

Parental Mediation and Excessive Internet Use in the Family Context: Perspectives of Parents and Children

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Abstract – The internet is essential for everyday activities, from staying informed and socialising to work and leisure. However, using it for personal development requires conscious time management and engaging in activities that foster useful skills, such as critical thinking and assessing online content. Parents should guide children in navigating the internet and help them cultivate healthy online habits. This study explored the potential impact of different types of parental mediation on the likelihood of excessive internet use in children. The research used a quantitative descriptive design and involved two scales, *The Media Parenting Scale for School-Aged Children* and *The Compulsive Internet Use Scale*. The sample comprised 145 dyads (parent-child pairs) from the Banská Bystrica region. The results showed a statistically significant weak negative relationship between active mediation by parents and children's excessive internet use, with a similar, slightly stronger but still weak, relationship for restrictive mediation. A statistically significant weak relationship was also found between parents' and children's excessive internet use. Further analysis identified statistically significant differences in active mediation based on the family's place of residence and in excessive internet use among parents, according to their gender.

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The findings suggest that reducing excessive online time and harmful internet use in young people can be facilitated through reasonable restrictions, alongside active parental involvement and open communication. Parents' own online behaviour is also crucial, as they set an example for responsible digital media use.

Keywords – Digital parenting, excessive internet use, parental mediation, children, parents.

1. Introduction

Parental mediation, defined as the range of strategies parents use to oversee and shape their children's interactions with media, represents a core component of digital parenting. Initially conceptualised in the context of television viewing, it has since evolved into a key framework for examining how parents shape children's engagement with digital technologies [1]. Excessive internet use (EIU) is defined as a maladaptive and compulsive pattern of internet engagement characterised by addictive online behaviours [2]. Research findings indicate that in children and young people, excessive internet use (EIU) can also be closely linked to phenomena such as digital addiction, the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO), and escapism into virtual reality as a coping strategy [3]. Parents are becoming increasingly aware of the potential risks associated with internet use and tend to favour open discussions about safe online behaviour rather than relying solely on restrictive measures [4]. Their own self-efficacy and beliefs about the digital world are key factors shaping their approach to mediation [5].

Despite the heterogeneity of theoretical frameworks, two complementary concepts are commonly distinguished: active mediation and restrictive mediation [6]. Restrictive mediation is defined by the enforcement of clear rules and parental control over media use, whereas active mediation emphasises dialogue about media content and shared online experiences.

These forms of mediation were conceptualised based on insights from several researchers [6]. While active mediation tends to predominate in families with adolescents aged 12–17, restrictive mediation is more frequently applied in families with younger children [4]. Some authors have expanded this framework to include the constructs of risky active mediation, which reflects a passive approach by parents, and overprotective mediation, which involves manipulative or intrusive restrictions [6].

Parental mediation concerning internet usage among young people is a relatively well-studied phenomenon in Europe [7], [8], [9] as well as in other countries around the world [10], [11], [12].

The research findings indicate a link between conscious parenting and internet addiction. Preventing such addiction in children can be achieved through the appropriate application of parental mediation [13].

Various parental mediation strategies have been associated with changes in children's digital behaviour, including reduced screen time and fewer negative online outcomes [14]. Nevertheless, their effectiveness is context-dependent and varies according to factors such as the child's age, digital competence, and the nature of online activities.

Active mediation ("joint visual attention") contributes positively to children's social and cognitive development, particularly in early childhood [15], although the dynamics are complex and shaped by multiple contextual factors. In practice, parents typically employ a combination of mediation strategies, tailoring them to the specific types of media engagement in which their children participate [16]. These findings are consistent with evidence from a systematic review that highlights parental mediation as a key protective factor against problematic internet behaviours, such as excessive use, gaming addiction, and cyberbullying. This indicates that both active and restrictive forms of mediation can effectively influence the relationship between digital media engagement and mental well-being, while underlining the crucial role parents play in shaping their children's online habits [17].

For effective guidance, parents must have adequate knowledge and skills in digital media [18]. Children's media use and bedroom devices are generally unrelated to parents' attitudes, except that children tend to use more touchscreens and own more devices when parents view media as a means of rest [16]. Periods of stress generally affect parents' engagement in guiding their children's media use [19].

Restrictive mediation was associated with lower overall internet activity and greater exposure to risks, likely reflecting adolescents' limited experience and autonomy in managing online challenges. In contrast, active mediation was linked to higher internet use, supporting experimentation and the development of autonomy without increasing risk [20].

Parental mediation is a key part of raising children in the digital age, helping children learn to use the internet safely and responsibly while reducing the risk of excessive use. It contributes to a better understanding of risks and to setting healthy boundaries, and it serves as a positive role model [21]. It is important to consider parents' preferences, whether they prefer active participation or just time control.

This study aims to investigate the relationship between different forms of parental mediation and children's excessive internet use, while also identifying demographic factors that may influence these variables.

2. Methodology

To achieve the above-mentioned research objective, a quantitative descriptive research design was employed, using a questionnaire consisting of two types of scales:

1. The Media Parenting Scale for School-Aged Children (MEPA-20) contains 20 items in three subscales representing active mediation (AM), restrictive mediation (RM), and overprotective mediation (OP). It is used to measure media parenting practices among parents of primary school children. The items comprise statements rated by respondents on a five-point Likert scale (1 = completely untrue; 5 = completely true) [6].
2. The Compulsive Internet Use Scale (CIUS) consists of 14 items designed to measure excessive internet use (EIU), assessing the frequency of EIU. The original score per item ranges from 0 to 4 points, with a modified format of 1–5, measured on a five-point Likert scale ("never," "rarely," "sometimes," "often," and "very often") [22].

The following hypotheses and research questions were formulated:

- H1: *It is assumed that active parental mediation has a statistically significant negative relationship with children's excessive internet use.*
- H2: *It is assumed that restrictive parental mediation has a statistically significant negative relationship with children's excessive internet use.*
- H3: *It is assumed that overprotective parental mediation has a statistically significant negative relationship with children's excessive internet use.*
- H4: *It is assumed that parents' excessive internet use has a statistically significant relationship with children's excessive internet use.*

RQ1: How does the use of active parental mediation differ across the selected independent variables?

RQ2: How does the use of restrictive parental mediation differ across the selected independent variables?

RQ3: How does the use of overprotective parental mediation differ across the selected independent variables?

RQ4: How does parents' excessive internet use differ across the selected independent variables?

RQ5: How does children's excessive internet use differ across the selected independent variables?

2.1. Research Sample Characteristics

The study sample comprised 145 families from the Banská Bystrica region, including 145 parents and 145 children. The mean age of parents was 43.55 years ($SD = 5.56$), while the mean age of children was 12.40 years ($SD = 1.52$). Data were collected via an online questionnaire between May and December 2024, following approval from the Ethics Committee of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. It was structured in such a way as to enable the pairing of respondents' answers for research purposes. Respondents were selected using both purposive and convenience sampling methods.

A research report mapping selected forms of risky behaviour among children and youth states that a statistically significant difference in excessive internet use among young people was found between regions. Respondents from central Slovakia (including the Banská Bystrica region) ranked third after respondents from western Slovakia and Bratislava in terms of excessive internet use [23].

A research report focusing on internet use, online activities, and potential risks from the perspective of primary and secondary school students states that primary school students more often confirmed the existence of restrictive measures by parents. Blocking and monitoring of websites were less frequently reported by students from the Banská Bystrica region than instead as in other regions [24]. A detailed description of the sample is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of the research sample according to the independent variables

Description of the research sample	N	%
Parent's gender		
female	130	89.66
male	15	10.34
Family type in terms of structure		
complete (or extended)	124	85.52
incomplete	21	14.48
Number of children (10–15 years) in the family		
one	104	71.72
two or more	41	28.28
Location		
town	77	53.10
rural (municipality)	68	46.90
Age of parents (categories)		
≤ 42	54	37.24
≥ 43	91	62.76
Child's gender		
girl	73	50.34
boy	72	49.66
Age of children (categories)		
pre-puberty (10–12)	78	53.79
puberty (13–15)	67	46.21

2.2. Data Analysis

Statistical evaluation of relationships and differences between variables was conducted using nonparametric methods (Mann–Whitney U test, Spearman's correlation coefficient) alongside a parametric method (Student's t-test), as normal distribution was observed in only three subsets, which was confirmed via the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests. A significance level of 0.05 was applied. Descriptive statistics included the arithmetic mean (AM) and median (Me). Analyses were performed using IBM SPSS version 27.0.1.0.

3. Research Results

Table 2 presents a summary overview of correlations between subscales and scales (types of parental mediation and excessive internet use), and Table 3 presents a summary overview of demographic variables that may influence the use of types of mediation by parents and excessive internet use by parents and children.

Table 2 demonstrates a statistically significant, though weak, negative correlation between parental use of active mediation and excessive internet use, both in parents ($r_s = -0.237$; $p = 0.002$) and in their children ($r_s = -0.187$; $p = 0.012$). The higher the parents scored on the active mediation dimension, the lower they scored on the excessive internet use scale. The higher the parents scored on the active mediation dimension, the lower their children scored on the excessive internet use scale.

Table 2 demonstrates a statistically significant, though weak, negative correlation between parental use of restrictive mediation and excessive internet use, both among parents ($r_s = -0.202$; $p = 0.007$) and their children ($r_s = -0.272$; $p = 0.000$). The higher the parents

scored on the restrictive mediation dimension, the lower they scored on the excessive internet use scale. The higher the parents scored on the restrictive mediation dimension, the lower their children scored on the excessive internet use scale.

Table 2 reveals a statistically significant, albeit weak, correlation between excessive internet use in adults and in their children ($r_s = 0.262$; $p = 0.001$).

Furthermore, statistically significant and stronger associations were observed between the different types of parental mediation ($r_s > 0.5$; $p = 0.000$). The higher the respondents scored in one of the dimensions, the higher they scored in the other two (Table 2).

Table 2. The presence of statistically significant relationships between the variables under investigation

Correlation between variables (subscales and scales)		Active mediation	Restrictive mediation	Overprotective mediation	Excessive internet use (adults)	Excessive internet use (children)
Active mediation	Spearman's correlation coefficient	1.000	0.684	0.542	-0.237	-0.187
	p-value	.	0.000***	0.000***	0.002**	0.012*
Restrictive mediation	Spearman's correlation coefficient	0.684	1.000	0.700	-0.202	-0.272
	p-value	0.000***	.	0.000***	0.007**	0.000***
Overprotective mediation	Spearman's correlation coefficient	0.542	0.700	1.000	-0.088	-0.070
	p-value	0.000***	0.000***	.	0.147	0.201
Excessive internet use (adults)	Spearman's correlation coefficient	-0.237	-0.202	-0.088	1.000	0.262
	p-value	0.002**	0.007**	0.147	.	0.001**
Excessive internet use (children)	Spearman's correlation coefficient	-0.187	-0.272	-0.070	0.262	1.000
	p-value	0.012*	0.000***	0.201	0.001**	.

Table 3 demonstrates a statistically significant difference in the utilisation of active mediation depending on family location (Mann-Whitney U test=1903.000; $p = 0.004$). Respondents living in cities scored higher (AM=4.35; Me=4.50) than respondents in rural areas (AM=4.02; Me=4.25).

Table 3 demonstrates that levels of excessive internet use among parents differed significantly according to gender (Mann-Whitney U test=655.500; $p = 0.038$). Male respondents scored higher (AM=23.87; Me=23.00) than female respondents (AM=21.14; Me=19.00).

Table 3. The presence of statistically significant differences in the use of types of parental mediation and excessive internet use among parents and children with regard to demographic characteristics

Variables	Dependent variables							
	Active mediation		Restrictive mediation		Overprotective mediation		Excessive use of the internet	
Independent variables	Mann-Whitney U test	p-value	Mann-Whitney U test	p-value	Mann-Whitney U test	p-value	Mann-Whitney U test	p-value
Parent's gender	934.500	0.792	879.000	0.532	864.500	0.472	655.500	0.038*
Family type in terms of structure	1074.000	0.199	1121.000	0.308	1126.000	0.321	1293.500	0.962
Number of children in the family	2061.500	0.756	1922.000	0.356	0.346	0.730	2024.000	0.634
Location	1903.000	0.004**	2255.000	0.150	1.138	0.257	2472.000	0.562
Age of parents	2381.000	0.755	2377.500	0.745	1.003	0.318	2006.500	0.065
Child's gender	-	-	-	-	-	-	Mann-Whitney U test	p-value
	-	-	-	-	-	-	2279.000	0.167
Age of children	-	-	-	-	-	-	Mann-Whitney U test	p-value
	-	-	-	-	-	-	2465.500	0.558

4. Discussion

The findings suggest that both active and restrictive parental mediation may help reduce children's tendency to use the internet excessively. Guiding children towards the appropriate use of internet services (from informal learning and entertainment to communication on social networks) requires, on the one hand, the provision of necessary information and knowledge by parents about sensitive and safe use, with a focus on support and reasoning. On the other hand, it involves clearly setting limits so that children also perceive other alternatives that offer them space for meaningful leisure and recreational activities.

It was found that both active and restrictive parenting reduce the amount of time children spend online [25]. Comparable findings suggest that, in general, restrictive mediation is more effective than active mediation at limiting the amount of time children spend on social networks and other online activities. However, both active mediation and co-use appear to have a stronger impact than restrictive mediation in reducing risks associated with media exposure [26].

Similarly, a study exploring the link between adolescents' excessive internet use and parental mediation, using a stratified random sample of adolescents aged 11–16 and their parents across 25 European countries, was conducted. The findings indicated that both active parental engagement in children's online activities, especially when addressing potential online harm, and restrictive mediation were associated with lower levels of excessive internet use [27].

A more detailed examination of the correlations among the studied variables indicates that restrictive parental mediation shows a stronger negative association with children's excessive internet use. This may be explained by the fact that, unlike restrictive mediation, active mediation requires parents to dedicate time to their children and engage directly with the online content they access, discussing potential risks, appropriate online behaviour, and strategies for critically evaluating fragmented information.

It was likewise observed that restrictive mediation, such as limiting online peer interactions, was associated with lower levels of online risk among adolescents, whereas active mediation through joint internet use did not appear to significantly reduce such risks [4].

Furthermore, a statistically significant relationship was observed between parents' and children's excessive internet use, suggesting that parents' digital behaviours may influence those of their children through processes of social learning and behavioural modelling within the family context. Research has shown that the more excessive the parents' internet use, the stronger their children's motivation to use it. These findings emphasise the importance of conscious parental behaviour in the online environment [28].

Parents in the sample who used active mediation more frequently exhibited lower levels of excessive internet use. The same pattern was observed for restrictive mediation. The importance of addressing internet addiction among parents to enhance the effectiveness of parental mediation was also highlighted [29]. Correspondingly, the study found that parental internet addiction, adolescents' engagement in non-essential online activities, and frequent parent-child conflicts significantly predicted internet addiction in adolescents. These findings suggest that simply regulating screen time may be insufficient to effectively reduce internet addiction among young people [30].

The strong correlations between different types of mediation may point to the fact that parents often combine approaches when guiding their children on the internet (e.g., restrictive mediation was associated with active discussion about media content). Research confirms that a combination of restrictions and active discussions yields the best results, helping children develop healthy habits and independence in the online environment without increasing risks [20].

Research shows that the most effective form of parental mediation in the digital environment is probably a combination of a restrictive approach with active communication, known as mixed mediation (the circumstances, however, are of primary importance) [31]. This balanced approach, which combines clearly defined rules with open dialogue about digital habits, supports the development of digital autonomy and healthy online practices in children without increasing the risk of problematic internet use.

The gender of parents appears to be a factor behind the statistically significant difference in excessive internet use among parents (male respondents reported higher rates than female respondents). These findings correspond with a meta-analysis revealing a global trend of higher internet addiction among men, albeit with a small effect and regional variations (more pronounced in Asia, the opposite in North America, and moderate in Europe and Africa) [32].

Place of residence was a determinant of the existence of a statistically significant difference in active mediation. Respondents in cities use it more often than respondents from municipalities (probably due to better information and technological awareness).

These findings align with research reporting that parents residing in rural areas tend to have lower digital competence and are less actively engaged in their children's online activities, which in turn heightens their children's vulnerability to online risks and cybercrime. The study also highlighted notable disparities between rural and urban families, showing that both parents and adolescents from rural areas generally have less experience and awareness of the potential dangers of internet use [33].

A more detailed analysis of the relationships between demographic variables showed that families living in cities tend to have one child aged 10–15, compared to families living in rural areas (1 child in the city $N=61$; 42.07 %; 2 or more children in the city $N=16$; 11.03 %; 1 child in rural areas $N=43$; 29.66 %; 2 or more children in rural areas $N=25$; 17.24 %). Implementing active mediation in the use of the internet by several children requires parents to take a much greater interest in how they spend their time online and get involved in joint activities where they can talk about the content they view, because interests and preferred activities on the internet can certainly vary from child to child.

However, the study has limitations. The research was confined to families from a single Slovak region, which may affect how widely the findings can be generalised. Moreover, the use of a self-report questionnaire carries the risk of socially desirable responses (which could also account for weaker statistically significant correlations) and does not allow for a deeper qualitative understanding of family dynamics in the digital environment.

5. Conclusion

Research suggests that both restrictive and active mediation can reduce the level of excessive internet use in children. Clear rules (which should be followed by parents as well) and communication about the content viewed on the internet (including content shared between children and parents) are crucial.

Given that the internet and its uses represent a dynamically changing environment involving interaction, preventive activities in primary schools aimed at online time should emphasise the expectations placed on parents when their children are online (so that both parents and students are aware of the various approaches). Parents are also encouraged to engage in preventive activities, where they can support their children through discussion or by sharing their experiences with different types of mediation. Similarly, space needs to be created for them to acquire the relevant knowledge and skills (some may not apply the above-mentioned practices when guiding their children on the internet, but rather favour overprotective mediation, which can have the opposite effect).

Reflecting the results of the research, it is necessary to involve both parents in preventive activities. This should also be reinforced in the classroom, where teachers clearly define the rules for using the internet and engage in conversations with children about analysing the content they search for and discuss online (they themselves represent an authority figure for children).

The points outlined earlier do not, of course, apply only to educational subjects. Even pre-service teachers, whose training emphasises the use of the latest digital technologies in teaching, should be aware of the optimal use of a wide variety of teaching aids. Given their familiarity with technology, they are likely to have a better understanding of the needs and preferences of the digital generation, enabling them to create more engaging and relevant learning experiences that resonate with today's tech-savvy students.

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