wider neoliberal framework where responsibility for children’s efficacious socialization rests “downloaded” to parents—as opposed to previous eras with greater emphasis on the welfare state (Hays 1996; see also Garland 1996; Loader 2006). The need for research on parental mediation strategies and understandings of the contexts of their use is obviated, with the middle class and affluent 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); dynamics that are, no doubt, amplified due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Mediation may include verbally checking what children are doing online and maintaining ongoing lines of communication, surreptitious use of web-monitoring software (or “spyware”), or engaging in punishments for bad behavior, which include either restriction or removal of phones, tablets, Internet access, screen time, et cetera. Children are to be “out-smarted” by parents anxiously wading in “uncharted” technological “territory” (Wall 2021:8).

Yet, what is often less pronounced in research is *knowledge regarding how parental digital mediation is being received by children and youth themselves*. Our research centers on the voices of teenagers, highlighting their perceptions and responses to parental anxieties regarding online addiction and their practices of technological mediation, including restrictions and punishments limiting or barring access to social media, phones, and so on. We highlight findings from qualitative interviews with Canadian teenagers, with several overarching questions: What are teens’ perceptions of parental mediation and governance? What are their expe-

riences when they first receive smartphones, and how does that relate to parental mediation? What are teens’ perceptions of how parents regard gender, birth order, and personality as it relates to online engagement, technological access, and mediation? 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.

The Neoliberal Digital Parent & The Neglected Voices of Children

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 the 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 mediate their children’s online activities. Media discourses often act to exacerbate anxieties and engender moral panics by reifying a view of youth as invariably naive and susceptible to being lured by the harmful consequences of technologies often presented as mysterious and dangerous (boyd 2014; Fisk 2016; Wall 2021). These “Frankensteinian” concerns are projected onto parents who are presented with mixed messages—simultaneously to be perpetually vigilant over their children’s technology use but also, when children are older, to “let off the gas” to allow teens to internalize responsibilities for themselves and regulate, prudentially, their behaviors (Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019). As Wall (2021:11) found regarding Canadian media and governmental discourses, conflicting messages are themselves

related to media representations framing youth “as being vulnerable (but also potentially deviant and dangerous), passive, lacking agency and judgment, and malleable.”

Parental “omnipresence” (Nelson 2010; Ranson 2018) and the “downloaded” responsibility from governments onto parents themselves to safeguard children’s safety and security online is itself driven by wider neoliberal logics of self-regulation. That logic spotlights potential parental agency in producing good (i.e., economically productive) children *through* obfuscation of wider social structures and processes that play an arguably larger role in shaping children’s subjectivities (Fisk 2016; Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016; Wall 2021; see discussion below). Conducting focus groups with parents in the US, Fisk (2016:126) discovered that 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).

Some teens may, grudgingly, accept the need for their parents to “monitor” their online activities (see: Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019), though teens themselves and increasingly researchers distinguish between more and less intrusive forms of parental mediation. The 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 mediate 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 that often trace social media posts and followers (Stattin and Kerr 2000; Racz and McMahon 2011). Perhaps unsurprisingly, teens often abjure the latter, seeing parental reliance on intrusive “spyware” as fostering distrust and besmirching open communication (Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019).

Despite omnipresent concerns regarding cyberbullying, sexting, hacking, and other forms of online harm and aggression, parents often express relatively more (albeit everyday) concerns about the long-term behavioral and psychosocial impacts of addiction to ICTs (Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2021; Jeffery 2021). 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 TikTok. A nationally representative survey in the US 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 (primarily mothers) in Singapore reveal 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). Active parental mediation tends to dissipate as 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). 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 teenagers (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" (Sanders et al. 2016:645). The general pattern is most parents minimize 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." These perspectives highlight the relationship between adolescent age and parental mediation. Our study advances that literature by focusing on *teen 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 concerning siblings, and how youth respond to parental strategies related to age.

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 (Livingstone and Helsper 2008; Lee 2013) and others who 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 teens are more likely than female to engage in risky online behaviors, explained by individual characteristics such as sensation seeking (Lau and Yuen 2013; Notten and Nikken 2016). Some also argue that male teens are more likely to be "addicted" to the Internet than female teens, and children with Internet addiction have lower positive parental support and higher negative parental control (Li et al. 2014). At the same time, parental concerns over online safety and security tend to center on daughters more than sons, for example, meeting strangers online (boyd and Hargittai 2013). Likely influencing parental concerns is the gendered marketing of risks to parents, which play a role in wider moral panics over youth accessing ICTs. For instance, some mobile advertisements focus on father-daughter surveillance discourse, with daughters portrayed as at-risk and parental monitoring as 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 of their digital access and use.

As indicated, most research on parental mediation of their children's online activities, understandably, centers on parents themselves. The work of Catherine Jeffery (2020; 2021) makes significant

contributions to parental mediation literature but lacks a focus on children's views. Wall's (2021) review of Canadian media and governmental discourses directed at parents aligns well with similar research in the US conducted by Fisk (2016). Yet, societal discourses often position youth as lacking agency in response to their decisions regarding technology adoption and use (Wall 2021). There is a need for research to attend to youth voices that does not presume agency nor lack of agency but explores their reactions to and experiences with parental mediation; specifically, youth's reactions to parental regulation of access to technology and punishments for bad behavior, such as removal of technologies (e.g., phones, etc.). The need is especially great for qualitative research geared towards unpacking the meanings and contexts of children's experiences from their perspective (see: boyd 2014; Bailey and Steeves 2015; Fisk 2016; Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016; Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019). The work of Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016) does capture how youth conceptualize various aspects of their identities, as well as the meaningful connections in their everyday lives—at school, at home, online, et cetera. 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. Our research, therefore, extends, in part, Taylor and Rooney's (2016) empirical study conducted with youth in the UK, exploring their views on the impacts of modern-day forms of surveillance on their daily lives. While we focus on teen responses to parental *surveillance* elsewhere (Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019), here we widen our analytic focus to include a range of mediation practices, including

restrictions on screen time to combat “addiction,” restrictions on technology use and access, as well as 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 mediation, including the role of ICTs in driving addictive behaviors, social connection, differences in parental responses between sons and daughters, and differences concerning 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, especially considering the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic 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; Vandebosch and Van Cleemput 2008; Allen 2012). In the current study, we provide knowledge from teens' words, which will be useful for parents, educators, teens themselves, and others interested in the role that ICTs play in family dynamics. Focus groups are useful for unpacking the “situated character” of experience within the “practical and mundane contexts” of people's everyday lives (Sparks, Girling, and Loader 2001:888; see also Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook 2007) because the dynamic group interactions and discussions

generate knowledge that extends beyond attitudes and opinions (Morgan 1997). Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008), for instance, chose to examine cyberbullying using focus groups. They expected that the interaction among youngsters about a conversation topic that is part of their everyday (social) life—namely, ICT—would reveal detailed information about their concrete Internet and mobile phone practices and their individual and group norms and values concerning electronic communication (Vandebosch and Van Cleemput 2008:500). Ideally, focus group discussions progress in directions controlled by participants more than moderators (Madriz 1997), and as such, garner a “certain ecological validity” illuminating the lived experiences of participants (Stewart et al. 2007:39). That is especially important for groups involving youth, who often are challenged to find a platform for their voice (cyberspace being one such platform).

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 a maximum of five. We aimed to have groups of greater than two (akin more to a group discussion than a focus group *per se*); however, that 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 Adorjan and Ricciardelli, 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 concerning 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 sample, 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 of 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 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. Despite popular depictions of child-parent antagonism, especially when it comes to parental restrictions placed on technology access and use, we found degrees of sympathy, or at least begrudging empathy, that teens have concerning parental digital mediation. We unpack how teens interpret the rules and regulations parents impose around technology (e.g., smartphones, iPads, iPods) as restrictive but well-intended (e.g., protecting eyesight, sleep considerations). We also discuss forms of hidden contestation, including “workarounds” employed by our teens, 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 behaviors. We continue by exploring teens’ views regarding how age (including birth order) and gender impact parenting strategies, especially concerning siblings.

Parental Motivations for Online Mediation and the Role of Digital “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 pa-

rental 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.” Evidencing some degree of sympathy for parental concerns, 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: Adorjan and Ricciardi 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 behavioral adaptations or hidden contestation. 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 do, 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, opens 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 secretively, in hopes to avoid being “caught” and thus, the risk of having their devices removed as punishment. Their hidden contestation is a way to not overtly antagonize parents and to stay within parental regulations and boundaries regarding screen time and sleep (drawing on several rather Goffmanian forms of front stage presentations for parental audiences [Goffman 1959]). Irene, in the same group as Greta, mentions that in her home, her “phone has to be off by 9:00, and then I can read until 10ish” but adds, “I check [my phone] sometimes, I mostly read in like hardcover, 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 mediation is not completely ineffective. The forms of hidden contestation here relate to the relatively dependent relationship younger teens often have with their parents.

A central concern that our teens expressed quickly emerged concerning discussions over parental mediation—the unintended consequences of restricting access to social connections online. Technology is addictive in quality among teens foremost due to ICTs’ mediation of *social connectivity* (boyd 2014); particularly given many teens use social network sites 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 (boyd 2008; Livingstone 2008; Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019). In our focus group discussions, participants often referenced having parents who “just don’t understand” the motivations and *modus operandi* of teens that drive home their desire, often perceived as a 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. [emphasis added]

Gordan notices that parents, who may be 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. During a discussion of parental mediation, 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 Adorjan and Ricciardelli 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." 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 center here 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 Punishments: Degrees of Qualified Empathy

Overall, our teens expressed antagonism towards parental punishments involving restrictions on and/or the removal of their technology. A common response among our participants is that tech punishment "just made me really angry" (Seth, age 17, Cyber City). 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 antici-

pated 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. When 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." When 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 was related to a fear of missing out, her reply suggests 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.

Rather than finding expressions of overt antagonism, our discussions often revealed interesting qualifications. Admittedly exceptional, Judy, 15 from Cyber City, 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. 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 in 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. [emphasis added]

Denise, in her response, suggests she accepts that teens ("we") are dependent on technology, and central to the dependence are the *social* consequences of removing access to the technology. The underlying reasons for youth antagonism towards punitive device restrictions as punishment are not just linked to "addiction" *per se* but to the *social exclusion* in which

being "offline" may result (boyd 2014; Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2021). 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 behaviors 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* that 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 (Przybylski et al. 2013; boyd 2014; Oberst et al. 2017; Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2019).

Beyond the unintended consequences of social exclusion, parental punishments, which include extended removal of access to technology (usually phones), were deemed by our teens as unsustainable and were often met with explicit contestation. For instance, during a focus group with three students from Cyber City, ages 13 and 14, Darius recalls: "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 Darius. Sidney's response, like Darius', 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: Adorjan and Ricciardelli 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.

Despite the best of intentions parents may have in applying practices of "intensive parenting," by their mid-teens, hyper-vigilant responses and "zero tolerance" removals of phones, et cetera are found by children to be frustrating at the least, and disruptive to both accessing school work and, perhaps

most significantly, to pivotal social connections and communications. Beyond that, our discussions also explored both gendered and age dynamics affecting parental mediation.

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 the participants recalled receiving their first phone when old enough to begin using public transportation independently, often to and from school. This aligns with neoliberal pressures on parents to remain hyper-vigilant as their children more regularly commute through physical spaces that may be seen as inherently dangerous (including public spaces especially seen as risky for daughters, as we discuss below). 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]). Some female siblings received phones at a younger age than male siblings. 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 that, 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 more than sons, for example, for walking their dogs at night. Indicating a gendered double standard that 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 stuff's scary, man!

During another focus group, 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.

We also found male teens expressed the same perceptions. For instance, Samson, age 17 from Cyber City, reflected on his parents' responses concerning 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 cell phone, 'cuz it's a hand-me-down from my mother... whereas I only got my cell phone as soon I started 10th grade, so they were going into 7th, they got their cell phone. *I think they're a bit more protected, or at least more concerned for my sisters.* [emphasis added]

The words of these participants confirm awareness of gendered parental 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; 2015; Bailey et al. 2013).

Despite these findings ostensibly confirming a gendered double standard regarding parental mediation impacting daughters with greater restrictions than sons, not all of our groups agreed with that differential treatment. During one group of 14-year-old male teens from Cyberville, Mark projected that he would be more protective with a daughter than a son, stating "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, that view was not shared by others during the discussion. Trevor, replying to Mark's comment, admitted to likely 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 iPods 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." [emphasis added]

Our teens included those whose parents, from their perspectives, 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 mediation) simply because their parents have become increasingly accustomed to the technologies and adjusting mediation concerning both their experiences with their firstborn, but also the personality of their later child or children (i.e., rather than solely influenced by wider gender norms or gendered double standards *per se*). Parental perceptions of gender regarding technological mediation practices likely play a role alongside interacting factors such as the age of the child and/or children, parental experience, child personality, and socio-economic class, as well as mobility.

Discussion

In the current study, we held focus groups with teens to explore experiences, perceptions, and attitudes towards parental mediation of technology, including access and use, and punishments such as the removal of phones. 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 well-being, for safety) and the stress they associate with being forced offline. Our discussions highlight, at times, teen frustration with parental mediation over their use of technology but also, simultaneously, degrees of qualified empathy with the perspective of their parents, regardless if they agree or disagree with said perspective. Our qualitative focus group discussions were geared to provide teens with a platform to discuss their views directly, in dialogue with each other. That helped bridge gaps in understandings from teenage standpoints, for example, 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 implicit or explicit resistance to efforts by their parents to control their access to and use of digital technologies. Based as they are within rationality of intensive parenting (Hays 1996) and neoliberal expectations for parents to practice hyper-vigilance in the face of the cyber risks ostensibly facing their children (Wall 2021), excessive controls often ironically contribute to a culture of fear, fuelling moral panics that act to ultimately reinforce the internal logic of restrictive technological re-

sponses (Marx and Steeves 2010; boyd and Hargittai 2013). 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); moreover, they described a variety of creative “workarounds” to overcome the limitations imposed. Notably, they also indicated that more well-calculated responses, such as to serious instances of cyberbullying, are more appropriate and effective.

Teens desire spaces where they feel their privacy or experiences are not impinged upon; for example, 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.

Our findings also revealed nuances beyond expected antagonisms to parental control, especially regard-

ing dynamics of gender, age, and personality. However, the multifaceted and everyday embeddedness of technologies 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 in our discussions, especially those with older teens, is that teens distinguish themselves as much apart from their parents as their younger siblings (to whom they sometimes refer as more addicted to digital technologies than themselves [see: Adorjan and Ricciardelli 2021]). That also suggests the need for more nuanced examinations of generational divides that 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 also crucial to consider the wider contexts of structural inequalities that affect 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 understandings of gender variations in how youth interact or are granted access to technology, and many additional questions regarding the influences of age, birth order, personality, as well as race, 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 (Madianou and

Miller 2011; Shin and Lwin 2017; Cabello-Hutt, Cabello, and Claro 2018). Research is warranted that unpacks gender discrepancies in the age that youth receive cell phones due to perceived variations in safety needs by gender, as well as the influence of birth order (perhaps juxtaposed with gender) in shaping parental technology mediation. Digital divides, influencing both access to ICTs and the proficiency of their use (Hargittai 2002; Keegan Eamon 2004), have been greatly amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, and warrant research on both the perspectives of parents and children.

Prior researchers support that lower SES families are more likely to face challenges related to a parent-child digital generation gap (Tripp 2011; Lee

2013). Research is thus needed that unpacks the structural inequalities influencing parenting and technology governance during the COVID-19 pandemic (Orgilés et al. 2020; Ramsetty and Adams 2020). Research is also needed on how these circumstances have impacted the already strong neoliberal pressures on parents, especially mothers, to remain hyper-vigilant with their children's online access and use. Mothers are much more frequently targeted by corporations selling "cyber-safety" solutions, including monitoring software (Fisk 2016; see also Gabriels 2016), and research on the gendered nature of hyper-parenting discourses is warranted, especially regarding teen experiences in comparison to fathers and mothers (a direction we did not pursue during our focus groups).

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