Cyberbullying, Online Risks and Parental Mediation: A Comparison Between Adolescent Reports and Parent Perceptions in the United Kingdom and South Africa

Maša Popovac and Philip Fine
Department of Psychology, University of Buckingham, England, UK

Study Overview
Despite the countless benefits associated with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), younger users are being exposed to various online risks including contact with strangers, harmful content, sending or receiving sexual images or comments (i.e. ‘sexting’), and cyberbullying. Parents, who may not be fully aware of the online spaces their children inhabit, often struggle to implement effective mediation strategies. This quantitative study explored (i) online risks, (ii) cyberbullying, and (iii) parental mediation among adolescents and parents in the United Kingdom (UK) and South Africa (SA), representing a developed and developing country respectively. Few studies to date have examined the impact of online behaviours and experiences among adolescents in a developed and developing context, where access to use of ICTs may vary and lead adolescents to encounter online risks differently. The study, therefore, examined differences in adolescent online behaviours and parental perceptions of those behaviours in these two contexts.

Study Overview

Study Participants
- A total of 1,250 participants took part in the study (SA: n = 700; UK: n = 550).
- Adolescents were aged 12-17 years (Mage = 15.1 (+/- 0.9), SD = 3.2).
- One parent of each participant was invited to take part in the study (SA: n = 227; UK: n = 100)

Study Design and Instrument
A quantitative survey design was used. Adolescent and parent questionnaires were developed based on focus group interviews, key literature, as well as items adopted from previous research. The questionnaires included sections on demographics, access and use of ICTs, online risks, cyberbullying, and parental mediation. Adolescents reported on their online behaviours and experiences, while parents reported on their perceptions of their children’s online behaviours. The questionnaires were piloted and reliability analyses indicated alpha levels of .93 - .97 for the individual scales. It was available for completion online and on paper.

Scoring and Data Analysis
Overall scores for each study variable were calculated. A score of “1” was given when participants indicated an online experience or engagement in a behavior and “0” when participants did not have the experience or engage in the behavior. Overall scores thus represented the range of behaviors and experiences for each variable and were used for independent samples t-test analyses to compare adolescents and parents in each country. Chi-square analyses on individual items were also conducted.

Method
Examples of key differences in adolescents reports and parent perceptions include:

- My child has sent that picture to someone real online: 
  - UK: 13.4% (106) vs. SA: 4.1% (22)
  - t(1239) = 12.00, *p < .001, **p < .0001

- My child has received threatening emails, texts, messages or calls: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 22% (99)
  - t(1239) = 12.32, *p < .001, **p < .0001

- My child has received threatening emails, texts, messages or calls: 
  - UK: 17.2% (122) vs. SA: 7.2% (33)
  - t(1239) = 13.68, *p < .001, **p < .0001

- My child has received a threatening email, text, message or call: 
  - UK: 62.4% (440) vs. SA: 58.9% (237)
  - t(1239) = 0.72, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 45.9% (322) vs. SA: 43.7% (185)
  - t(1239) = 0.14, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 54.4% (392) vs. SA: 56.3% (240)
  - t(1239) = 0.20, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 33.7% (141)
  - t(1239) = 0.42, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 34.4% (141)
  - t(1239) = 1.00, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 34.4% (141)
  - t(1239) = 1.00, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 34.4% (141)
  - t(1239) = 1.00, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 34.4% (141)
  - t(1239) = 1.00, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 34.4% (141)
  - t(1239) = 1.00, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 34.4% (141)
  - t(1239) = 1.00, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 34.4% (141)
  - t(1239) = 1.00, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 34.4% (141)
  - t(1239) = 1.00, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 34.4% (141)
  - t(1239) = 1.00, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 34.4% (141)
  - t(1239) = 1.00, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 34.4% (141)
  - t(1239) = 1.00, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

- My child has been targeted online: 
  - UK: 34.4% (247) vs. SA: 34.4% (141)
  - t(1239) = 1.00, *p < .0001, **p < .0001

Results
Online risks were high overall, but sexting and contact risks were higher in SA. In developing contexts, risks may be encountered ahead of policy aimed to address them (Livingstone, 2009). Most adolescents also had a narrow online experience, but were more likely to label it as cyberbullying in the UK. More attention to cyberbullying in developed contexts may result in more awareness and understanding of the term, which may account for the differences rather than differences in experiences.

Time spent online, online risks, and victimization and perpetration experiences were underestimated by parents, particularly in SA. The generational gap in knowledge and use of ICTs positions adolescents as experts in technology relative to parents (Livingstone & Bober, 2006). Thus, parents may not fully appreciate potential online risks and when they do, they may hold an optimistic bias about their child’s online behaviors relative to other adolescents. Adolescents may also disclose online risk experiences to parents for fear that their access to ICTs will be reduced.

Parents overestimated mediation compared to adolescents reports. Lower technical knowledge means that parents may not be aware of the risks and protective measures that adolescents are using to keep themselves safe. Differences across ICTs may exist but may not be communicatized or enforced effectively. Social desirability bias may also play a role in parent self-reports. Although various reasons exist, the developmental stage of adolescence cannot be overlooked. Characterized by a desire for autonomy and independence, it poses a challenge to parents in balancing their child’s independence on the one hand and keeping them safe on the other.

Conclusion
The study highlights the importance of including parents in online safety efforts in addition to adolescents as part of a holistic approach. This should also include steps to strengthen government and school policy as well as educational media campaigns, particularly in developing contexts.

References
No references are given in the document.