International Conference on Education & Educational Psychology 2013 (ICEEPSY 2013)

Educational packages about the risks on Social Network Sites: state of the art

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Abstract

Teenagers face different risks when using social network sites (SNS). Therefore, a variety of educational packages has been developed to teach children about these risks at school. However, there is no evaluation available of these packages. In this study five existing Flemish educational packages about the risks on SNS are investigated using two theoretical evaluation frameworks based on the risks described in previous literature and principles of effective evidence-based prevention campaigns. Furthermore, a focus group has been organized, to study how the packages are received by educational stakeholders and what these stakeholders consider as important characteristics of good materials. Future challenges are revealed, both for developers and researchers.

1. Introduction

Children and adolescents are one of the main user groups of social network sites (SNS). For instance, in July 2012 33% of the Facebook users in the US, 35% of their users in Australia, 47% of their users in Brazil and 38% of their users in Belgium were under 24 years old (checkfacebook.com). Moreover, recent studies show that in Flanders 87% of the Flemish teenagers have a profile on a SNS (Paulussen, Courtois, Mechant, & Verdegem, 2010). Since SNS are based on sharing personal information, privacy- and security issues are inherent in using SNS. How can we protect young people from the risks they are facing when using SNS?

Education has been put forward as a solution by many authors working on the topic (e.g., Marwick, Murgia-Diaz, & Palfrey, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). A variety of educational packages has been developed in

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Europe (for an extensive overview, see Insafe, 2012), but an extensive search in different academic databases showed that there are no reports of any evaluation. Therefore, as a first step to counter this shortcoming, a selection of Flemish packages aimed at the use in a school setting is evaluated theoretically in this state of the art.

The following research questions were put forth: (1) Do available educational packages tackle all the risks on SNS, (2) are these packages meeting the conditions of effective prevention campaigns?, (3) how are they perceived by educational stakeholders?, (4) which criteria are considered important by educational stakeholders? and (5) how should an educational package be implemented? To answer these research questions, two studies have been conducted. The first study adapts two theoretical evaluation frameworks, one about the risks on SNS and one about the conditions of effective prevention campaigns, to evaluate the content and program characteristics of the selected materials (RQ1 and RQ2). In the second study, a focus group was organized with educational stakeholders, to investigate the reception of the packages and the characteristics these stakeholders consider important in educational materials (RQ3, RQ4 and RQ5).

2. Study 1: a theoretical evaluation of existing educational packages

2.1. Method

First, two theoretical evaluation frameworks have been selected based on an extended literature review. Second, all Flemish packages about the safe use of SNS that were developed to use in a school setting (e.g., no websites, parental guides,..), and that were available to the researchers at the time of the study, were selected to be evaluated. Finally, the first two research questions were answered, by analyzing all the materials and screening them systematically for the elements that are important following the evaluation framework.

2.2. Evaluation Framework

To counter the lack of evaluation, two evaluation frameworks were used to conduct a theoretical evaluation. The first framework was used to evaluate the content of the packages, and describes the different risks that teenagers might face when using SNS. The second framework was used to evaluate the format of the prevention program, and describes general principles of effective prevention campaigns.

2.2.1. An evaluation framework describing the risks on SNS

To answer the first research question, the exhaustive overview of internet risks made by De Moor et al. (2008) (see Fig. 1) is used to find out which risks the packages tackle. This overview is made based on a literature study and interviews with teenagers, parents and teachers (Walrave, Lenaerts, & De Moor, 2009).

Although this overview is made for internet use in general, it can be fully applied on the use of SNS as well. There are three different categories of risks. The first one describes the content risks. This includes encountering provocative or wrong content on SNS. A typical example of provocative content teenagers might come across are hate-messages. The wrong information that might appear on SNS can be intentionally, such as gossip posted by other users, or unintentionally. The latter can happen when someone posts a joke that can be misunderstood as real information (e.g., satirical journals like The Onion). The second category of risks includes contact risks. Next to instant messaging, SNS are the most popular media used for cyberbullying (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Olafsson, 2011). Additionally, they can also be used for sexual solicitation, by sending sexual messages (Livingstone et al., 2011). The possibility to obtain contact information by surfing on SNS, also increases the risk of offline contact risks. 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