



# Do Instructions and Restrictions Work: An Analysis on Various Mediation Methods Regarding Cyberbullying and Its Effects in China

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## Abstract

*Based on parental mediation theory (Wright, 2017), the present study aims to investigate on the effectiveness of active mediation and restrictive mediation on mitigating cyberbullying in China. More specifically, the study explores the relationship between active mediation, restrictive mediation, and non-intrusive inspection with cyberbullying perpetration and cyberbullying victimization. Multi-stage cluster sampling was used for the study, in which, a total number of 721 parents and students with ages ranging from 11 to 21 years old in Mainland China participated in the online survey. The results supported the hypothesis which revealed that active mediation was negatively associated with both cyberbullying perpetration and victimization, whereas restrictive mediation was positively associated with the former, negatively associated with the latter, and passive mediation was positively associated with both. Gender serves as a moderator of parental mediation strategies and cyberbullying perpetration, as there is a stronger correlation between mediation strategies and cyberbullying perpetration in girls than in boys. Theoretical contributions and practical contributions are discussed as well.*

*Keywords: Cyberbullying, Computer-mediated communication, Parental mediation, Social media, Secondary education*

## 1. Introduction

People's daily lives have been drastically changed since the introduction of the Internet. As technologies permeate our daily lives more and more over the past few decades, children now are adaptive to these changes [6]. They utilize technologies and the internet to do just about anything, especially socializing—the Internet's ability to allow people to communicate from anywhere with virtually no lag between the communication associated with the traditional media (postage, telegraphs, etc.) facilitates the cybersocial space [6]. Just like how children might engage in physical bullying behaviors in person, they might also engage in cyberbullying behaviors or suffer from being cyberbullied online.

Cyberbullying behaviors inflict upon their victims' psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, and even lead to suicidal ideation [9]. The negative consequences of these behaviors are of increasing concern to the general public, educators, parents, and researchers alike. This parental supervision in which parents regulate children's behavior is referred to as parental mediation. Most of the researchers investigated how to reduce the aforementioned negative consequences, and proposed that parental mediation, strategies to regulate children's behaviors in online social media, served as an effective way to mitigate cyberbullying effects. Researches have shown that a higher level of parental supervision in regards to the digital use of adolescents reduces the risk of cyberbullying [5].

One distinction that this study seeks to make is between the two kinds of parental mediation: active and restrictive mediation. Active mediation describes an **“active and continuing dialogue with their children regarding online content and the risks associated with electronic technology use”** [10], and generally describes actions such as telling children what is acceptable to post online (for example, things that do not relate to personal information) and explaining the risks of social media to children. Restrictive mediation, on the other hand, is defined as **“parents' use of strategies employed to prevent children's access to certain online content”** [10], which usually includes but is not limited to actions such as limiting the time a child spends on the internet, limiting the kinds of social media the child is allowed to use or limiting the behaviors for the child. There's also non-intrusive inspection, which is mediation that does not involve the direct participation of the children, such as monitoring children's social media content online by viewing them from your own account.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying refers to a “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text” [4]. Cyberbullying acts include sending hurtful messages to a victim, derogatory comments on a public

forum aiming to shame the victim, or harmful messages about the victim to a third party. As Howard Broad and Liz Butterfield noted, social change gives fertile grounds for the emergence of predatory behavior that is characteristic of a small number of people; those who cannot adjust quickly to the new internet technologies are at risk from those who will weaponize it [1].

Cyberbullying differs from other kinds of in-person or physical bullying owing to the specific nature of the assemblage. Often using the portability and accessibility of the internet as an advantage, hiding behind the anonymity of it, the cyberbully can inflict distress on the victims almost anywhere at any time without much of a repercussion. The widespread use of pseudonyms and temporary email addresses greatly increases the difficulty for the victims to easily identify bullying perpetrators. According to Hinduja and Patchin, the perceived safety behind a computer screen removes the constraint that traditional social norms and morality puts on the bullies [4]. The use of the internet as an additional assemblage between the victim and the perpetrator removes the direct interaction between them, and the distance decreases the shame and embarrassment associated with engaging in cyberbullying behaviors. These behaviors include but are not limited to outing, pestering, excluding, threatening, and shaming behaviors [11]. The effective method to reduce such behaviors is parental mediation.

## 2.2 Parental Mediation

Mediation is defined as "strategies employed by parents to manage their children's relationship with media" [9]. These strategies seek to manage their relationship between themselves, emotions, and digital online technologies. They usually include restricting access to social media platforms, limiting the time and kinds of activities online, informing the child about the information they should not disclose on social media and the dangers of social media, etc.

The effects of parental mediation on cyberbullying victimization have been well-established [5][7][9][10][11]. Lwin et al. [5] explored the relationship between parental mediation strategies and the effectiveness of the safeguards introduced in the websites in limiting children's disclosure of information online. A higher amount of parental mediation decreases these disclosures of information, which in turn decreases their cyberbullying victimization [7]. Wright [9] found that parental mediation can act as a buffer between cyberbullying victimization and adjustment difficulties.

Specifically investigating the difference between mediation strategies, Wright discussed the role of gender between mediation and cyber victimization, and found that comparing girls to boys, restrictive mediation was more positively and instructive mediation was more negatively related to cyber victimization [10]; and Wright and Wachs [11] examined the correlation between parental mediation and being bystanders to cyberbullying, as well as different parental mediation strategies' effects on cyberbullying victimization over time.

Restrictive children's online access can reduce the opportunities for children to engage in cyberbullying behavior, but it might not necessarily prevent them from cyber victimization. Wright [10] noted that restrictive mediation is not conducive to the development of crucial skills such as autonomy, problem-solving, and social skills in children. Active mediation, in contrast, gives more autonomy to the child and encourages such skills to develop.

We hypothesize that active mediation is more effective in decreasing cyberbullying victimization than restrictive mediation. This is in line with other existing literatures [3][5][7][9][10][11]. We also aim to explore the role of gender that plays in the effectiveness of the mediation. Previous studies have found that certain restrictive mediation strategies reduce cyberbullying perpetration in boys but not girls, and that girls and boys report different levels of mediation [10]. This makes the roles of genders worth examining.

We aim to confirm whether studies observed outside China [10] can be repeated within China's unique internet sphere.

## 3. Materials and Methods

This study aims to investigate the differences between the effectiveness of various parental mediation methods employed to protect their children from cyberbullying. Participants in this study are child-parent pairs. The children were selected from the age group 11-21. We have selected to focus on this age cohort as this is the age where cyberbullying happens at a higher rate when compared to other age groups [8]<sup>1</sup>. We decided to measure parental mediation with paired data from the parents as it allows us to also collect more accurate demographic data about the parents and their use of electronics. The variables we aim to investigate are active mediation, restrictive mediation, and non-intrusive inspection, and cyberbully perpetration and victimization. We hope to measure these with

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<sup>1</sup> This study concerns Czech subjects, but the metrics it uses to measure cyberbullying can be generalized and is not specific to any locale.



reference to published methods [5]. We think that these variables are related in that the method of mediation employed will have an impact on the perpetration and victimization of children in China, just as studies have found elsewhere.

Chinese adolescents should be studied independently as a specific cohort as the internet space is unique in China. The preferred social media platforms, WeChat and Weibo, have different features than the usual western media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram; for example, WeChat limits the ability of accounts that are not one's friend/contact to comment on one's social media posts. The difference in the space within which cybersocial activities-and by extension, cyber bullying- are conducted could lead to a difference in the data being studied.

### 3.1 Sample and Methods

The data was obtained using convenience sampling via an online survey between January and March 2020. A detailed description of the survey, the specific purpose of the research, as well as the guarantee of confidentiality, was thoroughly explained to the participants before the online survey. We obtained consent from both the children and the parents prior to the survey, whom both completed the questionnaire voluntarily. The sample is designed in such a way in which the children who completed the survey are the children of the parents who were sampled; this way the data is parent-child matched. This sample design is chosen because some variables in our study (e.g., parental mediation) are assumed to be more accurately measured among parents, whereas other variables (e.g., cyberbullying victimization) are more adequately measured among children [2].

The data was obtained via an online survey of parents and their 11-21-year-olds in mainland China. The total number of parents who participated was 721. For our independent variables, the survey measures active mediation, restrictive mediation, and non-intrusive inspection, which was measured with reference to published methods [5]; for dependent variables, we have cyberbully perpetration and victimization.

### 3.2 Measures

*Demographic variable.* The survey collects the demographic data—age and gender for both parents and children plus the level of education for parents, household income, and parents' social media use as control variables.

For the parents within the sample, the respondents were 59.6% women and 40.4% men; the mean age of the parents is 44.4 years ( $s = 8.12$ ). The age range of the children of the parents was 11 to 21 years old ( $s = 1.86$ ,  $\bar{x} = 16.0$ ), 62.3% of whom were young women. Out of all the parents, 91.0% of the parents have had finished either junior ( $n = 450$ , 62.4%) or senior ( $n = 205$ , 28.4%) middle school<sup>2</sup> while 9.2% ( $n = 66$ ) hold undergraduate university degrees or above. Most participants' annual household income is below CN¥100,000 ( $n = 493$ , 68.4%), while some of the participants have an annual household income ranging CN¥100,000–CN¥200,000 ( $n = 152$ , 21.1%) and some have income above CN¥200,000 ( $n = 76$ , 10.5%). The average time spent using social media is 5.3 ( $s = 4.4$ ) hours daily for parents and 5.9 ( $s = 4.8$ ) hours daily for children.

*Active Mediation.* Active mediation ( $M = 4.77$ ;  $SD = 1.57$ ;  $Cronbach's \alpha = 0.89$ ) was measured with four items using Likert-scale (1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very frequently*). The participants were asked to report the frequency of engaging in these certain actions: (a) Tell your child about the information they can disclose on social media; (b) Tell your child to stop any experience on social media if they feel uncomfortable or scared; (c) Remind your child not to give out personal information on social media; (d) explain to your child about the dangers of social media.

*Restrictive Mediation.* This variable ( $M = 4.19$ ;  $SD = 1.57$ ;  $Cronbach's \alpha = 0.91$ ) was measured with five items using Likert-scale (1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very frequently*). The participants were asked to report the frequency of engaging in these certain actions: (a) restrict the type of social media platforms your child can visit; (b) set rules regarding your child's access to social media, including WeChat, Weibo, QQ, etc.; (c) restrict the amount of time your child can use social media; (d) limit the kind of activities your child can do on social media; and (e) limit your child to using social media only for school work<sup>3</sup>.

*Non-intrusive inspection.* This variable ( $M = 3.51$ ;  $SD = 1.82$ ;  $Cronbach's \alpha = 0.834$ ) was measured with three items using Likert-scale (1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very frequently*). The participants were asked to report the frequency of engaging in these certain actions: (a) check your child's social media

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<sup>2</sup> Junior middle school corresponds to grades 7-9 and senior middle school corresponds to grades 10-12 in China. Comparable to middle (junior high) school and high school in the United States. Junior middle school is compulsory while senior middle school is not but considered a crucial preparation for tertiary education.



profile(s); (b) know your child's social media account(s); (c) add your child as a friend on social media to check what he/she posts on social media. The third item was abandoned after a test of homogeneity.

*Cyberbully perpetration.* This variable ( $M = 1.09$ ;  $SD = 0.36$ ;  $Cronbach's \alpha = 0.83$ ) was measured with three items using Likert-scale (1 = *not at all* and 7 = *daily/almost daily*). The participants were asked to report the frequency of engaging in these certain actions: (a) sent rude or lewd comments to others; (b) sent threatening or aggressive comments to others; (c) spread rumors about others. The first item was abandoned after a test of homogeneity.

*Cyberbully victimization.* This variable ( $M = 1.43$ ;  $SD = 0.65$ ;  $Cronbach's \alpha = 0.64$ ) was measured with three items using Likert-scale (1 = *not at all* and 7 = *daily/almost daily*). The participants were asked to report the frequency of engaging in these certain actions: (a) received rude or lewd comments from others; (b) received threatening or aggressive comments from others; (c) rumors about you were spread. The third item was abandoned after a test of homogeneity.

#### 4. Results

To address our hypothesis that active mediation is more effective in decreasing cyberbullying victimization than restrictive mediation, we conducted ordinary least squares (OLS) hierarchical regression analyses. We introduced nonintrusive inspection as a control group between active and restrictive mediations, and we entered independent variables into the regression model according to their assumed causal order into four blocks. The first block contained demographic variables of both children's and parents' age as well as household income; the second block included restrictive mediation; the third block included passive monitoring, and the fourth block include active mediation. To explore how gender moderates the effects of parental mediation on cyberbullying, we ran the regression model two extra times on both genders.

We conducted two regression predicting cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. To compare cyberbullying perpetration and victimization in different genders, we conducted four regressions for males and females respectively. According to the regression analysis, the results showed that out of the mediation methods, only passive monitoring was positively associated with perpetration ( $\beta=0.129$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) overall as well as with boys ( $\beta=0.125$ ,  $p = 0.041$ ) and girls ( $\beta=0.125$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ). For victimization, only active mediation has a negative effect ( $\beta = -0.138$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) overall as with boys ( $\beta = -0.178$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ) and girls ( $\beta = -0.113$ ,  $p = 0.017$ ).

#### 5. Discussion

This study aims to explore the effects of active mediation and restrictive mediation on mitigating cyberbullying. Moreover, the study also examines how gender moderates the effects of parental mediation on cyberbullying. First, the study showed that active mediation strategies are negatively associated with cyberbullying perpetration. In other words, By performing active mediation strategies, parents could prevent their children from engaging in cyberbullying perpetration. Children could be aware of potential risks by involving in active parental mediation strategies [5]. Active mediations were also effective in preventing victimization. This might be because these methods can provide the children with means to proactively mitigate the potential for cyberbullying victimization [10].

The results also demonstrated that gender influenced the effects of parental mediation on cyberbullying, agreeing with previously established research. Comparing the difference between the genders, we can see that the correlation is stronger for girls than for boys between cyberbullying perpetration and parental mediation across the models. Between victimization and mediation strategies, the correlation is weaker for boys than they are for girls when restrictive mediation and passive observation are added, but stronger when active mediation is added. The plausible explanation is that girls typically report more mediation than boys [3]. Drawing from previous literature, parents might see girls as more vulnerable to the risks of online interactions and exploitations, and therefore implement stronger mediation strategies for their daughters than their sons.

Deviating from existing research, restrictive mediation is not shown to be significant in decreasing cyberbullying-related behaviors. This might be due to unique situational factors such as family dynamics or internet norms in China.

#### 6. Conclusion

##### 6.1 Limitation and Contribution

This study contributed to the existing literature by adding a dataset in China, whose cyberspace is often separate from the western internet where relevant researches often take place, and the gender dynamic is also different in a Chinese context. However, this study is not without its limitations. The data are obtained through a self-report, which is subjected to biases. This might be helped if data on mediation is obtained from both the parents and the child, as this decreases these biases associated with self-reports. The second limitation is that this study is only conducted at one point in time and does not offer insights into the effect of time on cyberbullying. More studies should be conducted to explore this temporal effect of mediation, especially considering parents might employ mediation



strategies differently depending on the age of the child.

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