Social Networking Sites: What are the Effects on Teenagers?

Marilin Equihua

California State University, Long Beach

Social networking sites have become an online phenomenon in the past few years. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Myspace have attracted the attention of many people, especially teenagers. According to Livingstone (2008), "Creating and networking online content is becoming an integral means of managing one's identity, lifestyle and social relations" (p. 394). Teenagers have turned to social networking sites to express themselves and create a sense of identity. A PEW study conducted in 2004 (as cited in Boyd, 2007) 87% of teenagers aged 12-17 have internet access, and of those with internet access, 55% of teenagers aged 12-17 have a profile on social network sites with 64% of them being ages 15-17. These percentages have more than likely increased during the past few years.

Since so many teens access these sites, it is important to take a look at how they use the sites. It is also important to take a look at what are some of the possible dangers that teenagers face by posting personal information of social network site profiles. Another area to consider is how social network sites like Facebook and Myspace deal with privacy issues.

Creating a Sense of Identity and Forming Relationships

Youth start to really form a sense of identity during their teenage years. They experiment with their identity and form relationships that build their character and personalities. Social network sites are providing teenagers with another means of creating their identities and finding other people who share their interests and beliefs. Turkle (2012) suggests that social network sites, such as Facebook and The Sims Online, creates a "crossover effect" that allows teens to practice for real life. Furthermore, these sites give teenagers a sense of comfort that allows them to develop their identities. In this way, teenagers are using social network sites to create a "true" identity that they can later practice in face to face interactions.

An example of how teenagers use social network sites to form a sense of identity can be through the creation of a profile page. Sites such as Myspace and Facebook offer this service to its users. On Myspace, users can easily create a profile by answering questions on an online questionnaire. Users can include their interest, personal information, and post photos and video (as cited in Guo, 2008). Facebook also offers very similar services than Myspace. The major difference is that "Facebook restricts profile views to only those within a user's communities" (as cited in Guo, 2008).

A study conducted by Hinduja & Patchin (as cited in Guo, 2008) states that "social networks allows young users with valuable opportunities to express themselves and interact with their peers" (p. 8). Through the creation of profiles, teenagers portray their identity in a way that they think is socially acceptable by their peers instead of showing how they really are (Boyd, 2007). Turkle (2012) also discusses this issue in her literature. Teenagers put a lot of thought about what pictures they post, what they comment about, and what information they reveal on their social network sites. They post not what they feel they should post, but what they believe their peers will consider "cool." The question now becomes: Are teenagers really developing their own identities on social network sites or are they portraying an identity they think others will approve of?

Teenagers believe that online profiles on social networks allow them to demonstrate their identities in a fun and safe environment. Elena (as cited in Livingstone, 2008) believes that layouts on profile pages show who they are to their peers. This is especially true of younger teens. Teenagers also like the fact that they can make revisions to their identities through their social network profiles. Leo, for example, stated that he did not like his previous profile because

people he disliked had access to it, so he simply created a new profile (as cited in Livingstone, 2008).

Social network sites also allow teenagers to form stronger relationships with their peers and create new relationships online. Ahn (2012) found "that youth who use Facebook and Myspace report higher social capital in both their school and online relationships" (p. 1). Furthermore, the study revealed that having a social network made teenagers' relationships with their peers at school stronger and allowed for more bonding time as opposed to those teenagers who did not use social network sites. The results of this study also showed that through participation in online social network sites, such as Facebook, teenagers have greater opportunities to build relationships outside of school.

Dangers of Social Network Sites

Since social network sites have gained such popularity amongst teenagers, it is no surprise that they have become targets of many dangers that exist by being connected to the internet. Anyone can be at danger in the online world, but teenagers seem to be more susceptible to such dangers. Some of the dangers that teenagers may face while using social network sites include cyber-bullying, online harassment, and encounters with sexual predators.

In recent years, cyber-bullying has caught the attention of many people. "A Pew Internet survey reported that one in three teenagers experience some form of cyber-bullying and typically more frequent victims are girls" (as cited in Sengupta & Chaudhuri, 2011). Sengupta & Chaudhuri (2011) state that there are many different types of cyber-bullying which teenagers can experience on social network sites. These include spreading rumors, receiving threats online, having embarrassing posts about them, and posting messages of them that they disclosed privately. The data collected by Sengupta & Chaudhuri (2011) showed that 40% if teenagers

that have a social network profile have been cyber-bullied before. Furthermore, the data revealed that female teens are more likely to experience cyber-bullying on social network sites than male teens by 63%.

Online harassment is another form of bullying that can happen on social network sites. This type of harassment is defined by Sengupta & Chaudhuri (2011) as instances where a teenager "has been either bullied or contacted by a total stranger (not known to the teen or their friends) online" (p. 285). It is not surprising that the study showed that female teenagers are more prone to this type of harassment by strangers as well. "Predators approach and solicit sex from one out five online youths" (as cited in Guo, 2008, p. 10). Since teenagers often make their profiles public and tend to disclose personal information about them, it is easier for sexual predators and total strangers to have access to their profiles.

It is imperative to take a closer look at what teenagers are doing and posting on social network sites to see what makes them more prone to dangers such as cyber-bullying, online harassment, and encounters with sexual predators. One such behavior that put teenagers in danger is providing false information on their profile pages. One example of this is the case of "Julie Doe." As cited in Guo (2008), a girl of one thirteen years of age created a Myspace account and reported that she was eighteen. On Myspace, she met a man named Peter Solis. After a few online and phone exchanges, Julie Doe and Solis met and he allegedly sexually assaulted Doe. Although this scenario is an extreme case, teenagers need to be made aware of such behaviors so that they can behave accordingly.

Besides divulging false information, other things can lead to dangerous situations on social network sites.   Vanderhoven, Schellens, Valcke, and Raes (2014) examined some behaviors that teens demonstrate on social network sites that make them more at risk of certain

dangers. They refer to dangerous behavior as *risky behavior*. Things that they consider risky behavior include posting personal information, alcohol-related pictures, pictures in swimsuits or underwear (sexually explicit photos), and the use of swear words. The study conducted by Vanderhoven et al. found that teenage males tend to disclose more personal information than teenage girls, but girls post more risky pictures of themselves on social network sites. They observed that "a lot of – potentially risky – information was present on profile pages, such as items referring to alcohol abuse, partying, or nudity" (p. 7). All of the things mentioned above make teens more prone to the many dangers that exist in the online community.

A study conducted by Xie and Kang (2015) shows that teens sometimes demonstrate regret about certain postings of photos of comments they display on social network sites. They found that "20% of teens have regretted sharing updates, photos, videos or comments on SNS" (p. 5). This is especially true for older teenagers, which is mostly due to the fact that they disclose more personal information about themselves. Xie and Kang (2015) also suggest that teens that spend more time on social network sites and have more strangers as "friends" tend to demonstrate more regret about online profile postings.

Privacy of Teen on Social Network Sites

Privacy is another major concern in regards to social network sites. However, what we consider privacy in daily life is different from privacy on social network sites. It is a common misconception to believe that teenagers do not care about privacy because they provide so much information on their profile pages. A 19 year old teenager (as cited in Marwick & Boyd, 2014) describes most teen's feelings towards privacy by stating:

> Every teenager wants privacy. Every single last one of them, whether they tell you or
>
> not, wants privacy … Just because teenagers use internet sites to connect to other people

doesn't mean they don't care about their privacy. We don't tell everybody every single

thing about our lives. We tell them general information—names, places, what we like to

do—but that's general knowledge. That's not something you like to keep private—"Oh, I

play games. I better not tell anybody about that." … So to go ahead and say that

teenagers don't like privacy is pretty ignorant and inconsiderate honestly, I believe, on

the adult's part. (p. 1052).

Like this teenager suggests that even though they share some information about themselves, that

doesn't mean they want other to know absolutely everything about themselves.

Most social network sites, such as Facebook, allow its users to set privacy settings that

determines who is able to view information in their profiles. Marwick and Boyd (2014)

however, suggest that teenagers cannot always control what posts they are tagged in or what

others post about them. So, although someone might set their privacy settings to "friends only,"

another friend of theirs might make their profile public, therefore making everyone on their

"friends list" at risk. Furthermore, a post can be easily disseminated. If a user posts a picture or

writes a comment that set for "friends only" on Facebook, any of the "friends" can disseminate

to their "friends list" that may or may not be the same friends of the original person whom posted

the picture.

Another area to consider in regards to privacy settings is the knowledge that teenagers

have about those settings. According to Vanderhoven et al. (2014), only about 29% of children

aged 9-16 are aware of the privacy settings they have on their profile pages. Livingstone (2008)

states that the language used for the privacy settings on social network sites are confusing for

many teenagers. Marwick and Boyd (2014) suggest that:

Networked publics make it difficult for teens to effectively control information flow.

> The privacy practices and strategies that teenagers engage in do not necessarily "solve" the problem of privacy, but they do reveal how the technical affordances of networked publics are insufficient to protect privacy. Networked publics create serious and significant conflicts for what youth are trying to achieve in disclosing or withdrawing both information and meaning. (p. 1064).

Unfortunately, not knowing privacy settings and having profiles set to public display poses danger to teenagers from possible online predators.

What Can Be Done to Protect Teenagers on Social Network Sites?

Since social network sites continue to be extremely popular to teenagers, there needs to be a continued effort to make these sites safer for that population. Xie and Kang (2015) suggest making social network sites with customized privacy features. This will allow users to change the levels of privacy based on the groups they are in contact with. For example, having the ability to make some social groups on their profile pages "friends only" and at the same time having the ability to set other social groups to "public."

Congress and state legislatures have already proposed a few things that can help protect teenagers from online dangers (as cited in Guo, 2008). These include restricting access of minors to social networks through the Deleting Online Predators Act of 2007 (DOPA II). Another proposal made by congress was the requirement of sex offenders to register their online identities and addresses. In this case, knowing whether or not sex offenders register all of their possible online identities will be difficult to determine. In Virginia, the Keeping the Internet Devoid of Sexual Predators Act (KIDS) already makes it a requirement for sex offenders to register their identities. The final proposal made by congress (as cited in Guo, 2008) is the

requirement of social networks to get parental consent from minors and verifying age of users prior to using the services provided by social network sites.

The easiest and most important way in which to help keep teenagers safe from possible dangers on social network sites is through education. Xie and Kang (2015) suggest that "Parental guidance and institutional education of teens' SNS use are thus especially important in helping them understand the defects of online disclosure such as cyber-bullying and false information exchange" (p. 405). Vanderhoven et al. (2014) also suggest that policies and interventions need to be set in order to educate teenagers about safety in social network sites, although successful interventions within schools do not seem to be put in place yet. Furthermore, the study conducted by Sengupta and Chaudhuri (2011) shows that parental interactions with teenagers are of great importance in keeping them safe. The results suggested that teenagers who use social network sites in areas away from their parents "watchful eye" are more prone to danger, such as cyber-bullying, as opposed to those teenagers who use these sites in common areas, such as the living room of their house.

It is practically impossible to say that teenagers will one day be completely safe from the dangers that come with online social network sites. However, if the community works collaboratively to educate and inform them of such dangers, it will be a great step forward.

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