

Mothers' protective strategies to cope with adolescents' online activities: A qualitative study

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Abstract

In digital world with spread of use of information and communication technology, online activities are the important part of daily adolescents' activities and their protection from harms is a serious challenge for parents. The aim of this study is to qualitative investigation of mothers' protection strategies for control and management of adolescents' online activities. Qualitative method was used to conduct the study and data were collected by using purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews. The sample of this study was 10 efficient mothers. The data were analyzed by using grounded theory method (Strauss and Corbin approach). Findings showed that mothers with high level of cyber literacy who have regular online activities, and conduct thoughts and behaviors of their children with informing and ruling, have more positive effectiveness in protection. Indeed, according to mothers' reports, management of parent-adolescent relationship, peer relations, and entertainment have a role in reduction on harms.

Keywords: protection strategies, online activities, adolescent

Introduction

In this information era, children and adolescents' lives are intertwined with cyber world and cyberspace, and technology is involved in each part of their lives. Cyber and online activities form a major part of adolescents' daily lives as such they are increasingly getting familiar with more various cyberspace tools (Boyd, 2014). According to UNICEF¹, about one-third of Internet users are below 18 years old, and adolescents at the age range of 15 to 24 years account for about 71 percent of this population. Ease of access to various information, resources, and data has provided favorable learning and education opportunities to adolescents, thereby enhancing their general and specific knowledge and awareness in various fields. With the growth of technology and communication, adolescents also face a new world of communication and interactions providing a variety of opportunities and challenges (Lenhart et al., 2001; Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009). According to the literature, the main objectives of adolescents to use the online spaces are strengthening and developing social relations, attracting attention and seeking identity, experiencing freedom and equality, reaching social and political surveillance, having entertainment, being informed and informing publically (Shahabi & Bayat, 2012; Behnami Fard & Habibi, 2016). Among adolescents, there are any popular messaging apps such as Telegram, WhatsApp, Line, Skype and various social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Since adolescents are tackling with many challenges, including growth, intellectual, identity, and communication challenges, the broad cyber world and widespread information and communication space would bring them a variety of attractions and opportunities as well as different risks and harms (De Souza & Dick, 2008; Romer & Rich, 2016.). Such opportunities and harms may differ by culture and place. In many countries, some threats of online and virtual activities performed by adolescents are Internet addiction, contact and communication with strangers, exposure to pornography, exposure to violence, and being a victim or committing all kinds of cybercrimes (Rodríguez-de-Dios et al., 2018). In Iran, cultural and value issues have also been affected by this fact; thus, families and parents with adolescents are mostly concerned with issues such as exposure to various ideas and thoughts, easy access to all kinds of information, more frequent partner relations in cyber and real spaces, and dependence on online activities (such as online games or chatting) as well as the prevalent use of pornographic content (Dehqani Firouzabadi, 2015; Shameli, 2017).

In this regard, parents would play a critical and remarkable role. Many studies have examined the role of parents in how adolescents use cyberspace. For example, Ahmadi et al. (2019), Imani and Shirali Nia (2015), and Dehqan Menshadi and Nazari (2017) reported that some factors such as quality of family relationships, supervision, and family members' familiarity with the Internet in families may affect their adolescents' online activities. According to Huh et al. (2009), some of the parents' "behavior" components that affect the adolescents' behaviors are as follows: 1- Monitoring: It

¹ And. [Http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/SOWC___ENG_WEB.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/SOWC___ENG_WEB.pdf)

includes behaviors by which parents become aware of different aspects of their children's individual and social life. 2- Emotional relationships: It represents the verbal and non-verbal interactions of parents to show their intimacy and care for their children's needs. 3- Coordination: It shows the coordination, coherence, and stability of parental behaviors based on the specified criteria and standards under different conditions. 4- Expectation: It indicates parents' wishes and desires for their child's behaviors. 5- Participation: It contains parents' behaviors to guide and direct children's behaviors. 6- Justifiability: It represents the transparency, rationales, and logics of parental behaviors and standards.

In this regard, Jang and Ryo (2016) documented that the parents' behaviors can be a strong predictor of their children's being or not being entangled with cell phone problems, including games.

In a large number of studies, the role of parents and their mediation in their adolescents' online activities are classified into two categories: restrictive mediation and active mediation. In the former case, the parents set specific frameworks for their children's online activities, such as time frameworks, thereby affecting their activities. In the latter case, parents are more likely to interact and talk appropriate activities in cyberspace, thereby affecting their children's behaviors.

According to the studies, active mediation plays a more remarkable and decisive role in reducing harms (Nathanson, 2002; Levine et al., 2008; Shin and Ismail, 2014).

In a qualitative study, Erickson et al. (2016) revealed some of the challenge's parents encounter to control their children's Internet use. According to these researchers, because children's knowledge and skills in using the Internet generally exceed their parents', parents often act in two ways: (1) Parents traditionally limit their use by using techniques such as setting time limits or physical restrictions (using the Internet in the presence of either parents), and (2) Parents set no limit for their children because of a lack of skill and adequate control. In the former case, since parents are unaware of the content of Internet activities, this type of external limitations cannot stop their children's destructive activities. In the second way, adolescents will certainly be exposed to all kinds of harms. Parents with higher knowledge and skills in cyberspace would be more successful in controlling and monitoring how their children use the Internet. However, they also face challenges in terms of observing children's privacy.

In today's Iranian society, with the broad spread of different cyber tools and spaces, many parents contemplate on how they can provide the grounds for their adolescents to take advantage of opportunities and benefits while being protected against the dangers and harms of such a space. Accordingly, this study aimed to use qualitative methods and mothers and adolescents' existing experiences (in Iran) to detect effective strategies adopted by mothers to manage their adolescents' online activities and protect them against relevant harms. Furthermore, the present study was to detect protective methods and strategies used by mothers to cope with their boys' online activities.

Methods

This research was an applied study in terms of objectives, and qualitative methods were

used since the field of this study was cultural, and precise and in-depth native information was required. The study data was extracted from interviews with mothers to detect their protective strategies to cope with their adolescents' online activities. The collected data was analyzed in accordance with grounded theory. The study sample in this study encompassed 10 mothers, who were selected from families with adolescent children (boys and girls aged between 13-19years) in Tehran. The participants met the inclusion criteria, and it was possible for the researcher to have their participation and cooperation. The participants also did not suffer from problems such as divorce, addiction, poverty, and mental disorders in their family. The samples with effective protection strategies were selected from those introduced by their acquaintances and colleagues, introduced by school parents, using convenient sampling technique, those who filled in Kaplan's (2002, 2010) destructive use of the Internet Questionnaire, which was standardized in Iran by Ahmadpour et al. (2018) and obtained scores between 15-37, those whose parents in general were satisfied with their online activities, and those whose online activities included useful and low risk behaviors (in terms of time and content) as they self-reported. Afterward, their mothers participated in interviews.

The interviews started with questions like: What are the harms of adolescent's online activities today? What did you do for protecting your adolescent from these harms? Since this study was qualitative and purposive sampling was used, the study population was equal to the research sample. According to the concepts extracted from the analysis of the preliminary interviews, further sampling process was determined. Theoretical sampling was also used in this study. In other words, sampling was performed for samples maximizing diversity and enriched the categories in terms of the considered features and dimensions. The sample size was set to be 10 as the data was saturated theoretically. That is, interviews continued until no new information or code was available, and the collected data merely repeated the previous data. The adolescents were also interviewed to detect the mothers' effective strategies, which were useful, effective, and acceptable from the perspective of the adolescents as well. In this study, the interviews contained open-ended and semi-structured questions. In this regard, in-depth and semi-structured qualitative interview based on open-ended questions was used to detect the mothers' efficient and effective strategies. To analyze the data using grounded theory throughout the interviews and their implementation procedures, the three-step process of open coding, axial coding, and selective encoding was used.

Results

In this study, there were in-depth interviews with 10 samples (i.e., efficient mothers) as well as their adolescents. The research question was as follows: What protective methods and strategies do mothers use to cope with their adolescents' online activities?

With transcribing, coding, and analyzing the interviews using Strauss and Corbin's method, there were four selected codes, 10 axial codes, and 29 open codes. According to the findings, four main strategies play key role: parents' cyber knowledge, parents' online activities, child security, and management of underlying factors. Regarding these codes, the management of underlying factors was considered as a background factor,

parents' cyber knowledge and online activities were causal factors, and child safety was selected as the main research strategies (Table 1).

Table 1: Mother's strategies

Selective codes	Axial codes	Open codes
Cyber knowledge (mothers)	Knowledge of tools	knowledge of communication applications / knowledge of social networks/ knowledge of online games
	Knowledge of the consequences	Awareness of the benefits of different tools / awareness of the attractiveness of different tools/ awareness of harms of different tools
Online activities (parents)	Rule-based	time rules / content rules / accessibility rules
	Commitment	behaviors based on rules / spouses' reminders / compensation
Behavioral and intellectual framing	Informing	teaching critical thinking / expressing outcomes / presenting patterns
	Rule-setting	age rules / accessibility rules / time rules/ content rules
	Returning	Justification / punishment
Relationship management	Parent-child relationships	Supportive relationships / Friendly and intimate relationships / Safe environment for conversation
	friendly relationships	Knowing friends / framing friend relationships
Entertainment management	leisure time	Planning / not being alone at home
	entertainment	Healthy individual fun / pleasant family fun

Mother's Cyber Knowledge: The mothers self-reported that their first measure to control their children's cyber activities is to promote their knowledge about this space.

Accordingly, this knowledge encompasses both the knowledge of different tools and applications and knowledge of its advantages and disadvantages. For example, one of the mothers mentioned, 'When Instagram just came out, I first installed it on my cellphone to see what it is and how it works, and then I found it unsuitable for my son's age since it has access to any kind of photo and video.'

Parents' Online Activities: One of the factors affecting how children use the Internet, cell phones, and other cyber tools is how the parents themselves use such tools. The mothers stated that they cannot restrict their children if they constantly or irregularly use these tools as such they also set rules and restrictions for their own usage, including time rules, content rules, and accessibility. Time rules set limits for the timing of online activities. For example, one of the mothers stated, "I rarely work and hang up on the phone at night when all family members are together."

Content rules also set restrictions for an individual or individuals on the usage of a particular tool or application with regard to its consequences. For example, one of the mothers reported, 'I found out that Telegram takes a lot of my time as I had to reply back all the messages from all my colleagues; hence, I uninstalled the app.

Accessibility rules indicate access to the content of the online activities by family members. The efficient mothers mentioned that they avoid private and inaccessible content on their cell phones.

Commitment to these rules is another factor referred to by efficient mothers. In other words, they obliged themselves to observe the rules they set since the parents' violation of the rules paves the way for children to do the same. In this case, the spouses can also monitor each other or remind the rules. In the cases of violation, they should seek to compensate.

Another key strategy is to secure children, which encompasses techniques adopted by mothers to direct their adolescents' attitudes and behaviors toward online activities in order to minimize harms. In this regard, one of the best techniques to keep children secure is to promote awareness. The efficient mothers spared their efforts to promote the knowledge and awareness of their adolescents regarding all kinds of virtual activities. One of the awareness raising techniques is informing as such the efficient mothers were to promote their adolescents' knowledge and awareness of virtual activities. To this end, one of the techniques is to teach critical thinking. According to the mothers, a variety of information is now easily accessible as such it is of essence for children to detect valid and invalid information easily and not to be affected by various information issued in cyberspace and friendly chats. For example, one of the mothers stated, "I told my son, 'Let's surf the Internet together to see whether female flower is not addictive or harmful as claimed.'

Another technique of informing is to talk about the consequences. The effective mothers said that they spared their efforts to inform their children about the positive consequences, especially the negative consequences and risks of all kinds of virtual activities. For example, one of the mothers stated, "Once I saw my daughter on a telegram group, I told her 'you see, your friends may add you to the telegram groups with girl and boy members. First, it may seem interesting but you don't even know who they are and what their goal is in that group. They then may send private messages and waste your time, energy, and emotions. They may also misuse your messages and photos'".

Another informing technique is to introduce objective models. The successful mothers said that they were to introduce successful and unsuccessful close models so that their children would objectively understand the consequences of appropriate and inappropriate virtual and online behaviors.

Rule-setting is another technique to secure children. In this regard, the efficient mothers set rules and regulations on the time and content of their children's online activities in accordance with their age. For example, a 13-year-old child is not allowed to have a personal cell phone but a 16-year-old child can have his own personal cell phone. However, he is not also allowed to use it at night, and his activities on social media, such as Instagram, must be monitored by his parents.

Accessibility also refers to this point that the parents determine how much they can have access to the content of the online activities of their adolescents.

Returning is a technique by which mothers deal with their children's abnormal and irregular behaviors to bring them back to normal behaviors. The effective mothers mentioned that they do so either by justification and conversation or by punishment. For example, a child who uses his cell phone at times but the specified times is not allowed to reuse the cell phone within a week.

According to mothers, there are some other factors indirectly affecting the adolescents' online behaviors and activities, which are referred to as underlying factors. For example, the interviewed mothers mentioned that they spared their efforts to create an intimate and friendly atmosphere in their families so that their children would be less inclined to spend time in cyberspace, and on the other hand, accept the family rules on how to use this space easier. They also added that they were to establish a safe, intimate, and supportive environment so that their adolescents could easily talk about different issues and problems and let them know about their activities. From the mothers' viewpoint, in such an intimate and transparent atmosphere, the parents could better guide their children and prevent potential dangers.

The other effective factors are friends and peers. The successful mothers reported that one of the factors leading to destructive online activities by adolescents is their friends. That is why these mothers got to know and communicate with their adolescents' friends and set frameworks for their relationships. In other words, they made attempts to control and limit their adolescents' interactions and socialization with friends who can encourage destructive and risky activities.

Another underlying factor is leisure time. As the mothers stated, unplanned leisure time, when no plan or useful activity is intended, provides the grounds for enhancing children's virtual and online activities. Accordingly, they made their attempts not to let their adolescents be free or at home for a long time. One of the mothers said, "He used to use and be obsessed with his cellphone for a while. Then I found out that the best option was not to let him be free. He also welcomed the idea. That was why I sent him to work with his father during the summer in order not to be free and to learn a profession. This option was useful very effective. Now, he sometimes uses his cell phone". Furthermore, fun and joyful family entertainments also decreases adolescents' tendency for virtual and high-risk online activities.

After selective coding, the relationship among these categories was detected in the form of a paradigm model based on the grounded theory. Afterwards, the central or nuclear category of this model, called "framing based on cyber informing", was selected. This central category was to establish a kind of cohesion among the codes and categories and promoted the coherence of the final model. The research findings and the relationships among the extracted factors is depicted in the form of a paradigmatic model (Figures 1):

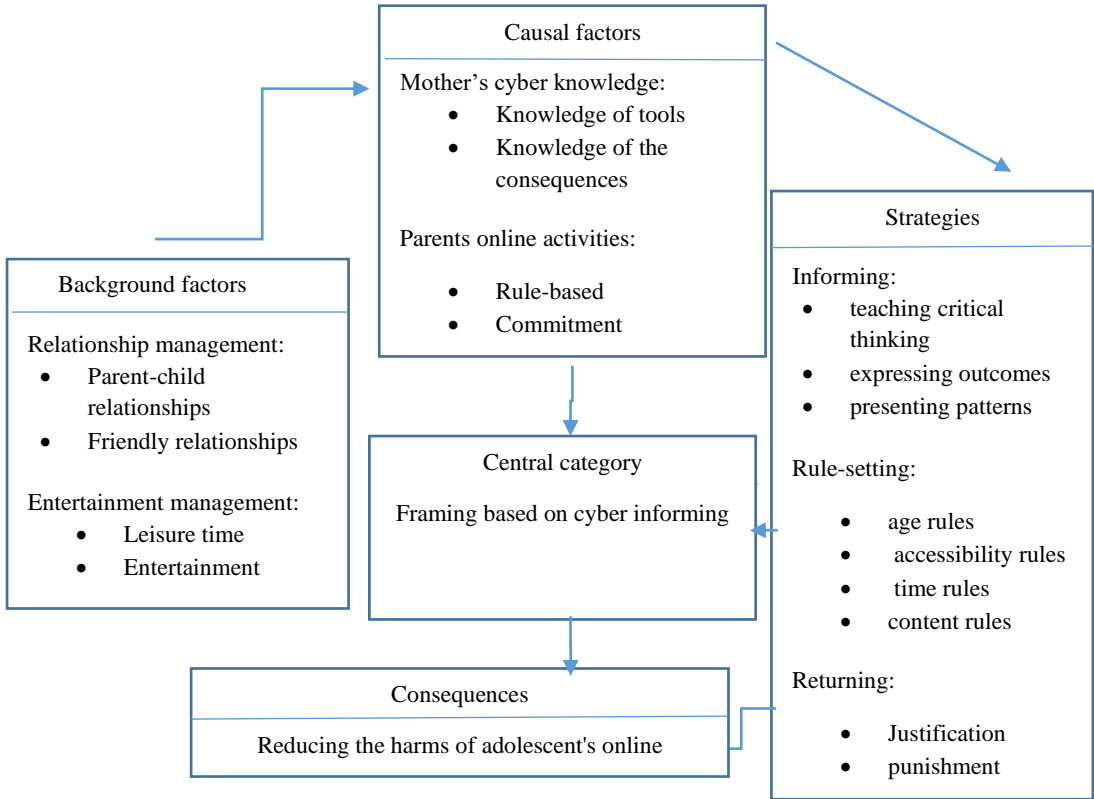


Figure 1. Paradigmatic model of mothers’ protective strategies (framing based on cyber informing)

Discussion

In this study, the mothers’ protective strategies to cope with the online activities of their adolescents were examined qualitatively. Regarding parents’ cyber knowledge, the findings of many studies are consistent with those of the present, indicating its significance in controlling and managing adolescents’ online activities (Boyd, 2007; Mesh, 2009; Erickson et al., 2016). In Iran, Montazer Qaem and Haji Kazem Tehrani (2014) and Bahadori Khosroshahi and Barqi (2018) similarly showed that parents’ knowledge and information in the media space affects how children use the space. A large number of studies on parent-child relationships have also confirmed that the quality of these relationships also influences how the cyberspace is used by adolescents.

This reveals that mothers or parents need sufficient knowledge and skills for this space and its tools to properly control and manage their adolescents’ online activities. They should also be acceptable models for their adolescents by performing systematic online activities.

The other significant and effective strategy adopted by mothers in this study was their interventions and mediations to direct their adolescents' thoughts and normalize their behaviors in cyberspace, i.e. securing children. The definition of these components also indicates that there have been active (informing) and restrictive (rule-setting) interventions and mediations reported in this study, both of which have been used simultaneously and effectively. Many studies have also revealed the positive role of active mediation in reducing adolescents' online threats; however, reports have revealed that restrictive mediation does not decrease the harms, and that it makes children more stubborn and encourages high-risk online activities (Nathanson, 2002; Levin et al., 2008; Shin & Ismail, 2014).

According to the aforementioned and the present study, this inconsistency might be due to the fact that if the restrictive strategies are exclusively used and do not happen in a close and intimate parent-child atmosphere with awareness and conversation, they are unlikely to be effective and would make adolescents be rebellious and stubborn due to the imposed limitations. On the other hand, if restrictive mediation is accompanied with the control of underlying factors, awareness, and conversation, it would be effective in reducing online harms, as the findings of this study documented.

The study finding also determined factors indirectly and fundamentally affecting adolescents' online use, one of which was the quality of the parent-child relationships. The stronger, more intimate, and closer the relationship of an adolescent with his/her parents is, the lower the tendency to spend time in cyberspace and the lower the willingness to accept parents' rules and regulations on the use of cyberspace would be. This finding is in a similar vein with many other studies. According to Chiu, Lee, and Huang (2004), in families with better family relationships and performance, there are fewer game threats and problems (a variety of computer, online and offline games). In this regard, because such families are closer and more concerned with their children's affairs and issues, they mostly divert their children's attention from digital activities to other types of activities. Ahmadi et al. (2010), Imani and Shirali Nia (2015), Hu (2009), Jeong and Kim (2011), Jang and Ryo (2016), Schneider et al. (2017) reported the same findings. According to the findings of the present study, adolescents' relationships with their friends and peers is the other factor affecting their online activities, as the mothers and their adolescents both highlighted the significance of this issue. The efficient mothers spared their efforts to monitor their adolescents' relationships with their friends by knowing and communicating with them and set frameworks for their activities. In this regard, Nathanson (2002) also reported that adolescents talk to their friends more about the anti-social content of the media and hold a positive attitude toward antisocial behaviors. Shin and Ismail (2014) also claimed that friends and peers play a significant mediating role in adolescents' high-risk online behaviors.

According to the present study, leisure time is the other factor affecting the adolescents' use of cyberspace. The effective mothers make attempts to plan for their children's leisure time and do not let them be free and alone at home or outside since their children's is mostly filled with online and virtual activities and concerns. The studies generally confirm that adolescents' unstructured leisure time enhances their

tendency to high-risk behaviors, including virtual activities (Mahoni & Statin, 2000; Bartko Eickles, 2003; Dehqan Menshadi & Nazari, 2017).

As this study was qualitative, the sample size was small that reduces conclusions generalization. Also, other limitations of qualitative research like researcher bias should be considered. From these findings, suggest that this study also design for clarifying father's role in adolescents' online activities. The extracted pattern of this study can be used in schools for educating parents of adolescents and reduction of online activity harms. We would like to thank mothers and their adolescents as the study sample, that trusted us and share their experiences and information with us.

Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, it can be stated that students can benefit from adjustment if they accept the mastery achievement goals or if the educational context encourage them to choose this type of goal. It is important to note that the present study just examined the role of basic psychological needs and achievement goals in students' adjustment. Therefore, the results are just important in terms of identifying the descriptors of adjustment based on basic psychological needs and achievement goals. This research was funded by personal expense and there is no conflict of interest in this study. Because research has been done on students, modified results in other groups are done with caution. Suggests that in future research, the subject of research in the field of segregation and educational levels for students be approached.

Disclosure Statements

The authors of this study declared no conflicts of interest

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