

Overcoming strategies of adolescents' risky online self-disclosure

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Abstract

Aim. Adolescents' online self-disclosure has a positive influence on adolescents' development but may also be related to risks that adolescents may not be able to overcome. Thus, the purpose of this study is to find out what do adolescents think about the risks of online self-disclosure and what are the coping strategies they use to overcome these risks.

Methods. To reach the purpose of the study, four focus groups were organized. Students were asked what they thought about online self-disclosure and what kind of strategies they used to overcome negative consequences of risky online disclosure. Content analysis was used to analyse the collected data. Twenty-one students (18 females and 3 males, 11-17 years), participated in the study.

Results and conclusion. The results of the study show that the coping strategies adolescents use are: asking help from adults, stalker prevention, online privacy management, and awareness of online self-disclosure.

Key words: online self-disclosure, adolescents, risky behaviour.

Introduction

Nowadays online communication is almost the most popular way of connecting with others both in adolescents and in adults. It is stated that youth uses the Internet daily more often than any other age group (McCrae, Gettings, & Purssell, 2017). According to the Eurostat (2017), 4 out of 5 (80%) young people use computer every day. Thus, as the ability to use the Internet is almost in any area and in different devices, the usage of the Internet is also growing (Eurostat, 2017; Livingstone, Mascheroni, Dreier, Chaudron, Lagae, 2015), especially among young people.

It is possible to predict that the most popular activity on the Internet among youth is communication (Christofides, Muise, Desmarais, 2012; Joinson, Paine, 2007; McCrae, Gettings, & Purssell, 2017). The most popular ways of communication are e-mail, social networking sites, and instant messaging (Eurostat, 2017). Thus, not surprisingly, it is possible to say that communication online is changing our reality by giving us an ability to move our face-to-face relations and/or interactions to online settings (McCrae, Gettings, & Purssell, 2017; Bak, Lin, Oh, 2014; Tait, Jeske, 2015).

A lot of scientists in the area of psychology and sociology agree that one of the most important aspects of communication is self-disclosure (e.g., Joinson, Paine, 2007; Pujazon-Zazik, Park, 2010). Basically, self-disclosure is defined as voluntary sharing one's personal information with others (Magno, Cuason, & Figueroa, 2009). Thus, for the last decade, online self-disclosure has become a widely studied phenomenon across scientists in social sciences. It is said that self-disclosure is an important aspect in adolescents (Nosko et al., 2012; Pujazon-Zazik, Peter, 2010; Valkenburg, Peter, 2007), as it is related to their social development. Some researchers (e.g., Boyd, 2007; McCrae, Gettings, & Purssell, 2017) state that nowadays adolescents are actually developing more online than in real life settings as online self-disclosure helps them to: experiment with their identity (McCrae, Gettings, & Purssell, 2017); experiment and express themselves (Boyd, 2007); create and maintain personal relations (Pujazon-Zazik, Park, 2010). It is said that adolescents are more likely to share their personal information than to keep it secretive because they observe and perceive more benefits than risks (Youn, 2005).

However, it is important to mention that adolescents' online self-disclosure also has negative consequences. Researchers state that sharing personal information online might cause some risks (Dowell, Burgess, Cavanaugh, 2009; Livingstone, 2008; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011): meeting strangers in real life, stalking, cyberbullying, infringing one's privacy. The qualitative study of Paluckaitė and Žardeckaitė-Matulaitienė (2017) has also shown that adolescents are likely to engage in risky online self-disclosure

which might be verbal (sharing personal information) or non-verbal (sharing photos or videos). This study has also shown that adolescents experience some negative consequences of risky online self-disclosure, for example, identity theft, stalking or cyberbullying.

It is said that because of lack of social skills and still ongoing other biopsychological changes, adolescents may not be aware of the risks they face when disclosing online. The problem is that adolescents in general communicate with strangers, share their photos on public places online (like on Facebook wall) or experience rude comments about themselves, and, according to Vandoninck and d'Haenens (2015), their engagement or exposure to online risks at some point is inescapable.

A significant international study EU Kids Online (Livingstone, Haddon, 2009; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011) of children risks and safety on the Internet has also examined what are the strategies or techniques that children use to cope or to deal with this risky behaviour online: cyberbullying, sexting, sexual content exposure, and contacts with strangers. According to the authors, the main coping strategies of risky behaviour online could be: passive, communicative and proactive (d'Haenens, Vandoninck, Donoso, 2013). It was found that communicative coping (talking to somebody else about experienced risks) is one of the most popular strategies used by adolescents (d'Haenens, Vandoninck, Donoso, 2013; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Youn (2005; 2009) has conducted a study to find out what are adolescents' perceptions of online privacy and coping behaviour. The author has found that the main coping strategy adolescents use to insure their privacy is disclosing or false personal information.

It is also important to mention that parents play a significant role in managing the risks their kids experience online. In the study of EU Kids Online (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011) it was found that the majority (70%) of parents use active mediation – talk to their children about what they do online. However, little is still known what adolescents' do to cope with risky online self-disclosure as self-disclosure, as a separate risky behaviour online, was not analysed in the studies mentioned earlier. Thus, the aim of this study is to find out what are the coping strategies that adolescents may use to overcome the possible negative consequences of risky online disclosure.

Methods

Procedure

The research was conducted in two Lithuanian schools, located in large and smaller cities of Lithuania. The schools have been chosen by convenient sample selection. After the selection, the schools' administration was informed about the study, its aims and procedure. All in all, 4 focus groups were organised (2

groups in each school). From 2 to 7 adolescents per group participated in each discussion. Focus groups were moderated by the main author of this study.

As it is recommended in the ethics of the research, before conducting the focus groups, parents' agreements of their children participation in the study were collected. Informative parents' agreements included information about the aims of the study, procedure, possible harm and consequences, and contact information of the organisers of the study. Thus, only those participants who brought a signed parents' agreement could participate in the discussion group.

The participants at the beginning of the focus groups were informed about the goals of the study, discussion and its procedure, mentioning their ability to refuse to participate at any time. The participants were also informed that the discussion would be recorded and that the records would be protected and used only by the mentor of the study. Participants were also informed that collected data would be used anonymously and only for scientific purposes.

Measures

The main measure used during focus groups was an abstract question. The question for the discussion groups was chosen according to the aim of the study – to find out what are the coping strategies of adolescents' risky online self-disclosure. Thus, adolescents participating in the focus groups were asked what they do whenever they face any type of danger related to online disclosure. The moderator of the discussion had also some extra questions to keep the discussion going and to get a richer data of the research.

In order to get demographic data of the participants, they also had to answer some demographical questions, including their age and gender.

Data analysis

In order to find out what the coping strategies are that could be used to overcome the negative consequences of risky online self-disclosure, the qualitative content analysis of the information from the focus groups was conducted. The recorded discussions of each group were transcribed word by word by the first author of the study. It is important to mention that any information which was clearly not related to the aim of this study was not included in the transcriptions. After the transcription, the main ideas and thoughts of the participants were highlighted in the text. Later on, distinguished parts of the texts were inductively grouped into the categories and subcategories.

Participants

Twenty one adolescent aged from 11 to 17 years ($M=13.86$, $SD=2.37$) participated in this study. Eighteen of them were female and three - male. Students' participation in this study was voluntary.

Results and Discussion

The results of what adolescents think about different forms of risky self-disclosure online and its consequences, can be found in the article by Paluckaitė, Žardeckaitė-Matulaitienė (2017). In short, the main results of the earlier presented study have shown that, according to adolescents' opinions, risky online self-disclosure can be verbal (e.g., disclosing person identifiable information) or non-verbal (e.g., sharing partly nude photos) and it may have negative consequences which generally is based on property damage (e.g., the theft of bank account) or interactional problems (e.g., communicating and meeting strangers in the real life settings). Thus, according to the adolescents' opinion, we may predict that adolescents experience several parts of risky disclosures online and that sometimes they also experience some negative consequences.

The content analysis of coping strategies of risky online self-disclosure shows that, according to adolescents' opinions, risky online self-disclosure can be divided into four categories: asking help from adults, stalker prevention, online privacy management, and awareness (see Table 1).

Table 1. Categories and subcategories of adolescents' opinion on coping strategies of risky online self-disclosure.

Category	Subcategory	Example
Asking help from adults	Informing adults	[...] (if someone is cyberbullying you) you may inform Facebook's administrator [...] (f11)
		[...] you can always inform someone [...] (f 13)
		[...] you can inform your parents [...] (f 14)
	Parental mediation	[...] parents have told me not to do the tests that are available freely on Facebook [...] (f11)
		[...] my parents have told me that until 16 I cannot post any photos of myself wearing shorts [...] (f11)

Category	Subcategory	Example
Stalker prevention	Identification check	[...] if you want to find out if a person you are talking is really your friend [...] I would ask him things [...] which only we both could know the answers [...] (m11)
		[...] you can always check if a profile is real [...] (f14)
		[...] checking if my friends have him in friends' lists [...] (f13)
	Meeting strangers in public places	[...] I would arrange fake meeting [...] I would tell him that we can meet near the market [...] and I with my parents would wait around the corner to see who came to the meeting [...] (m11)
		[...] the meeting place (of a person you don't know) should be public [...] (f13/14)
Online privacy management	Changing privacy settings	[...] you may use settings to set that your pictures could be seen only by your friends [...] (f11)
		[...] you can always set your profile as private [...] (f17)
	Deleting comments/posts	[...] I always delete the comments of the people I don't know[...] (f13)
		[...] you may delete the post on Facebook[...]but it is still saved somewhere on the web [...] (f17)
Using blur	[...] for example vloggers [...] if their (credit) card is visible somewhere (in the video) they cover it by using blur [...] (f17)	

Category	Subcategory	Example
	Blocking	[...]somebody was texting me with my photo on his/her profile [...] but I have blocked that person [...] (m11)
		[...] I use blocking [...] (f14)
		[...] I cancel or block the commenter [...] (f13)
	Ignoring	[...] just ignore [...] (f 14)
Awareness	Think before you do something	[...] you always have to think before you do something [...] (f14)
		[...] you can't trust anybody online 100 %. You should always be like sitting on needles [...] (f13)
		[...] screenshot all (negative) aspects of what you get or see [...] (f13)
	Do not disclose personal information	[...]My God, don't publish! [...] (f17; f15)

**Information in the brackets: f=female, m=male, numbers mean age of a participant.*

The first category, *asking help from adults*, includes two subcategories: informing adults and parental mediation. Interestingly, during discussions groups, adolescents, especially younger ones, were likely to state that if something bad, regarding online self-disclosure, happens to them, they would inform an adult or would ask them for help. Not surprisingly, parents or social network's administrator, as important adults for younger adolescents (Youn, 2009), take a significant place in dealing with risky online self-disclosure: according to younger adolescents, they may seek help from adults directly or get it indirectly. Direct help seeking here is when adolescents ask adults to help them deal with the problems online caused by risky online disclosure and indirect – when parents talk to their children about risks without them asking to do that. This might be called active parental mediation, when parents talk to their children about possible risks and coping strategies of risky online behaviour (Youn, 2009; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Thus, it is possible that younger adolescents are still taught by their parents what kind of information they can disclose online and what kind of self-disclosure would be risky. It is important to mention, that older adolescents didn't mention any aspects of asking help from adults or informing them about the possible danger of sharing information online. Youn (2005) has also found that younger adolescents are more likely to seek help from adults

than older ones. Therefore, it is possible to predict that older adolescents may trust in their own skills to cope with risky online self-disclosure (Christofides, Muise, Desmarais, 2013).

According to the students, *stalker prevention* is also a coping strategy of risky online self-disclosure mentioned by adolescents, which includes identification check and meeting strangers in public places. Once again, it is important to mention that this strategy was also popular only among younger adolescents, however, it is also a very useful technique in finding out whether another person in conversation is real or not. As 11 year old boy said, "if I were not sure about the person I'm disclosing to online, I would arrange a fake meeting [...] I would tell him that we can meet near the market [...] and I with my parents would wait around the corner to see who came to the meeting." Hence, as it might be seen in Table 1 section of examples, using the first two strategies is also related to asking help from or counting on adults, especially parents. Thus, this type of active coping (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011) might be called a combined strategy (Vandoninck, d'Haenens, 2015) where younger students take actions by themselves and involve parents in dealing with risky online self-disclosure.

The third category is *online privacy* management which can be divided into these subcategories: changing privacy settings, deleting comments/posts, using blur, blocking, and ignoring. It seems that younger and older adolescents know that they can save their personal information by changing their privacy settings from public to private. Deleting posts, comments or photos on social networking sites also seems to be a good technique that adolescents use to prevent possible damage. However, as a seventeen years old schoolgirl said, "you may delete the post on Facebook [...] but it is still saved somewhere on the web". It means, that some of the older adolescents also understand that any posted information online is still risky even if you deleted it. This goes along with a strategy we will discuss later in this discussion, suggesting that awareness may be an important strategy to use while coping with or preventing of risky online self-disclosure. Thus, it means that there is no guarantee that the technique of deleting posts or messages would always be helpful. Blocking somebody one does not want to talk to or is bothered by also seems to be a popular technique among adolescents. Ignoring somebody one does not want to talk to, was also mentioned by few adolescents. On the one hand, ignoring might be called as a passive strategy of coping (Vandoninck, d'Haenens, 2015), however, on the other hand, it is also partly related with acting (Youn, 2009) – meaning that danger was observed and an action of not doing anything was taken. According to Youn (2005) and Livingstone et al. (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011), ignoring or avoiding some information online is a strategy used by adolescents while dealing with various

risky behaviour online. It is also important to mention that, according to the adolescents, using blur on the shared videos, where specific information (e.g., credit card or ID) might be visible was also suggested as a strategy to prevent the negative consequences of risky online self-disclosure.

The fourth category which has emerged during content analysis is awareness. Awareness is a strategy mainly suggested and discussed by older adolescents. According to them, you must always be aware of what are you going to publish or to text online. Moreover, some of the older adolescents have also suggested that there is no need to publish private information online as it may cause risks which can be difficult to deal with. These answers presuppose the idea that older adolescents are more willing to trust themselves than adults while dealing with risks online (Vandoninck, d'Haenens, 2015). Consequently, as Livingstone et al. (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011) state, older adolescents are more likely to engage in risky behaviour online, but they are also more capable to deal with problems raised by the Internet.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The aim of this study was to find out what are the strategies that adolescents use to overcome or to deal with possible negative consequences of risky online self-disclosure. To find this out, 4 focus groups were organised, and the results of the groups were analysed using content analysis.

The results of the study showed that there might be four main categories that adolescents use to cope with risky online disclosure. These strategies are: asking help from adults, stalker prevention, online privacy management, and awareness of online self-disclosure. Thus, the results of this study suggest, that probably there are some age differences in the strategies adolescents use. To be more precise, the results of the study have shown that younger adolescents are more likely to use the strategies of asking help from adults and stalker prevention while older adolescents were more likely to use online privacy management and to be aware of self-disclosing in online settings.

This information draws an importance for the researchers while creating or implementing prevention or intervention strategies on risky adolescent's online self-disclosure. This study and previous analyses on adolescents' risky behaviour online coping strategies (e.g., Christofides, Muise, Desmarais, 2013; Youn, 2005; Youn, 2009; Livingstone et al., 2011; McCrae, Gettings, & Purssell, 2017) show that age is an important aspect on the strategies adolescents use. Thus, for example, prevention or intervention for younger adolescents' risky online self-disclosure might be focused more on adults, parental mediation and teaching technical tools on how to prevent risks while disclosing online; prevention or intervention for older adolescents might be based on the skills of awareness and privacy management.

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