

Adolescent Use of Social Networking Sites and Internet Safety

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Mary Kate Whitcomb

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The use of computers and the Internet continue to increase, especially by children and adolescents. The Kaiser Family Foundation 2010 Generation M<sup>2</sup>: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds, reports children ages 11- to 14-years old spend approximately 1-hour and 46-minutes on the computer in a typical day, and 15- to 18-year olds spend about 1-hour and 39-minutes daily. The report breaks down computer usage into more defined categories of use. On average, 29 minutes of the total computer usage time by 11- to 14-year olds is spent on social networking sites; 15- to 18-year olds spend slightly less time, 26 minutes, using social networking tools on the computer. Approximately 40% of adolescents access social networking sites, such as Facebook, in a typical day and spend on average 54 minutes on the sites. There is a dramatic increase in social networking engagement from 8- to 10-year olds (18%) and 15- to 18-year olds (53%) (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Recently, there has been a lot of media attention on one of the many dangers of Internet usage: cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is defined by Smith et al. (2008) as “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (p. 376). The prevalence of cyberbullying is increasing as adolescents have more access to the Internet.

Knowing that the majority of adolescents use social networking sites and typically spend 54 minutes on them daily, one should look at the reasons why adolescents choose to use these sites and the content that is displayed on the sites. Since adolescents are still under the care and supervision of their parents, the extent of parental monitoring and involvement in social networking sites is another important factor to consider. The world of the Internet continues to expand as does the research about its use by adolescents. Various laws and regulations have been created to help protect adolescents and children from possible dangerous encounters online.

Parents must also be aware of how children are using the Internet as well as how to promote Internet safety. This paper will provide the background on adolescents and media use, how and why adolescents are using social networking sites, and the importance of Internet safety through the government and parents. Identity is a major component of adolescent development and the Internet has become another tool in which identity can be explored and developed. Parents need to have an understanding of how adolescents are using the Internet for identity development as well as teaching about safe ways to use the Internet. A list of tips and recommendations is also provided to assist parents in promoting safe Internet practices among adolescents.

### **Adolescent Media Use**

There are two main theories that scholars consider when analyzing the use of media by adolescents. *Cultivation Theory* presents the idea that the media one uses, such as viewing certain content on the Internet, will in-turn shape or “cultivate” a person’s views of the world. The other main theory, *Social Learning Theory*, suggests that people who frequently view models perform behaviors that are rewarded, or not punished, are more likely to imitate those behaviors (Arnett, 2007). *Cultivation Theory* and *Social Learning Theory* together would suggest that media influences both adolescents’ worldviews and their behaviors. Conversely, the *uses and gratification approach* (Arnett, 2007) suggests that people are active consumers of media. Since people are different in many ways, the differences often influence people to consume different kinds of media. In addition, individuals will respond to the same media content in varied ways because of their different personality characteristics.

Based on the *uses and gratification approach*, Arnett proposes five main reasons for adolescent media use: entertainment, identity formation, high sensation, coping, and youth culture identification. Identity formation is a major component of adolescence, in that one is

developing a conception of his/her values, abilities, and hopes for the future. With an increase in availability of media in today's society, media is greatly related to the socialization of adolescents. The unique aspect of media being a tool for socialization is that adolescents have the ability to choose which forms of, if any, media they use; this allows adolescents to have a wide range of options when it comes to choosing their preferred form of media. With adolescents having greater control over socialization through media compared to socialization from family and friends, parents are less likely to know what an adolescent is engaging in or have very little control over the content (Arnett, 2007). Media can have an impact on adolescent development, but a major factor is what media one chooses to engage in and how one actually uses the media.

### **Social Networking Sites**

With the extensive resources on the Internet, adolescents can create personal pages, provide personal information, and communicate with other people through numerous websites. One of the most popular social networking sites is Facebook. On sites such as this, users are able to provide personal information, continually update information, and even chat with friends. A "friends" list is created by adding people who are actual offline friends and sometimes by adding people found through the social networking site (Schmitt, Dayanim, & Matthias, 2008).

Facebook began in 2004 as a social networking site for only college students, and then expanded to include high school students in 2005. Within the next year, over 22,000 commercial organizations became part of Facebook; the site had over 22 million visitors by August 2007 and became the third most popular website. A majority of users (two-thirds) log on to the site each day and spend approximately 20 minutes on the site. On Facebook, users are able to provide information such as education and work background, interests, and status updates (an activity one may currently be engaged in). Users are also able to communicate with others through wall

posts, status updates, posting pictures and videos, and sharing web-links and music, in addition to many other activities (Zywica & Danowski 2008). Facebook's website states that it "[gives] people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook, 2011). Users are able to share anything they would like, including e-mail and home addresses, phone numbers, relationship status, religious and political affiliations, and much more. It becomes a space where users can disclose what they choose to make their personal page exactly as they would like.

### **Social Networking Site Usage**

The Internet and social networking sites are a component of many adolescents' development and life. There are a vast number of social networking sites available for individuals to choose from with multiple factors influencing the decision to use a particular site. While individuals may state many reasons for using a social networking site, adolescents more often use such sites as a realm for identity exploration. The decision of whether to use online social networking and which social networking site to use are the first steps to begin engagement in the online social networking world.

### **Differences Use and Non-Use**

Differences in the use of the Internet, and in particular, social networking sites, can be seen between genders, ages, social-economic status, and ethno-racial identities and backgrounds. While women and men in the United States have about the same amount of access to the Internet, men typically spend more time online. Context of Internet use as well as level of experience directly influence if and to what extent a person is involved in online social networking sites (Hargittai, 2007).

Hargittai's (2007) study of 18- and 19-year old college students from an ethnically diverse university in Chicago looked at a typical day of Internet usage by the sample demographic. Through a pencil and paper survey (the researcher elected not to use an online survey as that may have skewed the results, since the study was about the Internet), the participants noted their frequency of use and access to the Internet as well as the typical activities that they engaged in online. The general results showed that the participants had access to the Internet in about six locations, had been using the Internet for about six years, and spent approximately fifteen hours a week using the Internet. With 74% of participants reporting using at least one social networking site often, the most frequently used site (from the list of six that were included in the survey: Facebook, MySpace, Xanga, Friendster, Orkut, and Bebo), Facebook, was one of the most known; the sites less known were also less used. Participants who identified racially as White, more often used Facebook, whereas Hispanics utilized MySpace and Asian/Asian Americans used Xanga and Friendster more frequently. There appeared to be no significant difference between genders in the use of social networking sites in Hargittai's (2007) study. It is interesting to note that participants whose parents had higher levels of education, were also more likely to use Facebook than MySpace in relation to those whose parents had lower education levels. A main factor contributing to the results of this study is that existing offline social networks influence the type of site that an individual chooses to use because social networking sites are mainly used to communicate with offline contacts (Hargittai, 2007). There are many different websites that individuals can choose to use for social networking purposes. While the site selected for use can vary among ethnic groups, the reasons for using such sites, including topics of identity and socialization, are generally the same.

## **Identity Exploration**

According to Schmitt, Dayanim and Mattias (2008), children in early adolescence may be spurred to create personal online homepages due to the development of mastery motivation (one's ability to accomplish a goal, such as online content creation), a key developmental challenge for children aged six to twelve, in reference to Erik Erikson's developmental theory. While adolescents are developing their self-identity, a process of developing goals, opinions, attitudes, and new traits, the Internet provides a space in which identity can be explored and experimented with. Personal homepages and blogs are the most public and personal forms of self-presentation on the Internet; in these mediums, adolescents are able to experiment with various self-presentations and essentially gain feedback from peers and others. Schmitt et al. (2008) surveyed children ages 8 to 17 and their parents on technology use and access, self-presentation when interacting with others on the Internet, and mastery skills and identity formation. A majority of the participants reported feeling proud of their homepage creation skills (showing mastery of the technique), in support of Erickson's theory, and that it would be easy to learn new technologies. In relation to identity development, 80% of participants who had created personal websites reported that the site helped them understand who they are as an individual. More than half reported that sharing personal information was easier on a webpage than face-to-face. Adolescent websites are a tool by which identity can be explored and personal information can be easily shared and expressed. Adolescents who created personal homepages were found to be more likely to experiment with identity than those who did not create personal homepages (Schmitt et al., 2008). This may be due in part to those creating personal websites having more access to tools in which identity can be explored.

The second part of Schmitt et al.'s (2008) study looked at the content on personal homepages and the relationship to mastery, identity development, and social communities. *Mastery* refers to one's attainment of a certain skill, such as website creation. The following mastery content areas were examined on each of the homepages created by the participants: homepage competency (knowledge of the site being used), use of graphics, links on site, and sports involving athletic ability. The following identity related aspects were also analyzed: basic demographics (name, gender, etc.), interests (movies, books, music, etc.), values, and relationships. Adolescents expressed their mastery skills, especially in sports and hobbies, on their personal homepages; these homepages were also found to be a way to express *likes* more often than *dislikes*. A main component on many of the homepages examined was a way for the creator to be contacted, often with an e-mail address being provided; this may indicate a desire for a social community through the Internet. Adolescents also typically mentioned friends and family, in particular siblings, on their homepages – another form of providing personal information and creating an online social network. Older adolescents were found to express more about their personalities, values, friends, and family than younger adolescents (Schmitt, 2008). This may be related to older adolescents having more mastery skills and more defined self-identities. General findings from this study indicate that personal homepage creation is often directly related to an adolescent's social goals. Contrary to some research, Schmitt et al. (2008) found that identity expression is more prevalent than identity exploration on personal homepages. The reasons adolescents create personal homepages are mostly related to social development, including expanding one's social world, increasing the relationship with peers at school, and exploring emergent identities (Schmitt et al., 2008). Adolescents are able to explore



their identity, but more importantly express their identity, through the use of social networking sites.

### **Social Enhancement and Social Compensation**

Themes of identity are not the only reasons found to contribute to the use of social networking sites. While popularity can be defined in many ways in different contexts, Zywicki and Danowski (2008) defined popularity on social networking sites such as Facebook through: 1) status indicators, such as number of friends and amount of wall posts, and 2) asking open-ended questions about popularity to users and using the responses to form a definition. Social networking site popularity may hold different meanings for people with differing levels of self-esteem and sociability. An analysis of college students' use and perception of popularity on Facebook was used to look at the hypotheses of *social enhancement*, in which those who have well developed offline social networks have larger online social networks, and *social compensation*, in which those with less adequate offline social networks compensate for that lack by having more online social networks (Zywicki & Danowski, 2008). Zywicki and Danowski (2008) administered online surveys to undergraduate students at a large, public university in the United States. Result from the study supported both *social enhancement* and *social compensation*; the support of both hypotheses is indicated as being a result from different subtypes of users, those who are more sociable (extroverted) and those less sociable (introverted). Those who were more popular offline reported less often than those less popular that popularity on Facebook mattered to them. Many participants indicated that people change their profile pictures and add more friends to appear more popular on Facebook (Zywicki & Danowski, 2008).

Previous studies cited by Zywica and Danowski (2008) found that popularity has a positive correlation with higher attractiveness, leadership skills, extroversion, and academic achievement. Photographs and other posted information on Facebook may be facets that contribute to a person being considered popular. Various pieces of information, including pictures posted on a Facebook profile can be looked at to determine attractiveness, dress, dating, and other behaviors, all of which can relate to social position and acceptance. In relation to self-esteem, both high- and low-self-esteem persons may attempt to look popular on social networking sites; those with low self-esteem may try to compensate for lack of offline social networking and those with high self-esteem try to enhance their already high social status. Self-enhancement, self-protection, and self-esteem are all factors that contribute to social networking site usage (Zywica & Danowski, 2008).

Identity exploration and social aspects have been found to be reasons for individuals to use social networking sites. Looking at the content users choose to post and the reasons behind the content selection also are major factors in social networking site usage.

### **Personal Content on Social Networking Sites**

The fairly open structure of social networking sites allows users to choose what to post and what not to post on their individual pages. Ethnicity not only plays a role in which social networking site an individual uses, but also in how ethnic identity and other content is portrayed on such sites. Identity exploration is engaged in and an intended image is created through the posting of selected content on an individual's social networking site.

### **Ethnic Differences**

Past studies, as cited by Grasmuck, Martin, and Zhao (2009), have shown that users are fairly realistic and honest in their self-presentation on social networking sites, such as Facebook,

as compared to role-plays that more often takes place in anonymous tools such as chat rooms. Grasmuck, Martin, and Zhao (2009) investigated the interaction of race/ethnicity and the structure of online social networks (in particular Facebook) in relation to racial identity formation on the Internet. It is noted that while there are more ethnic minorities using social networking sites than before and racial identities are more salient on these types of sites, racial stereotyping may be more prevalent and forceful on the Internet as compared to offline. The researchers analyzed the Facebook profiles of 63 ethnically diverse individuals from an urban public university; while all accessible content was analyzed, a focus was on the user's profile, social networks, and self-description. General findings from the study showed that African American, Latina/o, and Indian ancestry participants used more visual, implicit, and narrative techniques to display their ethnic identity, while White and Vietnamese ancestry participants were less involved in showcasing their ethnic identity. African American, Latina/o, and Indian students showed the highest numbers of photos, wall posts, and both on- and off-campus friends on their Facebook profiles. Photos and wall post were considered contributions to implicit, visual identity claims (Grasmuck et al., 2009).

Cultural self – consumption preferences and taste in things such as music, TV, and movies – was also analyzed in this study. Latina/o participants listed more music and movie preferences while African Americans listed more TV preferences and quotes on personal pages. This indicated that Latina/o and African American participants spent more time and selection in showcasing their *taste* identity than did Indian, Vietnamese, and Whites. In the free response or personal statement areas on social networking sites, such as the “about me” on Facebook, Latina/o participants far exceeded the other ethnicity groups in posting long responses in this area. While the majority of participants posted short responses, some of the responses were not

even about the person; for example, a white male from the study posted “what do you want to know??” in this personal statement area. African American, Latina/o, and Indian students often posted inspirational quotes related to racial themes of injustice, which reflects group connectedness, color consciousness, and a connection to historical (and present) racial stigmatism (Grasmuck et al., 2009). The role of ethnicity can be seen in the selection of which social networking site one selects to use as well as how one chooses to display personal information (in particular, ethnic identity) on such sites. Not only can one express who they are ethnically, an individual’s self-identity can be shared with others through the posting of certain content.

### **Identity Expression**

While the type of content on a social networking site is up to the user, how the content influences interactions between him/her and other site users determines if the content is helping the user achieve his/her idealistic online-image or not. It is an individual’s choice to post personal information, such as thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and activities, in the public realm of the Internet. According to Williams and Merten (2008), some of the major themes found on adolescent social networking sites include romantic relationships, friends, parents, substance use, sexuality, popular culture, school, and self-expression. Concerning and/or harmful themes may include eating disorders, depression, conflicts, and self-harm. A symbolic-interactionist point of view on personal homepages for social networking sites would be that the extent to which an adolescent invests in creation of the content on his/her page, the more importance that will be associated with it (Williams & Merten, 2008). While some may view the Internet as simply another element in the lives of adolescents, it can be a powerful and influential factor contributing to their development. When adolescents are exploring their identity, the Internet can

be a safe outlet for experiences such as mood swings, self-doubt, confusion, and conflict with parents; adolescents may be able to explore their feelings more and gain support from others with similar experiences (Williams & Merten, 2008).

Willaim and Merten (2008) analyzed 100 adolescent online blogs (of which all content analyzed was public) on the basis of: demographic content (gender, relationship status, etc.), social content, image appropriateness, family issues, school issues, social issues, risky behaviors, sexual content, identity vulnerability, and peer interaction. The researchers found that online social networking assisted in identity development of adolescents. A majority of the photos posted by the profile creator were considered appropriate, with about 17% deemed inappropriate – often due to indications of nudity, alcohol, or other unacceptable behavior. Posts about participating in and/or having an interest in athletics was found on a majority of the profiles. Most comments about and between peers were rated as positive, and special interests (such as books, movies, and music) were found on most pages. Risky behaviors and sexual content were common concerning trends found throughout many of the adolescent profiles examined. With the average number of friends for an adolescent on a social networking site being 194 “friends,” the average profile creator had had face-to-face contact with about 84% of those social connections. Social networking sites are a way for adolescents to communicate and maintain relationships as well as explore their identity and express themselves (Williams & Merten, 2008).

Zywica and Danowski (2008) define self-presentation as “a person’s effort to express a specific image and identity to others” (p. 6). On social networking sites such as Facebook, users can use screen names, profiles, and messages to convey an image to others. While initial impressions of someone based on online content is less complete and detailed than face-to-face

encounters, online impressions are more extreme due to less feedback of emotional expression, which is conveyed in face-to-face interactions (Zywica & Danowski, 2008). Marwick (2005, as cited in Zywica & Danowski, 2008) categorized content presentation into three main categories: authentic, in which true information was presented, such as real name and location; authentic ironic, in which sarcasm and irony were used to modify true information; and fakesters, which claimed being celebrities, objects, places, or activities. Younger social networking site users typically experiment more with identity through such sites and care more about being popular online as compared to older users. Facebook is more often used to connect with people who an individual has made an initial offline connection with rather than searching for strangers to become friends with (Zywica & Danowski, 2008). Social networking site users explore and share their self-identity through sites such as Facebook. Since the content creation and selection is done by the individual user, one may wonder what image the user is trying to achieve through posting certain content.

### **Use of Posted Content to Create an Intended Image**

Peluchette and Karl (2010) looked at the adolescents' intended image on Facebook in relation to the content that each chose to post on his/her personal page. While social networking sites such as Facebook provide users with a basic template and suggestions of what to post, it is up to the user to select what personal information he/she wants to share with other online users. Some adolescents have an optimistic bias about people besides their friends seeing the content. An optimistic bias can be defined as the tendency to believe that accidents and misfortunes are more likely to happen to other people than to one self, therefore, some believe that only their friends can view the content that is displayed on a personal webpage (Arnett, 2007; Peluchette & Karl, 2010). Younger generations appeared to be less concerned and embarrassed than older

generations about the content placed on the Internet, for basically the world to see. For some, it may even be empowering to post provocative material and exaggerate the extent of alcohol and drug use. What is not always recognized is the public access to such content, in particular by possible employers. Some researchers suggest that few users utilize the privacy settings provided by social networking sites (Peluchette & Karl, 2010).

Certain posted content may be used as a direct attempt to portray a certain image. Profile pictures, for example, are a tool that can be used to attract possible significant others; scantily clad pictures (for both genders), may be in an effort to appear more sexually appealing. Peluchette and Karl (2010) surveyed undergraduate college students on their willingness to display certain kinds of content on their profile, their perception of the content (appealing, wild, fun and friendly, or offensive), and their beliefs about who should be viewing the content posted on their personal profile. Users often make a deliberate attempt to portray a certain image on social networking sites. Those who posted content they deemed acceptable for general audiences, including family and employers, were less likely to post sexually appealing, wild or offensive images. Conversely, those who did display such content were accepting of strangers viewing the content; some participants stated that since strangers did not know them, there was no reason for them to care about the self-image that was being portrayed. While most participants agreed that it was ok for family to view their profiles, they were neutral on whether strangers and employers should have access to the content. Social networking site users' intended image is correlated with the content that is posted on the site (Peluchette & Karl, 2010).

It is a conscious decision and effort to put forth a certain image, often times to impress one's peers. Those who felt that only their friends could view the content on their personal pages were more likely to post controversial content compared to those who were less certain about the

privacy of the material they shared in the Internet (Peluchette & Karl, 2010). Peluchette and Karl (2010) suggest that college students more often used social networking sites to meet new friends and establish new relationships rather than keep in touch with pre-existing close friends. Social networking sites are used as a social connection tool but the content being posted assists in displaying a certain image of a person that is then essentially made for public access.

The abundance of access to the Internet today is associated with greater use by adolescents. During some of the many developmental milestones in adolescence, parents may be excluded from an adolescent's life. Identity development is starting to become more prevalent online, in particular, on social networking sites; parental involvement in identity development may help guide adolescents in healthy identity development. Not only do parents need to know why adolescents are using the Internet, but they should also be aware of how to protect adolescents from possible online dangers and educate them on appropriate use of the Internet.

### **Internet Safety**

Adolescents have access to and use a variety of tools on the Internet. Some of the most popular sites by adolescents are social networking sites, such as Facebook. Through these sites, users can explore and express their identity through the posting of self-selected content, as well as engage socially with people who are both known and unknown by the user. The vast world of the Internet may be putting children in danger if proper safeguards are not put in place and internet safety is not discussed. While there are some laws to protect the privacy of children online, parents should also be aware of what children are doing online and ways to help make the online world a safe environment for their children. Parents should understand that one of the main reasons adolescents use social networking sites is for identity development, a major developmental task during adolescence. Having a better understanding of how adolescents are



using the Internet for identity development and educating them about Internet safety practices may assist in a healthier development of identity.

### **Government Involvement**

With the expanse in the use of the Internet by children, the government has become more involved in protecting children's privacy while online. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) under the Federal Trade Commission provides protection from data collection on sites intended for children under the age of thirteen; there is no explicit protection for children thirteen and older. The expansion of the Internet has lessened the amount of control individuals have over their personal information while increasing the amount to which e-marketers know, collect, and use the personal information of individuals. Only a minority of adolescents (21%) from the Pew Internet Study in 2005 reported being concerned over privacy breaches of their personal information through e-mail, instant message or text-message and this information being shared with entities other than the recipient. The Teen Internet Safety Study conducted by Cox Communication and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in 2006 found that 45% of adolescents have been asked to provide personal information to someone they did not know, 37% did not worry about someone using their personal information in ways that were not authorized by them, and 20% felt it was safe to post personal information on a public blog or social networking site (Youn, 2008).

Various governmental regulations have been implemented throughout the years in attempts to safeguard children against online privacy breaches. The Children's Privacy Protection and Parental Empowerment Act of 1999 requires parental consent before brokers can sell or purchase personal information of children under the age of sixteen. The Children's Internet Protection Act, implemented in 2001, requires schools and libraries to install blocking

technologies to protect minors from harmful material and possible risks of unauthorized use and dissemination of personal information. Recent legislation has also been passed by the U.S. Senate to reduce access to social networking sites while at school. NetSmartz, a program to teach media literacy in schools, has shown to help students become more aware and knowledgeable of online risks, as well as becoming more cautious with sharing information on the Internet (Youn, 2008). The government, schools, and computer programs cannot be the only tools used to safeguard children when using the Internet. Parents are one of the largest influences in children's lives and should be aware of Internet usage as well as active in their children's privacy protection.

### **Parental Views on Technology Usage and Privacy Protection**

There are a variety of areas involving online privacy that may be of concern to parents, such as inappropriate content, online bullying, protection of personal information, and interactions with strangers. Sharples, Graber, Harrison, and Logan (2009) surveyed 121 parents about some of their concerns with children and the Internet. Some of the areas of highest concern to parents were found to be: inappropriate contact by unknown adults (possible fear of child abuse), accidental access to inappropriate material, and a child visiting a site that was not approved by the parent. While it was still a concern, parents reported being less worried about cyberbullying. The majority of the parents in the survey felt that the Internet could be a useful tool for children and that children should have well-developed technology skills. With parents reporting benefits of the Internet yet also admitting concerns when children use it, Sharples et al. (2009) also looked at parent's views of online safety. A majority of parents reported having rules in place to try to prevent children from accessing unapproved sites. A belief that children know how to create secure passwords and that children would not disclose personal information online

was held by over 60% of the parents surveyed (Sharples et al., 2009). Parents have been shown to have concerns over children's privacy and safety while online. As children get older and gain more independence, parents and children may begin to hold different views about and experiences with the Internet.

### **Parent and Adolescent Perceptions of Internet Use**

The extensive use of the Internet and sharing of personal information through social networking sites by adolescents may raise concerns for parents. Parents appear to have mixed views about the risks and benefits of the Internet for adolescents. One of the benefits stated by parents is educational gains, which is the leading reason why parents provide Internet access to their children. Concerns for risks related to commercialism, privacy, security, sexual material, and social relationships are what worry parents about providing Internet access (Liau, Khoo, & Ang, 2008). Liau, Khoo, and Ang (2008) investigated the similarities between parent- and adolescent-perceived reports on the adolescent's Internet behavior. The behaviors most looked at included frequency of use, types of websites visited, and engagement in risky behavior on the Internet. The results of the study indicated that parents underestimated the amount of time adolescents spent on the Internet (adolescents report an average of 11 hours, and parents believed 8 hours), the frequency of visiting inappropriate websites (54% of adolescents report visiting pornographic sites and 45% report visiting a site with gory and violent material, with parents respectively at 20% and 16%), and the engagement in risky behavior (16% of adolescents report seeing someone in-person who they first met online, and parents reported 4%). Conversely, parents reported higher percentages than adolescents in direct parental supervision while the adolescent was using the Internet, the amount of communication between the parent and adolescent about Internet safety, and parental tracking of sites visited by the adolescent. While

parents reported high levels of communication about the Internet with their adolescent, only about 28% of parents said that their adolescent had approached them about uncomfortable Internet situations. Another part of the study looked at the differences between mothers and fathers; it was found that mothers tended to have better predictions about Internet usage by adolescents than fathers did (Liau et al, 2008). One reason stated by Liau et al. (2008) for the discrepancies in parent and adolescent reports is that adolescents attempt to protect their personal privacy from their parents as part of their transition to becoming more self-reliant.

The expansive world of the Internet opens many avenues to which adolescents can share their personal information with possible negative repercussions due to sharing too much information and/or not having adequate privacy protections. Previous studies (cited by Youn, 2008) have found that a majority of parents reported that adolescents were not as careful with disclosure of personal information as they should be (81%), worried that his/her child provided personal information through websites and chat rooms (74%), and that children aged thirteen and older should have parental consent before disclosing personal information online (96%).

Parents have concerns about their children's safety and privacy protection on the Internet, but also have unrealistic views of the experiences adolescents have online. How parents discuss and deal with concerns of the Internet with their children may influence how their children view the Internet and online safety.

### **Parental Influence**

Youn (2008) looked at the relationship between parental influence and adolescents' attitudes towards online privacy protection. Consumer socialization was used in this study to help explain adolescents' attitudes towards online privacy protection; consumer socialization is considered the ways in which people learn skills, knowledge, and attitudes in relation to their

role as a consumer, in this case, Internet use and privacy. Previous studies (as cited by Youn, 2008) found two main communication methods between family members: socio-oriented and concept-oriented. In socio-oriented communications, importance is placed on harmonious relationships between family members, conformity to family values is more important than individual expression, and parents monitor and control their children's consumption activities, in this case, the Internet and social networking site usage. In concept-oriented communications, parents encourage children to develop and express their own views, discussion or debate through an open discussion are common, children are able to see multiple alternatives before making a decision and gain independence in this way, and children develop consumer skills and competence. Adolescents raised with a concept-oriented communication about the Internet were more influenced to consider online privacy concerns than those raised with socio-oriented communications (Youn 2008).

Rulemaking, co-viewing, and discussion are methods of mediation parents use to supervise media use or help interpret media content. Rulemaking is more often used by parents with high socio-oriented communication; rules are a way to limit access to outside influences, protect children from controversial media messages, and maintain parental authority when it is threatened by external forces, such as the Internet. Both socio-oriented and concept-oriented communications engage in co-viewing of television to monitor media use and exposure, and facilitate parent-child conversations about the content being viewed, respectively. Discussion is more often seen among parents who are concept-oriented; discussions about what is viewed on television helps children gain consumer confidence and advertising skepticism. A positive relationship has been indicated in previous studies (as cited by Youn, 2008) between level of concern and privacy protection behaviors. A previous study by Youn (2005 as cited by Youn,

2008), found that adolescents' unwillingness to disclose personal information online positively correlated with behaviors such as falsifying personal information, providing incomplete information, and using alternative websites that did not seek such information.

Youn's 2008 study surveyed students ranging in age from 14 to 18 at a public high school. Parental-mediation was found to influence adolescents' Internet privacy concerns and increase their desire for support from governmental regulation, school-based education, and name removal request for mailing lists. Adolescents had an increase in privacy concern when concept-oriented mediation was the communication method used in the home, possibly due to open discussions and co-surfing (parent and child using the Internet together). Discussions between parent and child were shown to be more effective in increasing privacy awareness and concern than rulemaking; simply those who talked to their parents about the Internet showed higher levels of concern than those who did not. While rulemaking did not assist in developing an understanding of online privacy concerns for adolescents, co-surfing was shown to be a conversation starter for privacy concerns. Adolescents who experienced rulemaking and co-surfing in the home were more likely to support government regulations, and those who experienced rulemaking and discussion more often supported school education (Youn 2008). How parents approach Internet usage and safety, whether it be through rules and expectations of conformity or through open discussion, has an influence on their children's actions while online and their views on privacy protection.

With parents' general concerns about the Internet but underestimations of Internet usage by adolescents and overestimations of monitoring, something needs to be done to bring parents and adolescents more together on the topic of the Internet and Internet safety. Providing parents with information about how and why adolescents use the Internet can allow them to be more

informed and possibly assist in starting a discussion with their adolescents about the Internet.

There are many resources that parents can use, such as books and various websites that provide parents with tips, popular website reviews, and ways to approach online privacy protection with children. Various developmental tasks during adolescence are connected with and influenced by use of the Internet, in particular, identity development. Since the Internet is continuing to expand, parents with a better understanding of how and why adolescents use the internet, as well as teaching about Internet safety, may be instrumental in healthy identity development and safe Internet practices.

### **Suggestions and Tips for Safe Internet Usage**

Based on the research in this paper, Common Sense Media (2011), Privacy Rights Clearing house (2009), and Greenfield (2004), the following tips and guidelines are offered as a way for parents to monitor, assist in protecting, and educate their adolescents about the Internet and Internet safety. Parents should remember that adolescence is a time of identity development and gaining more independence, and therefore should communicate their expectations yet also allow adolescents to have a sense of privacy when using the Internet and social networking sites.

#### **Tips and Guidelines**

- Set family rules for online computer use and discuss them as a family.
- Set time limits – this is determined based on the individual child and family as to what is appropriate.
- Keep the computer in a common family area.
- Tell children that passwords and personal, identifying information (home address, phone number, school name, family information, etc.) is not to be distributed to unknown people or services online.
- Have children report threatening or uncomfortable messages to you.
- Help children understand that people online may not be who they present themselves as online.
- Teach that it is ok to block people who are being harassing online.
- Foster respect in the online world.
  - Teach respect for other people's rights to their own opinions; do not discriminate or harass others.
  - Set expectations for use of appropriate language; avoid vulgarity.



- Learn about the websites that your child uses.
- Read the privacy statements of online sites your child uses.
- Establish a usage contract with your child.
- Talk to children about controlling their information (being selective in what they post) and using privacy settings.
- Set rules about what is appropriate to post. Have children self-reflect before they self-reveal – think about why they plan to post something.

### **Parenting Books**

- *Generation MySpace: Helping Your Teen Survive Online Adolescence* by Candice M. Kelsey
- *Cyber-Safe Kids, Cyber-Savvy Teens: Helping Young People Learn to Use the Internet Safely and Responsibly* by Nancy E. Willard
- *How to Protect Your Children on the Internet: A Road Map for Parents and Teachers* by Gregory S. Smith

### **Websites**

- Commonsensemedia.org
- Privacyrights.org

Sample Technology Agreement from Commomsensemedia.org

## Common Sense media agreement for parents and teens in high school

### I will protect my reputation and privacy.

- ☐ I will create privacy settings on social networking sites.
- ☐ I will keep my password private.
- ☐ I will not give out my personal information (like my address) to someone I don't know.
- ☐ I will not put myself at risk by posting or sending sexy or scandalous photos.
- ☐ I will not post anything on my profile that I wouldn't want my parents, teachers, college admissions officers, or future employers to see.

### I will demonstrate my maturity.

- ☐ I agree to only use the Internet responsibly and not be hurtful to anyone.
- ☐ I agree not to use technology to cheat in games or in school.
- ☐ I agree to flag and report content that is potentially inappropriate.
- ☐ I will be mindful of how much media I consume and will balance it with other activities in my life.
- ☐ I will confide in an adult if anything potentially dangerous happens online.

### I will think first.

- ☐ I know that not everything I read or see is true, and I will think about whether a source or person is credible.
- ☐ I agree to think about and understand anything I download or any survey I fill out.
- ☐ I will earn my independence and my parents' trust.
- ☐ I will help my parents understand why media is so important to me.
- ☐ I will show them how to use the tools that I like if they're interested in learning.
- ☐ I will recognize that my safety and well-being is more important to them than anything else.

### In exchange, my parents agree to:

- ☐ Be open-minded about the media that I love and recognize that it's a big part of my life, even if they don't always understand why.
- ☐ Let me make some mistakes and help me learn from them.
- ☐ Before saying "no," talk with me about what worries them and why.
- ☐ Respect my privacy and talk to me if they have concerns.
- ☐ Embrace my world: try to understand downloads, IM, online games, and Web sites that I like.

Signed by Me

Signed by my Parents



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