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Tweens' perspectives on their parents' media-related attitudes and rules: an exploratory study in the US

Ada S. Kim and Katie Davis

The Information School, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

ABSTRACT

Parent–child relationships are redefined during early adolescence, as tweens become increasingly independent and begin to assert their autonomy. Because today's youth are growing up in a digitally saturated world, investigating the technology use of tweens is key to understanding the changing dynamics in parent–child relationships in early adolescence. Through surveys ($N = 79$) and follow-up focus groups ($N = 30$) with middle school students, we investigated how tweens described and made sense of their technology use, how they responded to their parents' rules about technology, and how they navigated technology-related conflicts at home. Tweens perceived a misalignment between their parents' technology-related rules and their own purposes for using digital media, which they said created a tension between them and their parents. This exploratory study contributes new insight into how tweens relate their technology use to their interpretations of their parents' rules and messages around technology.

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Introduction

The transition from childhood to adolescence is well recognized as a fraught period for families. During this transition period, referred hereafter as the “tween” years (ages 10–14 years), parents and children start to reorganize their relationship from one characterized by unilateral parental authority to a more give-and-take relationship marked by negotiation and compromise (Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). This reorganization occurs as children begin to explore and assert their autonomy and increasingly come to see their parents as sometimes flawed individuals rather than all-knowing parental figures (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). It is common for parents and children to experience some conflict as they figure out new ways of relating to each other that respect both parental authority and children's desire for independence (Kroger, 2007).

In today's digital age, networked technologies serve as a lightning rod for parent–child conflict during the tween years. Clashes emerge around the appropriate age to get a smartphone, or sign up for accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat (Ammari, Kumar, Lampe, & Schoenebeck, 2015; Rideout, 2015; Rudi, Dworkin, Walker, & Doty, 2015). Once a

tween is in possession of a smartphone, tensions can arise around how it should be used (Burke, Adamic, & Marciniak, 2013; Weisskirch, 2011). For many parents, a cell phone serves as a tool to monitor their children and ensure their safety (Devitt & Roker, 2009; Wei & Lo, 2006). Tweens, by contrast, are more likely to see their cell phone as an opportunity to connect with their peers and assert their personal autonomy (Weinstein & Davis, 2015).

Though the underlying conflict – trying to reconcile the tension between parental authority and child autonomy – is familiar, the particular dynamics introduced by networked technologies are new. With internet-enabled computers, smartphones, and other mobile devices, tweens can access information and interact with people without leaving the house, and often without their parents' knowledge (Blackwell, Gardiner, & Schoenebeck, 2016; Brito, 2012; Mesch, 2006; Stutzman & Hartzog, 2012). Add to this invisibility the reality that many parents feel less technologically savvy than their children (Gardner & Davis, 2013), which may be why parents often fail to communicate clear and consistent rules to their children around appropriate media use (Blackwell et al., 2016; Clark, 2009; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011). These technology-related dynamics magnify and complicate existing tensions between parents and their tween children (Mesch, 2006; Vaterlaus, Beckert, & Tulane, 2014; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011).

As parents seek guidance on how to navigate this uncharted territory, researchers have begun to explore the role of technology in parent–child relationships at various stages of child development (Blackwell et al., 2016; Connell & Lauricella, 2015; Hiniker, Schoenebeck, & Kientz, 2016). This emerging work provides insight into how parents' and tweens' familiarity with, attitudes toward, and communication about technologies affect the rules that are established, whether they are followed, and the parent–child tensions that arise in the process. Still needed is a better understanding of how tweens relate their own technology use to their interpretations of their parents' rules and messages around technology.

In the current exploratory study, we investigated how middle school students describe and make sense of their networked technology use (particularly social media and gaming), as well as how they describe and make sense of their parents' rules about technology. We surveyed approximately 90% ($N = 79$) of students attending a sixth-eighth-grade middle school located in a major city in the Northwest United States. We conducted follow-up focus groups with 30 eighth-grade students to gain added insight into their motivations for using various digital media devices (specifically, laptops, personal computers, cell phones, and game consoles) and platforms (such as Facebook and Instagram), their interpretations of their parents' technology-related rules, and the tensions they experience at home when their motivations conflict with their parents' rules. This exploratory work contributes insights into tweens' perspectives on their digital media use and their parents' media-related rules. It lays a foundation for future research to investigate the extent to which tweens and parents hold similar perspectives on tweens' digital media use, as well as how these perspectives affect parent–child relationships during early adolescence.

Method

Research site and participants

The research site was a private middle school (grades 6–8, ranging in age from 11 to 14 years) located in a major city in the Northwest United States. The city is known as a hi-tech hub that serves as the headquarters for several major technology companies. According to the

school's website, one-third of students receive tuition assistance, and 23% of the students are from families of color. Students come from over 30 public and private elementary schools in the surrounding area.

Survey participants included 25 sixth graders, 26 seventh graders, and 28 eighth graders ($N = 79$), representing approximately 90% of the school's population in 2014–2015. Non-responders were absent on the day the survey was administered; there is no reason to believe they differed in any systematic way from survey respondents. The survey sample included 41 boys, 32 girls, and 6 students who preferred not to identify their gender. Focus group participants included 30 eighth-grade students, evenly split by gender.

The relative affluence of the private school population, combined with the surrounding area's focus on technology, limits the generalizability of the study's findings to those youth who have a high rate of digital media ownership. Of the 90% of students surveyed in 2015, all but one reported having regular access to at least one computer (98.7%), 41.6% indicated they had three or four computers at home, and 29.8% indicated they had more than five computers at home. In addition, 93.7% of the students reported owning a cell phone, and 63% reported having social media applications on their phone. We determined that eliciting the views of a group of highly connected youth was appropriate for an exploratory study aimed at uncovering an initial set of themes related to tweens' perspectives on digital media, because they would have sufficient experiences from which to draw when reflecting on their and their parents' attitudes toward digital media.

Procedure

The school provided an ideal location for a student-centered exploratory study. The technology teacher had planned a curricular unit in which eighth-grade students were tasked with designing a survey, to be administered to the entire school body, asking students about their technology ownership, use, and attitudes, as well as their parents' technology-related rules. Students worked with their teacher to identify questions that were of interest to them, making the survey design ideal for an exploratory study focusing on capturing students' interests and perspectives. The survey was administered anonymously and online to all students during their technology classes.

Following survey administration, the technology teacher invited us to observe her eighth-grade classes so that we could gain deeper insight into students' motives for asking certain questions and their interpretations of the survey data. Approximately two weeks later, we revisited the classes and conducted two focus group discussions, each lasting approximately 45 min, during which we asked students to reflect further on the survey responses. Because we conducted these discussions during the students' technology class, the focus groups were larger than typical, with 15 students in each group. We took care to ensure that all students had an opportunity to voice their opinions during the discussion. Together, the observations and focus groups helped us to identify themes about technology-related practices that mattered to students. The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

We examined the survey responses to document tweens' device ownership, digital media use habits, and the presence and type of parent technology rules. We used the focus group

data to gain a deeper understanding of tweens' perspectives on their parents' media-related rules, as well as their parents' attitudes and reactions to their media use. One researcher went through the focus group transcripts and highlighted comments relating to parents and technology. A second researcher reviewed the transcripts to make sure no comments were overlooked. The comments were extracted from the original transcripts and then separated into three categories: (1) parents' vs. tweens' perceptions of tweens' digital media use, (2) parents' technology-related rules and enforcement practices, and (3) tensions arising between parents and tweens around these rules. Students were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Findings

We identified two broad themes related to tweens' perspectives on their digital media use and their parents' media-related attitudes and rules: (1) parents and tweens held different ideas about the purpose and value of digital media; and (2) parents' technology-related rules did not always align with tweens' digital media use, leading to parent–tween conflict. Below, we explore each theme in depth.

The purpose and value of digital media: Parents vs. tweens

In the eighth-grade focus groups, students reported that their parents initially gave them cell phones in order to monitor their safety. Mark described how he obtained his current phone: "I think I got [my cell phone] in 6th grade because I don't live very close to the school so my parents wanted me to have a phone." For tweens, factors other than safety drove their cell phone use. While they did describe using their phones to check in with parents, this was just one of a variety of uses that they described, and certainly not the primary use. Rebecca explained the different ways she used her phone:

It's like the difference between like the social media and [the voice calling feature of] your phone, because [on] the phone you like contact your boss, or you need to contact your parents and stuff ... social media is just kind of, I mean *social*.

In this quote, Rebecca makes a distinction between the logistical use of a phone to communicate with a boss or parent, vs. the more socially driven use of her social media apps. Survey respondents reported using their phones to play games (71.2%), send and receive text messages (68.9%), listen to music (67.1%), and use variety types of social media (67.1%) (see Figure 1). Reflecting the sentiments expressed by Rebecca, many of these other uses represented opportunities for more peer-focused activities. Indeed, fully 83% of students said they initially started their social media accounts to connect with friends.

With respect to computer use, students in the focus groups said that their parents tended to assume they were "playing games" whenever they were in front of the computer. This type of misunderstanding caused conflicts between parents and tweens. Arthur complained about his mother's response to seeing him on the computer:

If I'm even so much as in my room like with the door closed ... one time I was just like taking a nap and my mom was just like "what are you doing? Get up from the computer and come." I guess I wish my parents realized that I don't just play games, because that's what they always assume. It's so annoying.

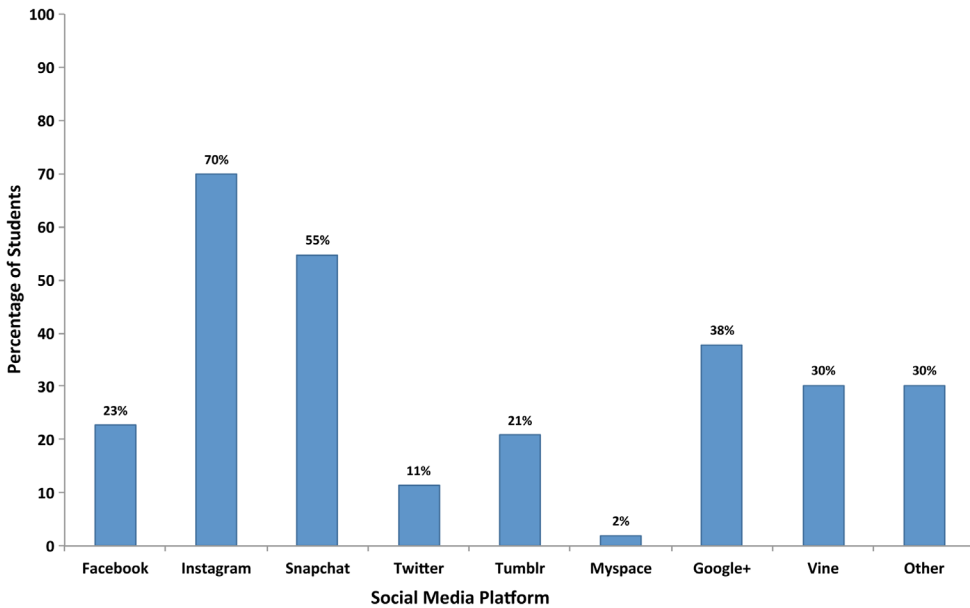


Figure 1. Social media platforms used by tween survey respondents ($N = 53$), in response to the question: “On which social media platforms are you active?”

Note: Percentages total more than 100% because some respondents reported being active on multiple social media platforms.

When students did play video games, they tended to see more value in them than their parents. Craig described how he tried to convince his parents of the educational value of games: “I try to convince my parents that there is value to the games but they’re just like: ‘Yeah, sure’ [*said in a dismissive tone*].” Such conflicts seemed to be reduced as parents’ knowledge increased, especially when they had direct experience with tweens’ digital media activities. Daniella explained how her parents responded differently to her gaming activities:

She [mom] doesn’t like them, but and my dad is a ... was a bit more of a gamer and so I’m sure that he doesn’t want me playing video games 24/7 and I don’t, but ... for the most part he doesn’t see much harm in it.

Rules, tensions, and circumventions

The different conceptions held by parents and tweens about the function and value of digital media resulted in parental rules that did not always align with how tweens actually used their devices. For instance, 59% of survey respondents reported that their parents had a “Do not talk to strangers” rule for cell phone use. Tweens, however, reported using their phones primarily to talk with people they already knew. Moreover, 29 out of 51 students (56.9%) indicated that they kept their social media accounts private.

Lacking an understanding of their children’s cell phone use, tweens said their parents tended to place restrictions on how often and when they could use their phones instead of focusing on the types of activities their children engaged in on their phones. Indeed, nearly three-quarters of survey respondents (71.8%) said their parents had a rule against using cell phones at night, which represented the most common cell phone rule. When asked what

rules his parents had around specific cell phone activities, Charlie responded: "I don't really have any, really. I guess one that I think everyone has but it might not have been set by their parents like: 'Just use your common sense.'"

Several students observed that their parents failed to enforce the technology rules they set. Mark pointed out: "... But my parents make rules and they don't uphold them and they forget about them." Similarly, Brad stated: "I'm saying like normally, our parents don't care like at all ... how much amount I'm online." Another student agreed: "They just don't care." Our analyses of the survey data showed that the lack of clear parental rules about one device tended to carry over to other devices. If students reported that their parents did not have rules about cell phone use, they tended to report that their parents also did not have rules about computer use ($\chi^2_{(1, N=73)} = 8.296, p < .01$).

Tweens described how they used social media to circumvent parental monitoring. For example, Arthur explained how he used social media to communicate with friends in order to avoid charges on his and his friends' cell phone bills, which were monitored and controlled by their parents:

I use some social media but basically for the only purpose of contacting people that are in the other states so that the phone bills don't roll in. Like, I have a friend in Canada and I use the Facebook chat to text him because it doesn't charge him like if I was to call, it'll charge him.

To avoid direct monitoring from their parents online, some tweens described opting to accept extended family members as "friends" on Facebook in place of their parents. Mark explained: "So like I have to choose to friend either my parents or my grandmother (...) and she is not my parents." He added: "Sometimes she posts interesting stuff, and like grandma would forget how to log into her computer so I think I'm safe there."

Rebecca described how social media and texting allowed her to communicate directly with her friends without having to go through her parents:

I think as you grow older I think you kind of get more easier to text to connect with your friends and stuff ... I feel like when you're in elementary school like either your parents have to drive you to their house and your parents can have organized a play date for like stuff like that so I feel like it's probably easier once you get older to connect with like your old friends.

For Rebecca, networked technologies allowed her to manage her friendships directly, giving her a level of independence that was not available to her in elementary school.

Discussion

The current exploratory study used surveys and focus groups to investigate how middle school students describe and make sense of their digital media use, as well as how they describe and make sense of their parents' attitudes toward technology and technology-related rules. Tweens reported having different ideas than their parents regarding the purpose and value of digital media. We examine the themes uncovered through our analysis in light of existing research and place them within the broader context of early adolescent development.

The tweens in the current study acknowledged that their parents gave them their phones in order to keep track of them and ensure their safety when not under direct adult supervision. Consistent with previous research (Weinstein & Davis, 2015), however, tweens described a much broader set of cell phone activities. Many of these activities, such as texting and social media use, were geared towards peer interaction (Weinstein & Davis, 2015). In this way, cell phones served as an avenue for tweens to exert their autonomy by conducting

their peer relationships outside the direct observation of their parents (Blackwell et al., 2016; Brito, 2012; Mesch, 2006).

Computers represented another area in which tweens believed their parents held different viewpoints from their own. The tweens in the focus groups complained that their parents assumed that they were playing video games whenever they were in front of a computer. The tweens also objected to their parents' assumption that video games were a waste of time and held no value. These sentiments are consistent with previous research documenting parents' relative unfamiliarity with the technologies used by their adolescent children (Blackwell et al., 2016; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011), as well as the difficulty of ascertaining exactly what one's children are doing when they are in front of a screen (Stutzman & Hartzog, 2012). The distinction that Daniella made between her mother's objections to video games and her father's more accepting attitude suggests that parents with greater knowledge of and experience with their children's digital media activities (as in the case of Daniella's father) may be more inclined to see value in them. Because this study was conducted in a hi-tech city, it is likely that the parents of the tween participants are more technologically savvy than the general population of parents in the United States. It is therefore possible that the tensions between tweens and parents identified in this study are more pronounced among tweens with less technologically savvy parents.

According to the tweens in this study, the disjunction they observed between their parents' and their own perspectives on the purpose and value of digital media resulted in a mismatch between parents' rules and tweens' actual digital media use. For instance, the most common parental rule they reported for cell phone use involved a prohibition against using the phone at night. Such a rule does not take into account the actual uses to which tweens put their cell phones. Similarly, the second most frequently cited rule for cell phone use was "Do not talk to strangers," despite the fact that tweens used their phones primarily to communicate with friends, and the majority of tweens (56.9%) kept their social media accounts private. Moreover, the tweens interviewed in the focus groups said that their parents enforced technology-related rules inconsistently, a finding that is reflected in previous research (Blackwell et al., 2016). In light of these rules and their inconsistent enforcement, it is not surprising that tweens described ways they used networked technologies to circumvent parental monitoring.

Practical implications

The findings from the current study have practical implications for parents seeking to minimize the technology-related conflicts in their homes and establish clear, effective rules regarding their tweens' digital media use. To minimize conflict and increase positive communication and trust, parents would benefit from making an effort to learn about the ways their children use digital media. They might ask their children to tell them about their favorite apps or video games, including how they work and why their children enjoy them. If parents find that their tweens are not particularly forthcoming, they could consult external resources such as Common Sense Media, a non-profit advocacy and education agency based in San Francisco, which rates and reviews a wide range of media used by children. They might also talk with other parents to learn about the latest apps and games. With this understanding, parents will be better equipped to establish and enforce rules that align with the way tweens use digital media, thereby increasing the chances of their effectiveness.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Ada S. Kim is a PhD student at The University of Washington Information School. Her research focuses on digital youth, identity, and informal learning. She received two master's degrees in psychology at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Korea University.

Katie Davis is an assistant professor at the University of Washington Information School, where she studies the role of networked technologies in teens' lives. She holds two master's degrees and a doctorate in Human Development and Education from Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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