

Caught between autonomy and control: How Liberian teenagers
perceive and navigate parental mediation of their mobile phone use

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RUNNING HEAD: PARENTAL MEDIATION OF MOBILE PHONE USE IN LIBERIA

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Abstract

Mobile phones play a central role in the lives of teenagers living in West Africa, but to date we have limited knowledge of how these teenagers perceive and navigate parental mediation of their phone use. This is unfortunate because such knowledge could inform about the interplay between culture, parenting, and children's media use across cultures. To broaden our understanding of parental mediation in West Africa, this study interviewed 37 Liberian teenagers about the parental mediation strategies of their parents and investigated how these teenagers respond to parental mediation. The findings reveal two main mediation strategies: restrictive mediation and monitoring. Although these strategies are also used in the Global North, Liberian parents' authoritarian application of these strategies as reported by our participants is different. Our findings further reveal a boomerang effect, because teenagers enact novel, mobile phone practices to circumvent parental mediation. These practices and the theoretical and practical implications of the study are discussed.

Keywords: Mobile phone, parental mediation, Liberia, Global South, sub-Saharan Africa, teenagers, under-the-radar, digital disconnection, phone muting

Impact summary

Prior State of Knowledge: Parents use different strategies to regulate technology use by teens. How teenagers experience and live through these strategies is unclear, because most of what is known about parental mediation is from the perspectives of parents.

Novel Contributions: In addition to contributing teen-centric perspectives to the literature on parental mediation, we uncover different applications of known parental mediation strategies and reveal novel agentic ways in which teenagers navigate parental mediation based on their sociocultural realities.

Practical Implications: Overrestricting teenagers can drive them into underground practices and make them vulnerable to the very risks and harm parents seek to prevent. Parents and teens therefore need media literacy to minimize harm while ensuring that teens harness the benefits of technology.

Mobile screens have become central in the lives of teenagers living in West African nations such as Liberia (Amobi, Sunday & Obia, 2021; Togar et al., 2023). Through affordances, such as portability and anytime-anyplace availability (Schrock, 2015), they present teenagers with multiple opportunities for quick information access, communication, and resource mobilization (Porter et al., 2016). Research that explores the mobile phone use of West African teenagers has increased. To date, however, only a handful of studies has examined how West African parents regulate their teenagers' phone use, and especially how the teens perceive and respond to these parental mediation strategies (e.g., Adigwe & van der Walt, 2020).

We know from research situated in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) nations that parents do mediate teenagers' mobile phone practices (e.g., Warren & Aloai, 2022). Even though much has been documented about parental mediation in WEIRD nations, its prevalence and use in West Africa remains understudied. A few notable exceptions (e.g., Adigwe & van der Walt, 2020; Burton, Bwalya, & Sihubwa, 2022), however, have produced interesting and different results compared to what is reported in the West. These studies found that African parents adopt a more restrictive approach to parental mediation compared to other forms, such as technical and participatory or co-viewing mediations. Studies also found that children circumvent parents' restrictions to surf online and engage in forbidden risky behaviors, and that the parents' lack of digital literacy skills limits effective parental mediation. Despite these notable, African-based contributions, there is a lack of empirical research on parental mediation in the developing region of West Africa. This is unfortunate, because it leaves us with limited understanding of parental mediation in an African region, in which mobile phone adoption and appropriation among teenagers continue to increase (Hasbi & Dubus, 2020).

Using qualitative interviews with teenagers, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring Liberian teenagers' perceptions of and responses to parental mediation. Studying parental mediation in the West African context, and in this case the Liberian context, is important. It not only adds a non-Western perspective to the growing literature on parental mediation, but also offers an opportunity to explore how teenagers' appropriation of mobile phones may challenge traditional West African cultural values. In other words, studying how teenagers experience and respond to parental mediation against the background of Liberia's cultural value orientation can broaden our understanding of parental mediation across cultures and shed light on how digitization shapes and is shaped by local culture.

Theoretical framework

Parental mediation

Parental mediation encompasses strategies parents use to control, supervise, or interpret [media] content for children and adolescents (Livingstone et al., 2017). A key assumption of parental mediation theory is that exposure to media contents can influence children's attitudes and behaviors (Sasson, 2019). With teenagers now surrounded by digital technologies, such as mobile phones, parental mediation has gained prominence among scholars seeking to understand what strategies parents use, why they use them, and what outcomes are tied to them.

The literature identifies four dominant parental mediation strategies: *restrictive mediation*, *active mediation*, *co-use*, and *technical or monitoring mediation* (e.g., Livingstone et al., 2017). Restrictive mediation involves setting rules and boundaries around media use; active mediation involves guiding children's media consumption; co-use or co-viewing mediation involves purposely using media together with children (Sasson, 2019), and, lastly, technical or monitoring mediation involves knowing about children's media activities mostly by using

software and other technical means to filter, restrict, and monitor children's media activities (Geržičáková, Dedkova & Mýlek, 2023).

Current evidence from studies in the Global North reveals two dominant forms of mediation: restrictive mediation and enabling mediation (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018, Livingstone et al., 2017). This shift is attributed to parents' increasing acquisition of digital knowledge and skills, (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). Enabling mediation, a form of active mediation, involves activities in its application "that might seem restrictive" (Livingstone et al., 2017, p. 17), yet it involves talking to a child about what they do online or encourages their activities as well as giving safety advice (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018).

Taken together, active, or enabling and co-viewing mediations are characterized by parents having open discussions with children about media and contents. Enabling and active mediation encourage positive uses of the internet to help children harness the internet's opportunities (e.g., Livingstone et al., 2017; Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). Conversely, restrictive mediation is argued to be a non-realistic option for parents. This is true, especially given the limitless access children have to devices both inside and outside the home (Jeffery, 2021) and because it can hinder teenagers from harnessing the opportunities of digital technologies.

New, Western narratives around parenting in the digital age are characterized by discussions about the reflexive or democratic family cultures (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020), in which children are allowed to participate in family discussions and decisions about digital technology use (Kalmus, Sukk, & Soo, 2022). In most African cultures, such as in Liberia, however, this reflexive culture or open dialogue seems to be rather exceptional, because of cultural norms in which children must obey parents and elders without questioning. Therefore, domestic rules regarding media use are handed down to children without their input, and

violators often face harsh punishment (Salami et al., 2020). Because of these cultural differences regarding domestic norms, it is expected that children in the Global North experience more autonomy and social equality regarding media use in comparison to children in Liberia.

Therefore, in this study we examine how teenagers perceive and respond to parental mediation in Liberia, a nation in West Africa. We deliberately choose to adopt a child-centric perspective on parental mediation for this study, because the socio-cultural context of sub-Saharan Africa sets up a family culture for teenagers that is very different from most family cultures in the Global North. As we explain below, this may affect how parental mediation is organized and enforced. Gauging teenagers' perspectives in that context is essential to seeing the world through their eyes. A child-centric perspective does not allow the direct mapping of parental mediation strategies employed by parents themselves. However, it sheds light on how these strategies have an impact on how teenagers use and make sense of digital media (Johnson & Francis, 2022).

The socio-cultural context of West Africa

Liberia is a small country situated in West Africa. The country has a dominantly youthful population (DHS, 2019-2020). Most of the population are illiterate or semi-illiterate (i.e., can read) with men having greater educational attainment than women. For many Liberians, the mobile phone is the first experience with telecommunication (Best, Smyth, Etherton & Wornyo, 2010). This helps explain why Liberians have widely embraced mobile phones since their introduction in 2001. The influx of cheap, Chinese phones on Liberia's growing mobile phone market, coupled with the offerings of freebies (free calls, low and often free data promotions) by rival service providers have increased affordability and use, especially among the country's youthful population. Facebook is the most popular social medium among Liberian teens (Togar

et al., 2023). Facebook's "free basics," which allows users to message each other within the app without a paid internet connection, adds to the attractiveness and popularity of the technology among Liberian teenagers. These realities have come to define mobile phone use among young Liberians. They make them less reliant on parents for the management of their phones, presenting both socio-economic benefits and challenges for parents of teens in terms of cost and mediation.

Parental mediation occurs within the home environment as a form of domestic regulation that takes place between parent and child (Amobi, Sunday & Obia, 2021). Therefore, the type of strategies employed to mediate teenagers' media use will depend on the culture, family values, and communication patterns (e.g., Georgiou, Ioannou & Stavrinides, 2018). For example, Georgiou, Ioannou & Stavrinides (2018) found that in Europe, parental mediation and parenting styles were influenced by parents' cultural orientation (i.e., collectivist versus individualism) and communication patterns. Given that these studies were conducted in the West, it is unclear whether similar findings will emerge in a typical African setting, such as Liberia, with hierarchical family ordering and greater parental authority.

In the typical, West African family, for example, children are not included in making decisions that affect their lives, and yet they are expected to do as they are told (Salami et al., 2020; Twum-Danso, 2009). Not doing what parents say can be viewed as disrespect and can result in tough punishment, including corporal (Salami et al., 2020; Twum-Danso, 2009). Moreover, in Liberia, and by extension West Africa, these child-rearing practices extend to young adulthood due to harsh economic realities that make it difficult for Liberian children to gain financial independence. Consequently, most children - even those up to 25 years of age - still reside with parents and rely on them for basic provisions, such as food, shelter, and clothes

(Mel et al., 2013). Whereas studies in Western contexts suggest that restrictive mediation is less applied to older teenagers (e.g. Nagy et al., 2023), the socioeconomic and cultural realities of Liberia subject older Liberian teenagers to parental control, because they remain reliant on their parents' resources for a prolonged time (cf. Twum-Danso, 2009).

Sub-Saharan Africa is diverse in ethnicity, culture, socioeconomics, and language just as it is richly diverse in religion. Christianity is dominant in sub-Saharan Africa, whereas Islam is dominant in the North and Horn of Africa. Smaller groups of folk or traditional religions exist in all parts (Mhaka-Mutepfa & Maundeni, 2019). Combined with traditional African values and beliefs, religion is a controlling force that finds expression in nearly every way of life in Liberia and, by extension, West Africa. Religious beliefs and practices, therefore, may also play a role in parents' mediation practices. For example, Morhason-Bello et al. (2018) found that parents with strong religious beliefs imposed stronger restrictions on premarital sex for children in an attempt to restrain the children from engaging in early sex (e.g. Morhason-Bello et al., 2018).

Domestic regulations are rooted in African culture and values. They are strongly supported by the social system, which empowers parents to establish rules about "what children do with their time, when they do it, and how long they do it" (Amobi, Sunday & Obia, 2020, p. 3). The enforcement of domestic rules, however, is dependent on parents' economic conditions or their ability to fulfill their parental obligations towards their children (Salami et al., 2020).

The ubiquity of contemporary digital media and teenagers' knowledge of these new tools (Jeffery, 2019), may now complicate and challenge Liberian parents' desire and ability to establish authority regarding teens' media use. That is because teenagers may be able to (re)negotiate and or (re)establish their freedom in subtle ways through digital media. Hence, this

study aims to determine the parental mediation practices of Liberian parents as experienced by teenagers (RQ1).

Teens' perceptions and responses to parental mediation

Parents view themselves as guardians and protectors responsible for safeguarding their children from harm (Amobi, Sunday & Obia, 2020). These protectionist practices of parents, however, may be problematic for both teens and parents for two reasons. First, teenagers' desire for autonomy and privacy intensifies when they progress from childhood to adulthood (Vanden Abeele, 2016). Given that autonomy is central for young people, the mobile phone may be instrumental in the gaining of (geographic) autonomy free of or with limited parental involvement or control. Consequently, teenagers are likely to use the modern mobile phone with its advanced capabilities to engage in subterfuge and under-the-radar practices in response to (restrictive) parental mediation of media (wa Ngula, Miller, & Mberia, 2018). These under-the-radar-practices can hinder parents from gaining an understanding of how their children are using digital media. Teens may view parental mediation as problematic for their privacy, which teens value highly (e.g., Burton, Bwalya, & Sihubwa, 2022; Onyima & Egbunike, 2018). For instance, Onyima and Egbunike (2018) found that tensions exist about individual privacy within families in Nigeria over smartphone use by adolescents seeking autonomy and greater privacy. This leads to parents using force and employing subtle surveillance of adolescents. Hence, parental mediation activities that are perceived as privacy-invasive risk being negatively perceived by teenagers. Based on the foregoing arguments, we aim to investigate how Liberian teenagers perceive parental mediation (**RQ2**) and how they use their mobile phones to navigate parental mediation (**RQ3**).

Method

Sample and Data Collection Procedure

Using semi-structured interviews, we interviewed 37 ($N = 16$ males; $N = 21$ females), Liberian teenagers¹ aged between fifteen and twenty-two years. Specifically, participants were 15-17-years-old ($N=8$), 17-19-years-old ($N=20$) and 20-22-years-old ($N=9$). Participants were recruited from eight schools in the capital of Monrovia. Specifically, three of the schools were from the city center, and the remaining five were from a suburban area approximately seven miles from the main city of Monrovia. Except for one school, all schools were public schools usually for students from lower socioeconomic status households.

Informed consent was obtained from participants and parental consent was obtained from parents of participants under age 18. We also obtained ethical clearance from the Research Ethics and Data management Committee (REDC) of Tilburg University, and from the Institutional Review Board of University of Liberia.

Sampling and Procedure

Participants were selected from a list of public and private schools in the capital city of Monrovia using convenience sampling. This presented the easiest and safest means to recruit participants because of Covid² protocols enforced by most schools. Participants had to own a mobile phone (i.e., smartphone or button phone) and had to be between 13 and 25 years old to be eligible to participate. Our interview guide was not designed to capture phone-sharing teens, and none of the teens recruited reported engaging in the practice. This may be because phones are

¹ Although some of the participants in this study were 20 years or older, we chose to use the term ‘teenagers’ throughout the manuscript. We believe this helps convey to the reader that culturally, these young individuals are considered to still live at home and fall under their parents’ authority as normal teenagers would.

² Data collection happened in the heat of the COVID-19 pandemic and prevented some interviews from being held.

comparatively affordable in the capital Monrovia. Interviews were conducted between July and September 2021, and participants decided on the interview venue.

Interview guide and procedure for analysis

Open-ended questions were used to allow respondents to talk freely and provide their own answers to questions. Interviews lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. The interview guide explored themes about autonomy (e.g., “Some people say that owning a mobile phone makes people more autonomous (free), but others disagree. What do you think?”), domestic norms (e.g., “What rules are there in your house about how you use your phone?”), and parental mediation of the phone.

Audios were transcribed using partial transcript, an approach that considers only important segments of the interviews (Arksey & Knight, 1999). We transcribed manually, because participants spoke primarily in pidgin³ English.

Thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2015) was used to allow us to draw out interesting codes and themes from our interview data that were relevant to our research questions and overall purpose. The general themes in our interview guide (e.g., domestic regulation, autonomy, privacy) served as upper-level codes. Further coding refined the procedure and produced subcodes or concepts drawn from interviewees’ perceptions and experiences (e.g., restriction, phone search, phone seizure). The entire process involved frequent discussions between the researchers. In the next section, we present the results of our analyses. Quotes are presented in their pidgin or colloquial forms as spoken by respondents during the interviews. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms are used instead of participants’ real names.

Results

³ Put simply, pidgin is a Liberian or in-group version of standard English. Even though standard English is widely spoken in Liberia, pidgin is commonly spoken, especially when interactants are Liberians.

We now present the findings from our interviews with the teenagers. We begin with the parental mediation strategies (restrictive and monitoring mediation), which teenagers reported that their parents used. In the section that follows, we describe teenagers' perceptions of parental mediation and the mobile phone practices enacted by teenagers in response to parental mediation.

Parental mediation of the mobile phone in Liberia

Restrictive mediation involves setting rules and limiting access around media use (Nagy et al., 2023). Most participants in this study articulated that their parents restricted their phone use for several reasons: to limit or control the amount of time teenagers spend on their mobile phones due to the belief that phones distract teenagers from (properly) performing domestic chores; to get teenagers to do their schoolwork; and when teenagers were suspected to be viewing adult or inappropriate content, etc.

Ruth (age 20) recounted how her mother took away her phone after she left the family meal to burn while interacting with her mobile device.

"I was like, cooking, and on Facebook. I forgot I was cooking. All the food burned. So, my mom took the phone from me for some time, like, two to three days".

Michael (age 15) reported that his mother placed time limits by imposing a 'phone curfew' on him.

"She [mother] put a restriction on me, that a certain time I can't make call, like when it's past 7[pm], I can't make call."

Our analysis, however, showed that these restrictions were stronger for girls compared to boys, and that the experience was the same for all age groups. Twenty-one-year-old Jacob, for example, stated,

“They [parents] got rules and regulations... you responsible to draw [fetch] water, you responsible to sweep. So, before I touch my phone, I know there are obligations.”

Sam (age 20) said:

“Once I forgot to send things to my calculator [app used to conceal privacy] and she [mother] took hold of my phone, she saw some nude photos in my phone, and she got angry and threw it [the phone] away.”

Several of the teenagers reported experiencing monitoring mediation. However, the form of monitoring mediation reported by the teenagers is somewhat different from what is reported in Western literature. For example, whereas Western parents are reported to use technological aids to know what children are doing online (Melhuish & Pacheco, 2021), Liberian parents are reported to physically search through their teenagers’ phones to monitor the teenagers’ social activities. Irene (age 18) and Sam (age 20) described their experiences

“She [mother] also said that we shouldn’t put any funny videos in our phones [so,] she usually takes my phone to look through it...[she] goes to my message box,” said Irene.

“When I know she’s [mother] coming to take the phone, I will transfer all my stuff in it and when she searches, she won’t see anything,” said Sam.

Parents’ religious beliefs and norms appear to motivate the monitoring of teenagers’ mobile phones (cf. Adgwe, Mason, & Gromik, 2024). For instance, 21-year-old Edward, who has a brother and two sisters, reported that his parents constantly searched his and his sibling’s phones to monitor their piety:

“They [parents] inspect the phone after every month that I am using to know whether things that [are] not Godly are in my phone [and] they will punish us for it or they will take the phone [if they find inappropriate contents].”

Older siblings have been found to be deeply involved with the everyday lives of younger siblings, performing roles that include guardianship. For example, a recent study in Nigeria found that older siblings support and prohibit young siblings' technology use (Uzuegbunam, 2024). We found a semblance of this reality in our analyses as narrated by one teenager, 17-year-old Edith:

"I was sleeping, she [Elder sister] took my phone, checked inside, and she saw certain message that she's not supposed to see, she got vex, burst [broke] the phone, [and] threw the sim-card [away]." In African societies, it is culturally normative for older siblings to play near-substitute roles for parents, providing care and watching over younger ones to keep them from harm (Hapunda, 2022).

Gender has been found to determine the degree of restrictive parental mediation of media use by children, with girls receiving more restrictions than boys (e.g., Livingstone & Helsper, 2017b; Nagy et al., 2023). We found similar patterns from our analyses. All the girls interviewed, regardless of age, said they experienced tougher restrictions concerning the use of their mobile phones. The stronger restrictions on girls may be to avoid teenage pregnancy, which is a common occurrence in Liberia, where, on average, three in ten are pregnant before the age of nineteen (Rehman, 2010). Mobile phones allow teenagers to connect easily with peers and their partners and afford unregulated access to the internet and exposure to sexual content that can motivate early sex (cf. Yakubu & Salisu, 2018), which can result in early pregnancy. This may explain why the girls in our study, such as Hawa and Miatta (both age 19), reported tougher restrictions by their parents. Said Hawa,

"Sometimes my friends call and my mother intercept the call and insult them. She will say they are useless, and they should leave me (laughs)." Miatta said,

“I was calling...and my mom, she came and saw me calling and she ceased the phone for almost a year.”

In sum, the parents of Liberian teenagers we interviewed were perceived by their children to use authoritarian approaches in their application of parental mediation. Most of the teens interviewed reported phone seizure, phone search, and call interference as mediations enacted by parents. This parenting style seemed to fall more heavily on girls than boys (cf. Livingstone & Byrne, 2018).

Teens’ perception of parental mediation

Teenagers’ description and understanding of parental mediation can vary from what parents actually do to why they do it. For example, Burton, Bwalya and Sihubwa (2022) in a Zambian study found that children slightly overestimated the mediation of their parents. In other words, what children perceived as parental heavy-handedness in terms of how parents mediated their mobile phone use was not quite true. Parents generally believed their actions were aimed at keeping their children safe from potential harm.

In our study, nearly all the teenagers expressed dislike for parental mediation and viewed the practice as controlling and threatening to their autonomy. Said Joshua (age 21),

“For me it [parents accessing children’s phone] doesn’t go down well with me because we [children] need to have freedom to do some things that make [us] to be happy.” For Maybel (female, age 17),

“I think that it [parents accessing children’s phone] is bad. As long as you [referring to parents] buy me phone, it should be for me, and you shouldn’t be looking inside.” Edith (age 17) agrees,

“By right, parents are not supposed to check in children phone. You give me the phone because you want me to have my own privacy so what’s the essence of you checking in my phone?”

This view, however, was not shared by all the teenagers. Whereas others frowned on the perceived parental heavy handedness, some viewed it as necessary and as part of parental duties to provide safeguards for children against harm. Said 18-year-old Fatu (female),

“I think it should be that way, because [it’s] for the best. They’re your parents, they brought you into this world, they will not look at anything that will harm you in the future and just sit back and look at it, so allowing them to go through your phone is the best.” Supported by Siah (age 20),

“It’s good for parents to check in their child phone to see whether there [are] some things going out of hand, like sending nude videos to people.” Sam (twenty years) said,

“Our parents are the ones that begot us and some children use their phone to go astray.”

Teenagers’ concerns for privacy and the desire to have control over their personal information was confirmed in our study. Specifically, nearly all the teenagers in our study demonstrated displeasure towards the idea of parents having access to teens’ phones. Stated Joshua (age 19),

“I don’t like for people to hold my phone, most especially my mom and dad.” Joshua went further to state that parental monitoring can be a source of tensions between parents and child:

“In case I give my phone to my dad, and he sees something that he’s not supposed to see there, he will feel angry.” Two other teenagers, Emma (female, age 19) and Mamu (male, age

18) agreed with Joshua on how problematic parental monitoring can be for both teenagers and parents. Emma said:

“There are some things in this phone that when you [referring to parents] see it you will feel bad about me.”

Mamu said,

“Looking through my phone at my privacy, I don’t like that honestly.” There [are] certain things my parents don’t have to see (laughs).”

The teenagers believe that their mobile phones should be private. This means, what they do with or on their phones, what they share and with whom, should be something that they should decide. The comments by the teenagers suggest that they believe there should be a boundary between parental guidance and teenagers’ privacy. As we show in the next section, transgressing that boundary can produce inter-generational tensions and unintended consequences (i.e., a boomerang effect), or under-the-radar behaviors.

Going under the radar

Parental mediation perceived as too controlling and restrictive appears to be resulting in Liberian teenagers’ dependency on mobile phones. This perception in turn is leading teens to enact creative ways of using mobile phones to circumvent parental control and monitoring. Some novel strategies enacted by Liberian teenagers and revealed in our analyses include concealment, phone muting, and digital disconnection. Using these mobile phone-supported techniques, some of the Liberian teenagers interviewed disclosed being able to escape parental surveillance and control in covert ways (cf. Burton, Bwalya & Sihubwa, 2022) that enable them to access, view, and even share adult contents or sexually explicit images of themselves (i.e., sexting). Twenty-

year-old Siah (female) and 16-year-old Abdul (male) narrated how they clandestinely use their mobile phones to sext and watch porn videos under the radar of parents and adults. Said Siah,

“When you have phone, you will do video call, having fun, nobody will know what you doing. Sending naked videos and naked pictures, your parents won’t be checking in your phone so they won’t know what you are doing.” Abdul stated,

“I sleep [in the same room] with my big brothers so I have my earpiece [and] at mid-night when my friends are sleeping, I will go near the wall, put my earpiece into my ears, and put it (porn video) on and watch it.”

To avoid detection, some of the teens mentioned using privacy protection strategies such as multiple passwords, lock patterns, concealment apps, and even data erasure, such as deleting messages and call data. Bendu (female, age 18) said she uses security lock patterns to keep her parents from accessing her private content:

“Because some things may be in it [the phone] that you [referring to parents] are not supposed to see [so] I put pattern to all of my apps.”

Afraid that her phone might be searched, Hawa (female, age 19), disclosed using data erasure techniques by erasing all sensitive data and information from her phone whenever her mother requests to use the phone.

“If my mom wants to use my phone I delete all necessary [sensitive/personal] things that I have in my phone...or I hide it so that she cannot be angry with me.” For Patience (female, age 17), her eldest brother with whom she lives forbids her from communicating with boys and from having a boyfriend, a rule she admitted frequently violating. To keep her brother in the dark, Patience uses her friends’ phones to communicate with her boyfriend, after which she deletes the call information from the call log

“Sometime when I am having some of them (i.e., boys) number, I will call on my phone, but I will delete it from there.”

Private mobile consumption of sexual contents, such as pornographic videos and sexual images, appears to also be practiced among Liberian teenagers (cf. Stephen et al., 2017). Mary (age 18),

“I have a secret calculator on my phone...It looks like a real calculator, and you can calculate on it, but underneath it, there’s a [pass]word to go through it. So, anything [an allusion to sexual contents] I don’t want my parents to see, I put it in there.” Said Ezekiel,

“...this [pornographic] movies, XXX yea when you get it, and you don’t want for people to know about it, you can put it in the calculator and hide it.”

A UNICEF 2020 study conducted in East Asia found the enactment of similar novel strategies (e.g., deleting messages and call records, use of multiple online accounts, covert use of parents’ phones, etc.) by teenagers to escape detection by parents and adults. Marwick and Boyd (2014) report similar findings regarding teenagers’ use of strategies to illude snooping parents. These findings and ours highlight the consistency in teenagers’ desire for personal privacy from parents and adults.

Teenagers also reported engaging in ‘phone-muting’ and ‘digital disconnection’ when in the presence of parents and adults. The teens articulated using these strategies to escape the embarrassment and culturally unacceptable practice of speaking with friends on sensitive subjects related to sexuality and intimacy. Said Mechen (female, age 15), for example,

“My dad doesn’t like to see me around boys, so actually when their [boys] call is coming in, I will not answer it. I will cancel the call or when I around them [parents], I put it [phone] on silent.” Mary (age 18),

“There are certain calls (like boys) I will not be free to talk around them [parents]. I will prefer putting the phone on Airplane mode.” Sam (age 20) said,

“...at my age, answering woman calls in my mother’s presence is a complete disrespect. Though I’m 20, but I can’t do it in front of her [mother]. ”

A final under-the-radar practice mentioned by some of the teenagers involved concealing their online activities from parents. To do this, the teenagers in our study reported excluding parents from their online social networks and using web browsers, rather than a mobile app, to access social media platforms. Said Mechen (female, age 15),

“We as children do not like to send our parents or other family members friend request because we don’t want them to know what we are doing.” Jacob (age 21) added to the narrative,

“We go to Opera Mini and then we browse on Facebook. Most parents are tough on their children [and] that’s the strategy the children always use on their parents. ”

Both boys and girls reported engaging in the under-the-radar practices described here, although girls reported engaging in the behavior more than boys. This may be because girls experience more parental restrictions and control than boys (cf. Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). These results illustrate how mobile phones grant teenagers some degree of geographic and social autonomy (cf. Schnauber-Stockmann et al., 2021). They show how they adapt to changing and uncontrollable circumstances with the aid of mobile phones, doing so in ways that produce less tension with parents. The findings here are similar to Burton, Bwalya and Sihubwa’s (2022) Zambian study in which they found that children employed illusive strategies, such as using a friend’s phone and deleting phone data such as calls and messages, to circumvent restrictions imposed by their parents. These findings point to the ineffectiveness and false security of restrictive mediation.

Discussion

Through interviews with teenagers, this study explored parental mediation practices in relation to the mobile phone in the West African country of Liberia. An additional aim of the study was to investigate how teenagers respond to parental mediation of using their mobile phones.

Our interviews with 37 teenagers revealed two dominant strategies used by Liberian parents: restrictive and monitoring mediation strategies (cf. Cino, Mascheroni, & Wartella, 2020). Based on the accounts of the teenagers, parents use these strategies in ways that are authoritarian: they confiscate teenagers' phones and sometimes even destroy the phones. Moreover, some parents were reported to regularly search through teenagers' phone messages, photos, and call logs. Compared to boys in our study, more girls reported experiencing these parental mediation practices. Hence, girls reported engaging in more covert use of their phones than boys to navigate parental restrictions. According to the teenagers' reports, Liberian parents' mediation practices appear to be partly motivated by religious beliefs and norms.. Religion is an inherent element of West African and Liberian culture in which Christianity and Islam are the dominant religions even though other smaller groups exist (Mhaka-Mutepfa & Maundeni, 2019). Parents use religion as an inhibiting force against unacceptable youthful desires and practices. The authoritarian parenting styles described in this study by teenagers not only gives parents a sense of false security but can have consequences on parent-child relationships and communication, limit or take away important opportunities afforded by mobile phones and leave children reliant on peers for support (Burton, Bwalya, & Sihubwa, 2022; Livingstone & Byrne, 2018).

There was no mention of the use of enabling or active, co-use, and technical mediations. These forms of parental mediation may be culturally problematic for Liberian parents or may challenge parents' technical competence. This is accentuated by Adigwe (2021) who found that lack of digital skills can hinder the parental mediation practices of parents. Enabling and co-use mediation require that parents engage in open discussions with teenagers about media contents (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018; Livingstone et al., 2017). Liberian parents may find such strategies problematic, considering the cultural norms and taboos that exist around parent-child communication on subjects of sex and sexuality in Africa (e.g., Olusanya et al., 2013). On the other hand, technical monitoring, or control, were not mentioned by the teenagers in this study. This is perhaps because parents lack the digital skills to utilize the available technologies (cf. Livingstone & Byrne, 2018; Livingstone et al., 2017).

Second, our findings confirm teenagers' apprehension of parental mediation (cf. Ghosh et al., 2018). Teenagers also respond to parental mediation in the opposite way by engaging in the restricted behaviors. Our findings are consistent with previous studies that show that teens not only perceive restrictive parental mediation negatively as a threat to their autonomy and privacy rights, but they also enact rebellious behaviors against parental restriction to restore their freedom (Sasson, 2019). Hence, the centrality of mobile phones in the lives of teenagers and the different meanings teens give to mobile phones when confronted with limiting and structural circumstances (cf. Vanden Abeele, 2016) can be understood.

Our results show that in response to parental mediation of mobile media use, the Liberian teens whom we interviewed enact novel mobile phone practices (cf. Marwick & boyd, 2014), such as phone-muting, digital disconnection, concealment behaviors, and data erasure, that allow them to operate under the radar of parents. These under-the-radar behaviors (e.g., viewing sexual

contents) found in this study, although also reported by boys, were reported mostly by girls. This may be because of the comparatively tougher restrictions girls face compared to boys (cf. Livingstone & Byrne, 2018), which forces them to conceal acts deemed as unacceptable.

Also, similar to what is reported in both Western and African literature, we found the consumption of pornography among Liberian teenagers. Pornography, as described by the teenagers, refers to film depictions of sexual intercourse while sexual images refer to sexually explicit or nude pictures of oneself or others. Most of the teenagers (especially boys) indicated using their mobile phones to access these forbidden contents without their parents knowing. Pornography is viewed by West African parents as antisocial, immoral, and unacceptable behavior (Nwankwo, 2022). Sex and sexuality are considered culturally and normatively sensitive subjects in traditional African societies where religion (i.e., traditional African religions, Christianity, and Islam) influence sexual thoughts, perceptions, and acts (Nwankwo, 2022). In some African countries, pornography is even prohibited and considered criminal because it is considered harmful and age inappropriate for children (Coetzee, 2015). With internet-supported smartphones now ubiquitous, preventing teenagers from exposure to and consumption of pornography now poses challenges for West African parents (Adigwe & van der Walt, 2020) as demonstrated in our study.

We also demonstrate the clever ways by which teenagers challenge or navigate parental authority to regain control while managing their sociability and privacy from parents and adults (cf. Marwick & boyd, 2014). Moreover, as teenagers constantly negotiate boundaries of control, these teen mobile phone practices point to a potential shift in the power dynamics between parents and teenagers in Liberia (cf. Vanden Abeele, 2016). Overall, our study demonstrates that teenagers mobile phone practices are shaped by and grounded in the socio-cultural realities in

which they live, highlighting intersections between local cultural norms and mobile media technology use.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Our study has some limitations. First, our participants were drawn from the capital city of Monrovia. Hence, the results may not be generalizable to teenagers living in rural and smaller urban cities. For instance, in more rural or smaller urban areas, schooling is less common, and most teenagers share phones in the household. Consequently, their experience and perceptions of parental mediation may be different from their colleagues in the capital of Monrovia. Future research that stretches beyond the capital can shed light on parental mediation and the mobile phone practices of teens living in these comparatively less opportunistic (e.g., poor education facilities, limited access to internet) zones. Second, the parental mediation practices discussed in this study are based on the perceptions and experiences of teenagers and not of parents themselves. Taking a parent-centric approach, future research could yield further insights into why Liberian parents prefer certain parental mediation strategies over others and what other motivations for parental mediation not revealed in our study exist. Consistent with the observation that older siblings adopt ‘parental roles’ in some African households (Mitchell et al., 2016), our study found that they equally monitor the media activities of their younger siblings.. (cf. Nevski & Siibak, 2016; Uzuegbunam, 2024). We therefore suggest future research to explore the role and perceptions of older siblings.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our findings have practical and theoretical implications for mobile phone research and for Liberian educators and parents. Theoretically, we show in this study that there exist

geographic differences in the application of parental mediation, pointing out the need for a more holistic approach to studying parental mediation. Doing so will broaden the scope and perspective of parental mediation thereby strengthening the theory.

On practical implications, our results demonstrate that (over)restricting and attempting to control teenagers can backfire and push teens to resort to under-the-radar behaviors that further exposes them to the very risks and dangers parents seek to prevent (cf. Burton, Bwalya, & Sihubwa, 2022). This is similar to what Burton, Bwalya, and Sihubwa (2022) found in a study in Zambia. They found that children still find ways to go online despite efforts by parents to impose restrictions. Our findings, therefore, highlight the need for media literacy education for parents and children. Media literacy can produce positive outcomes, such as media knowledge, criticism, influence, attitudes, and behavior (Livingstone & Byrne, 2018). A similar recommendation was advanced by Burton, Bwalya and Sihubwa, (2022) based on their study in Zambia in which they found a lack of awareness of the potential opportunities of digital technologies among caregivers (i.e., parents, teachers) to support children in the use of technology. For Liberian teenagers, such education may lead to more ‘appropriate’ use of mobile phones and may guide young people in media use while engendering self-regulatory practices that can minimize harm while maximizing benefits.

In sum, we suggest that, rather than restricting teens’ use of mobile phones, parents stand the chance of achieving the intended outcomes by engaging teenagers in open dialogue and coaching around media use and perceived risks and benefits of mobile phones. In this way, parents could avoid the risk of driving teens underground as demonstrated in our results.

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