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Experience of Children and Young Adults with Social Networks

Daniela KVETENSKA¹, Katerina JECHOVA²

Abstract: Social networks connect the world. Human communication takes on another dimension through social networks, with the current generation often referred to as one growing up in a virtual context. This paper focuses on the experience of children and young adults with social networks. The authors evaluate the accessibility of internet access from the point of view of children and young adults, as well as which social networks are the most popular among children and young adults in the Czech Republic. Further sub-questions focus on assessing vulnerability in social networking environments frequented by children and young adults. The authors used a questionnaire survey which was instituted at basic, secondary and higher educational institutions in the Hradec Králové region of the Czech Republic.

Keywords: *children at risk, social networking, communications.*

1. Introduction

Virtual communication through social networks, which has become an everyday part of human interaction, entails both advantages and risks, depending on how networks are used, misused or abused. The present article focuses on how children and young adults can be at risk of being threatened or even physically harmed by their use of virtual communication, with the focus placed on describing what kinds of threats children and young adults have encountered.

The most common types of attacks through social networks have been identified in the professional literature as cyberbullying, cybergrooming and sexting, which will be defined briefly as follows: Kopecký (2013) understands **cyberbullying** as a form of aggression implemented against an individual or a group using information or communication technologies. The abuse occurs repeatedly, whether by the original aggressor or by so-called secondary invaders.

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Noted as one of the most dangerous phenomena of the present, **cybergrooming** refers to the behavior of internet predators known putatively as cybergroomers who attempt to inspire in a potential victim a false confidence in the sincerity of the cybergroomer to a point at which the victim agrees to a personal meeting. The process is simply psychological manipulation conducted through the internet, mobile phones and other related technologies, always aimed toward a private or public encounter with the victim. As a result, the encounter with the attacker most often takes the form of the sexual abuse of the victim and / or repeated instances of abuse such as torture, forced child prostitution or the production of child pornography. In the Czech Republic, the sexual abuse of victims of cybergrooming have been cited most often (Bernson, 2002; Kopecký 2013).

Sexting is described by experts as an act of sending or exchanging nude photos by mobile phone or other electronic media. Recently the phenomenon has been associated mainly with the younger generation, who collect and publish what have been called “youth-produced sexual images.” Dissemination of the pictures takes place on social networks such as Facebook (Streichman, 2009; Kopecký 2013).

In this article, we will consider certain experiences children and young adults have had social networks in the Czech Republic, with particular emphasis placed on cyberbullying, cybergrooming and sexting.

2. Problem Statement

According to the results of one Czech research project (Kopecký, Szotkowski, Krejčí, 2014), 92.29% of Czech children aged 11-17 have an account with Facebook. Other researchers (Nosek, Trusinová, 2015), place the number of Facebook child users as approaching 76%. According to Kopecký (2015), this high number corresponds to the results of similar research carried out both in Europe and in the USA.

According to Kopecký (2015) in the Czech Republic Facebook is the most widespread social network in use, with about 4.2 million users. In comparison, Lidé.cz has about 833,000 users and 3 million registered accounts, Spolužáci.cz has about 606,000 users and more than 8 million registrations, Líbimseti.cz has about 270,000 users, and Google+ about 250,000 users.

Kopecký (2015) points out how the presence of cyberbullies in the Facebook environment has been demonstrated in a large number of studies both Europe and the USA as well as in Asian countries. According to Ditch

the Label (Ditch the Label, 2013), cyberbullying occurs most commonly on Facebook, Ask.Fm and Twitter. As part of this study, instances of cyberbullying in the Facebook environment were confirmed by 54% of respondents. Valuable information is also provided in the study *Dangers in Czech Internet Communication 3* (Kopecký, Szotkowski, Krejčí, 2012), according to which 34.22% of Czech children have experienced repeated verbal abuse, humiliation and embarrassment in the Facebook environment, 16.77% of children have experienced threats and 6.75% of children were victims of extortion on Facebook. According to a US-based survey of over 1,000 children from the United States (McAfee, 2012), 93% of respondents confirm that they have witnessed cyberbullying and online attacks predominantly on Facebook. According to this research, 23.3% of children became victims of cyberbullying, with 9.5% of respondents also confirming that actively participated in cyberbullying.

Research on sexting has been taking place since 2009 in a number of countries around the world, for example in the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, China and the Czech Republic. (Jolicoeur, Zedlewski, 2010; Kopecký, Szotkowski, Krejčí, 2012) In 2009, a US study found that from a sample of 653 teenagers aged 13-19, 38% of the sexually transmitted messages were sent to other people, with 19% of minors sending naked body pictures of themselves to other people. Regarding adults aged 20-26 (627 respondents), 58% sent a message with a sexual theme, with 32% of respondents having sent a photo of their own naked body. 71% of girls and 67% boys sent sexually suggestive content to their spouse or partner. According to this research, sexting has become part of the relationship (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2010; Kopecký 2013).

In the Czech Republic, Kopecký, Szotkowski and Krejčí (2012) conducted the study *Dangers in Electronic Communication*. The researchers worked with a sample of 10,700 respondents and found that 8.25% of children (11-17 years old) shared their own sexual content online and 9.15% sent content to other people. The results of this research suggest that sexting is not as prevalent in the Czech environment as in the US and other countries.

The present paper examines the experiences of children and young adults have had with social networks, focusing on sexting as well as on forms of cyberbullying. It identifies how the situation with sexting has

changed in terms of threats to children in the Czech Republic in comparison with other similar researches.

3. Research Questions/Aims of the research

The main objective was to determine what children and young adults experience with social networks. On a descriptive level, part of this goal consisted of finding out what social networks children and young adults are visiting and how they connect to them, i.e. in what ways are social networks available to these groups. In connection to these initial research goals, determining how often children and young adults connect to social networks is key. The present research builds on the work of the project Risks to Children from Social Networks (Jechová, Květenská, 2016) as well as Multidisciplinary Collaboration Benefitting Endangered Children (Květenská, Myška, 2016).

The present research project is directed toward the following goals:

1. Determining basic information on the type, manner and frequency of social networking by children and young adults
2. Determining basic information about children and young adults' own negative experiences or otherwise mediated experiences with social networks.
3. Determining basic information about the experiences of children and young adults in terms of their own efforts to harm others through social networks.
4. Determining information on the possibilities of assistance open to children and young adults, specifically determining where or to whom the respondent would turn for help.
5. Determining information on parental access to the social networks their children use.

The research findings will be further developed into additional future research objectives and will be used as a basis for designing and instituting preventive measures aimed at minimizing risk behaviors of children and young adults in their use of social networking.

4. Research Methods

As a basic research tool, a questionnaire (17 questions) was administered to allow anonymous answers and to facilitate the quick and straightforward processing of the acquired data. The survey was created and

processed online at Survio.com. As the quantitative data obtained was further processed, basic statistical methods were used.

Data collection took place from 5 March 2017 to 5 April 2017 at selected schools in the Hradec Králové Region in the Czech Republic. The questionnaire was distributed to 4 basic, 4 secondary and 2 higher education institutions. For a balance of information, 2 elementary schools located in rural areas were chosen. All the institutions selected randomly using an electronic list of schools and educational facilities, with the sole selection criterion being that the school be situated in the Hradec Králové Region.

A total of 308 respondents participated in the study, of whom 201 (63.3%) were girls and 107 (34.7%) boys. Of these, 121 (39.3%) respondents were between 8-12 years of age, 92 (29.9%) between 13-15 years old, and 36 (11.7%) between 16-18 years of age, and 59 (19.2%) of the total respondents could be identified as young adults aged 19-23. More than half of the respondents (166, i.e. 53.9%) were children and young adults living in a city with a population of between 50,000 and 300,000; 46 (14.9%) of the respondents live in a city of smaller size (a population between 5 000 and 50 000); and 89 (28, 9%) of the respondents were from a village. Only 7 (2.3%) of the respondents signified that they live in a large metropolitan area, i.e. with over 300,000 inhabitants.

5. Findings

The following results correspond to answers obtained to the identified research questions, with the findings based on the evaluation of the data obtained in the research. These findings will then be discussed and elaborated upon in “Conclusions,” section 7 of the present article.

5.1. Types, methods and frequency of use of social networks by children and young adults

The basic aim was to determine information regarding the internet access available to children and young adults. It was found that 97.1% (299) of respondents had the ability to connect to the internet at home, while 41.2% (127) of respondents also had connections available at school. 48.1% (148) of respondents indicated that they have an unlimited internet access on their mobile phone. Most respondents, i.e. 238 (77, 3%), connect via mobile devices. The second most common form of connection is by the respondents' own computer, as indicated by 126 respondents (40.9%). Only 18 (5.8%) of respondents said that they were not connected to the internet

at all. Generally, the very youngest respondents indicated that they were connected via a common family computer, with a total of 48 respondents (15.6%).

The respondents could select multiple social networks on which they have registered a profile. Most of the respondents 74.4% (229 respondents) have a Facebook account, with the popularity of other social networking also shown below in Table 1, in which only the most frequent results regarding various platforms are listed. Only 20 respondents, ranging mostly in age from 8 to 12 years old, indicated that they did not have a personal profile on any social network. Among young people between the ages of 13 and 15 years, use of the social network Snapchat was most widely indicated.

Table 1. The number of surveyed children and young adults maintaining a personal profile on a social networking platform

social networking site	respon es	percentage
Facebook	229	74.4 %
Instagram	160	51.9 %
Twitter	78	25.3 %
No social network affiliation	20	6.5 %

Respondents most frequently reported monitoring Facebook (39.6%) and Instagram (27.9%). More than half of respondents said that they check social networks “often, regularly and daily” (21.1%) and “several times a day” (35.7%). Thus, more than half (a total of 175, i.e. 56.8%) of the respondents track social networks at least once a day.

5.2. Their own or otherwise mediated negative experiences of children and young adults with social networks

The survey determined that 158 (51.3%) of respondents had not had a negative experience with social networks. Less than a third of respondents (30.5%) had received a Facebook request for "friendship" from an unknown person. A total of 72 (23, 4%) of respondents indicated that someone in their circle of "friends" had posted information that was not true. A total of 43 (14.0%) of respondents said that some of their "friends" had posted information that harmed a mutual acquaintance. A total of 22 (7.1%) of respondents indicated that someone among their "friends" had published information that harmed the respondent herself or himself. A similar

number of respondents (27, i.e. 8.8%) had actually met with someone who had threatened them on the social network. Less than 10% of respondents (28, i.e. 9.1%) had encountered a situation in which one of his "friends" published naked pictures of a mutual acquaintance with the intention of causing harm. A total of 32 (10.4%) of respondents indicated that one of their "friends" had published naked photos of the respondent. A total of 49 (15.9%) of respondents said that a "friend" had asked her or him to send naked photos. A total of 22 (7.1%) of respondents indicated that one of their "friends" had posted naked photos of the respondent with the intention of causing harm. Regarding negative experiences as described in answers to open-ended questions, the respondents reported, for example, "identity theft" by the creation of a false profile as well as publishing vulgar posts under the false profile, etc. In the open response section, respondents also described negative experiences in their immediate geographical surroundings.

In answer to the question as to whether respondents had been hurt by communications or information posted on the social network, 226 (73.4%) responded negatively. A total of 39 respondents (12.7%) answered that they had been hurt in some way. 43 (14.0%) of the respondents gave indefinite answers, i.e. "I do not know." Respondents were also asked if they know someone else in their neighborhood who had been hurt by a social network. A total of 107 respondents (34.7%) responded positively, with almost half of respondents (137 in total or 44.5%) indicating that they did not know anyone who had been hurt. Fully one fifth (20.8%, 64 in total) of respondents responded equivocally; this is not an inconsequential percentage and it may be possible to speculate on the significance of this equivocation.

5.3. The experiences of children and young adults in terms of their own efforts to harm others through social networks

In responding to a question regarding one's own negative behavior even in a virtual environment, the researcher may certainly expect misleading answers. As such, this question cannot be expected to contain unequivocal predictive value. Nevertheless, although it was anticipated that many responses would be self-serving and even dishonest, any answers at all that respondents were able or willing to express could very well prove to be interesting and valuable.

When the respondent was asked whether she or he had harmed someone by communicating or falsifying information in a social networking environment, only 8 (2.6%) respondents answered in the affirmative. 15

respondents (4.9%) responded equivocally. A total of 285 (92.5%) of respondents categorically denied that they would ever hurt someone through the use of social networks.

5.4. Responsible parties to whom the respondent could turn for help

In our survey, two questions were included to deal with this issue. One question was regarding a situation in which someone was hurt by the use of a social network; simply, who was the respondent to ask for help in such a case? Most respondents, i.e. 43 (14%), did not seek help at all. A total of 37 (12, 0%) of respondents turned to their parents, with a slightly lower number of respondents (25 or 8.1%) turning to a friend. Overall, 178 (57, 8%) of respondents indicated they had had no negative experience with social networks. It is quite interesting that none of the respondents sought help from a social worker, and only 1 (0.3%) turned to a teacher for assistance. A total of 5 (1.6%) had referred the matter to the police, an indication that these respondents had endured serious harm through social networks.

The second question focused on a situation in which the respondent had hurt someone by the use of a social network, i.e. who she or he would turn to for help. The most often indicated answer (153 or 49.7%) was that the respondents would take the matter up with their parents. The second choice was confiding in a friend, with a total of 83 respondents (26, 9%). Overall, 33 (10, 7%) of the respondents indicated that would ask for no help at all. In line with the answers to the previous question, it is not surprising that the respondents showed little confidence in teachers, with only 5 (1.6%) of respondents indicating that that would turn to them for assistance. Similarly, a small number of respondents would turn to a social worker, only 2 (0.6%). A total of 20 (6.5%) of respondents would turn to the police. In answers to the open-ended questions, in several cases respondents reported they would request help from a nurse, with others in the older age category of those surveyed indicating that they would turn to a partner.

Parents' access to their children's social networks

The last area of questioning focused on parents' monitoring of their children's communication on social networks. Half of the respondents (156, i.e. 50, 6%) indicated that their parents exerted no oversight at all over of their use of social networks. A total of 115 (37.3%) of the respondents said their parents exhibited a degree of understanding of their youngsters' social

networking, with the vast majority of respondents who responded positively corresponding to the age group ranging from 8 to 12 years (73, i.e. 83.9% of the number of positive answers). The remainder of the positive responses to this question were given the pupils between 13 and 15 years of age. In open-ended questions the respondents stated that their parents were informed only occasionally about their communication. Others indicated that their parents were not interested, but if they were interested, the respondent would have no problem communicating with them about their use of social networks.

6. Discussions

The present study focuses specifically on the Hradec Králové region of the Czech Republic. The results of our research survey described the experiences of children and young adults with social networks, building on previous research by deepening and concretizing previous findings. The results, which generally refer to the communication of children and young adults on social networks, correspond to results found by Kopecký, Szotkowski, Krejci (2014), according to whom the social network Facebook alone reaches 92.29% of Czech children aged 11-17 years. In our research, it was found that access to the internet is easy for children and young adults. It has also been confirmed that the most popular social networks are Facebook, which is used by 74.4% of the respondents, and Instagram, on which 51.9% of respondents have their own accounts. Only 6.5% of the respondents indicated that they have no personal profile at all on any social network.

Results from our research differ from those obtained outside the Czech Republic, e.g. research more generally in the European environment indicates that roughly 50% of respondents have had negative experiences with social networking (see above, e.g. Kopecký, 2015, Kopecký, Szotkowski, Krejčí, 2012, Ditch the Label, 2013). American research has shown that 23% of their respondents have been the victims of bullying, with 93% of respondents having reported cyberbullying in their own neighborhood (see McAfee, 2012). In our survey, 71 (i.e. 23.0%) respondents have had their own negative experience with social networking (based on their response "It has happened to me ..." to a multiple-choice question). A caution regarding the interpretation of this response, however, is that in this case the respondents were able to select from a number of options. Further results indicate that 39 (12.7%) of those surveyed were

harmed by social networking. On the other hand, since 51.3% of respondents have denied ever having a negative experience with social networking, it can be assumed that 48.7% of those who took our survey have indeed had a negative experience. Once again, this is a similar result in comparison to the other studies mentioned above.

Not much research has been conducted regarding respondent's attempts to harm another person by the use of social networks, i.e. on self-identification as an online bully. Studies attempting to quantify this phenomenon are encumbered by various problems, e.g. questions of trust in the anonymity of the survey, along with the desires to maintain a positive public image as well as a positive self-image. Thus, in our study as well, it can be assumed that a number of respondents to this question did not provide truthful information. According to one US research project (McAfee, 2012), 9.5% of those surveyed indicated that they actively engaged in bullying, whereas in our research 2.6% of the respondents were active in cyberbullying, a 7% lower result. In our research, 15 (4.9%) of respondents responded equivocally, however if "I do not know" is included as an ambiguous answer, the results of our data (7.5% in total) are more in line with those of the US study. This difference can be explained by a putative lesser degree of openness by the Czech population taking our survey, or by an anticipated dishonesty from respondents in the American research. Nevertheless, it can be said that in sociology there are subject areas in which the values of survey results cannot be relied upon. Self-implication in online bullying is undoubtedly one of these problematic issues regarding survey results, i.e. asking the respondent to admit her or his own unethical, immoral or unlawful behavior.

Issues regarding the provision of assistance with problems connected to social network communication have been addressed in international research reports only sporadically. In our research, we found a high level of parental trust in children and young adults, with almost half (49.7%) of our respondents indicating that they would turn to their mother and / or father in a case in which they were attacked through social networks. In addition, 12% of respondents said that they had in fact already turned to their parents when they encountered a negative experience in communicating on social networks. Confidence among respondents in their parents was second only to trust in friends, who 26.9% of the respondents would confide in. 8.1% of the respondents who had experienced an attack had already turned to friends for help. On the other hand, it was indicated

that children and young people had little to no trust in social workers, teachers and police officers. It is difficult to evaluate the potential access to help of 43 (14%) of the respondents who stated that they had never asked anyone for assistance, and the 33 (10.7%) who indicated that they would resolve the situation themselves and would not seek help at all in the case of an attack. Obviously, whether this attitude or approach is practicable, i.e. that a child or young adult would actually be able to repel an attack from a social network or to recover without help when one occurred, is highly questionable. Another consideration, of course, is the form an attack takes as well as how frequently the incidents occur.

Issues regarding parental supervision over their children's use of social networks are debatable, with some considering parents (strict) overseeing their offspring's communications to be a limitation of personal rights and a violation of trust. These questions are discussed in the literature, but the ethical nature of these issues is one reason that they have not been mapped out in terms of their implications. We asked our respondents a forthright question that did not conceal the ethical implications, i.e. one based on the assumption that parental supervision is a matter based on the values of a given family system. In one of the open responses, the respondent indicated that her or his parents are not interested in social networking, however the respondent did not perceive this lack of parental interest as a problem. In an open family system, a child's communications on social networks should be of no concern to parents if the young person has no reason to hide her or his own risk behaviors. In our survey, 115 (37.3%) of the respondents reported that their parents supervised their use of social networking; as expected these results corresponded with the youngest age group of respondents. A Facebook profile can only be officially created when the user is at least 12 years old, an age which the youngest group of our research respondents has not reached yet.

7. Conclusions

The above findings briefly outlined the results of the research. In the ensuing discussion the results were commented upon and compared with other studies. Based on this information, the following conclusions can be formulated:

1. The findings regarding basic information on the use of social networks by children and young adults indicate that internet access is

most accessible for children and young adults, with almost all respondents having the ability to connect. Approximately half of the children and young adults surveyed are also connected at school, and half of the respondents have stable data transmission on their mobile phones. It was confirmed that Facebook and Instagram are the most popular social networks among children and young adults. More than half of children and young adults monitor social networks daily, and only a small percentage of children and young adults have no profile at all on any social network.

2. About half of the respondents (51, 3%) indicated they had had a negative experience with communicating on social networks, either an incident that was mediated or one of their own. Regarding the direct question of whether the respondent had been harmed through social networks, 12.7% of the respondents answered positively. Of the total research set, 34.7% of the respondents said they knew a person who had been harmed by social networks. A total of 8.8% of those surveyed stated that someone had threatened them through social networks and 7.1% of the respondents said that one of their acquaintances had posted naked photos of the respondent in order to harm her or him.
3. Some 2.6% of respondents admitted to trying to hurt someone through social networks. A further 4.9% of the respondents chose the equivocal answer "I do not know." It can be assumed that even after adding together the totals of the two groups (7.5%), this share in reality should actually be higher. This is a very sensitive issue one in which the veracity of all the answers provided cannot be assumed.
4. The findings regarding seeking help with a problem can be divided into two categories, with the first of these related to the circle of respondents who have already been hurt by social networks. Out of the total number of respondents, 14% stated that they had not requested help from anyone; 12% turned to their parents; 8.1% chose a friend. The second category of respondents consisted of those who expressed their opinion on their potential choice of assistance in the case of a hypothetical attack on a social network. Here clearly the predominant choice for help was going to their parents (49.7%), followed by a friend (26.9%); 10.7% of the respondents stated that they would not ask for help at all. In both

categories, a low level of trust was shown regarding teachers, social workers and the police.

5. The findings in terms of issues of parental control proved particularly interesting. A total of 37.3% of respondents indicated that their parents supervised their use of social network, but it is not surprising that a significant majority of these answers came from the very youngest age group of respondents.

The results of this research should serve as a basis for forming and instituting preventive measures to be taken by both state and non-governmental organizations. Thought-provoking findings in terms of prevention have been identified by the respondents, a number of which eventually sought outside help. A clear need has emerged to reinforce confidence in teachers, social workers and police officers, as well as to educate them about the possible threats faced by youth in their use of social networks. The aim of the preventive measures recommended in this research should be to minimize the risks entailed in the communication of children and young adults on social networks.

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