Cyberbullying Research Summary
Personal information of adolescents on the Internet

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MySpace has emerged as the most popular online social networking site, capturing almost 80% of the visits made to this type of web site.[1] Perhaps because of its popularity, MySpace has received a significant amount of negative attention by the popular media, as well as by parents, teachers, school administrators, counselors, and even law enforcement. This is primarily due to the tens of millions of people who use the web site's technology to interact with others, and because of the potential vulnerabilities to victimization that may arise when youth unwittingly, naively, or carelessly post personal information about themselves or their friends on publicly-accessible web pages.

While there is little empirical data publicly available about the proportion of MySpace accounts that have been created by adolescents, most reports seem to suggest that about one-quarter of user profiles are of individuals under the age of 18.[2] Moreover, a recent telephone survey of 935 teenagers between ages 12 and 17 found that 55% of online youth have created a personal profile page and 85% of those have done so on MySpace.[3] As of August 2007, MySpace was the most popular web site in the United States, the sixth most popular English-language web site in the world, and by far the most popular of approximately 200 social networking sites, boasting over 225 million registered profile pages.

MySpace allows any individual to quickly and easily post a web page that serves as a digital representation of one's self – their interests, personal style, affiliations, likes and dislikes – and then connect with (link to) "friends" who have done the same. Multimedia enhancements enable users to post and link to pictures, videos, and audio with relative ease. Moreover, the communication features within the site facilitate easy interaction among a population that wants to receive or send information quickly and while engaged in multiple other online tasks. On their profile page, participants can post periodic blogs or journal entries (viewable to the public or restricted to only those approved as friends). They can also leave public "comments" on other profile pages or send private "messages" to other users, the content of which ranges from superficial greetings ("hey! what've u been up to?"), to the expression of meaningful sentiments ("I already miss the talks we had at the beach. I learned so much from you guys."), to random observations or statements or questions about anything of interest ("I like Jay-Z a lot, I even update my song to be Jay-Z"). All of these activities are done with the purpose of creating a profile page and interpersonal network that is socially appealing but also unique to the individual and representative of his or her likes and dislikes, inclinations, activities, and friendships.

Risks and Benefits

The media have reported on instances in which MySpace profiles have been linked to many social problems, including: cyberbullying, cyberstalking, alcohol and drug abuse, hate crimes, planned or executed bombings, planned school shootings, suicide, and even murder. In addition, the biggest public concern centers on the potential vulnerability of youth to predators and pedophiles.

Despite these occurrences that reportedly stem from interpersonal relationships through personal profile pages, there are a number of potential benefits of social networking for adolescents. Online interaction provides a venue to learn and refine the ability to exercise self-control, to relate with tolerance and respect to others' viewpoints, to express sentiments in a healthy and normative manner, and to engage in critical thinking and decision-making.[4] It also enhances self-discovery, and identity formation and production[5,6,7] among a cohort whose self-worth stems largely from peer perceptions, popularity dynamics, and current cultural trends.[8,9,10,11,12] Additionally, it provides a virtual venue in which to "hang out," share web-based cultural artifacts like links, pictures, and stories, and remain intimately connected with friends regardless of spatial distance.[9] Finally, social networking sites serve as a largely uncontrolled, unregulated, unconstrained public space in which adolescents can "see and be seen" in ways that support youth socialization and the assimilation of cultural knowledge.[9]

We sought to collect data to determine the accuracy of the media's claims about whether MySpace merited all of the negative attention and stigma it had received from many adults in supervisory capacities. We wanted to see if the numbers backed the panicked claims. As such, we embarked on a comprehensive content analysis of a representative sample of MySpace profile pages. In order to be representative, profiles to be analyzed had to have an equal and random chance of being selected for analysis from the entire universe of MySpace pages. This was accomplished using a random number generator, since

each profile is uniquely assigned a numeric identifier within the site upon its creation.

Findings

Of the 9,282 profiles we randomly-selected, 2,423 (26%) were created by youth under the age of 18 and were still "live" and accessible. Youth status was determined by coding their listed age and also searching the profiles for information that would either substantiate or contradict that age. A small but significant number of youth patently misrepresented their age on their MySpace profile. Approximately 39% (948 out of 2,423) of the youth profiles were "set to private" and as a result we were unable to access the profile because it was restricted and viewable only by friends. Accordingly, the final youth sample consisted of 1,475 profiles that were publicly accessible and consequently analyzed.

First, about 54% (n=795) of the profiles reviewed were created by females. Second, more than 8% (n=123) of the profiles included evidence of age inflation. Almost 57% of profiles (n=839) included at least one picture of the youth (median=2; maximum=16). Youth often included pictures of themselves with friends or family, or even random people they met at social gatherings. While including a picture or descriptive details potentially places a youth at risk, of particular concern were the youth who included pictures of themselves (n=56) or others (n=228) posing in swimsuits or underwear. Not only could these pictures be used by would-be cyberbullies to inflict harm, but they may also attract the attention of sexual predators or other individuals with prurient motives.
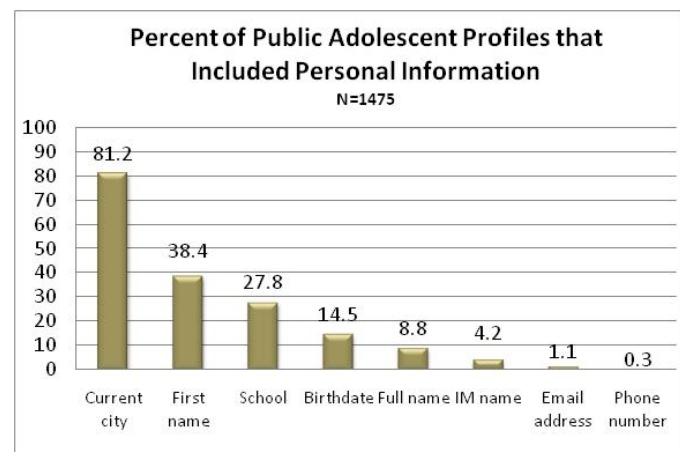
With regard to personal information, almost 40% of the profiles included the youth's first name, and approximately 9% included their full name. This information, along with their current city (81%) and school (28%), may also assist those seeking to identify profile owners offline. Some youth also included their instant messaging name (4%) or an additional email address (1%).

In rare cases (n=4) youth reported their personal (usually cell) phone number. In addition to the phone numbers reported on the profiles, we noticed a few cases where friends would include their own phone numbers in a comment left on a profile ("O yess, and those letters at church.. we need to get crackin on those hehe call my cell [***-1637] and we will figure somethin out soon"). Four profiles out of approximately 1,500 represents a small percentage (about one-third of one percent), however, this number extrapolated to all adolescents on MySpace suggests that as many as 75,000 youth may be including this very private information.

The dynamic nature of these personas allow youth to experiment with new identities as they seek to understand who they are and what they stand for. It was expected, therefore, that we would observe a significant amount of adult-oriented behavior being expressed within profile pages. Many youth indicated they had recently consumed alcohol (18%), while others noted that they had smoked cigarettes (8%) or used marijuana (2%). While it is perhaps shocking to see these behaviors being publicly flaunted on a MySpace profile page, it is important to remember that these activities are not uncommon among adolescents. That said, publicly revealing them could potentially have long-term consequences for these youth. Some prospective employers and college admissions counselors are searching social networking sites and excluding applicants who have engaged in questionable activities as revealed by the content of their profile page. In addition, some law enforcement agencies review social networking web sites in their routine background checks of individuals.
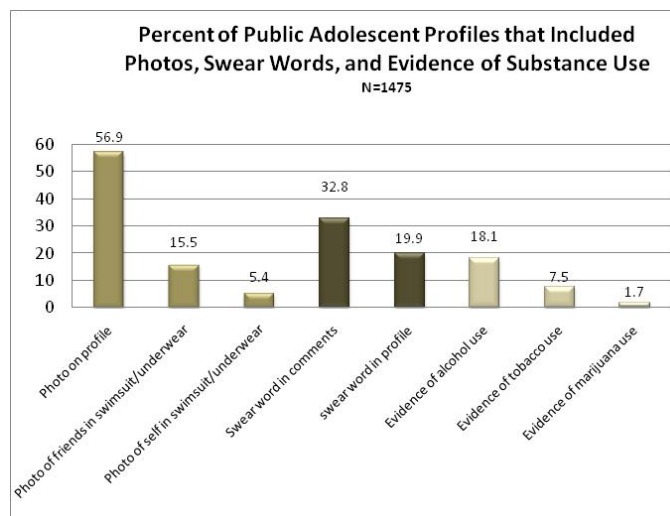
Social Networking and Cyberbullying

As noted above, there are a number of potential risks to youth on social networking web sites. To be sure, the likelihood that a sexual predator will contact your child

online and exploit them offline is extremely low. However, cyberbullying and similar forms of peer harassment is much more likely to occur. These environments are ideal for online aggression because they are popular, easily and widely accessible, and because bullies can hide or disguise their identity. The most common ways social networking sites are exploited by the cyberbully is though anonymous commenting (leaving mean messages on someone's profile), rumor spreading (e.g., setting up a profile to defame or insult someone), or identity theft (impersonating or hacking into some else's account and writing information without their permission).

Conclusion

The results of our study indicate that youth are in fact posting personal and identifying information, but perhaps not to the extent that many believe.

While the media, politicians, and many adults in supervisory positions have been quick to vilify the use of MySpace and similar web sites by youth because of the potential for predatory victimization, their denunciation has been based more on anecdotal, rather than empirical, evidence. To discount the reality of predators online would be both naïve and foolish, however, and is not our position. Over one-quarter of the youth in the sample listed the school they attend and included a picture of themselves. This information alone could easily be used to contact the individual offline. That said, the disclosure of personal information by minors on MySpace occurs with relative infrequency – contrary to previous research.[13]

Note: This Research Summary is an abbreviated version of a full-length journal article that is available in the Journal of Adolescence.

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NOTES:

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