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Involving parents in school programs about safety on social network sites

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Abstract

Social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook offer a lot of opportunities, but teenagers are often not aware of the possible negative consequences of posting personal, sexual, or offensive information. Therefore, schools and parents have an important role in educating kids about the risks on SNS. In this quasi-experimental study, the impact of a school intervention with parental involvement on pupils' awareness, their attitudes, intentions and behaviour on SNS is measured. Quantitative and qualitative results give an answer to the two research questions that were put forth: (1) is an intervention involving parents effective to teach teenagers how to use SNS safely? And (2) is organizing an information evening an effective way to involve parents in school programs? Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Children and adolescents are one of the main user groups of social network sites (SNS). Because of the emerging popularity of SNS among young people, adults' concerns about privacy and security are increasing. Indeed, children face different sorts of risks since SNS are based on providing personal information to connect and communicate with others. Unintended consequences of revealing too much personal information include damaged reputation, rumours and gossip, harassment or stalking, hacking, identity-theft and the use of personal

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data or information by third parties such as advertisers or superiors, teachers or the potential employer (Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009; Livingstone & Brake, 2010).

One of the categories of risks teenagers face while using SNS, are contact risks. Examples of contact risks are cyberbullying, sexual solicitation and all kinds of privacy risks (DeMoor et al., 2008). Indeed, next to instant messaging, SNS are the most popular media used for cyberbullying (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Olafsson, 2011). Additionally, they can also be used to send sexual messages (Livingstone et al., 2011). The possibility to obtain contact information by surfing on SNS, also increases the risk of offline sexual solicitation. Moreover, users in general and teenagers in particular face privacy risks, since they post a lot of personal and sometimes risky information online (Livingstone et al., 2011). Additionally, 29% of the teens sustain a public profile or do not know about their privacy settings and 28% opt for partially private settings so that friends-of-friends can see their page (Livingstone et al., 2011). While friends-of-friends may sound reasonable familiar, these people are nevertheless mostly strangers. All these risks are alarming, since research indicates that exposure to online risks causes harm and negative experiences in a significant amount of cases (Livingstone e.a., 2011; Mcgovern & Noret, 2011).

To counter these risks teenagers need to develop new skills. Media education at school has been put forth as a possible solution (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; Marwick, Murgia-Diaz, & Palfrey, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). However, although the topic of online safety has been formally included in school curricula in many European countries, the implementation is inconsistent (Safer Internet Programme, 2009). Previous survey-studies with teachers in England indicate that 42% of the teachers never lectures about online safety, and only 11% reported to do so frequently (Sharples, Graber, Harrison, & Logan, 2009).

Additionally, despite the fact that a variety of educational packages about safety and security in SNS has been developed (for an overview see Insafe, 2012), there is a lack of consistent evaluation of the educational efforts in this field (Safer Internet Programme, 2009). This causes uncertainty about the effectiveness of these initiatives. However, the few existing evaluation studies delivered promising results. A survey study in secondary education showed that while there was no direct impact of attention in school for the topic of safe use of SNS on pupils' behaviour, school efforts did have an indirect impact on unsafe behaviour by raising privacy care (Vanderhoven, Schellens, & Valcke, 2013). Moreover, a recent intervention study found that courses about the risks on SNS in secondary education are effective in increasing awareness about these risks (Vanderhoven, Schellens, & Valcke, Submitted_a). However, the same study revealed that these courses are not effective in changing the attitudes with regard to these risks, and they only have a limited impact on teenagers' behaviour. This is in line with other studies showing that (primary) school-based measures, such as classroom discussions, do not influence the online safety behaviour of children (Valcke, Schellens, Van Keer, & Gerarts, 2007).

Therefore, more research is needed to find the critical factors to change unsafe behaviour and to develop materials that can obtain all goals that were put forth. By refinement of problems, solutions and methods, design principles can be developed that can guarantee that next to an increase in awareness, behaviour will be safer as well. The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) states that behaviour is determined by the intention to execute this behaviour, which is in turn determined by the social norm -described as the social pressure people experience to behave in a particular way-, the perceived behavioural control and the attitudes towards the behaviour. Following this theory and the fact that teenagers are particularly sensitive to peer pressure (Sumter, Bokhorst, Steinberg, & Westenberg, 2009), Vanderhoven, Schellens, and Valcke (Submitted_b) hypothesized that the 'social norm' might have an important impact on pupils' behaviour. Because of the opportunities SNS offer when sharing information - e.g., communicating (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt & Runnel, 2012) and creating an online identity (Hum et al., 2011; Madden & Smith, 2010)- risky behaviour might be stimulated between peers and peer pressure might prevent behavioural change after the intervention. Vanderhoven et al. (Submitted_b) found indeed that when there is more time for individual reflection about the risks on SNS during the intervention, and less collaborative learning – where peer influences might have an important impact-, the intervention is more effective in changing unsafe SNS behaviour.

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