

A study of the relationship between internet use, well-being and self-concept of preadolescent males.

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Abstract

The aim of this mixed-methods study was to determine the impact of internet use and activities on the well-being and self-concept of 87 preadolescent males (aged 10-12 years), as measured using the EU Kid's Online Scale, the SWLS-C and Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children. While statistically significant differences were found between groups for well-being and social competence, it was concluded that this age groups' perception of physical appearance was predominately associated with internet use.

Aim

In an increasingly digitalized society, it appears that the more young people go online to gain digital skills and benefits, the more they may encounter risks, accidentally or deliberately (Livingstone et al., 2011). To date, most research focuses on online use and its potential influence on adolescents, with few studies including preadolescents, despite a rapidly growing number of this age group engaging with the internet just as regularly as their older counterparts (Willoughby, 2008). Additionally, the range of developmental changes that accompany preadolescence, including the emergence of social comparisons and acute concerns with personal identity, may serve to increase vulnerability when going online (Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007). Therefore, this study aims to fill this void by investigating the relationship between internet use and activities on the self-concept and well-being of preadolescent males.

Method

This study utilised a mixed methods design, involving male only participants aged 10 to 12 years (mean age 11.37 years; SD = .74). 74 students completed three questionnaires (EU Kid's Online Scale; SWLS-C; Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children) for the quantitative component. Data was analysed using SPSS 22. 13 boys participated in focus groups for the qualitative element. Thematic analysis was undertaken with NVivo.

Descriptive Statistics

86.5% use the internet every day.

81.1% regularly play online games.

64.9% have a social networking profile.

21.6% said that they had been cyberbullied.

8.3% cyberbullied another person.

20.3% added a stranger to their contact

13.5% meet a stranger in person who they met online.

26% unsuccessfully attempted to spend less time online.

Hypotheses

H1: There will be significant differences between participants who spend more time online (3 or more hours per day) and those who spend less time online (1 or less hours per day) with regard to psychological well-being and domains of self-concept.

After conducting a one-way ANOVA, a significant difference was found between groups in relation to perception of physical appearance [$F(7, 61) = 2.571, p = 0.022$].

H2: There will be significant differences between social media profile users and non-social media profile users with regard to psychological well-being and domains of self-concept.

No significant differences were found across groups after running independent t-tests; therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted.

H3: There will be significant differences between victim and non-victims of cyber-bullying with regard to psychological well-being and domains of self-concept.

Using independent samples t-tests, significant differences were found across groups for well-being [$p = .025$], social competence [$p = .025$] and physical appearance [$p < .001$] between groups.

H4: There will be significant differences between perpetrators and non-perpetrators of cyber-bullying with regard to psychological well-being and domains of self-concept.

Independent samples t-tests found statistically significant differences for well-being [$p = .008$] and physical appearance [$p = .002$] between groups.

Gaming is the most popular online activity.

Online interactions with strangers are common.

Going online is increasingly privatised.

Most preadolescents feel the advantages of the internet outweigh the disadvantages.

Discussion

• While no significant difference was reported for well-being between groups who spent more time online and those who spent less, over 1/5 of participants described experiencing symptoms of compulsive internet use which could potentially predict a decline in well-being scores in the future if left uncorrected.

• In contrast to previous research, a significant relationship was not found between social media use, well-being and self-concept (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013), perhaps suggesting males are not impacted by its use to the same extent as females.

• Preadolescents are vulnerable while using the platform of online gaming as warning signs traditionally associated with strangers are lost amongst the excitement of new virtual interactions.

Themes

Future Research

Significant differences were found for perception of physical appearance between groups in three out of the four hypotheses listed: hours spent online, being a victim of cyberbullying and being a perpetrator. This stresses the need for future research to focus on the relationship between internet use and body image of young males, which is currently lacking.

References

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