
Minimizing Online Risks: Qualitative Study of Teenagers' Online Exposure and Parental Internet Mediation

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Research aimed to explore various factors influencing teens' online engagements, exposure to risks and parental mediation in regulating their internet use. Qualitative research method was applied and eight (8) FGDs were conducted with 52 teens in district Lahore (Pakistan). The research provides an evidence base that teens' digital environment and excessive internet use make them more vulnerable to online risks. Research found that parental internet mediation is effective to maximize online opportunities and minimize online risks. These findings suggested to develop parental guidelines and launch awareness campaigns to educate parents, teens, families and communities about online risks and protection behaviors.

Introduction

Since the advent of internet, e-phenomenon of technology has increasingly become an inseparable part of our daily lives. Today, we all live in the digital era, in a home of modern internet connected devices, such as computers, laptops, video games and smart televisions (TV). Particularly, the handheld devices like iPods, iPads/tablets and iPhones/smartphones provide exposure to various platforms of communication, edutainment and socialization (Ólafsson, Livingstone, & Haddon, 2013).

Internet use has increased rapidly over time. Globally, there are 4.39 billion internet users and 3.9 billion active mobile users (Hootsuite, 2019). The number of internet users has been multiplied since 2011, due to substantial increase in smartphones (ITU, 2017). Statistics informed that a significantly higher proportion of 71% young people aged 15-24 years use internet daily (ITU, 2017).

Asia Pacific has shown impressive digital growth trends during last decade. Pakistan ranks in top 10 Asian countries (Statista, 2019), with 44.6 million internet users. Country has 35 million active social media users and 109 million mobile users. Amongst all, 58% users go online on daily and 31% on weekly basis (HootSuite, 2019).

Teenagers, between 13-19 years are the avid users of internet, hence recognized as 'cyber-teens' (Lee, Conroy, & Hii, 2003). Teens' sense of being always connected is characterized as a reference point for identity construction or socialization. Internet offers multiple opportunities for teens to experiment

with their identities online, which encourage them to enhance, modify or conceal certain features of their self, and pretend to be someone else (Katz & Rice, 2002). Therefore, they prefer virtual environment over real life, which make them risk-teens. Broadly, internet is beneficial for teens' learning and socialization, however, it increases their probability for online risks, such as identity theft, privacy invasion, personal information disclosure, cyberbullying and exposure to sexual, violent or hate material (Livingstone, 2009).

Parental Internet Mediation

Parental Mediation (PM) is an emerging concept, recognizing that parents take an active role in managing and regulating children/teens' online experiences (Clark, 2011). The concept of PM was primarily used in media research to understand the influence of media content, like TV and video games on teens' behaviors (Rothfuss-Buerkel & Buerkel, 2001). It argued that young viewers may adopt certain attitudes presented in media, unless parents intervene or guide (Bybee, Robinson, & Turow, 1982). Thus, media researchers identified three PM strategies i.e. restrictive, instructive or active and co-using (Valkenburg, Krcmar, & Roos, 1998; Nikken & Jansz, 2006). Later, the researchers began with these already identified PM strategies to understand the specific attributes of parental internet mediation and revealed following five dimensions of parental internet mediation (Livingstone, Mascheroni, Dreier, Chaudron, & Lagae, 2015):

- i) Active mediation (encouraging, sharing and discussing teens' online use);
- ii) Restrictive mediation (setting rules for time and use of internet);
- iii) Monitoring (checking available records afterwards);
- iv) Technical mediation (using software or parental control to filter, restrict or monitor online activities); and
- v) Active internet safety mediation (guiding for safe internet practices, before, during or after use).

Problem Statement

Parental mediation is the subject of contemporary societies including Pakistan, where teens' internet use, both in terms of time and activities is rapidly evolving. Teens are considered more vulnerable to online risks, due to their strong association with peers, limited capacity for self-regulation and insufficient e-maturity (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Therefore, societies rely heavily on parents to prepare teens to protect themselves, placing less burden on government, regulators or educators (Clark, 2011).

Previous researches mainly focused on PM in use of TV and games, whilst only a handful of studies researched parental internet mediation. Further, a vast body of PM literature represents western societies (Livingstone, & Helsper, 2008), highlighting the paucity for eastern societies like Pakistan. Literature review showed that most of the Pakistani studies examined role of internet addiction and

its effect on teens/adolescents' academic achievements (Akhter, 2013; Iqbal, Noor, & Mian, 2014; Saleem, Owaisi, & Tufail, 2015), and physical and mental health (Niaz, 2008). Further, only few studies assessed cyber-bullying, as a prevalent online risk in country (Microsoft Corporation, 2012; Telenor Group Survey, 2016). Thus, there is a dearth of literature regarding parental mediation in children/teens' use of media or internet in local settings. This research intends to bridge the gap and explore various factors influencing teens' online exposure, vulnerability to online risks and parental mediation in regulating their use of internet, particularly in minimizing risks in district Lahore (Pakistan). Based on research objective, following research questions are proposed:

1. Which factors are contributing in teens' online exposure and vulnerability to online risks?
2. How do teens perceive parental internet mediations and its role in regulating their use of internet, particularly in minimizing online risks?

Methodology

A qualitative research was carried out in district Lahore, (Pakistan), where Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to explore the phenomenon.

Participants

Considering research objective, teenagers, both boys and girls were included. Here a 'teen' is referred to a person between 13-19 years, studying and using internet on at least one of the digital devices at home.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling, the most widely used strategy, was applied for qualitative data collection. A total of eight (8) FGDs were conducted with teens boys and girls separately. In all, the sample of 52 teens was covered, including 26 boys and 26 girls.

Tool Development

After thorough consultation of literature, a qualitative FGD guide was developed to explore teens' perspectives on research. Guide covered broader areas, including access and use of internet; first internet experience; online time spent; online activities; digital skills; excessive use of internet; awareness of online risks and various dimensions of parental internet mediation.

Data Collection Process

Six educational institutions, including 3 higher schools and 3 colleges/universities were selected to hold FGDs. Only those teens participated, who showed willingness and gave informed consent. During FGDs, teens were encouraged to express their views openly. Each FGD took approx. 40-45 minutes. Along with written notes, FGDs were also audio-recorded.

Data Analysis

Data was transcribed and thematic approach was used for analysis. Each transcript was carefully examined to identify emergent themes and sub-themes (Figure 1). During analysis, names of participants/institutions and their identities were anonymous.

Findings

Thematic findings of FGDs are presented below:

Access and use of internet. Findings revealed that all teens have access to internet in terms of means, type of devices in use and personally owned, and location.

Means to access internet. Most of the teens confirmed that they accessed internet via wifi and mobile data package (3G/4G).

Devices to access internet and their ownership. Teens expressed that they used internet on multiple devices. Older teens confirmed the ownership of smartphones, desktops/personal computers (PCs) and laptops, while younger owned tablets/IPads or used shared devices (PCs or laptops) for internet.

Location of internet use. Results found that teens used internet everywhere, wherein younger teens used it at homes in their spare times, nevertheless, older teens used it at multiple locations, including homes, hostels, school/college/university or while roaming around.

First internet experience. Teens shared their first internet experiences, in terms of their ages, type of device and age at setting-up social media account.

Age at first use. Mostly teen girls started internet use at later ages, between 14-16 years, as compared to boys, who started it at early ages of 9-12 years. Few boys confirmed of internet use since their childhood. As 14 year old boy stated, "I was 3-4 years old, when I used internet for the first time".

Types of devices. Teens had their first internet experience on PCs/desktops or laptops, while some girls used their mother's smartphones and some boys used their own smartphones for internet. A 15 years boy narrated, "I got my own cell phone at the age of 9 years for internet."

Age at setting-up social media account. A large number of participants informed that they had set-up their social media accounts before reaching the age of 13 years. A girl aged 13 years stated, "I have set-up my account on Facebook, while I was 9 years old."

Online screen time. Analysis found that younger teens spent less time online, between 2-6 hours, while older teens spent more than 12 to 20 hours daily online. A 19th year old girl stated, "We remain online almost round the clock (24/7), unless we sleep".

Types of online activities. All participants responded that they used internet for studies, socialization, gaming and entertainment. A boy aged 18 years mentioned, "We use internet for studies, chatting with friends on social media, watching films/music and gaming (X-box)".

Internet addiction or excessive use. Analysis revealed that younger teens were less addictive to internet as compared to older ones, who felt bothered in absence of internet, as stated by a younger boy, "I become anxious, when don't have internet. Sometimes, I skip my meals and classes while being online". Teens also highlighted that their excessive internet use is related to studies and social media.

Digital skills. FGDs analysis showed that a large number of teens had more know how about internet and digital skills than their parents. As narrated by 18 year old girl, "Yes, I am more skilled, even I taught my mother how to use internet and smartphone". Contrary, few teens negated this notion and considered their parents more knowledgeable and skilled.

Awareness of online risks and coping strategies. Most of the participants were found unable to list all potential online risks and their severity. Analysis revealed that younger teens had less awareness of online risks in contrast to older teens. Regarding teens' awareness about coping mechanism against online risks, participants indicated to approach parents, teachers, elder siblings or friends for immediate support.

Increasing parental concerns with teens' online exposure. All participants unanimously affirmed that their online exposure raised parental concerns and worries, especially of mothers, who took more interest in their online activities. Nonetheless, some teens mentioned the high concerns of fathers. Upon probing, results highlighted that educated parents, who have awareness of online risk paid more attention to teen' online safety. A 17 years old boy stated in this regard, "My mother is a teacher, so she asks many questions, while I am using internet, like what are you doing, why online, to whom I am talking to etc."

Parental internet mediation strategies. Analysis highlighted that majority of teens were found unaware about the term of 'internet mediation'. Then researcher explained them the concept of internet mediation and its various dimensions, e.g., active mediation, restrictive mediation, monitoring, technical mediation and active internet safety. Findings revealed that more than half of teens particularly the older ones refused that their parents never applied any such internet mediation strategy. However, upon probing, teens expressed that their parents use mixed strategies, or in combination to keep teens safe and protected from online risks. Mostly reported about active mediation, restrictive mediation and monitoring altogether. The same has been shared by 15 years old teen, "My mother just sits with me and guides me, while I use internet. But, she has also set the rule of using internet for not more than 2 hours daily". A girl aged 14 year also reported of using the combination of active mediation and monitoring. She said. "My mother and I share our online activities with each other. She has my password as well, so sometimes she just logs in and checks all."

Participants were further asked to narrate any experience of online risks they faced, and how their parents mediated to minimize risks. A 19 year old girl shared her personal experience,

"Someone hacked my Facebook account and changed email address. This really worried me as account has my personal pictures

and details. I shared it with my mother, who always warned me about online threats. She immediately asked me to report against hacking to Facebook administration. I did the same and recovered my account.”

Discussion

The research was conducted to gain a deep insight of various factors influencing teens' online engagement, exposure to online risks and parental mediation strategies in district Lahore (Pakistan). Research found that teens' in Lahore are excessive users of internet, thus are exposed to multiple online risks. Research emphasized that teens' exposure to online risks is a strong sociological concern of contemporary societies.

Research highlighted that it is essential to understand the dynamics of teens' digital environment to comprehend their online activities. Findings showed that teens' internet use has increased due to its instant access on multiple devices and location via wifi and 3G/4G mobile data package. These findings are consistent to the study conducted in Utah (Atwood, 2016). Study also pointed out that teens' ownership of smartphones and online screen time is doubled over times, which stimulate their excessive use of internet. Most significantly, teens' social media use on smartphones also compelled them to frequently check their devices to stay up-to-date. These findings dovetail with previous studies (Lenhart, 2015; Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Research highlighted that some teens had their first internet experience in childhood and also set-up their social media accounts on Facebook and Instagram before reaching the age of 13 years. It indicates the violation of terms of social networking sites, as nearly all sites allow users aged 13 years and above, under Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (Harper, 2018).

Analysis also showed that engagement of teens in multiple online activities, such as socialization and edutainment enhanced their digital skills. Nonetheless, teens' low awareness of online threats and their severity make them more vulnerable to risks. Literature indicated that not every teen has the digital skills to manage online risks (Livingstone et al. 2011). These findings are in consistent with other studies (Lee & Chae, 2007; Livingstone, & Helsper, 2008; Livingstone et al. 2011).

An active involvement of parents is required to regular teens' excessive online use and minimizes risks (Smahel et al, 2012). There is a general belief that easiest solution to these risks is to prevent teens for use of internet, however experts argued that teens' non-exposure could do more harm as the benefits of internet cannot be avoided (Aftab, 2000). Here the role of parental mediation emerges, strategizing to supervise and guide teens' use of internet. In view of findings, majority of teens were found unaware of internet mediations. However, upon probing, participants responded that their parents applied mix mediation strategies. These findings are similar to previous research work, highlighting that

parents preferred to apply combination of mediation strategies, considering the needs and competence of teens, as well as their own values and priorities (Barkin et al. 2006; Livingstone et al. 2015). The same has been argued by several researchers, where most effective parental mediation approach was found a mix of strategies to guide and interpret the online content, and reduce online risks (Bybee et al. 1982; Valkenburg et al. 1998; Nathanson, 2002; Livingstone et al. 2015).

Conclusion

This research presented the main findings of qualitative analysis related to factors contributing towards teens' online environment, exposure to online risks and parental internet mediation in district Lahore (Pakistan). This research is the first of its kind, addressing an utmost important issue within local context, i.e. teens' online engagement and parental internet mediation. The research lays a foundation for future research in the area of parental mediation. This research provides an evidence base that parental internet mediation is effective in minimizing the online risks and maximizing online opportunities among teens, through instilling critical thinking and self-efficacy to handle any adverse situation. Research suggested that parents have prime responsibility for teens' learning and socialization, hence they should continuously guide, advice and support teens in their use of internet. These findings are particularly significant, highlighting knowledge gap regarding internet mediation, therefore it suggested to develop guidelines to ensure e-safety for both parents and teens. This research also recommends to initiate awareness raising campaigns to educate parents, teens, families and communities about online risks, privacy concerns, online protection behaviors and remedial strategies to promote positive and healthy outcomes amongst teens.

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Figure

Figure 1. Word Cloud of Thematic Analysis

