



# The role of disclosure of personal information in the evaluation of risk and trust in young peoples' online interactions



Jo Bryce\*, James Fraser

Cyberspace Research Unit, School of Psychology, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 11 October 2013

### Keywords:

Adolescence  
Risk  
Trust  
Internet

## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between the evaluation of risk, trust and disclosure of personal information in young peoples' online interactions. A series of 18 focus groups were conducted with young people aged 9–19 years old. The results suggested that the majority of young people have a high level of awareness of the risks and potential outcomes associated with their online behaviour. Participants perceived disclosure of personal information to be important for the development of online relationships, and discussed associated strategies for evaluating trust and verifying identity. The study suggests that the perceived benefits associated with the disclosure of personal information and interacting with 'strangers' online may outweigh the perceived risks associated with these behaviours as the result of the importance of peer relationships and the exploration of identity during adolescence. Identified age-related differences and similarities in relation to the themes are explored, and areas for future research discussed.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Online safety is a continuing concern for parents, schools, educators and policy makers. The internet, mobile phones and social networking sites enable the sharing and dissemination of personal information online, and are an integral part of many young peoples' everyday social lives and relationships. However, there are a number of online behaviours (e.g., sharing personal information, interacting with 'strangers') which are considered to be risky due to their potential to result in a variety of negative experiences (e.g., cyberbullying, sexual exploitation) (Bryce & Klang, 2009). There is a developing body of research examining the prevalence of young peoples' engagement in these behaviours and their subsequent outcomes. For example, a recent study found that 29% of 11–16 year olds in the UK had interacted with someone online with whom they had no prior contact, 36% had accepted friend requests from someone they had never met face to face, and 14% had disclosed personal information (e.g., address or phone number) to someone they met online (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). This study also found that 12% of 11–16 year olds had seen or received sexual messages online, and 8% had been bullied online in the past year (Livingstone, Haddon, et al., 2011; Livingstone, Ólafsson, & Staksrud, 2011). Other cross sectional studies report higher prevalence rates of 28% for cyberbullying (Cross, Piggitt, Douglas, & Vonkaenel-Flatt, 2012) and 38% for receiving sexually

explicit or distressing messages online (Cross, Richardson, Douglas, & Vonkaenel-Flatt, 2009).

A variety of educational strategies have been implemented by schools, enforcement and children's charities in recent years to increase young peoples' awareness of online risks and reduce exposure to associated negative experiences (e.g., the ThinkUKnow (TUK) Internet safety programme in the UK, developed by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre for delivery within schools). Recent research found that over 90% of young people aged 8–15 reported receiving information or advice about internet safety at school or from parents (Ofcom, 2011). Another study found a similarly high proportion of young people aged 12–17 who were confident in their ability to protect themselves online (Synovate, 2010). There have also been a small number of studies evaluating the impact of educational initiatives which suggest that they are successful in increasing awareness about online risks (Davidson, Martellozzo, & Lorenz, 2009; Spielhofer, 2010). However, researchers have concluded that awareness and confidence do not necessarily encourage risk-averse behaviour among young people (Davidson et al., 2009; Livingstone, 2008), and this is consistent with the proportion of young people who continue to report negative online experiences in the studies reported in the previous paragraph despite continuing educational initiatives in schools.

A potential explanation for the apparent contrast between risk awareness and online behaviour can be found in the literature on adolescent risk-taking which suggests that young people respond to the anticipated socio-emotional outcomes of specific behaviours

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 01772 893437; fax: +44 01772 892925.  
E-mail address: [JBryce@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:JBryce@uclan.ac.uk) (J. Bryce).

without adequately evaluating the associated risks (e.g., Albert & Steinberg, 2011a; Albert & Steinberg, 2011b; Romer & Hennessy, 2007). A similar focus on the anticipated positive affective and social outcomes of the disclosure of personal information and interacting with 'strangers' online may lead young people to perceive these potential benefits to outweigh the associated risks. This indicates the need for further research examining the relationship between young peoples' understanding of online risks and their behaviour in digital environments (Livingstone & Haddon, 2008; Spielhofer, 2010).

Examining the dynamics and consequences of young peoples' online behaviour also requires recognition of the importance of risk-taking and exploration of normative behavioural boundaries in both online and offline contexts for the development of coping skills and resilience (Byron, 2008; Coleman & Hagell, 2007; Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009). Expanding the risk-based approach to young peoples' online behaviour to consider the social and developmental contexts in which it occurs is important given the emergence of the internet as an important space for the exploration of identity, sexuality and intimacy (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012; Subrahmanyam, Garcia, Harsono, Li, & Lipana, 2010). Friendships and peer interactions are also of central importance to young peoples' lives, and represent a source of support during the achievement of the previously mentioned developmental tasks which characterise adolescence (Gross, 2004; Reich et al., 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). As a result, interacting with friends has emerged as one of the most important motivations for young people being online (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). However, research examining the influence of the peer group on adolescent risk-taking has found that the presence of peers also increases the salience of the immediate rewards and a reduced focus on the potential costs of engaging in risky behaviour (e.g., Albert & Steinberg, 2011a,b; Chassin, Hussong, & Beltran, 2009; O'Brien, Albert, Chein, & Steinberg, 2011). Such effects are also likely to operate online, and research suggests that peer relationships have a potential influence on adolescent risk-taking behaviour in digital environments (Reich et al., 2012).

Perceptions of adolescent vulnerability to risk-taking as the result of an inability to effectively evaluate risk (Mason & Hood, 2010; Albert & Steinberg, 2011a,b) are reflected in public discourse which constructs young people as lacking awareness of online risks and naively trusting the individuals with whom they interact online, making them vulnerable to deception, manipulation and victimisation (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009). Whilst there is a developing body of literature examining adult trust in ecommerce platforms and services (e.g., Ang & Lee, 2000; Metzger, 2006), it is interesting that concerns about internet safety have not led to an examination of perceptions of trust as a potential determinant of risk evaluation and the subsequent online behaviour of young people. Violations of trust, deception and the misuse of personal information are involved in facilitating negative online experiences (e.g., cyberbullying, sexual exploitation) within existing peer networks as well as by strangers. Consequently, investigating the dynamics of trust in young peoples' online interactions can inform understanding of risk-taking online and their potential manipulation by users with negative intent.

The lack of empirical examination of the role of trust is also surprising given that research has identified its importance in the development of intimacy and maintenance of friendships (Betts & Rotenberg, 2008; Erikson, 1963; Rotenberg et al., 2010). Initial beliefs about trust develop as the result of early attachment and family relationships, and are modified by subsequent experience of peer relationships during childhood and adolescence (Rotenberg, Boulton, & Fox, 2005). As a result, the online environment represents another context in which young people learn about trust and the development of intimacy in their social

relationships, and the disclosure of personal information is central to these processes (Bond, 2011; Joinson & Paine, 2007; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Mesch & Beker, 2010). Such social and developmental influences represent a potential explanation for young peoples' disclosure of personal information and interaction with 'strangers', despite awareness of the associated risks.

The characteristics of mediated communication have also been identified as factors influencing the disclosure of personal information and interaction with 'strangers' in online environments. The speed of communication, perceived anonymity and disinhibition have been found to intensify processes of relationship formation, the disclosure of personal information and intimacy (e.g., Baker, 2005; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). The public nature of interactions, together with the need to seek social approval and status within peer networks, may also influence the type of information disclosed and risk-taking behaviour. Young people may disclose intimate details about themselves more quickly, increasing their vulnerability to manipulation by the individuals they meet online and those within their existing peer networks.

The potential effects of anonymity have also been an important focus in the literature on mediated communication, with research suggesting that it can lead to disinhibition, identity deception, and facilitate cyberbullying (Heirman & Walrave, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). However, a recent study found that disinhibition and lack of face to face interaction were perceived by young people to have a greater role in encouraging cyberbullying than anonymity, and that victimisation by known perpetrators within existing peer networks was most prevalent (Authors, In Press). There is also evidence that many young people and adults include personal information in their online profiles in order to actually reduce anonymity and establish their identities (Livingstone, Ólafsson, et al., 2011; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). A recent study found that only 7% of 9–16 year olds in the UK had been deceptive about their online identity (Livingstone, Haddon, et al., 2011; Livingstone, Ólafsson, et al., 2011), suggesting that the majority of young people are communicating personal information in their online profiles which establishes their identity rather than exploiting the anonymity afforded by the online environment to engage in deceptive behaviour. The extent to which other young people use these details to evaluate the trustworthiness of online contacts has yet to be examined empirically, and is one focus of the current study. Examining the influence of the characteristics of mediated interaction on the disclosure of personal information, the development and behavioural influence of trust, and risk exposure in online environments is important as it can inform understanding of the way in which these factors combine to facilitate negative online experiences.

As a result, the aim of this study was to provide an initial qualitative examination of young peoples' perceptions and evaluations of risk and trust in the online environment. It focused specifically on examining their understanding of the risks associated with the disclosure of personal information and interactions with 'strangers' (i.e., people they have had no previous online or offline contact with). The associated strategies used by young people to evaluate and manage trust in online interactions, and associated behavioural influences, were also examined. The study took a qualitative approach to exploring these issues from the perspective of young people within the context of their everyday lives and in their own words.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Design and participants

This study used a focus group methodology to obtain a deeper insight into young peoples' online behaviours, and their associated

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/350677>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/350677>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)