

Coming of age on the Internet

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In the mid-90s, the Internet seemed like a dark place. Indeed, scientific studies from that time were documenting some real risks for teenagers, including fewer close friendships and more tenuous connections with family. It appeared that teens were sacrificing real relationships for superficial cyber-relationships with total strangers.

Is this still true? Social scientists are revisiting those early concerns, and some are coming to believe that the psychological benefits may now outweigh the detrimental effects. In a new report in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, psychologists Patti Valkenburg and Jochen Peter of the University of Amsterdam took a look at a decade of research on these questions, and they believe two important historical changes have altered the psychological landscape.

First, the sheer number of teenagers now using the Internet has transformed the technology into a true social networking tool. Even in the late 90s, only about one in ten adolescents were online, which meant that kids actually had to choose between online relationships and real relationships. There was very little overlap, so it was very difficult to maintain flesh-and-blood relations while exploring cyberspace. Today, Valkenburg and Peter say, the vast majority of teenagers in Western countries have access to the Internet, and most appear to use the technology to nurture their existing relationships rather than to forge new ones.

Second, the newer communication tools also encourage building on

existing relationships rather than isolating. In the 90s, the few teens who did spend time on the Internet tended to hang out with strangers in public chat rooms and so-called MUDS, multi-user dungeons. The appearance of instant messaging and social networks like Facebook has changed all that, according to the psychologists. Today, more than eight in ten teenagers use IM to connect with the same friends they see at school and work.

Recent studies document the positive effects of these technological changes. But what exactly is going on in the minds of the teenagers to produce this greater sense of well-being? Valkenburg and Peter believe that the 21st century Internet encourages honest talking about very personal issues - feelings, worries, vulnerabilities - that are difficult for many self-conscious teens to talk about. When they communicate through the Internet, they have fewer sounds and sights and social cues to distract them, so they become less concerned with how others perceive them. This in turn reduces inhibition, leading to unusually intimate talk.

The psychologists have also shown that "hyperpersonal" Internet talk leads to higher quality friendships, and that these quality friendships buffer teenagers against stress and lead to greater happiness. However, solitary "surfing" of the Internet has no positive effects on connectedness or well-being, and hanging around public chat rooms - though much rarer - still appears psychologically risky.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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