

Psychological and Social Risks to Children of Using the Internet: Literature Review

Aref O Alsehaima^{1*} and Ayidh A Alanazi²

¹Department of Child Development, University of Dundee, UK

²Department of Child Development, University of Brunel, UK

*Corresponding author: Alsehaima AO, Department of Child Development, University of Dundee, UK, Tel: 01382381517; E-mail: a.alsehaimi@dundee.ac.uk

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Abstract

The widespread use of the Internet by children offers great advantages to young people, most notably through access to a wealth of information, but it also poses many potential risks to their mental and social wellbeing. A systematic literature review is presented of studies that examine these risks. The dangers are particularly great where children of vulnerable personality have unrestricted access to the Internet for long periods of time. Children may be psychologically harmed by exposure to violent or pornographic imagery, and racist, hate or other inappropriate material. They may be encouraged toward negative behaviour through watching depictions of violent street acts, such as 'happy slapping', or webpages that glorify excessive drinking or drug taking. Social networking sites have introduced other possibilities for risk to young people including invasion of privacy both by strangers and peers, cyber bullying by peers, and grooming and sexual exploitation by adults masquerading as minors or otherwise assuming a false identity. Internet addiction, although it may manifest itself in both adults and children, is a potentially more problematic condition among teenagers, especially in those with an underlying psychological comorbidity. A systematic literature search was carried out using the keywords: children's online risks, Internet child protection, online sexual grooming, cyber bullying, and Internet addiction. Only original, peer-reviewed research papers in English, published after 2005 (i.e. within the past decade), were included for analysis. In addition to a summary of the risks facing children through their use of the Internet and the psychological and social effects these have been found to have, prevalence figures are presented for the various risks across different age groups. Finally, a review is provided of evidence pointing to the way risks to children, from use of the Internet and social media systems, may develop and change in the near and medium-term future.

Keywords: Psychological; Social risks; Children, Internet

Introduction

The rapid rise of the Internet and use of social media poses a new and significant threat to the wellbeing of children. Even in an otherwise safe environment, such as the home, young people can quickly gain access to images, videos, and stories that may be psychologically and emotionally harmful. Social media, in particular, present a number of dangers that were not faced by earlier generations, including cyber bullying, cyber predation, and the posting of private information by children that may prove damaging to them both immediately and in the future. Ninety per cent of teens who participate in social media have ignored bullying they have witnessed, and one third have been victims of cyber bullying themselves. Young people may also be especially vulnerable to 'phishing' (the use of emails that try to trick people to click on malicious links or attachments), falling for scams, and accidentally downloading malicious software.

Statements of the Problem

The pace at which the Internet has evolved and, particularly, the use of social media platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook and so on, has been dramatic over the past decade or so. The proportion of time that children spend engaged daily in online activities has risen steeply. Researchers, educationalists, and policy makers often struggle to keep up with these developments, especially in regard to the effect

that social media and exposure to imagery, which can be of an extremely violent or sexual nature, has on young minds. Entirely new forms of risk have arisen for children, which society must attempt to address and overcome.

Study Aim

The aim of this study is to examine the academic literature that has been published on the psychological and social risks to young people, up to the age of about 18, of exposure to the Internet and social media. It will summarise the findings in terms of the risks in various categories and then discuss these findings.

Methodology

There are two main types of literature review, narrative and systematic. For this paper, the researcher has chosen to use a narrative review as these are generally more comprehensive than the systematic variety and cover a wide range of issues within a given topic. Summarising different primary studies, the narrative review enables conclusions to be drawn into a holistic interpretation. A narrative review can provide up-to-date knowledge about a specific topic or theme, although without a discussion of the methodological limitations of the primary studies.

There are, however, two notable weaknesses of this type of review. First, there is no rule on how to obtain primary data and how to integrate results: this is a subjective criterion of the reviewer. Second,

the narrative reviewer does not synthesise quantitatively the data found in the different publications; therefore, these revisions are susceptible to inaccuracies and biases.

Sources

The researchers will use four search engines as follows:

- Books.
- Journals.
- Theses of PhD and MScs.

- International organisations reports.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The method employed in this study is a narrative review. This began by determining the selection criteria for inclusion and exclusion based on the central aim of the research, i.e., to establish what is known about the nature and extent of the problem, and secondary aims, including to ascertain what official steps have been taken to address the issue. The selection criteria used by the researchers are shown in Table 1.

Selection criteria	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Language	English and Arabic	Other
Publication date	From 2000	Before 2000
Search in	Complete journal articles, books, thesis and international organisations reports	-----
Geographical coverage	In the over world	-----
Study design	Any design	-----
Conditions of interest	social media risks, psychological risks, social risks, physical health and extortion of children by the Internet	Other

Table 1: The selection criteria used by the researchers.

Potential Risks that Children may Experience as a Result of Using the Internet

During the course of the literature search, many articles were found that addressed the present topic of different countries around the world. However, the focus of much of this research was on health matters rather than identifying the types of social risks. The researcher will discuss the latter issues from several angles as identified below.

Social media risks

The use of social media web sites is among the commonest activities of children and adolescents today [1]. Set against the advantages of such sites in enabling young people to learn, present themselves to others, build a wider network of relationships, and manage their privacy and intimacy, are risks to the self, such as loss of privacy, cyber bullying, and harmful contacts [2]. Desensitisation to violent stimuli is another potential consequence of excessive Internet use [3]. Both violent and pornographic imagery can fundamentally alter a developing child's perspective on the world. child pornography, in particular, may permanently and adversely affect a child's perception of human sexuality [4].

In the United States, approximately 75% of adolescents now own a smartphone, 24% report that they are "constantly connected" to the Internet while 50% describe themselves as being "addicted" to their phones [5]. Research suggests that there is a correlation between the amount that children use social networking platforms and the level of risk to which they are exposed [6]. The risk also appears to increase with the degree of digital competence of the child and with the extent to which they reveal details about themselves by, for example, displaying identifying information or having a public profile, or having a large number of contacts [7].

Psychological risks

Children who spend too much time online may experience feelings of isolation and depression. Increased use of the Internet limits the amount of time available for face-to-face socialisation with friends and family [8]. The instantaneous and artificial nature of the stimulation offered by the Internet may also leave a young person bored with the comparative mundaneness and lower pace of everyday life. Additionally, the vast amount of information available online may compromise a child's cognitive development and lead to symptoms such as stress and fatigue. This problem is exacerbated by much of the information being unmoderated and young children lacking the ability to weight the credibility of sources [9].

Research suggests that among the most strongly correlated comorbid psychopathology of pathological Internet use among children and adolescents are depression and symptoms of ADHD [10]. Associations were reported to be higher among males in all age groups. Daily use of social networking sites of more than two hours has been associated with poor self-rating of mental health and experiences of high levels of psychological distress and suicidal ideation [11]. Internet addiction (IA) is frequently related to psychiatric disorders, and the presence of these disorders in individuals with IA is the rule rather than the exception [12].

Social risks

Children with easy access to the Internet may become less able to separate fact from fiction [13]. The Internet has no filter and no peer review, so anyone can publish anything they want. Educators also worry that the informal communication common to chat rooms has carried over into academic settings. Students facing challenging homework tasks and essays are becoming more likely to plagiarise from Internet sources. The multitasking that many children engage in while online reduces attention span, making intense concentration on a single task more difficult. Viewing violent or sexually explicit content

on a regular basis can also contribute to increased aggressiveness, indifference toward suffering and intimacy or an inability to differentiate real life from simulation.

In a survey of European children, aged 9 to 16, the top risk factors of using the Internet were identified as pornography (22%), cyber-bullying (19%) and violent content (18%) [4]. Heavy Internet use by adolescents has been linked to increased social anxiety and hostility [14]. Social media, in particular, may bring benefits in the form of allowing young people easily to form online groups and communities but also have negative consequences in that they may lead to some individuals feeling alienated and ostracised [15].

Physical health

Obesity in childhood and adolescence is a major public health concern. A significant contributing factor to this problem is the increased number of hours per week that children spend in front of computer screens and on mobile devices to the detriment of sports and other outdoor activities. A sedentary lifestyle can lead to poor muscle development, and, if associated with weight gain, becomes a factor in the onset of childhood diabetes. Excessive use of keyboards and keypads is also linked to repetitive motion injuries, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, and eyestrain, which may cause headaches. For some children, rapidly flashing images of certain websites and games can trigger epileptic seizures.

A British child who is seven years of age, has spent an average of one full year watching screen media in the form of computer games, internet and TV. By the age of 18 years, the average European child will have spent 3 years in front of screens. Physical inactivity, including time spent on the Internet, has been strongly correlated with child obesity [16]. Studies have also found that increased time spent in front of screens (computers, mobile devices, and TVs) is linked to shortened duration and delayed onset of sleep [17].

Exploitation of children on the internet

Children are particularly vulnerable, when online, to manipulation and exploitation [18]. Sexual grooming is a particularly malicious behaviour engaged in by some adults, which typically involves winning the confidence of a child through misrepresentation over a period of time, with the goal of arranging a secret meeting. The child may then fall victim to sexual abuse, physical violence, or participation in pornography. Another form of manipulation, which again involves a process of building trust through deception, has as its goal persuading the child to disclose information such as credit card or bank details of, for example, parents, either to steal from accounts or tempt the child into online gambling.

Child sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children, which are major public health problems throughout the world, increasingly involve the grooming and recruitment of adolescents via the Internet and social media [19]. Children and adolescents may also be persuaded to reveal confidential information about themselves or others, including their parents, which may lead to them being the victims of various forms of cyber-crime, such as fraud and credit card scams [3].

Discussion

The past two decades have seen a huge upsurge in the use of the Internet and social media by children and adolescents. Great benefits

have come from this, including the ability to communicate easily with anyone anywhere on Earth, to share and acquire knowledge at the press of a button, to work remotely, and to conduct financial transactions effortlessly. However, increased use of the World Wide Web has also had many negative consequences, especially for young people, due to the rise of cyber bullying (in extreme cases leading to suicide), cyber porn, social isolation, Internet grooming, and more sedentary behaviour.

Excessive use of the Internet can have both internal and external effects on children. The internal aspects are those pertaining to the psychological and emotional wellbeing of the individual and any personality problems that may arise. External effects including any that are related to the functionality of the user and to problems associated with reduced activity levels. The latter may include obesity, and consequent health issues, and a reduction in social interaction with others. Too much time spent online may affect the quality of relationships with friends and family, and cause a lack of interest in daily life and neglect of school and other responsibilities. The anonymity allowed to users on social media makes the Internet a potentially dangerous place for children who may fall victim to unscrupulous adults posing as peers or friends.

The many risks posed to young people by the Internet make it vital that children and parents are aware of these risks so that they can take steps to minimise them. As increased online participation displaces, to some extent, activities traditionally associated with childhood, it is essential that parents, sociologists, government officials, and children question the physical and social effects of the Internet.

Recommendations

As the various risks to children of increased Internet and social media usage become apparent, it is important that young people and the adults who care for them, in the home, at school, and elsewhere, are made aware of these risks and how to deal with them. Organised multilateral efforts to address the social, psychological and physical effects of the Internet, nationally and internationally, are needed to combat the problem. At the same time researchers and healthcare professionals must continue their efforts to formulate new strategies to address such problems as Internet addiction, cyber-bullying, and the negative consequences of young minds being exposed to large volumes of inappropriate material. Government campaigns and advertising to better inform parents and children of the psychological and physical health dangers of excessive time spent on the Internet are required. These should be accompanied by lessons and discussions in schools of the risks of being on the Internet and how to counter various threats posed by it to young people.

Conclusion

For the majority of children, especially those of high school age, time spent on the Internet and engaged in social media is now a part of daily life. Although being online offers access to a wealth of information and communication opportunities, it comes with risks, which may be severe, for young people. Children, and adults, need to be made fully aware of these risks and how to minimise them. The Internet, mobile communications, social media, and the like are important aspects of the modern world but their evolution, and evolution of dangers associated with them, must be matched with a growing understanding of how to use them in safety.

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