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THE EFFECTS OF THE FRIEND NETWORKING SITE MYSPACE ON
ADOLESCENTS' GLOBAL SELF ESTEEM

by
Amanda L. Pietrangelo

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
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Advisor

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ABSTRACT

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THE EFFECTS OF THE FRIEND NETWORKING SITE MYSPACE ON
ADOLESCENTS' GLOBAL SELF ESTEEM

2007/08

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Master of Arts in School Psychology

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of the popular friend-networking site, MySpace on young adolescents' global self-esteem. The hypothesis of the present study states that adolescents who spend more time on the friend-networking site, MySpace, will experience lower overall self-esteem than their peers who spend either less time on the site, or no time on the site. Further, predictions were made on the basis of gender, suggesting that adolescent girls with adequate access will be more likely to experience these affects than will their male counterparts. Participants in this study were 95 (31 males, 64 females) seventh and eighth grade students from two middle class, suburban communities. The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES) was administered to all participants to measure global self-esteem. A Two-Way between-subjects ANOVA was performed to determine the results of the study. The results revealed that there was no significant relationship between participants' MySpace use and their self-esteem. These results suggest that the amount of time adolescents spend on MySpace does not directly affect their global self-esteem. Results also revealed no differences between genders, suggesting that in the sample population of this study, males and females view themselves in relatively the same way.

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Chapter I

The Problem

Need

In the past few years, the opportunities for adolescents to establish and maintain peer relationships via the use of the Internet have increased dramatically. Social networking sites such as Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook have rapidly been gaining popularity as prime locations for relationship formation and preservation. These friend-networking sites allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Friend networking sites are typically open systems. Everyone is welcome to join, but new members must register and many times the sites only allow new members to join if existing members invite them to do so. Members present themselves to others via online profiles that contain self-descriptions (e.g., demographics, interests) and pictures and organize their contacts through comments and feedback left on one another's profiles.

As Internet use among adolescents has grown exponentially over the last few years, so to has concern over its effect on their psychological well being (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002). A 1999 survey of over 1000 US parents revealed widespread public concern about the Internet's impact on the social adjustment of youth: almost two-thirds of respondents expressed concern that "going online too often may lead children to become isolated from other people" (Turow, 1999). The first major study of the Internet's psychological impact provided initial empirical support for the public's apprehensions. The initial reports of the HomeNet study of first time Internet users (Kraut et al., 1998)

indicated that using the Internet for as little as 3 hr weekly led to increased levels of depression and reductions in social support over the course of 2 years (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002). Further, results indicated adolescents to be the population most vulnerable to and affected by these negative effects.

Purpose

The present study examined the self-esteem of adolescents in two grade levels, seventh grade and eighth grade with respect to their overall amount of use of the friend-networking site, MySpace. Given the recent worldwide proliferation of such sites and the ever-expanding numbers of adolescents joining, these sites presumably play an integral role in adolescent life (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). The purpose of the current study was to investigate the consequences of the friend-networking site, MySpace, for adolescents' social self-esteem and well-being. Specifically, this study aimed to examine whether the amount of time adolescents spend on MySpace directly and/or adversely affects their self-esteem.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this study states that adolescents who spend more time on the friend-networking site, MySpace, will experience lower overall self-esteem than their peers who spend either less time on the site or no time on the site. Further, predictions were made on the basis of gender, suggesting that adolescent girls with adequate access to MySpace will be more likely to experience lower overall self-esteem than will their male counterparts.

Peer acceptance and interpersonal feedback on the self, both important features of friend networking sites, are vital predictors of social self-esteem and well being in

adolescence. On friend-networking sites, interpersonal feedback is often publicly available to all other members of the site. Such public evaluations are particularly likely to affect the development of adolescents' social self-esteem (Valkenburg et. al, 2006).

Significance

There is no period in which evaluations regarding the self are as likely to affect self esteem and well being as in adolescence (Valkenburg et. al, 2006). Further, the periods of early and middle adolescence are characterized by an increased focus on the self (Valkenburg et. al, 2006). Adolescents often engage in imaginative audience behavior in which they tend to overestimate the extent to which others are watching and evaluating their behaviors and, as a result, can be extremely preoccupied with how they appear in the eyes of others (Valkenburg et. al, 2006). It has been theorized that young adolescents are more influenced by the imaginary audience idea, and thus are relatively more self-conscious (concerned with what others will think about them) than children or older adolescents (Elkind & Bowen, 1979).

Definitions

For the purpose of this study, self-esteem is defined as an adolescent's own evaluation of their self worth or value; how much adolescents like or dislike themselves. Further, self-esteem is related to an adolescent's satisfaction with three dimensions of their selves: physical appearance, romantic attractiveness, and the ability to form and maintain close friendships (Valkenburg et. al, 2006).

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES) – perhaps the most widely used self-esteem measure in social science research, was originally designed to assess self-esteem among adolescents. This scale is a 10-item self-report measure of global self-esteem. It

consists of 10 statements related to overall feelings of self-worth. The scale asks participants to respond to one of four response choices, which range from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” (Rosenberg, 1965).

The term middle school in this study is used to describe a school, which accommodates students between elementary school and high school. For the purposes of this study, a middle school accommodates students that are in grades seventh and eighth.

The term adolescent refers to an individual between the lifespan stages of childhood and early adulthood. In the current study, adolescents’ are boys and girls, ages 12-14, who are in either the seventh grade or eighth grade.

Assumptions

Within the construction of this study, several assumptions have been made about the population that is being examined. The first is that the group of students in the study comprises a random sample of adolescents with heterogeneous race, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and cognitive ability. The second assumption that must be made is that the conditions for testing all of the students were the same. Although the same scale of measurement was administered to all students, we must assume that each student clearly understood the task, had adequate time and materials for which to complete the task, understood the 10 statements and the range of responses, and took the task seriously. Also, it was assumed that the participants answered the questions truthfully and to the best of their ability.

Limitations

A major limitation in the present study is that the participants are self-reporting and therefore may be unreliable in their assessment of themselves. Further, it is possible

that their responses may not be an accurate or truthful reflection of their global self-esteem. A second limitation in this study is that the classroom teachers are administering the scale, not the researcher. Individual teachers may explain directions differently, focus or emphasize attention on different aspects of the task, and provide various levels of assistance and support to the children in their classrooms. A final limitation of the current study is that recruited participants were from two school districts in the same county. Both school districts are of upper middle class socioeconomic status; therefore the results of this study may not generalize to other populations of different SES or to populations from other counties, states, or countries.

Overview

In Chapter Two, previous research on the topic of adolescence, self-esteem, and friend networking sites will be examined. The previous literature on these topics will be extensively reviewed and discussed.

In Chapter Three, the methods of the study will be described. This section will include the general demographics of the sample population in the study, the type of measurement scale that will be used, and the details of its administration (by whom, to whom, when, where, and how). The statistical analysis used to examine the results will also be discussed in greater detail.

In Chapter Four, the results of the study will be explained. The statistical analysis will be conducted and the results will be given. The significance of the obtained results will also be determined and provided.

Lastly, Chapter Five will explain, in greater detail, the results of the study and their significance, while providing theories as to why those results may have occurred.

Further, this last chapter will include possible implications of this study and suggestions for future research.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Introduction

The Internet is fast becoming a natural, background part of everyday life. In 2002, more than 600 million people worldwide had access to it (Manasian, 2003). Children today grow up with the Internet, much like past generations have grown up with the television or telephone. Likewise, children of today, as well as of the future, will take the Internet for granted, much like they do now with television, the telephone, and other technologies (Turow & Kavanaugh, 2003).

As use of the Internet and computer networks expand and integrate with everyday life, questions about use are changing from who is “signing on” to more in-depth analysis of what people do online. Among these considerations is a growing recognition of how the Internet is stimulating connections and forging new links at all levels of organization – grassroots, corporate, institutional, national, global – and a concern that such connectivity may detract from local interaction (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

In the past few years, much research has emerged on the Internet and its implications, both positive and negative. Early work in computer-mediated communication suggested that shifting interactions from traditional face-to-face venues to text-based media would create an impoverished communication environment, filled with misunderstandings and antisocial behavior. Yet, as the new media have become more familiar, and their use adapted through common and group conventions (Poole & DeSanctis, 1990; McLaughlin, Osborne, & Smith, 1995), they have come to function as a

vital means of maintaining work and social connections in everyday life (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002), crossing social worlds of work, home, and geography (Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2002; Salaff, 2002).

More recently, the Internet has been blamed for disconnecting people from local, family interaction, drawing them into online relationships with people of unknown and unconfirmed identity (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukhopadhyay, & Scherilis, 1998; Nie, 2001). Such ideas are countered however, by those who see the Internet as presenting the opportunity for keeping connections with friends and family while away at school (LaRose, Eastin, & Gregg, 2001), on business, vacation, or when moving to a new neighborhood (Hampton & Wellman, 2002).

The present study aims to examine the effects of one aspect of the Internet, friend-networking sites, on adolescents self-esteem. As adolescent Internet use has grown exponentially within the last decade, so to have a number of correspondent expectations and concerns. Among them were the theories that gender predicts usage, that Internet use causes social isolation and depression, especially for teens, and that adolescents use the Internet for anonymous identity experimentation (Gross, 2004).

The following research explores these issues in greater detail, while breaking topics down into four distinct sections. The first section of research will explore the vast effects of the Internet on psychological well-being (i.e., self-esteem, social anxiety, loneliness, depression). The next section will focus primarily on Internet self-disclosure and the factors, which affect it (i.e., age, gender, self-esteem, anonymity, shyness, lack of perceived social barriers). The third section examines the way in which impressions are formed via the Internet (i.e., different presentation strategies). The final section of

research describes social interaction (i.e., online relationships) among Internet users, and its implications for both users online and real world lives.

Psychological Well-Being

Many studies have aimed to examine self-esteem in adolescence and the factors, which affect it. This may be in part, attributed to the fact that adolescents are more keenly concerned with their self-image and what others think of them than are other age groups (Harper & Marshall, 1991). Middle adolescence is the developmental period, which is currently considered to be the most stressful as the demands for personal recognition are intensified and the adolescent, although not ready for the responsibility of being an adult, resents being treated like a child (Harper & Marshall, 1991).

Harper and Marshall (1991) conducted a study to examine the differences in the nature and extent of problems reported by middle-adolescent males and females, and to investigate the relationship between extent of problems and self-esteem. It has been suggested that contrary to popular theory, girls do not experience more problems than boys, and that this misconception results from girls simply being more able and willing to talk openly about their problems.

Researchers hypothesized that girls would report having significantly more problems than would boys, the types of problems expressed by girls and boys would be different, the self-esteem levels of girls and boys would be different, and the association between types of problems and self-esteem would be different for girls and boys (Harper & Marshall, 1991). Results indicated that, in support of the researcher's predictions, girls reported significantly more problems and lower self-esteem levels than did boys. Results also revealed a significant relationship between self-esteem and reported problems, and

different problem areas were related to self-esteem for girls and boys (Harper & Marshall, 1991).

Adolescents' relationships with friends and peers play a critical role in the development of social skills and feelings of personal competence that are essential for adult functioning (Ingersoll, 1989). In their study, La Greca and Lopez (1998) examined the association between adolescents' social anxiety and their peer relations, friendships, and social functioning. Results revealed that girls reported having more social anxiety than boys, and social anxiety was more strongly linked to girls' social functioning than boys'. Specifically, adolescents with higher levels of social anxiety reported poorer social functioning (less support from classmates, less social acceptance), and girls with higher levels of social anxiety reported fewer friendships, and less intimacy, companionship, and support in their close friendships (La Greca & Lopez, 1998). These findings suggest the value of social anxiety for understanding the social functioning and close friendships of adolescents.

Given the recent worldwide proliferation of the Internet, and the ever-expanding numbers of adolescents participating, the Internet presumably plays an integral role in adolescent life (Valkenburg, P.M., Peter, J., & Schouten, A.P., 2006). A 1997 study revealed that 73% of college students in the United States use the Internet at least once a week (Sherer, 1997). One decade later, it is inevitable that both the percentage of students and the frequency of Internet use have increased dramatically.

A study conducted by Gross, Juvonen, and Gable (2002) investigated the relationship between adolescent well-being and social aspects of Internet use. Their purpose in conducting this study was twofold: first they aimed to examine more closely

what adolescents were doing on-line, and second, they hoped to investigate whether distinctions among on-line activities and communication partners allow us to better understand the relation between Internet use and well-being (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002). Results of this study revealed time spent on-line was not associated with dispositional or daily well-being; however the closeness of instant message communication partners was associated with daily social anxiety and loneliness in school (Gross et. al., 2002).

In 2006, Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten examined the consequences of friend networking sites for adolescents' social self-esteem and well-being. Researchers in this study worked under the assumption that, "peer acceptance and interpersonal feedback on the self, both important features of friend network sites, are vital predictors of social self-esteem and well-being in adolescence" (Harter, 1999). Results revealed that adolescent's self-esteem was affected solely by the tone of the feedback that participants received on their profiles. Further, positive feedback enhanced adolescents' self esteem, and negative feedback decreased their self-esteem (Valkenburg et. al., 2006).

In 2007, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe examined the relationship between use of the social networking site, Facebook, and the formation and maintenance of social capital. Researchers in this study argued that online social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, support both the maintenance of existing social relationships and the formation of new connections (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

Results of the study revealed a strong association between the use of the social networking site, Facebook, and the three types of social capital explored within the study. In addition, Facebook usage was found to interact with measures of psychological well-

being, suggesting that it might provide greater benefits for users experiencing low self-esteem and low life satisfaction (Ellison et. al., 2007).

Previous research has suggested that socially anxious individuals may find it easier to interact online where anonymity can be maintained rather than engage in face-to-face interaction where being observed by others might induce a fear of negative evaluation (Shepherd & Edelman, 2005). To examine this theory, a Reason for Internet Use questionnaire was developed to examine the relationship between Internet use, social anxiety, and depression (Shepherd & Edelman, 2005). Researchers hypothesized that social anxiety, low ego strength, anxiety, and depression would be associated with the use of the Internet to cope with social fears. In line with the hypothesis, and in support of previous studies, results indicated a significant relationship between social anxiety, low ego strength, anxiety, and depression (Shepherd & Edelman, 2005). Results of this study support the contention that individuals with social anxiety use the Internet to help regulate social concerns.

In recent years, there has been much debate over whether the Internet is improving or harming participation in community life and social relationships (Kraut et al., 1998). To further investigate this premise, researchers conducted a study to examine the effects of the Internet on social involvement and psychological well-being. In this study, longitudinal data was used to observe the causal relationship between people's use of the Internet, their social involvement, and certain likely psychological consequences of social involvement (Kraut et al., 1998). Although the Internet was used extensively for communication in this study, results revealed that greater Internet use was associated with declines in participants' communication with family members within their

household, declines in the size of their social circle, and increases in their depression and loneliness (Kraut et. al., 1998). Hence, researchers named the occurrence, the Internet Paradox.

In 2002, a group of researchers revisited the Internet paradox with a follow-up report of participants from the original study. Results revealed that most of the negative outcomes initially associated with the use of the Internet dissipated overtime (Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson, & Crawford, 2002). The statistical interactions of loneliness and depressive symptoms with time period suggest that use of the Internet led to negative outcomes during the first phase of the study and more positive outcomes later (Kraut et. al., 2002).

In a second replication study, researchers again examined the effects of Internet usage on communication, social involvement, and psychological well-being. Results revealed that more use of the Internet was associated with positive outcomes over a broad range of dependent variables measuring social involvement and psychological well-being, including local and distant social circles, face-to-face communication, community involvement, trust in people, positive affect, and computer skill (Kraut et. al., 2002).

Past studies have indicated that computer-mediated communication (CMC) is inherently impersonal, shallow, and perhaps even hostile (Parks & Floyd, 1996; Walther, 1996; Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Research suggests this is due to the fewer channels of communication that CMC provides as compared to traditional face-to-face communication (FtF). For example, while CMC relies on only typed words and symbols to communicate and express emotions, FtF has spoken words, facial expressions, inflections in the speaker's voice, body language, and so on, that all equally contribute to

the information being conveyed (Moody, 2001). Recent studies have suggested that Internet use can displace valuable time that would normally be spent with family and friends (Nie & Erbring, 2000; Brenner, 1997), and many researchers are beginning to link Internet use with increases in psychological difficulties such as depression and loneliness (Kraut et. al., 1998; Weiser, 2001).

In 2000, a group of researchers set out to investigate the possible effects of Internet use among adolescents. More specifically, Sanders, Field, Diego, and Kaplan (2000) aimed to examine whether higher levels of Internet use are associated with depression and social isolation among adolescents. Past research has suggested that excessive use of the Internet has been associated with increases in psychological difficulties such as depression and loneliness (Moody, 2001). Researchers hypothesized that a high level of Internet use would be related to less optimal ratings on both relationship and depression scales (Sanders, Field, Diego, & Kaplan, 2000). Analyses revealed that low Internet users, as compared with high Internet users, reported significantly better relationships with their mothers and friends however, no significant differences were identified between high and low Internet users in terms of depression (Sanders et. al., 2000). The results of this study indicate that high Internet use is associated to weaker social ties, as low Internet users reported significantly better relationships with their mothers and peers than did the high Internet users (Sanders et. al., 2000).

In 1973, Robert Weiss identified at least two types of loneliness, emotional loneliness and social loneliness. In 2001, Moody conducted a study, which attempted to apply Weiss's bimodal theory of loneliness to Internet use. In his study, Moody

hypothesized that individuals with a high level of Internet use, as defined by a relatively large number of hours spent online, will be more likely to experience emotional loneliness, but less likely to experience social loneliness (Moody, 2001).

Results of this research supported the hypothesis, as they revealed that individuals who spend more time online are more likely to have higher rates of emotional loneliness and lower rates of social loneliness (Moody, 2001). These findings suggest the impact of the Internet on emotional well-being may be more complex than previously thought and can therefore not be viewed as having solely a negative or beneficial effect (Moody, 2001).

The model introduced and tested in a study by Caplan in 2003 suggests that lonely and depressed individuals may develop a preference for online social interaction, which, in turn, leads to negative outcomes associated with their Internet use (Caplan, 2003). Results of the study indicated that psychosocial health predicted levels of preference for online social interaction, which, in turn, predicted negative outcomes associated with problematic Internet use (Caplan, 2003). Additionally, results revealed that the influence of psychosocial distress on negative outcomes due to Internet use is mediated by preference for online socialization and other symptoms of problematic Internet use (Caplan, 2003). The results support the current theory that individual's preference for online, rather than face-to-face, social interaction plays an important role in the development of negative consequences associated with problematic Internet use (Caplan, 2003).

In 2007, Caplan conducted a study to examine the extent to which social anxiety might better explain results previously attributed to loneliness as a predictor of preference

for online social interaction and problematic Internet use. Caplan (2007) has argued that the correlation between loneliness and negative outcomes of Internet use is mediated by a preference for online social interaction (POSI) (Caplan, 2003; Caplan, 2005). In a previous study, Caplan found that participants' self-reported level of POSI mediated the correlation between their level of loneliness and the extent to which they self-reported experiencing negative outcomes due to their Internet use (Caplan, 2003). Such findings lend support to the theory that individuals with weak social networks and relationships are drawn to online social interaction for its interpersonal advantages, which in turn may lead to problematic outcomes. Results of the 2007 study supported the hypothesis that the relationship between loneliness and preference for online social interaction is spurious, and that social anxiety is indeed the confounding variable in the relationship (Caplan, 2007).

Much of the research discussed in this section lends support to the theory that excessive levels of Internet use may have adverse effects on individual's psychological well-being. In more recent years, public opinion about the Internet has increasingly become negative, as previous research has suggested that Internet use is positively correlated with stress, depression, and loneliness (Kraut et. al., 1998; Weiser, 2001). The results of more recent studies however, have suggested that although researchers initially assumed that the Internet would affect users detrimentally, their hypotheses were not supported (Shaw & Grant, 2002). Shaw and Grant (2002) conducted a study designed to rebut the earlier assumptions.

Shaw and Gant's (2002) study aimed to test the hypothesis that Internet usage can actually affect users beneficially. Results of their study revealed that Internet use was

found to decrease loneliness and depression significantly, while perceived social support and self-esteem increased significantly (Shaw & Gant, 2002).

Self-Disclosure

A multidimensional construct, self-disclosure is defined as “any message about the self that a person communicates to another (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007).

Research has suggested that pressures to highlight one’s positive attributes are experienced in tandem with the need to present one’s true (or authentic) self to others, especially in significant relationships (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). This tension between authenticity and impression management is inherent in many aspects of self-disclosure (Ellison et. al., 2006). In making decisions about when and what to self-disclose, individuals often struggle to reconcile opposing needs such as openness and autonomy (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006).

Interactants in online environments experience these same pressures and desires, however the greater control over self-presentational behavior in computer-mediated communication allows individuals to manage their online interactions more strategically (Ellison et. al., 2006). Due to the asynchronous nature of computer-mediated communication, and the fact that computer-mediated communication emphasizes verbal and linguistic cues over less controllable nonverbal communication cues, online self presentation and disclosure is more malleable and subject to self-censorship than traditional face-to-face communication (Walther, 1996).

Adolescence has long been referred to as a period of considerable emotional upheaval (Freud, 1968). One way adolescents can cope with these emotional disruptions is to discuss them with important persons in their social support networks (i.e., parents

and friends) (Papini, Farmer, Clark, & Micka, 1990). In their study of adolescent self-disclosure, Papini, Farmer, Clark, and Micka (1990) aimed to identify both age and gender differences in adolescent emotional self-disclosure to parents and friends and also to describe how familial and individual developmental characteristics influence patterns of disclosure.

Consistent with previous research on self-disclosure, the results of this study revealed that females disclose significantly more of their emotions to parents and friends than do males (Papini et. al., 1990). Age differences identified in adolescent emotional self-disclosure to friends, but not parents, within this study are also consistent with previous research. Results showed that emotional self-disclosure to friends was greatest among older adolescents in the study. Further, while younger adolescents showed preference to disclose information about their emotional state to parents, older adolescents preferred to disclose to friends (Papini et. al., 2001).

Those who feel better able to express their “true selves” in Internet rather than face-to-face interaction settings are more likely to form close relationships with people met on the Internet (McKenna, Green, Gleason, 2002). Researchers have identified two unique features of the Internet that make it a place where the true self might be more easily expressed than in traditional, face-to-face communication venues. The first feature is the Internet’s ability to be relatively anonymous in one’s individual or group level interactions (Bargh et. al., 2002). This feature allows one to both express oneself and behave in ways not typically available in one’s social sphere, both because one is free of the expectations and constraints placed on us by those who know us, and because the costs and risks of social sanctions for what we say or do are greatly reduced (Bargh et.

al., 2002). Secondly, in traditional face-to-face interactions there are significant costs to disclosing negative aspects of oneself. These barriers are not present in Internet interactions.

Internet behavior and, more specifically, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been characterized as more intimate, personal, and self-disclosing than face-to-face interaction (FtF) (Joinson, 2001; Walther, 1996). Research has shown significantly higher self-disclosure levels in CMC as compared to FtF interactions. The current evidence from past research, online counseling (Barak, 1999; Barak & Fisher, 2003), social support groups (Preece, 1999), web-studies of social desirability (Joinson, 1999), online communities (Rheingold, 1993), and web-based story boards (Roson, 1999) all suggest that people disclose more, less socially desirable, information about themselves online as compared to equivalent FtF contexts (Joinson, 2004).

The media preferences of both high and low self-esteem Internet users were examined in a study conducted by Joinson in 2004. Participants were asked to rank four media (face-to-face, email, letter, and telephone) in order of preference across four different communication scenarios designed to pose interpersonal risk. The results of the study revealed that low self-esteem Internet users showed a significant preference toward email communication as compared to high self-esteem users. Likewise, low self-esteem participants showed a significantly reduced preference for face-to-face communication as compared to high self-esteem participants. Results also revealed that a greater chance of rejection in a scenario led to email being preferred to face-to-face communication with low self-esteem participants (Joinson, 2004).

Recently, much concern has been expressed of the effects of misuse of the Internet on various aspects of children's social lives. Online environments offer individuals an increased ability to control their self-presentation, and therefore greater opportunities to engage in misrepresentation (Cornwell & Lundgren, 2001). Some theorists argue that computer-mediated communication gives participants more freedom to explore playful, fantastical online personae that differ from their "real life" identities (Stone, 1996; Turkle, 1995). In the faceless cyberspace, people can create online personas where they alter their identities and pretend to be someone other than themselves (Turkle, 1995).

A study conducted by Harman, Hansen, Cochran, and Lindsey (2005) predicted that children who misrepresent themselves on the Internet would have less well-developed social skills, lower levels of self-esteem, and higher levels of social anxiety and aggression. Results revealed that children who reported the most faking behavior on the Internet (e.g., pretending to be older) had poorer social skills, lower levels of self-esteem, higher levels of social anxiety, and higher levels of aggression (Harman, Hansen, Cochran, & Lindsey, 2005).

Impression Development

Prior research on interpersonal aspects of computer-mediated communication suggests that the absence of nonverbal cues inhibits interactants' ability to form impressions of each other and that without these cues; communication is generally depersonalized (Walther, 1993). In 1993, Walther conducted a study to explore the effects of computer-mediated communication on groups' impression development. Results of this study revealed that computer-mediated communication groups gradually

increased in impression development to a level approaching that of face-to-face communication groups.

A study conducted by Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs in 2006 examined different self presentation strategies among online dating participants, in an attempt to explore how participants manage their online presentation of self in order to accomplish the goal of finding a romantic partner. Results of this research suggested that participants attended carefully to small cues online, successfully mediated the tension between impression management pressures and the desire to present an authentic sense of self, and attempted to establish the veracity of their identity claims (Ellison et. al., 2006).

Social Interaction

For personality and social psychology, the Internet is a place where people are engaging in social interaction (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Indeed, the number one use of the Internet at home is for interpersonal communication (Kraut, Mukopadhyay, Szczypula, Kiesler, & Scherlis, 1998). Through email, chat rooms, instant messaging, newsgroups, and other means, people are sharing aspects of their daily lives, talking about interests with like-minded others, and keeping in touch with family and friends (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). A 1998 survey of 1,000 Internet users found that 94% of users reported that the Internet made it easier for them to communicate with friends and family, and 87% regularly use it for that purpose (D'Amico, 1998). In the midst of all this social activity, people are forming relationships with those whom they meet on the Internet, especially those with whom they interact on a regular basis (McKenna et. al., 2002).

Online relationships are a relatively new phenomenon, however they have already become a popular part of adolescent culture (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003). A national survey conducted by Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2003) confirmed the frequency of online relationships, finding that 25% of Internet users ages 10-17 had formed casual online relationships in the year before they were interviewed, and 14% had formed close online friendships or online romances. It has been suggested that adolescents may be especially drawn to online relationships because of their intense interest in forming relationships, and because the expansiveness of cyberspace frees them from some of the constraints of adolescence by giving them easy access to a world beyond that of their families, schools, and communities (Wolak et. al., 2002).

Research conducted by Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2003) aimed to explore whether online relationships such as close friendships and romances, were distributed evenly throughout the population of youth online as a whole, or whether they were more common among certain segments of youth Internet users (Wolak et. al., 2003). Knowing if some youth are more likely than others to form and maintain online relationships may be viewed as an important first step in learning about and understanding the impact online relationships may be having among adolescents (Wolak et. al., 2003).

Data for this study was collected from a national sample of youth Internet users to investigate the associations between forming close online relationships and a number of problems common among adolescents, including being highly troubled, reporting high levels of parent-child conflict, low levels of communication with parents, and high levels of delinquency, along with demographic characteristics and aspects of Internet use (Wolak et. al., 2003). Results revealed that girls who had high levels of parent-child

conflict, or who were highly troubled were more likely than other girls to have close online relationships, as were boys who had low levels of communication with parents, or who were highly troubled, as compared to other boys. These findings suggest that although little is known about the nature or quality of the close online relationships, youth with these types of problems may be more vulnerable to online exploitation as well as to other possible ill effects of online relationships (Wolak et. al., 2003).

Forming social connections online may have many different implications, however the greatest implication researched thus far may be the tendency to bring online relationships into the “real world.” Not only do individuals form strong relationships with others online, but they also become motivated to make these online relationships a reality. More than 50% of those who form relationships with others on the Internet actually meet their Internet friends in person (McKenna & Bargh, 1999). An even larger percent (64%) reported regularly talking with Internet friends on the telephone. Further, McKenna and Bargh (1999) found that many of the relationships people formed on the Internet became deeply intimate and often resulted in real-life romantic relationships. One survey revealed as many as 9% of individuals were engaged to someone they initially met online, while 7% of respondents were living with, or already married to, someone they met via the Internet.

Chapter III

Methodology

Sample

Participants were 95 seventh and eighth grade adolescents (31 males, 64 females) recruited from two public middle schools in southern New Jersey. Both middle schools were located in suburban, middle class towns, and both schools house only seventh and eighth grade students. Participants all varied in their ethnicity. Written parental consent was obtained for all participants, and additionally, adolescents gave oral consent prior to the start of the experiment.

Procedures

In order to gain permission to conduct this study, a written proposal and a copy of the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES) were sent to the assistant superintendent of the participating school districts. Once Board approval granted permission and full access to the schools within their districts, the principals of the middle school were contacted and provided with a copy of the scale. A guidance counselor from each school was then appointed to select the classes, which would be participating in the study and notified the classroom teachers of the study, as well as the dates and times for which the data would be collected. Once the classroom teachers were notified, letters for obtaining parental consent were sent home to the parents/guardians of all potential participants.

When the specified dates for data collection arrived, teachers administered scales to students during their regular class time. Prior to data collection, the guidance counselors debriefed all teachers on the goals and purpose of the study. Teachers were

instructed to dictate the directions orally to their students prior to distributing the scales. Participants recorded their own responses by first circling one of the four response choices provided on the 10 item scale, then responding to the five questions the researcher inserted at the bottom of the scale. Teachers were also asked to emphasize to their students the importance of being truthful and answering the questions to the best of their ability. The only descriptive data provided by the student participants was their gender (male or female).

Measures

All participants in the study completed the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES) (1965) to measure self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES) – perhaps the most widely used self-esteem measure in social science research, was originally designed to assess self-esteem among adolescents. This Likert scale is a 10-item self-report measure of global self-esteem. It consists of 10 statements related to overall feelings of self-worth. The scale asks participants to respond to one of four response choices, which range from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” (Rosenberg, 1965). The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES) is a very widely used scale and has been shown to have both high construct validity and reliability, with test-retest correlations typically ranging between .82 and .88 (The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale). The validity and reliability of the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES) is so well established, that it is often used as the comparison model when examining the validity and reliability of future scales. Upon completion of the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES), participants were asked to answer a series of four questions pertaining to their access to, and use of, the friend-networking site, MySpace. Finally, participants were asked to indicate their gender (male or female).

Design

The hypothesis of this study states that adolescents who spend more time on the friend-networking site, MySpace, will experience lower overall self-esteem than their peers who spend either less time on the site, or no time on the site. Further, predictions were made on the basis of gender, suggesting that adolescent girls with adequate access will be more likely to experience these affects than will their male counterparts.

An experimental design was used to test the hypotheses of the study. There were two independent variables in this study, use of the friend-networking site, MySpace (never, occasionally, or often), and gender (male or female). The dependent variable in this study was self-esteem, as measured by participants' scores on the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES).

Analysis

The present study examined the effects of the friend-networking site, MySpace, on the self-esteem of young adolescents. A Two-Way between-subjects ANOVA was used to examine the effects of the two independent variables (MySpace use and gender) on the dependent variable (self esteem).

Summary

In order to examine the effects of the popular friend-networking site, MySpace, on the self-esteem of young adolescents in two suburban middle class communities, students were recruited from two local school districts to participate in this study. All student participants completed the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES) to assess their levels of global self-esteem. A Two-Way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to test the hypotheses that adolescents who spend more time on the friend-networking site,

MySpace, will experience lower overall self-esteem than their peers who spend either less time on the site, or no time on the site, and that adolescent girls with adequate access will be more likely to experience these affects than will their male counterparts.

Chapter IV

Results

The current study aimed to examine the effects of excessive use of the friend-networking site, MySpace, on young adolescents' global self-esteem. The hypothesis of this study stated that adolescents who spend more time on the friend-networking site, MySpace, will experience lower overall self-esteem than their peers who spend either less time on the site, or no time on the site. Further, predictions were made on the basis of gender, suggesting that adolescent girls with adequate access will be more likely to experience these affects than will their male counterparts.

There were a total of 95 participants in this study. Of these students, 31 were male and 64 were female. The mean score for female participants on the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES) was 22.3281 (see figure 4.1). The mean score for male participants on this scale was 22.3548 (see figure 4.1). These scores indicate that in this sample of adolescents, both males and females view themselves in relatively the same way.

The hypothesis of this study predicted that scores on the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES) would be higher in those participants who reported little to no use of the friend-networking site, MySpace, while scores on the scale would be lower in those participants who self reported often or excessive use of the site. The mean score for participants who reported no use of MySpace (never) was 22.9818 (see figure 4.2). The mean score for participants who reported occasional use of MySpace was 21.8214 (see figure 4.2). The mean score for participants who reported excessive (often) use of the friend-networking site, MySpace, was 20.5833 (see figure 4.2). The results of a Two-

Way between-subjects ANOVA revealed no significant differences in overall global self-esteem with the varying levels of the independent variable, MySpace use. Results did reveal however, a positive trend towards the hypothesis, suggesting that the amount of time spent on MySpace may in some way be correlated with self-esteem. Further, the positive trend observed in the results of this study suggests that self-esteem levels may increase with lower levels of MySpace use. Results of this study also revealed no significant difference in the reported levels of global self-esteem between males and females, suggesting that in this sample population, males and females have relatively the same levels of self-esteem, regardless of their MySpace use.

Figure 4.1

Mean of Female and Male SES Scores

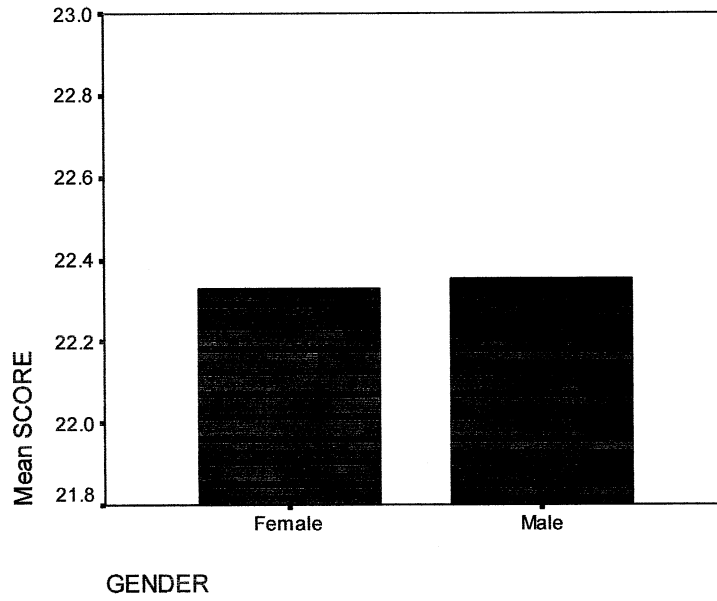
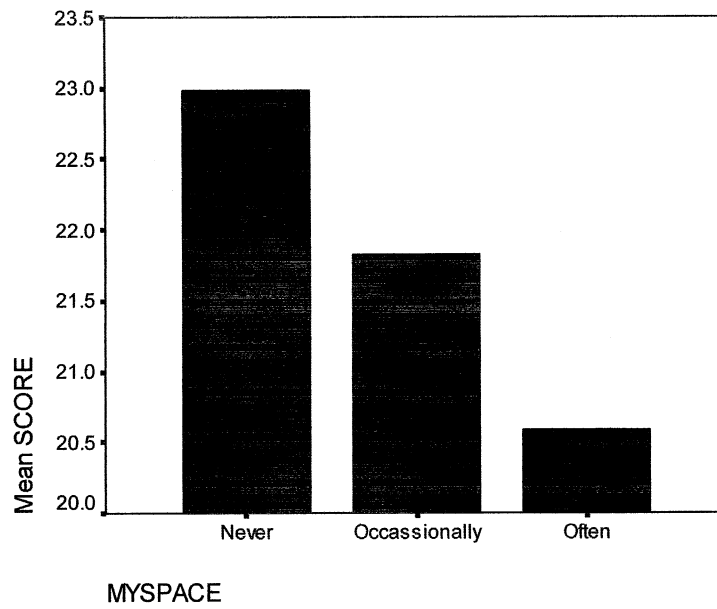


Figure 4.2

Mean of SES Scores for Amount of MySpace Use



Chapter V

Summary and Conclusions

Introduction

In the past few years, the opportunities for adolescents to establish and maintain peer relationships via the use of the Internet have increased dramatically. Social networking sites such as Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook have rapidly been gaining popularity as prime locations for relationship formation and preservation. These friend-networking sites allow individuals to present themselves, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Friend networking sites are typically open systems. Everyone is welcome to join, but new members must register and many times the sites only allow new members to join if existing members invite them to do so. Members present themselves to others via online profiles that contain self-descriptions (e.g., demographics, interests) and pictures and organize their contacts through comments and feedback left on one another's profiles.

As Internet use among adolescents has grown exponentially over the last few years, so to has concern over its effect on their psychological well being (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002). A 1999 survey of over 1000 US parents revealed widespread public concern about the Internet's impact on the social adjustment of youth: almost two-thirds of respondents expressed concern that "going online too often may lead children to become isolated from other people" (Turow, 1999). The first major study of the Internet's psychological impact provided initial empirical support for the public's apprehensions. The initial reports of the HomeNet study of first time Internet users (Kraut et al., 1998)

indicated that using the Internet for as little as 3 hr weekly led to increased levels of depression and reductions in social support over the course of 2 years (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002). Further, results indicated adolescents to be the population most vulnerable to, and affected by these negative effects.

The present study examined the self-esteem of adolescents in two grade levels, seventh grade and eighth grade, with respect to their overall amount of use of the friend-networking site, MySpace. Given the recent worldwide proliferation of such sites and the ever-expanding numbers of adolescents joining, these sites presumably play an integral role in adolescent life (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). The purpose of the current study was to investigate the consequences of the friend-networking site, MySpace, for adolescents' social self-esteem and well-being. Specifically, this study aimed to examine whether the amount of time adolescents spend on MySpace directly and/or adversely affects their self-esteem.

Peer acceptance and interpersonal feedback on the self, both important features of friend networking sites, are vital predictors of social self-esteem and well being in adolescence. On friend-networking sites, interpersonal feedback is often publicly available to all other members of the site. Such public evaluations are particularly likely to affect the development of adolescents' social self-esteem (Valkenburg et. al, 2006).

There is no period in which evaluations regarding the self are as likely to affect self esteem and well being as in adolescence (Valkenburg et. al, 2006). Further, the periods of early and middle adolescence are characterized by an increased focus on the self (Valkenburg et. al, 2006). Adolescents often engage in imaginative audience behavior in which they tend to overestimate the extent to which others are watching and

evaluating their behaviors and, as a result, can be extremely preoccupied with how they appear in the eyes of others (Valkenburg et. al, 2006). It has been theorized that young adolescents are more influenced by the imaginary audience idea, and thus are relatively more self-conscious (concerned with what others will think about them) than children or older adolescents (Elkind & Bowen, 1979).

Discussion

The results of this study revealed that although there was a positive trend towards the prediction of the hypothesis, the amount of time participants spent on the friend-networking site MySpace, had no effect on their global self-esteem. Further, results suggested no significant differences in self-esteem levels for the adolescent males and females that participated in this study. These results suggest that although significance was not found through the analysis of the present data, the possibility still exists that adolescents' self esteem is affected by their use of the friend-networking site, MySpace. Future research may aim to expand on this idea by replicating the present study with the inclusion of a much larger, more diverse sample population.

Limitations

A major limitation in the present study is that the participants were self-reporting and therefore may have been unreliable in their assessment of themselves. Further, it is possible that their responses may not be an accurate or truthful reflection of their global self-esteem. Also, it must be considered that participants may not have understood the questions they were asked to answer. Several of the questions on the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES) are reversed scored and therefore may be more difficult to understand than others, especially for the young age group examined in this study. A

second limitation in this study is that the classroom teachers were asked to administer the scale, not the researcher. Individual teachers may have explained directions differently, focused or emphasized attention on different aspects of the task, and provided various levels of assistance and support to the children in their classrooms. A third limitation relates to the way in which the classes were chosen to participate in this study. Guidance counselors from each school chose the classes for participation, not the researcher. Therefore, the researcher of this study is unable to fully attest to the randomness of the sample selection. A fourth limitation in this study was that the researcher determined the operational definitions of the three levels of the independent variable, MySpace use. Participants were asked to report how many hours per day and days per week that they spend on MySpace. The researcher then took their responses and categorized them into either “never,” “occasionally,” or “often” being on the site based on the operational definitions for the terms that the researcher defined. Therefore, the scoring of this data may not have been the most accurate reflection of the amount of time that participants spend on MySpace. A final limitation of the current study is that recruited participants were from two school districts in the same county. Both school districts are of upper middle class socioeconomic status; therefore the results of this study may not generalize to other populations of different SES or to populations from other counties, states, or countries.

Implications for Future Research

As previously mentioned, future research on this topic may benefit significantly from the inclusion of a larger number of participants, as well as a larger number of male participants as the male sample in this study was fairly small as compared to the female

sample. Further, all of the students who participated in this study were from the same middle class background and socioeconomic status. Future research may aim to expand on these parameters and include students from a more diverse range of socioeconomic status. Clearly, socioeconomic status may play an important role in a study like this, as those students from lower, more impoverished communities may not have the same access to the Internet as those from other backgrounds.

Future studies conducted on this topic may also control more closely for confounding variables, as the present study did not. Many factors and extraneous variables may have contributed to the self-esteem levels reported by the adolescents who participated in this study, therefore it cannot be said with absolute certainty that the amount of time participants spent on MySpace was the factor that actually influenced their self-esteem.

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