Impacts of the Use of Social Networking on Social and Emotional Well-Being of Adolescents in Australia

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Abstract

Technology and social networking tools and sites are changing the way that young people build and maintain their social connections with others (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). This study utilized a new measure: The Self in a Social Context, Virtual Connectedness Subscale (SSC-VC Subscale) to examine the effects of social networking tools and sites on social and emotional well-being among 1037 Australian young people aged 11-18 years. A Maximum Likelihood Factor Analysis identified three strong factors: Fit In (α = .81), Public Self (α = .79) and Comfortable Self (α = .83). Significant main effects were revealed for the number of times students check their Facebook $F(12, 2415) = 13.8, p < .001$, and for gender, $F(3, 913) = 10.8, p < .001$, but no interaction effect was found. Univariate tests also revealed a significant difference for Frequency of checking Facebook, $F(4, 915) = 4.98$, and for Gender, $F(1, 915) = 46.92, p < .001$ on the dependent variable of Emotional Difficulties. These findings suggest that social networking sites, though used differently by males and females, provide an important forum for building social connections across groups.
Identity formation and social development are key components occurring during adolescence. When young people are unable to connect with their peers and lack a sense of belonging they are likely to feel socially isolated. Maintaining quality connected peer relationships is an essential component of achieving positive mental well-being (Carroll, Houghton, Bourgeois, Tan, & Ozsoy, 2014; Corsano, Majorano, & Champretavy, 2006; Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). Corsano et al. (2006) found that the key factor determining psychological well-being in early adolescents is acceptance and integration amongst peers.

Today, the use of technology and online social networking has become progressively more important in the lives of young people. Social networking sites are web-based services that allow users to partake in activities such as constructing a public profile, managing other users with whom they share a connection, and viewing the activities of others with whom they are connected (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Some popular online social networking sites used among adolescents include Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, blogs, interactive computer games, and chat rooms. A study conducted in 2011 by The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) found that more than half of adolescents access online social networking sites more than once a day. It is reasonable therefore to expect that acceptance and integration in these online settings would be key factors for adolescent socialization and well-being today. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to understand the influence of online social networking sites on adolescent well-being and connectedness to their peers.

**Background**

This current study is part of a larger four-phase study investigating how schools promote social connectedness and engagement in their students (See Procedure Section). Part of that
data examined how young people connected to others using social networking sites and is the subject of this article.

**Social Connectedness and Well-Being**

Adolescent social connectedness can be measured across the following domains: family, peers, school, and community (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012). Peer connectedness, in particular, has been found to be an important predictor of well-being in adolescents (McGraw, Moore, Fuller, & Bates, 2008). Further, these researchers found that a sense of connectedness was negatively correlated with mental health issues such as depression, stress, and anxiety.

A group is able to maintain a sense of social connectedness when individuals feel at ease to contribute to group conversation, as well as foresee social interactions amongst members (Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). Conversely, an individual will experience connectedness when he or she obtains a sense of belonging within the group where they feel a level of comfort to be their authentic self (Jose et al., 2012).

An individual’s behaviour within the social world is somewhat controlled by their level of social connectedness which in turn affects their emotions and life perceptions (Duru, 2008). Therefore those who have a greater sense of social connectedness are more likely to cope with emotions through their ability to adjust to social environments. This behaviour is an important part of how adolescents present and promote themselves for inclusion within a group. Previous research on reputation enhancement and goal setting has shown that adolescents who want to be perceived by others in a certain way regulate self-presentation and self-identity (Carroll, Houghton, Durkin, & Hattie, 2009). This encompasses both academic and social goals. Adolescents manage peer reputations through their social goals usually as conforming or non-conforming individuals (Carroll et al., 2009).
Social Connectedness Online

Face-to-Face Communication Skills

Recently, maintaining a sense of social connectedness to peers also encompasses an online component. Given that the use of social networking sites has become more prominent, some researchers suggest that face-to-face communication is being replaced with time spent online, increasing the possibility of depression and a lack of social support (Harmen, Hansen, Cochran, & Lindsey, 2005). A large component of adolescent development comprises developing efficient social skills essential for maintaining friendships. While there is data that supports skill building such as acquiring and maintaining friendships, a sense of normalcy, and better communication skills, due to adolescent internet use, there is also concern that many of these young people can hide behind the screen hindering their ability to socialize in public settings (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). Pederson (2012) argues that the heavy use of online communication prevents young people from seeing people’s reactions to comments and posts, impeding their ability to have an empathetic reaction, which in turn can affect the development of healthy decision-making processes.

Friendship Problems Online

While online social networking can be beneficial to young people, teenage turmoil and feelings of loneliness are still probable. Reich’s (2010) study found that 25% of high school students and 21% of college students have experienced problems with friendships due to activity on social networking sites. The main issues included drama (caused by rumors and discovered betrayal), misunderstandings (due to feelings of exclusion of friends and romantic partners wrongly interpreting remarks posted by others related to betrayal, which never took place), and aggravation of problems (e.g., peers sharing private information publically and modifications to ‘top friends lists’) (Reich, 2010).
While the majority of young people report feeling safe online, social networking sites, such as Facebook provide an easy opportunity for young people to harass, criticize, and exclude each other with a peer audience (Barnett, 2009; Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nichols, & Storch, 2009; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Willard, 2007). These researchers outlined some dangers that online bullying can have beyond physical bullying. For example, online bullying is more invasive than face-to-face bullying, taking place anywhere at anytime, without allowing the target person to remove him or herself from the situation, and the predator may have access to a greater number of individuals (Dempsey et al., 2009). Additionally, it is argued that people can be more verbally aggressive when masked by an electronic device, as opposed to face-to-face contact (Dempsey et al., 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006) and there is much less adult supervision (Dempsey et al., 2009).

Hinduja and Patchin (2011) found that the majority of online bullying cases involve peers who knew each other. Furthermore, the young people who are most at risk for victimization off line are the same as the ones targeted online (AAP, 2011; Paul, 2012; Willard, 2007). Alice Marwick, a researcher at Microsoft contends “it’s not that the Internet is doing something bad to these kids, it’s that these bad things are in kids’ lives and the internet is just a component of that” (Paul, 2012). Although there tends to be a focus on the negative effects of online communication, reports show that young people report that social networking sites have provided a safe space for them to mend problems with friends (Reich, 2010) and ultimately for more connected relationships (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Reich, 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

Creating a Public Identity Online

Young people create their online profiles for their anticipated audience, which is subtly perceived and not necessarily realistic (Boyd, 2007). This online identity is generally created for two purposes: 1) for close friends who will view and have access to their virtual space;
and 2) outsider access (Barnett, 2009). Progressive research continues to debate whether or not people present their true selves to the virtual world. Public comments and shared photos amongst peers and online “friends” assist in the development of a person’s online identity. Qualitative research has found that young people will sometimes ask their friends to post certain comments on their profile as a means to making others believe something to be true, to create jealousy, and/or to provoke flirtation (Reich, 2010).

Adolescents are often challenged with the desire to be cool and fit in with their peers. Boyd (2007) argued that many teens use a false name, age, and locality when creating a profile (or a secondary profile) as a means to conceal their profile from their parents. Creating a profile that holds a young persons level of popularity, while at the same time appeasing their parents’ requests can be quite problematic (Boyd, 2007). The question that remains unclear is whether young people create virtual identities to portray who they are, who they want to be, or who they want their audience to think they are?

The use and exposure to online social networking assists with the formation of a young persons identity, which can both amplify and complicate the process (AAP, 2011; Barnett, 2009; Pederson, 2012; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). While some young people create factual profiles, others have damaged their reputation by posting offensive, inappropriate and/or conflicting photos, status’ and information (Barnett, 2009).

Furthermore, it has been postulated that some young people create a false sense of identity online encompassing greater derogatory and aggressive behaviour, while becoming less accountable (Harmen et al., 2005). Harmen’s et al. (2005) study found that users who falsely identify themselves online might jeopardize their social well-being. Harmen et al. (2005) also found that young people who create a false online identity, compared to their factual counterparts displayed lower self-esteem, greater social anxiety, inferior social skills, and higher levels of aggression towards their peers.
Connecting to Others Online

Willard (2007) argues that when individuals communicate on the internet they are more likely to say and do things that they would not do face-to-face and this behaviour can result in both positive and negative outcomes (Willard, 2007). For example, Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) found that although adolescents feel closer to their partners during phone conversations and in person interactions as opposed to online, they report being more able to “talk freely” (p. 125) to peers of the opposite sex when communicating online or through text messaging.

Reich (2010) found that 83% of high school students testified their need to utilize social networking sites daily as a means of staying connected to their peers. Indeed, nearly half of high school and college students who were not registered with social networking sites still browsed them regularly either independently or with a friend who is a member (Reich, 2010). Many of the young people in this study reported that browsing social networking sites gave them something to do when they were bored. Furthermore, the AAP (2011) found that some young people are so enticed by social networking, and have difficulty resisting, that it can at times hinder homework, sleep, and physical activity.

Most teenagers have been found to make thoughtful choices in regards to what they share online, as well as with whom (see Livingstone, 2008). While this is a beneficial trend for building connections, negative outcomes can arise from young people sharing personal information, without understanding how to navigate the privacy settings or the full implications of their actions (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Livingstone, 2008).

In the earlier days of the internet it was hypothesized that online social networking amongst adolescents predominately occurred with strangers, and reduced current friendships, resulting in superficial relationships with strangers taking the place of real life friendships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). However today, research demonstrates that the majority of
contact young people have online is with people they already know (see Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Livingston, 2008). Therefore, it is argued that utilizing online sites increases the level of friendships due to the notion that users divulge more personal information on the internet than they would in person, which is an essential indicator of mutually trusting, compassionate friendships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

Although excessive internet use may cause a reduction in human interaction, positive internet use can be healthy provided that face-to-face interaction is balanced with that of the online experience (Harmen et al., 2005). Online interactions can provide an outlet for young people to feel accepted, connect with others, and develop a sense of normalcy (Paul, 2012). For most young people, healthy internet use through online social networking provides a simple and efficient way to socialize and maintain friendships (Barnett, 2009; Dempsey et al., 2009).

Online social networking can also provide a safe space for young people to engage in meaningful discussions, be themselves, explore, flirt, partake in “normal” teenage experiences, and cope with personal problems (Paul, 2012; Strom & Strom, 2012). These interactions encourage feelings of connectedness, increase mutual respect and appreciation amongst peers and enhance friendships. (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Strom & Strom, 2012; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Valkenburg and Peter (2007) found that adolescents who use social networking sites primarily to connect with current friends report having closer relationships than those who do not.

Young people who struggle to maintain social friendships off line can utilize the internet and messaging as a means to communicate more comfortably (Szwedo, Mikami, & Allen, 2012). This opportunity provides young people with poor social skills the opportunity to take their time responding to comments and writing messages (Szwedo et al., 2012). Ultimately, online social networking can provide more satisfying relationships for those who
have a hard time making friends face-to-face. Some even argue that online social networking can aid in alleviating social anxiety (Harmen et al., 2005; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Szwedo et al., 2012).

High school students have reported that social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace allow them to stay in touch with friends who do not live nearby, and reconnect to those with whom they have lost contact (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Reich, 2010). Studies indicate that social media can improve communication, provide opportunities for social interaction, and assist with the development of technical skills for young people (AAP, 2011; O’Keefe, Clarke-Pearson, & Council on Communications and Media, 2011). Furthermore, it is common for teens to use networking sites as a means to organize plans with friends (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Lenhart & Madden, 2007) and it provides a place for youth to find opportunities, such as volunteering in the community (AAP, 2011).

To determine the influence of online social networking sites on adolescent well-being, a measure of virtual connectedness was developed: Self in a Social Context: Virtual Self subscale (SSC-VC Subscale), and the following research questions were examined:

1. What is the factor structure of the SSC-VC Subscale and does this reflect the elements of virtual connectedness as defined in the literature?
2. Is the SSC-VC Subscale a reliable measure of the underlying constructs of virtual connectedness among adolescents?
3. What differences, if any, are there in the emotional well-being of young people who use social media to connect to each other?

Method

The data presented here examined how young people connected to others using social networking sites and were collected as part of the larger four-part study investigating how schools promote social connectedness and engagement in their students.
Survey data were gathered in a cross sectional study using a convenience sample of young people at three participating high schools. An exploratory factor analysis was used to establish the structure of the data. Information was also gathered to begin to test the reliability and the capacity of the subscale to differ between groups in the frequency of social network site usage.

Participants
Participants were 1343 high school students, aged 11 to 18 years. Females made up 49% of the cohort. Students in the Junior school comprised 46% of the participants while 31% came from middle school, and 23% from upper school. Data were collected during school time and in a computer laboratory as part of a computer class. Students were asked to work independently to complete the measures. Where assistance was required, participants were read the questions by either a teacher, teacher aides or one of the researchers. Of students who agreed to participate, complete data for both the SDQ and the SSC-VC Subscale were gathered from 1037 participants (See Table 1).

| Insert Table 1 Here |

Measures
Participants were invited to complete the new measure (SSC) and a paper-and-pencil (SDQ) measure. These two measures were chosen to determine the impacts of the use of social networking on social and emotional wellbeing of adolescents in Australia.

SDQ (Youth Self-Report) (Goodman, 1997). This is a behavioural screening questionnaire that measures both positive and negative psychological attributes. It is a self-report 25-item measure of the psychological health and prosocial behaviours of adolescents aged between 11 and 17 years. For the current study, the SDQ was administered as a pencil-and-paper task and
took approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete. There are five subscales each comprising five items: Emotional symptoms, Conduct problems, Hyperactivity/Inattention, Peer Problems, and Prosocial Behaviour. Of particular interest for this study was the Emotional Symptoms Subscale. Participants are asked to rate statements such as “I worry a lot” or “I have many fears, I am easily scared” into three categories: Not true (0); Somewhat true (1); Certainly true (2). Higher scores indicate higher levels of emotional difficulties. The overall prorated score (PRESS) is calculated to categorize levels of emotional symptoms into “normal” (0 to 5), “borderline” (6) and “abnormal” (7 to 10). The SDQ is a reliable measure of emotional symptoms in an Australian context ($\alpha=.65$) (Mellor, 2005). Mean score (and standard deviation) for Emotional Symptoms Subscale for Australian youth aged 11 to 17 years is 2.4 (2.0) (Mellor, 2005).

SSC-VC (Carroll & Bower, 2013). The SSC-VC is a subscale of the Self in a Social Context Scale (SSC) (Carroll & Bower, 2013). The purpose of the SSC is to gain a measure of how participants feel connected to and engaged with others. This draft scale consists of a total of 97 items that measure levels of connectedness with family, friends, at school, in the community, and online. Of these 97, 20 items comprise the SSC-VC Subscale. The purpose of this subscale is to obtain adolescent views about online connectedness, specifically on Facebook. These items are presented if participants indicate that they use social networking websites. Participants use a four point Likert scale with “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree”, and “Strongly Disagree” to indicate their agreement to statements about how they relate to others on Facebook. High scores indicate stronger agreement with each statement.
Procedure

The study was approved in accordance with the ethical review guidelines and processes of the Behavioural and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee at The University of Queensland, Australia. These guidelines are endorsed by the University’s principal human ethics committee, the Human Experimentation Ethical Review Committee, and registered with the Australian Health Ethics Committee as complying with the National Statement. A larger study entitled *Investing in our Disadvantaged Youth: New School-Wide Approaches to Understanding and Improving School Engagement and Social Connectedness* was run in partnership with three schools on the outskirts of a major city in Australia. The four-phases of this larger project included gathering multiple data about school networks (Phase 1) and social connectedness of students (Phase 2); providing lectures and workshops for pedagogical and engagement practices with teachers (Phase 3), and conducting a wait-list control study for a social and emotional learning program within the schools (Phase 4). In Phase 2 of this larger study, data were gathered from young people to measure elements of social connection. Part of that data examined how young people connected to others using social networking sites and is the subject of this article.

Each of the three schools collected data and provided a de-identified file to researchers. Participants were informed verbally about the purpose of the research, the process of de-identification, and storage of data before commencement and that participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Results

The results section will first report the psychometric properties of the SSC-VC Subscale including the findings of factor analysis, reliability, tests for normality followed by MANOVA and ANOVA using gender, and frequency of checking social networking sites as
grouping variables. All calculations were performed using the statistical package, IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Analytics Software (SPSS) Version 20.

**Factor Analysis**

To determine the factor structure of the SSC-VC Subscale, the scree plot, factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 and percentage of variance accounted for by the factor solution were systematically examined. Three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 accounted for 50.5% of the variance.

A Maximum Likelihood Factor Analysis with Direct Oblimin Rotation was then conducted to explore the underlying dimensions of the 20 items. The oblique rotation was chosen over orthogonal methods to allow the factors to correlate since some correlation would be expected when examining social connectedness with others (Costello & Osborne, 2005).

Three clear factors were revealed and were labelled: *Fit In, Public Self*, and *Comfortable Self* (see Table 2). The analysis was run again forcing three factors and the factors remained unchanged. One of the items, Face_2 Bullied, *(I have been bullied on Facebook)* revealed the lowest factor loading (.39) and conceptually did not fit with the other items in that factor. Removing the item increased the reliability of the factor, *Public Self* and so Face_2 Bullied was deleted. 3 other items, Face_16 Closeness, Face_14 Valued and Face_Lots Friends loaded on more than one factor so they were included in the factor with the higher score.

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Insert Table 2 Here
Reliability

The scales formed on the basis of the factor analysis were analysed for internal consistency using Cronbach’s alpha. Fit In ($\alpha = .81$) and Comfortable Self ($\alpha = .83$) had strong internal consistency; the alpha for Public Self in its initial form was acceptable ($\alpha = .76$) and this increased to .79 when the item Face_2 Bullied was deleted.

Tests for Normality

The SSC-VC Subscale dataset and the SDQ dataset were combined and cleaned so that the new dataset included only those cases that were complete for both measures, ($n = 1037$). Of these, 18% checked their Facebook page less than once a day, 10% once a day, 17% two to three times a day, 17% more than three times and 38% as often as possible.

Before using parametric tests on the combined data, the assumption that data were normally distributed was tested. Several outliers were detected and removed. A total of 979 cases remained. The dependent variables were normally distributed.

Correlations

Correlations between the three new factors of the SSC-VC Subscale were moderately high (see Table 3); therefore, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was deemed suitable for further exploration of the association between the independent variables and SSC-VC Subscale.

Multivariate Analysis of Variance

Multivariate tests were conducted to analyse differences between groups based on the frequency of checking social networking sites and gender as the two independent variables. The mean scores for the three factors: Fit In, Comfortable Self, Public Self (SSC-VC Subscale)
were the dependent variables. Using Wilks’s lamda, there were significant main effects for the number of times students check their Facebook $F(12, 2415) = 13.8, p < .001$, and for gender, $F(3, 913) = 10.8, p < .001$, but there was no interaction effect.

Follow up univariate tests on the outcome variables revealed significant effects on *Comfortable Self* for Gender, $F(1, 915) = 15.08, p < .001$. Girls who check their Facebook more often indicate feeling more comfortable with their relationships to others online than did boys. Mean scores (SD) for *Comfortable Self* for girls and boys were 3.17 (.40) and 3.04 (.42) respectively.

Significant univariate statistics were also revealed for each of the three factors for the dependent variable of frequency of checking Facebook: *Fit In*, $F(4, 915) = 8.38, p < .001$, *Public Self*, $F(4, 915) = 35.18, p < .001$, and *Comfortable Self*, $F(4, 915) = 16.15 p < .001$, for differences in frequency of checking Facebook. Bonferroni’s post hoc test was chosen to determine which results accounted for the difference. Mean scores and significant differences are displayed in Table 4.

| Insert Table 4 Here |

*Emotional Symptoms.* Univariate tests were then conducted to analyse differences between groups based on the frequency of checking social networking sites and gender as independent variables and the *Prorated Total Score for Emotional Symptoms (PRESS)* as the dependent variables. There was a significant univariate result for Frequency of Checking Facebook, $F(4, 915), = 4.98, p < .001$, and for Gender, $F(1, 915), = 46.92, p < .001$ on the dependent variable of PRESS, but there was no interaction effect. Bonferroni post hocs revealed the difference in checking frequency could be accounted for between groups who checked Facebook <once per day and those who checked as often as possible, and groups who checked Facebook once per day and those who checked as often as possible ($p < .005$).
Those who checked Facebook more often than once a day reported a higher incidence of emotional difficulties as seen in Figure 1.

Discussion

The SSC-VC Subscale appears to be a psychometrically sound assessment tool for measuring social connectedness online across groups of males and females, aged 11 to 18 years, with factor analysis revealing three clear factors of *Fit In, Public Self* and *Comfort Self*, each with strong reliabilities. Frequency of checking Facebook pages seems to be clearly linked to levels of emotional difficulties as measured by the SDQ and to each of the three factors in the SSC-VC Subscale suggesting that the new tool is a valid measure of social connectedness online. The findings from this study support established research that young people participate in online activities to build connections to others in their adolescent years. But there are also some unexpected findings that require further examination.

There were four variables that were examined in this study. A higher score for *Fit In* indicates feelings of safety, ability to be authentic with others, share jokes and be respected when using social internet sites. A higher score for *Public Self* indicates bravado that was not necessarily an indication of true self such as inflated confidence expressing opinions, stretching the truth, behaving differently or investing time and effort into creating and maintaining a Facebook page. And a higher score for *Comfort Self* suggests that having close friends who are confidantes, engaging in respectful relationships and feeling valued, accessing information. A higher score for PRESS indicated higher incidences of physical symptoms such as headaches, worry, tearfulness, nervousness and fear.

Many researchers have found that the incidence of bullying, harassment and exclusion of others can cause loneliness and trauma for recipients (Barnett, 2009; Dempsey, Sulkowski,
Nichols, & Storch, 2009; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Willard, 2007). It was expected therefore, that those who checked their Facebook frequently might have a higher incidence of Emotional symptoms, which they did. What was not expected was that an increase in frequency of checking would also indicate higher scores in *Fit In* and *Comfort Self* as well as *Public Self* for the SSC-VC Subscale.

However, literature supports this also (Boyd 2007; Pederson, 2012). On deeper reflection it makes sense because many of the behaviours that take place online, including making and maintaining friendships, teasing, quarreling, flirting, bullying, and sharing comments, pictures, and opinions are all normal occurrences during adolescence with or without the use of a computer (Boyd 2007; Pederson, 2012; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). In line with findings by the AAP (2011) that more than half of adolescents access online social networking sites more than once a day, a positive sense of connection, feeling comfortable about self would be expected. It is reasonable therefore to expect that acceptance and integration in these online settings would be indicated.

This study revealed some differences in the ways that boys and girls use Facebook, with girls who use Facebook more often indicating higher levels of emotional difficulties and public self, but also higher levels of fitting in and comfortable relationships with others online. The reasons for these differences and specific links to wellbeing require further investigation. Lenhart and Madden (2007) conducted a survey which resulted in the notion that older teenage girls utilize social networking websites to strengthen their current friendships while their male counterparts use them as a way to flirt and find new friends.

Online social networking is an integral part of the lives of young people. Further research is needed to highlight the positive influences of this medium in building social and emotional wellbeing.
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