

## Chapter 9

# Fear for Online Adolescents: Isolation, Contagion, and Sexual Solicitation

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The research literature regarding fears associated with online activities of adolescents was reviewed and assessed in relation to earlier research reported by the author. The original qualitative study focused on the interactions between the social networks of young adolescents and their computer usage. Particular attention was devoted to determining whether heavy computer use tended to isolate adolescent users. The findings challenged the common attributions of prevalent danger, that heavy youthful computer users would experience social isolation. That earlier research led to further questioning of the potential harm of computer use in relation to contagion effects and alarms raised regarding sexual solicitation via the Internet. Recent literature was examined to assess whether danger warnings have been magnified, distorted, or manipulated for ideological purposes. Contrary to popular considerations, the interpersonal lives and computer activities of early adolescents reciprocally reinforced patterns of behavior that lowered the likelihood of risk behaviors to a significantly greater degree than did direct parental involvement. Recommendations to responsible adults were offered to re-focus energies and efforts in directions that would support appropriate computer use and promote pro-social behaviors of online adolescents.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Fear as a distinctive constructed social phenomenon has recently been the subject of not only of socio-psychological consideration but of public

attention (Altheide, 2002; Glassner, 2000; Furedi, 2006; Stearns, 2006). As social structures and technologies have become more complex, offering more alternative sources of communication, fear has been directed toward the very avenues of access, particularly the Internet. Combined with persistent fears regarding youthful experimentation

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with all sorts of means of interaction, we have a substantial focal point of public concern. This paper addresses certain common perceptions and attributions regarding the presumed damaging effects of Internet communication on the lives of adolescents. Our focus here is on examining the consequences of perceived risk behaviors of adolescents engaged in online environments. The attributions of isolation, contagion and sexual solicitation as possible outcomes of online interaction will be explored.

The emergence of distinctive online cognitive environments for adolescents has posed significant challenges to many parents and adult guardians whose non-digital orientation opens up profound questions of intergenerational distancing, loss of trust, and, mainly, fear of youth's degradation. Adult anxiety regarding youth social isolation as a result of excessive online activity reflects a linear mode of thought along with a limited realist notion of the meaning of sociality. In previous research, this writer presented qualitative data suggesting that under certain conditions, actual socialization of youth was not negatively impacted by virtual computer activity (Orleans & Laney, 2000). A counter-intuitive finding indicated that lesser parental involvement with online activity was associated with higher levels of pro-social interaction in both online and face-to-face environments. Since this issue has remained a public concern (Gross, 2004; Mazalin & Moore, 2004; Sanders, Field, Diego, & Kaplan, 2000), further review of this issue is most certainly warranted and will be presented here.

Further deepening the concerns of parents and professionals have been the features made possible through the advent of Web 2.0. This phenomenon refers to new ways of using the Internet to promote the formation of communities, collaborative environments, networks, file sharing sites, as well as wikis and blogs that have become commonplace in recent years. Myspace, Youtube, Facebook and Twitter are among the more popular social networking sites that are collectively and

continually built with substantial involvement of adolescents. The participatory nature of such sites may exacerbate fears of some parents, however carefully these sites may be scrutinized.

Recent research on social networking sites has found, for example, that despite parental concern, teens generally responded "to negative online events" in ways that could be characterized as "healthy" (Rosen & Carrier, 2008). Additionally, authoritative parenting was found to predict the lowest frequency of negative behaviors. Other research suggests that personal disclosures are not as frequent as some parents may assume and that adolescent use of Myspace is most frequently responsible and reasonable (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Valkenburg, Jochen and Schouten (2006) found that peer interaction on friendship networking sites increased the range of social relationships with effects on self-esteem related to the quality of feedback received.

Fear of contagion through online interaction expresses the dread that young people will be exposed to and persuaded by negative, corruptive sorts of influences. Fear of exposure to and obsession with inappropriate sexual material and communication, to crude, violent imagery, to recipes for anti-social actions such as homicide or suicide, drug use, etc., to extreme cultic ideologies, to all sorts of commonly despised possibilities, foment in the minds of many parents. Thus, fear of adolescent isolation is contrasted with fears of the very wrong kinds of social influences experienced in online environments (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Becker-Blease, 2007; Whitlock, 2006). Studies call for parental awareness of the dangers posed to address such issues without excessive hyperbole (Becker, EI-Faddagh, Berson & Berson, 2005; Schmidt, 2004; Bross, 2005; Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008).

While isolation and contagion fears reflect the duality of adult orientations toward online adolescent interpersonal experiences and subjective orientations, heightened concern regarding sexual solicitation and subsequent abductions of

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