

BENEFITS AND RISKS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS USING SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Children and teenagers widely use social media, and recent studies have shown that they spend majority of their time daily in social media pages. This study aims to show the positive and negative impacts that social media has in the development of the teenagers. This review brings together work from disparate fields which examine the relationship between social media and social capital, privacy, youth safety, psychological well-being, and educational achievement. We observed this phenomenon in Albania by interviewing teenagers between 11-16 years of age. Those selected were regular users of social media. The study shows that children and teenagers were positively affected as social media helped in increasing their communication abilities, getting information, developing their technical skills, and how they can effectively use this recent technology. On the other side, they are exposed to risk of Facebook depression, cyberbullying, and online sexual harassments. In the conclusions part of this study, some suggestions were given for further studies.

Keywords: Social media, benefits, risks, teenagers, children

Introduction

Teenagers in these days widely use social networks (sites). They have made this a part of their daily activities. Every webpage that allows for social interaction is considered to be a social media site. These pages includes the social network pages like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Myspace; gaming sites and virtual worlds such as Club Penguin, Second Life, and the Sims; video sites such as YouTube; and blogs. Consequently, such sites offer today's youth a portal for entertainment and communication. Based on the significant increase from previous surveys, 73% of wired American teens now use social networking websites (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Another study shows that 22 % of the teenagers log in their preferred social networks more than ten times per day, and half of the teenagers that were asked, log into this social media more than one times per day (Common

Sense Media, 2009). According to *American Psychological Association (APA)*, in the last 5 years, the number of pre-teenagers and teenagers that use these pages increased dramatically. According to a report done for the benefit of the European Union (2014), 59% of 9-16 year olds have a social networking profile including 26% aged 9-10, 49% aged 11-12, 73% aged 13-14, and 82% aged 15-16. Social networking is most popular in the Netherlands (80%), Lithuania (76%), and Denmark (75%), and least in Romania (46%), Turkey (49%), and Germany (51%) (Livingstone et al., 2014).

On one hand, the internet affords many opportunities for learning, entertainment, enrichment, and personal growth. Therefore, parents have a positive view of its use, and encourage children and adolescent to make judicious use of it. On the other hand, parents are ambivalent to the internet, as they are aware of the potential risks it carries by exposing users to negative content such as pornography, violence, commercialism, cyberbullying, unsupervised social relations, and privacy and security issues (Ceyhan, 2011). Many scholars suggest that students learn in new ways using social media and that educators should embrace these new platforms (Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2006).

For example, Facebook and similar social media programs allows students to gather outside of class for the purpose of collaborating and exchanging ideas about assignments (O'Keeffe, G.S. & Clarke-Pearson, K., 2011)

Research Questions of this Study

1. What is social media?
2. What do teenagers benefit from using social media?
3. What are the risks teenagers faced by using social media?

What is Social Media?

“Social media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The foundation of social media is the social interaction, which gives the participants the possibility to share opinions, thoughts, and knowledge in a global forum where time and place are insignificant (Carlsson, 2010). Web 2.0 contains social networks and communities such as Pirate Bay and My Space, blogs and sites where the participants themselves create the content, e.g. Facebook. Web 2.0 is a platform on which social media is based (Carlsson, 2010). The term Web 2.0 refers to websites that are designed to: (a) rely on the participation of mass groups of users rather than centrally controlled content providers, (b) aggregate and remix content from multiple sources, and (c) more intensely, network users and content together

(O'Reilly, 2007). Kreutzer and Hinz (2010) identified various social media platform types: blogs, microblogging sites (e.g. Twitter), media sharing sites (e.g. YouTube), social bookmarking sites (e.g. StumbleUpon), bulletin boards, and social networking sites (e.g. Facebook). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) also add virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life), virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft), and collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia) to that list. Furthermore, these sites offer youth entertainment and communication opportunities. Therefore, engaging in various forms of social media is a routine activity of which research has shown to benefit children and adolescents by enhancing communication, social connection, and even technical skills (Ito. et al., 2008). In recent years, the number of pre-teenagers and teenagers who use such sites has increased dramatically.

The Benefits of Teenagers in Using Social Media

The social media through its interactive platform enables the users to communicate with other members in building social relationship and sharing information and knowledge related to the needs and activities in the real life. Teenagers in particular, spend a great amount of their time interacting in their social lives. The usage of the social media by the teenagers occurs at the same time with their developing identity, sexuality, and their physical and moral development. Recent studies show some benefits derived by this teenagers as they have improved in their communication. At the same time, they have also improved their social life and emotional life which have a great impact on their development process.

Social Media may also provide a supportive environment for adolescents to explore romance, friendship, social status, and it provides teens the opportunity to share and discuss their musical tastes, knowledge of television and movies, video games, and the other aspects of adolescent culture (Ito et al., 2008).

Socialization and Communication

Social media sites allow teens to meet many online tasks that are relevant to their lives offline: to lie about friends and family, make new friends, share photos, and share ideas (Ito. et al., 2008). Social media participation can also offer adolescents deeper benefits that extend into their view of self, community, and the world (Boyd D, 2007). Thus, young adults who spend more time on Facebook are better at showing “virtual empathy” to their online friends (APA, 2011). Again, social media sites allow teens to accomplish many online tasks which are important to them offline: staying connected with friends and family, making new friends, sharing pictures, and exchanging ideas (O'Keeffe, G.S, Clarke-Pearson. K, 2011).

Accessing Health Information

Teenagers can find and 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, such as sexually transmitted infections, stress reduction, and signs of depression (O'Keeffe, G.S, Clarke -Pearson. K, 2011). However, the encouragement of parents to be more informed about the online accession of their children would go a long way in obtaining more information and would lead to a deeper discussion about this issue.

According to Lenhart et al. (2010), teens also use online searches to gain answers to many of their health concerns with 31% of online teens getting health, dieting, or physical fitness information. Seventeen percent of teens who use the internet, report they use it to gather information about health topics that are hard to discuss with others, such as drug use and sexual health (Lenhart et al., 2010).

Enhanced Learning Opportunities

The different studies conducted on the effects of social media sprang from the results that are seen when people use the media and the new technologies which evolved. Many scholars suggest that students learn in new ways using social media; and as such, educators should embrace these new platforms (Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2006). Middle and high school students are using social media to connect with one another on homework and group projects (Boyd D, 2010). Some schools successfully use blogs as teaching tools which has the benefit of reinforcing skills in English, written expression, and creativity (Borja RR, 2005). In addition, social media programs allow students to gather outside of class for the purpose of collaborating and exchanging ideas about assignments (O'Keeffe, G.S, Clarke -Pearson. K, 2011). Social networking can provide tools for teaching in compelling ways that engage young students (APA, 2011).

Risks of using Social Media

Apart from the benefits, social media also brings threats to the teenagers. They are at risk if they access the internet under the age they are not allowed without their parent's permission. The minimal age of internet access is 13 years old. This age was decided by the Congress in the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA, 1998), which prohibits Websites from collecting information on children younger than 13 years without parental permission. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) encourages that age should be respected. Therefore, falsifying age has become a common practice by some preadolescents and some parents, but this action risks the safety of their children.

According to the report made by the EU (2014), around half of all 11-16 year olds has encountered one or more of the 10 risks we asked about. With a recent increase among girls and the younger children in some countries, the changes from 2010 to 2014 suggested that children are experiencing more of both risks and opportunities - in Denmark, Italy, and Romania (and, less, in Ireland). Moreover in Belgium, Portugal and the UK, children are now benefiting from more online activities without an equivalent increase in risk. Therefore, the risks that teens face online are similar to those faced offline (Carroll, J.A. & Kirkpatrick, R.L., 2011)

Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

Cyberbullying is defined as an individual or a group wilfully using information and communication involving electronic technologies to facilitate deliberate and repeated harassment or threat to another individual or group by sending or posting cruel text and/or graphics using technological means (Mason, 2008). Cyberbullying is any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others beyond the school grounds, and follows targets into their homes (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Use of social media also creates an opportunity for emotional distress by receiving threatening, harassing, or humiliating communication from another teen. This is a common threat for the teenager and pre-teenagers. Cyberbullying appears similar in prevalence to offline bullying; and current data suggest that online harassment is not as common as offline harassment (Lenhart A, 2007). Furthermore, cyberbullying can occur to any young person online, and can cause profound psychosocial outcomes such as depression, anxiety, severe isolation, and tragically, suicide (Patchin J. & Hinduja S, 2006). The Monash University found in their study that the majority of surveyed secondary school students (72.4 per cent) indicated they had received unwelcome or unpleasant contact by strangers via their social networking profiles (Monash University, 2011). Cyberbullying has been shown to cause higher levels of depression and anxiety for victims than traditional bullying. It has also been connected to cases of youth suicide with teens known to engage in reading hurtful comments some days before their suicide attempts (Kowalski, 2010). Teens most at risk for cyberbullying are also those at risk of offline harms, such as teens who have experienced sexual or physical abuse or those living in poor home environments (Berkman, 2008)

Sexting

Sexual harassment encompasses a wide variety of behaviors and can range in severity from degrading remarks to unwanted sexual advances and

sexual assault (Dill et al., 2008). Unwanted online sexual solicitation is defined as “the act of encouraging someone to talk about sex, to do something sexual, or to share personal sexual information even when that person does not want to” (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007). Sexting can be defined as “sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cell phone, computer, or other digital devices” (Berkshire District Attorney, 2010).

Based on the studies conducted in different countries, it was observed that this phenomenon is present among teenagers. Livingston and Bober (2004) point to a discrepancy between the large numbers of children who admit being exposed to pornography, and a significantly smaller number of parents who are aware of their children's exposure to it. Children also report longer hours of daily use than their parents report, and admit more often than their parents are aware of, that they are exposed to some kind of online harassment (Cho & Cheon, 2005; Liau et al., 2008; Livingston & Bober, 2004). A study done in Washington in 2008 concluded that 20% of teens have sent or posted nude or seminude photographs or videos of themselves (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008). Youth are much more likely to receive sexual solicitation between same-age youth than sexual predation; and most of these solicitations come from same-age peers who are known offline (Collins, 2011). In a study of European Union countries, 15% of 11-16 year olds have received peer to peer “sexual messages or images ...[meaning] talk about having sex or images of people naked or having sex,” and 3% say they have sent or posted such messages (Livingstone et al., 2014).

Facebook Depression

Facebook depression is defined as a depression that develops when preteens and teens spend a great deal of time on social media sites, such as Facebook, and then begin to exhibit classic symptoms of depression (Davila et al., 2009). As with offline depression, preadolescents and adolescents who suffer from Facebook depression are at risk to 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 (O'Keeffe et al., 2011). Teens who use Facebook more often, shows more narcissistic tendencies, while young adults who have a strong Facebook presence show more signs of psychological disorders, including antisocial behaviors, mania, and aggressive tendencies (APA, 2011).

Daily overuse of media and technology has a negative effect on the health of all children, preteens, and teenagers by making them more prone to anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders, as well as making them more susceptible to future health problems (APA, 2011). Teens who

are the heaviest media users, reported being less content and are more likely to report that they get into trouble a lot, are often sad or unhappy, and are often bored (Rideout, 2010).

Privacy Concerns and the Digital Footprint

Today, the main risk faced by preadolescents and adolescents online are risks from each other, risks of improper use of technology, lack of privacy, sharing too much information, or posting false information about themselves or (Barnes S. A, 2006)

This kind of behaviors puts their privacy at risk. When Internet users visit various Websites, they can leave behind evidence of which sites they have visited. This collective, ongoing record of one's Web activity is called the “digital footprint.” One of the biggest threats to young people on social media sites is that of their digital footprint and future reputations (O’Keeffe et al., 2011) Preadolescents and adolescents who lack an awareness of privacy issues often post inappropriate messages, pictures, and videos without understanding that “what goes online stays” (Palfrey et al., 2010). As a result, future jobs and college acceptance may be put into jeopardy by inexperienced and rash clicks of the mouse (O’Keeffe et al., 2011).

Albanian Teenagers and Social Media Usage

20 teenager of age 11-16 years old were interviewed in the framework of this article. They are using social media regularly and at the end of the day, they counted nearly 3 hours of navigation on social media. 99% of them access their Facebook account every day and they also make two or three accesses per day. 65 percent of these teenagers use Youtube for music and other videos. 30 percent of them play online games and 10 percent of them read information from Wikipedia. All these teenagers use social media especially Facebook to connect and communicate with friends and to make new connections with unknown people. Majority of the teenagers participating in the interviews made online communication with unknown people in different ways: in their inbox, poke option, likes and comments in the statuses, photos etc.

Furthermore, 70 percent of them used social media to share materials use for the learning process. The materials shared between them generally are links that helps them develop their learning skills, share their homework, obtain consultancy about their lesson problems, listen to tutorials on Youtube, and communicate in a foreign language by practicing it. Some of them use social media to read information about any pathology or any health problem as a result of curiosity about the health problems of others.

The disturbing fact is that these teenagers felt threatened by the usage of social media. Three of them confessed that they were threatened and

harassed by unknown people in their online communication. 10 percent of them accepted that they shared sexual content with known and unknown people. All of them were uninformed about the digital tracks and were not careful about the information they shared online. They shared a lot of personal information about their life, address, and location. Only one of them admitted that he experienced Facebook depression. He wanted to stay long online on Facebook and had no desire to communicate with his nearby friends and family.

Conclusion

Based on the studies cited in this paper, we come to the conclusion that social media is a very important platform in the daily life of the teenagers. They benefit by increasing the communication skills with friends and relatives and they can develop their socialization process more. Also, we can say that the teenagers were able to use social media to obtain information about topics like health, education, and to increase the technical skills using the last technologies.

Consequently, various forms of social media have changed the ways the teenagers talk, learn, and think. On the other hand, teenagers are in danger of Facebook depression, cyberbullying, and online sexual harassment. It must be stressed that the benefits and risks of teenagers in the usage of social media have a significant impact in their physical and psychological development.

It is necessary to create parents and teachers “awareness” on the risks faced by pre-teenagers and teenagers on social media. These two groups should encourage dialogs between teenagers and discuss in detail the risks that come from the usage of this pages and the impact it might leave on them. However, the studies in this direction are few and we suggest a wider study in Albania and other regions on this issue.

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