Mediating Grannies: Caring for Young Grandchildren who Use Digital Media

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Abstract: Based on online surveys conducted in the United States and Israel, this study explored grandmothers’ involvement in mediation of their grandchildren’s digital media use. Study participants were highly involved in restrictive, instructive and supervising mediation—and to a much lesser degree in co-use and technological mediation. Their involvement was significantly associated with their familiarity with digital media popular among children, engagement in other activities with their grandchildren, and past mediation (as mothers). Results highlighted the technical challenges older women face in their efforts to mediate their grandchildren’s digital media use.

Keywords: children, caregiving, grandmothers, mediation, technology

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Médiation des mamies: prendre soin des jeunes petits-enfants qui utilisent les médias numériques

Résumé: Sur la base d’enquêtes en ligne menées aux États-Unis et en Israël, cette étude a exploré l’implication des grands-mères dans la médiation de l’utilisation des médias numériques par leurs petits-enfants. Les participants à l’étude étaient très impliqués dans la médiation restrictive, instructive et supervisée - et dans une bien

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moindre mesure dans la co-utilisation et la médiation technologique. Leur implication était significativement associée à leur familiarité avec les médias numériques populaires auprès des enfants, à leur engagement dans d'autres activités avec leurs petits-enfants et à la médiation antérieure (en tant que mères). Les résultats ont mis en évidence les défis techniques auxquels les femmes âgées sont confrontées dans leurs efforts de médiation pour l'utilisation des médias numériques par leurs petits-enfants.

Mots-clés: enfants, soins, grands-mères, médiation, technologie

Introduction

Grandparents have always played a significant role in multigenerational families (Silverstein, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 1998; Townsend, 1957), but their responsibility has gained a new form and intensity over the past few decades. A host of demographic and social changes—such as prolonged life expectancy, women’s increased participation in the workforce and rising divorce rates—led to much greater involvement of grandparents in caregiving for their grandchildren (Arber & Timonen, 2015; Becker & Steinbach, 2012; Bengtson, 2001; Herlofson & Hagestad, 2012; Man & Turluc, 2014; Share & Kerrins, 2015). Currently, more than half of the grandparents in Western societies take care of their grandchildren at least once a week (Di Gessa, Glaser, & Tinker, 2015; Hank, Cavrini, Di Gessa, & Tomassini, 2018; Horsfall & Dempsey, 2015). Accordingly, they function as their grandchildren’s significant caregivers, educators, confidants and playmates (Kornhaber, 1996; Share & Kerrins, 2015).

Gender is prominent among the individual, interpersonal and circumstantial factors that shape grandparenting practices. Women spend significantly more time caring for their grandchildren than do men because of their longer life expectancy and social expectation to perform the gendered role of “grannies” (Hasmanová Marhánková, 2015; Tarrant, 2010). They make themselves particularly accessible to their grandchildren and actively maintain relationships with them (Breheny, Stephens, & Spilsbury, 2013; Eisenberg, 1988). Furthermore, they tend to assume primary responsibility for family preservation, keeping in touch with family members and organizing family gatherings (Burke, Adamic, & Marciniak, 2013; Herlofson & Hagestad, 2012; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Tarrant, 2010). Consequently, grandmothers have closer relationships with their grandchildren than grandfathers do (Ando, 2005) and being a grandmother plays a greater role in their identity than being a grandfather does for the men (Breheny et al., 2013; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004).

Digital media offer grandmothers new forms of communication with their grandchildren (Ivan & Hebblethwaite, 2016), as well as numerous opportunities for shared leisure activities (Nimrod & Ivan, 2019). The 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic provided ample evidence for the significant role such devices played in
keeping isolated grandparents in touch with their grandchildren while practicing social distancing (Glazer, 2020). When watching over their grandchildren, however, these technologies challenge grandmothers with the need to mediate their grandchildren’s digital media use by limiting screen time, selecting appropriate content, using the digital devices together and so forth (Nimrod, Elias, & Lemish, 2019a).

The present study is based on an online survey conducted in the US and Israel—two countries in which digital media have a high family infiltration rate (Elias & Sulkin, 2017; Rideout, 2017) but differ from one another considerably with respect to certain related aspects. Insofar as the current study is concerned, it is important to note that the average number of children per Israeli family is 3.1 as contrasted with 1.8 and declining for US families (Weinreb, Chernichovsky, & Brill, 2018). In addition, in Israel adult children tend to live close to their elderly parents and thus about three-quarters of older adults in Israel see their children and grandchildren at least once a week, with 18% reporting that they do so on a daily basis (Nimrod, 2008). In the US, in contrast, long-distance grandparenting is more common. When grandparents visit their grandchildren, they usually stay for longer and more intense visits (Harrington Meyer & Kandic 2017). To make the samples comparable, therefore, inclusion criteria in both countries stipulated that grandparents must provide caregiving for their grandchildren at least once a week. The study aims at exploring the extent to which grandmothers in these two countries are involved in various practices that mediate their grandchildren’s digital media use and the personal and contextual factors associated with such involvement.

1. Grandparents’ Engagement in Grandchildren’s Media Uses

Digital media such as computers and smartphones offer grandparents new forms of caring for their grandchildren. These media are applied in tending to the children’s physical needs (e.g., finding recipes for food that the children like, making doctors’ appointments), as well as in tasks such as GPS navigation during road trips, finding information to help them with their homework and the like (Nimrod, 2020). Grandparents also use digital media for recreational purposes by providing the children with a device to keep them busy and entertained, or to be used jointly (Nimrod, 2020; Nimrod & Ivan, 2019). In addition, applications such as Skype, WhatsApp and Zoom provide them with new forms of remote communication with their grandchildren when they are away (Busch, 2018; Ivan & Hebblethwaite, 2016; Nimrod, 2020; Quan-Haase, Wang, Wellman, & Zhang, 2018).

Various types of media use take up much of the time children spend under their grandparents’ supervision (Dunifon, Near, & Ziol-Guest, 2018; Öztürk & Hazer, 2017). Our recent study revealed that grandchildren spend about half the time under their grandparents’ supervision engaged in various media-related activities, with actual proportion increasing with children’s age from 42% among toddlers aged 2–3 to 58% among older children aged 6–7. In all age groups, this rate is lower among
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girls than among boys. Differences increase with age, so that among the older children, the rate is 49% for girls and 64% for boys (Elias, Nimrod, & Lemish, 2019).

Mediation of media use refers to caregivers’ direct intervention, as well as indirect influence on what, when, where and how children use various media (e.g., Clark, 2011; Lemish, 2015; Valkenburg, Krcmar, Peeters, & Marseille, 1999). Previous research identifies five chief mediation practices: restrictive mediation, in which the caregivers set rules for media use or prohibit exposure to certain contents; instructive (also known as active) mediation, that refers to discussion of certain aspects of the given media content with children during or following exposure; supervision, that includes attempts to remain in children’s proximity when they use media and to keep an eye on the screen; co-use, that describes situations in which caregivers and children use the media together and technological mediation, that includes caregivers’ attempts to improve children’s technical abilities needed for mastering various digital devices and platforms (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Nikken & Schols, 2015; Valkenburg et al., 1999).

Numerous studies conducted during the past two decades found that mediation of children’s media use is important for healthy cognitive, social and emotional development (Barkin et al., 2006; Clark, 2011; Collier et al., 2016; Nathanson, 1999; Pempek & Lauricella, 2017; Rasmussen et al., 2017; Warren, 2003). Most studies, however, focused on parental mediation and completely ignored the important mediating role that could be played by other meaningful caregivers, such as older siblings, nannies and grandparents. To minimize the potential negative effects and maximize the benefits of the extensive screen time that children receive under their grandparents’ care, grandparents could mediate their grandchildren’s digital media use when taking care of them, just as their parents do.

In this respect, our pioneer study demonstrated that grandparents are highly involved in various mediation practices, but are more likely to apply them to non-interactive media use (Nimrod et al., 2019a, 2019c). This finding was partially explained with the insights gained through a series of in-depth interviews with grandmothers of young children, who reported being less familiar with and less confident about the handling of their grandchildren’s digital activities than they were with screen viewing. Interestingly, this lack of confidence was expressed by older and younger grandmothers alike, from various socioeconomic strata (Elias, Lemish, & Nimrod, 2020). The phenomenon may also be explained by grandparents’ attitudes towards the positive and negative effects of non-interactive and interactive media uses, that could result in major variability when applying mediation practices (Nimrod, Lemish, & Elias, 2019b). Although they demonstrate the importance of distinguishing between the two kinds of uses, these findings also suggest that grandparents feel less confident and knowledgeable regarding interactive digital media.
2. The Present Study

Although older adults gradually reduce age-related digital divides, they continue to lag behind younger cohorts in terms of connectivity, frequency and complexity of digital media use (Eurostat, 2019; Schumacher & Kent, 2020; Vogels, 2019) and are expected to continue to do so in the coming decades (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011; Rogers, 2003). Moreover, recent studies documented a digital divide within the senior citizen sector itself, the so-called gray divide (Nimrod, 2017; Quan-Haase, Williams, Kicevski, Elueze, & Wellman, 2018), that is reflected at all levels of the digital divide, including accessibility, complexity and benefits gained from use.

The gray divide is often associated with gender. In fact, older women have fewer technology-related skills and express less confidence and more dependence on help from others than any other age and gender group (Kim, Lee, Christensen, & Merighi, 2017; Siren & Knudsen, 2017). As familiarity with a medium may affect involvement in mediation of its use by children, the task of mediating children’s use of digital media may be more challenging for grandmothers than it is for grandfathers. By focusing on grandmothers and concentrating on interactive digital media, the present study aims at exploring the extent to which grandmothers cope with this challenge. Accordingly, it was designed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent are grandmothers involved in mediating their grandchildren’s use of digital media?

RQ2: What personal, attitudinal and contextual factors associate with grandmothers’ digital mediation practices?

By examining the various mediation practices individually (i.e., restrictive, instructive, supervision, co-use and technological), the study reveals the factors associated with each. Moreover, while considering all factors whose impact on mediation were already explored in previous studies, including the child’s age and gender (Barkin et al., 2006; Warren, 2005), the caregiver’s characteristics (e.g., Connell, Lauricella, & Wartella, 2015; Nevski & Siiback, 2016), attitudes towards children’s media use (e.g., Mendoza, 2009; Valkenburg et al., 1999) and the caregiving context (e.g., Connell et al., 2016; Warren, 2005), this study also explores the sociocultural context of mediation.

3. Method

The study was based on two online surveys among 647 grandparents (356 in Israel and 291 in the US) of young children (aged 2–7), who reported taking care of their grandchildren at least once a week. The subsample used for the present study consisted solely of the 308 grandmothers that participated in the surveys, who reported that their grandchildren use digital media when they are under their
supervision (142 in Israel and 164 in the US). The total number of grandmothers was 484. Hence, the rate of grandmothers reporting digital use among their grandchildren was 63.6%.

Prior to data collection, the institutional review boards of the relevant universities in both countries examined and approved the study. A commercial firm that operates an online panel of 50,000 internet users collected the data in Israel during February and March of 2018, while the Qualtrics company managed the survey in the US with its own online panel of ~18 million persons during the months of June-July 2018. Study participants in both countries were randomly sampled from panelists aged 50 and over. Quotas were instituted to ensure that the sample included grandparents for grandchildren at different ages.

After answering screening questions related to having grandchildren, their age and the frequency of their grandparental care, participants were presented with a description of the research aims, detailed instructions and the researchers’ contact information. Participants who had several grandchildren in the relevant age range were asked to choose the one with whom they spend the most time and refer to that child only in the survey. Although they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason, all participants submitted responses and most answered the entire questionnaire.

3.1. Measurements

The study was based on a questionnaire that consisted primarily of closed questions but also included several open-ended ones. The original questionnaire was written in Hebrew and was translated into English by the research team. To validate the translations, a native Hebrew-speaking person re-translated them into Hebrew. This process was repeated until the re-translations were identical to the original English version.

Mediation. The questionnaire measured involvement in the five mediation practices of digital media uses, namely restrictive mediation, instructive mediation, supervision, co-use and technological mediation, with two items per construct (Nimrod et al., 2019a). The participants were asked to rate the frequency with which they are involved in the various mediating actions when they take care of their grandchildren on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“always”). Example items include “Specify when and for how long your grandchild is allowed to use digital media”; “Talk with your grandchild about something specific s/he does with digital media” and “Join the grandchild when s/he is using digital media.”

Grandchild’s and grandparent’s characteristics. Participants were asked to report the selected grandchild’s sex and age, as well as their own sex, age, education, work status, monthly income and perceived health on a scale ranging from 1 (“very bad”) to 5 (“very good”). In addition, participants were asked about their attitudes towards children’s digital media uses, their familiarity with digital devices and platforms oriented towards young children and their mediation practices
when they were mothers of young children. Attitudes towards digital media consisted of four media uses common among children and the participants were asked to report their opinion about the impact each use has on child development on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“very harmful”) to 5 (“very beneficial”). Similarly, participants were asked to evaluate their familiarity with digital devices and platforms popular among children. Finally, past mediation comprised items representing major parental mediation practices that were common three decades ago, such as limiting the duration of children’s television viewing, selecting appropriate content and co-viewing (Cronbach’s alpha=.886).

Caregiving conditions. A series of questions explored the specific context in which the grandparental caregiving takes place, including typical duration of caregiving, presence of additional children and/or other adults and whether the grandchild brings along a mobile device. Furthermore, participants were asked whether the grandchild’s parents ask them to follow specific instructions regarding media use. Those who answered affirmatively were presented with a list of five instructions (e.g., limiting media use duration; monitoring the content the grandchild is exposed to, etc.) and were asked to mark all that applied to their experience. Finally, they were asked to evaluate the frequency of their involvement in joint leisure activities while taking care of the grandchild (e.g., reading books, spending time outdoors, playing non-digital games etc.). The Cronbach’s alpha for items comprising this scale was .777.

3.2. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS v.25 software, with a confidence interval of 95% in all tests. Independent samples T-Tests were conducted to examine sociodemographic differences between the two national samples of grandmothers, as well as differences in grandparental mediation scores. Next, linear regressions were performed with each mediation scale as the dependent variable and the grandmothers and grandchildren’s characteristics—as well as the conditions of caregiving—as the independent variables.

3.3. Sample Characteristics

In the US, the grandmothers’ ages ranged from 50 to 73, with a mean of 59.45 years (sd=5.84); 57.9% married or in steady relationships; and 24.4% had an academic degree. Twenty-seven percent reported having a higher than average income; 35.6% percent were employed and 58.3% described their health as “very good” or “pretty good”. Forty-three percent reported that they watch over one grandchild only and 67.7% took care of the grandchild by themselves. The ages of the grandchildren were 2–3 (43.3%), 4–5 (28.7%) and 6–7 (28.0%); 47.0% of them were boys. Bringing along a digital device was typical of 72.6% of the grandchildren.

In Israel, the grandmothers’ ages ranged from 50 to 75, with a mean of 61.69 years (sd=5.75); 79.6% married or in steady relationships; 52.8% had an academic
degree. Forty-five percent reported having a higher than average income; 47.9% were employed; and 81.7% described their health as “very good” or “pretty good.” Thirty-five percent reported that they watch over one grandchild only and 51.4% typically took care of their grandchild by themselves. The age of the grandchildren was 2–3 (33.8%), 4–5 (30.3%) and 6–7 (35.9%); 55.6% were boys. Bringing along a digital device was typical of 37.3% of the grandchildren.

Table 1 displays the principal differences found between the subsamples according to grandchild’s and grandmother’s characteristics and caregiving conditions. It appears that the grandmothers in the Israeli sample were older, more educated, more active in the labor market, in better health and at a higher income level than their counterparts in the US sample. Moreover, they reported that the grandchild’s parents give them more instructions regarding media use. On the other hand, grandmothers in the US sample reported a much longer duration of a typical caregiving event, a stronger tendency to look after only one grandchild and that their grandchild had a stronger tendency to bring along a mobile device. In addition, they were characterized by more positive attitudes towards digital media, and greater familiarity with digital devices and platforms popular among young children.

Table 1. Differences between the American and Israeli Grandmothers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>US</th>
<th></th>
<th>Israel</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandmother’s characteristics</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age***</td>
<td>59.45</td>
<td>5.84</td>
<td>61.69</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education***</td>
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<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment*</td>
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<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income***</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health condition***</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes towards digital media*</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Familiarity with children’s digital media**</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>.94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past mediation</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>.75</td>
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<td>Child’s characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caregiving conditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duration of caregiving***</td>
<td>7.84</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>4.56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Looking for one grandchild</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alone or with other adults**</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandchild brings a mobile device***</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental instructions***</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>2.19</td>
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<td>Joint leisure activities</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>.73</td>
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</table>
Notes. Dummy codes. Sex: 0 = boy, 1 = girl, Education: 0 = non-academic, 1= academic; Employment status: 0 = not working (retiree/unemployed); 1 = working (part time/full time); Looking for one grandchild: 0=no, 1=yes; Alone or with other adults: 0=with other adults, 1=alone; Child’s age: 0 =2-3; 1=4 and older; Grandchild brings a mobile device: 0=no, 1=yes. Significance was tested using independent samples T-Tests. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

4. Results

4.1. Grandmothers’ Involvement in Five Digital Mediation Practices

Both the American and Israeli grandmothers were highly involved in restrictive, instructive and supervising mediation, whereas co-use and technological mediation were applied to a lesser degree. All in all, supervising grandchildren’s media uses was the most common mediation practice in both samples and technological mediation the least popular (see Figure 1). Furthermore, grandmothers in the US sample reported greater involvement in mediation than their Israeli counterparts with regard to all types of digital mediation practices except restrictive mediation, for which the scores were rather close.

![Figure 1. Grandmothers’ involvement in mediation of grandchildren’s digital media use](image)

Notes. Significance was tested using independent samples T-Tests. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.
4.2. Factors Associated with Grandmothers’ Digital Mediation Practices

Regression analyses exploring factors associated with each type of digital mediation practice revealed important similarities among the practices, as well as certain differences (see Table 2). Restrictive mediation was associated with higher involvement in past mediation (as a mother), greater engagement in grandchildren’s leisure activities and more parental instructions. Instructive mediation—high prior mediation involvement, greater engagement in grandchildren’s leisure activities, more familiarity with children’s digital media, more parental instruction and grandchildren in an older age cohort. Supervision—high prior mediation involvement, greater engagement in grandchildren’s leisure activities and more familiarity with children’s digital media. Co-use—high prior mediation involvement, greater engagement in grandchildren’s leisure activities, more familiarity with children’s digital media and grandchildren in an older age cohort. Finally, technological mediation was associated with higher familiarity with children’s digital media, more positive attitudes towards digital media, with younger age of the grandmother and the grandchild’s tendency to bring along a mobile device.

Three factors thus appear to be associated with most mediation practices: Engagement in grandchildren’s leisure activities and past mediation were each positively associated with four mediation practices (but not technological mediation), as was familiarity with children’s digital media (excepting restrictive mediation). Country of residence, on the other hand, was not significantly associated with any of the mediation practices.

Table 2. Factors Associated with the Five Mediation Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Restrictive</th>
<th>Instructive</th>
<th>Supervision</th>
<th>Co-use</th>
<th>Technological</th>
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<tr>
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<td>-.063</td>
<td>-.020</td>
<td>-.096</td>
<td>-.140**</td>
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<td>-.005</td>
<td>.020</td>
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<td>Employment</td>
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<td>-.039</td>
<td>-.050</td>
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<td>-.052</td>
<td>-.060</td>
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<td>Health</td>
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<td>-.084</td>
<td>-.045</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>.052</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitudes towards digital media</td>
<td>-.072</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>-.016</td>
<td>-.005</td>
<td>.148**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past mediation</td>
<td>.364***</td>
<td>.384***</td>
<td>.361***</td>
<td>.158**</td>
<td>.085</td>
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<tr>
<td>Familiarity with children’s digital media</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>.139**</td>
<td>.112*</td>
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<td><strong>Child’s characteristics</strong></td>
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<td>Sex</td>
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<td>-.032</td>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Note: The table above shows the coefficients associated with various factors for each type of mediation practice. The values indicate the strength and direction of the association between the factors and the mediation practices. Positive coefficients indicate a positive association, while negative coefficients indicate a negative association. The significance levels are denoted by stars: * for p < .05, ** for p < .01, *** for p < .001.
Duration of caregiving | .039 | .012 | -.053 | -.098 | .008
Looking for one grandchild | .046 | .002 | .052 | .076 | -.034
Alone or with other adults | .064 | .017 | .005 | .021 | .039
Parental instructions | .027*** | .139** | .060 | .088 | .040
Joint leisure activities | .029*** | .233*** | .371*** | .314*** | -.019
Grandchild brings a mobile device | .090 | -.028 | -.094 | -114* | -.241***
National context | -.013 | -.026 | -.047 | -.035 | -.039
R square | .430 | .446 | .394 | .368 | .299

Notes. Numbers represent Beta values. Dummy codes. Sex: 0 = boy; 1 = girl, Education: 0 = non-academic, 1 = academic; Employment status: 0 = not working (retiree/unemployed); 1 = working (part time/full time); Looking for one grandchild: 0 = no, 1 = yes; Alone or with other adults: 0 = with other adults, 1 = alone; Child’s age: 0 = 2-3; 1 = 4 and older; Grandchild brings a mobile device: 0 = no, 1 = yes; National context: 0 = US, 1 = Israel. *p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Discussion and Conclusions

As the first to focus on grandmothers’ involvement in mediation of their grandchildren’s digital media uses, as well as the first to explore factors associated with each type of grandparental mediation practices, this study yielded several important insights. First, whereas our previous research (Nimrod et al., 2019a, 2019c) already demonstrated that grandparents are highly involved in restrictive and instructive mediation and in supervision, but less involved in co-use, this study pointed to a relatively low involvement in technological mediation. This finding may be explained by the participants being older women—the most challenged group among technology users (Kim et al., 2017; Siren & Knudsen, 2017). The results might have been considerably different had grandfathers been examined.

Second, the study provided an understanding of the factors associated with each mediation practice and—most importantly—of the factors associated with all practices. First, we found that familiarity with digital media for children, that may both be a motive for and a result of mediation (Nikken & Opree, 2018), plays an important role in mediating grandchildren’s digital media use. Grandmothers’ involvement in other leisure activities with the grandchildren was also a major factor associated with most mediation practices, indicating that grandmothers’ mediation is
part of the more holistic grandparenting approach (Burke et al., 2013). Furthermore, past involvement in mediation as a mother was a strong predictor of grandmothers’ involvement, a finding that stresses the role of continuity in later life (Atchley, 1999). Finally, the findings indicate that cross-national differences in mediation do not necessarily stem from the sociocultural context, but rather from differences among grandmothers’ in their personal circumstances, individual characteristics and caregiving conditions.

The current trajectory of media’s central role in children’s lives is clearly rising (Rideout, 2017) and their potential impact—both positive and negative—on children’s development and wellbeing is beyond debate (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). The COVID-19 crisis, with its heavy dependency on media for children’s schooling, entertainment and social connectedness, is expected to accelerate these processes even further. There is thus no doubt that the need to mediate children’s digital media use will continue to be an important arena for caregiver intervention. As the life expectancy of senior citizens increases and more and more children live in households characterized by dual-parent employment, single parents or multi-generational occupancy (cf. Arber & Timonen, 2015; Share & Kerrins, 2015), grandmothers will continue to have a significant and apparently growing role in caring for their grandchildren.

As our results suggest that poor digital skills constrain grandmothers’ involvement in mediation, one might be tempted to state that this challenge will disappear as current mothers become grandmothers. It is more likely, however, that technological innovations will continue to characterize our media world and that the senior population, as a whole, will always lag behind younger generations, who tend to be earlier adopters of new technologies (Rogers, 2003). At the same time, considering the educational trends that impel girls and women towards technological professions and shatter perceptions of masculine-dominated technology (Lerman, Palmer Mohun, & Oldenziel, 1997; Wajcman, 1997), the gender gap between grandmothers and grandfathers might be reduced in the future and the attendant longitudinal trends ought to be examined.

The importance of examining mediation as part of grandparental holistic approach to grandchild care reflects an ecological approach to media use (Jordan, 2004), perceiving it as an integral part of everyday life and not a set of discrete activities. Grandparenting styles—detached, passive, supportive, authoritative or influential (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1985)—that impact all other aspects of child care (e.g., eating, hygiene, discipline, schooling), are reflected in the approach that grandparents adopt regarding media use. A grandmother who sees her role as “spoilering” her grandchildren and adopts a passive role may be less inclined to intervene in their media choices than one who assumes more of an educational role and chooses to practice influential grandparenting. Exploring the relationship between grandparenting style and mediation of media use would thus offer another productive line of future research (Nimrod et al., 2019b).
Finally, the relationships found in this study between grandmothers’ current mediation styles, their past mediation practices when they were mothers and the instructions they receive from their children who are now the parents of their grandchildren, constitute a third important dimension that merits further in-depth exploration. Intergenerational relationships and continuity of educational values and practices concerning media use can inform us considerably about the nature of grandparenting and its evolution over time and circumstances. This too may be a highly gendered dimension of mediation, given the normative hegemonic expectations of women to assume the dominant role in care and education of children (Blackstone, 2003).

While we believe our study provides significant insights into these three areas and opens the door to future research that builds on it, one should consider its limitations nonetheless. The samples in both countries were obtained via online panels and were not representative. The result, in both countries, is a clear bias towards more educated and healthy grandparents who are regular internet users. Consequently, we recommend caution in evaluating the comparative aspects of the data presented, as there is some risk of overinterpretation. More robust samples from all walks of life in the two countries studied and others will provide a fuller picture of mediation styles within and between different societies.

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