

Cyberbullying Research Summary

Trends in Adolescent Online Social Networking



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In the summer of 2006, we performed an extensive content analysis of 2,423 randomly-sampled adolescent MySpace profile pages to determine the extent to which youth were posting personal information and publicly expressing or displaying participation in adult-like behaviors (such as swearing, drinking, and using alcohol, tobacco, or marijuana).¹ Concerning the former, results suggested that youth are largely demonstrating common sense when it comes to the personal content they include on their publicly-accessible profile page. Concerning the latter, a relatively small but meaningful number of adolescents were using inappropriate language on their profile page and/or reporting experience with illicit substances.

Since the initial study, various organizations (both online and offline) have sought to stridently inform and equip youth with the knowledge to stay out of harm's way when interacting in cyberspace.^{2,3} Formally, school districts around the nation and world are ramping up efforts to teach Internet safety (to varying depths) to students in elementary, middle, and high school.⁴⁻⁸ Informally, parents are increasingly broaching the subject of risks and dangers in cyberspace when talking with their children.⁹⁻¹²

MySpace itself has adopted a number of safety measures in an effort to protect their users. For example, they began airing public-service announcements promoting safe social networking, as well as rotating web banner ads within their pages in 2006. They hired a chief security officer and have buttressed their staff to more capably screen and remove problematic personal profiles and to more effectively work with law enforcement on complaints of criminal behavior.¹³ In addition, they have implemented technological restrictions to help keep known sex offenders in the United States from creating profiles, and deleted 29,000 profiles belonging to registered sex offenders in July 2007.³

With regard to problematic content, millions of images and video are uploaded daily, and MySpace utilizes both algorithms and people to identify if any of these violate their Terms of Service. To help reduce the likelihood that minors will be contacted by adults they do not know, MySpace automatically restricts access to (i.e., sets to private) any profiles created by individuals who are aged 13, 14, or 15. The profiles of users who are 16 or older are set to public but can be changed to private if the user desires (users who state they are younger than 13 are not

allowed to set up a profile page).² Finally, MySpace users who list their age as 18 or older are not allowed to add friends who list their age as under 16 unless the adult knows the teen's full name or email address.²

Cumulatively, these initiatives serve to pique the consciences of youth and motivate them to carefully consider what they say and do online. That said, no research to date has examined a cohort of MySpace profiles over time to determine whether the safety messages are being heard or the new strategies being employed are affecting the way youth are using MySpace. The current research sought to re-analyze the youth MySpace profile pages that were initially examined in 2006 to learn whether there have been any observable changes in the way adolescents are using that site.

Summary of Findings

As described above, there were originally a total of 2,423 youth profiles randomly-selected from all of the available profiles. When analyzing the profiles one year later, we found that approximately 10% (n=239) of the sample profiles had been deleted sometime during the previous year and were no longer active. Among those that were still active, 42% were set to private. This compares to 39% of profiles set to private in 2006. Approximately 48% of the profiles listed users as under 18 years of age, and almost 5% included clear evidence of age inflation. Evidence of age inflation was identified when some profiles revealed the youth's birthdate (7.9%), (e.g., 'I was born on March 14th, 1990') or the user acknowledged somewhere else in the profile that he or she was younger than the officially listed age (e.g., 'I'm 14 and a freshman at North').

Inappropriate Content and Personal Information

A common concern leveled by adults is that youth are including inappropriate content or pictures on their MySpace profiles.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Over half of the profiles (56.5%) included a picture of the youth, though only a small proportion included pictures of the youth (3%) or his or her friends (1.7%) in a swimsuit or their underwear. Moreover, a relatively small proportion of the profiles included swear words in the profile itself (7.6%) or in the comments left by visitors (15.7%). Finally, few of the profiles included evidence of alcohol (8.6%), tobacco (3.0%), or marijuana (1.2%) use. As a point of

comparison, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey notes that among 9-12th graders, 43% reported having a drink of alcohol, 23% reported using tobacco, and 20% had smoked marijuana in the previous 30 days.¹⁷

It should also be noted that less than one-third of youth included their first name while fewer than 7% included their full name. Almost 70% of profiles included information about the user's current city while about 11% listed his or her school. Finally, relatively few of the profiles contained the user's instant messaging name (2.2%, n=53) and very few profiles included his or her email address (0.6%, n=15) or phone number (0.2%, n=6).

Extent of Participation

While coding the profiles, it was observed that a significant number had not been updated for an extended period of time. MySpace lists the date that the user last 'logged on' to his or her profile and many users had not done so for many months. Specifically, 906 profiles (37.4%) were 'abandoned' – that is, not logged onto since before the initial 2006 study. When including those that had been deleted since the first study (n=239), approximately 47% of the profiles examined in 2006 are no longer used. This finding can mean one of two things: either youth are abandoning MySpace, or they are creating new profiles using a different email address or profile name. To be sure, there was more than one occasion where we observed evidence of migration to a different profile. For example, one user left a hyperlink to his new profile on his old profile which read: 'I don't use this profile anymore go to my new one the link is: [removed].' That said, it is impossible from the data collected in the current study to determine whether more youth are abandoning a particular profile or MySpace altogether.

On the other hand, we also noted a significant proportion of profiles that were seemingly logged onto quite frequently. For example, over one-third of the profiles (35.6%) had been logged onto within seven days of analysis, termed 'active' profiles. The remaining 412 profiles were termed 'occasional' because youth logged onto them since the previous analysis but not within the seven days preceding the coding. In comparing profile content, we used these three categories (abandoned, occasional, and active) to help understand adolescent MySpace behaviors based on frequency of use.

Comparing Profile Content from 2006 to 2007

The next stage of the analysis involved comparing the profiles from 2006 to 2007 to determine if youthful MySpace users have changed the extent to which they are including personal or identifying information on their

profiles. First (and as expected), significantly fewer youth in both the occasional and active groups are 17 or under as listed on MySpace. About 40% of the sample turned 18 years old since the first analysis. It is interesting to note that occasional users were significantly more likely to inflate their age than active users. Moreover, even though more active users include their birth date on their profile (15%), the number of occasional users that included this information increased significantly between 2006 and 2007 (from 6.6% to 10.9%).

Highlights from the Research:

- More youth restricted access to their profiles—especially active users
- Profiles included more pictures, but fewer inappropriate pictures
- Fewer youth listed their school name
- More youth included their first and full names
- A significant number of youth seemed to have abandoned their profiles

One of the more noteworthy findings from the current analysis is that more youth are setting their profile to private. In 2006, only 39.4% of the sample restricted access to their profile to friends; in 2007, 45.6% of occasional users and 58.3% of active users did so. The statistically significant increase from 39.4% to 58.3% among active users suggests that these adolescents have learned to be more responsible and guarded with their information. Moreover, additional analysis found that over 66% of active users who were under 18 years old in 2007 restricted access to their site by setting it to private.

Another expected finding was that users included significantly more pictures on their profiles than before. MySpace instituted a new policy since the initial 2006 study which allowed users to upload additional pictures and enabled the capability of users to create 'albums' of pictures. As a result, significantly more profiles included a personal photo and those that did so included significantly more pictures (from 3.7 to 6.7 for occasional users and from 6.0 to 29.1 for active users).

Also noteworthy is that active users included significantly fewer swear words on their profiles and in their comments. This suggests that active users have attempted to 'clean up' their profiles. This change was not noted among occasional users. While it appeared that active users included slightly less evidence of alcohol or tobacco use, this finding was not statistically significant. With respect to identifying information, about the same number

of profiles included the youth's current city while significantly fewer active youth revealed the school they attend. When considering these variables overall, there appears to be a general trend toward safer and smarter online social networking. That said, two pieces of data – first name and full name – were disclosed more often among both occasional and active users in their 2007 profiles when compared to their 2006 profiles. As noted in our initial study,¹ simply having a teenager's name, current city, picture, and school is all that someone would need to easily locate the individual.

Comparing Public vs. Private MySpace Profiles in 2006 and 2007

Finally, we sought to identify the number of adolescents who have changed the state of their profile at the two time points of data collection. Approximately 81% of the profiles did not change from public to private or from private to public between 2006 and 2007. One-third of the profiles were private and 48% were public both times they were reviewed. Suggesting that some youth desired an additional level of privacy for their information, 13% of the youth switched their profile from public to private. Only about 5% of youths changed their profile from private to public. Males were more likely to have their profiles viewable to the public, while females were more likely to restrict access to their profiles. In fact, we found that females are 1.5 times more likely than males to have their profile set to private. Finally, age did not significantly differentiate whether profiles were public or private in our sample.

Discussion

The purpose of the current work was to examine the extent to which youth are modifying the type of information they are including on their MySpace profiles. Efforts by school districts, non-profit organizations, and MySpace itself over the last year to educate youth about online safety have received significant attention by the media. The question is whether these efforts have led to observable changes in the nature of content posted to MySpace by adolescents.

The current study examined this question by focusing on a randomly-sampled panel of youth with MySpace profiles over time. These profiles were initially analyzed in the summer of 2006 and subsequently analyzed in the summer of 2007. Amidst the clamor related to MySpace being a haven for predators and pedophiles,^{16, 18-21} it appears that youth users are hearing the underlying message and modifying their online social networking practices accordingly. That said, the results of this study do not suggest or infer that MySpace or any other online environment is a completely risk-free venue in which youth can hang out. There are a number of potential hazards when interacting online. Most, however, can be minimized with proper guidance and supervision that allows adults to clearly explain to youth why it is unwise to post inappropriate content or personally-identifying information.

Note: This Fact Sheet is an abbreviated version of a full-length journal article entitled "Trends in Online Social Networking: Adolescent Use of MySpace over Time" which was published in New Media and Society.

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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>. © 2009 Cyberbullying Research Center - Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin