

THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET ON ADOLESCENTS' DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITY

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Abstract. In this paper we attempt to come to grips with the consequences of Internet use for young people's development of friendship and social relationships. Our study was carried out in Santiago de Chile and consisted of 645 surveys and 32 in-depth interviews administered to 14-19 year olds. Our findings demonstrate that adolescents' main uses of the Internet are chatting with friends, searching for information and downloading things. Using the Internet for these purposes provides adolescents with important social and personal gratifications such as helping them to build up and maintain their friendships and social networks. In particular, our results show that adolescents employ Instant Messaging (IM) mainly as a way to maintain their social relationships with peers as well as to enhance the development of their social skills.

1. Background

It has been amply demonstrated that media serve various social and psychological functions during adolescence by supporting the accomplishment of different developmental challenges typical of this age (Schramm, Lyle and Parker, 1961; Greenberg, 1982; Christenson and Roberts, 1983; Alexander, 1985; Fine et. al., 1990; Larson, Kubey and Colletti, 1990). One of the primary challenges undertaken during adolescence is the formation of an identity distinct from one's parents. As adolescents undertake this challenge they go through a phase of constant exploration and experimentation searching for a unique place in the world (Erikson, 1968; Hill, 1983). This search for an identity, usually characterised by a desire for increased autonomy, makes adolescents look for new ways to become independent and to distance themselves from their parents while becoming closer to their peers (Youniss and Smollar, 1980). Turning to media is a

common way for adolescents to increase and express their new sense of autonomy and individuality which is often reflected in adolescents' private uses of media, such as listening to music or watching television, especially in their bedrooms (Larson, 1995).

2. Adolescent friendship and social relationships

Adolescence is a time when youths begin to spend less time with parents and more time with peers (e.g. Erikson, 1968; Youniss and Smollar, 1980; Hill, 1983). Spending more time with their peers is necessary in order to develop "close, intimate friendships" (Youniss and Smollar, 1980). Friendships are important because they provide support and also because of the influence they have on adolescents' behaviour and attitudes (Savin-Williams and Berndt, 1993, p.277). Savin-Williams and Berndt (1993, p.277) argue that "for many adolescents relations with friends are critical interpersonal bridges that move them toward psychological growth and social maturity". Friendships are, indeed, "important, enduring, relatively problem-free relationships in which the participants understand one another and learn new things" (Youniss and Smollar, 1980). According to Youniss and Smollar (1980) friends contribute to adolescent development because with them friends get to know a reality external to their own familial world and can, therefore, experience a life of their own. Youniss and Smollar (1980) go on to argue that friendships are characterised by communication practices and that, therefore, friends talk about a variety of topics from personal problems to views on sexuality, interests or doubts. As a matter of fact, they maintain that adolescents are much more self-disclosing and open with their friends than with their parents or other adults. This may be due to the nature of friendships characterised by loyalty, commitment, genuineness and intimacy (Savin-Williams and Berndt (1993).

2.1. THE IMPORTANCE OF FRIENDSHIP DURING ADOLESCENCE

In relation to the potential benefits of friendship, it has been argued that "friends increase one another's self-esteem; provide information, emotional support, and advice while they also contribute to an evolving sense of identity, of having a place in the world (Youniss and Smollar, 1980 in Savin-Williams and Berndt, 1993, p.279). "Through self-disclosure, and by allowing oneself to become vulnerable before a coequal, adolescent friends share with one another their most personal thoughts and feelings, become sensitive to the needs and desires of other, and, in the process, acquire a deep understanding of the other and the self" (Sullivan, 1953 in Savin-Williams and Berndt, 1993, p.279). On the other hand, friendship groups are also an

important basis for the development of social identity during adolescence. In fact, this process can have positive consequences for development in other domains, as well (Tarrant, 2007). Tarrant, Mackenzie and Hewitt (2006) recently demonstrated that adolescents who feel a strong sense of attachment to or identification with a friendship group report less difficulty in negotiating various developmental tasks, such as accepting bodily changes and establishing close interpersonal relationships. Besides, they also tend to report higher levels of self-esteem than those less strongly identified with a group of friends.

In relation to the activities friends typically do together, Younnis and Smollar (1980) point out that friends spend a lot of time interacting with each other, talking about themselves, about other adolescents or simply discussing what is going on in their lives or in the world. Friends typically relax, watch TV, movies, listen to music, and play games, just for the sake of companionship and enjoyment. These activities “contribute to developing a sense of belonging with others who are respected and liked (...), to develop social skills such as the ability to empathize with and understand other’s points of view and also to increase the “knowledge concerning various aspects of the self by comparison with friends” (Savin-Williams and Berndt, 1993, p.279).

After having summarized the main characteristics of friendship and social relationships during adolescence, in the following sections we will discuss the ways adolescents are employing new on-line technologies such as instant messaging (IM) in order to fulfill the traditional developmental needs associated to the formation and maintenance of friendships and social networks.

3. Methodology

In our research we employed a methodology based on the principles of inclusive and participatory children centred methodologies (Barker and Weller, 2003; Livingstone and Bober, 2004). In congruence with this approach and with the aim of obtaining the best possible account of adolescents’ Internet-related practices, attitudes and perceptions towards the medium, a multi-method approach (Livingstone, 2002) consisting of a survey and in-depth interviews was employed.

3.1. THE SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Our survey was conducted during October-November 2004 and was administered to 655 high school students aged between 14 and 19 years (mean 16.02; SD 1.21). Of this sample, 341 (52%) were female and 314

(48%) were male. All the participants lived in Santiago and the majority came from middle class backgrounds. In relation to the school type they attended, 41% attended private schools (financed by students' families), 28% subsidized schools (financed by students' families plus state support) and 29% public schools (completely financed by the state). Specifically, in the survey pupils were asked about their frequency of Internet use, the kinds of Internet applications and utilities mostly employed by them, their places of Internet access, etc. On average, the questionnaire took 45 minutes to complete.

In our study a purposive and intense type of sampling was chosen (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). By means of this sampling strategy we were able to identify and select schools where Internet users were highly concentrated. Consequently, instead of a representative sample of the Chilean adolescent population we drew a sample focused on Internet users. Because of the sampling procedure we employed, caution should be exercised in interpreting the survey findings. Finally, the data obtained from our survey were analysed using the statistics software SPSS version 14.0.

3.2. THE INTERVIEWING PROCESS

In our research 32 individual semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with daily and weekly Internet users. These interviews focused on the generation of data about the nature of the users' Internet practices and perceptions, their motivations for using the Internet and their personal Internet histories. The interviewees were selected from the pupils who had responded to the survey during the first phase of our study. The criteria for their selection were the following: (1) having at least two years of Internet experience, and (2) using the Internet on a daily or weekly basis. Of all the respondents who fulfilled these requirements, three to four of the heaviest Internet users in each of the schools were selected to be interviewed. Sixteen girls and sixteen boys were chosen so as to obtain a balanced sample in terms of gender.

4. Internet access and use among Chilean adolescents

In our research 99.5% of 14-19 years-old surveyed claimed to have used the Internet, of whom 70% used it at least on a weekly basis. Of the 70.7 % who had Internet access at home, 75.8% had broadband access. In relation to the places of Internet access, adolescents use the Internet in a variety of places. Nevertheless, there is a clear preponderance of Internet use at home. In its turn, home Internet access and use have clear implications for frequency of use and expertise. Not surprisingly, Internet access and type of connection at

home are positively correlated with frequency of Internet use so that the better the connection the more frequently the Internet is used.

Adolescents use the Internet for a variety of purposes and therefore they employ different Internet tools and applications to serve them. In order to find out what the most popular Internet applications for adolescents were, they were asked to indicate the frequency with which they performed different on-line activities. The following applications were reported to be most often used by them: Surf the Net for school-related tasks (73.3%), surf the Net for information (70.8%), use IM (68.4%) and download things (58.4%). Adolescents' Internet use and motivations for using the Internet were further explored by means of Factor analyses. In order to measure the motivations for using the Internet, a scale consisting of 18 statements that represented different reasons for using the Internet was employed. Respondents replied how frequently they used the Internet for different purposes on a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from 'never' to 'often'. The scale consisted of items such as "I use the Internet to look for information about things that interest me" and "I use the Internet to meet people of the opposite sex". Here, a principal component factor analysis with Oblimin rotation extracted five factors reflecting the main motivations why adolescents go on-line: (1) to keep in touch with people they know, (2) to meet new people, (3) to obtain information, (4) to download things and (5) to access traditional media such as radio and television. The total variance explained by the eighteen items was 61.86%. Four items were deleted because they loaded on more than one factor. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of the scale was a very satisfactory .84.

5. The impact of the Internet on the social development of adolescents

One of the main aims of this article is to discuss the social significance of the Internet for adolescents and in particular to find out the ways the use of the Internet has affected the mechanisms through which adolescents establish, keep and develop personal relationships with their peers. Based on findings from our interviews and survey the following section discusses these issues in more depth.

5.1. INSTANT MESSAGING AND ITS IMPACT ON FRIENDSHIP AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The increased importance of peer friendships during adolescence is reflected in the large amounts of time adolescents spend interacting with their friends. Nowadays, much of that time is spent interacting on-line, and although the means of communication are certainly different to those of previous

generations, the purposes of such interaction continues to be practically the same. In this sense, the Internet seems to provide *new* spaces to satisfy *old* needs.

More specifically, our research revealed that, among the wide range of Internet applications available to the younger populations, instant messaging (IM) is one of the most popular ones. In fact, 89.9% of adolescents have used IM and that 77.3% use it on a weekly or daily basis. Besides, 74.4% of IM users say they like to use IM a lot compared to only 5.1% who state they dislike it. These findings are not surprising if one takes into consideration that research all over the world has demonstrated that IM is one of the preferred and most frequently performed Internet applications among young Internet users (Lenhart et. al., 2001; Dutton et. al., 2005). But why is this medium so popular especially among adolescent Internet users? We believe that one of the main reasons for the popularity of IM is the fact that it not only promotes communication among friends but also supports the stability of friendships by providing the “space” and the time to keep in touch with friends independently of physical or temporal constraints. Moreover, many adolescents value IM because it permits them to improve their social skills and their capacity for self-disclosure. This is especially true of those adolescents who are shy, insecure and /or introvert.

On the other hand, several of our interviewees expressed that IM possesses comparative advantages in relation to other means of communication, namely, (1) it allows them to enjoy more freedom and autonomy in that they can be *with* classmates and friends at times when they are normally not allowed to, for example, late at night during school days, (2) at least for those with broadband access, IM is cheaper than the telephone, thus it can be used more frequently and with less parental control or restrictions, and (3) it is a practical tool for doing things together with their peers such as exchanging information, doing school homework, and making arrangements.

Also interesting in our study was to find out how the relational world of adolescents is actually being created, maintained and /or modified through the use of IM. As it is well-known, the largest age group in the adolescent’s social networks is made up of peers (Youniss and Smollar, 1980). This fact is replicated in adolescents’ IM social networks, that is to say, in their “buddy lists” where the great majority of contacts are either classmates or friends whom they usually also see in person. Not surprisingly, in our interviews, adolescents expressed that IM was a means of keeping in touch with people they know, rather than a means of meeting new people.

In spite of the popularity of IM (reflected on its high frequency of use) the topics that adolescents cover on IM reveal that it is mainly used for instrumental purposes (e.g. talking about school-related topics, making arrangements to go out with friends) or as a way of furthering casual

conversations (e.g. talking about friend's latest news) rather than as a medium to discuss more intimate or personal issues. This, however, should not be surprising if we consider that adolescent friendships tend to be less intimate than older friendships (Youniss and Smollar, 1980). Finally, even though adolescents frequently use IM to be in contact with their peers, they still tend to prefer other means of communication, such as the telephone or face-to-face contact, to relate to their most significant social network members, i.e. their best friends.

6. Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that IM possesses some comparative advantages in relation to other means of communication such as face-to-face interaction or the telephone. Furthermore, IM has also proven to be important for the maintenance of psychological closeness among friends and peers. IM can also act as a social facilitator in that it allows youth to get in touch with people with whom, for various reasons, they may not have the chance to do so. On the other hand, IM not only yields important information about young people's on-line social worlds, but also provides relevant data about the points of intersection between adolescents' on-line and off-line social worlds as in many cases adolescents keep in touch with the same people through different on-line and off-line media. Developing healthy social relationships with peers and friends is crucial both to developing a sense of connectedness and belonging with others, to develop social skills and also to increase the knowledge concerning various aspects of the self indispensable to develop a sense of identity.

Finally, because of its usefulness for the maintenance of friendship and social relationships and also because of its popularity among adolescents, we can claim that IM has become an important means for the development of adolescents' social lives.

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