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„The impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China with different levels of parental mediation“

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Introduction

WeChat, a messaging application for mobile devices created by Tencent, a Chinese company, was originally released in 2011. Initially marketed as Weixin in its native market of China, it was later rebranded as WeChat in 2012 to cater to international audiences (Lai, 2023). The number of active WeChat users has consistently grown in recent years. This multifunctional social media platform had more than 1.3 billion active users every month by the end of March 2023 (Lai, 2023). WeChat is now the fifth most popular social network in the world based on the number of active users (Lai, 2023). It is a popular social media platform in China and has become a crucial part of daily life for Chinese people. There are users of different age groups on it. According to the latest statistics on WeChat's age distribution, the under-24 age group ranks in second, accounting for 22.3% of the user base (Turner, 2023). Among this demographic, early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old represent a significant portion of WeChat users. While WeChat has brought numerous benefits, such as facilitating communication and socialization, it has also sparked concerns regarding its impact on interpersonal relationships, particularly among children and adolescents.

The usage of social media has become increasingly common among individuals across different age groups, including children and adolescents. The easy availability and accessibility of the internet and smartphones have also contributed to the growing popularity of social media platforms (Collin et al., 2015). Therefore, it becomes increasingly crucial to understand the impact of children and adolescents' use of these platforms on various aspects of their lives, including parent-child relationships as they spend quite a lot of time on these platforms.

Parent-child relationships play a crucial role in children's growth and well-being. These relationships provide positive guidance, emotional support, and a sense of security as

children face the various challenges of growing up (Buehler et al., 2006). Nevertheless, the emergence of social media has introduced new complexities into these relationships. Extensive and unsupervised use of social media has been found to have negative effects on the relationship between parents and children, which is supported by research of Valkenburg & Peter (2011). Such consequences include decreased face-to-face interaction, increased conflict, and reduced emotional support between parents and children (Nikken & Jansz, 2014).

Early adolescence, typically ranging from 10 to 14 years old, is a crucial phase of life period characterized by significant physical, cognitive, and social changes as individuals transition from childhood to adolescence (Blum et al., 2014). Physically, they experience rapid growth and hormonal changes. Their cognitive level also develops, which allowing them to for more complex thinking and decision-making processes. Socially, they develop their interpersonal skills by establishing new relationships and exploring their identities. Early adolescence serves as a critical period for establishing healthy habits and relationships that can have long-term effects on future growth and development (Blum et al., 2014). Understanding how the WeChat use influences parent-child dynamics during this critical period has significant value for parents, educators, and policymakers. Such insights enable them to provide appropriate guidance and support.

Effective parental mediation is one factor that can influence the WeChat use on parent-child relationships. Parental mediation of social media use refers to the parental control and supervision over children's social media use (Kirwil, 2009; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Research has shown that e-effective parental mediation plays a crucial role in mitigating the negative impact of social media use on parent-child relationships, as demonstrated by Rideout et al. (2010). To ensure that their children's WeChat use aligns with their values, interests, and safety concerns, parents can actively monitor their social media activities.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how parental mediation affects the relationship between WeChat use and parent-child relationships, in order to understand the key role of parental participation in controlling the potential risks related to WeChat use in early adolescence. The findings of this study will contribute to provide parents, educators and policy makers with valuable insights on the use of WeChat in early adolescence, therefore develop effective strategies and interventions to promote healthy WeChat use and maintain positive parent-child relationships.

Theoretical Background

Social Learning Theory and Cultivation Theory

In social learning theory, the definition of socialization refers to how we learn and adapt to society through specific social learning experiences. These experiences include observing and imitating the behaviors of others, receiving guidance and education from others, as well as receiving rewarded or punished from others. These experiences have an impact on our understanding, feelings, and behavior. In other words, socialization defines how we acquire knowledge from society, and in turn, results in affecting the way we think, feel, and behave. (Zimmerman, 2001). Children's self-regulatory ability to adjust to changing environments, especially those related to their age and physical development, can be attributed to their experiences with social learning. Self-regulation plays a critical role in children's overall development as socialization involves sacrificing immediate gratification or familiar coping mechanisms in order to attain later benefits (Zimmerman, 2001).

When Albert Bandura first suggested imitative responses as a crucial mechanism of social learning, he meant that learning does not occur in an isolated environment. Individuals do not learn alone, but by observing and imitating others. (Grusec, 1992). Human experience has consistently demonstrated the importance of interaction and cognitive outcomes. A core principle that emerges from Social Learning Theory is that individuals, whether for positive

or negative outcomes, observe, imitate, and emulate the behaviors of others. This truth held relevance during Bandura's time and holds even greater significance in the era of social media (Deaton, 2015).

In the contemporary era dominated by social media, communication has evolved into a dynamic and ubiquitous tool that facilitates interactions on multiple levels. Communication in the age of social media could be two-way, three-way, and even multi-directional interactions (Deaton, 2015). Children develop new skills through the process of observation and imitation of others' behaviors. Given this context, the complex nature of social media as a platform for children's social learning undoubtedly has a significant influence on various aspects of their behavior, social norms, and social relationships, etc.

Early adolescence is a critical time for building healthy habits and relationships, children during this period may actively observe and emulate popular communication patterns and behaviors on social platforms, including the WeChat platform (Blum et al., 2014). WeChat exposes children to a wide variety of social interactions, including conversations, multimedia content sharing, and participation in online communities. In turn, these experiences significantly influence children's perceptions of appropriate communication styles, interpersonal relationships, and social norms in the parent-child environment. These observations have the potential to shape their interactions with their parents and ultimately influence the dynamics of the parent-child relationship.

According to cultivation theory, a theoretical framework rooted in the fields of communications and sociology, the continuous exposure to media has a significant influence on how individuals perceive the world and behave in their lives (Nabi & Riddle, 2008). Professor George Gerbner developed the cultivation theory in the 1960s in order to explore the impact of television on viewers, providing insightful information about the relationship between media use and individual perceptions (Gerbner, 1969).

The cultivation theory suggests that people who are regularly exposed to media content are more likely to understand and interpret what is happening in society through the information and descriptions presented in the media (Nabi & Riddle, 2008). In other words, how social realities are portrayed in the media affects how people perceive and comprehend their surroundings. Individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors are gradually shaped as a result of frequent exposure to particular messages, themes, and narratives in the media. Therefore, exposure to the media greatly influences how people especially children in a specific period understand social norms, values, and views.

In the case of WeChat, early adolescent children who spend a significant amount of time on the platform may form their views of parent-child relationships influenced by the content they encounter. For example, if they observe interactions characterized by conflict, disrespect, or lack of emotional support on WeChat, they may come to believe that these patterns of communication are acceptable within their own parent-child relationships. Similarly, if they predominantly encounter positive and supportive interactions, they may develop more positive perceptions of parent-child relationships.

Social Media Use and Social Interactions

Undeniably, social media has ingrained itself into our daily lives during the past ten years. According to research, people use an average of five social media platforms to communicate and interact with their family, friends, colleagues, or acquaintances. (Waterloo et al., 2018; Bayer et al., 2020). Social interaction is a fundamental part of our daily lives, involving various forms of communication and behaviors among individuals within a society. From a sociological perspective, social interaction refers to the reciprocal influence and engagement between individuals when they come together in a social setting (Drew, 2023).

Social Media use encompasses various dimensions, including the content, duration, and frequency of social media consumption (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Therefore, in order to

investigate whether the use of social media affects the parent-child relationship, it is necessary to consider both the time children spend on social media platforms and the types of interactions and content children participate in on the platforms.

Increasing researchers have explored the complex and multidimensional relationship between social media use and social relationship. Under certain conditions, proper use of social media platforms is also a good way to enhance children's social skills (McNaughton et al., 2018). Through effective and appropriate guidance, the social media use can provide various opportunities for social interactions like promoting collaboration, communication, and cooperation with their peers. For example, these platforms enable individuals to connect with others, build relationships, and exchange information, thereby improving social interactions (McNaughton et al., 2018). According to the study conducted by Subrahmanyam & Greenfield (2008), online social media platforms have both positive and negative impact on adolescent relationships. On one hand, these platforms offer advantages by improving social connections, allowing self-expression, and fostering social support among adolescents. On the other hand, they also have negative impacts such as decreased in-person interactions, the potential for misunderstandings, and the threats of cyberbullying and privacy invasion.

According to the research of Kim (2007), there is a complex interaction between mental health and social media use. Excessive social media use may have negative consequences on social interactions, leading to increased feelings of social isolation and loneliness. Individuals with more severe psychological problems are more likely to have excessive social media use, which in turn will make their symptoms worse. The findings from Vossen & Valkenburg (2016) suggest that social media use among adolescents may have a complex impact on their empathy ability. On the negative side, online communication time occupies the time individuals spent with offline people, which may make the ability of empathy become obtuse. On the positive side, active engagement on social media, such as

participating in online discussions and sharing emotional content, is related to an increase of empathy, which refers to experiencing and responding to others' emotions.

As one of the social media platforms, WeChat provides a wide range of communication functions, including text messaging, voice messaging, video calls, and multimedia content sharing (*Welcome to WeChat*, n.d.). However, similar to other social media platforms, the use of WeChat has a series of impacts on social interaction, both positive and negative. The time and content of children's social interaction on WeChat may have an important impact on their communication patterns and social interactions with their parents and friends. For example, if children primarily communicate with brief text-based conversations on WeChat, it may affect the depth and richness of their communication with parents. On the other hand, if children actively share their thoughts, experiences, and emotions through multimedia content, it may boost the quality of parent-child interactions and provide opportunities for meaningful conversations. It is crucial to take into account the balance between online and offline interactions, as well as the nature and content of the interactions that occur within the platform, in order to fully understand the impact of WeChat usage on parent-child relationships.

Parental Mediation of Children's Social Media Use

Over the past two decades, the increase in children's internet and social media usage has raised concerns among parents, educators, and policymakers regarding the potential negative impact on children's social and emotional development. Various forms of online risks, including encountering inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and privacy violations, have become major areas of concern (Livingstone & Haddon, 2008). It is challenging for both children and their parents to anticipate and shield themselves from these risks, as anybody may develop a number of websites with risky content or facilitate risky communication. Due to the difficulty of creating and enforcing legal regulations in this field, policymakers heavily

rely on increasing parents' awareness of these risks and entrusting them with the responsibility of protecting their children online (Kirwil, 2009).

Parental mediation of children's social media use refers to the strategies parents apply to maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages associated with their children's online social activities. The socialization approach, one of the theoretical perspectives on parental mediation, emphasizes the influence of socialization cultures on parental practices. According to this approach, parents aim to align their family's socialization goals with those social media platforms (Padilla-Walker & Thompson, 2005). Parental mediation is shaped by various parenting strategies, practices, and techniques, guided by the values and attitudes of the parents. These values are influenced by broader cultural dimensions, such as individualism or collectivism, prevalent in a particular society (Schwarz et al., 2005).

For children's social media use, there are two main types of parental mediation: restrictive mediation and instructive mediation (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Restrictive mediation involves setting rules and limits on children's social media use, such as restricting access to certain features or setting time limits. This form of mediation aims to protect children from potential harm and regulate their media consumption. Instructive mediation, on the other hand, refers to direct communication and guidance from parents, such as discussing online safety, privacy concerns, and appropriate online behavior with their children. Through instructive mediation, parents can enhance children's understanding of the risks and responsible use of social media (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Researchers have proposed different parental mediation strategies based on their type and level. Lwin et al., (2008) suggest four strategies based on these two mediation strategies: laissez-faire (no mediation), restrictive (rule-making only), promotive (instruction only), and selective (both strategies). Livingstone and Helsper (2008) identify four factors of parental mediation: active co-use, technical monitoring tools, rule-making, and active monitoring of online and

social media activities. Active co-use involves joint media engagement between parents and children. It includes activities like browsing social media together, sharing experiences, and discussing the content encountered on the platform. Technical filtering and monitoring tools, rule-making (which limits media use), and parental active monitoring are three types of restrictive mediation.

Effective parental mediation strategies can influence children's behaviors, attitudes, and experiences on social media (Kirwil, 2009). However, the effectiveness of parental mediation may vary depending on factors such as child's age, temperament, and the mediation strategies parents apply. Additionally, the cultural and socio-economic context may also influence parental mediation strategies and their outcomes (Kirwil, 2009).

Social Media Use and Parent-Child Relationship

Studies have proved that a positive relationship between a child and his parents will help him succeed in this world and even affect their quality of life as adults (López Turley et al., 2010). When parents actively participate in the lives of their children, such as supervising their children's study, paying attention to their emotions, and communicating with them frequently, children will get higher educational returns compared to those with less parental participation (Mullis et al., 2003). Although the quality and closeness of parent-child relationship change during the different stage of life, there is efficient evidence proving that a strong parent-child relationship has a more positive impact on children in primary and secondary schools, as most children of this age live with their parents (Perna & Titus, 2005). Positive parent-child relationship can even reduce the negative impact of economic disadvantage on children's growth. Although a family with poor economic conditions may limit some resources and opportunities for children, parents can help them overcome financial difficulties and create a good growth environment by providing a warm and supportive family environment (Crosnoe et al., 2002). Considering the importance of the

parent-child relationship on children, it is necessary to understand the factors that affect it.

Social media use can have both positive and negative impacts on the parent-child relationship. On the positive side, social media platforms can provide new channels for communication and connection between parents and children. It allows parents and children to share updates, photos, and experiences, facilitating a sense of closeness even when geographically separated (Spies Shapiro & Margolin, 2014). Moreover, social media platforms can serve as a platform for parents to express support, encouragement, and praise for their children's achievements. Publicly recognizing and celebrating their children's accomplishments on social media can contribute to children's sense of self-worth and strengthen the parent-child bond (Amatea et al., 2006).

However, social media use can also cause challenges within the parent-child relationship. Excessive or unregulated use of social media can lead to decreased face-to-face interaction and limited quality time spent between parents and children (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). Parents may perceive their children's preoccupation with social media as a barrier to effective communication and bonding. Additionally, social media platforms can expose children to various content that may be inappropriate or harmful. Parents may worry about their children's exposure to cyberbullying, online predators, or privacy invasion on social media platforms (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). These concerns may prompt parents to increase monitoring, rules, and restrictions on their children, potentially impacting the parent-child relationship.

The impact of social media use on the parent-child relationship can vary depending on several factors. For instance, the child's age, personality, the time they spend on social media platforms, and parents' mediation strategies can all influence the parent-child relationship dynamic (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2020). Similarly, the parent's own social media use habits and attitudes towards technology can also influence their interactions with their

children. It is crucial to consider that the relationship between social media use and the parent-child relationship is bidirectional. While social media use can influence parent-child interactions, the quality of the parent-child relationship can also influence children's behaviors and experiences on social media platforms (Coyne et al., 2017).

Increasing research bodies examine all aspects of social media use among children and adolescents, studies have explored the impact of social media on parent-child relationships and the role of parental mediation (Collin et al., 2015 & Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2020), but only limited research has specifically focused on the impact of a specific platform such as WeChat. This popular Chinese social media platform is very widely used in China including children (Turner, 2023). Parent-child relationships play a critical role in children's growth and well-being, unsupervised and widespread social media use can negatively impact parent-child relationships, especially during early adolescence (10-14 years) when this is a crucial life period that they go from childhood to adolescence (Blum et al., 2014). According to previous research, effective parental supervision can help reduce the negative effects of social media use on parent-child relationships (Kirwil, 2009; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). However, there is still insufficient research on the impact of parental mediation in the context of WeChat use among early adolescent children in urban China. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 in urban China, especially under the different levels of parental mediation. In this regard, this study proposed the following research questions:

RQ1: Does the WeChat use of early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China affect the quality of parent-child relationship?

RQ2: Does parental mediation affect the relationship between WeChat use and the quality of parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China?

RQ3: Are there differences in the relationship between WeChat use and the quality of parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China with high versus low levels of parental mediation?

RQ4: Does the type of WeChat use (i.e. socializing versus academic/educational purposes) have different effects on the quality of parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China?

RQ5: Does the impact of WeChat use on the quality of parent-child relationships among 10-14-year-old early adolescent children in urban China differ by the gender of the parents (i.e., mother versus father)?

Based on previous research, the use of social media may challenge the parent-child relationship: excessive social media use will reduce the high-quality interaction time between parents and children, and parents may worry that their children are addicted to social media or exposed to inappropriate content, which will lead to more supervision, rules and restrictions of their children's social media use, thus potentially affecting their parent-child relationship (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Nikken & Jansz, 2014). According to these research findings, this paper hypothesizes that:

H1: Greater use of WeChat will be associated with lower quality of parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China.

Similarly, according to previous studies, reasonable and effective parental supervision is helpful in reducing the negative impact of social media use on parent-child relationship, so as to maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of their children's online social activities (Kirwil, 2009; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Rideout et al., 2010). In this paper, we want to verify whether parental mediation can also reduce the negative impact of WeChat use among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H2: Higher levels of parental mediation will buffer the negative effects of WeChat use on parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China.

The use of social media has many aspects, including content, time, and frequency (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to consider the time children spend on social media, and the content types they participate in on the platforms to investigate the influence of their social media use on parent-child relationship,

For social purposes, spending too much time on online communication such as WeChat may loss non-verbal communication factors, such as facial expressions and body language. This may lead to misunderstanding and unclear communication, and increase the risk of communication barriers and conflicts (Venter, 2019). For academic and educational purposes, although WeChat facilitates information exchange and resource sharing, the lack of face-to-face interaction in long-term online learning may also affect the cultivation of social skills and interpersonal relationships (Yuhanna et al., 2020). Overall, Although the difference between the two purposes needs to be verified, considering that the overuse of WeChat for social purposes may also increase social isolation and loneliness (Kim, 2007), this paper hypothesizes that:

H3: WeChat use for socializing purposes will have a greater negative impact on parent-child relationships compared to WeChat use for academic or educational purposes.

In the current urban environment of China, there may be differences in parental roles and responsibilities. Mothers play a leading role in raising and educating children, but fathers are increasingly involved in the growth process of children and play an active role (Li, 2020). In view of this background, this study aims to explore whether the influence of WeChat use on parent-child relationship varies with parents' gender within the existing research framework. Therefore, this paper puts forward the hypothesis:

H4: The impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships will differ due to the gender of the parents, with maternal monitoring having a stronger mediating effect compared to paternal monitoring.

Method

Participants and Procedure

This study adopted an online survey method. Participants were parents/guardians of early adolescent children aged 10-14 living in urban areas of China, including male and female participants. In China, children aged 10-14 are usually students in grades 5 to 9, including upper primary and junior high school students (*China Education System*, n.d.). To maximize participant recruitment, I established contact with parent committee representatives from a middle school and an elementary school in urban area of Hangzhou, China, by the end of June 2023, as the end of June and the beginning of July coincide with the end of the school year and the start of summer vacation, parents tend to have relatively more free time to do the survey. I entrusted them with distributing the survey questionnaire in the WeChat groups composed of parents within the targeted grade levels. As a token of appreciation for their assistance, I paid them a small fee. It is common for almost every class in China to have a WeChat group where parents communicate with each other about their children's school-related matters. Some teachers also join these groups to communicate with parents about students' learning progress and the necessary parental involvement (*Trending in China*, n.d.). By targeting the parent WeChat groups corresponding to the age group of interest, the study aimed to obtain a relatively precise sample of the target population. Before conducting the main data collection, I conducted a pre-test by distributing the questionnaire to around ten parents whom I personally knew and who fit the target population criteria. Participants were asked to respond to a number of questions about their perceptions of the questionnaire. The

results showed that the respondents correctly understood the questionnaire. This step was taken to ensure that the questionnaire was properly understood and then produced the expected responses.

Participants were invited to fill out an online survey through the parent WeChat groups. Before the survey began, participants were first introduced to the main objectives of the study and the common privacy regulations on data use to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the survey. Participants were clearly informed that they had the freedom to withdraw from the survey at any time. This transparent and respectful approach can build trust and comfort among the participants. In order to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data, only participants who agree to take part in the survey can proceed to the next step of the questionnaire. Subsequently, those who agreed to participate were further asked whether they were the parents of children aged 10-14 living in urban China. Only participants who answered “Yes” could proceed to the next step of the questionnaire, while those who answered “No” would end the questionnaire. The purpose of this question was to ensure the precise targeting of the expected respondents, as only participants who met this criterion could provide valuable information related to the research questions. For those parents who met the criteria and agreed to participate, they will proceed to the main part of the questionnaire. This section covered a range of questions related to the independent variables, mediator variables, dependent variables, and sociodemographic information. By carefully and comprehensively collecting these data, the study will be able to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between WeChat use, parental mediation, and parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China, as well as the underlying influencing factors and mechanisms. This would provide a foundation for further analysis and research.

Data Sets and Sample

This study collected a total of 360 questionnaires, out of which 277 questionnaires were considered to be valid after selecting according to age and other relevant criteria. Among the respondents, the age distribution of parents ranged from 33 to 55 years old. Mothers accounted for 54.5% of the sample. The majority of respondents, 88.4%, were in married status. The highest proportion of parents' educational level was bachelor's degree, accounting for 43.7% of the respondents. Additionally, over 74% of the parents reported being employed full-time. Regarding the age distribution of the respondents' children, 12-year-olds were the most represented, accounting for 25.3% of the sample, followed by 11-year-olds at 22.4%, 10-year-olds at 20.9%, 13-year-olds at 16.6%, and 14-year-olds at 14.8%.

Measure

Children's WeChat Use

The children's WeChat use as the independent variable in this study was assessed in the questionnaire with the following item: "How frequently does your child use WeChat?" The response options ranged from 'Never' to '5 or more hours a day' and included the following categories: Never/Less than 1 hour a day/About 1 hour a day/About 2 hours a day/3-4 hours a day/5 or more hours a day. Additionally, another question was included to assess the purposes of children's WeChat use. The response options for this question were: Socializing purposes/Academic and educational purposes. Among the participants, 59.9% chose socializing purposes as the main purpose of their children's WeChat use. This question aimed to understand whether the different purpose of WeChat use has differential effects on the quality of parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China.

Parental Mediation of Children's WeChat Use

The mediator variable is parental mediation of children's WeChat use, which is assessed

through six questions aimed to understand parents' mediation strategies. Based on Kirwil's (2009) parental mediation framework, the questions include:

- To what extent do you utilize filtering/blocking tools to restrict your child's access to certain functions on WeChat?
- To what extent do you limit the amount of time your child spends on WeChat?
- To what extent do you restrict the content your child is allowed to access on WeChat?
- To what extent do you monitor or check the content of your child's WeChat account?
- To what extent do you use WeChat together with your child to share the experience and provide instructive interactions?
- To what extent have you established a rule requiring your child to voluntarily report online risks to you?

These questions aim to assess various aspects of parental mediation, including time restriction, content restriction, parental monitoring, social co-use, and non-restrictive rule making, in relation to their child's use of WeChat. All answers are measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from Never (=1) to Always (=7).

Parent-Child Relationship Quality

Parent-child relationship (PCRS) is the dependent variable in this study, and it is measured using the Parent-Child Relationship Scale (PCRS) which was developed by Pianta (1992). This scale consists of 30 specific items to evaluate various aspects of the parent-child relationship, with 26 of these items further divided into three sub-scales: conflict subscale (12 items), positive aspects of relationship (closeness) (10 items), and dependence subscale (4 items). All statements are measured by a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (=1) to strongly agree (=7). The conflict subscale evaluates the negative aspects of the parent-child relationship, for example, the conflicts and disagreements between parents and children. The positive subscale assesses the positive aspects of the

relationship, including the level of intimacy and effective communication within the relationship. The dependence subscale measures the degree of children's reliance on their parents for support and guidance. The conflict subscale needs to be reverse coded, and the scores from the conflict, positive, and dependence subscales are combined to generate an overall average score for each respondent. This comprehensive score represents the overall quality of the parent-child relationship, taking into account both positive and negative aspects. Higher scores on the scale indicate stronger and more positive parental relationships (Zebrea et al., 2020).

Covariates

The online survey included questions regarding some aspects of socio-demographic information, such as parents' gender, age, marital status, educational level, employment status, as well as the gender and age of their children. These demographic factors were considered in this study to control for the age of the participants and their children. Additionally, exploring whether the gender of the parents or other factors will also affect the parent-child relationship under the research framework.

Analysis

The analysis in this study only chose participants who provided complete information for all variables in the questionnaire (N = 277; 77% of the total sample). First, in order to ensure the internal consistency of the latent variables, this study conducted a reliability analysis on the variable parent mediation of children's WeChat use and the variable parent-child relationship. The variable parent mediation consists of 6 items, and showed good internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.94. Similarly, the variable parent-child relationship consists of 26 items, and the result of Cronbach's Alpha is 0.77, which also shows acceptable internal consistency. Descriptive statistics analysis was also conducted on

all required variables, followed by correlations analysis, regression analysis, PROCESS (V4.2) mediation analysis, and T-test analysis to address the specific research questions and hypotheses. These analyses were carried out to obtain meaningful conclusions of the research questions and validate the hypotheses based on the study's objectives.

Results

After conducting descriptive statistical analysis for each relevant variable, this study performed a correlation analysis. The result of the zero-order Pearson correlations, as shown in **Table 1**, revealed several correlation findings. First, parental education level shows the most significant positive correlation with the parent-child relationship, $r(275) = -.23, p < .01$. Additionally, the purpose of WeChat use is significantly negatively correlated with WeChat use frequency, $r(275) = -.89, p < .01$. Moreover, parental mediation is significantly positively correlated with the frequency of WeChat use, $r(275) = -.78, p < .01$. Conversely, parental mediation is significantly negatively correlated with the purpose of WeChat use, $r(275) = -.78, p < .01$, which indicates that parental mediation is lower when WeChat is used for academic purposes compared to social purposes.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between each relevant variables in this study

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.Parent-child relationship	4.53	.67	-							
2.WeChat use frequency	3.80	1.41	-.03	-						
3.WeChat use purpose	1.40	.49	.02	-.89**	-					
4.Parental mediation	4.98	1.54	.02	.78**	-.78**	-				
5.Parental gender	.43	.50	-.08	.03	-.04	.10	-			
6.Parental age	37.60	4.01	-.09	.04	-.04	.04	.15*	-		
7.Parental education	3.48	1.24	.23**	-.06	.07	-.01	-.09	-.10	-	
8.Parental employment	1.30	.60	-.09	-.07	-.07	.10	-.10	.04	-.16**	-

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In order to predict the impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships, several attempts were made with different covariate selections. Ultimately, a linear regression analysis was conducted with parent-child relationship as the dependent variable and WeChat use frequency and parental mediation as the independent variables. Parental age, gender, education level, and employment status were controlled as covariates to ensure the significance of the results. It can be seen from **Table 2** of results of the regression model that $F(6, 255) = 4.17, p < .001$, with an R^2 of .09, an adjusted R^2 of .07, the stability of the model is relatively low, but the model is still statistically significant. Based on the regression coefficient results, it was found that WeChat use frequency was significantly negatively correlated with parent-child relationship, while parental mediation was significantly positively correlated with parent-child relationship. Therefore, this model answered the question of **RQ1**, confirming that WeChat use does indeed impact the parent-child relationship quality among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China. **H1** was also supported, as there was a significant negative relationship between WeChat use frequency and parent-child relationship, proving that greater use of WeChat is associated with lower quality of parent-child relationships.

Table 2

linear regression analysis between WeChat use and parent-child relationships

Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>
Constant	4.66***		.43	4.66***		.44
Parental gender	-.08	-.06	.08	-.10	-.08	.08
Parental age	-.01	-.07	.01	-.01	-.07	.01
Parental education	.13***	.23	.04	.13***	.22	.04
Parental employment	-.06	-.05	.07	-.07	-.06	.07
WeChat use frequency	-	-	-	-.11*	-.23	.05
Parental mediation	-	-	-	.09*	.21	.04
		$R^2 = .07$			$R^2 = .09$	
		$\Delta R^2 = .06$			$\Delta R^2 = .07$	
		$F(4, 257) = 4.85, p < .001$			$F(6, 255) = 4.17, p < .001$	

Note. $N = 257$.

Dependent Variable: parent-child relationships.

Predictors in Model 1: (Constant), Parental Gender, Parental Age, Education level, Employment Status.

Predictors in Model 2: (Constant), Parental Gender, Parental Age, Education level, Employment Status, WeChat use frequency, Parental mediation.

*** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$.

To examine whether there were differences in parent-child relationships based on the purpose of WeChat usage, an independent samples t-test was conducted between WeChat use purpose and parent-child relationships. According to the results in **Table 3**, socializing purpose ($M = 4.52, SD = .56$) compared to academic purpose ($M = 4.54, SD = .80$), there is no significant difference was found, $t(275) = -.27, p = .79$. The value of Cohen's d was .03 ($< .20$) which indicated small effect size. This finding answers the **RQ4** that the type of WeChat use (socializing vs. academic/educational purposes) does not have a different effect on the quality of parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China. It also verified that **H3**, which states that WeChat use for socializing purposes, will have a greater negative impact on parent-child relationships compared to WeChat use for academic or educational purposes, is not supported.

Table 3

Comparisons of different WeChat Use Purposes on Parent-child Relationship

Variables	Socializing Purpose		Academic Purpose		<i>t</i> (275)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Scores	4.52	.56	4.54	.80	-.27	.79	.03

To answer **RQ2** and **RQ3**, this study conducted a mediation analysis using PROCESS (V4.2) with parent-child relationships as the dependent variable, WeChat use frequency as the independent variable, parental mediation as the mediator variable, and parental gender, age, education level, and employment status as control variables. From the results in **Table 4** and **Figure 1**, it can be observed that WeChat use frequency has a significant direct negative effect on parent-child relationships ($b = -.11, p = .02, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-.2083, -.0152]$), indicating a direct relationship between WeChat use frequency and parent-child relationships. Additionally, the results demonstrate that WeChat use frequency significantly affects parental mediation ($b = .89, p = .000, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.8102, .9743]$), and parental mediation significantly affects parent-child relationships ($b = .09, p = .04, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.0041, .1774]$), both indicating a positive correlation. Thus, this model addresses the **RQ2** and **RQ3** by showing that parental mediation affects the relationship between WeChat use and the quality of parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China, and the level of parental mediation can also lead to differences in the relationship between WeChat use and parent-child relationship quality. That is to say, **H2** is supported, indicating that higher levels of parental mediation will buffer the negative effects of WeChat use on parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China.

However, the indirect effect is not significant ($95\% \text{ CI} = [-.0304, .1896]$), suggesting there may be other mediation variables that have not been identified. Further in-depth research is needed to investigate other potential mediators and determine their impact on the

relationship between WeChat use frequency and parent-child relationships.

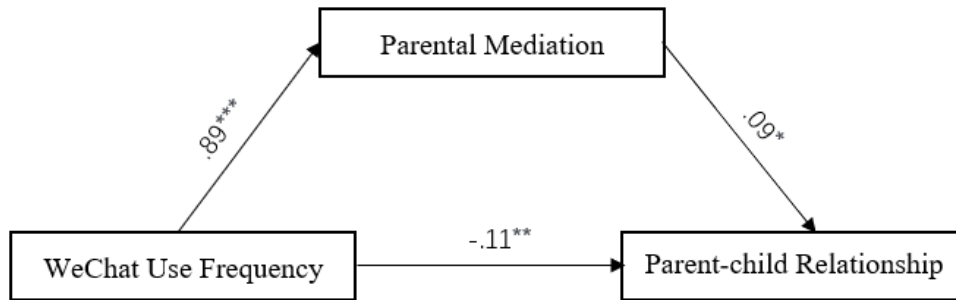
Table 4

Mediation analysis of WeChat use frequency on parent-child relationship through parental mediation

	M (Parental mediation)				Y (Parent-child relationship)			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>CI</i>
X (WeChat use frequency)	.89***	.04	21.40	[.8102, .9743]	-.11*	.05	-2.28	[-.2083, -.0152]
M (Parental mediation)	-	-	-	-	.09*	.04	2.06	[.0041, .1774]
			R ² = .65				R ² = .09	
			F (5, 256) = 94.67, p < .001				F (6, 255) = 4.17, p < .001	

Note. ***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05.

Figure 1: The effects of WeChat use frequency on parent-child relationship through parental mediation



***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05.

To address **RQ5**, this study conducted another mediation analysis using PROCESS (V4.2) with parental gender as the independent variable, parent-child relationships as the dependent variable, parental mediation as the mediator variable, and parental age, education level, and employment status as the control variables. From the results of the model, it can be observed that parental gender does not have a significant direct impact on parent-child relationships ($b = -.17, p = .56, 95\% CI = [-.7331, .3965]$). Thus, this model addresses the **RQ5** by showing that the effect of WeChat use on the quality of parent-child relationships among 10-14-year-old early adolescent children in urban China does not differ due to the gender of the parents. Therefore, **H4** is also not supported.

Discussion

Through the study findings on the complex dynamics between WeChat use and parent-child relationship with different levels of parental mediation among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China, valuable insights have been obtained, which can be further analyzed, explained, and compared with previous research. Further research could develop deeper into these associations and consider other potential factors, such as family background, cultural differences, and social environment, to comprehensively understand the complexity of this field. This knowledge will contribute to providing more targeted guidance for intervention measures and family support, ultimately fostering positive parent-child relationships and promoting the healthy development of children.

First, the findings of this study support the hypothesis that more frequent use of WeChat among early adolescent children in urban China is associated with lower quality of parent-child relationships. This result is consistent with previous research, which emphasized the potential negative impact of excessive use of social media on parent-child communication and emotional support (Nikken & Jansz, 2014; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). The popularity of WeChat among the younger generation in China has brought new challenges to maintaining meaningful parent-child interactions, as overuse may distract attention and decrease the quality of offline communication. By recognizing the potential negative consequences of excessive use of WeChat on the quality of parent-child relationship, it's more likely to draw parents' attention to supervising their children's WeChat use, so as to better guide their WeChat behavior and think about more effective measures to strengthen parent-child relationship.

In addition, the findings of this study also support the hypothesis that higher levels of parental mediation can buffer the negative impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships among early adolescent children in urban China. This finding is also consistent

with previous studies, which emphasizes the significance of parental mediation in managing children's social media use and maintaining healthy parent-child relationships (Rideout et al., 2010). Parents can reduce the negative impact on the relationships with their children by actively supervising and regulating their children's use of WeChat. The supervising measures that can be taken include setting a reasonable time limit, formulating acceptable rules, and having open discussion and communication with their children, so as to guide them to use WeChat correctly, avoid excessive addiction and inappropriate or harmful content. Apart from these measures, the exemplary role of parents themselves is also very important. As role models for children, parents should also follow the rules of WeChat use which setting by themselves, ensure that they also show positive and healthy behaviors when using WeChat.

Previous research has indicated that both restrictive and instructive parental mediation strategies can make sense and have the potential to reduce children's social media use risks, but their effectiveness depends on specific parenting styles and social-cultural contexts (Kirwil, 2009). Therefore, it is crucial for parents to know which strategies are most effective in specific cultural backgrounds. Further research can focus on the particular parenting environment and social-cultural factors in urban China to explore which parental mediation strategies are most effective for children in early adolescence. Through in-depth understanding and analysis of these factors, parents can be provided with more targeted strategies to help them better manage their children's WeChat use and promote healthy family interactions in different cultural settings.

However, the hypothesis that using WeChat for social purposes would have a greater negative impact on parent-child relationships compared to using it for academic or educational purposes among early adolescent children in urban China was not supported by the research findings. The results showed that whether WeChat is used for social or

academic/educational purposes, it may have a negative impact on parent-child relationship, and there is no difference due to different purposes. For social purposes, over-reliance on WeChat online communication often lacks non-verbal elements, such as facial expressions, intonation and body language. This makes the interpretation of information easy to be misunderstood, which leads to unclear information transmission, easy to cause communication obstacles and increase the risk of misunderstanding and conflict (Venter, 2019). For the academic or educational purpose, although WeChat provided a convenient channel for information exchange and learning resources sharing, especially during the period of COVID-19, long time online study and lack of face-to-face communication and cooperation opportunities may also affect the development of their social skills and interpersonal relationships (Yuhanna et al., 2020). Both purposes will indirectly lead to the reduction of parent-child communication and emotional support. For the possible differences, further research is needed to explore the potential mechanism and subtle differences of the influence of different WeChat usage patterns on parent-child relationship, so as to formulate corresponding intervention measures for different purposes.

The research results also do not support the hypothesis that the impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships differs with parental gender, with maternal monitoring playing a stronger mediating role compared to paternal monitoring. The lack of gender differences in the mediating role of parental supervision in this study may be attributed to several factors. First of all, although parents may have some differences in parenting roles and responsibilities, in the limited sample selected in this study, parents' supervision and participation in their children's use of WeChat may be similar. In addition, the social and cultural factors in the urban environment of China may also eliminate the potential gender differences to some extent. In the current urban environment of China, fathers are more and more involved in children's parenting and education, and play a more active role in children's

growth (Li, 2020). Therefore, although this study does not support the hypothesis that there are gender differences in mediation, it is important to realize that mothers and fathers have the same responsibility in supervising and educating their children. Parents, regardless of gender, should be encouraged to actively engage in managing their children's WeChat use and any other social media use, adopt appropriate communication methods to promote the trust and understanding of parent-child relationship.

Although this study provides some meaningful insights on the impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships among early adolescents in urban China, it also has some limitations. These limitations can provide directions for future research areas and provide a background for explaining the research results of this paper.

First of all, this study was conducted in the urban areas of China. Due to the limited data collected by this study, it's only participants from two schools in one city, which may restrict the generalizability of the research results to other cities or regions. Different regions in China have unique social and cultural norms, and different individuals have different habits of WeChat use. Future research could explore the influence of cultural factors and geographical differences on WeChat use and parent-child relationship dynamics.

Secondly, the study relies on parents' self-report survey to evaluate WeChat use, parent-child relationship, and parental mediation strategies, which may lead to potential biases and inaccuracies. Participants' feedback may be influenced by social expectations or subjective thoughts, intentionally or unintentionally exaggerating or underestimating their behaviors and opinions on WeChat use and parent-child relationship. In addition, this study did not collect children's views and opinions, children's views on their relationship with their parents' use of WeChat and parents' mediation strategies may be different from those of parents. Future studies can adopt more methods and data sources, such as combining parents' self-report and children's interview results to obtain more comprehensive and objective

information. In addition, the limitations of data collection in this study may lead to selection bias and limited sample representation. Participants are recruited only through a limited number of parents' WeChat groups in two schools, which may not fully reflect the diversity of the population. More diverse and representative samples are needed in future studies to enhance the generalizability of research results.

This study only considers the parental mediation strategies as a mediation factor between WeChat use and parent-child relationship. However, other factors, such as parents' communication style, parenting style, family structure and individual differences, may also affect the results, but they have not been discussed in this study. Future studies can take into account the influence of these additional factors in order to understand the complex dynamics more comprehensively.

Similarly, this study is mainly focused on early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old. The findings may not be directly applicable to other age groups, as the influence of WeChat use on parent-child relationship may differ across different developmental stages. Future research could also explore how the impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships varies across different age groups.

Finally, this study only considered the short-term impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships among 10-14-year-old adolescents in urban China, and did not involve the potential long-term consequences. Understanding whether the observed influence persists or changes with time can provide valuable insights for understanding the lasting impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships and children's development. Studies of long-term effects include tracking the trajectory of parent-child relationships and evaluating their quality and dynamics in a longer period of time, which requires following participants for months or even years. By observing the stability or fluctuation of parent-child relationship during children's transition from early adolescence to late adolescence, researchers can have

a deeper understanding of how the use of WeChat affects these relationships over time. In addition to the impact on parent-child relationship, research can also explore the long-term impact of WeChat use on other areas of children's development, such as exploring whether WeChat use will have an impact on long-term social interaction, academic performance and overall happiness. These studies can provide a valuable reference for the broader influence of the use of WeChat.

Conclusion

This study explores the influence of WeChat use on parent-child relationships among early adolescents aged 10-14 in urban China, emphasizing the impact of parental mediation as a mitigating factor. Through the theoretical background, methodology, and discussion of the results, this study has drawn some meaningful findings. The results show that the higher frequency of WeChat use among early adolescents in urban China is linked to lower quality of parent-child relationships. However, higher levels of parental mediation can buffer the negative impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships. It is noteworthy that the types of WeChat use, whether for social purposes or academic/educational purposes, do not have a different effect on the quality of parent-child relationships among Chinese early adolescents aged 10-14. Similarly, the impact of WeChat use on the quality of parent-child relationships in this age group is not affected by parental gender.

These findings emphasize the importance of parents' active involvement in supervising and guiding early adolescent children's use of WeChat to foster positive parent-child relationships and reduce potential negative effects. However, it is important to be aware of the limitations of this study. Future research can explore in-depth consideration of social and cultural factors, geographical differences, age group differences, and other potential factors while adopting more comprehensive research designs to obtain more accurate and comprehensive conclusions.

The findings provide some research references for parents, educators, and policymakers in urban China, enabling them to better manage the potential risks associated with WeChat use and create positive experiences for children during this crucial developmental stage. Firstly, for parents, the findings highlight their crucial role in supervising and guiding their children's WeChat use. Parents should actively engage in their children's WeChat and other social media activities, establish open communication channels, provide support and guidance to ensure that their children are fully aware of potential risks when using WeChat and learn to manage their online behaviors healthily. In addition, parents can use family time and activities to promote parent-child interaction, strengthen family cohesion, thereby further fostering a positive parent-child relationship. Educators can also educate students on how to use WeChat and other social media platforms properly to avoid potential negative impacts while emphasizing the importance of online safety and digital literacy. Policymakers can establish relevant policies and regulations to protect the rights and safety of children. Governments and schools can formulate regulations that require WeChat platform to provide suitable parental supervision tools and privacy protection mechanisms to ensure that children are properly protected and guided when using WeChat. Additionally, policymakers can support more public education campaigns to improve the digital literacy of parents and educators, thereby increasing their awareness and understanding of WeChat use. Through active participation and proper guidance to create a safe and supportive digital environment for children in China, the aim is to ensure that early adolescent children in urban China get positive social and learning experiences when using WeChat, promoting their overall development and well-being during this critical period.

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Appendix

Abstract (English)

This study aims to investigate the impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships among early adolescent children aged 10-14 years old in urban China with different levels of parental mediation. The study examined the role of parental mediation as a mitigating factor and explored potential differences in the impacts of WeChat use based on the WeChat use purpose and parental gender. This study used an online survey method to collect data from parents/guardians living in urban areas of China. Participants were invited to involve in the study through parent WeChat groups, and a total of 360 questionnaires were collected, of which 277 met the eligibility criteria and were used for analysis. The findings revealed in the context setting of this study, that higher frequency of WeChat use was linked to lower quality of parent-child relationships. Higher levels of parental mediation will buffer the negative effects of WeChat use on parent-child relationships. However, no significant differences were found in the impact of WeChat use on parent-child relationships based on the purposes of use or parental gender. The findings highlight the importance of parental supervision and active participation in guiding children's use of WeChat. Parents, educators, and policymakers need to promote responsible and cautious use of WeChat, better manage potential risks associated with WeChat use, and create positive experiences for children during this critical developmental stage. Given the limitations of this paper, future studies could explore in-depth considerations of social and cultural factors, geographical differences, age group differences, and other potential factors, while adopting more comprehensive research designs, to further deepen our understanding of the complex dynamics between WeChat use and parent-child relationships.

Abstrakt (German)

Diese Studie zielt darauf ab, die Auswirkungen der Nutzung von WeChat auf die Eltern-

Kind-Beziehungen bei frühadoleszenten Kindern im Alter von 10-14 Jahren in städtischen Gebieten Chinas mit unterschiedlichen Ebenen der elterlichen Vermittlung zu erforschen. Die Studie untersuchte die Rolle der elterlichen Vermittlung als mildernder Faktor und untersuchte potenzielle Unterschiede in den Auswirkungen der WeChat-Nutzung basierend auf dem Zweck der Nutzung und dem Geschlecht der Eltern. Diese Studie verwendete eine Online-Umfrage-Methode, um Daten von Eltern/Vormündern, die in städtischen Gebieten Chinas leben, zu sammeln. Die Teilnehmer wurden über Eltern-WeChat-Gruppen zur Teilnahme an der Studie eingeladen, und insgesamt wurden 360 Fragebögen gesammelt, von denen 277 die Teilnahmebedingungen erfüllten und für die Analyse verwendet wurden. Die Ergebnisse zeigten im Kontext dieser Studie, dass eine höhere Häufigkeit der WeChat-Nutzung mit einer geringeren Qualität der Eltern-Kind-Beziehungen verbunden war. Höhere Ebenen der elterlichen Vermittlung mildern die negativen Auswirkungen der WeChat-Nutzung auf die Eltern-Kind-Beziehungen. Es wurden jedoch keine signifikanten Unterschiede in den Auswirkungen der WeChat-Nutzung auf die Eltern-Kind-Beziehungen basierend auf dem Nutzungszweck oder dem Geschlecht der Eltern festgestellt. Die Ergebnisse betonen die Bedeutung der elterlichen Aufsicht und aktiven Beteiligung bei der Anleitung der Kinder bei der Nutzung von WeChat. Eltern, Pädagogen und politische Entscheidungsträger müssen eine verantwortungsbewusste und vorsichtige Nutzung von WeChat fördern, potenzielle Risiken im Zusammenhang mit der WeChat-Nutzung besser managen und positive Erfahrungen für Kinder während dieser wichtigen Entwicklungsphase schaffen. Angesichts der Beschränkungen dieser Studie könnten zukünftige Untersuchungen eine eingehende Betrachtung sozialer und kultureller Faktoren, geografischer Unterschiede, Unterschiede zwischen Altersgruppen und anderer potenzieller Faktoren ermöglichen und dabei umfassendere Forschungsdesigns anwenden, um unser Verständnis der komplexen Dynamik zwischen WeChat-Nutzung und Eltern-Kind-Beziehungen weiter zu vertiefen.