

Chapter 11

Social Networking Sites: Implications for Youth

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ABSTRACT

In the past few years, social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and MySpace have become increasingly popular among Internet users. They allow individuals to present themselves, share information, establish or maintain connections, and interact and communicate with other users. As SNSs have become tremendously popular among adolescents and emerging adults, research suggests that online social media use may be connected to young people's development. This encyclopedia entry summarizes up-to-date research on SNSs, and will focus on the relation between adolescents' and emerging adults' use of these sites to address traditional developmental concerns and their psychosocial well-being. Researchers have begun to explore the extent to which individuals engage in self-presentation and exploration as well as relationship formation on SNSs, and are examining the relationship between such use and psychosocial outcomes among youth. As digital youth are growing up in an ever connected world, it is important to understand online social media use and the implications of such use on their psychosocial development and psychological well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Today almost anyone can “broadcast” himself or herself online with a variety of social media such as social networking sites (SNSs), YouTube and other online applications. These Internet applications offer user-friendly features, which

allow users to easily connect with others, access and share information or media around the world. In 2010, millions of people visited SNSs around the world. The tremendous growth in popularity of these networking sites, especially among youth, has elicited a growing body of work that has sought to examine their social and develop-

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mental impact (boyd & Ellison, 2007b; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Livingstone, 2008; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006).

Social networking sites (SNSs) are online platforms or sites that enable users to interact and connect with others in their network of “friends”. On becoming a member in SNS, an individual begins by creating a profile, where he or she can post personal and identifiable information, images or other content depending on the features available at the particular sites and then make connections to existing friends who already have profiles or with unknown people who have profiles on the site. The sites serve various functions for users. While LinkedIn.com serves as a business-oriented social networking website, Facebook.com, Friendster.com, Orkut and others emphasize communication with friends, peers and family members, and provide forums to share photos, music, videos, comments, and more. Still, others target particular interest groups and the 2011 version of Myspace with its music orientation is an example of this kind of SNS.

Social networking sites have become very popular, particularly among youth, and according to the 2010 PEW report, 73% of teen users and 72% of young adults (PEW, 2010), report that they are members of these virtual communities. In 2010, the two most popular SNSs were Facebook, with over 500 million unique users, and Myspace, with 57 million users (Owyang, 2010). Anecdotal reports suggest that young people view SNSs as exciting opportunities for self-expression and exploration, sociability, and to derive a sense of community. Scholars have also begun to examine the extent to which individuals use SNSs to explore and present aspects of their self, create and recreate their identities, as well as interconnect with others and create and form relationships; additionally, research has begun to examine the relation between young people’s SNSs use and their social and psychological well-being

(Livingstone, 2008; Manago et al., 2008; Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). Because young people’s SNSs use has received the most attention, we will frame our discussion about the role of SNSs in the context of adolescence and emerging adulthood.

OVERVIEW

In the early days of the Internet, pioneering researchers such as Turkle and Wakeford speculated that users create new and different selves and identities online (Turkle, 1995, 1997; Wakeford, 1999). More recently, researchers at the Children’s Digital Media Center @ Los Angeles have studied young people’s use of interactive media and shown that contrary to early speculation, their online and offline lives are psychologically connected and developmental issues such as identity and intimacy are played out in online contexts. (Manago et al., 2008; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Subrahmanyam, Garcia, Harsono, Li, Lipana, 2009; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Tynes, 2004; Subrahmanyam, Šmahel & Greenfield, 2006). Researchers in other labs have found similar findings (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007; Huffaker, & Calvert, 2005; Pempek et al., 2009) With regard to SNSs, researchers, Manago, Subrahmanyam, and Valkenburg have suggested that individuals present aspects of the self and try-out possible selves for an intended audience, and use the feedback or approvals to socially validate their behaviors, and thus, integrate them into their own identity (Manago et al., 2008; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2010; Valkenburg et al., 2006). Research by boyd, Ellison, Subrahmanyam, and Valkenburg has focused on how young people use SNS to interact with people from their offline worlds and have shown that such interactions may be related to their social capital as well as psychological and social well-being (boyd, 2010; Ellison et al., 2007; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Valkenburg et al., 2006).

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