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Social Networking Sites

On the 7th April 2008, YACSA ran the YOUTHink Forum for young people across South Australia to discuss issues important to them. YACSA identified the issues of **bullying, media, social networking sites, body image, debt and the environment** for discussion.

Social networking sites were of particular concern to the participants of the YOUTHink forum as most of them were members of such sites as MySpace or Facebook.

Statistics

Social networking sites, such as MySpace or Facebook, have appealed to millions of users since their introduction. Users of them construct their own information and are able to share it with friends, family, people they know, or potentially the rest of the world.¹ They are so popular now that many of those millions of users now include access to MySpace or Facebook into their daily routines. In Australia, young people have the highest percentage of Internet usage than any other age demographic at 76.5% of the population.² The majority of these young people would have their own page on a social networking site. Although the majority of social networking sites have similar technological features, it is generally acknowledged that most have different cultures. Audiences may be attracted to sites that cater for diverse interests; or others that have common themes such as language, race, religion, nationality, or sexual identity. There are literally hundreds of these social networking sites that cover a broad variety of interests and practices, with one of the key themes amongst social networking sites being to maintain contacts, as well as to foster friendships and / or relationships between strangers based on mutual interests.³

Why do people use social networking sites?

Young people are attracted to social networking sites for a number of reasons. Original and personal information can be displayed, or created, and published on their own website. They provide opportunities for young people to express themselves freely, as well as easily communicated with other users.⁴ Many young people see social networking sites merely as an expansion of their offline lives, and some do not see the difference between an offline and an online environment.⁵

What are the positives and negatives of using social networking sites?

There are several positive opportunities on offer when children and young people communicate, interact, and share content and interests through social networking sites and user interactive services. However, there are also some negative consequences of using social networking sites, particularly for those under 18, because they are more likely to be vulnerable to harmful or inappropriate behaviour through their use. Unfortunately, it is impossible to make all social networking sites 100% safe.⁶

Adolescence is considered a normal time for challenging adult norms, deceiving parents, excluding or being excluded by peers, experimenting with relationships and sexual experiences, keeping or releasing secrets, testing boundaries, trying on different identities, and worrying about physical development. Although this is

¹ Great Britain Home Office Task Force on Child Protection on the Internet 2008, 'Good practice guidance for providers of social networking and other user interactive services 2008', Home Office, London, p. 11

² Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008, *Australian Social Trends: Internet Access at Home*, catalogue number 4210.0, ABS, Canberra

³ Boyd, D.M & Ellison, N.B 2007, 'Social network sites: definition, history and scholarship' in *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 13, issue 1, article 11, p. 1

⁴ Great Britain Home Office Task Force on Child Protection on the Internet 2008, 'Good practice guidance for providers of social networking and other user interactive services 2008', Home Office, London, p. 11

⁵ Ibid, p. 12

⁶ Ibid., p. 10

expected offline, it can also be expected online, where things may be perceived as worse as there is an avenue for a wider audience and therefore larger scale humiliations can follow. Online, things can be taken the wrong way or out of context, manipulated to suit the reader / viewer, and delivered in ways that are quicker and easier to do than if they are offline, which means consequences can pop up unexpectedly or have worse repercussions than if they were performed away from online communities.⁷

The majority of young people who use social networking sites do so positively, but sometimes may behave in risky ways. Although actions they take whilst on social networking sites may seem harmless to them at the time, they do not always realise that things can change over time and so can they way they are perceived. A message may lose meaning or take on a different meaning in a different context. The risks taken do not always come from social networking sites but rather from behaviours offline that can be put onto the Internet. Young people may be exposed to behaviours earlier than what they would offline, and may become involved in behaviour that is potentially risky to themselves, such as participating in cyber flirting and cyber sex. They can quickly lose control in these situations without even knowing it. Some of the risks young people take in social networking sites include: being bullied; being exposed to harmful and / or inappropriate material; getting involved (willingly or unknowingly) with posting illegal or inappropriate material; willingly or unknowingly posting details of identity and the location of a child; stealing personal information; being exposed to sexual harassment and hate, racist, and / or self-harm materials; viewing violence; receiving inaccurate information regarding drugs and alcohol; and leaving home to meet with online contacts.⁸

Bullying

Bullying and harassment are a concern for the young people who utilise social networking sites, because it can be manifested in many different ways. These include being abused, intimidated or threatened by someone else who has gained access to their page, being impersonated by someone establishing fake pages and content about the targeted person (or stealing their password to re-model their already existing page), being excluded, having pictures or videos of them (possibly modified) posted online to cause embarrassment and humiliation, or having inaccurate reports made about them to the service provider with the intention of getting them kicked off the website and their page shut down.⁹ However, social networking sites are becoming increasingly aware of bullying issues and some, such as Bebo, have even got safety videos on their site, including one that shows how to report bullying or abuse.

Recommendations

- Encouraging cooperative efforts between business, government, law enforcement and users to help create a safer, more secure online environment for children and young people
- Advocating for educational programs (both in and out of schools) to make young people aware of the safety risks when using social networking sites, and to equip them with safety measures and tools to help them manage their use of social networking sites
- Advocate for improved technology to be used to control who has access to these sites
- Supporting an information campaign to inform young people and adults of the possible dangers of social networking sites
- Advocating for Internet education and safety programs to include information about the possible misuse of technologies such as webcams that can be used in order to abuse and manipulate young people
- Empowering young people through education and media literacy

Further resources on social networking sites

www.netalert.gov.au

**The Youth Affairs Council of South Australia
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⁷ Ibid., p. 14

⁸ Ibid., p. 16

⁹ Ibid., p. 21