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Internet ethics of adolescents: Understanding demographic differences



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ABSTRACT

The current generation of adolescents, who are generally described as digital natives, have greater access to and are greater consumers of information than previous generations. However, adolescents are notably at-risk when they are confronted with ethical decisions since they may lack the necessary knowledge and experiences to discern and make the right decisions. This study investigated how the demographic variables of gender and socio-economic status (SES) influence the internet ethics of 825 Secondary 2 (Grade 8) students aged 11 to 16 in Hong Kong. Three unethical behaviours, namely, unauthorised acts (UNAC), internet stickiness (INST), and plagiarism (PLAG) were examined. Results revealed that male students tended to engage in more unethical behaviours than did female students. Also, students from low SES families tended to behave more unethically than did students from high SES families. Implications for educators and researchers are discussed with reference to the four component model of moral behaviour, which has been widely used to articulate internal psychological processes including moral sensitivity, moral judgement, moral motivation, and implementation that are commonly found in all moral acts.

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1. Introduction

Ethics is essentially concerned with the concepts of good and bad, and right and wrong, and people's ethical decisions and behaviours are mainly driven by their value systems. In a pluralistic and multicultural society, differences in values and judgements held by individuals are common, and the proliferation and ubiquity of technologies have helped to disseminate these individual differences. Computer ethics has been a field of study since the mid-1940s. According to Johnson and Maner (Johnson, 1985; Maner, 1980), the term "computer ethics" has been used to refer to the application of Western ethical theories such as utilitarianism, Kantianism, or virtue ethics to ethical scenarios that involve computers and computer networks. It has also been used to refer to the professional ethics practiced within the computer profession. On the other hand, internet ethics has been used to refer to aspects of computer ethics related to the internet. More precisely, internet ethics addresses "the moral evaluation of individual online behavior" (van den Hoven, 2000, p. 127).

Broadly speaking, from the perspective of meta-ethics, which concerns the nature and methodology of moral judgements, there are three views of ethics: cultural relativism, subjectivism, or supernaturalism (Gensler, Spurgin, & Swindal, 2004). The first view holds that the judgements of right and wrong are relative to what is socially approved by the majority in a given culture. The second view bases moral judgements on our subjective feelings. The third view posits that moral judgements describe God's will.

Regardless of their views on ethics, adolescents in schools are notably at-risk when they are confronted with ethical decisions since they may not possess the necessary knowledge and experiences to discern and make the right decisions. This issue is further exacerbated among the current generation of adolescents, who are generally described as digital natives and who have greater access to and are greater consumers of information than ever before. For instance, James et al. (2009) argued that the new digital media encourages participatory cultures that offer opportunities for users to access information, generate and share content, form communities, and influence others in various social circles. The authors found five key ethical issues at stake, namely, identity, privacy, ownership and authorship, credibility, and participation, and that youths constantly redefine these issues as they participate in the new digital media.

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Evidence suggested that in online social communities that comprise the new digital media, there were specific norms emerging around self-exposure (identity); personal information disclosure (privacy); content creation, appropriation, and sharing (ownership and authorship); and identity concealment (credibility) (James et al., 2009). The ethical stakes concerned are unlikely to nicely align with youth's traditional experiences and these present challenges to their ethical fault lines.

Against this backdrop, it is becoming more important to understand internet ethics of adolescents so that educators and policymakers can take appropriate measures and introduce appropriate policies to cope with the situation. This study investigated how the demographic variables of gender and socio-economic status (SES) influence the internet ethics of 825 Secondary 2 (Grade 8) students aged 11 to 16 in Hong Kong. It reported parts of the findings of a territory-wide government-funded research project that seeks to understand issues of educational inequality and information and communication technology (ICT) use in schools with a view to identifying appropriate ways to address such issues. It focused on how the aforementioned variables influence individuals' unethical behaviours.

2. Moral development of adolescents

Over the years, moral psychologists have made tireless efforts to understand cognitive moral development during the adolescence period. Hart and Carlo (2005) pointed out that there are political and theoretical reasons why adolescents' moral development has attracted so much attention. Westen (2002) reviewed three major approaches to cognition in moral development. The cognitive-developmental approach, notably due to Piaget (1932/65) and Kohlberg (1976), focuses on moral reasoning and proposes that moral development undergoes different stages akin to cognitive development. The cognitive-social approach emphasises moral behaviours and assesses moral development on the basis of prosocial behaviours. The information-processing approach attempts to understand moral development by examining changes in the components of the moral thinking processes.

Within the cognitive-developmental tradition, Kohlberg (1976) has been influential in his unique contributions to research on cognitive moral development. He theorised moral development at three distinct stages: pre-conventional (moral rules are obeyed to avoid punishment or to obtain rewards), conventional (moral standards are learnt from others, particularly authority figures), and post-conventional (moral reasoning is based on abstract and self-accepted principles). However, the theory has been criticised by other researchers. For instance, Gilligan (1982) argued that Kohlberg's views on moral development were biased towards males. Rest, Davison, and Robbins (1978) opposed the sequential nature of Kohlberg's model and suggested that moral reasoning is more dependent on the contexts experienced. Later, Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, and Bebeau (2000) took a Neo-Kohlbergian approach and postulated a model based on three developmental schemas (instead of stages): the personal interest schema, the maintaining norms schema, and the post-conventional schema.

Whereas some researchers have conceptualised moral development from the stage and schema theory perspectives, Narvaez and Rest (1995) developed a four component model of moral behaviour. This working model represents the internal psychological processes involved in producing a moral act: moral sensitivity, moral judgement, moral motivation, and implementation. Taken together, the following processes comprise the four component model and are presented sequentially: (1) Moral sensitivity involves perceiving and interpreting the relevant elements of a situation. It also includes awareness of the possible actions, who and what might be influenced by each possible action, and how the involved parties might respond to the possible outcomes; (2) Moral judgement involves reasoning about the possible actions and determining which is the most moral or ethical; (3) Moral motivation involves giving priority to the most moral or ethical action over all others and the impetus to fulfil the action; and (4) Implementation combines ego strength with the social and psychological skills required to execute the chosen action.

These components are neither personality traits nor virtues; rather, they are major units of analysis used to keep track of how a person reacts in a particular social situation. The model describes an ensemble of processes, not a single, unitary one. The operation of a single component does not result in moral behaviour. Instead, behaving morally hinges on each process and the execution of the entire ensemble. The completion of a moral action requires the interactions between cognition, affect, and behaviour. Using the four component model, Crowell (2009) argued that technology helps to create a psychological distance between technology users and those who may be affected by such uses so that the general social or moral constraints under non-technology environments may be reduced, thus favouring the occurrence of unethical behaviours.

3. Gender and SES differences in unethical behaviours

While there are admittedly many potential factors influencing internet ethics of adolescents, this study examined the factors gender and SES as they have consistently been the foci of more recent research on unethical behaviours (Kim & Kim, 2012; Krisanda & Peslak, 2009; Liang & Yan, 2005; The Josephson Institute, 2006). Accordingly, we explored the combined effect of SES and gender on adolescents' internet ethics.

The effect of gender on internet ethics has been studied extensively. Several studies indicated that women appear to behave more ethically than men (Siponen & Vartiainen, 2005) and "in all studies regarding gender's effect on ethics, men have never been shown to behave more ethically than women" (p. 7) (Krisanda & Peslak, 2009, p. 7). Kim and Kim (2012) showed that male teens were more likely to use unauthorised software (the odds increased by 151.3%) compared with their female counterparts. For hacking, there was also a remarkable gender difference in which males tended to engage more in this behaviour. Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, and Cauffman (2002) indicated that at both the high school and college levels, males were involved in more academic dishonest behaviour than were females. Regarding the question, "How many times you copied an Internet document for a classroom assignment in the past year?", 39.7% of males at high schools committed such an act at least once a month while for females, the corresponding percentage was only 26.0% (The Josephson Institute, 2006). Possible reasons for this gender difference are that women are more willing to express ethical beliefs as they are considered "outsiders" in the information technology field and men are more adept at using and also misusing computers than women.

Regarding the influence of SES, there is a dearth of research on how SES affects adolescents' internet ethics. Many studies employed adult samples in an offline context (Gattiker & Kelley, 1999; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993). Haidt et al. (1993) noted that individuals from high SES classes had higher acceptance of the violation of ethical rules. However, Gattiker and Kelley (1999) found that SES did not affect decision

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