Parents' of adolescents use of social networking sites

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ABSTRACT

The use of social networking sites (SNSs) has increased exponentially, especially among adolescents. While parents use SNS more than the general population of adults, very little is known about parents' of adolescents behaviors in a social networking environment. Guided by a uses and gratification perspective, the purpose of this study was to examine parents' of adolescents ($N = 649$) use of SNSs to monitor and connect with their children's life. Analyses revealed that parents of adolescents used SNSs for parenting more often than other online social activities such as instant messaging, Skype, chat rooms, or blogging. The top two reasons for using SNSs were to communicate with children and extended family. Hierarchical logistic regression results indicated that parents of adolescents who used a greater number of SNS activities were more likely to use SNSs to communicate with their children, their children's friends, and the parents of their children's friends. Those parents who had positive attitudes toward technology were more likely to use SNSs to communicate with their children's friends but less likely to communicate with parents of their children's friends. Parents of older adolescents were more likely to use SNSs to communicate with their children.

1. Introduction

The use of social networking sites (SNSs) has exploded in the last several years, particularly among adolescents, 80% of whom use SNS (Lenhart et al., 2011). Maintaining friendships, making connections (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Joinson, 2008), identity construction, entertainment, and information gathering (Joinson, 2008; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), have been found to be the main reasons for using social networking sites among older youth and college students. For example, students at a large university identified three motivations for using Facebook: relaxing entertainment, expressive information sharing, and social interaction (Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011). Most of the existing studies have focused on college students, even though the majority of adults who are online use SNSs (Brenner, 2012).

According to a recent report from the Pew Research Center, parents with minor children were more likely to use SNSs than adults in general (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012), but few researchers have focused on parents' use of SNS. In the literature that does exist, a primary focus on the behavior of new parents in social networking environments has recently emerged (Bartholomew, Schoppe-Sullivan, Glassman, Kamp Dush, & Sullivan, 2012; McDaniel, Coyne, &

Holmes, 2011). Despite reports that 80% of online adolescents use SNSs (Lenhart et al., 2011) and parents of adolescents are increasingly using SNSs (Madden, Cortesi, Gasser, Lenhart, & Duggan, 2005), only a few scattered findings regarding parents of adolescents have surfaced from research (Madden et al., 2012; Padilla-Walker, Coyne, & Fraser, 2012).

This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by reporting the various uses of SNSs by parents of adolescents and examining their reasons for using SNSs. We also examined parents' of adolescents specific use of SNSs to communicate online with their children, their children's friends, and the parents of their children's friends, aspects of monitoring adolescents' behavior that connect parents with their adolescents' lives. The uses and gratification perspective is commonly used to support functional studies which focus on the motivations of audiences as they make media choices (Rubin, 2002). Recently the uses and gratification perspective has been applied to the Internet (Grant, 2005) and specifically to social networking sites (Bonds-Raacke & Raacke, 2010; Dunne, Lawlor, & Rowley, 2010), making it an ideal framework for the current study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical perspective

The uses and gratification perspective focuses on individuals' purposive and goal directed media use; in other words, "what people do with the media, instead of what the media does to people" (Rubin, 2002, p. 529). According to this perspective, individuals

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actively choose media to gratify their needs. In the context of this paper, use is defined as what parents are doing online. One assumption of this theory is that media use competes with the use of other resources to fill gratifications (Grant, 2005). Gratifications are the desires and needs users have that motivate them to use certain media. According to Rubin (2002), gratifications are based in social roles and contexts. In this study, gratifications include parents' desire to monitor their children and connect with them online.

As a frame for the current study, the uses and gratification perspective can help explain parents' SNS behavior in an interactive, consumer driven environment (Ruggiero, 2000). The social context parents operate in can influence their patterns of use and gratification. For instance, in the current multi-media atmosphere with dozens of available media options, communicators are less likely to depend on any one channel of communication (Ruggiero, 2000). Social networking sites may be an important additional channel, particularly for parents of adolescents whose young people are highly engaged with SNSs. Utility may also affect parents' media use; parents who expect to benefit from a particular media will be more likely to use that media (Ruggiero, 2000). Specifically, parents may be motivated to use social networking sites by the need to monitor their adolescents' online behavior or the desire to connect with their adolescents' friends or the parents of their adolescents' friends.

2.2. Parents online

We know that parents are a highly connected subgroup of the population (Allen & Rainie, 2002; National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2011). Findings from the Pew Research Center suggest that in 2012 66% of parents of adolescents used SNSs compared to 58% in 2011 (Madden et al., 2012). Mothers were more likely to use SNSs than fathers (Madden et al., 2012; Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). Frequent technology users were more likely to report technology making a positive difference in their lives (Horrigan, 2007).

Further, evidence has suggested that parents who were younger than 40 were more likely to use SNSs than older parents (Madden et al., 2012). Although those with higher income and education were more likely to seek information online (Doty, Dworkin, & Connell, 2012; Radey & Randolph, 2009), findings linking socioeconomic status and parents' online social activities are mixed. One study indicated that low and average income parents connected with others frequently on parenting websites (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005), but another suggested that college educated parents were more likely to visit SNSs than those who did not attend college (Madden et al., 2012). This may be because Facebook, a popular SNS, was originally targeted toward college students.

Evidence suggests that parents used the Internet in general to garner support and connect with likeminded others (Brady & Guerin, 2010; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Hall & Irvine, 2009). Maintaining social ties online through social networking has been identified as a critical connection for new parents in particular. Bartholomew et al. (2012) found that 82% of new mothers and 75% of new fathers had a Facebook account. The majority visited their account at least daily, and new mothers increased their Facebook use during the transition to parenthood. Both mothers and fathers uploaded more pictures to Facebook after the birth of their child than they had prior to having a child. In another study of mothers of newborns, on average participants reported weekly visits to social networking sites (McDaniel et al., 2011).

Despite this small body of research, much of the focus of recent research on Internet use among parents and their children has been from a media effects approach (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012), looking at the potentially negative influence of the Internet on

family life (Mesch, 2006). To understand the practical utility of SNSs in the lives of parents of adolescents and what motivations they have to use SNSs, more research is needed.

2.3. Social role of parenting adolescents

Parents of adolescents have a unique role balancing the protection and monitoring of their children's online behavior while also building strong connected relationships with their children. Many parents monitor their children because it is part of a social expectation of being a good parent (Wang, Bianchi, & Raley, 2005); with children spending so much time online, this includes monitoring online behavior. Recently, the Pew Research Center reported that most parents of adolescents were concerned about their teens' online interactions with strangers and their online reputation (Madden et al., 2012). Studies have found 61–62% of parents monitored their adolescents online by checking their Internet activities or enforcing rules (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005; Wang et al., 2005). The majorityof parents had Internet rules for their middle school child, 50% used parental controls, 77% checked online history, and 96–98% checked the screen when children were online (Dowdell, 2011; Madden et al., 2005). In short, most parents thought they had a good idea of what children were doing online (Sorbring & Lundin, 2012). However, most children did not believe parents were checking in on them (Dowdell, 2011; Lenhart et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2005), and the majority of teens wanted to hide their online activities from parents (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, Olaffson, et al., 2011).

Liau, Khoo, and Ang (2008) argued that in the online environment, adolescent self-disclosure of negative experiences was a more effective way of obtaining information about adolescents' activities than tracking and monitoring online behavior. Those parents who had a trusting relationship with their adolescents were more likely to have insight into their online activities because of self-disclosure (Sorbring & Lundin, 2012). These findings echo studies of parent–child relationships offline (e.g. Waizenhofer, Buchanan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2004) and imply that building strong relationships may be the best way to protect adolescents online.

Parents need to balance their desire to protect their children with the need to allow them privacy as adolescents strive for autonomy (Koepke & Denissen, 2012; Liau et al., 2008). Parents build insight into their children's lives through shared participation in their adolescents' daily activities and through relationships with those who are close to their adolescents (Waizenhofer et al., 2004). Because adolescents are likely to be online frequently (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011), one place to connect with them is on the Internet. However, to our knowledge no research has examined whether parents of adolescents go online specifically to connect with their children, their children's friends, or the parents of their children's friends.

3. Purpose of the current study

To fill this gap in the literature, utilizing a uses and gratification perspective, we examined parents' of adolescents use of SNSs to monitor and connect with their children's life. In this study, we consider parents' online communication with their children, their children's friends, and the parents of their children's friends as key aspects of monitoring adolescents' behavior that connect parents with their adolescents' lives. We explored the following research questions:

(1) How frequently do parents of adolescents use social networking sites for parenting? Ruggiero (2000) argued that "fully focusing on the social and cultural impacts of new