Book Review

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Adolescent Online Social Communication and Behavior: Relationship Formation on the Internet
Edited by Robert Zheng, Jason Burrow-Sanchez, and Clifford Drew
Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2009.
280 pp. includes bibliographic references and index.

A new book on the subject of adolescent online social communication and behavior is to be welcomed, not because there have been few, if any, books focusing on the subject but also because of the unique value this new volume has to offer to its readers. Nowadays adolescents’ world or life space exists on many dimensions and within myriad communities because of the Internet. They make friends and connections with the world through the Internet and interactive communication technologies, such as Instant Messengers (IM), Google, Skype, MySpace, Facebook, and more. Online chat tools, blogging sites, social networking software, iPods, PDAs, and cell-phones with Internet services and multimedia functions become essential parts in their daily lives (Zhang & Bonk, 2009). As Prensky (2001) has described:

Digital Natives are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to “serious” work (Paragraph 11).

Consequently, adolescent online social communication and behavior has become one of the most interesting, dynamic, and yet challenging or even perplexing fields that we have been facing. Trying to have a comprehensive view and look at this important field, questions that Meier (1995) has emphasized the importance of five “habits of mind” are constantly raised in my mind: How do we know what we know (evidence)? Whose perspective does this represent (point of view)? How is this related to that (connections)? How might things have been otherwise (supposition)? Why is this important (relevance)? It was with these questions in mind that I read Adolescent Online Social Communication and Behavior: Relationship

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Formation on the Internet edited by Robert Zheng, Jason Burrow-Sanchez, and Clifford Drew. Three editors make clear the foci of this edited book in the preface: “(a) understand the theoretical aspects of adolescent online social communication, (b) identify the mechanism that supports and regulates adolescent online social communication, and finally (c) provide important evidence on successful development and implementation of adolescent online social environment” (xiv).

Robert Zheng, Jason Burrow-Sanchez, and Clifford Drew believe, and I have to agree, that previous studies on online teen social communication have been in separate directions on identifying adolescent cognitive development characteristics, personality and individual differences, social communication, and media characteristics. There has been a failure to provide a coherent and well organized compendium of adolescent online communication research until now. In addressing the purpose of this book, editors opine that “the key to a better understanding of adolescent online communication behavior is first to develop a unified theoretical framework on this topic” and “[T]his edited volume is significant in that it presents, for the first time, a systematic approach to the study of adolescent online social communication undergirded by a unified theoretical framework” (xiii). The edited volume consists of 14 chapters covering three important areas in adolescent online social communication research: (1) emerging conceptual and theoretical perspectives; (2) current legal perspectives and future legal needs; and (3) recent research findings, educational perspectives and practical applications.

First, the book offers a spectrum of theoretical frameworks in the research of adolescent online social communication. For example, Robert Zheng, Jason Burrow-Sanchez, Stephanie Donnelly Megan Call, and Clifford Drew propose a conceptual framework by focusing adolescent online behaviors in terms of their developmental, social-psychological, and cognitive needs. The authors delineate the relationship between social/individual factors and their online social behaviors and argue that the examination of adolescent needs should be situated in the milieu of social and individual factors in order to explicate the influences of related elements (e.g., developmental, social-psychological and cognitive needs) on adolescent behaviors in online communication. Zheng et al.’s study is complemented by Susan Miller, Kenneth Miller, and Christine Allison’s chapter which explores adolescent developmental needs and online relationship formation. They discuss the formation of online relationships in the dual contexts of adolescent cognitive and psychosocial development and characteristics of Internet communication technologies. They indicate that forming online relationships may rest with the teen’s awareness of how to present him or her given the unique cue-free Internet environment. Gustavo Mesch explores the relationship between Internet affordances and teens’ social communication through the lenses of motivation. He accentuates the important role of social application and the impact of the use of social application on the type, size and quality of social ties that are maintained and created. He proposes an approach that helps understand the use of different social applications, the structure and content of social communication and the behavioral and psychological association with those applications and content. Laura Widyanto and Mark Griffiths in their chapter unveil the critical variables in Internet addiction research. Further, the authors identify key areas related to adolescent Internet addiction for future research. Finally, Bryant Paul and Lelia Samson examine the Internet and adolescent sexual identity which somewhat falls within the line of research by Zheng et al. and Miller et al. previously discussed. The authors identify the specific role that Internet communication technologies play in the process of adolescent sexual socialization. They suggest that future research addressing the role of the Internet in the process of adolescent sexual socialization and identity development must consider both the specific structure of the adolescent brain and the unique nature of the Internet as a source of information and an opportunity for social networking.
Next, the book presents research on issues relating to legal aspects in the Internet which has become increasingly critical in the study of adolescent online social communication. Two chapters are included that offer legal perspectives on current and future practice and research. Larry Burriss identifies aspects on what is protected and what is not in ever-expanding CyberVillage in relation to speech, expressions, and other cyber-related behavior. He then argues that it is critical that schools develop written policies regarding the role of the school in education for civility, free speech, disruption, threats and proper computer use, and how computer use relates to these areas. On the other hand, Zheng Yan in his chapter Do High School Students Benefit from the Children’s Internet Protection Act? reviews The Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA; 2000) as well as other existing regulations in protecting children on the Internet. He then provides an empirical study showing the evidence that CIPA is associated with a decrease in high school students’ Internet use at school but does not appear to have a beneficial effect on their knowledge of Internet safety or opportunities for Internet safety education.

Lastly, the book provides a wide range of topics from effects of motives for internet use, to adolescent fear in online environment, to risk factors affecting adolescent online social communication, and so forth. Authors discuss various issues from recent research findings, educational perspectives and practical applications. For instance, Louis Leung in his chapter Effects of Motives for Internet Use, Aloneness, and Age Identity Gratifications on Online Social Behaviors and Social Support among Adolescents, explains how personality traits, such as perception of aloneness and age identity gratifications, together with motives for Internet use impact Internet habits and behavior. He investigates how differences in these constructs among adolescents and children influence their online social behavior such as use of instant messaging, online games, and participating in forums. Myron Orleans’s chapter Effects of Motives for Internet Use, Aloneness, and Age Identity Gratifications on Online Social Behaviors and Social Support among Adolescents, echoes an earlier study (Chapter Two) by Mesch who unveils the motivation factor in Internet social communication. Myron Orleans challenges the common attributions of prevalent danger, that heavy youthful computer users would experience social isolation. The researcher finds that the interpersonal lives and computer activities of early adolescents reciprocally reinforce patterns of behavior that lowered the likelihood of risk behaviors to a significantly greater degree than did direct parental involvement. Megan Call and Jason Burrow-Sanchez bring attention to Identifying Risk Factors and Enhancing Protective Factors to Prevent Adolescent Victimization on the Internet. They provide research-based information on adolescent Internet use and the risk factors associated with online victimization and indicate that it is important that mental health professionals and parents receive accurate information about online victimization in order to protect youth from harm. Sharmila Pixy Ferris in her chapter entitled Millennials, Social Networking and Social Responsibility, ventures into an unchartered area in which the researcher employs the Webnography approach to investigate Millennials’ social networking and social responsibility. Findings go against conventional wisdom as she finds that Millennials use social networking to take social and political action, engage in social entrepreneurship, and conduct charitable solicitation and donation. Ikuko Aoyama and Tony Talbert present a global perspective in the research of adolescent online social communication by pointing out the increasing trend of cyberbullying in an international setting. They describe the characteristics and theoretical frameworks that define and contextualize cyberbullying including the international prevalence and related statistics, backgrounds and profiles of perpetrators, and adults’ roles. They provide educators and parents with prevention and intervention strategies to address cyberbullying among youth. Maja Pivec and Paul Pivec take a unique perspective by addressing Misconceptions About Being Digital. They examine the relationship...
between electronic games and adolescent online social communication and claim that while it is agreed that technology such as electronic games provide a wealth of opportunities for digital generation learners, there is not enough evidence to show that the digital generation learns any different than previous generations, or children who have never been exposed to computing of any kind. They discuss the success of teaching role-play classes face-to-face and in a constructivist digital environment. Finally, Muhammet Demirbilek and Berna Mutlu in their chapter *Language Learning and Social Communication Using Chat Rooms*, provide a detailed discussion on issues related to chat rooms as a two-way real time communication tool frequently used by adolescents, especially on the effects of chat rooms on adolescents’ second language development.

*Adolescent Online Social Communication and Behavior: Relationship Formation on the Internet* is an informative, up-to-date, thought-provoking book. The topics of this book are indisputably relevant. Authors have done a great job to cover cutting-edge research and first-hand practices. Together, 14 chapters paint a clear picture of teens’ online: where progress has been made, where new opportunities exist, and where challenges remain. It is certainly too much to ask of an edited volume to completely capture the dynamics that happen within young adolescents while using the Internet. This book truly serves to “(a) identify the role and function of the Internet in adolescent social communication behavior, (b) bring together top researchers in the field who discuss the dynamic relationships among such things as adolescent social-psychological needs, personality, and social norms in online communication, and (c) bridge the theories with practices in adolescent online social communication by offering practical guidance to the public on this issue” (xiii). It certainly shed light on those questions in my mind. I believe the readers will benefit from the ample coverage from research experts and experienced practitioners. It is an invaluable resource for broader audiences including educators, trainers, administrators, parents, and researchers. I will definitely add *Adolescent Online Social Communication and Behavior: Relationship Formation on the Internet* to the list of readings that I suggest to my graduate students. I also encourage others include this book as a required or recommended text for a graduate level educational technology course.

REFERENCES

