

Mimi McNulty

Social Media Research Project Paper

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We live in a world where technology is advancing every minute making our world appear smaller through online resources. The internet holds a lot of promise for future generations and their forms of online interaction. The primary source for interaction is on social media networks. As technology advances, social media interaction has become more ingrained in our lives and is more accessible to users of all ages.

I propose that social media is a dangerous place for minors because they are not aware of the risks social media usage holds. The purpose of my research is to find the biggest threats found on social media for kids and teens. It is important to study how our next generation uses the internet and what they are exposed to so we can learn from that data to create safety precautions to keep minors who use social media safe. I probed the question, what are the biggest threats for kids and teens on social media I found that the biggest threats for kids on social media are exposure to inappropriate content, online “friendships” and chat rooms, cyberbullying, and online scams. (us.norton.org)

Inappropriate online content is described as any material that is disturbing, improper, and wrong for children’s eyes (raisingchildren.net.au) and anything that is not normal for a child to view. (safeatlast.co) Inappropriate content can be found in pop up advertisements, videos, messages, photos, (Byrne, Burton 43) hidden links, (consumer.ftc.gov) entertainment articles and through search engine results. (Cho, Cheon 489)

Online “friendships” and chatrooms are some other threats kids and teens must watch out for. Right now, it’s more common for people to form relationships with people they have never

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met face to face online. (Pavlik, McIntosh 218) Catfishing is the phenomenon of internet predators that fabricate online identities and social circles to trick people into emotional/romantic relationships. People who catfish do this by using false information and someone else's photos to build social media accounts. (Hartney 281) Online predators target minors by messaging them on social media sites or in chatrooms after studying their online profiles, (Groope 217) earning their trust and grooming them. Grooming is preparing a child for a meeting over the internet with the intent of committing sexual offence. (Mason 3) Predators will catfish victims to gather information about them, bully them, or to start a relationship with the intent of meeting and potentially assaulting the victim physically and/or sexually. (Santi 78-83)

Cyberbullying is bullying using digital technologies including mobile phones, email, and social media. Cyber bullying can include image sharing, sending threatening messages, spreading rumors online, publishing someone's private information without consent, identify theft, and hate sites. (Santi 79)

Online scams are emails, pop up ads, or messages used to trick kids into giving scammers personal information. This is called phishing. (consumer.ftc.gov) Scams targeted at kids and teens look like ads, contests, foreign emails, and scholarships. Scammers "information farm," or ask for personal data like addresses, phone numbers, social security numbers, passwords, and credit card information promising users that once they give away their information, they will be given something in return that the scammer never sends. (investopedia.com) Some scammers send a link to users that provides them of the user's IP address, Wi-Fi system information, and

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device data once the user clicks the link. (bbva.com) Children and teens are at risk of identity theft and personal information breaches from online scams. (investopedia.com)



(safeatlast.co)

While conducting this research, I used the Google search engine, Google Scholar, and Brookens Library Online Database Finder to find studies and statistics supporting my hypothesis. I looked up online information about the biggest risks for minors on social media. I specifically looked for information regarding threats involved with online interactions because finding evidence of threats to minors on social media would help explain needed safety and security measures on social media for teens and children.

A study done by Spanish researchers at Rey Juan Carlos University found that access to inappropriate content dramatically increases when kids find it involuntarily. This graph shows students' exposure to inappropriate content across age groups, sex groups, and school ownership types. Out of 2,233,244 Spanish students ages 12 to 17 years old, 21.7% went looking for sexual content actively on social media and 48.5% were exposed to webpages with intense sexual content unprompted. (Garcia, Lopez, Jimenez 469) In relation, an infographic created by SafeAtLast found that 70% of children will encounter porn or violent content while using the internet for homework. (safeatlast.co)

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	12-14	15-17	Males	Females	Public school	Private school
VOLUNTARY ACCESS TO INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT (see National survey description)						
Search for information about drugs	8.6%	8.4%	8.3%	8.8%	7.9%	7.1%
Access to sexual violence	3.7%	3.9%	3.7%	4.0%	4.0%	4.2%
Access to gambling or casino websites	2.3%	2.4%	2.3%	2.4%	2.2%	1.8%
Downloaded content from friends	33.6%	42.7%	37.6%	38.8%	33.6%	34.1%
UNINTENTIONAL ACCESS TO INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT (I have received the following type of content)						
Pages that contain any content	22.7%	23.2%	23.0%	24.1%	24.2%	23.0%
Content on bullying	23.8%	23.8%	23.7%	24.1%	27.4%	26.9%
Pages that contain and promote alcohol and drug consumption	12.1%	11.6%	12.0%	11.2%	11.8%	12.3%
Pages with strong sexual content or suggestive self-talk	26.7%	48.9%	45.1%	31.8%	30.4%	41.0%
Pages that contain and promote racism or hatred of certain groups	23.8%	23.8%	23.9%	23.7%	23.1%	21.8%
Pages about signs, warnings or threats of kidnapping, terrorism, or other violence	22.7%	23.8%	23.8%	23.8%	24.1%	23.2%
ACCESS TO INAPPROPRIATE CONTENT THROUGH ADVERTISEMENTS ON SOCIAL NETWORKS (I have witnessed the following type of advertising in the social networks)						
Content related to sex	23.7%	23.2%	23.2%	23.7%	23.8%	23.8%
Homophobic, transphobic, or anti-LGBTQ+ content	21.9%	22.8%	22.8%	22.8%	22.2%	21.8%
Advertising related to alcohol, tobacco, or gambling	18.2%	17.4%	17.4%	18.1%	18.2%	17.2%
Sex pages	12.9%	17.4%	15.2%	8.4%	18.5%	13.8%
Adultic language	9.8%	10.4%	10.7%	10.9%	10.9%	10.9%

(Garcia, Lopez, Jimenez 474)

Regarding the risk of online “friendships” and chatrooms, SafeAtLast also reported that 1 in 4 stalking victims report some form of cyberstalking, often taking place via email (83%) or instant messaging (35%). It is also stated that 55% of teens have shared personal information including photos and physical descriptions of themselves when asked by someone they don’t know personally online. (safeatlast.co)

The study done by Spanish researchers at Rey Juan Carlos University also found information about children and teens’ perception of personal risk in their own online environment. This graph explains students’ perceptions of personal risk in their own environment across age groups, sex groups, and school ownership types. The graph shows that 92.1% of 2,233,244 Spanish students ages 12 to 17 years old have witnessed or experienced cyberbullying on their social media accounts.

	12-14	15-17	Males	Females	Public school	Private school
EXPERIENCED RISK OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE (see National survey description)						
Experienced sexual violence	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Experienced sexual violence through social media	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Experienced sexual violence through text messages	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Experienced sexual violence through video	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Experienced sexual violence through images	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Experienced sexual violence through audio	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Experienced sexual violence through other means	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
EXPERIENCED RISK OF STALKING (see National survey description)						
Experienced stalking	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Experienced stalking through social media	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Experienced stalking through text messages	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Experienced stalking through video	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Experienced stalking through images	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Experienced stalking through audio	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%
Experienced stalking through other means	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%	10.7%

(Garcia, Lopez, Jimenez 477)

Identity theft is more common among kids and teens than any other age group. According to a 2011 Carnegie Mellon study of more than 40,000 children, children under the age of 18 were twice as likely as their parents to be victims of identity theft. This is because kids and teens tend

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to share more personal information online giving scammers the information, they need to commit cybercrimes against underage users. Personal information can also be extracted from phones when used on a public Wi-Fi service. (lifelock.com)

From this research, I have concluded that social media is not a safe place for children and teens. There are four large threats, exposure to inappropriate content, online “friendships” and chat rooms, cyberbullying, and online scams. (us.norton.org) In all online situations, children and teens are at risk of exploitation by any other social media user. The majority of threats come from marketing equipment and data collectors. The rise in social media use for children and teens has increased dangerous activity. (Mason 1) The more kids spend their lives on social media, the more data is collected making social media a less safe of a place. (ofcom.org.uk) A conclusion that can be drawn from my research is that before minors start using social media sites, it is important for them to learn about the threats encompassed in social media. They should learn how to observe their own online activity as well as the activity of people they know personally, people they met online, social media users they don’t know, and companies with an online presence. In effort to make social media a safer place, social media platforms need to expand their privacy policies to cater to minors and online marketers need to be more conscious of their potential publics. All in all, social media platforms that collect data from their users to create a “personalized” experience and participate in data sharing must be kept under control for the wellbeing of their underage users.

Figure 01: Children's level of the confidence in websites used for social media in
France (2015, 2016) or elsewhere (2015, 2016), by age



(ofcom.org.uk)

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