Evolution In The Role Of Parental Mediation From Traditional Media To Digital Media Usage In Children: A Review Paper

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Abstract

From the era that saw the development of the press, followed by radio and television, to the current times where digital technology pervades the world, media- usage has evolved with a paradoxical construct concerning its benefits and its harms. While, yesteryears, saw television consumption as both a boon and a bane, one of the key concerns in contemporary times is the penetration of digital technology and internet access which can be beneficial as well as harmful.

The recent pandemic Covid-19 only promulgated the use of gadgets like smartphones for education, entertainment, and e-commerce. The increased usage of digital technology, with special reference to smartphones, has raised serious concern about its impact on children. Conscious about the media usage of their children, parents across the globe have resorted to parental mediation in their children's media usage to encourage healthy use and mitigate the negative impact.

This essay examines the evolution of parental mediation from its historic perspective and attempts to underline its significance in the life of children and parents across the world. Furthermore, it also tries to analyze the present body of knowledge to explore the importance of parental mediation and the types of mediation adopted to counter the current digital media influence.

Keywords: Parental Mediation, Parental Control, Smartphone usage and Parental Mediation, Restrictive mediation, Active mediation, Co-usage, Parental Monitoring

1. Introduction

The current times are witness to the fact that digital technology like laptops, iPads, Notepads, and smartphones have become more of a necessity, rather than just a technological tool for communication. Smartphones today are gradually replacing laptops and personal computers in many homes. The usage of digital technology like smartphones, iPad, or Notepads brings varied benefits. It provides access to the internet, applications, and social media which are used by all, inclusive of children, adolescents, and teenagers for education, entertainment, and socialization. Digital technologies provide access to OTT (over-the-top) platforms, social media, gaming, networking, content creation, short messages, video calling, and so on. However, with a plethora of opportunities, media usage has also given rise to a paradoxical situation for both the children and parents. Digital media technology is metamorphosing from a boon into a bane for parents across the globe. While children benefit from the multiple applications that are readily available and the knowledge provided at the swipe of a finger, the challenges and deterrents of a healthy lifestyle are many.

In the years, when Television viewing was considered dangerous due to children, adolescents, and youngsters getting exposed to adult or violent content, parental mediation was focused around guiding children's consumption of the right content. Chaffee, Mcleod, and K. Atkin (1968) highlight that parents mediated the television consumption of their youngsters by making rules and quotas and keeping a tab on the programs being watched. Research studies in the field of parental mediation gradually began focussing on computers, gaming, online dangers, internet addiction, and currently, smartphone addiction. Montag et al., (2019) in their research findings equated Smartphone addiction to internet use disorder, due to the prominent usage of smartphones for multiple activities that lead to many dangerous trends when uncontrolled.

Various research studies in the field of digital media usage have highlighted the negative impacts that stem from excessive media usage. This includes anxiety, behavioral problems, myopia, sleep deprivation, smartphone addiction, exposure to inappropriate content, stranger- danger, pedophile threat, misuse of private information or data, cyber-bullying, inappropriate content, etc (Smahelova et al., 2017; W. Shin, 2018; Chian J-T et al., 2019). Given the glaring threats coming from exposure to the digital world, many parents are trying to mediate the media usage of their children irrespective of their age. One of the key objectives of parental mediation is to derive media benefits healthily and mitigate the negative impact on their children (Mendoza, 2009). This process is identified as Parental Mediation. The merits of Parental mediation in children's media usage have been presented in many research studies including that by Ron Warren (2001).

With a plethora of Apps, scores of websites, and multiple social networking platforms to hang out on, both children and teenagers are prone to explore the same. Parents need to be alert about the fact that their children are using safe Apps, and genuine websites and are cautious in their indulgence with strangers online, which could lead to harm. Hence, parents mediate the media usage of their children by monitoring their media usage, providing them guidelines through sharing and evaluation of media content, or insisting on rules and regulations to prevent excessive usage which could lead to other problems for children (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Mesch, 2009; Ren and Xhu, 2022). This is termed parental mediation. Depending on the context, parents resort to different strategies to mediate their children's media usage.

2. Historical view of the initiation of the studies in Parental Mediation

Research in the field of parental mediation can be traced to the 1950s, as the researchers explored the influence of television on children, adolescents, and individuals at large. Desmond Roger, Singer Jerome, Calam Rachel, Singer Dorothy, and Colimore Karen (1985) divide this period into three stages. During this period the researchers delved into exploring the impact of television viewing on various aspects of human life. They highlight that the first stage occurred in the 1950s when the study was geared towards finding out how leisure derived from Television consumption led to a lax in reading and sports activities of children and adolescents.

The second stage in the 1960s saw research delving into an exploration of how television consumption led to an imitation of values, learning cooperation and sharing, knowledge of the political situation, and initiation of aggressiveness in human behavior (Comstock, 1978; Desmond et al., 1985). Research studies here include those of Chaffee et al., (1968) that highlight the parental influence on adolescent children's television usage and non-social parental control methods.

The third stage unfolded itself during the 1970s- the period which witnessed research

dominated by the finding of "mediating variables in the television-to-viewer relationship" in the arena of academic achievements, perception of reality, and the cognitive development of individuals (Wackman B. and Wartella E., 1977; Desmond et al., 1985). This era also focussed on studies that explored the formation of attitudes, gaining of knowledge, and behavioral nuances amongst preschool and schooling children. It was also around this time that research was conducted concerning parent, sibling, or peer mediation through inter-personal communication in television consumption habits state Desmond et al., (1985). Thus, research on parental mediation that includes parental rules and disciplinary measures of enforcing media consumption timings, restricted viewing, and prohibition of certain content while encouraging others that are beneficial in the case of Television viewing (Desmond et al., 1985) was also prominent in many developed countries during this period.

The fourth stage during the 1980s witnessed a degradation of children's content in Television which further led to a spate in the research related to Parental mediation (Mendoza, 2009). The research study by Bybee, Robinson, and Turow (1982) described three distinctive concepts of restrictive mediation, evaluative mediation, and unfocused guidance. These concepts have been elaborately discussed and applied to varied media over years. Furthermore, studies in the same field by Valkenburg et al. (1999) focussed on developing a reliable measuring scale to chart out Parental mediation and its varied types.

In the fifth stage post the year 2000, the concept of free data access, social networking sites, Wikipedia, and OTT platforms like YouTube, Netflix, Sony, etc., led to a massive transformation in communication, information, education, and entertainment. Research in the field of parental mediation began focusing now on digital media, its influence on children, and the role parents played in navigating new media

and its digital format. The perspective now turned towards the influence of Computers, social media, and other Digital media, inclusive of smartphones upon children, adolescents, youngsters, and their parents. Prominent scholars in this field like Ron Warren (2001), Sonia Livingstone (2007 onwards), Clark Lynn (2011), Nikken and Schols (2015), etc., have contributed massively to understanding parental mediation, parental control, and parental guidance in the context of digital technology.

Digital media, with its potentially good and bad usage, has become a cause of major concern and anxiety within families, especially in matters of parent-child relationships and dialogue (Wong, 2010). Parents are prone to monitoring, regulating, or even actively discussing digital media consumption practices in the households which further adds to a contested negotiation between parents and children (Wong, 2010).

Parental mediation given the ever-evolving technology is changing, however, the basic concepts and fundamentals continue to remain the same. Digital media and the dangers of cyberbullying, stranger danger, lack of privacy, pornography, addictive or dangerous gaming practices, etc., have only led to parents becoming conscious and protective. Hence, it is inevitable that parents are prone to mediating the digital media usage of their children across ages and countries, which has further led to the escalation of research studies in this field in the current scenario.

3. Parental Mediation and the different strategies in the context of current media usage

Parental mediation is defined as any type of parental intervention or protective behavior employed by Parents to encourage healthy media habits and mitigate its negative impact (Warren, 2001; Mendoza, 2009; Clark, 2011, Hwang and Jeong, 2015; Shin, 2018). Parents

mediating a child's media usage resort to supervision, monitoring, rule-making, active discussion, parental apps, and co-use of the device concerned. Parental Mediation is also influenced by the parenting style a parent employs based on communication tactics parents perceive as appropriate during child-care (Warren and Aloia, 2019). Hence, parents use different types of mediation techniques. Researchers across the years have used varied categories to express different types of mediation.

Parental Mediation strategies are therefore categorized into- 1. Restrictive Mediation implies restrictions being imposed by parents on children to regulate their media usage; 2. Active Mediation wherein parents use sharing and discussions as means to guide their child's media usage; 3. Monitoring indicates parents' supervision and monitoring of their children's media usage; 4. Role-Modelling is a kind of mediation where parents are role models for ideal media usage; 5. Co-Usage implies parents co-using the media along with their children for education, entertainment, and various activities (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008; Nikken and Schols, 2015). The different types of mediation have been elaborated on over the period of years in varied contexts by different researchers.

3.1 Restrictive Mediation

Restrictive Mediation is one of the most commonly used mediation methods along with active methods by many families. A parental mediation that imposes restrictions on timings allotted for 'media-consumption', shopping without permission, viewing of sites with inappropriate content or is inclusive of the usage of Parental Control apps meant to block inappropriate content is termed as Restrictive Mediation (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008; Nikken and Schols, 2015, Zaman et al, 2016).

In the case of digital media usage, parents are prone to imposing time restrictions or having a schedule of a fixed duration for the use of

gadgets state Zaman et al., (2016). They also point out that Parents used 'Content' Restrictions to prevent their children from exposing themselves to inappropriate content; 'Location' restrictions in view of safety and 'Technical' restrictions to guard their children to address safety concerns (Zaman et al., 2016).

3.2 Active Mediation

In active mediation, parents share safety information, instruct and discuss issues related to dangers from excessive smartphone usage and provide an explanation regarding safety concerns to help children become aware of the dangers, problems, and harms associated with unhindered media usage and grow in critical media awareness (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008; Nikken and Schols, 2015, Smahelova et al., 2017).

3.3 Monitoring

Monitoring indicates a mediation wherein the parents keep a watch on the child's media activities, supervise and check the sites the child has accessed online, the applications that are downloaded or the browser history (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008; Nikken and Schols, 2015). The research by Broll et al., (2013) highlighted the importance of parental monitoring of a youth's media consumption. This research was also based on workshops organized to guide parents in dealing with children's media usage which helped the Parents monitor their children's media usage in a healthy manner. Some scholars, like L. Kirwil (2009) combine monitoring with restrictive mediation as it pertains to making rules and checking emails and websites. However, most other researchers have started mentioning 'monitoring' as a separate type of mediation.

3.4 Co-usage

Co-usage is possible in the case of media like television, computer, or a laptop, where parents consume media along with their kids without

snubbing them over the usage. While co-use is possible on technology that is tantamount to bigger screens, it is not feasible on smaller gadgets like smartphones which are predominantly meant for single users (D. Hefner et al., 2019). However, there could be a possibility that parents indulge in gaming together or even perform educational activities on a smartphone together. This is also termed co-usage. Nikken and Schols (2015) state that parents who are convinced of the educational and recreational benefits of media usage are prone to both co-using media with their children and to open discussions on media content.

3.5 Role Modelling

Hoffman (1979) stated that Parents hold a significant place in the lives of children and are often considered responsible for the moral upbringing and behavior of a child. Research in 2015, by Nikken and Schols, led to the findings that children are prone to copying parental behavior, hence parents and even older siblings are indeed role models for children.

4. Parental Mediation and research in the current scenario- A Literature Review

Research in the field of Parental Mediation has grown significantly due to the ever-rising concerns that arise from new media gadgets and the evolving internet-based, digital technology. Research by Valcke et al., 2010 in contrast with other researchers found that compared to older parents, younger parents were more prone to using parental control which included supervision, control of internet usage timings, and making time provisions. This research also stated that the educational background of the parents influenced the parenting style.
Research by Brito et al., (2017) that analyzed parental mediation in 14 countries also led to the findings that restrictive mediation including the focus on controlling the child's duration of media usage, supervision of watched content, and control over the apps installed, was the

most commonly used parental mediation technique. This research also pointed out that parents did monitor both television usage and mobile devices of their kids, occasionally asking their children to watch a different channel in case of inappropriate content or uninstalling apps which deemed unsuitable (Brito et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, the findings of D. Hefner et al., (2019) contradict the previous research. The study revealed that the more the restrictive mediation of parents, the more the adolescents were prone to problematic mobile phone usage. This research also highlighted that children whose parents were involved actively with Mobile phones had children following suit, which highlighted the significance of Role-modelling (D.Hefner et al., 2019). A similar result was also seen in another German study by J. Matthes et al., (2021). This study also affirmed that parents and children conflicted in cases where parents who are themselves excessive smartphone users wanted to have parental control over the smartphone usage of their children (J. Matthes et al., 2021). Study findings by Lauricella and Cingel (2020) also led to the analysis that Media usage behaviors of youth among many other factors are also influenced by media rules, media attitudes of their parents, and significantly their parents' own media usage.

Research findings by Brito et al., (2017) found that parental mediation in families with "low economic status and intense use of technologies" (Brito et al., 2017) was almost negligible. Having said this, the researchers acknowledge that the sample consisted of very few families in each country, which invariably indicates that the research cannot be generalized.
Research studies across the world related to parental mediation in different countries have differed in their analysis. Smahelova, Juhová, Cermak, and Smahel (2017) conducted their research in the Czech Republic among a few parents and found mixed results. While some

parents did not follow any protocols for technical usage, others had 'duration' rules which stated the use of technology only post the child's homework or class work completion. Some parents imposed strict rules on the time spent with the device while others used the device as a reward or punishment for accomplished work (Smahelova et al., 2017). This research also pointed out to supervision of the activities the child would perform over the device, especially in the case of younger children. Parents also used Co-usage along with active mediation to understand that technology could be beneficial in daily life. The Parents were aware of all cyber-dangers, however, the parents felt that their kids were too small to be indulging in harm (Smahelova et al., 2017).

In 2018, research carried out by Lee Eun Jee and Yolanda Ogbolu in South Korea found no relation between Parental control and smartphone addiction. Surprisingly, technical restrictions, and using parental control software also did not make a difference as children were smart enough to use proxy software which bypassed the software and access the sites they chose (Lee and Ogbolu, 2018). A similar outcome was also seen in research on parental mediation in Delhi, India by P.M. Mathias and Amit Chawla (2021). This research showed that despite being heavily employed, restrictive mediation and monitoring did not have significant effects on adolescents. The study, however, showed a significant association between restrictive mediation and gender, as girls were subject to much more restrictive mediation measures (P.M. Mathias and Chawla, 2021).

The study by Chang et al., (2015) that was conducted amongst 1917 adolescents in Taiwan led to the findings that parents' use of restrictive mediation had led to lesser internet addictions amongst them, while, those with lower parental attachment were prone to engage in dangers stemming from excessive usage. However, the same was not the case in a later study conducted in Bangladesh, Dhaka, in 2020 amongst adolescents, which found that Active mediation, rather than Restrictive mediation was significantly associated with problematic internet usage (R.M. Chandrima, et al., 2020). This was also a suggestion in the research by A. Stanaland et al., 2015 which was conducted in Singapore in view of parents trying to mediate the Social Networking (Facebook) usage of students, that parents needed to adopt active mediation strategies as compared to restrictive or other mediation strategies.

A meta-analysis by researchers Liang Chen and Jingyuan Shi (2019) on 52 empirical studies, led to the findings that amongst the various types of mediation, restrictive mediation was the most effective as compared to active mediation in reducing children's media-usage time, while active mediation and co-use led to decrease in media-oriented risks.

Research conducted in Western China by Wei Ren and Xiaowen Zhu amidst 1284 children led to an analysis that restrictive mediation did lead to a decreased leisure use of the internet while active mediation was also linked to a decreased amount of leisure-related use of the internet only in case of parents with a supportive nature. The study's findings also revealed that in the case of parents who used restrictive mediation there was only a decrease in leisure usage while those that used active mediation had both a decreased leisure usage and an increased learning-related usage (Ren and Zhu, 2020).

5. Conclusion

Parental mediation is a matter of importance and concern in the current scenario. Based on the papers reviewed, it was observed that parental mediation of media usage does play an important role in the lives of children and adolescents. The choice of mediation may vary from place to place based on varied demographics, the development of the country, and the technological impact, but parental mediation is important in guiding the media usage of children. While restrictive mediation is

a popular choice, many researchers encourage the use of Active mediation, which can avoid the hampering of parent-child relationships, especially among adolescents and youth. Research study by D. Hefner et al (2019) recommends both parents and educators "invest in" building relationships with children and a self-monitoring of media usage. This also implies what many research studies have constantly suggested for parents i.e., to grow in awareness and an understanding of digital knowledge, to reach out to the new generation (Duerager and Livingstone, 2012; R. Benrazavi et al., 2015)). Technology is only going to get bigger and even more complicated with the stepping-in of virtual avatars and a virtual presence. The boon and the bane will constantly be there. It is up to us to become a conscientious generation and guide our children and adolescents in making the right choices.

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