
A PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY AS TOOL FOR EDUCATING ADOLESCENTS ON INTERNET SAFETY

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ABSTRACT

This psycho-educational strategy, in the form of a website, was designed to educate adolescents in schools with regard to online safety practices. The study made use of a mixed-method methodology. One hundred and eighty-three (183) adolescents completed quantitative questionnaires. Qualitative data was gathered by eight semi-structured adolescent focus groups. After the integration of results, a website that included information on safety education was designed. Six areas of online safety were illustrated and addressed on the website - cyber bullying, pornography, social networking, online gaming, sharing of personal information, as well as plagiarising and stealing content. Adolescents were given the opportunity to explore the website in order to evaluate it as an effective educational tool for promoting online safety. The research reveals that adolescents could benefit from the psycho-educational strategy as it creates awareness and serves an educational purpose in terms of identifying possible harms of the internet. Findings indicate that schools, educators and parents could use the psycho-educational strategy to educate adolescents about internet safety.

Key words:

adolescents, internet, psycho-educational strategy, safe internet use

INTRODUCTION

The internet is a popular medium that adolescents use regularly (Donnerstein, 2013; Ahmed, 2011; Baker and White, 2010). When searching the internet, many parenting tips and programmes are available from sites like Safekids (www.safekids.com), Wired Safety (www.wiredsafety.com) and Microsoft (www.msn.com) security pages. The organisation Rape Wise also provides some helpful information on cyber bullying (www.rapewise.com). However, there seems to be no current programme or course that educates adolescents specifically on overall safe internet use in the South African context.

The study focussed on developing a psycho-educational strategy, by using a website that aimed at educating adolescents about the internet. The educational activities of the strategy provided tools to safeguard adolescents from potential harms the internet might have. The psycho-educational strategy aimed to empower and enable adolescents to access the internet safely by means of appropriate education. This was a necessity, since it seemed that very little awareness had been raised in South Africa with regard to educating adolescents about using the internet. Therefore, the psycho-educational strategy was developed to educate South African adolescents accessing the internet. The strategy was developed as a tool for educators and parents to aid in education regarding the safe use of the internet. The strategy aims at guiding adolescents in the school system by providing the necessary guidelines for using the internet safely.

The following section addresses the conceptual framework that guided the study, followed by a literature review regarding the current understanding of adolescents' connectedness with the internet. Second, the research methodology is explained, and finally, a discussion of the findings follows, focussing on the psycho-educational strategy as a tool to educate adolescents regarding online safety.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Psycho-education refers to “a holistic approach to understanding what it means to be human” (Griffiths, 2006:21), and furthermore, how one can be aided and educated in understanding human conditions and social situations. In this study, the social situation relates to the issue of internet safety. The psycho-educational strategy was designed in the form of a website, which was the tool used within the strategy, providing an interactive approach for adolescents. The ideal was that schools could ultimately use this website as part of their curriculum, as a compulsory educational method for scholars.

Sharp and Dellis (2010:7) state that, since most adolescents move through the educational system, “schools are an important setting for interventions to prevent high-risk behaviours in teens (adolescents)”. Therefore, the research aimed at designing an interactive website that would appeal to an adolescent and be age-appropriate and relevant for this developmental phase. Poole, Simpson and Smith (2012) state that using the internet as a tool for learning in health care has considerable potential. Poole et al. (2012) argue that using a website on the internet as a psycho-educational tool will reach a larger audience and be cost effective. Anderson (2013) is of the opinion that, when researchers educate adolescents about technological dangers, they should engage with the research actively in order to establish what their opinions are about technology. Furthermore, Anderson (2013) notes the importance of including adolescents in the process of education by stating that by giving them a voice, they are offered an opportunity to be more responsible for their own bodies and minds. The idea of the website was to create a platform for learning and integrating the information into the lives of adolescents. The main focus of the strategy was the adolescent phase because adolescents in this developmental phase specifically experience conflict between becoming unique individuals versus not wanting to be isolated and different from a group (Geldard and Geldard, 2004). The core conflict during adolescence is not to be separated from the peer group, whilst maintaining individuality. From the literature, it becomes evident that adolescents tend to become so enmeshed with their group that they consequently develop a group identity. Therefore, the study was conducted through the lens of Gestalt field theory (Yontef, 2005; Mackewn, 1997), since Gestalt views the individual as a whole within an environment. Gestalt, as a theory, views a person within a field as opposed to being apart from his or her context, i.e. his or her environmental field. According to this theory, persons can be understood only within the system of which they are an integral part (Nevis, 2000). From the principles of Gestalt, the field theory emerged. This theory emphasises the relationship and process of contacting the other, the field or environment (Parlett, 2005; Nevis, 2000). In many ways, this resembles the complexity theory (Morrison, 2006) and the systems theory (Skyttner, 2001; Laszlo and Krippner, 1998), in which the individual forms part of larger and bigger systems that interact with and focus on connections between the individual and his/her environment. Various theories, combined with the Gestalt field theory, were incorporated, mainly to gain the needed insight into understanding the adolescent in his/her field. Gestalt theory on its own did not focus holistically on the process and development of the adolescent phase; therefore, other theories were incorporated to understand this phase better.

ADOLESCENTS AND THE INTERNET

Adolescents as a developmental age group and their relation to internet use have been discussed in various fields of research. Livingstone (2011:348) is of the opinion that children and young people are usually the earliest and “most enthusiastic” users of information and communication technologies. Adolescents are more likely than older age groups to make use of the internet (Donnerstein, 2013; Purcell, 2012). Anderson states that the internet “is the medium they [*adolescents*] prefer the most, even more than music or television” (Anderson, cited by Arnett, 2007:409). According to Elena, Laouris and Taraszow (2010), the highest percentage (96%) of people who access the internet, range between the ages of 16 and 24. The Digital Agenda for Europe Scoreboard (2012) released statistics on internet use that also indicate high rates of internet use among the younger generation. In South Africa, Kreutzer (2009) found that 84% of the 441 adolescents he interviewed in his study accessed the internet daily. The Office for National Statistics in the United Kingdom reported the age group mostly accessing the internet was between the ages of 16 and 24 years (2014).

When one considers the South African context, most adolescents seem to access the internet via their cell phones. The age group defined as using the internet via cell phones was between the ages of 16 and 24 years; the same as in the United Kingdom (Cranston and Davies, 2009). From the above, it is evident that adolescents make regular use of the internet.

A concern emerged that regular internet use by adolescents might affect their development; therefore, these possible areas of concern should be known in order to provide guidance, education and support.

According to Ralph, Berglas, Schwartz and Brindis (2011), the internet can be accessed for various viable and positive uses, including entertainment, communication, research, shopping, online banking, video downloads and online travel arrangements. Ralph et al. (2011) and Guan and Subrahmanyam (2009) discuss the positive uses of the internet for adolescents. These authors include the internet as a tool for education and learning. For some, the internet can be a tool to empower youth, and adolescents use the internet to gain information about health concerns (Guan and Subrahmanyam, 2009, Ralph et al., 2011). This is why a psycho-educational strategy via the internet was suggested as a means to educate adolescents about safe internet use by combining the positive use of the internet and education regarding its harms.

PROVIDING EDUCATION BY A PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY

Psycho-education refers to “a holistic approach to understanding what it means to be human” (Griffiths, 2006:21). In this study, the understanding of humanity is placed against a contextual background, the internet. When trying to understand what it means to be human by considering humanity holistically, modern society will have to include the use of the internet as a means of human connectivity and communication.

Donker, Griffiths, Cuijpers and Christensen (2009) state that psycho-educational interventions can vary from passive materials such as leaflets, electronic mail or informational websites to active multisession group intervention with exercises and therapist guidance. Psycho-educational interventions are usually less expensive, managed more easily and potentially more accessible than conventional psychological interventions (Donker et al., 2009). Grey, Whittemore, Liberti, Delamater, Murphy and Faulkner (2012:769) found that “several clinical trials demonstrating the efficacy of psycho-educational interventions in transitioning youth” were available. This transition in thinking about internet safety makes the psycho-educational strategy an appropriate one to use. Colom (2011) states that psycho-education is not merely giving information to a person regarding a medical or psychosocial condition. Psycho-education refers to “empowering training targeted at promoting awareness” and “proactivity, providing tools to manage, cope and live” (Colom, 2011:339). The intention of the strategy was to be an empowering tool to promote awareness regarding safe internet use among adolescents.

The intention with the website was to create a platform for learning and integrating the information into adolescents’ lives.

The following section includes the various aims and objectives that shaped the creation of the strategy.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study was to develop a psycho-educational strategy in the form of a website, in order to educate adolescents about safer use of the internet to safeguard them against the potential dangers of using the internet.

The objectives of this study were to:

- **identify** possible components of a psycho-educational strategy that will educate adolescents about using the internet safely;
- **design** the framework and content of a psycho-educational strategy consisting of an interactive website for adolescents to promote safe use of the internet;
- **evaluate** the perceptions of adolescents regarding the psycho-educational strategy and how the strategy influenced their process of growth.

The objectives were pursued by using a process of investigation and research. The following section focuses on the methods that were used during the study.

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

Participants

In this study, the population consisted of adolescents in participating schools in the northern suburbs of Cape Town.

Participants for this study were selected by means of probability, cluster sampling. Schools in the northern suburbs of Cape Town were approached and requested to participate in the study voluntarily. Schools that were approached had pupils between 12 and 18 years of age, had access to computers and internet facilities, were government-funded schools with Afrikaans- and English-speaking learners, and were situated in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. At the schools that agreed to participate, adolescents were sampled randomly from the classes and invited to participate and to do so voluntarily by signing letters of consent. Boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 18 years agreed, and the volunteers were organised into focus groups.

The participants provided the data needed to design and implement the website. The process and collection of data is discussed in the following section.

Process and data collection

The initial literature study identified possible areas of concern and popular activities of adolescents on the internet. This study was a parallel mixed-method study incorporating quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative data

(focus groups). Quantitative data were incorporated initially by using a questionnaire that was completed by adolescents from participating schools in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. The adolescents' responses were recorded as quantitative data.

The quantitative questionnaire was designed to gain insight into the possible areas of concern by gaining adolescents' perspectives about each area as well as their perspectives on internet safety practices or/and the possible lack thereof. The adolescents' responses to the questionnaire were analysed, and a representation of adolescents' experiences and understanding of internet safety was compared with theories in the literature.

Based on the responses from the questionnaires, the psycho-educational website was developed. The website consisted of messages promoting safe internet use and addressed areas of concern as indicated by the literature study and the quantitative results. Adolescents were exposed to the websites by means of interactive focus groups and asked to engage with the newly developed website. Feedback about their experiences was given in the focus groups. Focus groups were conducted at two participating schools in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. The aims of the focus groups were to explore adolescents' reactions to the website and gain insight into the successful use of the website as a psycho-educational tool for safeguarding adolescents on the internet. Eight focus groups were conducted. Two groups formed part of the pilot study, and six were part of the empirical research. The focus groups were conducted until a point of saturation was reached.

Research question

This study, being a parallel mixed-method study, made use of various research questions and not a hypothesis. In this mixed-method study, a primary question formed the basis, but it was supported by various secondary questions to direct the research and its content. The objectives of the study assisted in shaping the question the researcher was ultimately exploring.

Primary question

What should the psycho-educational strategy for internet use and safety amongst adolescents consist of?

Secondary questions

- What is the current understanding of internet use and safety among adolescents at high schools in the northern suburbs of Cape Town?

- What components need to be included in such a psycho-educational strategy?
- How does a web-based psycho-educational strategy facilitate safer internet use among adolescents and growth into a self-regulating individual?

RESULTS FROM THE STUDY

The first leg of the research was a preliminary study that asked adolescents to complete a structured questionnaire. The results from the questionnaires indicated adolescents' opinions about and experiences of the internet. From the structured questionnaires, results were noted, and these are represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Results from preliminary, structured questionnaires

| Adolescents who: | Percentage of participants who agreed with the accompanying statement [N=183] |
|---|---|
| access the internet daily | 76 |
| access the internet weekly | 93 |
| access the internet via a cell phone | 94 |
| have a profile on a social network | 83 |
| think they spend much time on the internet | 56 |
| state that they enjoy accessing the internet | 87 |
| dislike accessing the internet | 10 |
| claim to have experienced bullying via the internet | 22 |
| use real names on the internet | 80 |
| admit to lying about their age on the internet | 38 |
| have posted their phone number online | 33 |
| have posted their address on the internet | 19 |

| | |
|--|----|
| clear their browsing history after use | 66 |
| are open to their parents about activities online | 75 |
| lied to their parents about online activities | 28 |
| have free internet access at home | 59 |
| use the internet at school | 54 |
| access the internet at school for academics | 45 |
| are scared to go online because someone specific logged on | 18 |
| admit to inappropriate activities online at school | 37 |
| admit to using the school's internet for an activity that is not permitted | 17 |
| have contacted a stranger via internet | 20 |
| have been contacted by a stranger online | 47 |
| have met an online stranger face to face | 31 |
| admit to posting negative comments online | 32 |
| stated that they were exposed to sexual content online | 40 |
| play online games | 52 |
| found the internet to be dangerous | 39 |

The results included statistics indicating that:

- 33% of the adolescents admitted to posting a personal cell phone number on the internet;
- 19% posted an address on the internet;
- 28% lied to their parents about online activities; and
- 18% felt scared to go online when a specific peer was also online.

These results raised concerns because of the potential harm to which those actions could lead. Furthermore, adolescents identified the internet as a dangerous playground, as 39% agreed to the latter.

A further confirmation of the necessity of education with regard to online safety was the fact that 93% accessed the internet on a weekly basis, which is frequent. When adolescents have frequent access to the internet, they are more vulnerable to the possible harms of the internet. Finally, although not all the adolescents have internet at home or access it at school, 94% access the internet via their cell phones.

From the above-mentioned results, it was noted that some concerns echoed the literature with regard to safe online use among adolescents. These were moulded into the six areas that were incorporated into the study. The six areas included cyber bullying, pornography, social networking, online gaming, sharing of personal information, as well as plagiarising and stealing content.

The second part of the research was to develop the website as a tool for psycho-education. The website was developed based on the literature study and the quantitative results from the questionnaires. Upon completion of the website, three focus groups from each school ranging between five and eight adolescents per group were interviewed. The focus groups, who were introduced to the website, consisted of adolescents who were not previously used in the study. Interviews with six groups were conducted. After the sixth group, a point of saturation was reached.

The feedback from the focus groups is discussed under the following emerging and recurrent themes.

THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

The themes that emerged from the focus groups were grouped together to form the following five main themes:

Relevance and age relatedness

Theme 1 mainly centred around the fact that the website was age appropriate, and adolescents commented on the fact that it was easy to use and included elements that were of interest to them. This was important, as it should be a site that is usable in this specific age group. If the age group cannot relate to what is on the site or struggle to use it, it serves no purpose.

Increased awareness

Awareness was the second theme and one of the major themes that emerged from the study. It is acknowledged that one of the potential uses of this psycho-educational strategy is to create awareness. From the responses of the focus groups, it was clear that many respondents experienced heightened awareness in the process of engaging with the psycho-educational strategy. Awareness provides an opportunity for change (Yontef and Simkin, 1993). By being made aware of the harms associated with internet use, adolescents can make decisions that are more informed when using the internet. All the focus groups mentioned that awareness had been gained from the strategy that related to areas of the internet that might be dangerous or harmful to adolescents.

Cyber bullying as the prominent area of concern

Cyber bullying was discussed as a prominent area of interest among the adolescents in the focus groups. Many adolescents spoke about the realities and their experiences of cyber bullying and also asked various questions regarding this specific issue. Therefore, it was necessary to mention it as a theme, as it was very noticeable as an area of concern for adolescent participants.

Danger areas of concern to adolescents

Acquiring knowledge about the harms and dangers of the internet was a fourth theme. Discussions on themes 3 and 4 indicated that adolescents had concerns about internet use, further emphasising the potential negative consequences of internet use among adolescents. Adolescents noted the dangers of the internet and potential harms they experienced on a daily basis. Some of the more prominent concerns mentioned by adolescents included plagiarising, sharing of personal information on the internet, the viewing of online pornography, and dangerous activities associated with social networking.

The preventative nature of the website

Finally, adolescents acknowledged that, once that they had seen what the potential harms were, they could be confident in avoiding these harms or dangers. Adolescents shared their views about their own realisations concerning online dangers. After viewing the website, some of the participants discussed the influence the website had on their thought processes and

how their view of the internet had changed. Therefore, this theme indicated that the website could be a preventative strategy for adolescents. By educating adolescents about the potential harms, they are empowered with knowledge and therefore, can avoid harmful situations.

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to develop an internet-based psycho-educational strategy in the form of a website to educate adolescents about safer use of the internet in order to safeguard them from the potential dangers of internet use. The internet-based psycho-educational strategy was devised based on the findings accumulated throughout the research process. From the results of these research endeavours, a number of conclusions were formulated.

From the literature and findings, it is evident that age-appropriate and relevant mechanisms are needed to address online safety among adolescents. The present research revealed that adolescents could benefit from the psycho-educational strategy as it created awareness of the possible harms of the internet. Specific areas of concern included cyber bullying and the reality that they faced regarding this hurtful activity. Adolescents further indicated that they lacked knowledge in areas concerning pornography, plagiarising, and the sharing of personal information.

The internet is a portal or field that is accessed for various activities. Some of these activities are for recreational purposes, social stimulation, the enhancement of academic research, and for enjoyment. Although the mentioned activities seem harmless, there are consequences and potential risks that could occur when engaging in risky activities.

The concern was that, if left without any intervention, the social and communicative functioning of the online adolescent was in danger. Therefore, a means of intervention was proposed. The intervention occurs through learning about these potential harms in an attempt to not only create awareness of these dangers, but to supply tools and coping techniques that will assist the adolescent, should one of these harms become prevalent.

Finally, as indicated by the results, the proposed method of education, a psycho-educational strategy by means of an interactive website, had a positive effect on most of the participating adolescents, as they expressed these views during the focus groups. Awareness was one of the major themes that emerged from the study, along with acquiring knowledge about the harms and dangers of the internet.

It is suggested that more research should be conducted in this field, as it seems that psycho-education is an empowering tool to safeguard adolescents and support parents and educators in this fairly unfamiliar field of the internet. The internet is ever evolving and changing, and contemporary research will aid in verbalising precautions and supporting adolescents who access the internet.

Providing awareness regarding possible harms will enable adolescents to safeguard themselves and can play a preventative role in terms of the negative consequences of online activities. The research indicated that a psycho-educational perspective holds value when addressing online safety. Finally, the internet as a form of intervention was successful as the adolescents eagerly accepted and related to this means of education when participating in the focus groups.

The psycho-educational strategy and research contributes, *first*, by giving educators, parents and other professionals an academic reference and resource to gain appropriate knowledge about the potential risks, dangers or harms the internet might hold. *Second*, the website in itself can serve as a tool that could be accessed directly by adolescents to motivate and educate positive and safe use of the internet. *Third*, the study contributes data to the greater research society, by indicating areas of concern for further research in a new and developing field of technology. *Finally*, the research aimed at raising awareness of the negative effects of excessive use of the internet among adolescents.

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