

Risks and Consequences of Adolescents' Online Self-Disclosure

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Abstract

Nowadays the majority of adolescents spend their time online: studying, communicating with others or entertaining themselves. On the one hand, it is agreed that the usage of the Internet has a positive impact on adolescents' lives (e.g., helps to maintain personal relations). Still, it also has a negative impact – may cause risky online behaviour. It is said that online self-disclosure is one of the forms of risky behaviours online, which often occurs in adolescence. However, it is still unclear what do students think about disclosing online.

Thus, the aim of this research is to find out what do adolescents think about the risks and consequences of online self-disclosure.

In order to reach the aim of the study, the method of focus groups has been used. Twenty one adolescent (18 females and 3 males), aged from 11 to 17 years, participated in 4 focus group discussions. The collected data of discussion groups has been analysed using content analysis.

The results of the focus groups have shown that, according to adolescents: risky online self-disclosure can be verbal (disclosing personal information, sharing personal ideas and opinions, building relationships) and nonverbal (sharing photos or videos); risky online self-disclosure may cause property damage and interactional problems (identity theft, communication with strangers, cyberbullying). Thus, more attention should be paid in educating adolescents about the risks of online self-disclosure.

Key words: online self-disclosure, adolescents, risky online behaviour

1. Introduction

Self-disclosure on the internet may be defined as a process, when one person voluntary shares his/her personal information to others online [7]. It is important to mention, that online self-disclosure can be verbal or non-verbal [1]. In online settings, verbal disclosure may be explained as sharing personal opinions or thoughts while non-verbal disclosure may be related to sharing photos or videos of oneself.

Differently from face-to-face interactions, generally online self-disclosure is more frequent [8]. This might be explained by the sense of anonymity [5] which allows users to feel more secure to disclose. Moreover, such kind of disclosure is wider than in real life settings [7], it means that while disclosing online, you can share your personal information with a wide range of people while in real life settings it happens not too often.

Adolescents spend a lot of time online and this tendency is just growing. Mostly they spend time on social networking sites or special apps for communication where disclosure occurs [6] [7]. Thus, it is important to mention that online self-disclosure have negative and positive consequences on adolescents' development [8]. The main positive aspect of adolescents' disclosure online is that it allows them to explore their identity what is an important part in their development. Moreover, it allows creating new relations or maintaining the ones created in the real life settings [4] [7]. Despite that, the studies show that online self-disclosure is also related to risky behaviour [9]. In this case, it is possible to state that sharing personal information online is a risky behaviour by itself [2] [3] [10].

However, self-disclosure as risky behaviour online isn't very widely studied phenomena yet. Even though the overall risky behaviour on the Internet is widely studied area of today's researchers. Mostly they pay attention to adolescents' cyberbullying or risky sexual behaviour online. Thus, as it was already stated, there is a need to better understand what kind of self-disclosure online adolescents understand as risky behaviour and what consequences it causes. Moreover, the scientific knowledge in the area of adolescents' risky disclosure online may help us to create and implement possible prevention or intervention programs [3], in order to prevent or decrease risky online self-disclosure.

2. Methods

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2.1 Procedure

The research has been conducted in two Lithuanian schools, where 4 focus groups have been organised. Thus, from 2 to 7 adolescents per group have participated in this study. Focus groups have been moderated by one of the research authors.

Before conducting the focus groups, active parents' agreements of their children participation in the study were collected. At the beginning of the focus groups, participants were informed about the goals of the discussion and its procedure, including their ability to refuse to participate. The participants were also informed that: this discussion will be recorded; the records will be protected by the mentor of the study; collected data will be used anonymously.

2.2 Measures

The questions for the discussion groups were chosen according to the aims of the study. These questions are:

- What is risky online self-disclosure? Give some examples.
- What are the consequences of risky online self-disclosure? Give some examples.

The participants had to answer some demographical questions, including their age and gender. In order to find out what do students think about risks and consequences of online self-disclosure, the qualitative content analysis of the information from the focus groups was used. The recordings of each group were transcribed word by word, however, the information, which was clearly not related to aim of this study, wasn't included. The main ideas and thoughts of the participants were highlighted in the transcribed text and inductively grouped into the categories and subcategories.

2.3 Participants

Twenty one adolescent aged from 11 to 17 years ($M=13.86$, $SD=2.37$) participated in this study. Eighteen of them were female and three - male.

3. Results

3.1 Forms of risky online self-disclosure

Content analysis of the forms of risky online self-disclosure has shown that, according to adolescents, risky online self-disclosure can be distinguished into two main categories: verbal or non-verbal risky online self-disclosure (see Table 1).

Table 1. Categories and subcategories of risky online self-disclosure.

Category	Subcategory	Example
Verbal	Disclosing personal information	<...> you disclose your personal data, like where you live, what's your first or second name, your birth date <...>
		<...> sometimes e-mail <...>
		<...> where your parents work <...>
	Sharing personal ideas or opinions	<...> writing blogs. You show others what do you think, disclose your own opinion <...> it can be risky <...>
		<...> someone may use your ideas against you <...> they may try to hurt you <...>
	Building relationships	<...> communicating with people you don't know <...>
<...> well, if I talk on Skype I do it just with my relatives <...> I'm afraid to talk with people I don't know <...>		
Non-verbal	Posting photos	<...> your bank card's account may figure in the shared photo <...>
		<...> they may send your shared photo to somebody who you don't know <...>
		<...> I've seen on Instagram <...> that some people was self-injuring and posting the photos of that <...>
		<...> young schoolgirls were sending their naked photos to older students <...>
	Posting videos	<...> I found one girl who's posting videos of how she self-injures <...>

According to the students, verbal risky online disclosure is mostly related to disclosing personal information of one's age, home address, e-mail, and birth-date. Non-verbal risky online self-disclosure

is mostly related to sharing photos or videos of inappropriate behaviour or psychological problems. The particular students' examples can be found in Table 1.

3.2 Consequences of risky online self-disclosure

Content analysis of the consequences of risky online self-disclosure has shown that, according to adolescents, negative consequences of risky online disclosure can be related to property damage or interactional problems (see Table 2).

Table 2. Categories and subcategories of consequences of risky online self-disclosure.

Category	Subcategory	Example
Property damage	Robbery	<...> if you post, that you are not home, they may come and rob your house <...> <...> they may find where you live, come and kill you <...>
	Bank account theft	<...> you may accidentally share a photo where your bank account is visible. Thus, somebody may use that against you<...>
Interactional problems	Identity theft	<...> you can create a <i>pseudo profile</i> of yourself <...> the problem is, that you may start thinking that you really are that <i>pseudo person</i> <...>
		<...> for example, you send your photo to somebody <...> and later on you find out that it's a 50 years old man <...> who was using somebody's personal data to look younger <...>
	Communication with strangers	<...> stalking <...> he may have your photos and you don't who is he <...>
		<...> stalkers <...> may start frightening you <...> that they will disclose something about you to others <...>
		<...> you may agree to meet strange in face to face <...>
		<...> he may kidnap, kill or rape you <...>
	Cyberbullying	<...>mocking, telling others lies about you <...>
<...> somebody may start mocking <...>		
<...> horrible comments on the posted photos <...>		

The damage of one's property, as negative consequences of risky online disclosure, is mostly related to house robbery or bank account theft. Another important aspects, distinguished by adolescents, is interactional problems, mostly related to identity theft, communication with strangers or people you don't know, and cyberbullying. The particular students' examples can be found in Table 2.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study was aimed to find out what do adolescents think about the risks and consequences of online self-disclosure. Thus, this study has shown that risky online self-disclosure can be verbal or non-verbal. These results go along with a main theoretical background of self-disclosure, which states that disclosure can verbal or non-verbal [1]. This study has also shown that, according to adolescents, risky online disclosure may cause property damage or interactional problems. According to Tufekci (2008), these negative consequences of online disclosure is related to poor users' possibility to evaluate what to disclose online, meaning that not everybody can be trusted. However, the most importantly, this study indicates that adolescents know that online disclosure can be risky and they also can describe some important consequences of such behaviour. However, even if they know the risks, they still engage in risky online self-disclosure. Thus, more attention should be paid in educating adolescents about the risks of online self-disclosure.

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