Adolescent Internet use: What we expect, what teens report.

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Abstract

As adolescent Internet use grew exponentially in the last decade, with it emerged a number of correspondent expectations. Among them were the following: (1) that gender predicts usage, i.e., that boys spend more time online, surfing the web and playing violent games, while girls chat or shop online; (2) that Internet use causes social isolation and depression, especially for teens; and (3) that adolescents use the Internet for anonymous identity experimentation. These expectations were based on research with earlier technologies when the Internet was less diffused in the adolescent population. By means of highly detailed daily reports of adolescents' home Internet usage and peer-related adjustment, the present research sought to compare these expectations with the actual experiences of early and mid-adolescents in 2000 and 2001. Participants were 261 7th and 10th graders from suburban California public schools who completed four consecutive end-of-day reports on their school-based adjustment and Internet activity (including detailed logs of instant messages). Results challenge prevailing expectations regarding gender, well-being, and identity play. For the most

prevailing expectations regarding gender, well-being, and identity play. For the most part, adolescent boys' and girls' online activities have become more similar than different. On average, boys and girls alike described their online social interaction as (1) occurring in private settings such as e-mail and instant messages, (2) with friends who are also part of their daily, offline lives, and (3) devoted to fairly ordinary yet intimate topics (e.g., friends, gossip). No associations were found between Internet usage and well-being. Online pretending was reported to be motivated by a desire to play a joke on friends more often than to explore a desired or future identity, but participants reported a range of pretending content, contexts, and motives.

Keywords

Adolescents; Internet use; Instant messaging; Gender differences; Peer relationships

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