Risky sociability and personal agency-offline meetings with online contacts among European children and adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Meeting online contacts offline can be considered both as a risk-taking behavior and as an opportunity to expand one's social circle. This study distinguishes between specific types of meetings, whether with 'friends of friends', 'complete strangers' or 'both', and examines the role of individual psychological factors (sensation seeking, selfefficacy and psychological difficulties) together with structural societal factors (agentic and communal life strategies - locus of control and importance of friends) while controlling for age, gender and personal Internet use. Data from the Euro Kids Online II project dealing with children and adolescents who reported being in touch via Internet with people whom they didn't know personally and indicated whether or not they had met them offline were compounded with data from the European Values Study for societal factors and analyzed through two-level multinomial logistic regression. The odds of engaging in meeting online contacts offline increase with higher sensation seeking, self-efficacy, psychological difficulties, and age, and decrease with higher importance of friends. Types of meetings were found to vary with age and level of sensation-seeking. The results are discussed with regard to risk-taking in adolescence, safety of meeting types, models of sociability, and personal agency.

1. Introduction

In the context of the ubiquitous spread of computer-mediated communication and new media, contacting new people online (and furthermore, meeting them in person) has become an increasingly widespread practice among young people. According to the EU Kids Online data, one third of children aged 9–16 got in contact with someone new online and 9% of all children have gone to a face-to-face meeting with someone met in this way (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Meeting online contacts offline, as one of the "grey area" practices of young people—practices that can be framed from both risk-taking and opportunity-enhancing perspectives—still needs to be better understood through individual and structural contextualization. In spite of the generalized concern related to children's meetings with online contacts, research has shown that a great deal of their motivations are related to needs of entertaining, social compensation (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2006) and social interaction (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005).

Moreover, the EU Kids Online results (Livingstone et al., 2011) show that children report both meetings with friends of friends and with complete strangers, thus making relevant the distinction between the type of contacts met in the context of the 'stranger danger' discourse.

When it comes to expanding one's circle of friends and connections, younger people are particularly susceptible to trying out new strategies and experimenting more, since for them experimentation is less costly (Flanagan, 1987). At an individual level, several psychosocial factors have been identified as playing a key role to increase young people's risky behavior, and subsequently, a key role in their practice of contacting new people online, and further, meeting them offline, e.g. sensation seeking, self-efficacy and psychological difficulties (Hasebrink, Görzig, Haddon, Kalmus, & Livingstone, 2011; Barbovschi, 2013). Moreover the social climate can influence the individual's inclination to gain new contacts. The World Values Survey and European Values Survey (Inglehart, 1997; Welzer & Inglehart, 2005) classified countries according to their distribution on two dimensions: one rating countries according to the prevalence of traditional values (as opposed to secular-rational), and a second pitting survival values against self-expression values. Social climates that foster openness to new opportunities and individual self-expression are environments in which alternative choices (including taking risks) might thrive. Therefore, it is expected that the degree of freedom and personal agency children have to expand their social circles should play a significant role in

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their taking up of 'risky opportunities', meetings with new online contacts included.

Research has commonly accepted that individual development is linked with contextual variables (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); however, perspectives that integrate both individual and country-level characteristics for analyzing children's online practices are still scarce. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory can be used for this integration. According to Ecological Systems Theory, the individual with all his/her inherited and acquired characteristics is placed in the center of the ecological systems. The systems (i.e. Micro-, Meso-, Exo- and Macrosystems from proximal to distal factors) are in interaction with each other and the individual. Macrosystem which includes attitudes, ideologies, beliefs and values of the culture affects the individual via changing the Exosystem which includes mass media, local politics, social services etc. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, this article aims to examine the role of sensation seeking, self-efficacy, and psychological difficulties as individual factors and importance of friends, locus of control, importance of meeting nice people in leisure time and importance of teaching children at home: tolerance and respect for others as societal (Macrosystem) factors (all from European Values Survey) by controlling for age, gender, and personal Internet use.

As meeting online contacts (but not complete strangers) "in real life" is generally beneficial for extending social networks (Best & Krueger, 2006) and it can be an indicator of giving importance to friendships. Recent reports have suggested that meetings offline with online strangers can be a risky practice, especially for younger and more vulnerable children (Barbovschi, Marinescu, Velicu, & Laszlo, 2012). However, research evidence on technology-related violence and cyberbullying shows that peers too can be and often are perpetrators of relational aggression varying from spreading rumors, gossip, exclusion, attacks against reputation (Jackson, Cassidy, & Brown, 2009), to personal data misuse in the form of "revenge sexting" or "sexualized cyberbullying" (Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012; Ringrose & Barajas, 2011), with often serious harm inflicted on those affected. Therefore, the level and type of risk can change according to the type of meeting online contacts (friends, friends of friends or complete strangers). Inasmuch as young people's sociality online is still something to be understood in terms of their outcomes and consequences, distinguishing between types of contacts met this way in the context of children's agency and degree of freedom is relevant and needs more examination. Below we present a literature review of individual and structural factors from the perspective of risk because to our best knowledge there is no study which examined the direct associations between the types of online contacts and these factors.

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Individual factors

Sensation seeking is defined as a personality trait which reflects taking social, physical, and financial risks to satisfy the need for physiological arousal, intensity, and novel experiences (Arnett, 1994; Bardo, Donohew, & Harrington, 1996). It has been found to be related with risky behaviors such as substance use (Stephenson, Hoyle, Palmgreen, & Slater, 2003), dangerous driving (Arnett, 1990), and problematic Internet use (Lin & Tsai, 2002) etc. Longitudinal studies examining the relationship between age and sensation seeking showed an increase during late childhood and adolescence (Steinberg, Albert, Cauffman, Banich, & Graham, 2008). In addition to age, research consistently indicates higher sensation seeking in males than in females (Ball, Farnill, & Wangeman, 1984; Roth, Schumacher, & Brähler, 2005). Moreover, individuals who feel more competent in a specific field may be unrealistically optimistic about the results of their actions in that field and may seek new sensations, including risks (Zuckerman, 1979; Weinstein, 1987). This relation might hold for meeting new online contacts, with frequent internet users meeting more people online and offline (Livingstone et al., 2011).

As important individual dimensions in risk-taking behavior, self-efficacy and psychosocial difficulties are mutually interrelated and constantly influence each other. Self-efficacy has been defined as individuals' confidence in their ability to organize and execute a given course of action to solve a problem or accomplish a task (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006). Lower levels of self-efficacy are generally related to risk-taking in adolescence (IOM,, & NRC, 2011) and to problematic Internet use (İskender & Akin, 2010). A causal relationship between self-efficacy and risk-taking applies in both directions, as lower self-efficacy can lead to engagement in risky behavior, and negative outcomes of such behavior can lower self-efficacy. However, the EU Kids Online data showed positive correlations between self-efficacy and children's engagement in risky online activities (Hasebrink et al., 2011; Livingstone & Helsper, 2010; Livingstone & Görzig, 2012); other studies also suggest a positive relationship with problematic Internet use (Shi, Chen, & Tian, 2011) or generally with higher rates and broader use of the Internet (Eastin & LaRose, 2000; Tsai & Tsai, 2010). This inconsistency can be stemmed from various operational definitions and measurements of the concept "self-efficacy" in EU Kids Online and other studies. Moreover, there is a body of empirical evidence and comprehensive review for a connection between risk-taking behavior and psychological difficulties (Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998, Lawton & Parker, 1998; Sumer, 2003).

1.1.2. Structural factors

Peers are one of the most important agents of socialization for children and adolescents. Studies have shown that children's and adolescents' offline relationships continue online (Bayraktar & Amca, 2012; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). According to the theory of cultural change (Welzer & Inglehart, 2010), agentic life strategies are not necessarily contradictory to communal life strategies; for example, they found no contradiction between importance ascribed to friends and family as a measure of people's emphasis on communal life and people's agentic propulsions, as they complement each other in increasing life satisfaction. However, previous research has found a negative connection between emphasis on communal feelings at a societal level and young people's taking up new opportunities to expand their social circle (Barbovschi, Kontrikova, & Bayraktar, 2013).

As mentioned previously, sensation seeking can increase if an individual has a sense of control over an activity. At this point, locus of control (Rotter, 1966) can be another predictor of meeting new contacts online. Locus of control defines how a person perceives the world and involves individuals' expectations about the outcomes in their lives: whether they perceive these outcomes to be mainly under their own control (internal locus of control) or controlled by external factors such as luck or fate (external locus of control). Potosky and Bobko (2001) found that individuals with an internal locus of control (i.e. internals) have more positive attitudes toward computer use (i.e. there was an indication of digital confidence and competence among internals). Moreover, Hoffman, Novak, and Schlosser (2003) indicated that internals use the Internet more to try novel activities, while externals use the Internet more for routine activities such as meeting family and friends, continuing their daily offline life online. However, this can vary from culture to culture. In response to the spread of emancipating values, people place more importance on feelings of agency (also conceptualized as locus of control) when it comes to life satisfaction and well-being (Welzer & Inglehart, 2010). Consequently, as greater agency and increased opportunities go together, people's (and especially young ones') willingness to try out and experiment with new strategies increases considerably (Birch & Cobb, 1981).

The other two structural factors were *importance of meeting nice people in leisure time* and *importance of teaching tolerance and respect children at home*. These two factors indicate sociability of parents, also showing tolerance/respect for others both can be related with interaction with online contacts. To this end, the specific structural context (country-level) is crucial for the degree of agency, freedom, sociability