

Cyberbullying Research Summary

The Changing Nature of Online Social Networking



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Adolescents have, by most accounts, completely embraced online social networking. As of the fall of 2009, 73% of teens between the ages of 12 and 17 use such sites, an increase from 58% in 2007.¹ Specifically, 82% of youth between the ages of 14 and 17, and 55% of youth between 12 and 13 years of age have a social networking profile page. One of the most popular of such sites is MySpace (www.myspace.com), which is currently the 7th most popular web site in the United States.^{2, 3} It is estimated that approximately one-quarter of MySpace users are adolescents.^{4, 5}

Recently concerns have arisen when youth participate on social networking sites in ways that could compromise their safety, or lead to problematic, deviant, or criminal outcomes. For example, reports in the media have tied MySpace to a variety of societal ills, such as harassment, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, alcohol and drug abuse, hate crimes, planned or executed bombings, planned school shootings, suicide, and murder. Moreover, MySpace has been vilified in past years as a haven for predators and pedophiles, who may lurk and troll the site for unsuspecting young victims.

Apart from the problems that stem from actually participating in adult-oriented and risk-laden behaviors, posting comments, blogs, pictures, and videos *reflecting* that behavior appears to be unwise as an increasing number of prospective employers, teachers, counselors, administrators, law enforcement, and college admissions coordinators search through MySpace to determine if youth they know are demonstrating deficiency of character. This form of online information reconnaissance has repeatedly led to significant real-world consequences where youth have unwittingly sabotaged current and future academic and professional opportunities due to what they have posted online.

Since 2006, various governmental, non-profit, and private-sector organizations have worked to safeguard online children and teenagers through education and awareness campaigns. Additionally, schools and families are increasingly broaching the topic and meaningfully equipping their youth to exercise vigilance, discretion, and responsibility when interacting in cyberspace. As such, it is hypothesized that youth have become more restrictive with their information in an effort to protect themselves while interacting on MySpace. Specifically, we believe that in recent years teens have reduced the frequency with

which they are: 1) posting revealing pictures; 2) cursing on publicly-viewable pages; 3) demonstrating tobacco, alcohol, or marijuana use; and, 4) sharing personal information that could be used to locate them. To examine these predictions, a sample of MySpace profiles was analyzed in the summer of 2009 and their content was compared to those that previously analyzed in the summer of 2006.

Results

First, the current research suggests that a meaningful number of MySpace users have abandoned their profiles. In 2009, 44.1% of profiles sampled were invalid or had been deleted (compared to 6.4% in 2006). In addition, over 50% of the remaining “valid” profiles had not been updated in over one year (9.2% in 2006) and less than 18% of the profiles in 2009 had been logged onto in the week prior to analysis (compared to almost 43% in 2006).

Highlights from the Research:

- Many MySpace users have abandoned their profiles
- Significantly more MySpace users restricted access to their profile in 2009 compared to 2006 (85% of adolescents set their profile to private in 2009 compared to 39% in 2006)
- Youth were less likely in 2009 (compared to 2006) to post personal and private

Second, significantly more MySpace users chose to restrict access to their profile by making it “private” (11.5% in 2006; 37% in 2009). Those who remain on MySpace seem to be more motivated to “lock down” their profile and reduce its accessibility to individuals outside their social circle (i.e., anyone who is not their “friend”).

Third, there were several noteworthy differences between the adolescent profiles reviewed in 2006 and those reviewed in 2009. Far more youth chose to restrict access to their profile in 2009 compared to 2006 (85% compared to 39.1%). Youth also were significantly less likely to include pictures of their friends in their swimsuits or

underwear (9.4% vs. 1.9%), or swear words both on their profile (12.3% vs. 5.2%) and in their comments (19.9% compared to 6%). Similarly, evidence of alcohol and tobacco use was visible on significantly fewer profiles in 2009. The research did identify an increase in the number of youth who include their first and full names on MySpace, though fewer included their current city and school name. As noted for the total population of MySpace users, more adolescents appear to be abandoning their profiles (44.6% in 2006; 50.7% in 2009) and fewer are actively using the site (39.5% in 2006; 26.2% in 2009).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of online social networking among adolescents and to assess any behavioral changes that might have occurred between 2006 and 2009. We found that many youth have abandoned their MySpace profiles, with some including a statement on their profiles letting visitors know that they have moved to other social networking environments: "Oh, and I never go on here anymore. Get me on Facebook," "I'm barely on mspace, and when I am I barely reply. Check my facebook out."

The current research also found that youth are more frequently restricting access to their profiles and less frequently revealing personal information on public profiles. While it is impossible from the current study to know exactly why teens are becoming more concerned about their privacy, it could simply be that messages warning of the consequences of disclosing too much online are being heard and applied. This speculation is supported by a recent study which found that teenagers who were directly warned about inappropriate content contained in their profiles were likely to make changes.⁶

Other research has found that adolescents on MySpace who viewed real-world privacy as important to them were less likely to disclose personal information through their online profile pages.⁷ It appears, then, that adults would do well to impress upon the minds of youth that being privacy-conscious is beneficial, as it may encourage those youth to reveal less in cyberspace.⁸

This also supports the call being made by researchers and Internet safety advocates that promoting education and awareness about these issues – as opposed to increased punitive legislation or reactive technological solutions – is the best preventive tack to take among this population.⁹⁻¹¹

Note: This Fact Sheet is an abbreviated version of a full-length journal article entitled "Changes in adolescent online social networking behaviors from 2006 to 2009" which was published in Computers and Human Behavior.

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Notes

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The Cyberbullying Research Center is dedicated to providing up-to-date information about the nature, extent, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying among adolescents. For more information, visit <http://www.cyberbullying.us>. © 2010 Cyberbullying Research Center - Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin