

Chapter 79

Internet Safety

Yuriko Sasaki

University at Albany, State University of New York, USA

Jon Hobbs

Evaluation and Training Institute, USA

ABSTRACT

Internet safety has become a great concern in daily life. This entry provides information about Internet safety in terms of: (1) psychological well-being; (2) online privacy; (3) cyberbullying; and (4) exposure to sexual content. As part of the narrative, the authors discuss problematic Internet use, online communication and psychological factors, breaches of online privacy, privacy concerns, privacy protection behaviors (online privacy), cyberbullying (Internet harassment), online pornography, and sexual offenders. For each topic, the authors identify factors that are related to Internet safety and the potential for harm in online and offline contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Internet safety refers to concerns about the negative impacts of Internet use, such as psychological or physical harm, that can happen to people of all ages and can occur both online (e.g., sexual solicitation of children in a chat room), or offline (e.g., physical attacks that are a result of insulting text messages or e-mails).

OVERVIEW

Research on Internet safety and related topics are part of a relatively new field of research on cyber behaviors, which traces its roots to early work following the advent of the World Wide Web. Early research on the impact of Internet use was pioneered by Robert Kraut and colleagues (1998; 2002), who began studying the impacts of Internet use in the late 1990's. Since this early work, research on topics related to Internet safety has been conducted in many different disciplines, such as psychology, sociology and criminal justice, but these efforts have not been merged into a broader,

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cross-disciplinary field called “Internet safety.” For example, when conducting a literature review for this entry using the American Psychological Association’s PsycINFO database, the earliest record of a scholarly article identified with the key words “Internet safety” did not appear until 2005 (e.g., Yan, 2005), even though related topics were published in the late 1990’s.

Internet safety is best understood as a broad area of research and practice, with several specific areas of inquiry that examine the potential negative impacts of Internet use on several areas, such as: (1) psychological well-being (e.g., Caplan, 2003, 2005, 2007; Morahan-Martin, 2003; Pratarelli, 1999; Young 1998); (2) online privacy (e.g., LaRose, 2005, 2006, 2008; Milne, 2004; Miyazaki, 2002; Sheehan, 2005; Turow, 2007); (3) cyberbullying (e.g., Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007; 2008); and (4) exposure to pornography (e.g., Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007a; 2007b). Like many other attempts to study human behaviors, these areas are not discrete and many authors have observed the connections between them. For example, there are connections between psychological well being and exposure to pornography (in youth), or the connection between cyberbullying and online privacy.

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Psychological well-being has been a topic of interest from the beginning of Internet safety research. In his seminal paper, “Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being?” Kraut and colleagues (1998) documented the negative effects of the Internet, namely displacing offline social activity and personal relationships. In a later paper, Kraut and his co-authors walked back some of their strongest statements about the negative effects of the Internet, but also found that personal characteristics (personality type) mediated the

negative effects of problematic Internet use (Kraut et al., 2002).

There are many factors related to psychological well-being, such as the availability social support networks of friends and family, interpersonal skills for coping with stress, and positive affect and mood. Kraut et al. (1998) used three measures of psychological well-being: loneliness, stress, and depression. Researchers have continued to focus on these aspects of psychological well-being when studying the Internet. In addition, psychological well-being is often studied from one of two perspectives: the impact of Internet use on mood and affect, and how personal characteristics, such as mood and personality factors, effect online behaviors.

It is important to note that going online can contribute to psychological well-being, and can be helpful. For example, Pakistani undergraduates perceived the Internet as useful tool for improving their academic performances (Suhali & Bargees, 2006), and succeeding in school can be an important factor in psychological well-being. Furthermore, certain people are more comfortable with online communication than offline communication, and preferred accessing the Internet when they felt isolated (Suhali & Bargees, 2006). However, Internet safety issues arise when problematic Internet use puts users at risk of harm. Problematic Internet use is a threat to safety when an over-reliance on online communication technologies leads to negative impacts on emotional health and well being, such as depression or loneliness, or even the development addictive behaviors related to Internet use. For example, research has shown that excessive use of the Internet decreased job and school performance because of a lack of focus on offline responsibilities (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003).

Threats to psychological well-being have been linked to problematic Internet use, but in most cases it is difficult to point out any direct causal relationship due to the types of research used (such as correlational or descriptive studies).

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