

Chapter 10

Social Networking, Cyber Bullying, and the Role of Community Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the link between social capital, the bullying that can occur via social networking sites, and community education. It becomes evident that social networking sites are influential sources of informal learning despite the published literature being somewhat divided on the sociological, psychological, and emotional benefits of social networking. Through the presentation of Australian statistics and case studies, the chapter demonstrates how social capital can be eroded through the misuse of social networking sites particularly in the form of cyber bullying. The Australian government has responded to the social impacts of cyber bullying by funding an extensive community education program. Through examining this program, it is possible to see how important it is to have effective and accessible community education regarding safe and responsible social networking.

INTRODUCTION

The exploration of social capital has become increasingly popular within the socioeconomic literature, but there remains some confusion about exactly what constitutes social capital (Urwin, Di Pietro, Sturgis, & Jack, 2008). The additional factor of emerging technology and its impact on individuals, groups and wider society only compound this confusion. This chapter aims to

explore the link between social capital, the bullying that can occur via social networking sites and community education. What becomes apparent is that social networking sites offer a wide range of informal learning opportunities that can support other learning that occurs in formal and non-formal settings. Informal learning is defined by Coombs (1985) as “the spontaneous, unstructured learning that goes on daily in the home and...through the various mass media” (p. 92). Within the context of

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this definition, Tynes (2007) effectively highlights advances in critical thinking, the taking of multiple perspectives and the acquisition of information and advice that can be informally gained through the use of social networking sites.

Given the widespread and pervasive nature of informal learning, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has commenced efforts to formally recognise the learning that takes place outside of educational institutions (OECD, 2010). The OECD is actively working with member countries to acknowledge the depth of social capital that stems from informal learning. This chapter uses the concept of informal learning and the progressive work of the OECD to set the context whereby social networking can be viewed as an influential source of informal learning. By placing particular emphasis on the benefits stemming from having community members who are well connected and confident in their use of modern information and communication technology, it is possible to explore the perils, which can also arise. These perils can include occurrences of online fraud, identity theft, the presence of fake profiles and cyber bullying—all of which can actively erode social capital at both individual and community levels.

The literature is somewhat divided on the sociological, psychological and emotional benefits of social networking, particularly regarding the number and type of online ‘friends’ that can be made through a cyber community. Kraut et al. (1998) found that people who spend a significant amount of time on the Internet experience higher levels of loneliness and a larger number of daily stressors than people who do not spend as much time on the Internet. Through the presentation of some Australian statistics and case studies, this chapter aims to demonstrate how social capital can be eroded through the misuse of social networking sites—particularly when the misuse comes in the form of cyber bullying.

Estimates of all forms of cyber bullying incidents which target Australian school children

range from 7-10% (Cross, et al., 2009) to 20% (as cited in Campbell, 2007) to even 57% (Price & Dalglish, 2010). Occurrences of cyber bullying in particular can negatively impact upon levels of social trust, social capital and overall positive regard for online interactions. As a result, an online user’s effort to become connected via social networking may in turn lead to even greater levels of social isolation as they refrain from entering the virtual environment that they perceive to be dangerous, unpredictable, difficult to control, and open to the exploitation of their conscious and unconscious vulnerabilities.

It has previously been found that an increase in chat-room activity (such as that experienced in romantic social networking sites) results in individuals being more vulnerable to identity theft and the invasion of their privacy (Milne, Rohm, & Bahl, 2004). Dating and online romance scams are particularly difficult to detect and avoid because of the involvement of emotional attachments, and the victims’ perceptions that they have found companionship and happiness. Victims of dating scams are typically found through virtual environments, and romantic social networking sites provide an ideal environment for scammers, as unwitting users trust that they will meet like-minded, honest people who are in a similar situation to themselves. Through the creation of trust comes vulnerability. This is further compounded by the fact that whilst online communities facilitate social interaction, they also provide users with an “escape” from reality (Janda & Fair, 2004) that further separates them from the very real risks and dangers associated with online social networking such as incidents of cyber bullying.

As stated, the prevalence of cyber bullying within Australia ranges from 7% to 57%, and there are a number of flow-on effects to the offline environment. Given these statistics, this chapter aims to showcase how the Australian government has responded to the social impacts of cyber bullying by funding extensive community education programs. By providing an overview of these

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