Social Networking and Young People:

Privileging Student Voice

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Abstract

Young adolescents today are growing up in an environment rich in digital technology. They are highly connected with their technology always on and always on them. In this digital culture there are consistent concerns regarding the impact of this new way of being, and adult-generated concerns include perceived diminished childhood, bullying and fear which dominate much of the widely held understanding of the digital culture which these young people inhabit. In this culture of fear and in the context of schools, adult-generated strategies for enhancing the experience of young people engaging with social networking is generally the norm and student voice is repressed.

In contrast, this study set out to explore the experience of young people with respect to their engagement with social networking, through the privileging of student voice rather than assuming that adult knowledge be applied. In summary, this research set out to investigate what young people in a single site school were engaged in online and what they valued about using SNSs. The research sought to determine what it is that young people (as those individuals immersed in a digital culture) report would be helpful to them and what this might mean in terms of recommendations for school program and policy development.

Keywords: social networking sites, student voice, digital culture.

Introduction

The development of resilience in young people as they traverse the middle years of schooling is a crucial aspect of identity development, both offline and online. The privileging of student voice is necessary in the facilitation of supporting young people through these formative years, and thus eliciting genuine student voice rather than simply including students as participants in the data collection process was key to this study. Utilising the three factors necessary to facilitate student voice – authenticity, inclusion, and power – as the primary lenses for the study, provided a focus on genuine student engagement.

This study set out to provide an opportunity for the expression of student voice, particularly the needs of young people in regard to their engagement with social networking use as they negotiate their lives in a technology-rich world. It identified many similarities in thinking between young people and adults, as well as identifying divergence and hence areas that require addressing.

For the purpose of this study, the term "young people" will be used when referring to adolescent students in the middle years, which pertains to students from Years 7 to 9. Along with the literature concerning the phase of young adolescence, there is also a great deal of information available that characterises the nature and needs of the changing generations, and especially how generational location aligns with digital culture (Bennett, 2008; Jenssen,

Gray, Harvey, DiClemente, & Klein, 2014). A cultural feature of digital natives is the natural existence of social networking as a part of their social experience.

With the development, refinement and widespread adoption of social networking sites (hereafter referred to as SNSs), the capacity for young people to engage with this specific technology is relatively easy. Even though they now live in a digital world, ironically, young people today experience many of the same challenges and issues as the generations that preceded them. The development of identity, managing strangers and the practices of youth being perceived as puzzling by their parents is not new. However, there is a perception that these concerns are all new and the product of recent times (Livingstone, 2008). It seems that young people are fundamentally the same as previous generations, but with new tools at their disposal. As Thomas (2007) notes, "[W]hat children do online is essentially similar to what they do offline: make friends, talk about their interests, engage in hobbies and pursuits that interest them, and have fun" (p. 180).

The need for identity establishment is a driving factor among young people, as is the need to create a strong sense of self through acceptance within peer groups and within the wider community. During this time of identity generation, it is common for the peer group to assume a greater level of influence, sometimes more so than family, in determining success via acceptance of the new identity or rejection via isolation of the individual from the peer group (Bahr, 2007; Kuem, 2017).

The need for young people to establish their identity is not new. What has changed is the ways in which they can do so. Digital technology provides a constantly changing platform for

experimenting with identity formation. For example, building a profile page on a SNS may be seen as an "initiation rite", part of "coming of age", and affords young people with another platform from which they can learn how to manage their impression (Boyd, 2008; Liu, 2017). Identity formation is an important skill required when moving from the realm of childhood to adulthood.

A key focus for young people is the formation of identity and how they go about constructing their various identities to suit the different aspects of their lives within "various social contexts: social, fantasy, role playing: and for various purposes: leadership, learning, power, rebellion, and romance" (Thomas, 2007, p. 1; Boyd, 2008). These contexts and themes have remained consistent over time. What has changed is that digital culture has now created an alternative vehicle through which these contexts and themes can be enacted. The vehicle is no longer the same as in previous generations, thus creating a divide, otherwise known as a digital divide, due to lack of experience and related understanding by adults. The "selfie" is an example of the way the digital divide might be easily represented, where young people today are prolific takers and sharers of digital images of themselves on SNSs (hence the name selfie), whereas their parents would mostly have had less abundant and more formal photos taken of them at the same age to be shared only amongst close friends and family (Levin, 2014).

As Thomas (2007) notes, our "children's online lives are intimately connected to their sense of self and their developing identities as subjects of the new media age" (p. 2). Online profiles that young people create within the various SNSs provide a good example of this. Their colourful and animated profile pages are the digital version of the stereotypical

teenager's bedroom where young people display their likes and identity. Where in previous times young people would decorate their bedroom walls with posters, photos, and so on, they now also have the ability to display this information digitally (Boyd, 2008). Whilst the need to share this personal information in a public way may be puzzling for adults, it is regarded as essential by young people who want to be seen (Tufeki, 2008).

The greatest difference in identity representation is that when presenting an identity online, the actual physical constructs that describe us in real life, such as appearance, gender, ethnicity, age, fashion sense, tattoos, and so on, can be constructed online to be as we wish they were, not necessarily how they are. Thus the identity is formed more by the text used and this becomes more of an important factor in identity representation (Thomas, 2007). Young people develop their virtual presence by "writing themselves into being" (Boyd, 2008, p. 129). They develop their identities with every word that they write, with every photo, video, blog entry, image, and audio file they add to their profile pages. Whilst this may mean that online profile pages may not always provide a true personal representation, they do allow for risk taking through trial and error.

Online identity representation allows young people a sense of control as they can add, change, and eliminate aspects of their profile that they consider unsuccessful. The negative aspect of online identity representation is that the lack of face-to-face interaction means that the impression made via this digital body is more open to misinterpretation (Boyd, 2008; Pangrazio, 2013). This study aims to determine which online aspects generate the most concerns for young people and what online assistance they require.

For young people, identity seeking and validation, along with the need to test boundaries through risk taking, is central to their development. Validation and acceptance is sought, not from adults, but rather from peers (Beaumont, 2009). This then perpetuates a lack of understanding by adults regarding the issues that pertain to young people as they develop their identities. This study seeks to privilege student voice in order to understand from the young person's perspective both the positive and negative aspects they perceive influence them as part of their digital culture. A strong sense of identity, online and offline, is a key factor in developing resilience within young people.

Yet, research from the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) is generally undertaken from the risk management paradigm, focusing on cyber safety, and looking at the dangers of online predators and cyber bullying of students and strategies to assist in keeping children safe (ACMA, 2011a, 2013), rather than the social benefits of digital tools and how the tools form a part of establishing and shaping identity and relationships that young people typically traverse during these formative years. This presents a quandary for educators who are keen to utilise the tools digital technology offers, yet cognisant of the perceived and/or real safety challenges.

Students have access to a vast array of SNSs and can make contact 24 hours a day, 7 days a week via their computers, mobile phones, gaming consoles and other readily available devices. Many maintain a "24/7" vigil. Australia features as having one of the highest mobile phone ownership rates in the world (Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT], 2015), resulting in a highly digitally connected society. Internationally, Australians are renowned as early adopters of digital technology, and this effect impacts on

all age groups (DFAT, 2015). Of note, 89% of young Australians own a mobile phone and 69% own a smart phone; 72% of young Australians go online more than once per day (ACMA, 2014a).

Current media reports, which are often inflammatory and sensational in terms of the use of SNSs, have generated fear and alarm regarding their use. The focus of research is typically cyber safety and online stranger danger (ACMA, 2009a, 2013; Barrett-Maitland, 2016). Many schools are implementing policies and programs that relate to the cyber bullying and online stranger danger aspects. Eliciting student voice is necessary in order to develop policies and programs that will provide effective guidance and support to young people as they develop their sense of identity and resilience, thus enabling them to navigate successfully the world in which they live. In particular, the pros and cons from their perspective, what they feel they need, and also how parents, teachers and schools can help young people with their virtual and real-life interactions.

Research methods

This research aimed to explore the experiences of young people and to determine their engagement in SNSs, in a unique case study. Specifically, students aged from approximately 12-16 years, in the middle years of schooling (Years 7-9), are the subject of this study as they constitute the years where rapid growth and development, identity formation and establishing practices associated with social networking occur.

A case study approach was employed thereby enabling a rich analysis in a unique context to be undertaken. Mixed methodology was utilised, combining the strengths of both qualitative

and quantitative methods. Specifically, a review of seven school-based documents was conducted, along with a survey of the entire cohort of Years 7, 8 and 9 students with 236 student participants. Following the survey, focus groups were conducted with students (n=10), teachers (n=8), and parents (n=4) of students in Years 7 to 9.

The data were analysed using a range of appropriate analytic techniques: the documents were analysed using document analysis; the surveys were analysed via basic descriptive statistics; and the focus group data were analysed using Leximancer to conduct content analysis. In each analytic technique there was a continuous focus on privileging student voice and the analysis of teacher and parent focus groups sought to identify areas of consistency and to highlight areas of contrast with those of student data collected in the surveys and focus groups.

It is acknowledged that the case study approach adopted in this study has limitations; nevertheless, it provides rich insight into one school context, with close-grained mapping and analysis of issues, tensions and priorities that are likely to be of concern to many. Hence, the insight gained from this study may be more widely generalised, and could be applied to a wide range of school sites and settings.

Findings

This study provided insights into the perceptions of young people regarding their online interactions, particularly with SNSs. Ruddock and Fielding (2006) nominate three key elements for genuine student voice: authenticity, inclusion, and power. Merely eliciting student views does not privilege student voice. There needs to be adequate follow up so that

student perceptions and recommendations are responded to, in order for student voice to be genuine.

This research study was *authentic,* as student perceptions from the data in the survey and focus groups were gathered and responded to, and form the basis of the summary and conclusions presented. This research study considered the *inclusion* of student voice by addressing the silence or absence of student voice as well as including the whole cohort rather than just a select few. This research study also attempted to privilege student voice by recognising the *power* constructs within the data-collection phase.

In this study, three main data sources were used: document review, survey, and focus groups. The document review highlighted that the documents were written primarily from an authoritative and legalistic frame of reference and as such tended to reinforce the fear-based paradigm held by some adults regarding the use of SNSs. It also highlighted the lack of power, inclusion and authenticity within the documents, in other words, the total lack of inclusion of student voice.

The data utilised in this research have highlighted fourteen key points regarding the use of SNSs by young people, including both positive and negative aspects as well as areas for consideration for future support of young people within the realm of social networking.

Research has detailed concerns about the diminishing childhood of young people growing up in a digital age (McQueen, 2010a). Due to their constant connection to information and thus being more exposed to adult material and concepts, it has been suggested that our young

people are suffering from a loss of innocence by having to grow up too quickly. Gadlin (1978) disputes this by noting that our young people are experiencing the opposite by living an extended youth. Young people today are better educated, stay at home longer, and are more protected by their parents than any generation before them.

Data from this study highlighted that 12% of respondents spent more than 3 hours per day on SNSs and a further 23% of respondents reported that they spent between 1-3 hours per day on SNSs. This corresponded with ACMA (2013) research which showed that young people spend approximately 2.9 hours per day accessing the internet. Respondents in this study represented as typical in their time use and site use when compared with the wider research done by ACMA (2009b; 2013), which may support the transference of the recommendations to other similar settings.

Data confirmed that the young people involved in this study are using a wide range of SNSs, including some sites that are not age appropriate. In the vast majority, respondents reported that they were on age-appropriate sites and were using SNS for legitimate purposes, and that the most of their online experiences were positive. Respondents in this study also confirmed their reliance on SNSs to stay connected with their peers during out-of-school hours whilst they were at home, with 69% of respondents stating this as the greatest thing about SNS use, thus reinforcing Gadlin's (1978) perception that young people today are more protected than previous generations as they appear to have less physical freedom than young people of previous generations.

Young people and adults both recognised that privacy was an issue when using SNSs. However, the adults differed from the young people in that they felt that the young people did not have a clear and thorough understanding of what private versus public meant.

> "But everyone is so open and they share their private stuff. They put on their age, on their Skype status you can like scroll and there's a part where it says age and like where you live, and some people put up their real age and where they live." (John, Year 7)

Parents and teachers also made comment about the notion of privacy and expressed their concerns regarding this during the focus groups:

> "On Facebook there are a billion people out there who look at Facebook every day and if I put a billboard up on the M1 and put all of your private details on the billboard, would you like that?" (Edward, Parent)

Adults were concerned that young people were sharing via SNSs information that they considered to be private. This finding aligns with research of Collin et al. (2011) and Livingstone (2008). Research by Boyd (2008) and Livingstone (2008) proposes that young people describe their SNS profiles as private spaces for themselves and their friends and emphasise the need to keep this private from their parents. Young people in this study expressed their need for privacy on SNSs from their parents but did also acknowledge that friending parents provided a safety mechanism for them.

The majority of young people reported having no problems with their SNS use. The problems that did occur were reported as largely having occurred in the home and not at school. Young people also felt, on the whole, that these problems did not transfer into the school setting.

Problems that were most prevalent included: cyber bullying; fight with friends; technical difficulties (including how to control privacy settings, un-tagging, spam); hacking of accounts and fake identities; inappropriate pictures; as well as stalkers and predators. The reported dangers or problems were consistent between adults and young people. The issue of "unknown friends" was a concern for adults and young people, as was timewasting (adult perception) or distracting (young people perception) and addiction to SNSs.

The high level of connectedness that young people now have has generated other areas of concern for adults. The large number of "friends" that young people now have on the SNSs has been an increasing cause for alarm by many adults (Bennett, 2008). Adults are worried about the safety of young people who share private information with unknown friends, perhaps putting themselves at risk (ACMA, 2009c). Some adults also perceive the need to have an extensive number of friends as narcissistic (Boyd, 2008; Livingstone, 2008). The focus group responses from adults in this study confirmed these findings.

The most important factor regarding SNS use for students was the ability to be connected to their peers. Even though all groups agreed that time spent on SNSs was a problem, the parents disagreed with the perception of young people regarding the need to have 24/7 contact. Parents thought it was detrimental whilst young people felt it was essential, as identified in parent Ella's comments.

> "The biggest thing I would say is a problem with Facebook is time. The time that it soaks up. Once they start to build up a big network of friends on Facebook and everyone's posting things up and putting up different things to look at and that sort of

thing, they could spend 24 hours a day literally looking at all of the different things that are getting posted by all these other people, and that to me is the biggest problem, is the amount of time it soaks up without them realising that time is gone."

Ironically, Adam sums up the need for young people to stay connected whilst recognising the time taken and wasted in doing so.

"For me, social networking is not really important because like I think the only important thing that social networking can be used for is to contact friends and tell them about things that you're planning to do or ask them for some, maybe some help sometimes but other than that I don't think it should be used for messaging and stuff because that's just wasting your time." (Adam, Year 9)

Girls used SNSs primarily to talk to friends. Although they had few concerns, they commented that they were most concerned about paedophiles. Boys also used SNSs primarily to talk to friends and whilst they also had few concerns, they were most concerned about cyber bullying and privacy.

Whilst much of the literature refers to the negative aspects of SNS use (ACMA, 2007, 2011a), there is increasing evidence of the many positive aspects of online interaction, including improved educational outcomes, facilitating supportive relationships, identity formation, promoting a sense of community and wellbeing (Collin et al., 2011).

For the young people in this study, the most important factor regarding SNS use was the ability to be connected to their peers. This online "anytime" access to their peers and friendship groups is a crucial part of their identity development as young people seek

validation and acceptance from their peers rather than from adults (Beaumont, 2009). It also provides them with quick and easy access to each other. Data from the focus groups held with young people highlighted their need to be connected to each other at all times as being "essential" to them. They also reported their preference for SNS sites, such as Skype, which allowed for chat facilities that were easy to use and were free or cheap to access.

Overwhelmingly, young people were consistent in their belief that they did not have any problems and/or did not require assistance at home or at school with SNS use. When asked what type of assistance they may require from home and school, *support* was the most prominent response.

If they were to seek assistance, young people ranked parents, friends, teachers and then no one. Boys aligned with this ranking; however, girls ranked parents, friends, no one, and teachers lastly.

Both adults and young people felt that young people were well informed about the dangers of SNS use. However, young people were more concerned with the immediate dangers or problems whereas the adults were more concerned with long-term issues.

Young people had a positive view of their perception that "they know it all", whereas the adults had a negative perception of young people "knowing it all".

Young people agreed with the adults that the monitoring of their sites by their parents was a good protective factor or safety mechanism for them.

Young people expressed that sharing of stories or scenarios by other young people who had actually experienced difficulties in real life on SNSs would be of the most benefit to them.

Both young people and adults could clearly articulate that there were good points and bad points to SNS use.

Furthermore, issues arising from SNS use was reported as incidents having largely occurred in the home and not at school and included cyber bullying and technical difficulties. The study also revealed the positive aspect of social networking as predominantly the ability for young adolescent people to be connected to their peers. This study also noted minor differences when data were considered through the lens of gender. Support was requested by young people in the form of case studies or scenarios led by other young people who had experienced actual difficulties when using SNSs.

Summary

The eliciting of student voice has made a valuable contribution to the school referenced in this case study through the implementation of a set of recommendations which have privileged student voice. These recommendations may also be transferable to the wider field. Emerging from the study, the following six recommendations have been framed:

1. The school should continue with the structured cyber safety training and this training should be ongoing and regular for young people both in the primary school setting and the high school setting. The content of this training should also consider topics as requested by the students. There are a plethora of cyber safety training programs that

are being implemented nationally and internationally. It is recommended that these programs also be considerate of topics suggested by the young people for whom they are designed.

2. Cyber safety training, for the school and the wider field, should include the safety aspects such as online stranger danger, managing security settings, and cyber bullying strategies, but should also include training in online *netiquette* in order to develop understanding of appropriate communication and interactions between young people, to understand the differing purpose of differing SNSs, and to maintain a positive digital footprint.

3. School documentation relevant to use of electronic resources should be reviewed and re-written within a positive and proactive frame of reference rather than a fear-based position. These documents should be re-written in order to make them clear to both young people and adults so that they are more accessible to the young people to whom they refer. Including young people as part of this process would assist in making these documents more relevant to them. All schools should consider reviewing their documentation to determine the inclusion or absence of student voice.

4. All schools should continue to provide training and information to parents to assist them in their knowledge and understanding of strategies they can use in the home regarding the online interactions of their children. These strategies should encourage active supervision and open and positive dialogue between young people and their parents.

5. The school should develop a peer mentoring model as part of its Personal Development Program where young people who have experienced issues relating to online interactions lead discussion sessions with other young people. These sessions would be scenario

based, providing young people with real-life situations and practical solutions and strategies for managing similar issues if they were to arise. These scenarios should include cyber bullying, contact from unknown friends, sharing of inappropriate content, managing positive digital footprints, and possible consequences for breaching state and federal communication laws. The scenarios should be developed in consultation with the young people. All schools should consider determining avenues for relevant scenario-based training within their structures that are driven by the needs and choices of young people in order to ensure that training is applicable to the young people for whom it is intended.

6. The school should develop a peer coaching model as part of its Personal Development Program where young people with technical expertise train other young people. The purpose of this is to develop a higher level of technical proficiency, particularly in the areas of privacy and security settings on the various SNSs young people are utilising, as well as to develop a better understanding of the varying purposes on different SNSs in order to engage in SNSs that are most suitable to them. The areas of training should be developed in consultation with the young people. All education providers of young people should consider providing access to technical training related to SNS use, driven by the needs as directed by young people who are experiencing technical difficulties.

Conclusion

This research has sought to enhance previous research by exploring the experiences of young people and their engagement in SNSs by privileging student voice, specifically to determine

the influence electronic communication, in particular social networking, is having on young people.

This research has helped to widen the scope of reference regarding SNS use by establishing both the positive and negative aspects of SNS use as identified by young people and adults, and has acknowledged similarities and differences based upon gender and age. Online communication is not a short-lived phenomenon but rather a popular and legitimate form of communication for young people and adults alike. Learning how to manage oneself in a positive manner, with appropriate *netiquette*, is a necessary life skill for all people accessing this as a form of communication. This is also true of the need to understand how to create suitable digital artefacts and maintain an appropriate digital footprint.

This research has added to the field as it has helped to establish that young people do want and need assistance in developing appropriate skills and knowledge that will allow them to have positive online experiences. It is important that adults do not assume that young people are experts in this arena simply because they have "grown up digital". It is important that adults do not assume what assistance young people need, but rather ensure that young people have a voice and legitimate say in what that assistance encompasses. It is important for adults to assist young people in their online lives as they would in their offline lives, since for young people these two are no longer separate. A balance between safety skills and online life skill training is needed to assist young people in their development as safe and productive online citizens.

A change from the fear-based paradigm where the internet is considered to be a bad place, to a balanced view and understanding of both the necessary safety aspects as well as the many positive benefits of online interaction, is needed. This will encourage young people and adults to work together to develop in our young people the skills necessary to be effective and positive digital citizens. Open and supportive dialogue between adults and young people is essential in encouraging young people to seek assistance when they need it without fear of being banned from their technology use.

By eliciting student voice with the aim of privileging it, this research has reinforced that for young people, there is no offline and online living. These two worlds are one for them, and increasingly for adults as well. Continual collaboration, dialogue, support and development, at school and at home, is needed to ensure that young people grow up with developmentally appropriate skills and understandings which allow them to be safe and to manage their interactions in a positive manner.

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