Teens and the Internet

As adults struggle to catch up with the latest advances in technology, adolescents are often two steps ahead in terms of their ability to utilize the latest options available on the Internet. From e-mail and instant messaging to YouTube, interactive video games, and virtual reality environments, teenagers are taking full advantage of the communication opportunities provided by the rapidly changing electronic tools available in today's world. At the same time, adults are finding it challenging to stay aware of what occurs within the context of adolescents' online activities and to monitor teenagers' participation in such activities.

In the latest edition of *The Future of Children* series, experts on children and media highlight some of the most pressing concerns related to children and media in today's world, including the use of the Internet by teenagers. Among youth today, for instance, some of the most popular communication forms include e-mail, instant messaging, text messaging, chat rooms, bulletin boards, blogs, social networking utilities such as MySpace and Facebook, video sharing such as YouTube, photo sharing such as Flickr, massively multiplayer online computer games such as *World of Warcraft*, and virtual worlds such as Second Life and Teen Second Life.

Although there is limited research on the effects of these various new forms of interaction on the healthy development of teens, still preliminary investigations can be informative. A survey study of preadolescents and adolescents in the Netherlands, for instance, suggests that teens use the Internet primarily to support ongoing peer relationships, but this may be related to the online contexts being visited. Eighty percent of those surveyed reported using the Internet to maintain existing friendships, and participants who communicated more often on the Internet felt closer to existing friends than those who did not, but only if they were using the Internet to communicate with friends rather than strangers. At the same time, although participants who used instant messaging communicated primarily with existing offline friends, those who visited chat rooms communicated with existing friends less often.

Research also suggests that the nature of online social environments may be changing the qualities of teen relationships themselves. A recent focus group study of MySpace on a college campus found that most participants had between 150 and 300 “friends” on their MySpace site. Within MySpace, friends’ photos and names are displayed on users’ profiles and each profile includes a list of “top” friends ranging from a “top four” to a “top twenty-four.” Since this public display of best friends may affect teen relationships, the effects of these public pronouncements could be an important area of investigation for future research in this area.
Finally, the existence of cyberbullying and online harassment has also become a cause for concern in terms of its effect on teen development. A connection may exist between real-world bullying and online bullying, as a 2005 U.S. survey with more than 1,400 respondents aged twelve to seventeen found that participants who had experienced repeated school-based bullying were seven times more likely to be subjected to repeated online bullying. In fact, according to research, about two-thirds of cyberbully victims knew the perpetrator; one third did not. In terms of the mechanism used for cyberbullying, the U.S. study found that instant messaging was the most common tool used for bullying, while a U.K. study found that text messaging (which was more popular in the United Kingdom) was most commonly used. This may change over time as texting becomes more popular in the United States.

As an example of this hand-held trend emerging in the United States, Virgin Mobile USA reports that more than nine out of ten teens with cell phones have text-messaging capability: two-thirds use text messaging daily, more than half of customers aged fifteen to twenty received at least eleven text messages a day, and nearly a fifth texted twenty-one times a day or more. At the same time, from October through December 2006, Verizon Wireless hosted 17.7 billion text messages, more than double the total from the same period in 2005. In addition to texting, many of the other forms of online interaction teens find appealing are now becoming available on portable devices, such as cellphones and personal digital assistants (PDAs). As these advances in technology allow the potential for teens’ virtually unlimited access to online interactive possibilities, adults will need to remain aware of the activities available, monitor adolescents’ participation, and assess the impact of teens’ online experiences on their overall development.


Specific Chapters Referenced Include:


For more information on this topic, please contact the issue editors of this volume: Jeanne Brooks-Gunn brooks-gunn@columbia.edu or Elisabeth Donahue edonahue@princeton.edu.