

Social Networking Sites are causing the downfall of
adolescents and children.

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Abstract

This paper explores how Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are detrimental for adolescents and children. According to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (2014) SNSs are an important part of youngsters worldwide. Adolescents often use platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Tumblr to express themselves, share and build an online identity. There is enormous amount of research papers, articles and books that discussed the positive side of SNSs despite the dangerous consequences that it may cost. In this conference paper, we will discuss how teens are victims of sexual predators, distorted body image and cyberbullying as well as how SNSs is affecting youth mental health. In an article by San Murugesan he explains how web 2.0 is a “more dynamic and interactive than its predecessor, web 1.0, letting users both access content from a web site and contribute to it”. This paper discusses how SNSs are traps in disguise for teenagers through the opportunity of identity creation, communication and participation that it gives.

Keywords: SNSs, body dissatisfaction, cyberbullying, sexual predators

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INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites are emerging, it helps users to stay connected with relatives and friends who are abroad or even just keeping in touch with everyone, it also helps to develop once identity and build new relationships. The rise of adolescents and children presence on social networking sites are raising concern and “in response, the internet industry has developed a range of consumer strategies and technical tools to minimize these risks, ranging from a straightforward attempt to ban children younger than 13 years old from using these sites, or in certain cases to design SNSs strictly for children, to the provision of safety tools such as privacy settings, ‘report abuse’ buttons, reactive content moderation services, management of default safety settings, and safety guidance for children and parents.” (Livingstone & Olafsson & Staksrud, 2013) strategies are being created as adolescents and children are being victim of SNSs. In this paper, I will discuss how SNSs are being used as a dating sites for sexual predators and paedophiles, how exposure to content published on SNSs can bring along body dissatisfaction, the effects of cyberbullying and the effects that SNSs have on the mental health of youngsters. My arguments are the main ideas of the dark side of SNSs for teenagers and the articles used in this conference paper are more focus on Australia but there are some that are worldwide. I will also present some counter arguments and limitations of the article.

Sexual Predators

Social networking sites are crowded of teenagers and children but also of sexual predators. In the year 2006 there was approximately fourteen million youths utilizing SNSs (Mitchell & Finkelhor & Jones & Wolak, 2009) and that is why this is now a commonplace for predators. Sexual predators, according to Levenson, Baker and Brannon (2007) are thirty-four percent relatives, fifty-nine percent acquaintances and twenty-seven percent strangers. Some of the online predators “contact victims using deception to cover up their age, gender and sexual intentions” (Mitchell & Finkelhor & Jones & Ybarra, 2008) which means teenagers are victims of, catfishing; the action of lying about your identity. It is easy to take up another identity on social media many times grown up men pretend to be a girl of thirteen and ask for inappropriate things. In an article Seto, (2009) explains that paedophilia is more likely to be frequent with male than female but still there are some few cases. There are various ways in which they prey on their victims, Rufo (2012) explores “The 10 P’s of the predation process” this process consist of “proficiency” which means that they are skilled, “prefer” they have a certain criteria so during the search process they focus on that, “puberty” searching for children that are not experienced but yet are very curious, “plan” this is the longest part it consists of analysing behaviours and use gratification, “patience” along with perseverance are used to have higher chance of having the trust of the victim, “praise” they express admiration and comfort, “persuasion” to lure the child, “privacy” where they try to meet in an isolated place, “pleasure” where they seek any kind of sexual contact and “power” which they exert over the victim for them not to disclose the truth. This process is also known as the online grooming. Sexual predators are often attracted to youngsters because they want to be idolized, want to feel powerful, are scare of engagement or the enjoyment of risky situations (Chan & McNiel & Binder, 2016). Similarly, to the biblical story of Adam and Eve, the mind of the offender is attracted to the forbidden and wooing younger partners make them feel as young while they can show the experience they have. There are different cases regarding the use of social networking sites to prompt minors to get engage into sexual interactions or improper talks. A real life example is ‘the murder of Carly Ryan’ in 2007. (Carly’s story, 2018). The victim was aged fifteen-year old and became ‘friend’ with her

murderer who was a serial paedophile. Carly Ryan was the first victim of an online predator in Australia. Since then there are laws that have been implemented; the section 204B (2) of The Code punish “the use of ‘electronic communication’ with the intent to: procure a child they know or believe to be under the age of 16 years to engage in “sexual activity” or expose a child they know or believe to be under the age of 16 years to any “indecent matter”. Adolescents and children are at that time fully exposed not only to predators but also to content on SNSs that may develop body dissatisfaction.

Body Image

According to Lawler and Nixon (2009) teenage years are the most significant cycle where changes in the body occur and teenagers facing the exposure to the large amount of pictures allow them to do body comparisons. “Social networking sites are available for viewing content, creating and editing 24/7, on mobile devices, anywhere, anytime, allowing for exponentially more opportunities for social comparisons and dysfunctional surveillance of pictures of disliked body parts than were ever available with the conventional mass media.” (Perloff, 2014) Teenagers often compared themselves to images that have been altered by professionals. Instagram and Pinterest are the biggest image related social networking sites. “Instagram is an image-based social media platform, with over 80 million images uploaded to Instagram every day.” (Instagram, 2016). After exposition to these contents, they proceed in two ways in which this affect them; first, by internalization where they have set standards about what is the perfect body and try to replicate these standards (Lawler & Nixon, 2009), the second is comparisons where they compare themselves generally to mannequin and famous personalities (Fardouly & Pinkus & Vartanian, 2016). Teenagers hype “using applications and other editing devices, such as Photoshop, to alter selfies” (Makwama et al, 2018) to fit into a certain category. Using applications can affect the mental health while they post pictures and struggle to look as the edited pictures and cannot accept their real self which can lead to self-deception. On social networking sites many influencers and celebrities tend to project a ‘perfect’ body image while using photo editing applications. Teens tend to compare themselves to “popular socialites Kim and Khloe Kardashian” who have “utilized Photoshop to post edited selfies for their Instagram accounts” (Makwama et al, 2018). Many teenagers look upon them as models but they have had various surgery, professional make-up artists,

personal dietician and nutritionist along with professional photographers who can enhance their pictures to their advantage. Teenagers resort to editing as a kind of cheating to be more like them, that illustrates the degree of non-acceptance of their bodies and the need of reshaping, covering, airbrushing along with other tools. Being exposed to these kinds of images is sometimes detrimental for teenagers. Content that social media projects can have dangerous mental effects, namely “low self-esteem, depression, perfectionism, internalization of the thinness ideal and centrality of appearance to self-worth” (Perloff, 2014). Social media presents a diet culture and teenagers normally fantasize about the body presented to them. Poor body images also have an effect on the mood of teenagers, they do not enjoy eating or can fall into over-eating thus obesity which brings along other diseases. Bulimia, anorexia and obesity do a lot more than only damaging the way the teenagers eat. These also damage the dental health, stomach, oesophagus, throat and other organs. Sometimes not fitting in a certain category can lead to cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying

According to Smith (2012) “cyberbullying can be defined as an aggressive act or behaviour by electronic means against a certain group or an individual repeatedly and over time online.” Bullying and online terrorisation can be toward race, sexual orientations, based on physical appearance. Hemphill and Heerde (2014) conducted a study among Australian youth and came to the result that “5.1 % of young people self-reported they cyberbullied, 5 % reported being bullied online only and 9.5 % reported both cyberbullying perpetration and being bullied”. According to Nocentini, Schultze-Krumbholz, Calmaestra and Ortega-Ruiz (2010) cyberbullying being one complex term also takes various forms, one is “flaming” which means that users send abusive messages due to fiery topics, “harassment”, “cyberstalking” referred when a user is repeatedly using messages to threaten someone or even look upon their activities, “impersonation” is when someone create a fake account using a user’s name and picture then causing harm to their image and “cyber threats” which is when someone voluntarily trying to harm a computer system. With the emergence of incognito message platforms like Ask.fr or Sarahah, there are even more bullies roaming online. SNSs are now giving various opportunities to bullies, the different features including accessibility to a large public, the bullies cannot perceive the victim’s emotions and there is a kind of

anonymity (Gualdo & Durkin & Hunter & Sanchez, 2015). The action of cyberbullying comes with destructive consequences. Bullies, bully-victims and observer, will have aftereffect of this act. (Gradinger & Strohmeier & Spiel, 2013) Consequences may be emotionally, mentally or physically. Furthermore, victims and bullies have higher risk of getting into depression and to try to commit suicide or committing suicide. (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010) These research show that the action of bullying does not have an effect only on the victim but that the bullies are already in a bad state of mind for example there is a greater chance that they suffer from social isolation. There are various ways to avoid getting affected by cyberbullying; Woda Tim (2015) states there should be “open communication”, cyberbullying should not be a taboo parents should educate their children on the topic, also for children not to be bullies parents should be “teaching their children good citizenship” to know the values of others and to respect other, and last by “showing them how to use privacy setting”, children are more exposed on SNSs and most of time they do not how to protect themselves or their profiles so it is important that they parents explain it to them for security. Parents should keep in mind that cyberbullying can affect the mental health of children and adolescents.

Mental Health

According to The World Health Organization (WHO) there ten to twenty percent of children and adolescents who suffer from mental disorders worldwide. During adolescence there are different changes in someone, from their body to their way of being. This is the stage when they develop and create relationships. SNSs are playing a greater role in the socialisation and development of youngsters, how can this exposure be detrimental to their mental health? Non regulate exposure to social media can lead to “social comparisons which alongside rumination, leads to later depression” (Ferguson & Negy & Berryman, 2017). Adolescents are doing constant social and body comparisons on SNSs while “Instagram was ranked as the most negative platform in terms of sleep (quality and amount of sleep), body image (how respondents felt about their looks), and FoMO (the “fear of missing out,” or the fear that people are missing out by not being present in their various social circles).” (Wiederhold, 2018) Furthermore, Instagram allows users to display a fake persona of themselves which can be deceitful to themselves affecting the mental health. A high usage of

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SNSs can also lower loneliness, but in disguise it pushes users to internalise their problems. (Barry & Sidoti & Briggs & Reiter & Lindsey, 2017), SNSs pushes people to have a social isolation while they are socially active on networks. Social media allows users to connect but these same users cannot get along in a face to face conversation. Teenagers are using social media as an escapism, they try to drown their problems or everyday pressures online. Parents regulation should be important from the time they spent on the SNSs and to the content they are exposed to.

Forming and Preserve Relationships

Social Networking Sites can also be a positive impact on the lives of children and adolescents. There are various of features that SNSs allow us to use to bond with other, for example on Instagram, you can a live video when you are at a show, or record a video and post it on your story instantly anyone can react and send you a message link to your post. “Research shows that teens are mainly using social media to communicate with pre-existing offline friends and spend time together, make plans, discuss everyday issues and gossip.” (Weigle & Reid, 2014) Teenagers can spend time talking to their friends in the comfort of their home without going out and possibly putting themselves in further dangers. Video calling a friend is less investment than going out, and it is easier and can be done whenever. On online platforms users can also meet new people within a similar community and create a friendship based on the hobby they have in common.

Conclusion

Social Networking Sites will continue to evolve so teenagers and children will still be exposed to its negative aspects. It is near impossible to ban all sexual predators online as, as stated above most of them have a fake persona when flirting with minors, users will always compare themselves to pictures they see on SNSs being it adult or teenagers and bullies will always be around. However, SNSs are an important tool as it helps to build up relationships and even enhance those who are already existing. I wanted to have a focus paper on Australia but the articles were mostly broad so I had to try to put it in the context to have a good and relevant outcome.

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