GENDER DIFFERENCES INRISKY BEHAVIOURS ON THE INTERNET IN CASE OFSTUDENTS

Hajnalka Kanya, Assist. Prof., PhD Student, PartiumChristian University of Oradea

Abstract: The present paper refers to the research of risky behaviours of students on the Internet, based on the gender differences in these behaviours. Students can be considered in their lifecycle as being in prolonged adolescence and facing different stressors, having special psychological characteristics and behaviours. For the research purpose the Internet was considered as one of those factors which can induce stress for students. Many factors can influence the behaviour of students on the Internet in general, and there are specific factors which can contribute to risky behaviour in special. For this reason I have designed a questionnaire in order to analyse the grade of implication of students in risky behaviours on the Internet. I used a group of subjects for the research, both male and female students. Measurements were made using the questionnaire elaborated by the author for the purpose of the research. The results of the research reveal that students manifest risky behaviours on the Internet, and for this reason it would be necessary to develop and implement prevention and intervention programs, in order to reduce the experienced harms and their negative psychological consequences.

Key-words*: risky behaviours on the Internet, prolonged adolescence, gender differences, prevention, intervention*

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence and prolonged adolescence is considered by specialists a transition period from childhood to adulthood, when individuals have to face accelerated changing processes in their cognitive, social and emotional development, accompanied by enormous physical and psychical restructuration.

Through the period of adolescence individuals can have intensified perceptions and can be exposed to intense stress (Peterson & Spinga, 1982 cited by Cătană & Sassu, 2009). Among the various stressors, the Internet and the use of online social media can become a stressor for adolescents and individuals in prolonged adolescence period of their life. As the stressors can have not just short term, but also long term impact on individuals' development and personality, it is important to analyse the characteristics of the behaviours of adolescents on the Internet, the forms and grade of their risky behaviours on the Internet, the perceived harm, and the effects of using the Internet in a risky way.

Based on the results of these kind of researches there exist the possibility to reduce risky behaviours on the Internet and the harms, and negative impacts on individuals.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERNET USE OF ADOLESCENTS AND PROLONGED ADOLESCENTS

Through adolescence and prolonged adolescence three types of stressors have an impact on individuals:

- Normative stressors, which are different life events experienced by all individuals (Heaven, 1996 cited by Cătană & Sassu, 2009);
- Non-normative stressors, which are different events which can appear in the life of only some individuals (Cătană și Sassu, 2009);
- Daily harassment stressors, which are different events which can cause stress at individual level of a person (Cătană și Sassu, 2009).

For the purpose of the research the author considered the use of Internet and social media an important stressor. As the culture of Internet use and education offered for adolescents and prolonged adolescents in Romania have serious lack regarding security aspects of the Internet use, there exists high probability of dangerous and risky behaviour on the Internet and online social media, and the possibility of appearance of harm and negative impact on individuals' life, psychological development and even personality.

In order to reduce risky behaviour of prolonged adolescents on the Internet we need to obtain information about the psychological profile or psychological type of individuals which expose themselves to a high risk on the Internet, and we need to find the reasons of doing that.

A research on adolescents between 12-17 years old revealed some factors of their risky behaviours on the Internet. Regarding the use of social media the main danger is that adolescents easily meet face-to-face strangers in real life, whom they have communicated only online before. 16% of Internet user adolescents included in the research have met in real life a person they have known from the Internet, from a social media. Age, frequency of Internet use, frequency of online chatting, frequency of online gaming, rules established by parents regarding the use of the Internet, types of personal data offered online publicly, quantity of impropriate content received online, visiting websites with impropriate content, types of received advice related to the use of Internet are among those factors which influence adolescents to meet strangers in real life after they encountered them online. (Liau et al., 2005)

Another research on adolescents revealed that especially individuals of 12-14 years old are willing to meet strangers encountered online before. It is worth to mention that as frequency of chatting online has increased, the frequency of chatting with strangers decreased. But if individuals have engaged in long chatting sessions, they had the tendency of chatting with strangers. Having fun, the need of meeting and knowing new people, and receiving social rewards are those main factors which can be considered the reasons for chatting with strangers. (Peter et al., 2006)

Adolescents tend to stay more time in online social media, especially on the Facebook. A research analysed the behaviours related to private life protection, personal data protection of adolescents and their parents who use the Facebook. The results underline the importance of parental concern for personal data protection and secure online social media use, as if parents are concerned of the publicly offered personal data, it increases the attention paid by adolescents to keep private their personal data in online social media. (Feng & Xie, 2014) Adolescents can be exposed to getting messages with sexual content, on the Internet and in online social media, phenomena named sexting. The results of a research related to 11-16 years old adolescents show that exposure is higher at higher ages, higher level of

psychological difficulties, intense sensation seeking, and risky offline and online behaviours. But the research also revealed that exposure is higher at lower ages, especially in case of girls who face higher levels of some psychological problems, and at lower levels of seeking sensations. As a result one of the main conclusions of the research was that age, psychological difficulties, sensation seeking, online and offline risky behaviour are those factors which influence most exposure to sexting in case of adolescents. Another main conclusion was that specialists should differentiate the predictors for risky behaviours which can expose individuals to getting messages with sexual contents and their exposure to harms/abuses as a result of seeing the contents of these kinds of messages. From this point of view specialists consider that there exist a need of some exposure in case of adolescents, in order to increase their resilience, and it is not sufficient to exclusively reduce their risky behaviours through different politics and practical interventions. (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014)

Parents have an important role in educating and assuring the conditions for optimal psychological development of their children, and can become a positive model in using the Internet, and can prevent Internet dependency of their children. (Sears & Sears, 2002)

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS OF PRIMARY RESEARCH

The main objective of the primary research is to analyse the risky behaviours of prolonged adolescents (students from Oradea), and to reveal the gender differences in these behaviours, if they exist. The importance of the research is underlined by the need of increasing secure use of the Internet.

I chose to analyse the online behaviours of students, because generally they use the Internet regularly, and if they manifest high levels of risky behaviours in the cyber space, this is an important sign, that we have to pay attention to develop education and culture of Internet use from younger ages. I used a non-representative sample of students from Oradea, who study different fields of economics. As the used sample is non-representative, the results can be interpreted only for the level of the used sample.

I used an intergroup experimental design, and I compared the behaviours of male and female students. I used as dependent variable the risky behaviour on the Internet, which was operationalized through the number of risky behaviours on the Internet (a total number of 17). As a measurement tool I developed a questionnaire in order to measure the consciousness of risky behaviour on the Internet, and the main characteristics of risky behaviour on the Internet. The questionnaire contains 22 questions, related to three main topics:

- Manifestation of risky behaviour on the Internet;
- Social norms – peer group norms related to Internet use;
- Impact on social identity and self-confidence.

As hypothesis for research purposes I have formulated the followings:

- "Students manifest a high level of risky behaviour on the Internet."
- "There exist significant gender differences in some aspects of behaviours and risky behaviours on the Internet".

The gathered data were introduced and analysed in SPSS. I tested homogeneity with Test χ^2, in order to reveal gender differences related to risky behaviours on the Internet.

Significant gender differences were observed in the following aspects:

- Question 5: $\chi^2(1)=6.706$, p=0.010 < 0.05, which reflects that exist significant gender differences related to finding fun almost every day on the Internet.
- Question 6: $\chi^2(1)=5.294$, p=0.021 < 0.05, which reflects that exist significant gender differences related to finding opportunities to encounter new people on the Internet.
- Question 13: $\chi^2(1)=4.848$, p=0.028 < 0.05, which reflects that exist significant gender differences related to public visibility of own profile on Facebook.

Regarding the characteristics of Internet use and risky behaviour of male and female students of the sample used in research, we can underline those main differences which are reflected in the answers of the interviewed students.

Female students have the following special characteristics of their behaviours:

- Female students tend to chat online more than male students (58.3% - female students, 25% - male students).
- Female students tend to find more possibilities for fun on the Internet on a daily basis than male students (91.7% - female students, 37% - male students).
- Female students tend to find more possibilities to encounter new people on the Internet than male students (100% - female students, 62.5% - male students).
- Female students tend more to meet in real life individuals known only from the Internet than male students (75% - female students, 37.5% - male students).
- Female students tend to think more that their popularity is measured and reflected by the number of likes received on Facebook (average: 5 - female students, 3.25 - male students).

Male students have the following special characteristics of their behaviours:

- Male students tend more to have publicly visible Facebook profiles than female students (75% - male students, 25% - female students).
- Male students tend to post more photos of themselves on Facebook which are publicly visible (visible for anyone on the Internet) (62.5% - male students, 33.3% female students).
- In case of male students strangers can find easier information about their schools, than in case of female students (75% - male students, 58% female students) and about their addresses and homes (50% - male students, 41.7% - female students).
- Parents tend less to establish rules for Internet use in case of male students than in case of female students (12.5% - male students, 25% - female students).
- Male students should suffer more in case of not being able to play online games any more than female students (average: 2.62 - male students, 1.91 - female students).

Generally students from the sample reflect a high level of risky behaviour on the Internet. The average is 11 (the number of risky behaviours, from the total 17 possible risky behaviours reflected in the questionnaire).

If we look to gender differences regarding the levels of risky behaviours manifested on the Internet by the students from the sample, we can observe, that female students manifest a higher level of risky behaviour than male students (the average for female students is 11.41 from the possible 17 types of risky behaviours, and the average for male students is 10.37 from the possible 17 types of risky behaviours).

These results of this research attracts our attention on the necessity of rising the risky behaviour consciousness of the interviewed students, as their level of risky behaviour is high, which seems not to bother them. Another necessity is to develop prevention and intervention programs in accordance with the psychological characteristics of different categories of students implied in highly risky behaviour on the Internet in order to increase secure use of the Internet and reduce the harms due to risky behaviours.

As students, who can be considered in prolonged period of adolescence, or young adults, reflect high levels of risky behaviours and low level of consciousness of their risky behaviours, we can wonder what is the situation in case of adolescents between 11-18 years old, and of course in case of children under 10 years old? Maybe we should worry for them, too, and further researches can reveal the characteristics of their risky behaviours on the Internet.

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE RESULTS OF PRIMARY RESEARCH

Students from the sample who participated as subjects in the primary research (both female students and male students), are considered to be part of the digital generation, which has specific psychological characteristics in comparison with other generations, due to specific environmental conditions which had impact on their psychological development, and they use the information and communication technologies and tools, the Internet and the Facebook in their daily lives and routines.

These individuals use naturally computers, mobile phones and smart phones, the Internet and social media in their daily lives for different purposes:

- getting and sharing information;
- communicating with others;
- spending their spare-time;
- entertainment;
- gambling;
- learning and preparing home-works/essays etc.;
- watching movie online or downloading films;
- listening online music or downloading music;
- socialization, etc.

A special characteristic of digital natives is that they easily pass the boundaries between offline/real/physical world and online/digital/cyber/virtual world, and they generally are not aware of the differences between these two spaces (offline and online). (Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2014)

The use of the Internet by adolescents was studied from the points of view of psychological rewards obtained by them and of social influences, too. It seems that

adolescents use the Internet especially for hedonic reasons, and their continuous involvement in online activities in general, and in social media in special, is associated with their hedonic experiences in the cyber space. (Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2014)

From the point of view of developmental psychology adolescents and prolonged adolescents pass a transition period from childhood to adulthood, during when they face huge physical and psychological transformations, try to develop a stable and coherent identity and self-image, build their social identity. In this developmental stage the influences and norms of peer-groups are very important, and have a huge impact on their behaviours. They try to become independent from their parents; as a result the influence of the parents on their behaviours is decreasing (but is not disappearing totally, of course). (Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2014)

From the point of view of the motivational theories in psychology, the online behaviour of adolescents and prolonged adolescents can be explained through the rewards they feel to get on the Internet, especially in three directions: utilitarian rewards, hedonic rewards and social rewards. (Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2014)
From the perspective of social influences the online behaviour can be explained by the impact of normative beliefs of peer-groups. (Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2014)

Taking in view the principles of social psychology regarding psychology of groups and school psychology, the behavioural norms and standards accepted in educational institutions influence the online behaviours of the individuals who are part of those institutions. (Neculau & Boncu, 1998 cited by Cosmovici & Iacob, 1998)

In order to reduce risky behaviours on the Internet in case of students, first of all it is important to raise their level of awareness of the dangers of Internet use, of their own risky online behaviours, of the possible negative impacts and harms of their risky online behaviours. It is also important to offer them education regarding safer use of the Internet and to develop their Internet use culture.

5. IN CONCLUSION

In conclusion we can observe that there exists a preoccupation in developed countries for evaluating and reducing the negative effects of risky behaviour on the Internet, especially in case of children and adolescents, and an interest to study those categories of individuals who manifest high exposure to online risks, harms and cyber abuses.
Also in Romania there exist germs of these kind of preoccupations, but there is a need for more researches, and based on results of these kind of researches, there is a need of developing and implementing successful prevention and intervention programs at different levels (for example at national level, at level of educational institutions, at level of classrooms, and of course at individual level of children, adolescents, prolonged adolescents and adults).
On one side today adolescents in Romania, who are members of the digital generation, the native digitals, use naturally the information and communication technologies and tools in their daily lives, in their daily routines, they use the Internet and online social media for different purposes (learning, getting information, culture, socializing etc.). On the other side these adolescents manifest a serious lack in their Internet using education and culture, which

can lead to risky behaviours, and most important to serious harms, when they navigate on the Internet, or when they use online social media.

The main question can be: "Who is responsible to protect them from the negative effects and harms due to risky behaviours on the Internet?". The answer is very complex, as different actors are implied, and have various responsibilities and tools in order to do this.

The present paper aimed to analyse the risky behaviours of students on the Internet, as they have generally over 18 years old, can be considered on one side prolonged adolescents, on the other side young adults, and if they manifest risky behaviours on the Internet, this can be an important signal that something has to be done in order to protect them from the resulted harms.

Regarding the utility of the present research we can mention that it can trigger parents, teachers, educational institution managers, representatives of local/national/international authorities to pay attention to risky behaviours on the Internet of children and adolescents, and to involve them in a responsible way to prevent these risky behaviours using different methods and tools. The main goal of doing this is to contribute to a healthy psychological development of individuals, reducing their exposure to stress and traumas caused by Internet use.

The present paper suggests that further studies are necessary in order to reveal the impact of parental styles and of peer-group standards, values and norms from educational institutions (especially schools) on risky online behaviours of children, adolescents and prolonged adolescents, the psychological profile of different risk categories of individuals, etc.

Identifying different risk categories of individuals (for example children with learning difficulties, adolescents with opponent behaviour, etc.) specialists can develop prevention and intervention programmes in order to increase their safe behaviours on the Internet, involving, if necessary, their parents, educators and teachers, members of peer-groups, educational institutions, local/national/international authorities etc.

Representative researches at national, regional, or local levels could reveal specific aspects which can be the base of developing politics, prevention and intervention programmes at national, regional, local, institutional and individual levels.

Of course we have to mention that these programmes will be successful only if they take in account the psychological characteristics of the genders, of different age groups, of psychological difficulties faced, of socio-economic background, of cultural background, etc. of individuals.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Cătană, Anamaria – Sassu, Raluca (2009): Factori şi efecte ale vulnerabilităţii şi rezilienţei la stresul psihosocial în adolescenţă. In Milcu, Marius – Griebel, Wilfried – Sassu, Raluca (2009). *Cercetarea psihologică modernă: direcţii şi perspective. Cercetare cantitativă vs. cercetare calitativă.* Editura Universitară, Bucureşti, pp. 24-30.

Feng, Yang – Xie, Wenjing (2014): Teens' concern for privacy when using social networking sites: An analysis of socialization agents and relationships with privacy-protecting behaviors. *Computers in Human Behavior,* Vol. 33, pp. 153-162. available at http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563214000144 [15.04.2015.]

Liau, Albert Kienfie – Khoo, Angeline – Hwaang, Peng (2005): Factors Influencing Adolescents Engagement in Risky Internet Behavior. *CyberPsychology & Behavior,* Vol. 8, Nr. 6, pp. 513-520. available at http://online.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/cpb.2005.8.513 [15.04.2015.]

Livingstone, Sonia – Görzig, Anke (2014): When adolescents receive sexual messages on the Internet: Explaining experiences of risk and harm. *Computers in Human Behavior,* Vol. 33, pp. 8-15. available at http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563213004743 [15.04.2015.]

Mäntymäki, Matti – Riemer, Kai (2014): Digital natives in social virtual worlds: A multi-method study of gratifications and social influences in Habbo Hotel. *International Journal of Information Management,* Vol. 34, pp. 210-220 available at http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0268401213001679 [10.05.2014.]

Neculau, Adrian – Boncu, Ștefan (1998): *Capitolul XIII. Perspective psihosociale în educaţie.* In Cosmovici, Andrei – Iacob, Luminiţa (coord.) (1998): *Psihologie Școlară.* Editura Polirom, Iaşi, pp. 229-254.

Peter, Jochen – Valkenburg, Patti M. – Schouten, Alexander P. (2006): Characteristics and Motives of Adolescents Talking with Strangers on the Internet. *CyberPsychology & Behavior,* Vol. 9, Nr. 5, pp. 526-530. available at http://online.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/cpb.2006.9.526 [10.05.2014.]

Sears, William – Sears, Martha (2002): *The Successful Child. What Parents Can Do to Help Kids Turn Out Well.* Little, Brown and Company, Boston.