Supervision Matters: Teenagers' Perception
of Parents' Involvement in Their Internet Use

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Abstract

With the growing popularity of digital devices, Internet has become an integral part of teenagers' daily life. As teenagers are in a complicated period of development, parents struggle in supervising their use of the internet. This study takes the teenagers' standpoint and explores how the teenagers perceive their parents' involvement in their Internet use. Survey was conducted towards teenagers in UAE, which has the highest penetration of digital devices in the Gulf region as well as one of the highest in the world. The results showed that girls usually receive more supervision from parents' than boys. The older the teenagers are and the more they depend on the Internet, the more they perceive parents' supervision to be beneficial. However, not enough supervision has been given to those who access the Internet more frequently. The findings indicate more parents' supervision is needed from the teenagers' point of view. Discussions are made from psychological and socio-cultural perspectives and suggestions for future research are presented.

Keywords: Internet use, teenager, parents, supervision

Introduction

As we are all experiencing now that with the growing popularity of digital devices, such as computers, laptops, smart phones and tablets, the Internet can now be accessed with almost any content, from anywhere, and at anytime. Teenagers today are the generations that grow up with the Internet. For them, the Internet has become an integral part of their daily life for almost everything, including information, education, entertainment and socialization (Gross, 2004; Hamdan et al., 2013; Valentine & Holloway, 2002; Wang, Bianchi, & Raley, 2005). On one hand, the Internet provides useful resources for teenagers to explore the world, do well in their school projects and socialize in the virtual world, on the other hand the heavy use of the Internet also raises parents' concerns of some negative impacts physically and psychologically, such as exposure to inappropriate content and people, cyber bullying, physical inactivity, social isolation, and other related health problems such as obesity and depression (Kraut et al., 2002; S. Livingstone & Helsper, 2009a; Sonia Livingstone, 2003; Sorbring, 2012).

The focus of this research on teenagers especially is because teenagers use Internet more frequently and extensively than younger children. A recent survey conducted by GfK in 2013 in US showed that teenagers' spent more than 4 hours per day using the Internet and this time grew 37% since 2012, faster than that of any other key age groups. The teens' increases were driven by huge leaps in their time spent online via tablets, smartphones, and even connected TVs. Their data showed that smartphone ownership among the 13 to 17 group jumped from 35% to 55% and tablet ownership doubled from 18% to 37% since 2012 ("Teens' Time Spent Online," 2014). This study was conducted in United Arab Emirates (UAE). UAE has a large population of young people with over 50% below 24, among them are teenagers. In recent years, the growth of digital devices in UAE has been the highest in GCC countries and one of the highest in the world. According to a study by Dubai Press Club ("Arab Media Outlook 2011-2015," 2014), 78% of the UAE people own a laptop, 66% own a smart phone, 47% own a PC-desktop, 21% own a tablet and 11% own a smart/connected TV (Figure 1).

More importantly, teenagers are in a complicated period of development. As teenagers are no longer young children, they tend to be more independent and have more self-control. They usually dislike too much control from their parents (Eccles et al., 1993; Sun, 1995). Regarding the Internet use, although many parents feel uncertain and unease about their teenage children's actions and experiences on the Internet, they struggle in supervising them properly and effectively (Kirwil, 2009; Lin, Lin, & Wu, 2009). As parents of teenagers, it is not easy to keep a good balance between two things: to respect their children's autonomy and freedom of choice by not supervising everything all the time, and to come up with strategies to make them follow family rules and values in using the Internet (Eastin et al., 2006; Sorbring & Lundin, 2012; Sorbring, 2012). Also, as the technologies are developing at an unstoppable speed, many parents have far lagged knowledge and skills in using the Internet than their teenager children, therefore lack the ability to supervise (Livingstone, 2003; Sorbring, 2012; Wang et al., 2005). Besides, the easy access of the Internet through mobile devices e.g. smartphones and tablets, which are commonly owned by the teenagers today makes the supervision even harder for parents (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011) .

Many previous studies focused on the parents' perspective and explored how parents supervise their children's Internet use; such as setting family rules, monitoring time and content of use, parents' active participation in teenagers' internet activities, installing monitoring software etc (Eastin et al., 2006; Kyung, Yop, & Bum, 2009; Lin & Yu, 2008; Livingstone & Helsper, 2009b; Wang et al., 2005). For example, Eastin et al. (2006) investigated how four types of parenting: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and neglectful, influence their mediation including using interpretive, co-viewing, technological, and restrictive techniques to monitor teenagers' Internet use. However, most of them find that the various forms of mediation strategies from parents' are reported to be ineffective from teenagers. Fleming et al. (2006) surveyed 692 Australian teenagers and found the use of blocking or filtering software from parents' control did not lead to significant differences in their children' exposure to inappropriate content. Livingstone & Helsper (2009b) conducted a national survey of 1511 children and 906 parents in UK and found that parents' mediation strategies, which favoring active co-use and interaction rules over technical restrictions using filters or monitoring software, were not necessarily effective in reducing risks the teenagers encounter online.

Other research that examined both parents' and teenagers' views revealed consistent discrepancy between parents' and teenagers' report regarding the parents' supervision on the Internet. Turow and Nir (2000) found that when pairs of parents and children were interviewed, there is disagreement on whether parents' ever discussed the Internet use with their children. Wang et al. (2005) also found that there is discrepancy between parents and teenagers on Internet monitoring, about one third of the parents who said they have rules on Internet use but the teens say there are none . These findings indicate that parents and teenagers define, experience and demand the Internet supervision quite differently. Interestingly, in Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak's (2003) research, it is found that parents' reports of the installation of monitoring software did not predict lower exposure to unwanted sexual material, while teens' reports of the installation of such software predicted less exposure to unwanted sexual material. This confirms our belief that as teenagers are more mature and independent, parents' involvement can only be effective when it meets the teenagers' understanding, acceptance and appreciation. So it is important to know what and how the teenagers view their parents' involvement in their Internet use.

In this regard, this study aims to explore teenagers' perception of their parents' Internet supervision: whether they believe it is effective and beneficial and what factors that affect their perceptions. The main research questions include:

RQ1: What is the teenagers' perception of their parents' supervision in the Internet use?
RQ2: What are the factors that affect their parents' supervision in the Internet use?
RQ3: What is the teenagers' perception of benefits from their parents' supervision?
RQ4: What are the factors that affect teenager's perception of benefits from their parents' supervision?

According to previous studies, a couple of factors have been identified and discussed regarding parents' supervision on teenagers' Internet use.

Internet Use.

Parents' concern about teenagers' Internet use includes how long and how often teenagers use the internet, what content they are exposed to, what activities and interactions they are having online. It is proved that the higher frequency of teenagers' Internet use is linked to greater levels of worry on parents (Sorbring, 2012). Those worry are mainly about their children being exposed to dangerous people and material containing pornographic, violent, distressing content, experiencing bullying or threats, giving away private information, and becoming target of commercialism (Gross, 2004; Hamdan et al., 2013; S. Livingstone & Helsper, 2009a; Livingstone, 2003). In UAE, the internet is relative safe for teenagers since the Telecommunication Regulative Authority, which was established under UAE Federal Law, controls and supervises the content online. A list of inappropriate content is banned including pornography, politically sensitive material, and anything against the perceived moral values of the UAE. However, this doesn't prohibit the risks that teenagers may encounter online (Hamdan et al., 2013).

Internet Dependency.

In some studies, the term Internet addiction is used referring to the excessive use of the internet (Kyung, Yop, & Bum, 2009b; Lin et al., 2009). However, this study uses a more neutral term Internet Dependency as adapted from the concept of media dependency. In Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur's (1976) media dependency theory, they believed that the stronger the dependency on the media, the more likely it will have an impact on people's cognition, affect, and behaviour. In the case of the Internet, the easy access and the richness of the content meets almost all the need of teenagers. The more dependency on the Internet, the more it affects the teenagers' attitudes and behaviour. Therefore, we would like to see how Internet Dependency affects teenagers' perception of being monitored by their parents.

Age.

Earlier research has showed that age affects parents' supervision of Internet use. Studies in different countries have come up with consist results that older teens receive less supervision from parents than younger ones (Livingstone & Helsper, 2009b; Sorbring, 2012; Wang et al., 2005). From the report of parents, those parents of younger children are more worried that their teenager will come into contact with dangerous people and violent, distressed or uncomfortable content (Sorbring, 2012). This is quite comprehensible as the older the teenagers are, the more independence and self-control they have, facilitating parents to reduce supervision and reply more on their self-efficacy.

Gender.

Gender has been proved to be an influencing factor on parents' supervision (Kyung et al., 2009; Chien-Hsin Lin et al., 2009; S. Livingstone & Helsper, 2009b; Sorbring & Lundin, 2012; Sorbring, 2012; Wang et al., 2005). Gender differences are reflected in teenagers' different activities online, e.g. boys are more interested in games while girls are keen on social networking (Buti, Saleh, Sara, & Rajan, 2011; Gross, 2004), therefore they are encountering different risks accordingly. It is natural that parents'

concern and worry also differ between girls and boys. Sorbring (2012) found that parents are more worried that the girls, rather than the boys, will be subjected to bullying, come into contact with dangerous people and distressful and uncomfortable content. For boys, parents have more worry that they will become passive and inactive in using the Internet. Since parents have different perceptions of boys' and girls' activities and what is suitable, it might make parents think and act differently depending on the child's gender. So when it comes to teenagers' perception of parents' supervision, it is not surprising that there is difference from boys' and girls' report of being monitored. Livingstone & Helsper found (2009b) that girls perceiving themselves to receive more mediation than boys though in the same study parents did not perceive a gender difference in their action.

Most of the studies are conducted in Western and East Asian countries; few were carried out in the Middle East, especially in countries like UAE, which has the fastest growth of digital device and a large population of teenagers. More insight of teenagers' Internet use and perception is valuable to ensure the effectiveness of parents' invention and to protect the teenagers from risks online.

Methods

Survey method was used in this study. The Population for the survey is teenagers in UAE. Given the realistic concern of the implausibility of obtaining a probability sample of the UAE population for this experimental study, convenient sampling method was used. Survey questionnaire was distributed by Emirati students through their family and extended family members whose age fall within 13-19. Both hard copy and soft copy were distributed in November, 2013. In total, 50 questionnaires were collected. Among the respondents, 40% aged 13-15 and 60% aged 16-19, with 48% boys and 52% girls.

Independent variables.

    Internet use. The variable of Internet use is measured by time, content and purpose. For time, the respondents were asked "How much time do you spend on the Internet?" The answer is listed as "A. Less than an hour, B.1-2 Hour, C. 3-4 hour, and D. More". The questions for content include: "What do you use on the Internet?" Answers range from "A. Games, B.Video, C. Search engines, D. Social media, and E. Others, please specify." For online socialization, questions were asked about "Have you made any friends through the Internet?" and "Do you trust having friends through the Internet?" Each of the question is scaled from 1 to 3 with 1 for never and 3 for all the time. In case of online commercials, they are asked about "How do you normally behave when pop-up advertisements appear on your screen?" Three behaviours are listed to choose from: A. I click it. B. I ignore it. C. I close it. The question "Why do you use the Internet?" was asked for the purpose of using the Internet,

    Internet dependency. Two questions were asked about dependency on the Internet, one is "How often do you feel the need to check the Internet daily?" and the other is "Do you consider yourself an Internet fanatic?" Both answers are scaled from 1 to 3, with 1 for never, 2 for sometimes and 3 for all the time. For the first question, 60% of the respondents said they feel the need to check the Internet all the time.

Dependent variables.

Perception of Parents' supervision is measured by asking "Does your parents checks on what you access through the Internet?" The answers are scaled from 1 to 3, with 1 as never and 3 all the time.
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Perception of benefit from parents' supervision is measured by asking "Does your parents' involvement in your internet access benefit you in anyway?" with the answer also scaled from 1 to 3.

Data Analysis.

Based on the research design, T-test was conducted to explore the gender difference in parents' supervision of the Internet use. To investigate how Internet use and Internet dependency affect teenagers' perception of benefits from parents' Internet supervision, correlation was performed based on the available data. Because of the limited sample size, simultaneous multiple regression was conducted to explore how Internet Use, Internet Dependence, age and gender can affect perception of parents' supervision and its benefits. At this stage, the variable of gender was dummy coded with male as 1 and female as 0, so it can be added in the regression analysis and be interpreted accordingly.

Results

Descriptive Results

Internet Use. 64% of the teenagers spent more than 3 hours online daily. Regarding teenagers' access of content and activities online, the data showed that social media was used the most with 38% of teenagers choose that answer, followed by watching videos 26% and using search engines 24%, the least goes to games with 12%. In case of socialization online, 82% of the teenagers reported they made friends online. 62% of them do trust online relationship. However, the teenagers don't prefer to interactive with their family online, with 70% still prefer to communicate with their family members face to face. Looking at commercial information online, it is surprising to find that 90% of respondents choose to view the link of pop-up advertisement, showing their high vulnerability of being targeted by commercialization.

Internet Dependency. For the question "How often do you feel the need to check the Internet daily?" 60% of the respondents said they feel the need to check the Internet all the time. When asked "Do you consider yourself an Internet fanatic?" 84% answered yes, indicating there is high dependency on the Internet among teenagers.

Parents Supervision and its Benefits. It seems that the parents' control and supervision of Internet is quite weak in the society of UAE as perceived from teenagers. The majority of the teenagers (84%) reported that there is no parents' supervision on their Internet use, 16% said that their parents supervise their Internet use occasionally and only 2% said that their parents check their online behavior all the time (Figure 2). Regarding teenagers' perception of the benefits from their parents' Internet supervision, most teenagers (84%) reported that it is never beneficial, only about 16% reported it benefits them sometimes (Figure 3).

Explanatory Results

T-test was performed to test the gender differences on the perception of parents' supervision and its benefit. Significant gender differences were found in parents' supervision of the Internet use. The means for boys and girls were M=1.04(SD= 0.20) and M=1.35(SD=0.56) respectively, t(df)= -2.59, p<.05 with girls' higher than boys', which indicates that the parents' supervision is more on teenage girls than boys as reported by teenagers. However, no significance was found between their perceptions of benefits of parents' supervision (Table 1).

Correlation was conducted to explore the factors that affect the perception of parents' Internet supervision. Significant correlation results were found among 3 pairs of variables (Table 2).

First, it showed that *frequency to access the Internet* was significantly and negatively correlate with *perception of parents' supervision*, r(50) = -.40, p<.01, which means the more frequent the teenager access the internet, the less parents supervision was given to them.

Second, *Internet dependency* was significantly and positively correlation with *perception of benefits from parents' supervision*, r(50) = .38, p<.01, which means the more they depend on the internet, the more they perceive their parents' supervision to be beneficial.

Third, *Perception of benefits from parents' supervision* was found to have a significant and positive correlation with *age*, r(50) = .36, p<.05, meaning that the older the teenagers are, the more they perceive their parents' supervision to be beneficial.

Multiple regression found that the model containing the predictors on perception of parents' supervision was significant, R^2 = .30, F (7, 42) = 2.64, p<.05 (Table 3). Two variables, *frequency to access the internet* and *gender* are two significant predictors. For the variable of *frequency to access the internet*, the direction is negative, which means the frequent access to the Internet predicts less parents' supervision. This result is consistent with the findings from correlation analysis in that *frequency to access the Internet* is negatively correlation with parents' supervision. It showed that *gender* is also a negative predictor of parents' supervision. As boys are coded as 1 and girls coded as 0, the result indicates that the boys' perceived less supervision from their parents, a finding that also echoed what was found from the T-test, in which girls reported more supervision from parents. No significant predictors were found in the model of predicting perception of benefits' from parents supervision.

Discussion

Given the wide ownership of digital devices among the teenagers in UAE, it is disturbing to find that the majority of the parents are not supervising their teenagers' Internet use as reported from their children. Nor do they think their supervision is beneficial. The percentage of the parents that monitor their teenager children's Internet in this study is far more below that in Western and East Asian countries. A study in UK (Livingstone & Helsper, 2009b) found that parents attempt a fair degree of regulation for teenagers. In another study in European Union, about one third of the

parents reported applying a variety of measures to ensure their children's safety online (Livingstone et al., 2011). However, there is only one study in US that reported the similar level of deficiency in parents' supervision (Stahl & Fritz, 2002), but the research was conducted more than ten years ago. Hamdan et al.'s (2013) study in UAE showed a bit higher percentage of parents' supervision which is 29%. The variation may caused by the regional differences in the sample since the economy and culture is quite different from one emirate to the other in the country. Future study with a more complete sample in each emirate of UAE is suggested to gain a complete understanding of the parents' supervision of the Internet use in the country.

The fact that parents' supervision is relatively weak in UAE can be explained by a few reasons. First, UAE has an interesting combination of modernity and tradition. On one hand, the high per capita income in the country makes the ownership and updating of digital devices very common among young people; on the other hand the tradition of keeping big family size, usually more than 5 kids per couple, makes it hard for parents to spare as much time and energy on each kids as that in other societies. Second, there is also the problem of digital gap between the parents and their teenager kids. As noted by many scholars, parents may not be as faster as their teenager kids in learning and updating knowledge and skills of using the Internet, therefore, lack the ability to supervise their kids effectively (Wang et al., 2005). The various devices and applications to access the Internet make parents' supervision even harder. Last but not the least reason that reduced parents' concern may lie in their belief that the Internet is relatively safe in UAE. A list of various Internet content is prohibited under the UAE's policy including content for learning criminal skills, gambling, illegal drugs, hacking, pornography, and more ("Prohibited Content Categories," n.d.).

The findings showed that among those who perceived to have parents' supervision, more girls than boys reported being supervised. Gender is an important predictor of perception of parents' supervision, however no gender difference is found in perceiving whether the supervision is beneficial or not. In previous studies that surveyed to the teenagers, males reported to have more exposure to inappropriate material or behaviors online (Fleming et al., 2006). From surveys to the parents, many find that parents usually worry more about boys than girls, for example, in a survey towards over 500 mothers of teenagers in US, Eastin et al. (2006) found that moms place more time and content restrictions on younger males than females. Even though boys are believed to encounter more risks due to their preferences in online activities hence raise more parents' concern, girls reported to have more parents' supervision than boys when referring to actually supervision actions from parents (Livingstone & Helsper, 2009b). It is natural that parents care more about their teenager girls' exposure to dangerous people in the virtual world (Sorbring, 2012) , especially in a society like UAE where female's privacy is highly valued and protected. It is believed that any inappropriate exposure may impair the reputation of the girl and the family. In order to protect their girls and make them follow the values of the society, parents are expected to put more supervision and restriction on girls than boys.

Due to the lack of parents' supervision on Internet use, it is not surprising to see that most teenagers reported there is no benefit from their parents supervision, a result more depressing than in other areas. For example, a study in EU showed that teenagers are generally positive about their parents' supervision with over two theirs

say it is helpful (S. Livingstone et al., 2011). Among those who did perceive the benefits from their parents' intervention, more older teenagers than younger ones who reported so. Given that many studies proved that parents usually gave more supervision on younger teenagers than older ones (Livingstone & Helsper, 2009b; Sorbring, 2012; Wang et al., 2005), the findings in this study indicates that the more mature the teenagers are, the more understanding they have towards their parents' intervention. It is also find that for those teenagers who claim to be more dependent on the Internet, they perceive parents' supervision to be more beneficial, indicating that when the teenagers aware that they are out of self-control, they do need parents' intervention and help. However less parents' supervision was given to those who use the Internet more frequently. As frequency of Internet access is proved to be a predictor for parents' supervision, it calls our attention that more supervision should be given to those who tend to get addicted in using the Internet. Scholars found that families play an important role in preventing Internet addiction (Kyung et al., 2009; Chien-Hsin Lin et al., 2009; S. Livingstone et al., 2011), so more programs should be considered by schools, policymakers and social workers to enhance parents' involvement in their children's Internet use.

The limited sample size may affect the generalization of the findings in this study; however it casts insights into the parents' and teenagers' attitudes and actions towards the Internet use in UAE. We have reached an important understanding that parents' supervision really matters as it is appreciated by those older and more mature teenagers and those who feel lack of self-control; it is also missed and needed by those who use Internet more frequently. A good communication, understanding and appreciation between parents and teenagers is the key to ensure the best use of the Internet.

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Table 1 Independent T-test for Perception Parents' Supervision and its Benefits

Variables	Gender Male mean (& SD)	Female mean (& SD)	t value	df	Significance
Perception of Parents' supervision	1.04 (0.20)	1.35 (0.56)	-2.59	32	p<.05
Perception of Benefits from Parents' supervision	1.17 (0.38)	1.15 (0.37)	0.12	48	ns

Table 2 Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Internet Use, Internet Dependence and Perception of Parents' Supervision and its Benefits

Variables	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Internet Use							
1.How much time do you spent on the Internet?	.19	-.28*	.51**	.11	-.23	.07	-.17
2. Have you made any friends on the Internet?		.32*	.05	.06	-.09	.09	.00
3. Do you trust having friends on the Internet?			-.34*	-.01	-.03	-.01	-.09
4. How often do you need to check the internet daily?				.11	-.40**	.06	-.15
Internet Dependence							
5. Do you consider yourself an Internet fanatic?					-.12	.38**	.36*
6. Perception of parents' supervision						-.01	-.09
7. Perception of benefits of parents' supervision							.36*
8. Age							

** $p<.01$ (2-tailed) * $p<.05$ (2-tailed)

Table 3 Simultaneous Multiple Regression of the Factors on Perceptions of Parents'
Supervision

Factors	Beta	t
Internet Use		
1.How much time do you spent on the Internet?	-.03	-.17
2. Have you made any friends on the Internet?	-.08	-.52
3. Do you trust having friends on the Internet?	-.10	-.64
4. How often do you need to check the internet	-.44	-2.82**
Internet Dependence		
5. Do you consider yourself an Internet fanatic?	.04	.31
Age	-.13	-.92
Gender	-.35	-2.45*
F	*2.64**	
dfs	*7,42*	
R^2	*.30*	
n	*50*	

*** p<.01 * p<.05*

Figure Captions
Figure 1 Digital devices owned by individuals in UAE (Source: Arab Media Outlook
2011~2015)
Figure 2 Teenagers' Perception of Parents' Supervision
Figure 3 Teenagers' Perception of Benefits from Parents' Supervision

Never
Occasionally
all the time

2.00%

16.00%

82.00%

never
occasionally
all the time

16.00%

84.00%