



Are social networking sites a source of online harassment for teens? Evidence from survey data

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ABSTRACT

Media reports on incidences of abuse on the internet, particularly among teenagers, are growing at an alarming rate causing much concern among parents of teenagers and prompting legislations aimed at regulating internet use among teenagers. Social networking sites (SNS) have been criticized for serving as a breeding ground for cyber-bullying and harassment by strangers. However, there is a lack of serious research studies that explicitly identify factors that make teenagers prone to internet abuse, and study whether it is SNS that is causing this recent rise in online abuse or is it something else. This study attempts to identify the key factors associated with cyber-bullying and online harassment of teenagers in the United States using the 2006 round of Pew Internet™ American Life Survey that is uniquely suited for this study. Results fail to corroborate the claim that having social networking site memberships is a strong predictor of online abuse of teenagers. Instead this study finds that demographic and behavioral characteristics of teenagers are stronger predictors of online abuse.

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1. Introduction

Media reports on incidences of abuse on the internet, particularly among teenagers, are growing at an alarming rate (Goodstein, 2007). A recent video of a Florida teenager being beaten, posted on YouTube,¹ created uproar and a renewed call for assessment of unmonitored use of the internet by teenagers. A Pew Internet survey reported that one in three teenagers experience some form of cyber-bullying and typically more frequent victims are girls. Cyber-bullying or internet abuse takes the form of unwarranted contact by strangers, distortion of photographs, posting distorted information, and even coercive actions like sending threatening or aggressive messages online (Slonje & Smith, 2008). These incidents have been on an upward swing causing much concern among parents of teenagers and prompting state-level legislations aimed at regulating internet use among teenagers (Thierer, 2007).

Internet use, particularly the use of chat rooms and instant messaging can be addictive (Becker & Murphy, 1988) and risky if teenagers indiscreetly divulge private information, indulge in inappropriate behaviors, and encourage contact with strangers. Scholars have found correlations between internet use and online harassment and sexual abuse of youth and teenagers (Finkelhor, Kimberly, & Wolak,

2000; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). Finkelhor et al. (2000) conducted a survey on the internet use of representative youth aged 10 to 17 years in the United States and found that one in five youth were exposed to sexual solicitation, one in seventeen were harassed or threatened and only a fraction reported these cases while more than 63% reported being upset, embarrassed or stressed as a result of these unwanted contacts. Abuse on the internet creates emotional distress, psychosocial trauma and has serious mental health consequences for teenagers (Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006). To protect teenagers from being bullied and abused in the cyberspace, there have been calls for restrictions on youth access of the internet with the hope that such restrictions may reduce the intensity of risky behaviors. In some cases, harsher consequences have been introduced to dissuade bullying and harassment of teenagers by peers and strangers. For example, the state of California enacted a new law in 2009 based on AB 86 that added cyber-bullying to school disciplinary codes and gives school officials the authority to suspend or expel students for bullying fellow students electronically.

Internet technology has provided social networking sites (SNS) like MySpace, Facebook, Orkut, LinkedIn and others in addition to instant messaging and online chat rooms as means to contact friends, acquaintances and socialize over the internet. SNS have become increasingly popular among teenagers (Mishna, Saini, & Soloman, 2009) and are also potential vehicles for adolescents to engage in risky and destructive behaviors (Duncan, 2008). SNS have been particularly blamed as a source of harassment for teenage internet users and for the recent increase in teen abuse (Thierer, 2007) making a case for restricting teen access to social networking sites. However, there is no

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¹ Report: Teen beaten in youtube attack to be homeschooled, Wednesday, April 09, 2008, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,348908,00.html>.

consensus that SNS leads to greater harassment or abuse of teenagers and studies that have explicitly measured this correlation have not been able to determine whether SNS sites are to be blamed solely, or that it is a result of use of different types of online technology as well as teen attitudes and behaviors (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008; National School Boards, 2007). Critics have thus blamed the media for alarmist coverage (Goodstein, 2007) on the impact of SNS on teen abuse.

Although the cost of networking on SNS may be incidences of harassment, there are also tangible benefits of online social interactions. It is difficult to establish causal effects of social networking on incidences of online harassment because there may be unobservable characteristics that may predispose certain teenagers to specific types of harassment online. Use of SNS is a fairly recent phenomenon and lack of longitudinal data makes it difficult to establish causality between use of SNS and rise in online harassment. Some researchers have suggested the need for investing in virtual outreach to help teens that are more prone to internet abuse (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008).

What is completely lacking in this literature is a study that systematically examines the demographic and behavioral characteristics of teenage internet users, and other factors that may potentially increase their likelihood of being victims of online abuse. This would help determine the youth most at risk and also identify the key intervention for prevention of such abuse. Our study fills this gap by studying the characteristics of teenagers, their environmental and parental characteristics that are correlated with their likelihood of becoming victims of online abuse. We examine whether it is having SNS site memberships or the nature of internet use that results in incidences of cyber-bullying and online harassment for teenagers in the United States. Although researchers have established that parental characteristics are highly correlated to youth behaviors and outcomes (Painter & Levine, 2000), there is a limited understanding of the relationship between parental characteristics and controls and teen abuse on the internet. Using parental background information, we seek to shed light on the relationship between parental characteristics and teen abuse on the internet.

We use a unique data collected by Pew Internet™ American Life Survey that tracks internet usage of individual households. A component of this survey is the Teen Online Survey that was most recently conducted between October and November 2006. It tracks activities of teens on the internet and asks participants questions that help to identify whether a teen was abused, bullied or approached by strangers through the virtual medium. The survey also collects household demographic information that allows us to track education levels and internet use among parents of teen respondents.

This study, therefore, fills important gaps in the existing literature by examining the following four questions: First, what kinds of teenagers are most likely to have SNS access? Second, does SNS access increase the likelihood of being cyber-bullied or harassed? Third, what kind of teenage characteristics and behaviors make them most prone to online abuse? Finally, what is the impact of parental characteristics and parental controls on teen online abuse? The study thus has important policy implications. It systematically identifies predictors of risky online behaviors of teens that can help policy-makers and health professionals identify the most vulnerable teens and target interventions to prevent potential harassment and consequences that are likely to be faced by these teenagers.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data and variables

We use data from Pew Internet™ American Life Survey's Online Teen Survey, conducted in October and November 2006. The survey asked a variety of questions to both parents and their teenage children on their online awareness and activities. This nationally representative survey collected data from 935 teens in the age bracket of 12 to 17

belonging to the census regions of North-east, Mid-west, South and West. In particular, the survey focused primarily on the social networking activities of the teens on the internet and parents' awareness of their children's online activity. It also tracked parent's monitoring of their teenage children's internet activities. Most importantly, the survey collected information on whether the teens have been contacted by strangers online or have been bullied in any form, including whether they had rumors spread about them, embarrassing pictures posted online or received threatening messages.

For the purposes of this study, teen internet abuse can be of two types: cyber-bullying and online harassment. Cyber-bullying is a categorical variable that is 1 (0 otherwise) if the teenager has experienced bullying in the form of rumor spreading, receiving threats, embarrassing information posted about them, and forwarding private messages. Online harassment is defined as a categorical variable with a value of 1 (0 otherwise) if a teenager has been either bullied or contacted by a total stranger (not known to the teen or their friends) online.

Incidences of online abuse may depend on a variety of factors. We take into consideration whether a teen has an online profile on sites such as MySpace or Facebook and whether these profiles are protected, i.e., only visible to friends. Teens who visit SNS more frequently are more likely to be exposed to online abuse hence we consider the frequency of such, very high to extremely low, visits to SNS. An important factor that may expose teens to online abuse is the ease of access that the teen has to SNS and the frequency with which they access the internet. Teenagers can access the internet from home, school, workplace, libraries, friend's houses or other places, but are more likely to spend time at home surfing the internet. Therefore, whether the teen has access to the internet at home is considered as a determinant of online abuse.

One of the key determinants that may result in internet abuse is the online behavior of teen users and the information they disclose in their online profile. This primarily consists of their personal information (name, address, school name, city and state, cell or home phone number, and instant messenger id) and pictures of themselves or their friends. We use these online behaviors to determine the relative importance of these behavioral characteristics on the incidences of teen abuse. Flirtatious activities and display of fake information may encourage stranger contacts or other forms of harassment. Hence, other determinants of online abuse include whether teens display fake information on their profiles, whether they use online chat rooms, and whether they occasionally use SNS or chat rooms to 'flirt'.

Since teenagers spend significant time surfing the internet at home, there has been much discussion of whether parents should place computers in a more public space in the home, install monitoring systems to prevent their children from visiting adult sites and track their child's online behavior. To test if monitoring teen behavior makes a difference, we control for whether the teen uses internet privately (example, in bedroom) or whether parents monitor their children's internet use (by using monitoring or filtering software or by checking the history of sites visited).

Besides these key variables, we examine the influence of other demographic characteristics such as age, race, gender and household income on the likelihood of internet abuse. Family environment, such as parents' marital status (married or otherwise) that can influence teen behavior in the household is examined as an additional factor. We also add categorical variables indicating broad geographical regions such as north-east, west, mid-west and south to control for geographical differences in the use of the internet.

2.2. Estimation

We estimate three different models using logistic regression analysis. All estimations use sampling weights to generate nationally

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