

Abstract

Online social networking has become extremely popular with adolescents and young adults. Ninety-three percent of college students have a Facebook account. As the prevalence of online social networking grows so do psychologist's concerns about Internet communications effect on adolescent social development. In reviewing the literature, there were two predominate concerns my paper addresses. Who is using online social networking sites? Some data points to adolescents who are already socially adept using the Internet to maintain relationships and connect to new groups. This phenomenon is known as the *rich get richer* hypothesis. Other research supports a *social compensation* thesis, in which youth who are less socially adept use social networking websites to self-disclose and make new friends when they might be too shy to do so in real life. The second question researchers pose asks what is the nature of the relationships adolescents are forming online? Research provides evidence that young people use online social networking to maintain already formed friendships and build communities. So are social networking websites simply giving adolescents a new outlet for something they were traditionally focused on in this stage of their life or is the distance the Internet provides detrimental to the development of young people's face-to-face social skills?

Introduction

Online social networking and Internet communication is becoming wildly popular with adolescents and young adults (Allen, Evans, Hare, Mikami, & Szewedo, 2010, Anderson-Butcher, Ball, Brzozowski, Lasseigne, Lehnert, & McCormick, 2010; DeGroot, Ledbetter, Mao, Mazer, Meyer, & Swafford, 2011; Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolack, 2002; Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2008; Kramer & Winter, 2008; Regan & Steeves, 2010; Sheldon, 2008). 93% of young people in America between the ages of twelve and seventeen are using the Internet (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2010). Ninety-three percent of college students report having a facebook account (Sheldon, 2008) and these numbers are only increasing. As youth online social networking usage grows in prevalence, so do psychologist's concerns about the effects virtual communication has on adolescent social development. After reviewing the research, it became obvious there were two aspects of adolescent development and social network usage most often discussed by scholars.

First, is the debate over whether Internet communication is used most by those already socially adept for additional interactions to bolster already thriving social networks or those young people who lack social skills and employ social networks as a form of *social compensation* (Sheldon, 2010). Second, adolescence is possibly the most essential time for social development in a person's life. In this period teens learn to form and maintain intimate friendships and other essential social skills. These skills become vital in young adulthood when peer groups become the primary resource for emotional support (Allen et al., 2010). Researchers want to comprehend the nature of the relationships adolescents are forming online. This paper will be an in depth examination of the research findings on these two topics.

Rich Get Richer vs. Social Compensation

Researchers have proposed two opposing hypothesis in answer to the question; why are young people so apt to utilize social networking sites (Sheldon, 2008)? The first of these is the *rich get richer* theory. More extraverted teens that already have well-established peer groups report using the communication websites as additional peer interaction to reinforce already formed friendships and keep in touch with long-distance friends. On the other hand, less socially adept youth explain their online social networking as a place to anonymously self-disclose and make friends when they might otherwise be too uncomfortable to do so. This group is using online social networking to compensate socially, thus displaying the second hypothesis, the *social compensation hypothesis* (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2010). There is much debate and contradictory research over which of these motives takes precedence because past research has shown that less socially capable teens are more likely to turn to the worldwide web while current research is showing the opposite.

Sheldon (2008) conducted a study in which she explores student's motives for creating and maintaining a facebook account and the relationship between *unwillingness-to-communicate* and facebook usage. She wanted to discover what students' motives for facebook usage were, if those who did not like face to face communication had different motives for utilizing facebook, and if unwillingness-to-communicate could predict a student's behavior and attitude in their online social networking. Sheldon surveyed a sample of 172 from a large university. Students completed a questionnaire that asked them to report on their demographics, unwillingness-to-communicate, motives for having a facebook account, the amount of time they spend on facebook, and their attitude toward

the social networking website. After analyzing her data, Sheldon found maintenance of relationships and passing time were the motives for facebook usage that scored highest. When she compared motives for employing facebook and unwillingness-to-communicate, the author found students who did not enjoy or felt anxiety about face-to-face interaction used facebook to pass time and feel less lonely but were far less likely to believe online communication would aid them in making new friends. Finally, Sheldon looked at the correlation between unwillingness-to-communicate and the amount of time spent on facebook as well as attitudes towards it. Her data suggested that students who engage less in personal social interaction have fewer facebook friends but logged on to facebook more. The results of this research appear to support the rich get richer hypothesis.

Allen et al. (2010) hypothesized that the young people who participated in online social networking would be more socially adjusted. They also examined how adult communication was affected, which will be discussed later in this review. The researchers conducted a longitudinal study on 172 participants. First, they surveyed and interviewed preteens on their *peer sociometric status*, positive and negative peer interaction, and symptoms of depression. The mothers of these preteens were surveyed about their children's deviant behaviors. When participants reached young adulthood, the researchers asked for access to their facebook pages if they possessed one. Allen et al. coded 92 facebook pages for number of friends, connection with friends, friend displays of support, hostile profile biographies, and inappropriate pictures. They also surveyed these 92 young adults on the quality of their friendships and symptoms of depression. Finally, they asked friends of the participants to complete the *Young Adult Behavior Checklist*. After performing an ordinary least squares hierarchical multiple regressions on each variable, these

researchers found preteens who had displayed negativity in friendships and reported symptoms of depression were less likely to possess a social networking profile. In contrast, early adolescents who reported more positive intimate friendships were more liable to possess a webpage. This article also supports the rich get richer theory.

Kramer and Winter (2008) did a study on how self-esteem, extraversion, self-efficacy, and self-presentation are affected by online social networking. Their first hypothesis explored the relationship between presenting oneself on social networking sites and extraversion. They conducted their study on 58 young people who were members of studiVZ, which is a German social networking website much like facebook. These youths completed a survey on their level of extraversion, self-esteem, and ability to effectively present themselves. Then the participant's profiles were assessed on numbers of friends, groups, photos, biographical fields completed, and words. They also checked profiles for real names, political leanings, and relationship status. The researchers conducted a multivariate analysis of variance using extroversion as the stable factor. They discovered a positive correlation existed between extraverted individuals and a more creative profile picture. However, no other significant relationships showed up in their analysis. These research findings were inconclusive and support neither the rich get richer or the social compensation hypothesizes.

DeGroot et al. (2011) conducted an extensive study on young people's feelings towards socially connecting online and self-disclosure as predictors of communication on facebook as well as the level of intimacy in relationships. Their study included nine hypotheses, two of which are relevant to this examination of findings on the two motive hypotheses. The researchers ask if *online social connection* (OSC) has a positive relationship

with the frequency of face-to-face communication with facebook friends and if communicating on facebook is positively correlated with personal interactions with facebook friends. There were 325 facebook users who participated in this study. They were surveyed on their attitude towards online communication and then asked questions about a randomly selected facebook friend. These questions included where the friend lived, amount of facebook communication with this friend, non-Internet communication with this friend, and how close they were to this friend. After analysis, the results showed that OSC has a positive relationship with communication via facebook when *online self-disclosure* is low. They also found that personal interaction with a friend made it very probable for facebook communication to occur. Evidence for the rich get richer hypothesis is shown in this study.

As previously discussed, current research is beginning to show support for the rich get richer hypothesis. However, because online social networking is such a young field further research is still needed in order to fully confirm this hypothesis. If young people who already have solid social communities and skills are more likely to employ online social networking, it raises the question, can traditional adolescent relationship patterns be applied to online social networking? This question and others will be addressed in the following section.

Relationships

In the discussion of online social networking's effects on teen relationships many questions arise. What kind of relationships are adolescents forming online? Does Internet communication strengthen bonds or weaken relationships because there is less face-to-face interaction? Do adolescent relationships and interactions on social networking sites

parallel traditional youth relationships and interactions (Greenfield and Subrahmanyam, 2008). Research in the area of online social networking and adolescent relationships attempts to answer these questions.

Mitchell et al. (2002) conducted research on adolescent online relationship closeness and tried to describe how many and the types of relationships formed online by teens. They used a nation wide sample of 1,501 youths and conducted telephone interviews with the teens after receiving parental consent. Participants were asked about their Internet safety, casual online friendships, close online friendships, romantic relationships online, and meeting someone online then meeting them in person. After frequencies were run on the variables, data displayed that 55% of the youth surveyed had used some form of Internet communication in the past year to interact with someone they had not met in person. 25% described casual friendships, 14% said they were or had been involved in a close Internet friendship, 7% of youths interview had actually gone to meet someone they met online, and only 2% admitted to a romantic relationship online. This research suggests that friendships formed online are more often shallow, casual, and short-lived.

Greenfield and Subrahmanyam (2008) thoroughly reviewed literature on Internet communication exploring how online interaction shapes relationships with friends, significant others, strangers, and family. They explained that peers seem to use social networking sites most often to stay in touch with offline peers. However, girls usually use online social networking to maintain previously existing friendships while boys are more likely to use online communication to make new friends or flirt. The authors also report that 48% of teens believe online social networking has improved their relationships (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2001; as cited in Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2008).

However, Greenfield and Subrahmanyam's article suggests that online social networking sites may be impacting adolescent relationships by bringing selection of social networks and friend groups to a new very public level. Teens also use online social networking to reinforce romantic relationships in the same way they use it to maintain friendships. The authors also report relationships with strangers online are usually superficial and not long lasting. Only a small percentage of adolescents report a close relationship with someone they met online and troubled youths were most likely to report an online relationship with someone they had not met. Internet relationships with strangers can still pose risks to teens and should be monitored by adults. Finally, this article reports that a large number of parents feel the amount of time their child spends on social networking sites interferes with family functioning and bonding.

In a previously discussed study, DeGroot, et al. (2011) wanted to know if relationship intimacy could be predicted by the relationship between OSC and online self-disclosure. They found that OSC and OSD did have a positive correlation with closeness in relationships. Teens who communicated through social networks and self-disclosed via Internet communication were more likely to have intimate relationships with their peers.

Regan and Seeves (2010) analyzed research and discussed the way online social networking could empower young people. The authors explained that adolescents have been the first to use social networking sites because their age group is predisposed to focus on peer interactions and social relations. They also discussed the *social capital model* and describe the way in which social networking websites allow young people to maintain existing friendships, make new friends, and find past friends in order to renew old relationships. Thus online social networks are able to both *bridge* and *bond* social capital by

connecting large groups of people in loose networks and allowing for communication that fosters relationship closeness. In their final comments on relationships the authors suggest that self-esteem may be boosted by the relationships and feelings of connection and integration these social networks provide. These relationships in networks might even help socially isolated youths feel more included.

Allen et al. (2010) conducted a longitudinal study previously examined in this review. These researchers also explored Internet communication and the adjustment of young adults. Their data displayed a positive relationship between pre-adolescents with positive friendships and young adults number of friends and support received from friends on their online profile. Preteens who exhibited negative friendships were less likely to connect with friends on their webpage. This research suggests continuity between face-to-face relationships and how people behave online. "In a well-known cartoon for *The New Yorker*, a dog in front of a computer says to his canine companion 'on the Internet nobody knows you're a dog.' On the basis of the current findings, however, it is perhaps more accurate to say 'on the internet, you behave like the dog that you are'" (Allen et al., 2010, p. 55).

Anderson-Butcher et al. (2010) researched the positive and negative developmental effects of adolescent blog use. They used a sample of 100 teens that posted blogs on xanga. The researchers coded blogs from the past thirty days from each user for geographic location, drug use, the *Teacher Referral Checklist*, the *Search Institute's developmental assets framework*, and community building. They used three coders in order to ensure reliability of their data. The data displayed that blogs like other forms of online social networking was primarily used by teens for community building. Most often blogs were used to foster and

maintain relationships with peers. The authors suggested that this is the main goal in adolescence; thus blogging parallels traditional adolescent relationships and interaction.

Conclusion

Since the massive popularity of social networking sites come about until the early 2000s, research in this field is obviously incredibly young and there is still much to be done. The studies reviewed in this article appear to indicate that despite initial concern, online social networking may have more positive influence on adolescents than negative. Internet communication is an outlet for both extroverted and introverted youths. Traditional social development does not seem to have been impacted since social networking patterns seems to follow the norms in this area. Teens most often use social networking sites to connect with friends and build communities, something they are also doing offline. Nevertheless, risks lie in communication with dangerous strangers, lack of face-to-face interaction, and the weakening of family ties. Much research remains to be done in this field before any conclusive assumptions can be made.

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