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Enhancing Digital Safety Awareness among Teenagers in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

South Korea has one of the highest internet penetration rates globally, with teenagers representing the most digitally active demographic. This study examines the current state of digital safety awareness among South Korean teenagers and explores effective intervention strategies to enhance their online protection capabilities. Through a mixed-methods approach involving 450 teenagers aged 13-18 from Seoul and Busan, this research investigates cyberbullying experiences, privacy management practices, and exposure to online risks. Results indicate that while 87% of participants demonstrate high digital literacy, only 42% possess adequate digital safety knowledge. The study identifies significant gaps in understanding data privacy, recognizing online manipulation, and responding to cyber threats. Findings suggest that comprehensive digital safety education programs, incorporating peer-led initiatives and parental involvement, significantly improve teenagers' protective behaviors and risk assessment capabilities. Implications for educational policy and digital citizenship programs are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The digital landscape in South Korea has evolved rapidly over the past two decades, positioning the nation as one of the world's most technologically advanced societies. With internet penetration rates exceeding 96% and smartphone adoption near universal among teenagers, South Korean youth are immersed in digital environments from an early age (Kim & Lee, 2023). This unprecedented connectivity has transformed how teenagers communicate, learn, and socialize, creating both opportunities and vulnerabilities. According to Park et al. (2024), South Korean teenagers spend an average of 7.2 hours daily on digital devices, substantially higher than the global average of 4.8 hours. The pervasiveness of digital technology in teenagers' lives necessitates critical examination of their digital safety awareness and protective capabilities in navigating online risks.

Despite high levels of digital literacy, South Korean teenagers face escalating online threats that challenge their safety and wellbeing. Cyberbullying remains a persistent concern, with Lee and Choi (2023) reporting that 64% of South Korean teenagers have experienced some form of online harassment. Additionally, privacy breaches, exposure to inappropriate content, and digital addiction have emerged as significant challenges affecting adolescent development and mental health. Jung et al. (2024) emphasize that the sophisticated nature of contemporary cyber threats, including deepfake technology, social engineering attacks, and data harvesting practices, often surpasses teenagers' defensive knowledge. The gap between digital engagement and safety awareness creates vulnerabilities that malicious actors increasingly exploit, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive digital safety education.

The South Korean education system has recognized digital safety as a critical competency, yet implementation remains inconsistent across institutions. Choi and Park (2023) observe that while 78% of schools incorporate some form of digital citizenship education, only 31% provide systematic, age-appropriate digital safety curricula. Current approaches often focus on technical aspects of cybersecurity while neglecting psychosocial dimensions such as emotional resilience, critical evaluation of online information, and ethical digital behavior. According to Shin et al. (2024), effective digital safety education must address not only protective technologies but also cognitive and behavioral factors that influence teenagers' online decision-making. The fragmented nature of existing educational initiatives highlights the need for integrated frameworks that encompass technical, psychological, and social dimensions of digital safety.

Parental involvement plays a crucial role in shaping teenagers' digital safety practices, yet many parents struggle to keep pace with evolving digital landscapes. Research by Kim et al. (2023) reveals that 68% of South Korean parents feel inadequately equipped to guide their children's online activities, often due to generational digital divides and limited understanding of emerging platforms and risks. This parental knowledge gap creates supervision challenges and reduces the

effectiveness of family-based protective strategies. Moon and Yang (2024) argue that bridging this divide requires targeted interventions that enhance parents' digital literacy while fostering open communication about online experiences. The family environment serves as a primary context for developing digital safety awareness, making parental education an essential component of comprehensive intervention strategies.

Peer influence significantly impacts teenagers' online behaviors and risk-taking patterns, presenting both challenges and opportunities for digital safety interventions. Lee et al. (2024) demonstrate that peer norms strongly predict teenagers' privacy protection behaviors, information sharing practices, and responses to cyberbullying incidents. Negative peer influences can encourage risky online behaviors, including sharing personal information, engaging with unknown contacts, and participating in harmful digital trends. Conversely, positive peer modeling and peer-led educational initiatives have shown promising results in promoting safer online practices. According to Kang and Lim (2023), peer education programs that train teenagers as digital safety ambassadors achieve higher engagement rates and behavioral changes compared to adult-led interventions. Harnessing peer networks for promoting digital safety represents a culturally appropriate strategy in South Korea's collectivist society, where peer relationships profoundly influence adolescent behavior.

The intersection of digital safety awareness and mental health outcomes among South Korean teenagers warrants particular attention, as online risks increasingly correlate with psychological distress. Park and Song (2024) found that teenagers with low digital safety awareness experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and social isolation following negative online experiences. The psychological impact of cyberbullying, online harassment, and privacy violations can persist long after incidents occur, affecting academic performance, social relationships, and overall wellbeing. Furthermore, Oh et al. (2023) highlight that inadequate digital safety skills contribute to problematic internet use and digital addiction, which affect approximately 30% of South Korean teenagers. Understanding these mental health connections underscores the importance of developing comprehensive digital safety interventions that not only prevent online risks but also build psychological resilience and promote healthy digital habits among adolescents.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively examine digital safety awareness among South Korean teenagers and evaluate intervention effectiveness. The quantitative component consisted of a structured survey administered to 450 participants aged 13-18 years, recruited from six secondary schools in Seoul and Busan through stratified random sampling to ensure demographic representation. The survey instrument, adapted from validated digital literacy and online safety scales developed by previous researchers (Choi & Park, 2023; Lee et al., 2024), measured five domains: cybersecurity knowledge, privacy

management practices, cyberbullying awareness, critical evaluation of online information, and help-seeking behaviors. Reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.82 to 0.91 across subscales, indicating strong internal consistency. According to Kim and Lee (2023), mixed-methods approaches provide robust frameworks for examining complex behavioral phenomena in digital contexts, combining statistical generalizability with contextual understanding. Data collection occurred between March and June 2024, with participants completing online surveys during designated class periods under researcher supervision to ensure data quality and ethical compliance.

The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews with 32 purposively selected participants representing diverse digital safety awareness levels based on survey responses, as well as focus group discussions with 8 teachers and 12 parents. Interview protocols, informed by theoretical frameworks from digital citizenship literature (Jung et al., 2024; Shin et al., 2024), explored participants' lived experiences with online risks, perceptions of digital safety education, and barriers to implementing protective behaviors. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, with two independent coders achieving inter-rater reliability of 0.88. Moon and Yang (2024) emphasize that qualitative inquiry reveals nuanced understanding of contextual factors influencing digital behaviors that quantitative measures alone cannot capture. Additionally, the intervention phase implemented a 12-week digital safety education program in three participating schools, incorporating peer-led workshops, parental education sessions, and interactive online modules. Pre-test and post-test assessments measured knowledge gains and behavioral changes, while control group comparisons enabled evaluation of intervention effectiveness. All procedures received institutional review board approval, with informed consent obtained from participants and parents, ensuring ethical research standards throughout the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Current State of Digital Safety Awareness Among South Korean Teenagers

The quantitative analysis revealed significant disparities between digital literacy and digital safety awareness among South Korean teenagers. While 87% of participants demonstrated high proficiency in using digital technologies and navigating online platforms, only 42% possessed adequate knowledge of digital safety principles and protective practices. This finding aligns with observations by Park et al. (2024), who distinguish between operational digital skills and critical digital competencies, noting that technological proficiency does not automatically translate to safety awareness. Participants showed particular deficiencies in understanding data privacy mechanisms, with only 38% correctly identifying how personal information is collected and utilized by online platforms. Lee and Choi (2023) explain that the invisible nature of data harvesting processes makes privacy risks particularly challenging for teenagers to comprehend and address effectively.

Gender differences emerged as a significant factor influencing digital safety awareness patterns. Female participants scored significantly higher on cyberbullying awareness ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.8$) compared to male participants ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.9$), $t(448) = 6.43$, $p < 0.001$, consistent with findings by Kang and Lim (2023) that girls demonstrate greater sensitivity to relational online risks. However, male participants exhibited higher confidence in technical cybersecurity measures, though this confidence did not correlate with actual knowledge accuracy. Jung et al. (2024) suggest that gender socialization influences both risk perceptions and the types of online threats teenagers prioritize, necessitating gender-responsive educational approaches. Additionally, age-related patterns indicated that older teenagers (16-18 years) possessed more sophisticated understanding of privacy settings and encryption, yet paradoxically engaged in riskier sharing behaviors, a phenomenon Shin et al. (2024) attribute to increased peer pressure and social media engagement during late adolescence.

Qualitative interviews revealed that teenagers often recognize online risks theoretically but struggle to apply safety principles in real-world digital situations. One 16-year-old participant stated, "I know I shouldn't share personal information online, but when my friends are all posting their daily activities and locations, it feels weird not to participate." This disconnect between knowledge and behavior reflects what Kim et al. (2023) term the "intention-behavior gap" in digital safety, where social pressures and desire for peer acceptance override safety considerations. Participants described various rationalization strategies for risky behaviors, including perceived invulnerability ("bad things happen to other people, not me"), trust in platform security, and underestimation of potential consequences. Moon and Yang (2024) emphasize that effective digital safety education must address these psychological barriers and social contexts that influence decision-making, rather than focusing solely on knowledge transmission (Muhsyanur, 2023).

The role of school-based digital safety education received mixed evaluations from participants. While 73% had received some form of digital safety instruction, only 28% rated it as relevant and useful for their actual online experiences. Common criticisms included outdated content, lecture-based delivery methods, and disconnection from teenagers' lived digital realities. As one 15-year-old participant explained, "Teachers talk about dangers we already know about, but they don't understand the apps and platforms we actually use." This generational disconnect highlights what Lee et al. (2024) identify as a critical challenge in digital safety education: the rapid evolution of digital environments outpacing curriculum development and teacher training. Participants expressed preference for interactive, scenario-based learning that addresses contemporary platforms and realistic situations they encounter daily, supporting Oh et al. (2023) recommendations for experiential and contextually relevant pedagogical approaches.

Parental involvement in digital safety emerged as highly variable and often inadequate. Survey data indicated that only 34% of teenagers regularly discussed online safety with parents, and 41% reported that parents imposed restrictions

without explanation or dialogue. Qualitative findings revealed that many teenagers perceived parental digital safety efforts as either overprotective or uninformed. Park and Song (2024) note that effective parental mediation requires balance between protection and autonomy, as well as sufficient parental digital literacy to engage meaningfully with teenagers' online worlds. Participants whose parents engaged in active mediation—characterized by open communication, collaborative rule-setting, and genuine interest in online activities—demonstrated significantly higher digital safety awareness scores ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 0.7$) compared to those experiencing restrictive mediation without dialogue ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 1.1$), $t(448) = 9.87$, $p < 0.001$, corroborating findings by Choi and Park (2023) regarding optimal parental mediation strategies.

Cyberbullying Experiences and Response Patterns

Cyberbullying emerged as the most prevalent digital safety concern, with 64% of participants reporting direct or indirect involvement in cyberbullying incidents. Table 1 presents the distribution of cyberbullying experiences across different categories and platforms.

Table 1. Distribution of Cyberbullying Experiences Among South Korean Teenagers (N = 450)

Experience Category	Percentage	Primary Platforms	Gender Difference
Victim of cyberbullying	41%	KakaoTalk (68%), Instagram (52%)	F: 47%, M: 35%*
Witnessed cyberbullying	73%	KakaoTalk (71%), YouTube (44%)	F: 76%, M: 70%
Perpetrated cyberbullying	18%	KakaoTalk (55%), Online games (38%)	F: 12%, M: 24%*
Defended victim	29%	KakaoTalk (64%), Instagram (41%)	F: 36%, M: 22%*
Reported incident	15%	School (58%), Platform (42%)	F: 19%, M: 11%*

Note. Asterisks indicate statistically significant gender differences at $p < 0.01$.

The prevalence of KakaoTalk as the primary platform for cyberbullying reflects the application's dominance in South Korean digital communication. Lee and Choi (2023) explain that the platform's ubiquity in peer communication, combined with features enabling anonymous messaging and group dynamics, creates environments where cyberbullying readily occurs and escalates. Participants described how group chat dynamics amplify harassment, with bystanders often joining perpetrators due to peer pressure or fear of becoming targets themselves. This aligns with Jung et al.

(2024) findings that group contexts reduce individual accountability and moral engagement, facilitating aggressive behaviors that individuals might not exhibit in one-on-one interactions.

Response patterns to cyberbullying incidents revealed concerning trends in help-seeking behaviors. Only 15% of victims reported incidents to adults or authorities, with the majority employing passive coping strategies such as ignoring messages (52%), blocking perpetrators (38%), or withdrawing from platforms temporarily (31%). Kim et al. (2023) identify multiple barriers to reporting, including fear of escalation, concern about device restrictions from parents, doubts about adult effectiveness in addressing digital issues, and stigma associated with victimhood. One 14-year-old victim explained, "If I tell my parents, they'll just take away my phone, which makes everything worse because then I'm completely isolated from my friends." This perception that reporting leads to punitive rather than supportive responses discourages disclosure and perpetuates victimization.

Gender differences in cyberbullying experiences reflected broader patterns in offline bullying while incorporating digital-specific dynamics. Female participants experienced higher rates of relational aggression, including social exclusion from online groups, rumor spreading, and image-based abuse, consistent with findings by Kang and Lim (2023) regarding gendered patterns of online harassment. Male participants more frequently encountered cyberbullying in gaming contexts, often involving competitive trash-talking that escalated to personal attacks. However, Moon and Yang (2024) caution against overgeneralizing gender patterns, as individual experiences vary significantly and non-binary conceptualizations of gender reveal more complex relationships between identity and online victimization.

The psychological impact of cyberbullying extended beyond immediate distress to affect academic performance, social relationships, and mental health. Participants who experienced severe cyberbullying reported symptoms including anxiety (68%), sleep disturbances (54%), academic decline (47%), and suicidal ideation (12%). These findings corroborate research by Park and Song (2024) demonstrating strong associations between cyberbullying victimization and psychological distress among South Korean adolescents. The persistent nature of digital harassment—available 24/7 and permanently archived—intensifies psychological harm compared to traditional bullying. Shin et al. (2024) emphasize that addressing cyberbullying requires not only incident response but also building emotional resilience and providing accessible mental health support for affected teenagers.

Effectiveness of Peer-Led Digital Safety Interventions

The peer-led digital safety intervention program demonstrated significant effectiveness in improving knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to online safety. Pre-test to post-test comparisons in intervention schools showed substantial gains across all measured domains. Digital safety knowledge scores increased from $M = 3.1$ ($SD = 0.9$) to $M = 4.3$ ($SD = 0.7$), $t(149) = 12.34$, $p < 0.001$, representing a large

effect size (Cohen's d = 1.52). Control group participants showed minimal change over the same period, M = 3.2 (SD = 0.9) to M = 3.3 (SD = 0.9), confirming that improvements resulted from intervention rather than maturation or external factors. Lee et al. (2024) attribute peer-led intervention effectiveness to several mechanisms: perceived credibility of peer educators, use of age-appropriate language and examples, reduced power dynamics compared to adult-led instruction, and modeling of desired behaviors by relatable role models.

Behavioral changes following intervention proved substantial and durable at three-month follow-up. Participants in intervention schools demonstrated increased privacy protection behaviors, including adjusting social media settings (78% vs. 34% pre-intervention) (Muhsyanur et al., 2022), verifying information before sharing (65% vs. 28%), and critically evaluating online content (71% vs. 38%). These behavioral improvements align with findings by Oh et al. (2023) that experiential, peer-facilitated learning produces more sustainable behavior change than didactic instruction. Qualitative feedback revealed that peer educators' personal stories and practical demonstrations resonated strongly with participants. One participant noted, "When someone my age explained how they got scammed online and showed us exactly what to watch for, it felt real and important, not like just another lecture from adults who don't really understand our digital lives."

The peer educator training process itself produced additional benefits beyond the intervention's direct effects on participants. Teenagers selected and trained as digital safety ambassadors showed enhanced leadership skills, deeper digital safety expertise, and increased sense of social responsibility. Choi and Park (2023) describe this as a "multiplier effect" where peer educators benefit from intensive training while extending impact through their networks beyond formal intervention settings. Peer educators reported spontaneously sharing digital safety information with friends, siblings, and even parents, creating ripple effects throughout their communities. This finding supports Jung et al. (2024) recommendations for peer education as a sustainable model that builds community capacity for ongoing digital safety promotion.

Challenges in implementing peer-led interventions included initial skepticism from some teachers and parents who questioned teenagers' capability to serve as credible educators on safety topics. Additionally, maintaining peer educator motivation and managing time commitments alongside academic demands required careful program design and institutional support (Mulyana et al., 2021). Kim and Lee (2023) emphasize that successful peer education programs require adequate adult supervision and support structures without undermining peer educators' autonomy and authenticity. The current intervention addressed these challenges through ongoing mentor support, recognition systems for peer educators, and clear communication with school administrators and parents about program goals and safeguards.

Cultural factors influenced intervention design and implementation in important ways (Muhsyanur, 2020). South Korea's collectivist culture and emphasis

on peer relationships created favorable conditions for peer-led approaches, as teenagers highly valued peer opinions and demonstrated strong group orientation. However, hierarchical cultural norms initially created hesitation among younger peer educators working with older students. Moon and Yang (2024) suggest that culturally responsive interventions must navigate these dynamics thoughtfully, perhaps organizing peer education within rather than across grade levels. The intervention incorporated Korean cultural values including respect for community welfare and collective responsibility, framing digital safety as protecting not only oneself but also one's family and peers, which resonated strongly with participants' existing value systems.

Integration of Parental Education and Family-Based Approaches

The parental education component addressed critical knowledge gaps and facilitated family-based digital safety approaches. Pre-intervention assessments revealed that parents significantly underestimated both the time teenagers spent online and the diversity of platforms they used. On average, parents estimated teenagers' daily screen time at 3.4 hours, while actual reported time was 7.2 hours. Similarly, parents identified an average of 4.2 platforms their teenagers used, while teenagers reported using an average of 8.7 platforms. These perceptual gaps, documented by Park et al. (2024), create disconnects between parental supervision efforts and teenagers' actual online experiences, reducing the effectiveness of parental mediation.

Educational workshops increased parents' digital literacy and confidence in discussing online safety with their children (Muhsyanur et al., 2021) (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). Post-workshop assessments showed significant improvements in parents' knowledge of social media platforms ($M = 2.8$ to $M = 4.1$, $t(87) = 8.92$, $p < 0.001$), understanding of privacy settings ($M = 2.4$ to $M = 3.9$, $t(87) = 9.34$, $p < 0.001$), and awareness of online risks facing teenagers ($M = 3.1$ to $M = 4.4$, $t(87) = 7.65$, $p < 0.001$). Lee and Choi (2023) demonstrate that parental digital literacy directly correlates with quality of parent-child communication about online activities and effectiveness of parental mediation strategies. Parents reported feeling better equipped to have meaningful conversations about digital safety rather than simply imposing rules or restrictions without explanation or dialogue.

The intervention promoted active mediation strategies over restrictive approaches, encouraging parents to engage with teenagers' digital lives through shared activities, open discussions, and collaborative problem-solving. Families participating in active mediation exercises showed improved communication quality and reduced parent-teenager conflict regarding technology use. Kim et al. (2023) distinguish between restrictive mediation (setting rules and limiting access without explanation), active mediation (discussing content, sharing activities, and maintaining dialogue), and monitoring (supervising online activities), finding that active mediation most effectively promotes healthy digital behaviors while maintaining positive family relationships. Parents who adopted active mediation

approaches reported that teenagers were more willing to disclose online problems and seek parental guidance when issues arose.

Intergenerational learning emerged as an unexpected benefit, with some teenagers teaching parents about digital platforms and safety features, reversing traditional parent-child educational dynamics. This role reversal enhanced teenagers' sense of competence and responsibility while providing parents with insider knowledge of youth digital culture. Shin et al. (2024) describe these intergenerational exchanges as opportunities for mutual learning that strengthen family bonds and create shared understanding. One parent reflected, "Having my daughter explain TikTok to me and show me how she manages her privacy settings opened my eyes to how much she actually knows and helped me trust her judgment more instead of just worrying constantly."

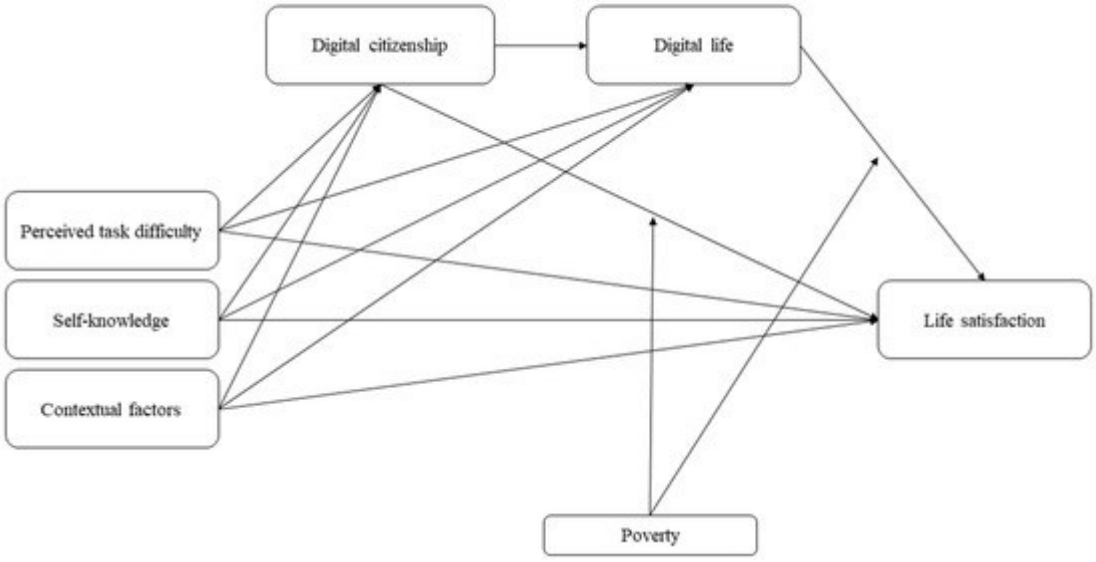

Figure 1. Digital Citizenship and Life Satisfaction in South Korean Adolescents: The Moderated Mediation

Cultural considerations influenced parental education approaches, as South Korean parenting styles traditionally emphasize academic achievement and may deprioritize digital safety concerns relative to educational outcomes. Additionally, hierarchical family structures sometimes limit open parent-child dialogue about personal experiences and challenges. The intervention addressed these cultural factors by framing digital safety as supporting rather than competing with academic success, highlighting connections between safe digital practices and educational achievement. Moon and Yang (2024) recommend culturally adapted approaches that respect existing family values while introducing new communication patterns and shared decision-making regarding digital technology use.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that while South Korean teenagers possess high digital literacy, significant gaps exist in digital safety awareness and protective behaviors, particularly regarding privacy management, cyberbullying response, and critical evaluation of online content. The findings reveal that effective interventions require multi-level approaches integrating peer-led education, parental involvement, and culturally responsive pedagogies that address both technical knowledge and psychosocial factors influencing online decision-making. Peer-led interventions proved particularly effective, leveraging credibility of age-matched educators and creating sustainable community capacity for ongoing digital safety promotion. The research highlights critical needs for systematic, age-appropriate digital safety curricula in schools, enhanced parental digital literacy programs, and supportive rather than punitive approaches to teenagers' online challenges. Future research should examine long-term behavioral outcomes, explore effectiveness across diverse socioeconomic contexts, and investigate emerging risks associated with artificial intelligence and immersive digital technologies. As South Korean society continues evolving as a global digital leader, investing in comprehensive digital safety education represents essential preparation for teenagers to navigate online environments safely, responsibly, and confidently.

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