

Network Identity, the Internet Addiction and Romanian Teenagers

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Abstract - We investigated factors that influence teenagers' engagement in risky Internet behavior, in particular the factors relating to development identity. All the students, aged between 15 to 18 years old, come from 7 high schools of Iasi, Romania. The studied group of samples comprised 250 teenagers who answered to a questionnaire comprising 28 questions related to online computer activities. The authors examined the online construction of identity at 250 teenagers, who had been involved in an online relationship and (a) the identification of a possible Internet addiction, (b) perceived realism of the Internet, and (c) construction of network identity. The survey reveal that amount of time spent online for the Internet are positively related to more favorable perceptions of online relationships. We find that approximately 3.5% of cases with possible pathological Internet use. Results indicated the predictor's factors when the adolescents search for their own identity or relationships. Having an identity and having a network identity are different subjects.

Keywords: identity, relationships, internet addiction, teenagers, perception, development.

1 Introduction

The Internet can be a wonderful learning tool or resources, the connection between local learning environments and virtual learning environments.

Cyberspace has become the new frontier in social relationships. People are making friends, colleagues, lovers, and enemies on the Internet.

In every culture, people are expected to act within a certain set of rules. Some people live in a world where they are ashamed of who they are, and try to hide their true self behind a mask. Others are curious as to what it would be like to live the life of someone else [1].

The increasing pervasiveness of the Internet in the lives of adolescents is by now well established but there remains a dearth of research on what exactly youth are doing when they are online, with whom, and why—and, moreover, how these aspects of Internet use may be related to young people's well-being and development [2].

The online world has such a large number of cultures and subcultures that there is a group to which everyone can find a *sense of belonging* [3].

Identity is the result of the process through which the individual assumes social values, shared norms of behavior and knowledge which allow the individual to feel part of a social group and at the same time, allow him to be recognized. Therefore, viewed as part of the psychical dimension that permits the realization of self [2], [3].

It has been suggested that people with low self-esteem turn to the Internet to reduce the chances of

rejection, to find support, and to discuss their emotions. Other scholars have suggested that the appeal of the Internet lies in the possibility it offers to construct a new identity for oneself [4], [5].

The construction of a healthy sexuality is a major task facing adolescents. Another major task facing adolescents is that of developing stable and consistent identities: gender, sexual, moral, political, and religious [6].

A stable identity consists of one's self-definition, as well as the roles and relationships one takes on, and one's personal values or moral beliefs [7].

Research suggests that peers and romantic partners play an important role in adolescents' construction of their sexuality and identity [8].

Ward, 2004, has reported that peers along with media are important sources of sexual information for teens. Research with college students suggests that conversations with friends during the high school years was an important source of sex-related information; conversations with best friends has been found to be related to sexual attitudes and behaviors [9].

Having an identity and having a network identity are different subjects. An identity is one aspect in a description of a person's network identity.

Other conversation topics with peers during the adolescent years include appearance and the self, two important aspects of identity construction. Up until now, adolescents' peer conversations about sex and sexuality were hard to study. Teen chat, the location, has three main advantages for researchers: it makes

peer conversations accessible for study; it provides the conversations in a written form without requiring transcription; and last, but perhaps most important, the conversations are recorded without the intrusive presence of the researcher-observer.

2 Methods

2.1 Design

For collecting the data concerning this issue we used a questionnaire for the students with 28 items. These were aimed at highlighting: (a) the identification of a possible Internet addiction, (b) perceived realism of the Internet, and (c) construction of network identity. The data were processed using the SPSS statistics software, 13.0 versions.

2.2 Participants

The survey included a representative sample of 250 high school students. All the students come from 7 high schools in Iasi, Romania, aged between 15 to 18 years old and included 48.7% girls.

2.3 Procedure

They volunteered to confidentially complete surveys during their regularly scheduled class times. Most questions supposed to rate on a scale the frequency of occurrence of a certain event or issue; some questions solicited an open-answer or to choose an answer from a list. The themes were chosen according to the objectives of the study and were based on the previous research concerning students' interests and needs at this age. Surveys contained a combination of demographic items, interval scales, and open-ended questions.

3 Results

Both the boys and the girls think that the computers are absolutely essential in today's society.

All adolescents included in this study reported having online activities on the Internet.

Results show a high tendency of students to spend more time online, giving up their social or family duties.

45% of teenagers report that often and very often it happens to stay longer in front of the computer than initially expected. The results within the groups show a tendency of the 15-18 years old students to lose control more often of the time spent on online.

Concerning the time spent in using the computer, the results show that children spend a considerable amount of time online, on average more than five hours per day (Table 1).

hour/day	girls	boys
1h - 4h	30,2%	35.3%
4h – 8h	66,3%	61%
over 8h	3,5%	3.7%

Table 1: Time spent online per day

All students prefer to use the computer very late, after 11 pm.

Participants were queried whether parents talk to them about what they do on the Internet, and whether they would tell their parents about receiving pornographic junk mail. More than 79% of the subjects admit they do *not* or only *occasionally* discuss online behavior with their parents. (Fig.1)

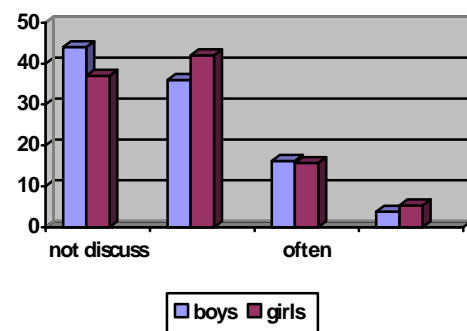


Fig. 1 Teenagers and the discussion about online behavior with their parents

We could not say that the family is not present when 15 to 18 year-olds use their computers, but this is rather a passive presence and lacking involvement.

We used questions to assess the disinhibitory effects of the Internet. For example, items included “I prefer communicating online to face-to-face communication.”, “I know most of my friends from online,” and “My online friends understand me better than other people.” and used a four-point Likert scale.

Results indicated that the following factors were found to be predictors of adolescent's engagement in such face-to-face meetings: frequency of Internet use, frequency of chatting and gaming behavior, parental rules, the inappropriate messages received, websites have been visited, and type of internet advice heard.

Favorite online activities are chat for both groups girls and boys (Table 2):

	boys	girls
Computer games	I	IV
Chat	II	I
Entertainment	IV	II
Overload information	III	III

Table 2: Favorite online activities

Wolak et al. also speculated that online relationships may “amplify alienation among troubled youth by encouraging racism, fascination with violence, and other antisocial attitudes.” Not is there any evidence from this data.

Perceived realism of the Internet was measured using a Likert-type scale (the scale has a four-item). We find that a positive relationship between perceived realism of the Internet and perception online relationships.

A total of 39 adolescents (15.6% of Internet users) reported having met someone in real life that they first encountered online.

One very fundamental way in which participants express their identities in chat rooms is via their screen names, called nicknames or nicks. In a chat room, there is no physical embodiment of gender or other physical markers of identity.

We found a high concordance between stated gender identity and the more implicit message conveyed by the nicknames.

Both sexuality and personal identity are key adolescent issues [10]. Consequently we see that adolescents spend a lot of time talking about sex, exchanging sexual jokes and sex-oriented literature as well as using sex slang [11]. They are also sexually active.

Boys were significantly more likely than girls to be pathological internet users (3.7% vs. 3.5%; $p < 0.01$) and girls were more likely than boys to have no symptoms (34.5% vs. 26.2%; $p < 0.01$).

Teenagers who have become addicted to the computer will require increasing amounts of time in order to feel satisfied. When they do not have access to the computer, they may have symptoms of withdrawal, including anxiety, depression, irritability, trembling hands, restlessness and obsessive thinking, compulsive behavior or fantasizing about the Internet.

Relationships in the real world may be neglected as those in the virtual world increase in importance. Academic performance is likely to suffer.

4 Discussion

Frequently mentioned as a recruiting tool, Internet accessibility is often provided free of charge, with many schools having Internet connections in residence hall rooms or available at home 24 hours per day. The eight research question addresses the issue of dependence, this study used criteria that were modeled after the DSM-IV TR criteria for all forms of substance dependence.

While no actual substances are involved in typical Internet use, this is similar to the concept of dependence. The DSM-IV TR currently lists seven criteria that are used to determine substance dependence.

A diagnosis of dependence is based on the presence of 5 or more of these symptoms occurring at any time in the same 12-month period:

1. Do you feel preoccupied with the internet (think about previous online activity or anticipate next online session)?
2. Do you feel the need to use the internet with increasing amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction?
3. Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop internet use?
4. Do you feel restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop internet use?
5. Do you stay online longer than originally intended?
6. Have you jeopardised or risked the loss of a significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the internet?
7. Have you lied to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the internet?
8. Do you use the internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (for example, feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)?

For the purpose of this study, the five true/false questions that most closely paralleled the diagnostic criteria as listed above were used to discriminate those who were considered Internet dependent from those that were not dependent. An individual was described as dependent if they responded, in the required direction, to three or more of these questions.

The most frequent type of theoretical model for conceptualizing the role of media in human development is an effects model, in which the content of media is believed to affect children's attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors [12].

However, as the communication functions of the Internet become increasingly important for people in general and adolescents in particular, it is vital to think in terms of construction and co-construction processes.

Research has found that adolescents make use of mass media to learn about two important aspects of identity development—sex and gender [13]. It is important to remember that participants in online environments can be relatively anonymous and do not have information about each others' bodies such as age, gender, race, physical appearance, and physical attractiveness [14]. Information about bodies is especially relevant to sexual conversations and activities that are popular among adolescents and that they engage in online [15].

Mitchell et al., 2003, found that a variety of parental supervision techniques such as having rules about the number of hours spend online, asking what youth do online, checking the history function, and using filters were not related to the risk of receiving sexual solicitations. However, two particular Internet

rules relating specifically to not having face-to-face meetings, and not meeting strangers online lowered the risk of such a meeting. Also, adolescents who had heard the Internet safety advice never to arrange to meet anyone were less likely to have had a face-to-face meeting.

In society of today media provide common ground for all adolescents and are an important socialization agent for adolescents. According to Arnett, 1995, the Editor of *Journal of Adolescent Research*, adolescents have considerable freedom and choice about the materials that they draw from the media—the materials that then contribute to their socialization. Thus, but when they use media materials towards identity formation or coping, when they participate in a media-based youth subculture, adolescents are also, in a larger sense, participating in activities that are part of their socialization.

Overall, as Internet use increases, the perceptions of online relationships are more positive. This finding also reflects the results of previous studies regarding media and technology that positive relationships among computer use and ratings of computer liking.

It's well known that people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel more uninhibited, and express themselves more openly. Researchers call this the "disinhibition effect." Sometimes teenagers reveal secret emotions, fears, wishes. Or they show unusual acts of kindness and generosity. On the other hand, they explore the dark underworld of the internet, places of pornography and violence, places they would never visit in the real world. We might call this toxic disinhibition [3], [16].

Several factors are at play in this online disinhibition: Dissociative anonymity (You Don't Know Me); Invisibility (You Can't See Me); Dissociative imagination (It's Just a Game); Asynchronicity (See You Later); It's All in My Head; Minimizing authority; Personality Variables; True Self?; Self Constellations Across Media; Altering Self Boundary [14].

Cyberspace offers all sorts of opportunities for adolescents to satisfy that need to express, explore, and experiment with their identity. The good aspect of online anonymity is that it encourages teenagers to discuss things about themselves that they would hesitate revealing in real life. Teens can learn a lot about themselves from that.

Media as a socialization agent are more similar to peers than other agents such as family, school, or community. Since adolescents choose both their media and their peer group, they have more control over their socialization from these agents compared to their socialization from agents over whom they have less control, such as their family or school. Chat enables researchers to look at this socialization process up close and personal. Nicknames then

become the initial and primary vehicle through which teen participants present their identity to others in the chat room—a kind of substitute for the face and body.

If adolescents spend a lot of time conversing on the Internet, it's inevitable that their online social skills will improve. They will be encountering people of various ages and cultural backgrounds, so they have the opportunity to learn how to relate to a wide variety of people. Under optimal conditions, those skills may carry over to their in-person life. Unfortunately, many kids approach chat rooms as if they are computer games. Without seeing or hearing the real person behind the typed words or avatars, they (probably unconsciously) behave as if the other person is some kind of robot or video game target. Being able to hide behind their online anonymity makes the abuse even easier to inflict. It provides an easy, safe way to satisfy that need to vent the frustrations of their real life [13].

Not all adolescents are so extreme in their tendency to misbehave online. The more intensely teens act out, the more likely they are having problems in their real life and are using the Internet to vent and escape from those real life tensions [16].

Building a blog or personal web page also is a great exercise in figuring out who you are by what you want to reveal about yourself. In online fantasy worlds and games, teens experiment with all sorts of imaginative identities that express their hidden wishes, needs, and fears. The character they create for themselves may give them the opportunity to act like the type of person they admire. Under ideal conditions, they can learn something about themselves from the characters they create. Maybe they can even develop, in their real life, the traits they admire in their characters. Under less than ideal conditions, the online personae simply become another way to ventilate the frustrations and conflicts of their real lives, without any personal insight or change. It's the difference between using their online characters to work through their problems, as opposed to simply acting them out [16].

One significant difference between online and offline conversations is that some of the awkwardness of interacting face-to-face and in-the-moment with their peers, especially for younger teens, is a bit tempered, which results in them opening up a bit more when online. Again, it's that online disinhibition effect.

Even though, at that moment, the adolescent may be trying to avoid dealing with these tricky emotional situations in-person, navigating these situations online can be a good way to practice skills that later will generalize to their face-to-face encounters. On the internet, they may indeed find what they are missing. Or, because of the partial anonymity of cyberspace, which allows lots of room for fantasy and

imagination, they may think they have found what they are missing.

It is through screen names that participants present those aspects of their identity that they wish to reveal, such as their gender and race/ethnicity [14].

5 Conclusion

Identity is a very complex aspect of human nature. The Internet is not a place where identity plays little role but quite the contrary a place where identity is important and provides a tool through which needs, problems or issues related to identity (not only ethnic, but also gender, age or class) may be articulated. These give teens a new hot place to stay in touch with their friends, meet new friends, plan events, and get all the latest gossip. [10]

One of the interesting conclusions about the internet is the opportunity to offers teenagers to present themselves in a variety of different ways. They can alter their style of being in wild experiments with their identity by changing their age, history, personality, physical appearance, even their gender. The username they choose, the details they do or don't indicate about their self, the information presented on their personal web page, the persona they assume in an online community - all are important aspects of how teenagers manage their identity in cyberspace.

Online relationships are a growing phenomenon—and potentially dangerous. They are involved with a perfect stranger on an ever-deepening emotional level, and they have no way of knowing anything about this man except what he tells them. In normal, face-to-face relationships, words are either supported or denied by actions over time. They have the opportunity to see someone's character revealed in many ways. There are no such opportunities online.

Also, by spending their time communicating with the online person, they are spending less time working on their "real" relationship, so this will degrade.

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