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Students' Engagement in Risky Online Behaviour: The Comparison of Youth and Secondary Schools'

Ugnė Paluckaitė^a Kristina Žardeckaitė-Matulaitienė^{b*}

* Corresponding author: Kristina Žardeckaitė-Matulaitienė, k.zardeckaite-matulaitiene@smf.vdu.lt

^aMA, Department of General Psychology, Vytautas Magnus University, Jonavos st. 66/328, Kaunas, Lithuania, ugne.paluckaite@gmail.com

^bPhD, Department of General Psychology, Vytautas Magnus University, Jonavos st. 66/328, Kaunas, Lithuania, k.zardeckaite-matulaitiene@smf.vdu.lt

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Abstract

Nowadays adolescents use the Internet very often in their daily life activities what, according to the researchers, causes their engagement in risky online behaviour. Youth school's students may be at greater risks online as they generally come from socially riskier or single-parent families. Thus, the purpose of this study is to find out if there are any differences between youth and secondary schools' students' engagement in risky online behaviours. Research method – cross-sectional survey with a questionnaire, created using a variety of risky online behaviour forms (e.g., *communicates with unknown people; visit pornographic sites*). The tendency to engage in any risky behaviour participants had to rate on the scale from 1 (*never engage*) to 6 (*always engage*). The participants also had to answer some demographical questions about their family, age, and gender. 195 students (105 female and 90 male; mean age - 14.8) have participated in the study. Results have shown that youth school's students are more likely than secondary school's students to post photos of age forbidden behaviour and to post rude, offensive comments. Students engagement in risky online behaviour is related to their age and time spent online: older and using the Internet more often students are more likely to engage in risky online behaviours. Thus, older students and students who spend more time on the Internet are more susceptible to online risks despite their social environment. More attention should be paid for youth's risky online behaviour psychological interventions.

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1. Introduction

The Internet in today's society is one of the most used techniques in our daily lives. The increasing ability to use the Internet in almost every place you go promotes the possibilities to get connected whenever you want. Thus, it's not surprising that, according to the PewResearchCenter (2015), 92% of teens go online every day and only 2% of them note that they use it less than once a week. The most



popular youth's activities online are using social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram), texting, or playing online games.

There is no doubt that dramatically increasing usage of the Internet among youth influences their behaviour. First of all, the Internet has a positive impact on teenagers' social lives, as it helps to keep contact with their friends and family (Eijnden et al., 2008; Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mithcell, 2008). It is also useful in educational settings where students can search for the material they need (Ybarra et al., 2007). However, this massive usage has a negative side also, as it may cause physical, social or psychological problems (Ybarra et al., 2007). Nowadays researchers pay a lot of attention to the online risks adolescents engage in. Basically, a risky online behaviour may be defined as hazardous actions or activities online which may cause a menace for the user (Berson, & Berson, 2005).

It is important to note that adolescents, being at the state of puberty and lacking knowledge, are the main group of people who engage in a risky online behaviour. Moreover, engaging in such kind of behaviour may also depend on the teenagers' social environment. Thus, it is possible to predict that adolescents, studying at the youth school, may be more likely to engage in risky online behaviour than students from secondary schools.

1.1. Risky online behaviour

With reference to the risky online behaviour studies of Dowell, Burgess & Cavanaugh (2009) and Livingstone with colleagues (2011), we may distinguish the main forms of risky behaviours on the Internet. These forms are risky sexual behaviour, communication with strangers, sharing personal information, cyberbullying, and accessibility to age-inappropriate web pages. Further, we shortly discuss each of these forms.

Risky sexual behaviour. Risky sexual behaviour may be defined as an active engagement into the sexual activities online (Livingstone, & Görzig, 2014) what may have negative consequences to one's personal life (Holloway, 2014). It is said that adolescents generally use the Internet to look for the information about sex and sexual experiences, to flirt or to start and maintain sexual conversations with other Internet users (Subrahmanyam, & Greenfield, 2008). On the one hand, it may happen because adolescents feel more open to talk about sex virtually than in the real life settings (Schrock, & Boyd, 2011). However, such kind of behaviour may lead to social isolation (Wachs et al., 2015).

Communication with strangers. The hugest problem of teens online is their wish to communicate with people they don't know and have never met in their real life (Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010a; Noll et al., 2013; Schrock, & Boyd, 2011). It is important to note that communication with strangers generally leads to other forms of risky behaviour: meeting with a stranger in real life settings or getting into risky sexual behaviour (Livingstone et al., 2011).

Sharing personal information. Ybarra and colleagues (2007) state that sharing personal information online can be called as the process of sending or sharing one's personal information in virtual settings. Any information submitted on the Internet is mostly related to the usage of social networking sites. Adolescents, using Facebook, generally like to share their surname or age, publish personal photos, or give information about the place they study (Livingstone et al., 2011; Žibėnienė, & Brasienė, 2013).

Cyberbullying. Cyberbullying, which is described as sending private or public harsh, obscene comments online (Ybarra et al., 2007), is a very common behaviour in online settings. It is meaningful to say that in some ways the Internet is a safer place for those who experience a real life bullying (Wach et al., 2015). However, the analysis of cyberbullying studies has shown that virtual harassment triggers mental, emotional and social difficulties to the victims of cyberbullying (Guan, & Subrahmanyam, 2009). According to Pujazon-Zazik & Park (2010), the permanent propensity of bullies to persecute their victims in virtual settings may also provoke adolescents' feelings of anxiety or fear, thus, they may start to avoid social contacts in real and online settings.

Accessibility to forbidden web pages. Age inappropriate or forbidden web pages for adolescents are related to the possibly harmful content they may find in the particular web page. However, teens can easily access such kind of pages because the security of them is not working well (Livingstone et al., 2011). Age forbidden pages generally contain the content of pornography or other sexual information (Livingstone et al., 2014). Visiting such web pages, according to Guan & Subrahmanyam (2009), may cause problems in adolescents' sexual development and may be the reason of early sexual intercourse.

1.2. Students' engagement in risky online behaviour

According to the research of Dowell, Burgess & Cavanaugh (2009), generally adolescents tend to engage in different kinds of risky behaviours online, e.g. sharing or sending personal information, texting with or for strangers and meeting them in real life, cyberbullying, visiting sites of pornography or other sexual stuff, visiting unsecured sites. Similarly, Livingstone and colleagues (2014) have found that adolescents on the Internet tend to look for pornographic material, engage in virtual bullying, receive sexual messages, communicate with unfamiliar people and meet them in real life, access harmful content and disclose personal information.

It is important to note that teenagers at the later adolescence are more likely to engage in risky behaviours online than any other age group (Escobar-Chaves, & Anderson, 2008) because of puberty and other biopsychosocial changes (Gamez-Guadix, Borrajo, & Almendros, 2016). It is also related to the teenagers' tendency to experiment with one's identity and to discover the surroundings (Dowell, Burgess, & Cavanaugh, 2009). The usage of the Internet here plays an important role as a longer time spent on the Internet is positively related to adolescents' risky online behaviour (Wach et al., 2015). Plus, according to the studies (e.g., Peter, & Valkenburg, 2006; Livingstone et al., 2011), teenage boys are more likely to engage in risky behaviours online than girls as females are more concerned about their privacy than males. These studies of secondary schools' students' show that adolescents tend to engage in various risky online behaviours. Thus, the interest of adolescents' behaviour online of the researchers is just growing. However, to our knowledge, there is no study conducted to analyse risky online behaviour and its relation to demographical characteristics of students from alternative schools.

Youth school is an alternative education place for youth. The main goal of youth school is to reduce the drop-out rate of students who lack the motivation to learn. It is also very important that students, studying at the youth school, generally come from single-parent or socially risky families what, according to Notten and Nikken (2014), may be related to higher risks online. On these bases, we predict that: adolescents from youth school may be more likely to engage in risky online behaviour

than students from secondary schools; older, male and spending more time online students are more likely to engage in risky behaviours online than others. Thus, the purpose of this study is to find out if there are any differences between youth and secondary schools' students' engagement in risky online behaviours.

RQ1: What are the forms of risky online behaviour that youth and secondary schools' students tend to engage in?

RQ2: How youth and secondary schools' students' engagement in risky online behaviour is related to their demographical characteristics?

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

195 6th-12th grade students from youth (N=45) and secondary (N=150) schools' participated in this study. 105 of them were female (53.8%) and 90 male (46.2%). Their age ranged from 11 to 17 years, with a mean of 14.8 years (SD=1.66). Two of the participants have been removed from the analysis as they have noted not using the Internet.

The sample for this study was taken from Lithuanian youth and secondary schools' and it was homogenous in terms of ethnic background.

2.2. Measures

Students' risky online behaviour was measured using a questionnaire created by Ybarra and colleagues (2007) and Notten & Nikken (2014) studies. The created scale includes 11 items (e.g., *talk about sexual things; posting photos of me*). The participants there asked to rate how often they engage in each of a given behaviour on the scale from 1(*never*) to 6 (*very often*). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.66.

Students also had to indicate their gender, age, school type, and the amount of time they spend online.

The research has been organised in Lithuanian youth and secondary education schools after getting the agreements from the schools' administration to conduct the research. In the youth school, the links to the online questionnaires were given to the students during the lessons of information technologies; in the secondary education schools, students had to fill in the paper-pencil questionnaires at the beginning of the lesson.

3. Findings

First of all, in order to find out if there is any difference in the particular forms of risky online behaviour that youth and secondary schools' students tend to engage in, nonparametric Mann-Whitney test for two-independent samples was used (Table 1).

Table 1. The mean ranks of particular forms of students risky online behaviour by the school type (N=195).

Risky online behaviour	School	N	Mean rank	Statistic Z
Set a real name and/or surname	Youth	45	88.98	-1.25
	Secondary	150	100.71	
Set a real telephone number	Youth	45	95.72	-.33
	Secondary	150	98.68	
Set school's name	Youth	45	96.39	-.22
	Secondary	150	98.48	
Set a real age or birth date	Youth	45	90.77	-1.00
	Secondary	150	100.17	
Post personal photos	Youth	45	98.34	-.12
	Secondary	150	97.24	
Post photos of age forbidden behaviour	Youth	45	109.04	-2.35*
	Secondary	150	94.69	
Pretend to be someone else	Youth	45	88.21	-1.72
	Secondary	150	100.31	
Post rude, offensive comments	Youth	45	110.34	-2.01*
	Secondary	150	94.30	
Accept unknown people to "my friends" list	Youth	45	93.29	-.68
	Secondary	150	99.41	
Talk about sexual things	Youth	45	96.69	-.24
	Secondary	150	98.39	
Visiting pornographic sites	Youth	45	99.16	-.23
	Secondary	150	97.65	

*p<.05.

The results have shown that both youth and secondary schools' students are tended to engage in various risky online behaviours. Interestingly, secondary schools' students seem to engage in risky behaviours online more often than youth school students (e.g., *set a real name and/or surname* ($Z=-1.25$, $p=.21$), *set a real age or birth date* ($Z=-1.00$, $p=.32$), *pretend to be someone else* ($Z=-1.72$, $p=0.09$)), however, the differences between these behaviours aren't statistically significant (see Table1). Only the results of the behaviours of *posting photos of age forbidden behaviour* and *rude, offensive comments* were statistically significant (Table 1): youth school's students are more likely than secondary schools' students to *post photos of age forbidden behaviour* (e.g. smoking or drinking) ($Z=-2.35$, $p=.02$) and to *post rude, offensive comments* ($Z=-2.01$, $p=.04$).

In order to evaluate youth and secondary schools' students' engagement in risky online behaviour taking into account their demographical characteristics (gender, age) and time spent online, the regression analysis with *enter* method was used. The scale of risky online behaviour was chosen as depended variable. As independent variables were chosen: gender (*1- female, 2-male*), age, the amount of time spent online per day (*1 – less than one hour, 2 – 1-2 hours, 3 – 2-3 hours, 4 – more than 3 hours*), and the school type (*1- youth school, 2-secondary school*).

Table 2. Predictions of students' engagement in risky online behaviours by students' age, gender, type of school, and the time spent online (N=195).

Independent variable	Risky online behaviour		
	B	SE B	B
Age	1.16	.29	.28*
Gender	1.49	.96	.11
School type	-.60	1.11	-.04
Time spent online	1.75	.44	.27*
R ²			.18
F			9.76*

p<.001.

Table 2 shows that regression model is statistically significant ($R^2=.18$, $F(4, 183)=9.76$, $p<.001$). However, only students' age and the time spend online differ from 0 statistically significantly ($p<.001$). By the given results it is possible to say that older ($\beta=.28$, $p<.001$) and spending more time online ($\beta=.27$, $p<.001$) youth and secondary schools' students are more likely to engage in risky online behaviours.

4. Conclusions

Although risky online behaviour becomes a widely studied behaviour of adolescents from secondary or higher education schools, researchers still lack data of students' from alternative schools (e.g. youth school) risky behaviour on the Internet. Thus, this study was aimed to find out if there are any differences between youth and secondary schools' students' engagement in risky online behaviours.

The results of the study have shown that both youth and secondary schools' students tend to engage in risky online behaviours. These results partly go along with the ones in the study of Livingstone and colleagues (2014) – students are likely to engage in risky behaviours online and mostly it is related to sharing their personal information online or texting. However, according to our study, youth school's students are more likely than secondary school's students to post photos of age forbidden behaviour (e.g. smoking or drinking) and to post rude, offensive comments. This indicates the importance of the students' social context background (Notten, & Nikken, 2014). Youth school's students may engage in more aggressive and forbidden behaviours online than secondary schools' students because of a poor parental monitoring what may cause their lack of social competencies (Sasson & Mesch, 2014). Moreover, youth school's students may be likely to show off by their inappropriate online behaviour as it is normally accepted and promoted behaviour among their friends.

As it was already mentioned, the peak of the engagement in risky online behaviour is reached in the middle of adolescence (Escobar-Chaves, & Anderson, 2008; Baumgartner, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010). Our study has also shown that older adolescents engage in risky online behaviours more often than younger ones. Similar results were found in Dowell, Burgess, & Cavanaugh (2009) study: in the later adolescence students are likely to share their personal information, engage in cyberbullying, talk about sexual things and visit sex-related web pages. As Smahel, Brown & Blinka (2012) suggest, at the later adolescence teens are in the lack of social contacts, thus, the majority of the time they spend being alone what draws them up to use the Internet and engage in risky behaviours.

It is also important to note that, according to our study, students who spend more time using the Internet are more likely to engage in risky behaviours online despite the school type. These results go along with the Wach's and colleagues (2015): the more time adolescents spend on the Internet, the more often they engage in risky behaviours online. Moreover, authors note that spending a lot of time online is a risky behaviour by itself as it causes other forms of risky behaviours in virtual settings. Thus, Gamez-Guadix, Borrajo, & Almendros (2016) implicate that because adolescents are in the lack of ability to control their internet usage they start acting foolish and fast what probably causes their engagement in risky online behaviours.

According to Notten and Nikken (2014), male adolescents are more likely than females to engage in risky online behaviours because of sensation seeking and spending more time online. Moreover, comparing to girls, teenage boys are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviour (Peter, & Valkenburg, 2006). Interestingly, our study has shown that gender isn't related to the youth's tendency to engage in risky behaviours online. Therefore, as the studies mentioned above suggest that adolescents engagement in risky online behaviours differ by their gender and considering the fact that the Internet is easily accessible in all Lithuanian settings (e.g. home, city and schools environments), it would be useful to include larger sample of youth and general schools' students into the study to find out if there is any gender influence into students' risky online behaviours.

This study indicates that risky online behaviour is an important issue and it is common among youth from different educational settings. However, this research also promotes the need for wider analysis of adolescents' risky online behaviour, to have a better understanding of its features in a variety of settings and the relation to demographical characteristics. In this case, it would be easier to educate the students, teachers and parents to monitor and counsel of youth's risky online behaviour.

To sum up, this study indicates that students from different social and educational contexts are likely to engage in risky online behaviours. Therefore, it highlights the need for researchers and educators to pay more attention and put efforts in creating and implementing psychological interventions in order to reduce and/or prevent youth's engagement in risky online behaviours.

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