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The positive role of Internet use for young people with additional support needs: Identity and connectedness

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ABSTRACT

This article documents findings, from one of the first studies in this field of research, considering young people with Additional Support Needs' use of the internet and how this might contribute to the development of identity and social connectedness. Six focus groups, including 36 young people with Additional Support Needs (aged 13–18) were completed. Transcribed group discussions were analysed using Framework Analysis. Two themes were developed: 'Identity and Connectedness' and 'Issues related to Risk'. The theme 'Identity and Connectedness' is detailed in the current article and encompassed three sub-themes (implicit belonging, explicit belonging and competence). The use of the internet by adolescents in the current study appears to allow the young people to engage in activities which support the development of identity, competence and a sense of connectedness and belonging within a social network, essential to healthy development and psychological well-being and areas that may present a challenge for this population in offline environments. Findings also indicate a need to consider how best to support this group, in relation to understanding the role of supervision, the range of cognitive ability within this population and additional social pressures, which may impact on safe and effective internet use and this populations' ability to take full advantage of what the internet has to offer.

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1. Introduction

There has been rapidly growing interest in the use of the internet by many different groups of people, including children and adolescents. A survey conducted involving 25,142 young people in 25 European countries found that 93% of 9–16 year olds were using the internet at least weekly and that 60% were online almost every day (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011).

Some work has attempted to provide an overview of the types of activities young people engage in online. These include support with school-work, playing games, messaging, posting images and searching for health related information (Borzekowski & Rickert, 2001; Kanuga & Rosenfeld, 2004; Ólafsson, Livingstone, & Haddon, 2013). Young people with a range of special needs are reported to be using the internet in similar ways to children and adolescents without additional needs (Del-Manso, Bailey, Hughes, Findlater, & Findlater, 2011). Didden et al. (2009) reported that 67% of their sample of participants with intellectual and developmental disabilities made use of the MSN networking site:

57% played online games, 30% used the internet for educational purposes, 28% made use of a web-cam, 27% put information about themselves onto the internet and 24% chatted to others on various websites. Despite these figures, researchers have identified continued gaps in the literature with regards to what activities young people in the mainstream population are involved in online and how they may reap the benefits. In addition, it has been reported that there is currently more research on risk and harm than on opportunities and benefits of internet use by young people (Ólafsson et al., 2013).

1.1. Possible benefits of internet use

The possibility of the internet being used as a platform to develop a sense of identity, competence and social connectedness has been suggested (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Köbler, Riedl, Vetter, Leimeister, & Kremar, 2010; Lee, 2009; Lenhart, Simon, & Graziano, 2001; Turkle, 1999; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). In recent years, people have become part of a wider range of social groups facilitated by the internet (The Social Issues Research Centre, 2007). Children and young people spend large amounts of time on social networking sites, such as

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Facebook (Livingstone & Brake, 2010), where they can experiment with self-expression and presentation by designing a profile page to display what they want others to know about themselves (Slater, 2002; Williams & Merten, 2008). In addition, opportunities for learning and developing competencies online have been proposed for both child and adult populations (Gray, 2004; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Lenhart et al., 2001). This can include learning new skills to make use of advances in technology (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009) as well as developing offline skills within an online forum, such as social competence and using the internet to support academic development (Lenhart et al., 2001).

Further to this, there has been some suggestion that certain offline environments may not function in the best way to support young people effectively at certain developmental stages. Eccles (1999) considers the secondary education environment, where focus is placed on school performance and discipline at a time when adolescents are making social comparisons and trying to exert independence as part of normal development. Eccles comments that this particular environment may not be well suited to allow adolescents to move easily through this stage. It may be therefore, that what young people cannot find in their offline environments, they are looking for online. There is current debate within the literature, however, as to whether the use of the internet to develop a sense of identity, competence and connectedness is linked to positive or negative outcomes.

1.1.1. Identity development

The development of a personal identity is considered to be a key task of adolescence (Eccles, 1999; Kroger, 2007). A number of theories are discussed within the literature; however Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development (1968) has been a particularly influential model describing identity formation and its impact on adolescent emotional development (Cantor, 2013). Erikson proposed that identity development involves the individual passing through a number of stages, during each of which a conflict must be overcome. Within adolescence this stage involves the conflict between identity and role confusion; where the individual must establish who they are within a range of contexts (Kroger, 2007). Difficulties in the successful achievement of identity can result in a range of consequences including emotional, intellectual and interpersonal problems (Cantor, 2013; Eccles, 1999).

A different perspective is taken by theorists who consider that the process of social learning is an important factor in identity development. Wenger (1998) introduced the concept of 'communities of practice', which describes the process of learning taking place within a social group. The individual's membership within this group then also leads to the development and modification of their own identity.

Findings vary with regards to the potential benefit of the internet to support identity development (Mazalin & Moore, 2004). Valkenburg and Peter (2008) describe the 'identity-affected self-concept unity hypothesis', which comprises two possible opposing outcomes. The pessimistic standpoint hypothesises that identity experiments online will result in individuals feeling less sure of themselves and therefore hindering the process, potentially resulting in poorer outcomes. Others argue however that the experimentation of identity online, where individuals may pretend to be someone else can support and foster identity development. This ties in with Goffman's (1956) proposal that identity formation involves an element of role-playing allowing individuals to control how they are seen by others (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009).

1.1.2. Connectedness

Social connectedness describes an individual's relationships and the sense of connectedness and belonging they experience with others (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Connectedness is considered to be linked to positive psychological outcomes with lower levels being associated with depression, anxiety and lower self-esteem (Lee & Robbins, 1998).

Social identity theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), considers that the development of an individual's identity and sense of self is based on their membership of certain societal groups, which allows the experience of a sense of belonging and connectedness. This is evident within adolescent behaviour, with young people often experiencing the process of identity formation through their connectedness to a particular peer group (Durkin, 1995). It is also considered that individuals will assess the worth of their own group (in-group) by making comparisons with others (out-groups) and that if the in-group is considered to be superior this can have a positive impact on an individual's self-esteem (Brown, 2000).

Debate exists with regards to the impact of internet use on the development of social connectedness and belonging (Mazalin & Moore, 2004) and a number of hypotheses relating to this have been suggested. Lee (2009) describes these including the displacement hypothesis, which proposes that the internet will have a negative impact on social interaction and connectedness due to time online replacing time spent in face-to-face interactions and relationships. Alternatively, the increase hypothesis suggests that internet use can increase social interaction and the development and maintenance of social connectedness by maintaining existing relationships and providing opportunities to develop new ones (Lee, 2009).

The increase hypothesis was subsequently developed to include the rich-get-richer and social compensation hypotheses which differ in relation to how they propose that the internet can aid social connectedness. The rich-get-richer hypothesis claims that internet use can provide positive social and psychological outcomes for individuals considered to already have good social skills and networks offline. Authors comment however that when online relationships are used as a substitute for offline social networks this can result in increased loneliness and depression (Kraut et al., 1998). In comparison, the social compensation hypothesis considers that the internet may be particularly beneficial for socially anxious and isolated individuals, allowing them to develop online connections to compensate for their lack of offline network (Lee, 2009).

1.1.3. Competence and learning

The use of the internet as a way of learning and developing competences has also been considered (Gray, 2004; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Lenhart et al., 2001). Social learning theory, developed by Bandura and Walters (1963), has been highly influential within the literature. This theory describes the way individuals learn and modify their behaviour by making sense of their social experience, for example by modelling others (Durkin, 1995; Grusec, 1992). Research has also highlighted that particular groups may learn in different ways. Developmental theorists would argue for example that children at different ages require different types of input to support their understanding (e.g. Piaget Stages of Development Theory, 1976). A similar situation is experienced when working with individuals with cognitive deficits, such as Intellectual Disability (ID) and Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This group can benefit from a range of additional supports, such as visual aids, to improve their understanding of spoken language or environmental stimuli (Dettmer, Simpson, Myles, & Ganz, 2000; Thiemann & Goldstein, 2001; Witzel, Mercer, & Miller, 2003).

Caplan (1980; cited in Griffin, Scheier, Botvin, & Diaz, 2001) describes competence as an individual's ability to overcome problems encountered in life by means of their cognitive and social skills. Competence is also thought to be linked to psychological well-being (Griffin et al., 2001; Holoapainen, Lappalainin, Junttila,