

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

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## 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 differences in online behaviours and experiences among adolescents in a developed and developing context, where access to and use of ICTs may vary and lead adolescents to encounter online risks differently. The study, therefore, examined differences in adolescent online behaviours and parent perceptions of those behaviours in these two contexts.

## Study Variables: Definitions and Prevalence

### Online Risks

- Contact Risks**
  - Contact with online strangers
  - Relationship formation
- Content Risks**
  - Exposure to risky online content or harmful information
- Conduct Risks**
  - Sharing personal information
  - Sexting

(Livingstone, Kirwil, Ponte, & Staksrud, 2013)

**Prevalence:**

- 42% of 12-14 year olds in the US spoke to online strangers (McQuade & Sampat, 2008), and 40% of adolescents in SA met them in person (De Lange & Von Solms, 2011)
- 21% of 11-16 year olds in Europe had seen risky online content (Livingstone et al., 2013)
- 19% of 13-19 year olds in the US reported 'sexting' behaviours (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

### Cyberbullying

- Behaviours include:
- bothering someone online
  - teasing in a mean way
  - calling someone hurtful names
  - intentionally leaving someone out of something
  - threatening someone
  - saying unwanted sexually-related things to someone (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006)

**Prevalence:**

- Between 16%-25% of young people in the UK had been cyberbullied (Campbell, Butler, & Kift, 2008)
- 37% of 12-24 year olds in SA experienced cyberbullying (Burton & Mutongwizo, 2009)

### Parental Mediation

"Any strategy parents use to control, supervise, or interpret [media] content" for their children (Warren, 2001, p. 212)

- Restrictive Mediation**
  - Restrictions on time or online activities
- Technical Mediation**
  - Installing blocking or filtering software
- Monitoring**
  - Monitoring online activities and behaviours
- Active Mediation**
  - Discussions about online risks and appropriate behaviours

**Prevalence:**

- SA: 54% were not supervised when using the Internet (De Lange & Von Solms, 2011)
- UK: 10% parents admitted they were not aware of what their child did online (EU Kids Online studies)

## Method

### Study Participants

- A total of 1,350 participants took part in the study (SA: n = 900, UK: n = 450)
- Adolescents were aged 12-17 years (SA: n = 673; UK: n = 320)
- One parent of each participant was invited to take part in the study (SA: n = 227; UK: n = 130)

### 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 adapted 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 child's online behaviours. The questionnaire was piloted and reliability analyses indicated alpha levels of .63 - .92 for the individual scales. It was available for completion online and on paper.

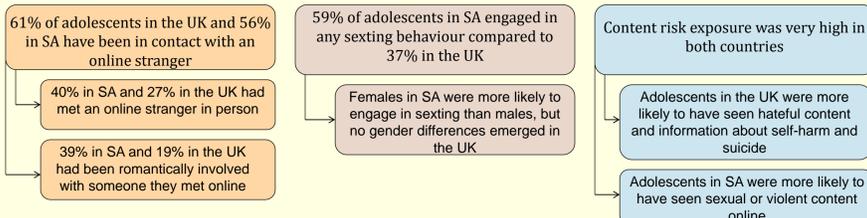
### Scoring and Data Analysis

Overall scores for each study variable were calculated. A score of '1' was given when participants indicated an online experience or engagement in a behaviour and '0' when participants did not have the experience or engage in the behaviour. Overall scores thus represented the range of behaviours 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.

## Results

High access and use of ICTs was reported by adolescents in both countries, but those in the UK spent an average of one hour longer online per day. Social networking, instant messaging and programs that involve uploading and commenting on images (e.g. Instagram or Snapchat) were most popular.

### Online Risks



### Cyberbullying

While most adolescents in both countries had at least one negative online interaction examined in the study (SA: 80%; UK: 69%), those in the UK were more likely to label their experience as cyberbullying,  $\chi^2(1, N = 915) = 6.13, p = .013, \phi = -.08$ .



### Differences between Adolescent Reports and Parent Perceptions

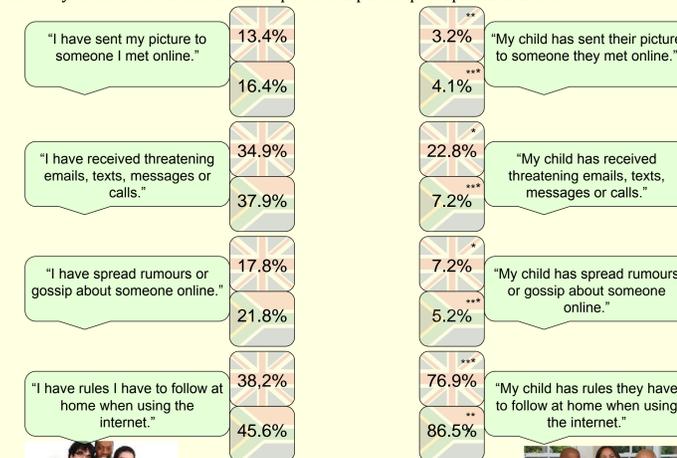
Comparisons between adolescent reports and parent perceptions showed that parents underestimated their child's online risk behaviours and negative online interactions as victims and perpetrators. Parents also overestimated parental mediation in the home (see table below).

Variables (max. score)	SA			UK		
	Adolescent Reports	Parent Perceptions	t	Adolescent Reports	Parent Perceptions	t
Time Spent Online (hrs. per week)	21.9 (24.6)	12.4 (11.4)	7.66***	28.2 (26.5)	16.4 (9.9)	6.66***
Online Risks (8)	1.3 (1.4)	0.7 (1.1)	5.98***	2.1 (1.7)	1.3 (1.4)	4.72***
Online Victimization (8)	2.9 (2.4)	0.7 (1.5)	16.5***	2.9 (2.7)	1.6 (1.9)	5.79***
Online Perpetration (8)	1.60 (1.7)	0.26 (0.8)	16.62***	1.18 (1.8)	0.57 (1.2)	4.25***
Parental Mediation (23)	7.0 (5.2)	11.7 (6.9)	-9.25***	7.4 (5.4)	11.5 (7.7)	-4.95***
- Restrictive Mediation (9)	2.2 (2.9)	4.9 (3.8)	-9.92***	1.9 (3.0)	3.9 (3.8)	-5.29***
- Technical Mediation (4)	0.7 (0.9)	0.9 (1.2)	-1.43	1.2 (1.2)	1.5 (1.4)	-2.14*
- Monitoring (4)	0.8 (1.1)	1.8 (1.5)	-9.12***	1.0 (1.2)	1.9 (1.5)	-5.73***
- Active Mediation (6)	3.2 (2.3)	4.0 (2.4)	-4.44***	3.6 (2.4)	4.1 (2.5)	-1.99*

Note: \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

## Results

Examples of key differences in adolescent reports and parent perceptions include:



Note: \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$  (chi-square)

## Discussion Points

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 negative online interaction, 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 victimisation 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 behaviours relative to other adolescents. Adolescents may also not disclose online risk experiences to parents for fear that their access to ICTs will be reduced.

Parents overestimated mediation compared to adolescent reports. Lower technical knowledge means that parents may believe they are providing adequate mediation, which is to the best of their knowledge. Rules about ICTs may exist but may not be communicated 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. Characterised 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 interventions with 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.

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