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Review

Social media, parenting, and well-being

Ine Beyens¹, Loes Keijsers² and Sarah M. Coyne³

Abstract

One of the key challenges faced by many parents is to manage the pervasiveness of social media in adolescents' lives and its effects on adolescents' well-being (e.g., life satisfaction) and ill-being (e.g., depressive symptoms). Parents may manage adolescents' social media use and social media-induced well-being and ill-being through media-specific parenting: parental actions to restrict, regulate, and discuss adolescents' social media use. Recent evidence suggests that media-specific parenting may reduce adolescents' anxiety and depressive symptoms and minimize the effects of cyberbullying on adolescents' depressive symptoms. However, more robust evidence regarding the moderating role of media-specific parenting and the direction of effects has to be established to understand how parents may shape the effects of social media on adolescents' well-being and ill-being.

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Keywords

Social media use, Social networking sites, Well-being, Ill-being, Anxiety symptoms, Depressive symptoms, Parents, Parental control, Parental mediation, Parental monitoring.

Introduction

Parenting has become increasingly challenging. Today's parents find it more complex and stressful than previous generations to raise their children into healthy and

resilient adults [1]. A key challenge parents mention is the pervasiveness of social media in children's lives [1–3]. While social media provide a useful tool for parents to stay in touch with their children [4], many parents are concerned that children's social media use reduces their well-being (e.g., life satisfaction) or increases their ill-being (e.g., depressive symptoms) [2,5]. Empirical evidence indeed suggests that social media may yield such adverse effects, at least among some youth, although evidence for positive effects, such as an increase in well-being, is equally strong [6]. A pressing question is how parents can stimulate or enhance social media-induced well-being and prevent or reduce social media-induced ill-being.

The current review discusses recent empirical evidence concerning the effects of media-specific parenting on children's social media use, well-being, and ill-being. *Media-specific parenting* concerns all parental actions to restrict, regulate, and discuss children's media use [7]. Earlier reviews and meta-analyses have investigated media-specific parenting of a variety of media use, such as children's television viewing, game playing, and internet use [8–11], and its effects on children's aggression, substance use, and sexual behavior [8]. However, a review of the evidence of media-specific parenting of children's social media use and its effects on well-being and ill-being is lacking.

We synthesize the findings of 32 articles published between 2017 and 2021 that examined media-specific parenting in the context of children's social media use, of which 19 studies investigated associations of media-specific parenting with children's social media use and eight studies investigated associations of media-specific parenting with children's well-being and/or ill-being. We included studies that focused on the time children spent using social media, as well as problematic social media use and social media addiction (i.e., social media use that interferes with the ability to function; [12]), cyberbullying, and sexting. And we included studies that investigated aspects of well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, social well-being), ill-being (e.g., depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms), or risk and resilience factors for well-being and ill-being (e.g., sleep problems, loneliness). Since all of these studies focused on adolescents, we will refer to adolescents in the remainder of this article.

Parental mediation and monitoring of social media use

Parents can influence adolescents' social media use and well-being/ill-being through their media-specific parenting practices [7]. These practices may help adolescents use social media in a healthy way, enhance adolescents' well-being, and reduce ill-being. For example, parents can restrict adolescents' social media use to ensure that they do not spend too much time using social media or discuss that certain social media content is unrealistic. The literature distinguishes between two media-specific parenting practices: parental mediation and parental monitoring.

Parental mediation

Parental mediation refers to parents' actions to restrict the time adolescents spend using media and restrict and explain specific media content, in order to minimize negative and maximize positive media effects [7,13,14]. The literature distinguishes between three mediation strategies: restrictive mediation, active mediation, and co-use [7,13,14]. *Restrictive mediation* refers to parents' rules and restrictions concerning when or how much time adolescents can use media, or what adolescents can do with media [7]. *Active mediation* concerns parents' explanation and evaluation of media content and media use more generally and is aimed at encouraging critical thinking [7]. *Co-use* happens when parents and adolescents use media together, without discussing the content, for example, by watching the same television program [7]. While co-use involves parents' mere presence during adolescents' media use, it may merge into active mediation when it involves parent-adolescent discussion [7].

Originally developed to investigate parental mediation of children's and adolescents' television viewing [7,13–15], studies have reconceptualized parental mediation to address the use of social media. Studies have predominantly focused on restrictive and active social media mediation [16–18] and less often on co-use [17,19]. Because adolescents typically have their own devices to use social media and social media use is more interactive than television viewing, co-use of social media (e.g., browsing social media together) is likely less opportune. Recently, a focus group study among adolescents and their parents identified four parental social media mediation strategies [16]. Besides restrictive and active mediation, two other strategies were also considered mediation: authoritarian surveillance (i.e., having access to adolescents' social media accounts and passwords) and nonintrusive inspection (i.e., browsing adolescents' social media profiles). However, these latter two parental surveillance practices may rather be considered parental monitoring than mediation [20] (see next section).

Parental monitoring

Parental media monitoring concerns parents' actions to keep track of when and how much time adolescents spend using media, what they do with media, and with whom [20,21]. These actions include communication efforts, such as asking questions [20,22], as well as more controlling efforts, such as imposing rules and restrictions, or surveillance [20]. *Parental surveillance* involves parents keeping an eye on or checking adolescents' media use, for example, by using tracking software, possessing adolescents' social media passwords, or checking adolescents' social media profiles [5,23–30]. While parental mediation involves a primarily reactive approach, as parents react to adolescents' media use when faced with problematic use, inappropriate content, or adverse effects [31], parental monitoring involves a more proactive approach, as parents try to anticipate and prevent the occurrence of problematic media use and adverse effects [32]. Such a proactive approach requires parents to be informed and knowledgeable about adolescents' media use [20].

Building on the parental mediation literature, research distinguishes between two media monitoring strategies: restrictive and active monitoring. *Restrictive monitoring* involves restricting the time and content of adolescents' media use, and where adolescents can use media (e.g., not in their bedroom) [33]. *Active monitoring* concerns parents' discussion, explanation, and evaluation of media content, and can occur before, during, or after adolescents' media use [33]. Although restrictive and active monitoring of adolescents' social media use constitute two theoretically valid routes through which parents can affect adolescents' social media use and well-being/ill-being, they have received little empirical investigation. Some studies investigated whether active and restrictive monitoring of movies, commercials, and computer games, but not social media, were associated with adolescents' social media use [e.g., 34]. Other studies relied on the broader parenting literature [20] and operationalized parental monitoring in terms of its potential outcome, that is, *parental knowledge* of adolescents' activities, whereabouts, and companionship [35–37] or online activities [38]. Studies also investigated the sources of parental knowledge of adolescents' activities, including adolescents' disclosure of their (online) activities [38,39] and parental solicitation of what adolescents do on social media [23].

The style of mediation and monitoring

While studies have mostly investigated how frequently parents mediate or monitor adolescents' media use [8], it has increasingly been argued that their effectiveness depends on the style with which parents mediate and monitor [40]. Parents can use four styles when restricting, regulating, or discussing adolescents' media use

[40,41]: an *autonomy-supportive* style, in which parents provide a developmentally appropriate rationale for their rules and take adolescents' perspective seriously. An *autonomy-restrictive* or *controlling* style, in which parents provide rules in a strict and harsh way, without respecting adolescents' perspective. An *inconsistent* style, in which parents randomly vary in their restriction, regulation, or discussion. And finally, a *permissive* style, through which parents avoid guidance and discussion and provide few to no restrictions or rules. Different mediation and monitoring styles may influence adolescents' social media use and well-being/ill-being differently [40]. For example, while an autonomy-supportive style may reduce the time adolescents spend using social media and may lead to improved well-being, an autonomy-restrictive style may lead to opposite effects. Nonetheless, only two studies included in the current review have investigated the style of mediation and monitoring [34,42].

Parental mediation and monitoring and adolescents' social media use

A total of 19 studies investigated associations of parental mediation and monitoring with adolescents' social media use [17–19,24,28–30,34–37,42–49]. Evidence regarding the association with the time adolescents spent using social media is mixed. Three studies found that parental mediation and monitoring were not associated with the time spent using social media [28,36,43]. However, other studies found that adolescents whose parents used more inconsistent [42] or controlling restrictive mediation [34] and adolescents who did not accept parents' internet rules [44] spent *more* time using social media. In contrast, adolescents spent *less* time using social media if parents had greater control over adolescents' social media use [45] or used more autonomy-supportive restrictive mediation [34]. Evidence regarding problematic social media use is fairly consistent. Overall, studies found that adolescents reported less problematic use if parents used more parental monitoring [37], restrictive [46] or active [47] mediation, or strict internet and smartphone rules [48]. One study yielded opposite findings, showing that more restrictive mediation was associated with a higher risk of social media addiction [17].

Regarding cyberbullying, studies found that adolescents were *more* often a perpetrator or victim of cyberbullying if parents used more monitoring [24,29] or restrictive mediation [18,19,49], but *less* often if parents used more active mediation [18,19,49]. One study found no association between parental control of adolescents' online activities and adolescents' cyberbullying victimization [30]. Finally, the only study that focused on the association of media-specific parenting with sexting showed that adolescents sent less sexts if their parents had more rules about the content of adolescents' internet use or more knowledge of adolescents' activities, whereabouts,

and companionship [35]. Importantly, since the bulk of evidence relies on concurrent associations, it is not possible to draw causal conclusions. While parental mediation and monitoring may cause changes in adolescents' social media use, it is equally likely that adolescents' social media use elicits changes in parents' mediation and monitoring.

Parental mediation and monitoring and adolescents' well-being and ill-being

Eight studies investigated associations of parental mediation and monitoring with adolescents' well-being and ill-being [19,34,45,48,50–53]. Overall, these studies suggest that parental mediation and monitoring may boost adolescents' well-being and act as a buffer against ill-being. Although one cross-sectional study found that parental mediation was not associated with adolescents' loneliness, depressive symptoms, or anxiety symptoms [50], another cross-sectional study found that adolescents reported fewer depressive symptoms and higher life satisfaction if parents had greater control of adolescents' social media use [45]. Likewise, longitudinal studies found that adolescents reported fewer depressive symptoms if parents used more mediation one year before [51] and fewer sleep problems if parents had strict rules about media use before bedtime one year before [48].

Empirical evidence also exists that the effectiveness of parents' mediation and monitoring depends on the strategy (restrictive versus active) and style (autonomy-supportive versus autonomy-restrictive). A longitudinal study found that adolescents reported *more* depressive symptoms if parents used more restrictive mediation one year before, but *fewer* depressive symptoms if parents used more active mediation [19]. A cross-sectional study revealed that adolescents had *more* anxiety and depressive symptoms if parents used a more autonomy-restrictive style to restrict adolescents' media use, but *fewer* of these symptoms if parents used a more autonomy-supportive style [34]. Likewise, adolescents reported better social well-being (e.g., getting along well with friends) if they felt understood and taken seriously by their parents when communicating about their social media use [52].

Of the eight studies that investigated associations of parental mediation and monitoring with adolescents' well-being and ill-being, three studies investigated whether parental mediation could minimize the effects of social media use on adolescents' ill-being [19,51,53]. Two of these studies found that adolescents who had experienced cybervictimization reported fewer depressive symptoms (but not anxiety or loneliness symptoms) if parents used more parental mediation [51,53]. A third study found that the mediation strategy mattered: Adolescents who had been a victim of cyberbullying

reported *fewer* depressive symptoms if parents used more active mediation, but *more* depressive symptoms if parents used more restrictive mediation [19]. Social media co-use did not moderate the association between cybervictimization and ill-being. Finally, the question whether parental mediation or monitoring may maximize the positive effects or minimize the negative effects of social media use on adolescents' well-being has not yet been addressed empirically.

Conclusions and directions for future research

The omnipresence of social media in adolescents' lives makes parenting increasingly challenging [1–3]. Reassuringly, recent empirical evidence suggests that media-specific parenting may shape adolescents' social media use, well-being, and ill-being. Adolescents whose parents use more mediation and monitoring, especially in an autonomy-supportive way, spend less time using social media and report less problematic social media use. Recent evidence also suggests that active and autonomy-supportive restrictive mediation and monitoring may reduce anxiety and depressive symptoms and minimize the effects of cyberbullying on adolescents' depressive symptoms. Despite these insights, more robust evidence has yet to be established to understand how parents may best manage adolescents' social media use and shape the effects of social media on adolescents' well-being and ill-being. Based on the current review, we present three directions for future research.

Toward a better conceptualization and operationalization of social media-specific parenting

Just as in the literature about media-specific parenting of television and computer use [7,9], inconsistency exists in the conceptualization and operationalization of social media-specific parenting. This partly mimics the ongoing monitoring debate in the parenting literature [54]. First, different conceptualizations have been used interchangeably, including parental mediation [16,47], parental monitoring [23,31,32,34], parental knowledge [38], and nonintrusive inspection [16]. Second, parental mediation and monitoring have been operationalized to cover a diverse range of behaviors. For example, while most studies focused on active and restrictive mediation and monitoring, other studies considered practices such as authoritarian surveillance as parental mediation [16]. Finally, with a few notable exceptions [16,19,25,55], studies have often focused on parental mediation and monitoring of adolescents' internet use [44,46,49], mobile device use [35,48], game playing [34,48], or overall media use [42] instead of social media use. Future research needs to develop a better conceptualization and operationalization of social media-specific parenting. In doing so, researchers may build on the broader parenting literature. For example,

by operationalizing parental mediation and monitoring both in terms of frequency and style [40].

Toward a better understanding of the direction of effects

Most studies that investigated the associations among media-specific parenting and adolescents' social media use, well-being, and ill-being have used cross-sectional designs. Such designs cannot unravel the direction of the associations. Consequently, it remains unclear whether the associations uncovered in the literature point at *parent effects*—whereby media-specific parenting leads to changes in adolescents' social media use, well-being, or ill-being—or *child effects*—whereby adolescents' social media use, well-being, or ill-being lead to changes in media-specific parenting. Importantly, adolescents are not passive recipients of parenting, but active agents, who may also influence their parents [56], including parents' media-specific parenting [57]. Therefore, future research should investigate bidirectional influences, by using longitudinal designs, so that we can understand how parents influence adolescents' social media use, well-being, and ill-being (parent effects), and how adolescents' social media use, well-being, and ill-being influence parenting (child effects).

Toward a better understanding of the moderating role of media-specific parenting

In the media effects literature, parental mediation and monitoring are conceived as practices that may prevent or counteract negative media effects and stimulate or enhance positive media effects [40]. Surprisingly, only three studies have investigated whether parental mediation and monitoring may alter the effects of social media use on adolescents' well-being and ill-being. All three studies investigated the moderating role of parental mediation in the association between adolescents' cyberbullying victimization and ill-being (but not well-being) [19,51,53]. Therefore, there is a vital need for studies that investigate whether parental mediation and monitoring may maximize the positive effects and minimize the negative effects of social media use on adolescents' well-being and ill-being. It is only then that we can truly understand how parents can help adolescents navigate today's social media world.

CRedit author statement

Ine Beyens: Conceptualization; Literature search; Writing Paper.

Loes Keijsers: Reviewing and Editing Paper.

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Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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- * of special interest
- ** of outstanding interest

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