Social Networking and Adolescents: *Issues and Concerns*

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Abstract

Participation with technology for social purposes has become the mainstream communication method for many people in the past several years. In particular adolescents in schools have adopted these forms of communication as the paramount way to keep in touch with family and friends. Social networking is a current phenomenon that consists of both web-based communication with Internet users through websites (Face book, MySpace, YouTube) and interaction with others via cellular phones. Social Networking websites, such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace are the most popular places for these students to spend their time. These young people are the most prolific users of social network sites (SNS). Emerging studies find that youth spend a considerable portion of their daily life interacting through social networking. The rise of the internet age has enabled us to live a life at a faster pace. Because of the freedom the web provides, millions of people can communicate at the same time. Never before in human history, has there been a time like this. What's most intriguing about this revolution is that children and teens are leading the way. And because of their limited capacity for self-regulation and susceptibility to peer pressure, children and adolescents are at some risk as they navigate and experiment with social networking. Present paper conceptualizes that there are frequent online expressions of offline behaviors, such as bullying, clique-forming, and sexual experimentation, that have introduced problems such as cyber bullying, privacy issues, and "sexting." Other problems that merit awareness include Internet addiction and concurrent sleep deprivation.

Introduction:

Engaging in various forms of social networking is a routine activity that research has shown to benefit children and adolescents by enhancing communication, social connection, and even technical skills. Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace offer multiple daily opportunities for connecting with friends, classmates, and

people with shared interests. During the last 5 years, the number of preadolescents and adolescents using such sites has increased dramatically. According to a recent poll, 22% of teenagers log on to their favorite social networking site more than 10 times a day, and more than half of adolescents log on to a social networking site more than once a day. Seventy-five percent of teenagers now own cell phones, and 25% use them for social networking, 54% use them for texting, and 24% use them for instant messaging. Thus, a large part of this generation's social and emotional development is occurring while on the Internet and on cell phones.

Many parents today use technology incredibly well and feel comfortable and capable with the programs and online venues that their children and adolescents are using. Nevertheless, some parents may find it difficult to relate to their digitally savvy youngsters online for several reasons. Such parents may lack a basic understanding of these new forms of socialization, which are integral to their children's lives. They frequently do not have the technical abilities or time needed to keep pace with their children in the ever-changing Internet landscape. In addition, these parents often lack a basic understanding that kids' online lives are an extension of their offline lives. The end result is often a knowledge and technical skill gap between parents and youth, which creates a disconnect in how these parents and youth participate in the online world together.

The increased use of Social Networking Websites has become an international phenomenon in the past several years. What started out as a hobby for some computer literate people has become a social norm and way of life for people from all over the world (Boyd, 2007). However, the growth in Internet access and software availability as well as advancements of cell phones, combined with a population of youth who have grown up exposed to this technology, has resulted in social networks being replaced online (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008) and through telecommunications. The youth of today use technology such as the Internet more than any other method through which to communicate and socialize (Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009; Kaynay & Yelsma, 2000; Nie & Hillygus, 2002). Recent studies have shown that communication technology is increasing exponentially with each generation and is becoming a mainstay within our society (Mishna et al., 2009).Teenage youth are a unique population of SNS users. They are among the first to have grown up entirely surrounded by communication technologies. However, the growth in Internet access and software availability as well as advancements of cell phones, combined with a population

of youth who have grown up exposed to this technology, has resulted in social networks being replaced online (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008) and through telecommunications.

SOCIAL NETWORKING AND ADOLESCENTS

The younger section of society comprised of children, pre-teens and teens accounts for a very large portion of the internet populace. The same group also accounts for the most rapid increase in internet use. And when this group stays online, the most common thing they do is join social networking sites. In fact, for an average American teen, social networking is basically the same as social networking – it absolutely defines how and where teens get to communicate and socialize with other people. But the ongoing popularity (or maybe dependence) on the internet and social networking carries not only positive but also negative effects. First, we have to consider that the web is responsible for making media, society, and our lives in general work faster. A fast paced society has its ups and downs and the way it affects children and teens is two-fold – on one hand, social networking makes life easier and more convenient, but it also puts traditional relationships in a new and sometimes distorted light. For instance, children and teens are supposed to learn how to build relationships with other people around the neighborhood or in school. Traditionally, they have been taught by their parents, religious ministers, guidance counselors, and teachers to respect authority and follow what older people say. Furthermore, they are also taught to earn friends by means of showing respect and practicing good manners. Our point here is that building quality relationships with people takes time and effort. Discussions about adolescents today differ considerably from the past through the central role that technology plays in youth lives. Ito et al. (2009) observe that:

The technologies that youth utilize today are most definitely new and how teenagers use them to communicate with each other is clearly novel. Nevertheless, the technologically mediated activities that youth participate in are similar to past generations:

Just as they have done in parking lots and shopping malls, teens gather in networked public spaces for a variety of purposes, including to negotiate identity, gossip, support one another, jockey for status, collaborate, share information, flirt, joke, and goof off. They go there to hang out (Ito et al., 2009, p. 79).

Not surprisingly, the apprehensions of parents and educators about SNS are also comparable to past questions about how youth spend their time. SNS represent a new environment through which to examine adolescent development and learning. Within this context, I focus

on several areas of concern that are particularly salient for adolescent populations: youth characteristics and digital divide, privacy and safety, psychological well-being, and learning. The youth of today use technology such as-

- **Text Messaging**

  Among all the forms of digital communication, texting is the most ubiquitous among teenagers: It is the type of electronic communication that the largest number of teenagers have ever used (87%), it is the most frequently used (68% text daily), and, outside of visiting face-to-face, it is by far the most popular way to communicate with friends (33% of teens choose texting as their Convenience is the main reason that many teens prefer texting, saying they prefer it because it's the quickest and easiest way to get in touch with one another. Teenagers send or receive SMS even at midnight while lying in bed (under the sheet) and in public places, because text messages are discrete.

- **Social Networking Sites**

  Social Networking Sites (SNS) have been popular since the year 2002 and have attracted and fascinated tens of millions of Internet users (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Though only a few have gained worldwide publicity and attention Most people who are members of these sites, such as Facebook (over 400 million users) and MySpace (over 100 million users) participate in them on a daily basis (Duven & Timm, 2008). Each person who becomes a member of a SNS has the opportunity to create his or her own webpage or "profile" which is supposed to be seen as a reflection of that person's personality (Tufekci, 2008). Social status is also a very important part of SNSs because it is plays a role in how each individual is viewed on their profile by others (Tufecki, 2008). These SNSs are not just for keeping in touch with classmates and meeting new people, they are used to build adolescent identities (Siibak, 2009). Because social networking sites are used primarily by adolescents and young adults, that is why we are discussing this group of individuals and their Internet use.

- **Mobile Communication**

  Mobile phones have not only re-defined communications but have also reshaped the space in which the interaction takes place. With mobile technologies "it is precisely the possibility of moving through space while interacting with others who are both

remote and in the same contiguous space via one's relative location to other users" (deSouza, 2006, p. 269). Mobile devices have enabled the possibility of being 'always-on' not just through social interaction but also through connection to the information space by means of the internet.

Most of the teens have their own mobile device capable of connecting to the Internet, such as a Smartphone, iPod Touch, iPad, or similar device The vast majority of teenagers have their own cell phone including 41% who say they have a "smart" phone, meaning they can use it to "check email, download apps, or go online." Cell phone ownership varies by age and by income

BENEFITS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

Though many arguments can be made about the possible risks of adolescent social networking, it is important to point out the benefits of these websites as well. Many schools have started to use these sites to promote education, keep students up to date with assignments, and offer help to those in need (Boyd, 2007). In general, the Internet and social networking sites can be a positive influence on adolescents. Social networking sites provide an outlet for teens to express themselves in their own unique ways (Boyd, 2007). In addition, they serve both as a meeting place for teens to interact with other like-minded people and as showplaces for a teen's artistic and musical abilities (Boyd, 2007). Finally, school students use these sites as tools to obtain information and resources for graduation preparation and future planning. For example, students applying for college visit profiles of that college's students to view pictures and read blogs of past students to determine whether the college would be a good fit (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

➤ **Socialization and Communication**

Social networking sites allow teens to accomplish online many of the tasks that are important to them offline: staying connected with friends and family, making new friends, sharing pictures, and exchanging ideas. Social networking participation also can offer adolescents deeper benefits that extend into their view of self, community, and the world, including:

• opportunities for community engagement through raising money for charity and volunteering for local events, including political and philanthropic events;

- enhancement of individual and collective creativity through development and sharing of artistic and musical endeavors;

- growth of ideas from the creation of blogs, podcasts, videos, and gaming sites;

- expansion of one's online connections through shared interests to include others from more diverse backgrounds (such communication is an important step for all adolescents and affords the opportunity for respect, tolerance, and increased discourse about personal and global issues); and

- Fostering of one's individual identity and unique social skills.

➢ **Enhanced Learning Opportunities**

Middle and high school students are using social networking to connect with one another on homework and group projects. For example, Facebook and similar social networking programs allow students to gather outside of class to collaborate and exchange ideas about assignments. Some schools successfully use blogs as teaching tools, which has the benefit of reinforcing skills in English, written expression, and creativity.

➢ **Accessing Health Information**

Adolescents are finding that they can access online information about their health concerns easily and anonymously. Excellent health resources are increasingly available to youth on a variety of topics of interest to this population, such as sexually transmitted infections, stress reduction, and signs of depression. Adolescents with chronic illnesses can access Web sites through which they can develop supportive networks of people with similar conditions. The mobile technologies that teens use daily, namely cell phones, instant messaging, and text messaging, have already produced multiple improvements in their health care, such as increased medication adherence, better disease understanding, and fewer missed appointments. Given that the new social networking venues all have mobile applications, teenagers will have enhanced opportunities to learn about their health issues and communicate with their doctors. However, because of their young age, adolescents can encounter inaccuracies during these searches and require parental involvement to be sure they are using reliable online resources, interpreting the information correctly, and not becoming

overwhelmed by the information they are reading. Encouraging parents to ask about their children's and adolescents' online searches can help facilitate not only discovery of this information but discussion on these topics.

RISKS IN USING SOCIAL NETWORKING:

But because of social networking, real and hard-earned relationships are now replaced with online relationships. Many youths are leaning towards communicating with other people through social networking rather than going out in person and making friends with neighbors. What this means is that they are fond of making life faster. But the question is: is this good for them?

Using social networking becomes a risk to adolescents more often than most adults realize. Most risks fall into the following categories: peer-to-peer; inappropriate content; lack of understanding of online privacy issues; and outside influences of third-party advertising groups.

- **Cyber bullying and Online Harassment**

  Cyber bullying is deliberately using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing, or hostile information about another person. It is the most common online risk for all teens and is a peer-to-peer risk.

  Although "online harassment" is often used interchangeably with the term "cyber bullying," it is actually a different entity. Current data suggest that online harassment is not as common as offline harassment, and participation in social networking sites does not put most children at risk of online harassment. On the other hand, cyber bullying is quite common, can occur to any young person online, and can cause profound psychosocial outcomes including depression, anxiety, severe isolation, and, tragically, suicide.

- **Sexting**

  Sexting can be defined as "sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cell phone, computer, or other digital devices." Many of these images become distributed rapidly via cell phones or the Internet. This phenomenon does occur among the teen population; a recent survey revealed that 20% of teens have sent or posted nude or seminude photographs or videos of

themselves. Some teens who have engaged in sexting have been threatened or charged with felony child pornography charges, although some states have started characterizing such behaviors as juvenile-law misdemeanors. Additional consequences include school suspension for perpetrators and emotional distress with accompanying mental health conditions for victims. In many circumstances, however, the sexting incident is not shared beyond a small peer group or a couple and is not found to be distressing at all.

- **Facebook Depression**

Researchers have proposed a new phenomenon called "Facebook depression," defined as depression that develops when preteens and teens spend a great deal of time on social networking sites, such as Facebook, and then begin to exhibit classic symptoms of depression. Acceptance by and contact with peers is an important element of adolescent life. The intensity of the online world is thought to be a factor that may trigger depression in some adolescents. As with offline depression, preadolescents and adolescents who suffer from Facebook depression are at risk for social isolation and sometimes turn to risky Internet sites and blogs for "help" that may promote substance abuse, unsafe sexual practices, or aggressive or self-destructive behaviors.

CONCLUSION

Using social networking Web sites is among the most common activity of today's children and adolescents. Any Web site that allows social interaction is considered a social networking site, including social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter; gaming sites and virtual worlds such as Club Penguin, Second Life, and the Sims; video sites such as YouTube; and blogs. Such sites offer today's youth a portal for entertainment and communication and have grown exponentially in recent years. Adolescents have especially embraced this new way of communicating with classmates and keeping in touch with friends. Though there may be benefits to keeping connected with others by use of these sites, there is also the danger that they may negatively affect high school academics and achievement. For this reason, it is important that parents become aware of the nature of social networking sites, given that not all of them are healthy environments for children and adolescents. Since their introduction, social networking sites have attracted millions of users, many of whom who have integrated these sites into their daily lives. Adolescents have especially embraced this

new way of communicating with classmates and keeping in touch with friends. Though there may be benefits to keeping connected with others by use of these sites, there is also the danger that they may negatively affect high school academics and achievement. This paper has shown that although many students find their SNS memberships to be important in their lives, they are also aware of the benefits of education and completion of high school. Though some admit to spending a lot of time on these sites, the issue remains to be how they are participating and how this is affecting their relationships with other students. Communication is rapidly changing, and more emphasis must be placed on how educators can help students enjoy the benefits of social networking while also recognizing the problems they may create.

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