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## **Managing Peer Relationships Online - Investigating the use of Facebook by Juvenile Delinquents and Youths-at-risk**

### **ABSTRACT**

While extensive research has been conducted on young people's peer interaction via online communication, the focus has been on mainstream youths, with marginalized youth communities being understudied. To help address this inadequacy, the current study conducted interviews with Singaporean male juvenile delinquents ( $n=36$ ) to understand the role of online communication in their peer interactions and the salient characteristics of such interactions. Our findings show that Facebook was the principal tool of online peer interaction. However, given the particular circumstances of juvenile delinquents, online social networking presents issues that may compromise efforts to rehabilitate them. These include extending the time and opportunities for unstructured and unsupervised peer socialization, peer endorsement of delinquent acts and the pressure of having to display group loyalty in the online space. Even after rehabilitation, youths who attempt to distance themselves from their delinquent peers are challenged by the persistence of their online social networks.

*Keywords:* Internet, online social networks, Facebook, juvenile delinquents, youths-at-risk, youth rehabilitation, online risks

## **1. Introduction**

Extensive research has been conducted on young people's peer interaction via computer-mediated communication over the Internet and mobile phone, with the attention centered on mainstream youths. However, the use of mediated communication by marginalized youth communities such as juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk is still understudied. In light of rising Internet and mobile phone use amongst youths worldwide, coupled with the prevailing issue of delinquency and risk-taking among youths (Haynie, 2002), this is an issue of growing import that bears closer examination. As Skoric (2011) notes, "computer-mediated communication is hardly new but its growing ubiquity should prompt us to reexamine its role in social and political life" (p. 427). Thus, the relationship between online peer interaction and juvenile delinquency warrants closer examination.

Peer interaction among juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk has always been an issue of concern because delinquency has been traced to intense peer relationships among high-end risk-takers (Davis, 1999). Indeed, it has been consistently found that adolescents with delinquent peers are more likely to be delinquent themselves (Agnew, 1991) and that antisocial behavior amongst adolescents is more likely when they spend more time with peers than with adults (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). The impact which delinquent peers have on adolescents' delinquency is influenced by their sense of attachment to peers, time spent with peers, and the extent to which peers set pro-delinquency norms and model and/or reinforce delinquent behavior (Agnew, 1991; Boeringer, Shehan & Akers, 1991; Haynie, 2002; Matsueda, 1988). When embedded in a network of delinquent peers, an adolescent is exposed to the expectations, norms and

sanctions that either support or discourage delinquent behavior (Haynie, 2002). Furthermore, the more time an individual spends with peers, the more likely the occurrence of situational inducements to deviance, and consequently, higher rates of deviance (Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman & Johnston, 1996; Osgood, Anderson & Schaffer, 2005). Individual motivations for delinquency within the context of the social group have also been scrutinized. It has been found that delinquents engage in 'reputation management', wherein their delinquent behavior is an assertion of their social identity and moral reputation amongst their peer network, and is often geared towards shoring up their popularity (Emler & Reicher, 1995). Notably also, popular adolescents have been found to be more likely to increase behaviors that receive peer endorsement, such as substance abuse and other delinquent behaviors (Allen, Porter, McFarland, Marsh & McElhaney, 2005). In the Singapore context specifically, juvenile delinquents tend to be socialized rather than characterological in that they offend due to close attachment to their peer groups and legitimize their group membership by conforming to group norms (Choi & Lo, 2004). The social nature of juvenile delinquency in Singapore is most pronounced in the activities of organized gangs, with territorial divisions drawn along the lines of residential neighborhoods, clubs or shopping malls (Lim, 2007; Othman, 2006; Wong, 2001). Their most common offences are theft, gang fights, loan-sharking and harassment (National Youth Council, 2009; Singapore Police Force, 2010).

In an era where youths' peer interaction is increasingly taking place via computer-mediated communication over the Internet, hereafter online communication, it is therefore crucial to understand the role of the Internet in the peer interaction of

delinquent youths and youths-at-risk. Hence, the present study seeks to address the following research questions:

**RQ1.** What role(s) does online communication play in the peer interaction of juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk?

**RQ2.** What are the salient characteristics of these youths' online peer interactions?

As an urbanized city-state with high rates of technology adoption, Singapore is a pertinent setting for such a study. Internet penetration is close to saturation (IDA, 2010) and notably, 54% of Internet users aged 15-24 use social networks (IDA, 2011), while mobile phone ownership among Singaporean youth is at 85% (Synovate, 2010). The study's findings are thus of potential value to other urban settings with similar trends in technology adoption and youth development.

## **2. Literature review**

Existing literature has focused on young people's use of the Internet for peer interaction and identity formation.

As early as 2001, it was found that the most common use of the Internet among youth was to communicate with peers (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut & Gross, 2001). Indeed, "technological affordances of the Internet make it an effective tool in relationship maintenance and facilitation of social and civic activities" (Skoric & Kwan, 2011, p. 468). Livingstone (2002) noted that young people use online communication "to supplement rather than displace existing activities" (p. 7). Today, online social networking sites in particular have become well-established fixtures for peer sociality

for youth in many countries today. More recent studies have shown that youths' adoption of social networking sites (SNSs) such as MySpace and Facebook is related to their everyday offline social life – young people use their online profiles to communicate and stay in touch with existing friends or someone they already know rather than to meet new people online (e.g. boyd, 2008; Ito et al., 2009; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2011) further noted that within online peer interactions, youths employ 'social information-seeking'- a suite of behaviors that revolve around using the site to discover more information about someone with whom the user shares some kind of offline connection. With regard to the Singapore context in particular, Skoric and Kwan (2011) found that mediated socializing through platforms such as online gaming and SNS can help individuals to create new ties that extend beyond pre-existing offline ties. There have also been calls to move beyond discussing dichotomous 'online' and 'offline' social worlds in order to better appreciate how individuals integrate various communicative channels into their peer interaction routines (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2011). A recent study notes that young people are logged into SNSs for a significant portion of their time, and that these have "become spaces where much of the social activity of teen life is echoed and amplified" (Lenhart et al, 2011). Similarly, Albrechtslund (2008) refers to online social networking as a mixed world, given the overlapping relationships found therein. Thus, youth sociality practices online and offline are linked and social network sites should be viewed as "embodiments, stabilizations and concretizations of existing social structure and cultural meanings" (Ito, 2008, p. 402).

Another salient theme in the literature relates to identity formation and impression management on SNSs. Identity formation and presentation is both a cognitive and a social process for impression management by modifying behaviors to perform online whatever aspects of identity are chosen (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). For instance, Rosenberg and Egbert's (2011) study found that Facebook users who have a strong desire to be liked by others are likely to use self-promotion, damage control, and role-modeling tactics to be seen in a positive light; while Facebook users who tend to exploit situations and people for their personal benefit are not likely to employ role-modeling tactics, showing little concern for others and greater concern for themselves. Being liked by others is an important concern for adolescents because it is widely assumed that peer groups replace parents as their most important social influence (Zywica & Danowski, 2008; Utz, 2010). In the online environment, popularity would be dependent inter alia on youths' impression management strategies and how these can elicit positive social appraisals from peers. For instance, Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten (2006) found that youths can derive social self-esteem and well-being from their SNS use. Specifically, youths who reported receiving positive comments from friends posted on their page also reported good adjustment, thereby underlining the importance of positive peer evaluation online and popularity to youth well-being. Indeed, appropriate use of the Internet can be extremely edifying, and enhance its users' sense of well-being (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2005).

Another key to the blurring of boundaries between online and offline may be seen in the characterization by Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008) of Facebook as a 'nonymous' environment, in which the whole point is to be seen, not to remain

anonymous. Facebook users therefore claim their identities in the context of relationships that are anchored in the real world. This explains how the number of friends a user has can have implications for the impressions created among other users. For instance, Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman and Tong (2008) found that participants judge Facebook page owners on the basis of characteristics of the friends on the owners' pages, suggesting that youths evaluate peers through Facebook peer affiliations. SNSs support public displays of friendship and connection as well as anchor relationships to the real world (Merchant, 2012). Greenhow and Robelia (2009) also note that "within SNSs, the creation of online personal profiles and the formation of social networks impacts directly on the expression of identity and how identity is performed and reinforced" (p. 124).

### **3. Research method**

Juvenile delinquents in Singapore are predominantly male and below 16 years of age (The Subordinate Courts of Singapore, 2006). Based on this profile and the structure of Singapore's justice system which tries criminal suspects aged 18 and below as juveniles, we recruited male respondents aged 13 through to 18. 13 is the age where Singaporean youths enter secondary/high school and marks a coming of age where parents typically impose less supervision of their children. Institutional approval for our study was sought and obtained before our fieldwork commenced.

So as to capture the views of juvenile delinquents at various stages of the rehabilitation process, we approached four agencies: a counseling center for youths who have been identified by teachers and youth workers to be at risk of involvement in

delinquent activities, a low security residential rehabilitation home for juvenile offenders committing less serious crimes, a high security residential rehabilitation home for those committing more serious crimes and a counseling center which counsels youths who have completed rehabilitation and are attempting to re-integrate into society. The agencies recruited respondents from their pool of clients/residents. Parental consent and respondent assent were sought and obtained before the interviews commenced.

We developed a ‘delinquency lifestage’ framework to classify our sample into three categories: (i) identified as at-risk and undergoing counseling, (ii) in low or high security rehabilitation and (iii) completed rehabilitation and receiving counseling while re-integrating. With the exception of one post-rehab respondent who was employed, all other respondents were students in secondary schools, junior colleges or vocational institutes. To avoid identification, all respondents are referred to by code numbers. Table 1 summarizes the profiles of respondents for each of the three categories.

<b>Identified as at-risk and undergoing counseling, <math>n=5</math></b>
Age of respondents: 17-18 years Mean age: 17.8 years History of delinquency: involvement in theft, shoplifting
<b>In low or high security rehabilitation homes, <math>n=28</math></b>
Age of respondents: 13-18 years Mean age: 15.9 years History of delinquency: involvement in gang activity, substance abuse, assault, theft
<b>Completed rehabilitation and undergoing counseling while re-integrating, <math>n=3</math></b>
Age of respondents: 16-18 years Mean age: 17.3 years History of delinquency: involvement in gang activity, substance abuse, assault, theft

**Table 1** Respondents categorized by delinquency lifestage



We interviewed the youths using a series of semi-structured questions about how they used ICTs in their everyday lives for family interaction and peer socialization, their individual and shared ICT usage habits and the gratifications which they derived from them. Given the predominance of digital media in the lives of Singaporean youths, our interviews centered on the youths' Internet and mobile phone use. We probed into how they used different communications platforms to interact with the significant individuals in their lives. To obtain a more holistic picture of our respondents, we sought to situate our respondents' Internet and other ICT use within the broader context of their personal histories. To this end, we collected information on our respondents' family background, familial and peer relationships, performance in school, past engagement in criminal or delinquent activity and their response to counseling and rehabilitation. This information was provided to us via discussions with the youths' counselors prior to the interviews with the youths, wherein brief notes were taken but no audio-recordings were made.

The interviews were conducted by the four authors, either individually or in pairs, at the rehabilitation homes and youth counseling centers between December 2010 and July 2011. Each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed, before being analyzed together with the background information on each respondent. The "meaning condensation" approach was used to analyze the interview transcripts (Kvale, 1996). Large amounts of interview text were compressed into brief statements representing the meta-themes and sub-themes which emerged from the coding process. The meta- and sub-themes included: social network enlargement/extension (discriminating/ indiscriminate); social network maintenance (online/

offline/ proxy/ editing/ auditing/ restoration); social network dynamics (responsibility fulfillment/ obligation management/ conflict management). As English is the working language and the language of instruction in Singapore, all interviews were conducted in English. In informal conversational settings, Singaporeans tend to speak Singlish, a vernacular English-based creole infused with smatterings of other local languages. In cases where respondents used Singlish expressions, explanatory information is appended to the quotes that are reproduced in this article. (Where verbatim interview exchanges between interviewer and respondent are reproduced, “R” refers to the respondent while “I” refers to the interviewer.)

#### **4. Results**

In terms of Internet access, almost all of our respondents owned home computers and enjoyed ready Internet access mostly at home, at school or Wi-Fi hotspots. Due to the systematic incorporation of the Internet into the Singapore education system (Lim, 2009), all our respondents were familiar with the Internet and did not report difficulties with using it. Across the sample, their online repertoire comprised the same few activities which, in decreasing order of interest, were: Facebook, viewing YouTube videos, checking out websites related to personal interests such as sports, and when required, going online to complete school assignments or seeking online information for the same purpose. Unless they were in rehabilitation homes, all of our respondents used Facebook daily. For all of our respondents, almost all their Facebook friends were their peers, constituted principally by friends from school, the neighborhood and hobby groups, as well as mere acquaintances who were friends of friends. Only a small

minority mentioned using Facebook to friend people with whom they had had no face-to-face encounters or mutual acquaintances.

#### *4.1 Youths identified as at-risk and undergoing counseling*

The youths interviewed in this category had been referred for counseling by the police after having committed crimes such as theft. As first-time offenders, they were spared criminal records and incarceration in rehabilitation homes. However, as part of their rehabilitation, they were required to attend scheduled counseling sessions with state-appointed counselors. Reoffending and failure to attend counseling would result in their being sent to a rehabilitation home. Nightly curfews were also imposed on the more serious offenders in this category and these curfews had to be strictly observed. Besides having to adhere to curfews and their personal counseling regimes, youths in this category had considerable autonomy over their time and movements because they resided at home. Given these circumstances, respondents in this category were largely free to interact with their peers but had to avoid a further slide into delinquency which could raise the risk of arrest and residence in a rehabilitation home.

Since they stayed at home, these youths also had unrestricted access to media devices and platforms as long as their parents permitted and provided for them. It should be noted that most youths were not subjected to parental restrictions on their media use. Typically, the youths in this category had personal mobile phones which they used to keep in touch with family and friends, and also had Internet access both at home and in school. Our respondents' fraternization with peers followed a typical sequence. After school hours, they would coordinate gatherings with these friends using their

mobile phones or Facebook, with the customary gathering points being the ground floor of apartment buildings, playgrounds or LAN game shops in the neighborhood. When meeting new acquaintances, phone numbers and/or email addresses would be exchanged, following which 'friending' one another on Facebook would follow. In the process of interacting with some delinquent peers, our respondents were then drawn into delinquent activities such as theft, glue sniffing and gang fights that were initiated through face-to-face encounters or invitations issued via mobile phone or Facebook.

Our respondents used Facebook daily for posting, reading and commenting on status updates, arranging meetings and chatting online with peers. Through such actions, peer relationships were maintained and nurtured. Given the publicness of Facebook, and our respondents' not putting any particular effort into keeping peer-to-peer communication private through personal messages or the use of Facebook groups, peer interaction tended to be conducted in a highly demonstrable, transparent manner, occasionally with power hierarchies explicitly identified. In the case of AR5 for example, he and his friends 'tagged' themselves in Facebook as famous rappers such as 50 cent, Lloyd Banks and Young Buck to denote whom the group's leaders were and which of them commanded more 'respect' among their peers. AR5 was discernibly proud that he had been tagged as Young Buck, indicating that he was one of those *'that everybody looks up to'*. Such actions also allowed the youths to assert a group identity, with several respondents reporting that they would add the same prefix or suffix to their individual Facebook profile names, or by including their gang name, logo or 'secret' numerical code in their individual profile information.

Besides relationship networks and peer linkages being public and transparent, peer dynamics were as well. Arguments were played out for everyone in the peer group and extended social network (friends of friends) to view via Facebook status updates and comments. AR1 in particular shared that he positioned himself as a leader among his friends – someone whom they could turn to for help in mediating fights, both online and offline. He explained that on Facebook, he often stepped in to placate his friends if they were arguing on one another's Facebook walls. Another affordance of Facebook which facilitated peer interaction was its accessibility and perpetuity in that it was easily available and perpetually on, as long as you had an Internet connection. This affordance was exploited by the respondents who were placed under curfews. Via services such as Facebook chat, even if our respondents had nightly curfews to observe, or had been prohibited by their parents from fraternizing with particular individuals, they could continue interacting with their friends in a way that did not arouse parental concerns. For example, AR4 had been placed under probation for committing theft, and was given a strict nightly curfew. Whereas he previously used to hang out with his neighborhood friends even at night, the same friends with whom he used to commit delinquent acts, now the curfew prevented him from doing so. Even so, their interactions could still continue via Facebook:

*R: If I never get a chance to meet them outside right, [over] Facebook I can talk to them.*

*I: So do you find that you use Facebook more now to talk to them than before?*

*R: Yah because of the curfew timing.*

*I: So before the curfew thing, you used to go out with them at night?*

*R: Not like, not every day. Like sometimes [when] I'm free then I'll go out with them around my place.*

AR4, under probation

#### *4.2 Youth in low or high security rehabilitation homes*

The respondents who were in rehabilitation were incarcerated in rehabilitation homes after having been caught for repeated criminal offences including substance abuse, gang-related violence, assault, theft and housebreaking. In Singapore, the rationale for residential rehabilitation of juvenile offenders is to remove them from the undesirable surroundings which may have contributed to their delinquency, while also making provisions for these youths' education and training so as to facilitate their re-entry into society. Those who had committed more minor offences were placed in low security rehabilitation homes while the more serious offenders were placed in high security ones. After a period of good behavior however, residents in both low and high security homes would be granted home leave on weekends, when they would be able to leave the residential rehabilitation home and return to their family homes for a limited period of time, typically 36 hours.

In terms of their media access and personal autonomy, there is a sharp contrast between the respondents' regulated lives at the rehabilitation home and their freedom of movement outside of it. While at the rehabilitation home, the boys do not have access to technology such as mobile phones or the Internet. Upon return to their family home over the weekends, they can enjoy Internet access as well as their personal mobile phones. Many respondents shared that when on home leave, they would immediately

use Facebook upon their return home to notify their friends that they were 'out' for the weekend, thus enabling them to maintain ties with their old network of friends. With one post, they were thus able to announce their weekend plans to all of their Facebook friends. They would also ensure that while they were on home leave, they would log into their accounts and renew their acquaintances with their friends or manage new friend requests that they had received in the interim, almost as though they had not been away. A few sought the assistance of their siblings, mothers or friends to engage in proxy maintenance of their Facebook accounts. Indeed, two respondents made a concerted effort to conceal the fact that they had been incarcerated: *"I don't want people to know [I am in a rehabilitation home] because like... (pause) I... [it's] not a very good thing to tell people"* (IR3, in high security rehab).

All the respondents in this category shared that before they entered rehabilitation, they would use Facebook for status updates and online chat. We asked them to share their process of friending people on Facebook. One respondent explained that he had been recruited into a gang as a consequence of their face-to-face and online interactions with gang members:

*"Sometimes you will have an outside friend [not from school], then when we see that we have mutual Facebook friend then, like sometimes when we go out with them right, then they will see their gang friends, then they talk. Then like that we [respondent and gang member] get to know each other. Then through that it's either he [gang member] add me on Facebook or I add him. After that,*

*the more frequently we talk, then as you talk you get closer, then you get recruited into the gang.*

IR8, in high security rehab

For this very reason, some other respondents were cautious about whom they included in their network of friends because of concerns that they might have gang affiliations and consequently attract police surveillance:

*I: If somebody sends you a friend request do you accept it or do you...*

*R: I view their profile first before accepting. You know like I choose my friends so those not so decent ones I'll usually say "sorry", send them a message or post "sorry I cannot add you for certain reasons" then I will just delete them [friend requests].*

*I: You were saying just now that you don't really want to associate with some of the gang members. What if they add you as friend then? Will you add them?*

*R: If I know them. But if I don't know them I will definitely view their profile and check if they are okay because Facebook, like I said, you can get into trouble... Not [only] friends, even the cops, the police also will add you in Facebook. So you better see, "who the heck is this guy man?", adding me [to his friend network]. So you must check it out in Facebook, you know.*

IR4, in high security rehab

However, not all of our respondents were equally cautious, with just as many being highly indiscriminate, virtually accepting all friend requests:



*I: How do you choose whom to add [to your social network] or whom to accept friend requests from?*

*R: Because last time I love[d] to add girls. Then now like, I go home [during home leave], I see I have 100 over requests then one by one I confirm them. I don't know them. I never see their face. I never see their name. I just confirm, confirm, confirm, confirm.*

IR1, in high security rehab

Motivations for being unselective and indiscriminate ranged from being able to know more girls, to widening their social circles in general simply because that was the purpose of participating in social networks: “Facebook is for making a lot of friends” (IR6, 16, in high security rehab).

Other respondents were concerned about surveillance of a different kind in that they were uncomfortable with having parents and guidance counselors in their social networks. Yet a small group of respondents managed this issue by managing multiple Facebook accounts such as IR8 for example:

*R: This [good] account I do it for family and friends that are close to me. My bad account I do it (laughs) for my crew, my dancing team and all those, you can call it the bad guys, friends, lalaland...all those things.*

*I: So what kinds of things do you post on your two accounts?*

*R: The good account I will definitely post the good things, the bad account for sure have bad comments, or those comments that are out of this world. I post a lot of things, those clubs...my mum knows I club, drink, smoke, but a few*

*things she doesn't know. So those are in my other [bad] account. Okay my good account I only accept friends who are studying, praying...My bad account is for my club, bikes, gang...*

**IR8** to change in proofs to **IR4** , in high security rehab

Above and beyond the process of making friends via Facebook, we asked our respondents what they appreciated and/or disliked about their Facebook use. Many respondents enjoyed giving and receiving peer affirmation via Facebook:

*They [my friends] like will write [on Facebook] "on this day I am sad because I just failed my exam". Then from there my friends all support and say "Relax. Fail one exam only. Next year still have, next exam still have [another chance to pass]"*.

**IR5**, in high security rehab

*I want to see like [whether] my pictures [that I posted on Facebook received] any comments. Like yesterday I just took [and posted] pictures I also want to see the comments... Yeah I feel good [when I see the comments]. They make me feel proud of myself, like they sometimes say "wah your girlfriend so pretty" like that.*

**IR1**, in high security rehab

Some respondents related seeing peers post photos or updates of their gang-related activities. For example, IR1 shared that someone from his peer network posted pictures of himself posing with illegal weapons and these elicited responses of awe from other users:

*R: A lot ah. Say like ... [they show how they have] the samurai sword. Sometimes the rotitoh. Rotitoh are Malay type of word for one type of parang (machete). Rotitoh...a lot [of them have].*

*I: Oh these are all illegal weapons. How do they get them?*

*R All gang members [have] a lot ah. Gang members [have] a lot....So then they take pictures holding these [weapons].*

*I: So when you see your Facebook friends having pictures like this do you ever comment or say anything?*

*R: No, I just see like they 'step power' (demonstrate their power), like they like to show off, then I don't 'Like', just ignore.*

*I: Oh you ignore. So you don't put any post there.*

*R: Never post.*

*I: But do you see their [Facebook] friends posting any comments about them when they post pictures like that?*

*R: Yeah like they 'woogi' ah, how to say ah, they praise them. 'Wah like you power [powerful] ah!" like that like that like that. Praise them ah!*

IR1, in high security

rehab

It should also be noted that respondents in this category were in rehabilitation and were thus being encouraged to actively turn over a new leaf and put their delinquency behind them. Many respondents expressed an intention to do so but explained that they found it challenging because of issues of gang affiliation and loyalty:

*“To say openly and truthfully, leaving them [the gang] is like leaving my family”* (IR4, in high security rehab). Another respondent with similar sentiments explained that he was not prepared to completely withdraw from his social network by starting a new Facebook account, or by eliminating negative peers from his existing Facebook network by ‘defriending’ them. Instead, to introduce some distance between himself and members of his former gang, he posted a status update to signal his intention to make a clean break from his delinquent past:

*I: Alright, you want to make a clean break from them [negative peers].*

*R: Yeah.*

*I: But you can still see everything that they are doing [via Facebook].*

*R: Yeah, I can see but my main purpose is I want them to see what I am missing ... I want them to show them, like tell them I change already. I don't want all this type of shit.*

*I: So that means you're telling them in two ways, is it? One you send the direct message...then the other thing is through your posts?*

*R: Yeah, through my post...like I say, “I'm sick and tired of this life. I just want to change”.*

*I: So you put that as your status update.*

*R: Yeah, either they get it or don't get it.*

IR8, in high security rehab

Similarly, another respondent who had resolved to mingle less often with negative peers used Facebook and its location-based Facebook Places “Check In” service to decide

which places to avoid: *“I also can through Facebook know where they are slacking (hanging out). Sometimes they will “check in”, at Ang Mo Kio, Cathay... then I know, I don’t go there.”* (IR8, in high security rehab)

#### *4.3 Post-rehabilitation youths receiving counseling while re-integrating*

The three youths in this category had completed their rehabilitation at a high security rehabilitation home, having previously been arrested on multiple occasions for substance abuse and theft. They were undergoing post-rehabilitation counseling at a youth counseling center and were either working or studying while staying at home with their families. Hence they enjoyed considerable freedom of movement as well as unbridled access to their personal mobile phones and the Internet. Seeking to re-integrate into society, these youths had to conscientiously steer clear of delinquency because they had spent an average of two years in rehabilitation and were thus the oldest of our respondents. They were close to reaching the age of 18, wherein if they were to reoffend and get arrested, they would be tried as adults and attract stiffer sentences for any crimes they were to commit. The respondents in the category were thus emphatic about wanting to start their post-rehabilitation life on a clean slate.

In terms of their media use, they were similar to respondents in other categories, avidly using Facebook and the mobile phone to keep in touch with their peers. Facebook was used to express emotions that were not uttered face-to-face but mediated: *“I can communicate with friends easily....they share their emotions on Facebook...Yeah, if they are angry then they write... sometimes they say vulgarities down there (on their status updates). Then I ask what’s wrong. Then they tell me.”* (PR2). He also

appreciated the fact that there was always someone online for him to chat with, estimating that at any one time, about 10 per cent, or about 40 of his 400 Facebook friends would be online and prepared to chat.

Given his desire to re-integrate into society, respondent PR1 sought to concentrate on his vocational training course so as to make a fresh start in life. He was extremely judicious about whom he befriended on Facebook because he wanted to keep out those whom he regarded as negative peer influences from his past. In fact, he had felt compelled to close an old Facebook account and open a new one to keep his account “clean”. However, since he retained the same mobile phone number from before his rehabilitation stint, he was still contacted by delinquent peers from his past and had to actively turn down many of their invitations to gatherings. PR3 had a similar experience with his mobile phone communications:

*I keep changing my [mobile phone] number because I don't want my old friends, like the bad guys to find me... so every time I will change my number just to run away from all my old friends. Because [these old friends will say] "eh you are my brother. Come lah. Let's go and drink". I will like... feel like pai seh (awkward). So I will go. Definitely I will go. So after that I just change my number. Then they can't contact me [anymore]. Then I will relax.*

PR3, post-rehab

He explained that these negative peers had many friends in common with him and that completely removing himself from his prior social network was unrealistic and impractical. Although mobile phone communication is not the focus of this paper, the

preceding accounts help to illustrate how peer networks that are sustained by Internet and mobile communications have some remarkable characteristics. In sum, the online and mobile phone interactions of our respondents provided an additional and alternative avenue for them to be in contact with delinquent peers.

## **5. Discussion**

**RQ1.** What role(s) does online communication play in the peer interaction of juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk?

Facebook, with its many affordances for social networking, status updates, photo sharing and online chat, was clearly the principal tool for our respondents' online peer interaction. Respondents who were not residing in rehabilitation homes used it on a daily basis, reflecting the salience of Facebook in the lives of Singaporean youths as evinced by earlier research (Skoric & Kwan, 2011). Even respondents who were in rehabilitation would access Facebook whenever they were on home leave, with some arranging for their accounts to be maintained on their behalf by trusted friends and family members. That proxy management of their online social network was deemed necessary and desirable also indicates the importance that Facebook plays in these youths' management of their peer relationships. Such proxy management sustained their online presence, enabling them to ensure the viability of their social ties despite being forcibly disembedded from their social contexts.

Notwithstanding the importance of Facebook in our respondents' lives, it should be noted that their peer interactions involved a mixture of online, mobile phone and face-to-face communicative practices as noted in prior work (Ellison, Steinfield &

Lampe, 2011; Ito, 2008; Skoric & Kwan, 2011). Resonating with Livingstone's (2002) observation, our respondents' online peer interactions supplemented rather than displaced their offline sociality, with face-to-face encounters preceding or following friending each other on Facebook. With regard to extending their social networks via Facebook, some respondents were careful not to rely solely on 'social information-seeking' (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2011) to discover individuals with mutual offline connections. Instead, some respondents who did not belong to organized gangs assiduously avoided befriending people with gang affiliations and who could thus invite police surveillance of their Facebook accounts. Such experiences indicate that these youths recognize that peer affiliations over SNS pose risks and may present adverse network effects.

Facebook also served as an additional platform for peer interaction. For youths in the at-risk category, specifically those who were bound by state-imposed curfews or parental restrictions aimed at limiting their fraternization with potentially negative peers, Facebook assumed special importance because it offered them an alternative platform for socializing that was accessible, discreet and less likely to arouse parental concern. Such online interactions enable delinquent youths to carve out adult-free online spaces where adult supervision is minimized. Similarly, respondents who managed multiple Facebook accounts for different social spheres so as to avoid 'context collapse' (Wesch, 2009) sought to minimize surveillance by parents, teachers and counselors. Such practices may compromise the successful rehabilitation of these youths considering that prior research indicates that delinquent behavior amongst adolescents



is likelier when more time is spent with peers than with adults (Schlegel & Barry, 1991) and particularly in situations of unstructured socialization (Osgood et al., 1996; 2005).

**RQ2.** What are the salient characteristics of these youths' online peer interactions?

Many of our respondents admitted to enjoying the peer interactions on Facebook, especially where peer support and affirmation was offered or received. Beyond such gratifications, our findings also indicate that some delinquent youths strategically use Facebook's highly visible, 'nonymous' environment (Zhao et al., 2008) to engage in identity formation and presentation (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). Indeed, there were accounts of youths who were gang members engaging in self-promotion (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011) by posting exploits of their illegal activities, some of which elicited peer endorsement in the form of positive comments. For delinquent youths, such acts are likely to be efforts in 'reputation management' (Emler & Reicher, 1995) aimed at raising their personal profile and standing among their peers. Arguably, when youths post their delinquent acts online and receive positive appraisals from Facebook peers, such peer affirmation may offer validation and encourage greater delinquency (Agnew, 1991; Boeringer, Shehan & Akers, 1991; Haynie, 2002; Matsueda, 1988).

It has also been noted that Facebook users judge one another on the basis of their peer affiliations (Walther et al., 2008). This is understandable given that the architecture of SNSs support public displays of friendship ties (Merchant, 2012). In this regard, another characteristic of our respondents' peer interactions via Facebook is the public display of loyalty and affiliation within peer groups and most often gangs. As Choi and Lo (2004) had observed of juvenile delinquents in Singapore, their sense of

attachment to their peer group is strong. To assert a group identity, several of our respondents would add the same prefix or suffix to their individual Facebook profile names, or by including their gang name, logo or 'secret' numerical code in their individual profile information. On the other hand, our findings also show that the publicness of peer interactions on Facebook can be exploited to express disassociation from the gang as evidenced by respondent IR8 who posted a status update about his intention to break away. Indeed, the persistence of the negative peer network is a troubling issue for youths who are trying to make a clean break from their delinquent pasts. The visibility and durability of online connections, and the ever-present possibility of being contacted by negative peers from one's past was another risk that respondents had to grapple with or learn to manage.

### *5.1 Conclusion*

Our study has sought to extend the field's understanding of youths' Internet use by focusing on this understudied population of juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk. As our findings suggest, it is imperative to understand how juvenile delinquents and youths-at-risk use online communication in their management of peer relationships so that efforts to rehabilitate them are not compromised. In so doing, we can appreciate and recognize the social mechanisms that may be facilitated or encouraged by the Internet, and discover ways to help reduce these youths' exposure to and participation in delinquency in order to increase their well-being. Just as online peer affiliations can result in social affirmation and emotional support, they can also expose youths to shared undesired content and negative peer influence. As Livingstone (2008) notes, youths

must negotiate subtle connections between risk and opportunities in their use of social network sites and the ability to do so successfully can enhance their well-being.

### *5.2 Limitations*

Our study has several limitations. With a larger sample size, there could have been a greater possibility of eliciting a wider spectrum of experiences related to peer interactions on Facebook . Also, the addition of offline participant observation would have added a layered perspective to the analysis of online practices, especially given the objective of grounding the research in concentric circles of context. Even within the examination of online practices, it might have been beneficial to engage in real-time observations of SNS in-use, rather than relying solely on self-report and revelations of selected parts of SNS profiles. Indeed many of these were considered in the initial research design. However, this is a difficult population to gain access to, much less study in great ethnographic detail. Even with institutional support not many youths came forward to be interviewed, and the researchers were careful not to exert any implicit coercive influence, mindful of the sensitive nature of the youths' backgrounds. The youths who did consent to participate were guarded in their disclosures, possibly the result of repeated encounters with the police. The institutional setting itself may have prevented more disclosures, emphasizing as it did the power difference between the youths and the adults they were speaking with, as well as their lack of freedom. Ethical concerns prevailed over empirical needs in any event of a conflict between the two.

### 5.3 Future research

To complement our understanding of Internet use from the youths' perspective, we are triangulating our current findings with a follow-up study of social workers who work with youths to garner their insights into their clients' use of the Internet and social media. We have also alluded to how the mobile phone is intricately woven into the communicative repertoire of youths in Singapore alongside physical and online interactions and how this could have implications for the delinquent youth peer (dis)association practices. Due to the focus of the special issue, we have concentrated on their online social practices but future work that explores the relationship between different communication platforms and its implications for youth well-being can be potentially productive.

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