How Young Adults Use Social Media to Cope with Parental Divorce

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Abstract

Social media sites are becoming increasingly popular go-to sources of information for learning how to cope with personal difficulties. The purpose of our study was to gain insights into how to design social media messages and strategies to help young adults cope with issues related to parental divorce. Our research question focused on how the use of social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) was used by young adults to cope with the divorce of their parents. The participants of this study were 18-25 year olds with divorced parents. This sample was collected because we felt people in this age group had a clear understanding of why their parents may have divorced. We asked questions about three major topics:

1) What types of social media are they currently using?

2) What were the most difficult issues they faced in regards to their parents' divorce and how did they cope?

3) Did they find any helpful information to cope on the Internet, and if so, what was it?

From our analyses, we expect to be able to identify social media strategies to help get science-based information to young adults who have divorced parents.

Methods

The data were collected through an online survey on a university campus in the Midwest United States. Students from a university as well as young adults from around the world were recruited through posters, announcements in classrooms, and through social media. In some classes, professors chose to offer extra credit as an incentive for students to participate in the study.

Questions were asked about their parents' divorce and their Internet use, along with demographic information.

We gathered data from a total of 245 18-25 year olds from around the world, including some participants from Europe and Australia as well as the United States.

Individual Characteristics of Participants by Sex		
	Male N=63	Female N=182
Ethnicity		
African American or Black	5%	14%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%	1%
Asian or Asian American	19%	11%
Hispanic, Latina, or Latino	10%	10%
Caucasian or White	65%	60%
Other	2%	4%
Age when Parents Divorced		
0-5 years old	16%	26%
6-11 years old	33%	26%
12-14 years old	24%	21%
15-18 years old	19%	21%
19-25 years old	8%	5%
Perceptions of Parents' Divorce Conflict		
High Conflict	35%	43%
Medium Conflict	41%	41%
Low Conflict	24%	13%
Other	0%	2%
Mother's Socioeconomic Status (while growing up)		
Lower Class (or poor)	19%	14%
Middle Class	68%	76%
Upper Class (or wealthy)	13%	10%
Father's Socioeconomic Status (while growing up)		
Lower Class (or poor)	17%	13%
Middle Class	63%	65%
Upper Class (or wealthy)	19%	23%

Geographic Location of Participants

0 — 653
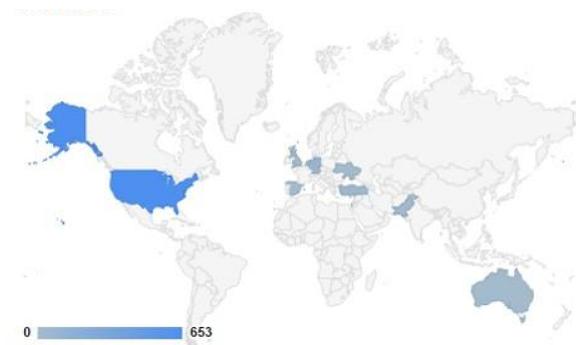
Results

### 1) What types of social media are they currently using?
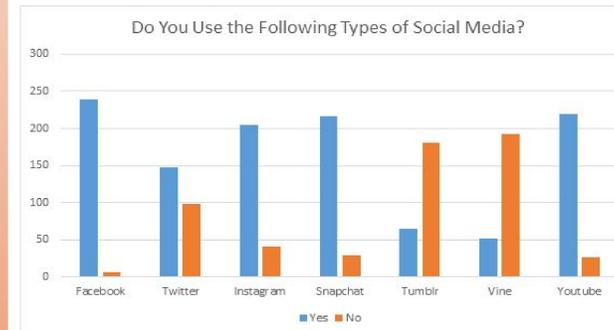
To gain an idea about the access our participants had to the Internet, we asked about their social media use. We found that the majority of our participants accessed multiple forms of social media on a regular basis. 58% said they used social media constantly throughout the day and 41% said they used it several times throughout the day. This age group is very engaged in social media. The top three social media sites that participants used the most were Facebook, YouTube, and SnapChat.

2) What were the most difficult issues they faced in regards to their parents' divorce and how did they cope?

Challenges	Mean	Number of Responses
Parents' arguing	2.59	233
Feeling caught in the middle	2.67	209
Parents' substance abuse	2.74	124
Not liking stepparent	2.79	86
Worries about future	2.81	230
Parent's abusive to each other	2.82	144
Personally feeling guilty	2.84	219

The lower the mean score the higher the difficulty of the challenge. Not all participants responded to the question, as some of the issues were not applicable to them. The top two challenges for participants coping with parental divorce were parents' arguing and feeling caught in the middle. Although the issues of parents' substance abuse and not liking stepparents were less frequently mentioned, these issues were a major difficulty for the participants who did mention them.

3) Did they find any helpful information to cope on the Internet, and if so, what was it?
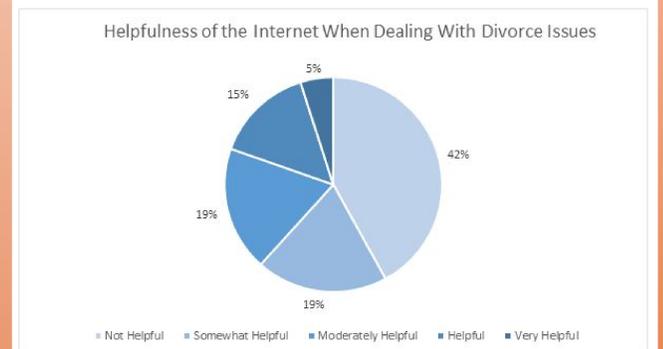
We asked about the helpfulness of the Internet when dealing with divorce issues and found that many participants did not find the Internet particularly helpful. When asked about seeking specific information about such issues, between 60-80% of participants said they seldom or never sought these types of help or information from the Internet. For example, 70% never sought information about support groups, 64% never sought information about parents' remarriage, and 58% never sought information on how to help siblings or how to deal with parental substance abuse. A previous independent search found little useful information for young adults about divorce issues.

Conclusions, Implications, and Future Directions

Our results revealed that young adults have a tendency to spend time on the Internet, however, they did not find the Internet useful in searching for information about coping with parental divorce. As such, we argue that program developers should foster innovative ways to reach and engage youth with evidence-based divorce education content.

Future directions could include the creation of websites and videos aimed at young adults and young adults coping with parental divorce. Another future direction could be comparing young adults' coping skills and social media use across different countries.

Acknowledgments