

TEEN SOCIAL MEDIA USE DURING COVID-19: PARENT PERCEPTIONS AND OVERSIGHT

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates how parents of American teenagers navigated teen social media use during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, amid school closures and stay-at-home orders. Through an online survey, parents of teenagers reported on teen engagement, happiness, and social media use along with their own levels and types of oversight related to that social media use. Findings showed that parents perceived their teens to be similarly or less engaged in school and social activities than usual, and generally happy with social media use contributing somewhat to that happiness. Parental monitoring of social media use was the same or lower than during pre-pandemic times overall, with some significant differences related to parent gender, teen age, and teen gender.

KEYWORDS

Social Media, Parent, Teenagers, Pandemic, COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

In spring 2020, much of the world swiftly shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific responses to the pandemic varied by country and region, but stay at home orders were common, leaving people to increasingly rely on their phones and computers to connect with the outside world. Social media specifically provided a platform through which phones and computers could unite people, and thus has played a prominent role in pandemic life. Among its many functions have been maintaining existing social connections, developing and supporting community networks, entertainment, and crowdsourcing information at the local, national and global levels. For many people, social media was a primary way of learning how others were experiencing the pandemic and having social interactions with people outside of one's household during the first months of the pandemic.

Teenagers may have been forced into household isolation in spring 2020, but this did not mean that they lacked social interaction. For American teenagers, who were already heavy users of both mobile phones and social media pre-pandemic (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), social media networks and established patterns of use were already in place. For many teens, their social media networks and experiences are intertwined with their school networks and experiences (Dennen, Rutledge, et al., 2020; Rutledge et al., 2019). In other words, teens use social media to connect outside of school to support peer relationships and identity development (Dennen, Choi, et al., 2020). When physically in schools, where social media and mobile phone use are complex and multifaceted (Greenhow et al., 2019) and may be restricted or eschewed in favor of face-to-face interactions (Garcia, 2017), teens are likely to discuss things they have seen on social media (Dennen, Rutledge, et al., 2020; Rutledge et al., 2019). Thus, during Spring 2020, when schools at all levels shifted to emergency remote learning (Hodges et al., 2020) for the remainder of the school year as a safety precaution, high school students experienced not only an educational disruption (Colvin et al., 2022), but also a social one. School closures and isolation have been blamed for a range of ill effects on teens (Tan, 2021), and in particular teen mental health issues (Meherali et al., 2021). Other effects experienced by teens during this time include increased screen time (Ceylan et al., 2021) and sedentariness (Rossi et al., 2021).

Both teens and their parents struggled during the lockdown when they were largely limited to each other for in person social interaction. For teens, this period was marked by an increase in mental health issues and negative behaviors (Breux et al., 2021), with established family relationships moderating how these issues

were internalized and externalized (Skinner et al., 2021). Social media offered a way to maintain friendships outside the household and communicate with friends during the early months of the pandemic (Dennen, Rutledge, et al., 2021a, 2021b), but its use was more situated or visible in the household than usual, where parents could directly monitor things like time spent online.

The triadic relationship between teens, social media, and their parents is complex. Social media can be a source of positive outcomes, but also a source of peril for teens. Parents themselves often look to social media to support their parenting (Dennen, Jung, et al., 2021). Parental monitoring of social media use, starting in the pre-teen years, can lead to more positive outcomes for teens (Fardouly et al., 2018). However, at some point parent oversight must be relaxed, with control over online decisions ceded to the teen. Not only is it developmentally appropriate for teenagers to have privacy and make their own social decisions, but it also connects to the important development of digital literacy skills. This situation can prove challenging, with parents as a primary source of both guidance and discipline over an activity that occurs in a virtual space where parents are not welcome.

2. PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to investigate parent perspectives on and oversight of teen social media use during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The parent perspective is an important one for three reasons. First, parents are usually the responsible party providing teenagers with access to mobile phones and Internet service for social purposes. In this position, parents serve as potential technology gatekeepers. Second, contemporary parenting involves monitoring teenagers' mobile phone and social media use, along with teaching them to be responsible users (Dennen et al., 2019). Third, parents typically live and interact with teenagers daily and can offer perspectives on their teenager's activities and moods. Although a parent's report on teen attitudes and behavior is secondary data, parents are nonetheless keen observers of teen behavior. Parents are often used as a source of data about teen social media use (e.g., Wallace, 2021). Additionally, this study focuses on how parents monitor and respond to their teenager's social media use, in which case they directly self-report information.

The study focuses specifically on teen engagement and happiness along with parent social media restrictions and monitoring in the immediate wake of the pandemic. Of interest here is whether parents perceived that their teen's everyday life was affected by the pandemic and whether they became less restrictive about online activities as a result. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. Did parents perceive a difference in their teen's engagement regular activities during the early months of the pandemic?
2. Did parents perceive social media as an important component of teens happiness during the early months of the pandemic? Did perceptions of happiness differ by age and gender?
3. Did parents adjust their social media monitoring behaviors in the early months of the pandemic? Did parent oversight differ by gender and age?
4. What was the relationship between parent oversight and perceived level of teen social media use during the early months of the pandemic?

3. METHOD

To address the research questions, a survey study was conducted during the summer of 2020. The study was approved by the researchers' Institutional Review Board.

3.1 Participants

Participants in this study were 641 parents or guardians of teenage children in the United States. The sample included parents representing 44 of the 50 states. Each participant reported data on up to three teenagers, with a total of 921 teenagers represented in the data set (see Table 1 for an overview of demographics). Although most respondents indicated they were female and in a mother role, the gender balance of teenagers was more

even. The 4.5% of participants in the other role were stepparents, grandparents, and legal guardians. For brevity, the term parent is used throughout this study to indicate individuals in a parent or parent-like role. Most of the teens were white, and they were evenly split between younger teenagers, defined as between ages 13-15, and older teenagers, defined as between ages 16-19.

Table 1. Family Demographics ($N_{\text{parents}} = 641$, $N_{\text{teens}} = 921$)

Demographic Variables	N	Percentage
Parent Gender		
Female	560	87.4%
Male	78	12.2%
Non-binary	3	0.5%
Parent Role in Family		
Mother	560	87.4%
Father	52	8.1%
Other roles	48	4.5%
Teen Gender		
Female	430	46.7%
Male	480	52.1%
Non-binary/unknown	11	1.2%
Teen Race		
White	691	75.0%
Black	78	8.5%
Hispanic or Latinx	56	6.1%
Asian	21	2.3%
Other races	75	8.1%
	N	M(SD)
Age of teens	921	15.5(1.83)
Younger Group (13-15)	482	52.3%
Older Group (16-19)	439	47.7%

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection occurred via an online survey using the Qualtrics survey platform. All participants opted into the survey after first being presented with a study information sheet. The survey itself consisted of parent demographics, followed by a question about how many teenagers were in the parent's household. For each teenager in the household, up to a maximum of 3 teenagers, parents were asked a block of questions about the teen's demographics, the parent's oversight of the teen's social media use, and the parent's observations and perceptions of the teen's social media use. The survey was advertised to parents using paid advertisements on Facebook and Instagram during July 2020. Parents could follow a link embedded in the ad to access the survey. At the conclusion of the survey they could enter a drawing to win one of four \$25 gift cards.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis focused on descriptive analysis of responses to answer the first three research questions, and a chi-square tests of independence to explore demographic differences for research questions two and three. For the chi-square analyses we explored differences across three demographic variables, parent gender, teen gender, and teen age. Teen age was grouped into younger (13-15) and older (16-19) teens (see Table 1) based

on the typical legal driving age in the United States, which is 16 years old. This division was meaningful because for many teens independence is associated with driving (Scott-Parker, 2018). In another study conducted during the early period of the pandemic, teens who were able to drive reported more interactions with friends and the outside world than younger teens (Dennen, Rutledge, et al., 2021b). Finally, logistic regression was used to answer the fqwtj research question.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Parent Observation of Teen Engagement and Happiness

Around half of the parents reported that their teens were less engaged in school and social activities during the early months of the pandemic when compared to pre-pandemic times (see Table 2). Notably, some parents perceived that their teen’s engagement in school or social activities increased during this period. Despite the perceived decrease in engagement for many teens, most parents reported that their teen’s happiness was at a medium or high level. Similarly, social media was reported to be important to teen happiness during this time at either a medium or high level. A chi-square test of independence showed no differences in happiness related to teen gender or age.

Table 2. Teen engagement and happiness

	Less	Same	More
School Engagement	459 (49.8%)	231 (25.1%)	209 (22.7%)
Social Engagement	507 (55.0%)	268 (29.1%)	135 (14.7%)
	Low	Medium	High
Happiness	74 (8.0%)	366 (39.7%)	481 (52.2%)
SM Importance	83 (9.0%)	317 (34.4%)	521 (56.6%)

4.2 Parent Social Media Oversight

Parents were asked to indicate whether their social media restrictiveness and monitoring activities had changed during the early months of the pandemic. As reported in Table 3, most parents reported that their monitoring was about the same, but a sizable minority reported that they had become less restrictive during this time. When asked about specific forms of oversight, the greatest changes were reported about monitoring and restricting the amount of time teens spend online. Specifically, parents loosened their oversight with regards to time.

Chi-square tests of independence were used to examine differences based on parent gender, teen gender, and teen age (see Table 4). There was a significant relationship between parent gender and level of oversight, $\chi^2(2) = 6.403, p = .038$. The post-hoc tests showed that mothers were more likely than fathers to reduce restrictions during this time, whereas fathers were more likely than mothers to increase restrictions. For example, 24.5% of fathers increased their monitoring of with whom their teens interacted online compared to only 14.8% of mothers.

There were also significant differences in oversight based on the age of the teens, $\chi^2(2) = 15.08, p = .001$. For every item, parents were more restrictive with younger teens (age 13-15) than they were with older teens (age 16-19). Additionally, parents reported being more likely to have increased conflicts about social media use with younger teens.

Teen gender did not show significant differences when parents reported about oversight in general, $\chi^2(2) = 4.232, p = 0.12$. However, there were significant differences when focused specifically on monitoring who teens interact with. A post-hoc test showed that parents were more restrictive with daughters than they were with sons.

Table 3. Changes in parental monitoring activities

	Less restrictive	About the same	More restrictive
Parental monitoring of teen's social media use	187 (20.3%)	656 (71.2%)	78 (8.5%)
Monitoring Activities	Less	About the same	More
I monitor what they post online.	101 (11%)	683 (74.2%)	137 (14.9%)
I monitor who they interact with online.	117 (12.7%)	659 (71.6%)	145 (15.7%)
I monitor how much time they spend online.	227 (24.6%)	527 (57.2%)	167 (18.1%)
I restrict the amount of time they spend online.	291 (31.6%)	509 (55.3%)	121 (13.1%)
I have conflict with my teen about their online activities.	153 (16.6%)	616 (66.9%)	152 (16.5%)

Table 4. Chi-square results of the impact of family factors on teens' social media use

	Parent gender χ^2 (df)	Teen gender χ^2 (df)	Teen age χ^2 (df)
Level of monitoring	6.403 (2)**	4.232 (2)	15.08 (2)***
Monitoring activities			
I monitor what they post online.	2.939 (2)	0.972 (2)	17.263 (2)***
I monitor who they interact with online.	6.729 (2)**	7.727 (2)**	26.942 (2)***
I monitor how much time they spend online.	9.524 (2)**	5.812 (2)	22.801 (2)***
I restrict the amount of time they spend online.	8.882 (2)**	3.706 (2)	6.569 (2)**
I have conflict with my teen about their online activities.	1.569 (2)	1.435 (2)	7.504 (2)**

Note. ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

4.3 Oversight and Level of Use

To explore the relationship between changes in parent monitoring and level of teen social media use, we did an ordered logistic regression. The results showed that heavy teen use of social media was significantly associated with decreased parents' oversight ($\beta = -.239$, Wald's $\chi^2 = 14.243$, $p < 0.001$). The logistic regression model indicated that parents whose teens are heavy social media users less restrictively monitored those teens (OR = 0.787, 95% CI = 0.696, 0.892).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

These findings suggest that parents recognized that their teens were less engaged in typical school and social media activities (research question 1). Although most parents did not feel that their teens experienced a dip in happiness, they nonetheless recognized the importance of social media to their teens for maintaining social connections during a stressful time (research question 2). These findings were corroborated by teens in a parallel survey study (Dennen, Rutledge, et al., 2021a) and are consistent with another study that found both parents and teens experienced increased reliance on social media during the early pandemic (Drouin et al.,

2020). Addressing research questions 3, parents responded accordingly by either relaxing their oversight, including time restrictions, or by maintaining the status quo. Finally, lower rates of restriction and monitoring were associated with heavier teen social media use, at least in terms of parental perceptions (research question 4). The many parents who reported no change in their oversight behaviors combined with the association between less restrictive parents and higher teen social media use implies that prior to the pandemic they had already established effective ways of parenting their teens related to social media use. In this sense, the term *effective* is relative and assumes that whatever arrangement was in place pre-pandemic balanced factors like safety, maturity level, and parent-child conflict in a manner that led to satisfactory outcomes.

In the roughly 30% of cases in which parent monitoring changed, we did not collect data that explains the change. However, various explanations can be considered. In cases where parents and teens experienced greater togetherness at home, parent exposure to teen behaviors may have increased. In particular, this phenomenon may explain the significant difference based on parent gender, which somewhat challenges findings from a pre-pandemic study which suggest that mothers are more engaged in social media monitoring (Wallace, 2021). During the pandemic, an increase in parents working at home may have given fathers greater exposure than usual to their teen's online behaviors. This awareness may have led them to try to enact new limits.

Conversely, parents who previously enforced restrictions and monitored teen use closely may have been too tired to continue this practice or may have swiftly concluded that the benefits outweighed the risks of allowing their teens to use social media and to have privacy while they use it. Without social media during this time, important peer interactions may have been lost, delaying the continuous development of interpersonal skills and social competencies (Hussong et al., 2021). Given the frequent perception that social media was contributing to teen happiness, this is a logical conclusion. It is also supported by findings from another study in which parents reported that they think monitoring teen social media use is a good idea, but they are uncertain of their efficacy (Douglas et al., 2020). Alternately, after spending more time together than usual some parents may have concluded that restrictions were not necessary, mimicking Bulow et al.'s (2021) finding that behavioral controls were ceded to autonomy in some instances during this time.

This study confirms prior studies that suggest parents are more heavily involved in monitoring the social media use of younger teens in comparison to older teens (Douglas et al., 2020; Wallace, 2021). A reduction in monitoring as teens get older is developmentally appropriate. Parents can provide greater guidance and set firmer limits when their children are first learning to use the medium, ideally helping to establish healthy online behaviors and awareness of perils to avoid. As teen knowledge and parent trust both increase, parent oversight can recede.

Differences based on gender appear to be more complex. This study found differences on a single issue, specifically *who* their teen interacted with. The greater concern about daughters' interaction partners may reflect fear of sexual predators along with the stereotyped double standard that suggests girls are more likely to be prey in this context. Such stereotypes have played out in other studies of teen online behaviors. For example, Douglas et al. (2020) found that parents of sons were more concerned than parents of daughters about teens watching sexually explicit material online.

This study provides a glimpse at parent perceptions and oversight of teen social media use during a time of high stress and uncertainty. The sample represents individuals who are social media users already and who opted in to participate, which is a limitation of the study. A survey of parents who are not social media users may have led to different findings. Such parents would not have experienced parallel increased reliance on social media alongside their teens as the pandemic began, nor would they understand as effectively how social media functions. Continued research into this area would be valuable, examining how the triadic teen, parent, and social media relationship evolves more generally as teens age and within specific circumstances.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was funded by a Collaborative Collision: COVID-19 Seed Grant at Florida State University.

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