

Adolescents do not 'get the gist' when it comes to making risky decisions online

October 25 2016, by Amy Mcsweeny



Credit: University of Plymouth

Adolescents are more likely than adults to take online risks, regardless of the gamble involved, according to new research by the University of Plymouth.

The study, led by Claire White from the School of Psychology, was carried out to explore the [psychological mechanisms](#) underpinning why teenagers are more likely to take risks online when compared to young adults.

The study gave adolescents (aged 13–17) and young adults (aged 18–24) the same online quiz gambling scenario, framed in two different ways – one highlighting what could be won, and one highlighting what could be lost.

After dealing with both scenarios, the overall results showed adolescents demonstrated the riskier behaviour. These results were partially linked to sensation seeking, but more fully explained by Fuzzy Trace Theory – the notion that people process information in both a verbatim (quantitative) and gist (qualitative) fashion. However, the older a person gets, and the more memories and experiences they have, the more inclined they are to consider risk intuitively, drawing on simple gist representations.

But the study also showed that, independent of sensation-seeking, adolescents were not swayed by how the question was framed, whereas the [young adults](#) were – choosing not to make the gamble when the potential losses were highlighted. Calculating the risks involved, compared to making intuitive decisions, led to higher rates of risk-taking by adolescents.

The researchers said results highlighted the importance of conveying information online in a clear and objective way to teenagers, and communicating risk-averse beliefs and values that are easy to remember and retrieve, effectively tailored to different age groups.

Claire said:

"Our findings provide important and novel insights into ways in which online safety training and risk communication is understood by people of different ages, and so how experts and campaigners can tailor their information to keep everyone safe online. Drawing on Fuzzy Trace Theory enabled us to explain why younger people were more likely to take risks, over and above the influence of sensation seeking.

"But whereas it may have been assumed that hinting at a risk's severity might deter anyone from taking a risk online, our results show that this is irrelevant when it comes to [adolescents](#) due to their lesser ability to draw upon the gist of risky situations. We hope that the study goes some way to understanding more about young people's behaviour online, and so can help keep them safe in future."

More information: Claire M. White et al. Framing of Online Risk: Young Adults' and Adolescents' Representations of Risky Gambles., *Decision* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/dec0000066](https://doi.org/10.1037/dec0000066)

Provided by University of Plymouth

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