PARENTS’ VIEWS ON RISKY ONLINE BEHAVIORS AND POSITIVE TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AMONG HONG KONG EARLY ADOLESCENTS

Wilfred W.F. Lau1, Morris S.Y. Jong1, Gustavo S. Mesch2 and Tianna T.Y. Leung1
1Department of Curriculum and Instruction, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China
2Department of Sociology, The University of Haifa, Israel

ABSTRACT
With the increasing use of technology in the 21st century, most people must access the Internet every day, and the new generation of young people has even greater access to the Internet than previous generations had. This study investigated parents’ views on risky online behaviors and positive technological development (PTD) among early adolescents in Hong Kong. Additionally, it explored the influence of parenting styles on the Internet use of early adolescents. The sample consisted of 11 parents from six families (five fathers and six mothers) whose children were 11- to 15-year-old adolescents from six secondary schools. This study used semi-structured interviews to elicit the parents’ views and conducted thematic analysis to analyze the interview data. The results indicate that early adolescents participated in few risky online behaviors but exhibited significant PTD. Three relationships, which were mediated by a variety of factors, such as personal interests and peer influence, were identified between risky online behaviors and PTD. Parents limiting their children’s online activity often led to their children refusing to share the Internet content they consume with their parents. When parents allowed their children to use the Internet without any restrictions, the children either indulged in or self-regulated their Internet use. The parenting styles of the parents in each family were consistent. However, the mothers generally spent more time with their children than did the fathers and were more familiar with their children’s Internet use habits. Herein, we propose some specific suggestions for schools and parents to reduce adolescents’ online risk-taking and promote PTD.

KEYWORDS
Parents, Early Adolescents, Risky Online Behaviors, Positive Technological Development

1. INTRODUCTION
Numerous studies have been conducted on risky online behaviors among adolescents (Chan et al., 2014; Lau & Yuen, 2013; Wong et al., 2014). However, little research has explored the positive technological development (PTD) of adolescents and how it is related to their risky online behaviors. Few studies have investigated how parenting styles affect the Internet use of youth or distinguished the influence of fathers and mothers on the Internet use of adolescents (Shek et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies have tended to investigate risky online behaviors on the basis of self-reported questionnaires completed by adolescents (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2016). To fill these gaps in the literature, this study elicited parents’ views on risky online behaviors and PTD among Hong Kong early adolescents. It also explored the influence of parenting styles on the Internet use of early adolescents. The research questions were as follows: “In what risky online behaviors do early adolescents engage?”; “How do early adolescents use technology positively?”; “What relationships exist between risky online behaviors and PTD in early adolescents?”; and “How do parenting styles affect early adolescents’ Internet use?”

This study focused on early adolescents because they experience drastic physical, social, emotional, and cognitive changes as they transition from childhood to adolescence. During this transition, adolescents develop a stronger sense of individuality and a desire for self-exploration, including on the Internet, but are vulnerable to online risk-taking due to changes in brain structure and hormones (Smith et al., 2013). Guiding early adolescents in proper use of the Internet is therefore paramount.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Risky Online Behaviors

Risky behaviors can be defined as “behaviors that are associated with some probability of a maladaptive outcome—that is, an outcome that can impede the acquisition of culturally-accepted goals” (Defoe, 2021, p. 2) and risky online behaviors refer to such behaviors in online settings. Risk exposure and self-control are the two key predictors of risky behaviors during adolescence. The changing physical and social environment in which adolescents live can either protect them from or expose them to various risks. Risky online behaviors occur in a variety of forms, and the risks adolescents encounter online can be broadly classified into four categories: content risks (e.g., exposure to illegal and harmful content), contact risks (e.g., contact with strangers and cyberbullying), commercial risks (e.g., illegal downloading), and privacy risks (e.g., exposure of personal information and intrusion of privacy) (Livingstone & Haddon, 2008). Studies have reported that Hong Kong early adolescents engage in risky online behaviors such as committing unauthorized acts, Internet addiction, engaging in online plagiarism, consuming online pornography, and cyberbullying (Chan et al., 2014; Lau & Yuen, 2013; Wong et al., 2014).

2.2 PTD

Herein, “positive” is used to describe valuable attributes and events that contribute to the self-improvement and social development of adolescents (Bers et al., 2012). Although scholars originally postulated that six developmental assets (competence, confidence, caring, connection, character, and contribution) are associated with PTD (Bers et al., 2012), we discuss PTD from the perspective of three dimensions, which were validated in a previous study involving Hong Kong early adolescents (Lau, 2015) and are defined as follows:

1. perceived technological self-efficacy, which refers to an individual’s ability to confidently use new technologies;
2. technological contribution, which refers to an individual’s ideas to make meaningful contributions to the society by using technology; and
3. social uses of technology, which refers to an individual’s ability to use technology to express care to or to connect and build relationships with others.

2.3 Influence of Parenting Styles on Children’s Internet Use

Parenting styles have been widely categorized as authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful (Baumrind, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Moilanen et al. (2015) demonstrated that authoritarian and permissive parenting inhibit self-regulation among adolescents whereas authoritative parenting promotes self-regulation among adolescents. In addition, parental overprotection has been associated with problematic Internet and social media use (Koronzai et al., 2020). Lee and Chae (2007) found that parental warmth leads to greater Internet use for educational purposes and more positive Internet behaviors. Özgur (2019) reported that adolescents from families with warm, authoritative, and authoritarian parenting styles were less dependent on online games than were adolescents from families with other parenting styles.

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 parents (five fathers and six mothers) from six families whose children were 11- to 15-year-old adolescents from six secondary schools in Hong Kong. Informed
consent was obtained from the respective schools and parents before data collection. In view of the pandemic situation at the time of the interviews, the interviews were conducted over Zoom and transcribed for data analysis. The interviews consisted of questions in two sections. The questions in the first section were related to the demographic information and Internet use of the parents’ children. The second section evaluated the parents’ views concerning children’s risky online behaviors and PTD and their relationships and their parenting styles in relation to their children’s Internet use by using four predetermined open-ended questions corresponding to the aforementioned research questions. Prompt questions were used throughout the interviews to encourage parents to expand on their ideas if necessary. Because of the scope of the paper, we herein report only the findings related to the parents’ responses to the four predetermined research questions. Both the fathers and mothers of the families involved were present for their respective interviews, with the exception of one family, the father of which could not participate due to work obligations outside Hong Kong; only the mother was interviewed.

3.2 Information about the Early Adolescents and their Internet Use

The adolescent children of the six families interviewed comprised five boys and one girl aged from 11 to 15 years. Over half (70%) of the children had used computers/the Internet for 3 years or less at the time of the interviews, and most (83%) of them considered their computer proficiency to be fair or good. All of the children possessed smartphones. Most (83%) of them spent less than 5 hours per day using computers/the Internet at home for online lessons, and most (83%) of them spent less than 3 hours per day using computers/the Internet at home for learning other than online lessons. All of the children spent less than 3 hours per day using computers/the Internet at home for entertainment and social networking.

3.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews were thematically analyzed, which involved (1) familiarization with the data, (2) coding, (3) theme identification, (4) theme review, (5) theme naming, and (6) write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both deductive and inductive coding were used to analyze the data. Deductive coding was appropriate for the data related to preconceived themes derived from theories, such as those concerning PTD and parenting styles. In this study, PTD was conceptualized using the three dimensions of perceived technological self-efficacy, technological contribution, and social uses of technology (Lau, 2015), and parenting styles was conceptualized through categorization as authoritarian, authoritarian, permissive, or neglectful (Baumrind, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Inductive coding was necessary for the themes that emerged naturalistically from the data without any theories.

4. RESULTS

Thematic analysis revealed the themes and subthemes presented in the following subsections. Direct quotes from the interviewed parents are provided to illustrate the identified themes and subthemes and demonstrate how the results were derived.

4.1 Few Risky Online Behaviors

Overall, the adolescents from the six families engaged in few risky online behaviors. The parents of two of the families said that their children did not engage in any risky online behaviors. However, the father of Family 4 stated that his child was a victim of cyberbullying by his classmates and had also discovered that his child had accessed inappropriate age-restricted pages to watch adult content:

“He has been bullied by others. When he was the chairman of the class committee, I don’t know if his classmates did it for fun or what, but they would abuse him verbally.” Father, Family 4.

“Sometimes we see him watching some adult content. He usually watches on the phone but seldom on the computer.” Father, Family 4.
Some of the parents mentioned that their children relied too much on electronic devices and exhibited Internet dependency. This sparked worries about their children’s ability to communicate face-to-face in the future. One parent observed that his child’s body language was less expressive in everyday conversation since he used technology to communicate.

“He uses technology to do something, and he becomes overreliant on it. He cannot communicate with others through the iPad for his whole life; he must interact with others face-to-face. I think he has started using less body language. Using the iPad affects him so much. I think the main negative effect is overreliance.” Father, Family 4.

4.2 Significant PTD

Regarding perceived technological self-efficacy, all the parents claimed that their children exhibited high self-efficacy when using the Internet:

“I think using technology is beneficial to him. He is confident. When he uses technology, he is faster than when he reads books.” Father, Family 4.

Adolescents can explore the Internet confidently without their parents’ assistance. The parents of two families said that their children were more familiar with the use of computers, smartphones, and software than they were and that they are unable to assist with their children’s use of the Internet. Instead, they had to seek assistance from their children when they were faced with computer-related problems.

“Even if we want to help, our son is much better than us at using computers. In fact, we cannot help him, but he helps us. He often confidently says ‘Let me handle this issue’ when we encounter computer trouble.” Father, Family 2.

We found that the adolescents were willing to try using different online applications and new technologies to help them develop their own interests. During the COVID-19 pandemic, young people have independently explored and determined ways to improve learning and maintain classmate relationships by using the Internet—for instance, setting up online study groups on Zoom. The daughter of Family 6 used an iPad app to create music independently as a hobby.

Regarding technological contribution, several parents said that their children recorded videos and posted them on platforms like YouTube to express themselves and share content with others. The contents of the videos include community events, cooking, scenery, and daily life.

“He records some incidents that happen in the community or makes some videos and uploads them to YouTube. He has been to Kwan Tong Promenade; he thought the scenery was beautiful. He said he wants more people to watch his videos. He said that if he can record it, then others can view it.” Mother, Family 4.

“When his mother makes cakes, he takes photos and posts them on platforms like YouTube so that others can see. He wants to express that he has had this experience.” Father, Family 4.

Regarding social uses of technology, adolescents maintain relationships with family through the Internet. The mother of Family 1 indicated that she and her son maintained social bonds with relatives by using the Internet. They keep in touch with the son’s father and grandparents, who live in Mainland China, by using social media tools such as WeChat and through voice calls or video calls.

“He also chats with his father on video calls. His father is in the Mainland now and cannot come back to Hong Kong, and his grandparents also live in the Mainland. We always keep in contact with each other through WeChat.” Mother, Family 1.

Some of the parents also said that their adolescent children used the Internet to maintain relationships with classmates and would use various social media tools to do so. The mother of Family 4 indicated that her son organized meetings with his classmates and interacted with his classmates through study and discussion groups on Google Meet and Zoom. For example, to prepare for an English examination, her son organized study sessions, during which he and his classmates expressed mutual support.

“He can use the iPad to read spontaneously. He uses it to communicate with his classmates through Zoom. Several classmates discuss what they want to discuss in a group; they learn from each other.” Mother, Family 4.

Apart from using the Internet to connect with relatives and classmates, adolescents also use the Internet to connect with teachers. The son of Family 2 collected video clips of his primary school life and made a compilation video as a gift for his teacher.
4.3 Multiple Relationships between Risky Online Behaviors and PTD

Interviews with the parents of some families revealed that their children exhibited PTD more often than they engaged in negative Internet behaviors. Some of the parents reported that their children exhibited an equal degree of positive and negative online behaviors, and others reported that their children exhibited either positive or negative behaviors. Some of the parents mentioned that other factors may influence adolescents’ Internet use in daily life, including the degree to which they engage risky online behaviors or exhibit PTD.

The first factor is the tendency of young people to have various interests and engage in other meaningful activities, which attract them away from risky online behaviors. The father of Family 2 expressed that because his son spent more time on his hobbies, he was more involved in extracurricular activities and was less likely to engage in online risk-taking.

“But in daily life, some factors affect his computer use. My son has many hobbies, and he cares about his academic results. He wants to achieve good performance in these endeavors, which pulls him away from the computer. This is a positive factor, and its impact is larger than when he uses the computer for other purposes.” Father, Family 2.

The second factor is the influence of adolescents’ peers. Some of the parents pointed out that their children’s use of the Internet was influenced by their peers. Some of the parents indicated that their children were so strongly influenced by their friends that they often watched the videos recommended by their friends, even if they were not enthusiastic about doing so.

“He is largely affected by peers and is familiar with the trends. Although he is not keen on it, sometimes he shows us some Korean pop stars or funny YouTube videos. We believe that he knows about those things because of his friends.” Father, Family 2.

“His friends send some links to him through WhatsApp, related to bullying at school or some bad stories in society. If others do not send it to him, he does not search for this kind of information, because he does not like it.” Father, Family 5.

4.4 Internet Parenting Styles

4.4.1 Parental Control and Monitoring

The interviews revealed that some of the parents restricted how long and how often their children could use the Internet. Some of the parents set up specific rules for their children; for example, their children could only play games on their smartphones for a few hours on a holiday and must allow their parents to see the content they access on the Internet. Some of the parents even reported taking away their children’s devices if their children broke any of their rules or continued playing on their phone at inappropriate times.

The mother of Family 5 said that they usually monitored their son’s Internet use rather than letting him explore freely and tried their best to filter information before passing it on to their children. They claimed that although their son is mostly willing to comply with their rules, he often hides the content of his WhatsApp chats with classmates from them.

“When he finds some interesting apps or games, he asks us to help him download them because we have activated the parental control on his phone. He needs our approval before he can download any apps.” Mother, Family 5

Some of the parents also mentioned that their adolescent children had become more protective of their privacy and were sometimes reluctant to tell them what content they consumed online. The parents tended to agree that they should respect their children and that checking the contents of their children’s phones constituted an invasion of privacy. The father of Family 5 said that they respected their son’s privacy because their son had already grown up.

“He has grown up; I have to respect his privacy. If I want to set an example and teach him to understand privacy issues, I need to show him that I respect his privacy. I need to let him know that his father respects his privacy. However, if he oversteps on some issues, I will speak to him: ‘I read the chat on your phone, I did not intend to do that.’” Father, Family 5.
4.4.2 Parental Permissiveness and Negligence

Some of the parents had less parental control than others and set hardly any rules for their children’s Internet use. The father of Family 4 described his parenting style as permissive and reported that he could not control his son’s excessive Internet use.

“If we do not monitor him, he would seize the chance to play games... even if we scold him, he still does it... Once he comes back home, he immediately goes for the iPad. I must keep it from him and not let him touch it.” Father, Family 4.

The mother of Family 3 did not impose any restrictions on her child’s computer use and trusted his self-regulation. Nevertheless, he engaged in various Internet behaviors and exhibited strong self-discipline compared with the other children whose parents adopted a permissive parenting style.

“I have not needed to pay much attention to his behaviors ever since he was very young. We could not help with his homework; he relied on himself.” Mother, Family 3.

4.4.3 Consistency between Maternal and Paternal Parenting Styles

In this study, the father and mother of each family exhibited consistent parenting styles and agreed on the children’s education. The mothers were generally more involved in their children’s Internet use than were the fathers, especially in the family in which the father traveled for work while the mother was a full-time housewife who was, therefore, responsible for childcare. In two of the six families we interviewed, the mothers reported that they spent more time with their children than did their children’s fathers and were more familiar with their children’s Internet use habits. In one of the families, the mother answered more questions than did the father during the second half of the interview.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Three relationships between risky online behaviors and PTD among early adolescents were identified in the present study: some of the adolescents exhibited PTD more often than they engaged in risky online behaviors, some exhibited the same extent of PTD and risky online behaviors, and some exhibited either PTD or risky online behaviors. Furthermore, these relationships were mediated by a variety of factors, such as personal interests and peer influence. This study revealed that some of the parents restricted their children’s online behaviors, which resulted in their children refusing to share the Internet content they consumed with their parents. When the parents allowed their children to use the Internet without any restrictions, the children either indulged in or self-regulated their Internet use. These findings are in line with those reported in prior studies (Moilanen et al., 2015; Ö zgur, 2019). The present study also indicated that fathers and mothers played distinct roles in guiding their adolescent children’s Internet use. The mothers generally spent more time with their children than did the fathers and were more familiar with their children’s Internet use habits. However, each pair of parents adopted consistent parenting styles.

Online risk-taking is common among early adolescents. Schools and parents are both responsible for educating youth regarding Internet use because home and school are two critical environments for adolescent development (Smyth & Darmody, 2021). Schools should plan curricula designed to educate students on critical thinking skills and discourage risky online behaviors to enable adolescents to make proper decisions when confronted with inappropriate online content. Schools should work closely with parents to implement effective interventions for youth and organize workshops to teach parents knowledge and skills of Internet parenting.

Previous studies have reported that parental mediation strategies are effective in cultivating adolescents’ self-regulation skills (Eisenberg et al., 2005). For restrictive mediation, Lin and Chen (2016) suggested that parents should adopt appropriate disciplinary methods. In a healthy family relationship, parents can openly discuss and formulate reasonable rules for Internet use, such as restricting the consumption of violent and pornographic videos and the amount of time spent on games and entertainment, with their children. The parent–child relationship and parental behaviors strongly influence adolescent behaviors (Liu et al., 2013). If parents engage in high-risk behaviors, their children may also choose to engage in those behaviors. Parents should be aware of the exemplary role that they play in the lives of their children. When enforcing Internet use rules with their children, parents should also follow their own rules. Parents should clearly communicate their expectations for Internet use with their children; for example, if parents ask their children not to use...
their mobile phones when eating, those parents should follow the same rule. Parents must respect the privacy of and demonstrate their trust in their adolescent children rather than interfering excessively in their children’s online behaviors. However, if the parents of adolescents who exhibit poor self-discipline and high Internet dependence want to use monitoring software to guide their children’s Internet use, they should focus on determining how often their children surf the Internet and talk to others rather than focus on the details of their children’s content consumption and online interactions (Ghosh et al., 2018).

For active mediation, high parental responsiveness and acceptance cultivate an open, warm, and caring environment in which adolescents are more willing to disclose information to their parents (Smetana et al., 2006). This helps protect young people from risky online behaviors and enables them to navigate the digital world more safely and wisely. Rather than prohibiting negative behaviors, parents may encourage positive behaviors (Blackwell et al., 2016). Parents may discuss with their adolescent children what they can accomplish with technology, encourage them to develop technological self-efficacy, and teach them how to use the Internet to care for others and contribute to society. Furthermore, parents may adopt appropriate parental mediation strategies depending on their children’s characteristics and provide opportunities for children to enhance their self-regulation and emotion regulation skills (Chen & Chng, 2016).

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated risky online behavior and PTD among Hong Kong early adolescents and how parenting styles affect early adolescents’ online behaviors. Schools should develop relevant curricula to educate students on positive Internet use and collaborate with parents to nurture adolescents. Parents should adopt appropriate mediation strategies to help children use the Internet positively.

The present study has some limitations that must be addressed in the future. Only one of the adolescents discussed was female; future studies should involve an equal number of boys and girls. In our sample, the fathers and mothers in each of the six families adopted the same parenting styles; therefore, we were unable to compare the views of such families with those of families that adopt inconsistent parenting styles. Future studies should include families with inconsistent parenting styles for comparison. This study relied on data from semi-structured interviews conducted with parents; ethnographic research is necessary to observe how parents and adolescents behave and interact in authentic family settings.

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