

Dr. Mark D. Griffiths is a Professor of Gambling Studies and Daria J. Kuss is a doctoral researcher in the area of online addictions. They are both at the International Gaming Research Unit, Psychology Division, Nottingham Trent University, Burton Street, Nottingham, NG1 4BU. For communication please email: mark.griffiths@ntu.ac.uk

Mark D. Griffiths and Daria J. Kuss

Adolescent social networking: Should parents and teachers be worried?

Over the past few years, there has been a significant increase in the number of media stories about social networking. This has also led to a recent upsurge in the amount of empirical research being carried out. Of particular interest is their use by children and adolescents, and to what extent their use is seen as problematic. In this article we briefly examine the issue of social networking in relation to young people.

The popularity of social networking

Social networking sites are virtual communities where users can create individual public profiles, interact with real-life friends, and meet other people based on shared interests. They are seen as a 'global consumer phenomenon' with an exponential rise in usage within the last few years. Active participation in social networking increased by 30% from 2009 to 2010 (The Nielsen Company, 2010). Currently, Facebook, the world's most popular social networking site, has more than 500 million users, of whom fifty percent log on to it every day. The average Facebook user has 130 friends, creates ninety items of content every month (Facebook, 2010), and logs onto the site nearly twenty times per month on average (The Nielsen Company, 2010).

Social networking by adolescents

A market research report commissioned by National Family Week among 1000

children (8- to 15-year-olds) and 3000 parents claimed that 40% of girls and 6% of boys reported the social networking site Facebook as the most important thing in their lives (Coughlan, 2010). Although the finding that Facebook is so important in some young people's lives may seem somewhat alarming, the fact that social networking sites appear to be so popular among girls compared to boys is much less a surprise. Comparing boys and girls, research has shown females tend to have better social skills and males often have superior spatial ability (Griffiths, 2008). If this translates to online behaviour, we would expect to see more girls engaged in social networking and more boys playing video games, and this appears to be the case (King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2010).

Should these findings be a concern to parents and teachers, or to society in general? When we were at school, if we wanted to communicate to someone in our class we would send them a handwritten note. Nowadays, children and adolescents have SMS, Twitter and Facebook. Youth today are simply using the technologies of the day in the same way we did when we were their age. When we were young we passively watched a lot of television. For today's teenagers, television viewing appears to have been displaced by various forms of interactive social media (Griffiths, 2010a). Today's children probably spend as much time in front of the screen as we did but today's children have more choice and are more proactive than we were. Research

into teenage use of social networking certainly shows its popularity (e.g., Lenhart, 2007; Pfeil, Arjan & Zaphiris, 2009) but says very little about whether its use is potentially problematic.

Qualitative interview research by Livingstone (2008) investigated why adolescents used social networking sites. Interviews were conducted with adolescents aged 13 to 16 years. The results indicated that they used social networking sites in order to express and actualize their identities either via self-display of personal information (which was true for the younger sample) or via connections (which was true for the older participants). Research has also shown that the nature of the feedback from peers that is received on one's networking profile determines the effects of social networking usage on wellbeing and self-esteem. For instance, Dutch adolescents aged 10 to 19 years who received predominantly negative feedback on their social networking page had low self-esteem which in turn led to low wellbeing (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006).

Internet use and the change in behavior and attitudes

When psychologists first started researching into the psychology of Internet use back in the mid 1990s, there were anecdotal accounts of people using the internet to meet and date other like-minded users (Griffiths, 1996). Such behaviour was classed as strange and bizarre and these people were labelled 'nerds', 'geeks' and 'anoraks'. Nowadays, the Internet is viewed as another tool in the peoples' social armoury, particularly in youth (Griffiths, 2000). Whether it is work, romance or simply keeping in touch, interactive technology is part of modern life and teenagers should be adept in using state-of-the-art technology. They are certainly going to need it in the future. However, that is not to say there aren't downsides to children

and teenagers using the Internet. One of the main reasons why behaviour online is very different from offline is because it provides a 'disinhibiting' experience (Joinson, 1998). One of the main consequences of disinhibition is that on the internet people lower their emotional guard and become much less restricted and inhibited in their actions.

The main reason for this is because when people are interacting with others online it is non-face-to-face, is perceived as an anonymous environment, and is non-threatening. On the positive side, this process can lead people to develop long-lasting friendships and, in some cases, fall in love online (Whitty & Joinson, 2009). On the negative side, people might do things online that they would never dream of doing offline including, in some instances, criminal behaviour such as cyber-bullying and cyber-stalking (Whitty & Joinson, 2009). These people are engaged in text-based virtual realities and sometimes take on other personas and social identities as a way of making themselves feel good and raising their own self-esteem (Widyanto & Griffiths, 2006).

Social networking and parental responsibility

Some have argued there's a technological generation gap between parents and their children (Griffiths, 2010b). For some, this may be indeed so but socially responsible parents still need to play a proactive role in their children's lives and get to know what they are up to online. Two of the most responsible actions any parent can take is to not let children have a personal computer with internet access in their bedrooms and to try and ensure that their online computer use takes place in the same room or vicinity as the child's parent(s). Whether watching a young son playing with his virtual friends on Club Penguin, watching a daughter dressing up cartoon girls on Star Dollz, or

watching an older son playing Farmville on Facebook, parents need to take an active interest in their children's online use (Griffiths, 2003; 2009).

Conclusions

Despite the sometimes potentially negative consequences of online behaviour, there is lots of evidence suggesting the Internet has a positive effect in most people's lives. In short, for the vast majority of people, including children and adolescents, the advantages of being online, and on social networking websites, far outweigh the negatives based on the empirical research evidence carried out to date. However, as has been witnessed in internet usage more generally, it may be the case that some particular applications on social networking sites (e.g., gambling and gaming applications) may be more problematic than the act of social networking in and of itself (Griffiths & Parke, 2010).

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