Follow my Snaps!
Adolescents’ Social Media Use and Abuse

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ABSTRACT

Using third-person perception as a theoretical framework, a survey of 1,167 American adolescents explores their social media use and its relationship to verbal, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Despite the sexual nature of social media platforms like Snapchat, which are popular with adolescents, even adolescents who have experienced sexual violence in the past. Snapchat users were more likely than non-users to report abusive behavior to others. Adolescents exhibited third-person perception, believing others were more affected than they were by negative social media posts. This was related to experience with violence, and social media use. A third-person effect emerged, as adolescents who exhibit third-person perception were more likely to engage in abusive behaviors, both face-to-face and in an electronic medium.

KEYWORDS
Adolescents, Facebook, Snapchat, Social Media, Teen Violence, Third-Person Perception

INTRODUCTION

According to the Pew Research Center (2015), 92% of teens go online daily, facilitated by the widespread availability of smartphones. The most popular social media platforms were reported as Facebook (used by 71% of teens), Instagram (52%) and Snapchat (41%). The purpose of the current study is to explore adolescents’ changing patterns of social media use and their experience with victimization and perpetration of violence, using third-person perception (TPP) as a theoretical framework.

Adolescents and Social Media

A report issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2011) outlined the benefits and risks of social media use by children and adolescents. On the positive side, staying connected with friends and family, exchanging ideas, and sharing pictures. Adolescent social media users find opportunities for community engagement, creative outlets, and expanded social circles. According to the report, the risks fall into these categories: peer-to-peer (bullying), inappropriate content, lack of understanding of privacy, and outside influences (social and corporate). The report also refers to “Facebook Depression,” which emerges when adolescents spend too much time on social media and start exhibiting classic signs of depression.

A number of social media apps were designed specifically for finding sexual contacts or the “hook-up culture.” Apps like Grindr and Tinder allow users to find potential sexual partners locally, using the GPS in their smart phones. The popular app Snapchat began as a means to quickly share
explicit photos for a set period of time, without the receiver saving a copy of the image. Use of the app has evolved, with some users sharing benign photos and videos and others using it for more explicit purposes. Facebook also began as a hookup app limited to college students. As other users (including parents) were permitted to use the app, the social media giant evolved, becoming many things to over one billion users worldwide.

A recent study (Stevens, Dunaev, Malven, Bleakley & Hull, 2016) outlined how adolescents use social media in their sexual lives. Adolescents seek out sexual content (sexually explicit material, information about sexual health, sexual norms). Social media platforms provide an opportunity for sex-related communication and expression; According to the study, 25%-33% of adolescent social media users post or distribute provocative images, seeking feedback on their appearance or connection with other users. Finally, social media provide adolescents with tools for seeking out romantic or sexual partners, which may result in risky behaviors.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine issued a review of a decade of research on bullying (Flannery et al., 2016). According to the report, bullying and cyberbullying prevalence rates reported vary from 17.9 to 30.9% of school-aged children for the bullying behavior at school and from 6.9 to 14.8% for cyberbullying. Much of the variance can be attributed to sexual orientation, disability, and obesity. Physical consequences can be immediate (injury) or long-term (headaches, sleep disturbances). Psychological consequences include low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, self-harming, and suicide. There is some evidence to suggest links between being bullied in adolescence and perpetration of violence in adulthood. A recent publication from the American Psychological Association called “a call to action” reviewed a decade of research on suicide, which acknowledged a dearth of research on the relationship between suicide and social media (Westerfield, 2018). Social media are developing more quickly than our ability to process and understand their impact.

Third-Person Perception and Social Media

Third-person perception (TPP) is the belief that negative media message influence others more than oneself. The phenomenon has been well-documented over a variety of contexts, which recently include news coverage of election polls (Kim, 2016), deceptive advertising (Xie, 2016), and the impact of religious cartoons (Webster, Li, Zhu, Luchsinger, Wan & Tatge, 2016). A third-person effect emerges when the misperception causes a behavior or attitude change. The most common third-person effect reported in the literature is support for censorship (Chung & Moon, 2016; Kim, 2014; Webster et al., 2016). A recent study (Lee & Park, 2016) found TPP regarding H1N1 (pandemic flu), which predicted intentions to vaccinate.

A growing literature is documenting TPP regarding social media (Antonopoulos, Veglis, Gardikiotis, Kotsakis & Kalliris, 2015; Paradise & Sullivan, 2012; Wei & Lo, 2013). Facebook users believe they are less likely than other users to suffer negative consequences to their personal relationships and privacy (Paradise & Sullivan, 2012). Adolescents believe others are more harmed by sexting, and, in turn, support restrictions for others. Buturoiu and colleagues (2017) found similar results among a large sample of college students, but added one more piece to the puzzle. The strongest predictor of TPP regarding the influence of news stories shared on Facebook was Facebook itself. Students who used Facebook the most exhibited the highest degrees of TPP. The current study seeks to document TPP regarding a broader range of social media platforms and explore a third-person effect related to violence.

Based on the preceding review of the literature, the following research questions are posited:

RQ1: What are adolescents’ patterns of use of social media platforms?
RQ2: What are adolescents’ experiences with victimization and perpetration of violence?
RQ3: Do adolescents believe others are more influenced by negative social media posts (TPP)?
RQ4: What is the relationship between TPP, social media use, victimization, and perpetration of violence?
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