

Teenagers more inclined to repeat 'risky' behaviour

March 31 2015, by Alan Williams



Study shows 13 to 17-year-olds who have previously engaged in risky online behaviour are much more likely than other young adults to repeat such acts

School-age teenagers who have previously engaged in risky online behaviour are much more likely than young adults to repeat such behaviour in the future, according to a new study by Plymouth University.

In an attempt to understand the psychological mechanisms contributing to young people's online [risk](#) taking, researchers examined their tendency towards behaviours seen by parents and educators as being increasingly important in terms of potential victimisation.

These included disclosing personal information to strangers, or befriending strangers on [social networking sites](#), and the results have prompted researchers to suggest education about risky online behaviour needs to be tailored more for different age groups.

The study was conducted by PhD student Claire White, alongside Dr Michaela Gummerum and Dr Yaniv Hanoch of Plymouth University's School of Psychology, and their article – Adolescents' and Young Adults' Online Risk Taking: The Role of Gist and Verbatim Representations – is published in the online version of *Risk Analysis*, a publication of the Society for Risk Analysis.

For the study, researchers studied participants from three educational establishments in the South West of England. They included 122 adolescents (ages 13-17) and 172 [young adults](#) (ages 18-24).

The students were asked about their past online risk-taking activities, and their intentions to engage in future [risky behaviour](#), with adolescents showing significantly higher intentions to take risks than young adults. The researchers also categorised the way risk was perceived into two distinct groups.

The first, 'verbatim', occurs when an individual uses details and quantitative information from past experiences to decide on future actions, with one example statement featured in the questionnaire being "I am likely to be bullied or harassed online in the next six months by a person I do not know offline". The second is "gist" reasoning, where individuals rely on personal values and beliefs to create a qualitative, intuitive understanding of risks. Examples of this include "Better to be safe online than sorry" or "Better to never give out my personal information online than risk having my identity stolen".

The results showed adolescents aged 13 to 17 who perceive online risks

based on "verbatim" reasoning were especially likely to participate in future risky online behaviour, while adolescents and young people who relied on "gist" measures were more protective regarding their future intentions.

The authors suggest the differences in reasoning about risks could be important factors to consider when designing online training and education for both preventative and protective measures.

Claire White said, "Media reports are rife with stories of young people taking their own lives due to cyber-bullying or being blackmailed by abusers into performing sexual acts and self-harming on live webcam links, highlighting how online exposure can potentially be harmful to young people. Developing and imparting more gist-based knowledge, in order to engage more intuitive thinking about online risk-taking, may well help to protect [young people](#) against some of the dangers involved in certain online activities."

More information: "Adolescents' and Young Adults' Online Risk Taking: The Role of Gist and Verbatim Representations." *Risk Analysis*. doi: 10.1111/risa.12369

Provided by University of Plymouth

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