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Adolescent Violence: The Risks and Benefits of Electronic Media Technology

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Abstract

This paper centres on the psychological effects new digital media, like the internet, have on adolescents. Although the internet has enormous benefits, it also poses a host of risks that can make adolescents vulnerable to victimisation and/or developing associated psychosocial problems. Characterisations of adolescents’ social relationships in the internet medium, as well as the investigation of the continuity between digital media literacy and online social behaviours, carry high relevance for developmental psychology. It is during the adolescent period that peer interactions arguably hold the greatest importance for individuals’ social and behavioural functioning.

Keywords: Cyberspace and Virtual Reality, Adolescents’ Online Identities, Electronic Violence, Digital Media Literacy:

1. Introduction

My interests as a researcher prompted me to take a close look at cyberspace, or the virtual world, and why adolescents get addicted to it. I consequently created my own avatar (for those who may not be familiar with the term – an avatar is a two- or three-dimensional graphical representation of oneself in the virtual world) (Chung, deBuys, & Nam, 2007).

To continue, I created my own avatar and entered cyberspace. I wanted to go places, but did not know where! The search engine offers a list of popular spots, but almost all of them are marked “mature” and involve some kind of sexual content, or they are places to party. I also found a variety of shops where you can buy avatar supplies, including shops devoted to sexual items and avatar bodies. It became clear rather quickly that adolescents take their avatars very seriously. They spend a great deal of time, effort and money designing them. Therefore this paper focuses on the effects of the internet and cyberspace on the psychological well-being of adolescents; topics include online identity, online relationships, personality types in cyberspace, transference in cyberspace, regressive behaviour in cyberspace and the influence of avatar creation on behaviour.

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2. Identity and role confusion

Most people are familiar with Erik Erikson’s eight stages of human development. At stage five, adolescents are in search of an identity that will lead them to adulthood (Harder, 2009). If they cannot make deliberate decisions and choices, especially about vocation and sexual orientation, role confusion becomes a threat. At stage five they therefore make strong efforts to answer the question “Who am I?”, and these efforts usually include trying different roles and identities.

The positive side of avatars, therefore, is that they give adolescents fun, safe ways to explore different personalities and express themselves while keeping their real identities secret. Many adolescents also find it easier to resolve identity and role confusion in cyberspace, because they can communicate more freely online than face to face. As a result, many of them also experiment with varied roles in chat rooms.

2.1. Elements for a positive outcome

There are five interlocking factors that explain how adolescents may benefit from creating multiple identities in cyberspace:

- The multiple aspects of one’s identity can be enhanced or integrated online.
- Negative aspects of one’s identity can be acted out or worked through, and positive aspects can be expressed and developed.
- Online identities can be real-to-life, imaginary or hidden.
- Unconscious needs and emotions can surface in online identities.
- Different communication channels express different aspects of one’s identity (Suler, 2002).

2.2. Elements for a negative outcome

These online identities, however, also have negative effects that can have psychological repercussions. A significant one is that the anonymity avatars provide can give adolescents the courage to act out in ways they would not have if they were not disguised. An assumed identity provides the opportunity to be mischievous or even bullying. Because avatars’ skin colour and body types are variable, adolescents can also make stereotyped or racially charged decisions. Sure it is pretend, but prejudice is as real in cyberspace as it is in real life. Therefore, both the positive and the negative aspects of online identities have to be considered.

3. Online disinhibition effect

I found cyberspace a fascinating world with lots of features, places, activities, people and subcultures to explore, and adolescents love it. But what I also found was that it is very common for people to get aggressive in this realm. Due to the online disinhibition effect, people argue, criticise, berate and insult others without much provocation (Suler, 2004a). I am therefore of the opinion that this might be the collecting ground for the argument that cyberspace does make adolescents more aggressive.

From a Freudian/psychoanalytic point of view, the disinhibition effect has a tendency to make people believe that everything that inhibits them, such as repressed and suppressed emotions, is what would define who they really are (Tokunaga & Rains, 2010). This suggests that when adolescents are in cyberspace, their true selves are revealed. This, however, is not necessarily true, as their online behaviour can conceal as much as it reveals. Adolescents behave differently in different environments, so one form of behaviour in one environment cannot account for the adolescent’s entire self.
There are many factors that suggest reasons for the online disinhibition effect. I agree with Suler (2004a) that the five primary reasons why adolescents sometimes act radically different on the internet than in real face-to-face situations are:

- **You can’t see me**
- **Core concept:** Invisibility
- **See you later**
- **Core concept:** Asynchronicity
- **It’s all in my head**
- **Core concept:** Solipsistic introjection
- **It’s just a game**
- **Core concept:** Dissociation
- **We are equals**
- **Core concept:** Minimising authority

4. Personality types in cyberspace

The basic psychological features of virtual environments shape the way in which people and groups behave in those environments. But that is only half the story. Online behaviour will always be determined by how those features interact with the characteristics of the people in those environments.

There are several ways of categorising the different types of avatars. One way would be to use well-known personality types as a guideline. The psychoanalytic system uses the following categories:

- psychopathic (antisocial, superficial);
- narcissistic (power, status);
- schizoid (indifference, interpersonal detachment, intellectual);
- paranoid (distrust, isolation);
- depressive (gloomy, dark, lack of self-esteem);
- manic (energetic, impulsive, happy);
- masochistic (self-destructive);
- obsessive and compulsive (serious, perfectionist);
- histrionic (dramatic, emotional, vain), and
- schizotypical (dissociative, superstitious) (Suler, 2004a).

In order to explore how these personality types behave online, how they experience and react to the various psychological features of cyberspace, and how they shape the online experience for others, as well as in order to determine both the pathological and potentially salutary aspects of their online activities, some of the questions that might be asked are the following:

- Does online anonymity and freedom of access encourage antisocial personalities? Are they some of the hackers of cyberspace?
- Do narcissistic people use the access to numerous relationships as a means to gain an admiring audience?
- Do people with dissociative personalities tend to isolate their cyberspace life from their real life? Do they tend to create multiple and distinct online identities?
- Are schizoid people attracted to the reduced intimacy resulting from online anonymity? Are they lurkers?
- Do manic people take advantage of asynchronous communication as a means of sending measured responses to others, or do they naturally prefer the terse, immediate and spontaneous conversations of chat and instant messages?
- Are compulsives generally drawn to computers and cyberspace for the control it gives them over their relationships and environment?
- Do histrionic people enjoy the opportunities for theatrical displays that are possible in online groups, especially in environments that provide software tools for creative self-expression?
Another, simpler, approach to categorising avatars would be to group them according to more general visual types, like animals, cartoons, etc (Suler, 2004b). These categories are fairly obvious, and each conveys interesting psychological and social themes – themes that, in some cases, overlap with the personality types just described.

5. Presence in cyberspace

Through the use of avatars, one personality aspect of an individual is strengthened and exaggerated, while others are minimised, or disappear completely. This creates a dualistic self: the person in cyberspace, as well as the person behind the computer.

As adolescents grow into virtual environments like the internet, they begin to describe their interactive experiences in terms of spatial metaphors (Fenichel, 2011). For example, one may “travel” through cyberspace, “get lost” in it, “surf” to a web page, open or close “windows”, and so forth. They perceive cyberspace as a physical space, due to at least five factors:

- Sensory stimulation from the environment: The more sensation one perceives within an environment, the more “real” it will seem.
- Change in the environment: Cyberspace is not static; there is continuous growth and movement, therefore it is alive in some form.
- Interactivity with the environment: This allows one to travel within, explore and leave the environment.
- Interactivity with other users: This adds a sense of presence and comfort within cyberspace.
- The degree of familiarity: This allows a user to feel comfortable within the environment. Anxiety occurs in new environments where a person has no idea what to expect (Wallace, 2001).

6. Transference in cyberspace

In addition to the perception of cyberspace as a physical space, it can also be regarded as a “transitional space”, an extension of one’s mind. In a more general sense of the term, transference is people’s tendency to revert back to a typical pattern of thought, feeling, and behaviour through the establishment of new relationships (Suler, 2007). For example, adolescents may exhibit certain behaviours within an online relationship that are reminiscent of the type of relationship they have with their mother or father. For instance, if the adolescent often plays a subordinate role in relation to his or her parents, then the adolescent may re-enact this same role in an online relationship.

Transference may also be exhibited through gaming. In many cases a game is used as a coping strategy (Kalning, 2011). For example, a frustrated, angry teenager starts playing Angry Birds in order to help him or her vent that anger. After all, spending an hour gaming your anger away is much better than a minute of screaming at the people around you.

7. Regressive behaviour in cyberspace

There is also no doubt that adolescents regress in cyberspace (Norman, 1996; Jones, 2011). There are three signs of regressive behaviour in this realm: flaming, sexual harassment, and the extraordinary generosity, and openness you sometimes see on the internet. In short: In the paradigm of regression, communication on the internet has its plusses and minuses. The plusses are generosity and openness. The minuses are aggressive flaming, sexual attack and increased vulnerability. So the pros and cons are two sides of the same coin: sex and aggression in positive and negative, active and passive forms. And both sprout from a lack of inhibition – a regression.

But what lures people into this regression? The simplest answer is: the computer itself. At the heart of the regression is the individual’s tendency to confuse person and machine. In cyberspace, the user sees the computer
as human and other people as something less than human – resulting in a disinhibition of sexual and aggressive acting out (Suler, 2004a).

8. Virtual reality

Virtual reality is not just a tool – it is at the same time technology, medium and engine of social relations. In other words, cyberspace is not only the space within which social relations occur – it structures these relations (Mayer, 1999). It provides a communication environment in which the benefits of creativity, but also the dangers of deception are amplified beyond the levels people experience in their interpersonal interactions (Norman, 2008).

On the one hand, virtual reality is sad. Children and adolescents play tennis on a computer screen when they could be outside, hitting a ball with a friend in the real world. Many of them play computer games in which they pretend to be in artificial worlds, slaying dragons, jumping off skyscrapers, and generally saving the world.

Adolescents need time for active, physical play, hands-on lessons of all kinds, and direct experiences of the natural world. However, many schools in South Africa have cut already minimal offerings in these areas to shift time and money to expensive technologies; this despite the fact that research shows that sports facilities are not frills, but essential for healthy child development (Alliance for Childhood, 2004). Adolescents also need stronger personal bonds with caring adults, yet modern technologies are distracting adolescents and adults from each other.

Virtual reality *per se* is therefore neither good nor bad, but rather what adolescents make of it. It could be “a lifesaving godsend”, a groundbreaking educational tool, and a means of becoming their best selves. Or it could be a mindless, energy-sapping diversion, an off-ramp to electronic isolation, a playground for immortality. Chances are, it will be all of these things.

9. Digital media literacy in the Life Orientation curriculum

It is clear that the aim of the learning outcomes for digital media literacy is to capitalise on new and emerging forms of media to advance adolescent learning.

Secondary school adolescents still do not have the power of judgement to always make great decisions, but they are smart enough to understand the effects of risky practices. With regard to these learners, the Life Orientation learning area will show more success if it emphasises the positive and negative impacts of digital media. For example, it should explain the reasons why too much screen time is harmful, or why too much exposure to violent video games raises aggression and lowers empathy. Adolescents may actually be able to see evidence of this in their peers who spend too much time playing games.

Meanwhile, digital media literacy education in secondary schools in South Africa remains a marginal aspect of the compulsory curriculum. There is also little evaluation of this education in formal schooling. The skills suggested by the National Curriculum and the skills actually learned by the learners differ. In some instances this is because the National Curriculum itself is inconsistent to teaching practices. Furthermore, the importance of digital media literacy skills is not sufficiently explained in the National Curriculum, and the current curriculum also does not recognise the skills required in our increasingly multimodal society (South African Department of Education, 2003).

A study on digital media literacy around the world found that there are nine factors that appear to be crucial to the successful development of digital media literacy programmes in secondary schools (Pungente, 2010):

- Digital media literacy programmes, like other innovative programmes, must be a grassroots movement. Teachers need to take the initiative in lobbying for its inclusion in the curriculum.
- Educational authorities must give clear support to such programmes by mandating the teaching of digital media studies within the curriculum, establishing guidelines and resource books, ensuring that curricula are developed, and making certain materials available.
Faculties of education must hire staff capable of training future teachers in this area. There should also be academic support from tertiary institutions in the writing of curricula and in sustained consultation.

In-service training at school district level must be an integral part of programme implementation.

School districts need consultants who have expertise in digital media literacy and who will establish communication networks.

Suitable textbooks and audiovisual material that are relevant to the country and/or area must be available.

A support organisation must be established for the purposes of workshops, conferences, dissemination of newsletters, and developing curriculum units. Such a professional organisation must cut across school boards and districts to involve a cross-section of people interested in digital media literacy.

There must be appropriate evaluation instruments suitable to the unique attributes of digital media studies.

Because digital media literacy education involves such a diversity of skills and expertise, there must be collaboration between teachers, parents, researchers and media professionals.

10. Conclusion

Adolescents are young. They are at an age where they are grappling with who they are, experimenting with all sorts of identities, while at the same time dealing with intensified libidinal and aggressive drives. And cyberspace is the perfect place to give their whirlwind of emotions free rein. They do not fully understand the ramifications of some of their actions. The misperception of invisibility, and the lack of tangible feedback on the consequences of these actions negatively impact on their behaviour.

The challenge schools face is to raise adolescents to use cyberspace for growth, knowledge, and a broader understanding of and connection to the world; this whilst protecting them, keeping their social skills and physical health intact, and ensuring their empathic understanding. Above all, today’s adolescents are in need of a digital media literacy education that equips them with four crucial life skills: critical thinking, responsibility, an appreciation of differences, and efficacy.

Through healthy social norms, and sound digital media literacy education, parents and teachers can greatly reduce the risks cyberspace poses, and raise safe, healthy and responsible citizens of the virtual as well as the natural world.

References


