Cyberspace Behaviors Keep Researchers Busy

BETSY BATES

LOS ANGELES — Today’s adolescents are so immersed in technology that they multitask in their cyberspace lives, texting while listening to their iPods, talking on cell phones as they scope out other e-ray's Facebook pages.

Even for adolescent medicine specialists, their worlds move fast—so fast, in fact, it’s difficult for researchers to keep up with what teens are doing, what it all means, and whether these technologies can be tapped for the betterment of teen health.

Researchers at the annual meeting of the Society for Adolescent Medicine observed a mixed picture of teens and technology, and they agreed that the topic is a moving target.

“As soon as we figure out what they’re doing, they’re on to something else,” said Amy B. Jordan, Ph.D., director of the media and the developing child sector of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

“As part of this movement, texting and instant messaging are in, e-mailing is out—the latter now just a relic ‘used to communicate with adults and institutions,’ said Pattie M. Valkenburg, Ph.D., director of the center for research on children, adolescents, and the media at the University of Amsterdam.

“Texting” is also a hot topic, with 20% of 12- to 17-year-old texting messages with sexual content and/or explicit photographs of themselves, Dr. Jordan said.

Younger adolescents quickly “appropriated” the social networking site Facebook from college students, but now there are indications that the teens are moving on.

In an ad, Dr. Valkenburg described her own 14-year-old daughter’s horror at learning that her 74-year-old grandmother had a Facebook page and 11 “friends,” “8 of whom she does not know!”

Dr. Valkenburg noted that American and European teens are particularly cynical in their ravenous consumption of technology, with more than 90% of U.S. and Dutch teens logging onto the Internet.

The reality of online life for teens means they “are one click away” from pornography, drug and alcohol messages, and hard-bitten marketing schemes bent on capitalizing on their impulsivity, Dr. Valkenburg said.

“With that perspective in mind, it is useful to note that researchers are discovering that American and Dutch teenagers are more sanguine, with 92% revealing their first names and 62% their last names.”

Another technology expert, Kaven Subrahmanyam, Ph.D., reported that, despite “exaggerated” online behaviors, few adolescents tend deeply into out-of-character, risky territory when they log on.

Troubled teens are troubled in all domains of their lives, while well-adjusted teens connect online with friends and those with similar interests.

“It does appear that teens’ offline and online worlds are connected,” said Dr. Subrahmanyam, director of the media and language lab at California State University, Los Angeles.

Her studies of cyberbullying, for example, reveal highly creative bullying techniques, from slam books to embedded pictures to texting.

But the cast of characters holds few surprises.

“The majority of bullies know who their victims are. Their victims are offline bullying at school,” she said.

Indeed, for some victims, the Internet may provide a buffer in which they can avoid social rejection by connecting with online friends.

On the other hand, Dr. Subrahmanyam warned that some children and teens are vulnerable to harmful influences and manipulation online, often marked by a solitary retreat to the online world.

“For those of us who work with teenagers, it’s important to consider that a discrepancy between offline and online life probably a red flag for suspicion,” she advised.

From a professional standpoint, it would behoove adolescent medicine professionals to get immersed in the fast-moving technological culture of adolescence in order to understand its influence on the teens they see, said Dr. Elise Wartella, executive vice chancellor and provost for the University of California, Riverside.

From a public policy standpoint, physicians’ voices are needed in the effort to monitor and control content, she maintained.

“You really need to experience it, not just listen to someone like me talk about it. Bring in some college students or teens . . . to actually walk you through ‘Twitter and take you into Second Life (an online virtual world),’” she advised.

Immersed in these environments can “go a long way” in gaining insight into how these new forms of communication are so very different from previous forms of adolescent communication, she said.

To view a video interview with Dr. Subrahmanyam, go to www.youtube.com/ClinPsychNews.

Forensic Psychiatry

Subrahmanyam, 39, author of "Internet Effects: Adolescents, Adolescents, Adolescents," was one of three psychologists who was interviewed on this subject.

Dr. Valkenburg is the director of the Media Effects Research Programme at the University of Amsterdam.

Dr. Subrahmanyam is the director of the Media and Language Lab at California State University, Los Angeles.

She is the author of “Cyberbullying: Identity, Technology, and Developmental Psychopathology” and has been the lead investigator in several major research projects investigating the effects of social networking sites on youth.

Dr. Valkenburg is also a collaborator on several research projects investigating the effects of social networking sites on youth.

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