



Parental mediation, peer norms and risky online behavior among adolescents



Hagit Sasson, Gustavo Mesch*

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Haifa, Israel

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown that parental mediation of adolescents online is associated with the latter's participation in risky behavior online and being a victim of online harassment and bullying. However, there is a paucity of studies investigating the differential contribution of peers' norms and parental mediation on adolescents' engagement in risky online behavior. To fill this gap in the literature, we collected data from a representative sample of 495 sixth to eleventh grade students in a large city in Israel. Participants responded to an online survey measuring three types of parental mediation: active guidance, restrictive supervision and non-intervention. We measured risky behavior online with items indicating the frequency of posting personal details, sending an insulting message and meeting face-to-face with a stranger met online. In addition, respondents reported their perceptions about their peers' attitudes toward various risky online behaviors. Multivariate findings show that after controlling for age, gender, time spent online and online activities, only restrictive parental supervision had a significant effect. However, such supervision actually increased adolescents' risky behavior online. Perceptions that one's peers approve of such behavior reduced the effect of restrictive parental supervision, leading to increased risky actions online. The results emphasize the importance of peer networks in youngsters' engagement in risky online activities.

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1. Introduction

Information and communication technologies have become integrated into the social and entertainment life of adolescents and are important tools for searching for information, connecting to parents and peers, and consuming and producing content (Hasebrink, Livingstone, Haddon, & Ólafsson, 2009; Livingstone, Haddon L., & Ólafsson K., 2011). At the same time studies have focused on the misuse of new technologies and their potential for offensive and harmful behavior (Hope, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008; Tokunaga, 2010). A consistent finding of previous studies is that certain online activities are conducive to higher risks of harassment and cyberbullying. This is particularly true of online activities that involve contact with strangers, content production (such as posting personal photographs or video clips) and activities in which children disclose private information (Mesch, 2009).

In searching for the factors that can minimize these risks, several studies have examined the role of parents in the use of media and attitudes toward risky behavior. These studies indicate that

parents can play a role in reducing young people's susceptibility to engaging in risky activities by guiding the child's media use (Guo & Nathanson, 2011). Some types of parental mediation are associated with a decrease in the involvement in risky online activities. Restrictive mediation (setting rules about and controlling the time that is spent on the media) and to a lesser extent active mediation (critically evaluating media content and/or giving instructions on how to interpret media) seem to be effective in minimizing online risks. However, other activities such as co-use (parents and children consuming media content together) did not reduce involvement in risky online behaviors (Nikken & de Graaf, 2013).

While many studies have been devoted to understanding the role of parents, and several studies have examined the role of friends, there is a paucity of studies about the differential contribution of family cohesion, parental monitoring and peer norms on youngsters' involvement in risky online activities. Adolescence is a period in which social relationships outside the family expand and include the peer group. Social interaction with peers provides a forum for learning and refining the socio-emotional skills needed for enduring relationships. Furthermore, as the social world of adolescents expands, peer beliefs and activities influence their behavior. The values of the youngsters' peers compete with their parents' value system in shaping the former's activities. The goal of this

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Haifa, Har Hacarmel 31905, Israel. Tel.: +972 4 8240993; fax: +972 4 8240819.

E-mail address: Gustavo@soc.haifa.ac.il (G. Mesch).

study is to fill this gap and to investigate the differential contribution of various forms of parental mediation and peers' injunctive norms on the risky online behavior of adolescents.

1.1. Parental monitoring and parental mediation

In the transition from childhood to adolescence, an important developmental task is the achievement of personal autonomy. This process is gradual as adolescents explore the limits of accepted behavior. The role of parents in monitoring their children's activities is critical for restricting involvement in both externalizing and internalizing behavior. Parental monitoring refers to activities that allow parents to know where their children are, with whom they are associating, and what they are doing when they are out of the house (Dishion & McMahan, 1998). Given that the Internet has become a space for the social activity of youngsters, parental knowledge often requires learning about their children's online activities. In recent years, scholars have determined that parents use various strategies for acquiring this knowledge, and these strategies differentially affect the involvement of children in deviant and risky behavior online (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). In their discussion of parental monitoring Kerr and Stattin (2000) differentiated among control, solicitation and disclosure as potential sources of parental knowledge about their children's activities. Control refers to parent initiated efforts to control their youngsters' behaviors through rules and restrictions. Solicitation refers to parents' active efforts to obtain information from their adolescents by questioning their children's friends and teachers, and using other surveillance methods. Thus, control and solicitation can be considered monitoring activities. Disclosure, in contrast, refers to the children's willingness to share and provide truthful information to their parents and is related to the degree of family cohesion. Studies that tested this conceptualization of parenting reported that disclosure is negatively associated with youngsters' breaking norms and risky online activities. For example, a study conducted among 733 adolescents aged 10–18 found that the more often adolescents tell their parents about their online activities, the fewer aggressive messages they send online (Law, Shapka, & Olson, 2010). However, the effect of control and solicitation are not consistent across studies (Kakihara, Titton-Weaver, Kerr, & Stattin, 2010; Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010; Law, Shapka, & Olson, 2010; Stattin & Kerr, 2000).

In the study of media effects, a notion closely associated with parental monitoring is parental mediation, namely, parental activities directed at protecting their children from exposure to risky activities and dangers online (Livingstone, 2007). Previous studies have shown that some types of parental mediation reduce involvement in risky online activities. Restrictive mediation (e.g. setting rules about and controlling the time that is spent on the media) is close to parental solicitation as it involves actively seeking information about youngsters' online activities through social or technological devices. Previous work has shown that parental solicitation is perceived as intrusive and an invasion of the child's autonomy. Such actions may actually motivate children to engage in risky online activities. Thus, we expect that:

H1. Parental monitoring activities (e.g. actively seeking information about their children's online activities through technological and social activities) will be positively related to the number of risky online activities.

H2. Parental support for their children's autonomy, conceptualized as parental mediation that does not involve intervention, will be negatively associated with the number of risky online activities.

1.2. Family cohesion

Family cohesion is defined as the “emotional bonding that family members have toward one another” (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1983, p. 60). The term implies the positive involvement of parents with their children, as reflected in shared activities, supportive behavior, and affection. The beneficial implications of family cohesion for children's behavior and development enjoy strong support in the social sciences (Baer, 2002; Coleman, 1988; Lamb et al., 1988). Adolescents who report being close to their parents show higher achievement in school, have fewer episodes of truancy, are less likely to drop out of school, and exhibit fewer emotional or behavioral problems (Amato & Rivera, 1999; McNeal, 1999; Otto & Atkinson, 1997).

Past studies have suggested that families that have an internet connection at home differ from families that do not have internet connection at home, in their interactions, family time and conflicts. Previous studies have also reported that the frequency of adolescents' Internet use is associated with a decline in family cohesion even when controlling for personality characteristics. However, we cannot dismiss the possibility that Internet use can have positive effects on family cohesion too. For example, the Internet may be used in other family contexts to strengthen the boundaries of the family and to create memories that help develop a collective identity. Following this argument, in this study we expect that:

H3. The greater the family cohesion, the fewer the number of risky online activities in which the adolescent is involved.

1.3. The role of friends

Adolescence is a time of major changes, including physical growth, the onset of sexual maturation, the activation of new drives and motivations, and a wide range of social and affective changes (Forbes & Dahl, 2010). Along with these changes, this period is characterized by increased involvement in risk-taking behaviors (Michael & Ben-Zur 2007). During this time, friends become central in the life of young adults, and adolescents start to see themselves as a part of social networks outside the family. Adolescents gradually start experimenting with behaviors and attitudes in order to develop their own unique personal style. Moreover, given that adolescents want to fit in with their peers, they are also sensitive to influences from their friends. With regard to media use, friends usually play a completely different role than parents. Whereas parents usually try to restrict risky media behavior and inspire critical thinking about media, friends may leverage media to test the boundaries of what is acceptable.

Social norms theory suggests that peers have an influence on adolescents' involvement in risky behavior (Berkowitz, 2005). This influence is rooted in the adolescents' beliefs about the norms that are prevalent among their peers. Such norms may dictate how to dress and behave, as well as expectations about the types of media to use and on how these media influence their friends' attitudes and behavior. For example, Baumgartner, Valkenburg, and Peter (2010), Baumgartner, Valkenburg, and Peter (2011) determined that adolescents who expected their friends to engage in risky online sexual behavior were more prone to seek such activities themselves. Nevertheless, despite the central role of perceived peer norms on the behavior of adolescents, studies have not examined yet the differential contribution of parental mediation and perceived peer norms on risky online behavior.

The social norms approach posits that there are two types of social norms: descriptive norms and injunctive norms. Descriptive norms can be defined as beliefs about what is actually done by most people in one's social group. These norms imply that if one

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