Executive Summary:
Social media effects among primary school children

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Summary

This research was conducted by students of the University of Amsterdam in collaboration with the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) and YoungWorks. The aim of this study was to gain information about how and why primary school children between the ages of six and twelve use the Internet. The main focus was to provide practical suggestions on preventing cyberbullying. For this research we conducted four focus groups. According to the findings children from all age groups are frequent users of the Internet but only ten to twelve year-olds use social media. Younger children only go online for entertainment reasons. All children were aware of the risks of using the Internet and were familiar with the concept of cyberbullying. They were also able to come up with ideas of how they would deal with cyberbullying and how to protect themselves while being online. As a result to the children's answers and ideas, recommendations were made for RIVM. These recommendations include creating an anti-cyberbullying website, implementing a 'bully police' and having counselors on schools.

Introduction

Nowadays, the Internet is more involved in our lives, children start to use new media at a very young age. The Internet can expose children to harmful content (un)intentionally[1]. However, using the Internet can expose children to the same amount opportunities[2].

This research is authorized by RIVM. The main aim of this study is to know more about how children from the age of six to twelve use social media and with what purposes. RIVM emphasized their interest in the negative consequences of using social media (such as cyberbullying) and how to prevent these effects. However, it is also important to look at the positive effects to be able to give a clear image of what the benefits and disadvantages are of using social network sites. Moreover, when talking to children it is sensible to not only focus on the negative effects, but to also discuss the positive consequences to make the conversation more enjoyable for them. With the information provided by RIVM in mind, a research question with four sub-questions is formed.

The research question in this study is: *How and with what purpose do children in*

middle childhood use social media?

1. What are the negative effects of using social media?
2. How to prevent the negative effects (such as cyber bullying)?
3. What are the positive effects of using social media?
4. How to encourage positive effects?

Methodological approach

The methods used for this research consists of a literature review and qualitative analyses from the data collected from the focus groups. First, a literature study was conducted, which provided strong foundations and insights to children's internet preferences. Second, four focus groups were conducted at two primary schools. Two focus groups came from a Dutch primary school in North of Amsterdam. The other two came from an International primary school in Hilversum. At each school, four children came from grade five and six (age eight to ten) and four children came from grade seven and eight (age eleven and twelve). Even though RIVM was interested in internet use of children between the ages of six and twelve, children younger than eight did not participate. The results of previous research showed that children younger than eight hardly used the Internet, they are more interested in other media such as television[3]. Teachers randomly chose children from everyone who wanted to participate and got permission from their parents to take part. Before conducting the focus groups letters of consent were acquired from the parents of all participants for interviewing and recording the children.

During the focus groups, one person led the interview and another made notes. First, simple questions were asked to create an atmosphere in which the children would feel comfortable. Each focus group lasted sixty minutes, because of the short attention span of young children, we included various techniques to keep them focused, such as letting them draw.

Literature review

It is undisputed that the Internet has become a part of everyday life for children, adolescents and adults in today's society. The Internet can provide a lot of benefits but has a lot of risks too[2]. Social media are a big part of Internet use and these networks are becoming bigger and are reaching users of any age, including children in primary

school[3].

When it comes to children in primary schools, it is not surprising that 30 million children are online each year[3]. Children and adolescents are the most common users of the Internet[3]. Of children aged ten to thirteen 65% use the Internet and 75% of adolescents aged fourteen to seventeen are online[3]. More specifically, 93% of children in the Netherlands use the Internet[2].

Internet use by children is focused on school research and information seeking, but it also includes listening to music, playing online games and communication through chat rooms and email[3]. Children socialize online by communicating with others through social media such as social networks, chat rooms and support groups[3].

Research has shown that in the last five years the number of children using social media has increased[4]. Being part of social media and being involved in online communication has shown to be beneficial for children and adolescents because their social skills are enhanced[4]. They have the ability to stay connected at all times by texting and instant messaging which is also available through smartphones[4].

Social media can provide communication between students after school hours that can lead to additional discussion of what has been mentioned in the classroom[4]. Social media can offer opportunities for children to explore their uniqueness, be creative and develop their character[4]. Children can communicate through social media with peers that share the same interests or problems and find support with one another[4]. Another benefit of social media is that they provide opportunities for children to access health information and discuss their problems with others whilst keeping their anonymity[4].

Social media can also have negative effects on children. The three most common risks of being online are: seeing pornography, giving out personal information and being cyberbullied[2]. Half of teenagers have given personal information online and one in five teenagers has been cyberbullied[2]. Being accepted by peers plays a significant role in their lives even when it is with online contacts[4].

Cyberbullying is one of the bigger risks that children come across while online[2,5]. It can

lead to various psychological, emotional and behavioral problems in children's and adolescents lives[6]. Victims of cyberbullying stated feeling anger, sadness, embarrassment or even being scared[7]. Children who experienced cyberbullying are more likely to present rebellious and aggressive behavior[5].

Findings

The findings showed that the children in grade seven use the Internet daily and all have their own device. The younger children, the fifth and sixth graders, also use the Internet at least once a day. Most of them do not have their own devices but share them with siblings also some of them own gaming consoles that can access the Internet with. The older children are aware of all the different mobile phones and can manage the applications on it well: *"At the moment I've got a Samsung but next week I'll receive my Blackberry Curve with internet on it"*. Most of the time they play games on it, but they also use applications like Twitter, Facebook and What´s App. The younger children use mobile devices mostly for playing games. All children use the Internet for school work and use Google for information seeking for school projects.

The older children all know what Social Media websites are and are familiar with YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Hyves and MSN, also they mentioned one website named Touch which is similar as Facebook designed for young kids. Most of them use Twitter to follow their favorite singers and footballers so they are up to date. They use Google translation if they don't understand the English Tweets. Also Facebook is often used, even though one of the children does not have a Facebook account he still uses it through his mother's account: *"My mother thinks it is too dangerous to have a Facebook account so she only allows me to use her account to play games on"*. They use Facebook for playing games, looking at funny images and watching videos. The children in fifth and sixth grade do not use Social Media except YouTube for watching funny videos. They also access game websites where they often use the chat room. They prefer using the Internet for entertainment purposes whereas the older children use the internet for social purposes as well.

All children are aware of the negative aspects of the Internet and also the concept of 'cyberbullying'. They are well aware of the consequences of putting content on the Internet concerning their privacy: *"Everyone can read it and can talk about it and then the whole school knows"*. Some children use social media under a fake name or

nickname. They do not want strangers to disturb them, but in the meantime, they use social media to communicate with friends. The younger children experienced cyberbullying during a chat session while playing a game but they also give examples of serious cases in their environment. In one case a fifth grader's account in a gaming site got hacked, making the child realize that it is dangerous to share passwords and personal information. Even though cyberbullying differs between age groups, they all indicate that they will not choose to solve the problem online, but talk about it in person with each other or during a private chat: *"I would also use the chat and won't discuss it through the picture on Facebook because then everyone can see what you have written, so you better do it via chat or at school"*.

All the children came up with ideas for an anti-cyberbully website. The seventh graders would like to see tips on how to discuss the issue with their parents, a chat room to talk about it, some shocking anecdotes to make people aware of the consequences. They also would implement games to make the website more attractive for children. The fifth and sixth graders would also include informative and educational games to inform the children and distract them with smiley faces, funny photos and videos. People should be able to talk to each other on this website and share their problems and stories

On Facebook the seventh graders would block and delete a person who is cyberbullying. It depends on the situation if they would go to their parents or a school teacher with an issue. The children would prefer solving the problem at school if the other person also attends the same school. The younger children are withdrawn about the involvement of the school. Surprisingly, a teacher or a principal is not someone they would like to talk to because they spend less time with them than with their parents. They also feel that teachers are not very helpful in finding a solution. The seventh graders stated that not all information on (cyber)bullying is useful. Because bullying keeps on existing and they believe it always will. The only solution that they think will help is a 'bully police'.

Playing games, talking to friends and making new friends were positive aspects of the internet. The fifth and sixth graders talked about how much they liked seeing familiar characters on the internet. Many children mentioned playing a game called *Moshi Monsters*. One child talked about the characters in a television series called *Victorious*.

Others preferred the characters in *Spongebob Squarepants* and sports heroes. The seventh graders also like the game playing aspects, but they are also into the social aspect that the Internet offers them. Using, for example, Skype to chat with their friends or family and being informed about people's lives through Facebook and Twitter is something they enjoy. Children from the international school use Skype and Facetime more often, in order to communicate with friends and family that live abroad. All children are very aware of the problems that the Internet can cause but they also know that the Internet has many positive aspects.

Recommendations

In this part of the report recommendations for RIVM will be provided. Even though positive effects of Internet are important, our main aim was to research cyberbullying among primary school children. Therefore, the focus will be on recommendations to help prevent cyberbullying.

Based on our findings, a first recommendation is to create a website about cyberbullying. In the focus groups several aspects of what should be on such a website were discussed. Children who are bullied should be able to talk to each other on this website and share their problems and stories. The people that bully others should not be able to get on this website. The children thought it was a good idea if there was a general list of bullies known to website creators. Besides finding comfort, they also thought it was a good idea to have content that cheers people who are bullied up. It therefore is sensible to create a part on the website where you can see funny videos and photos. Another aspect for the website is games; they would entertain, create a distraction and inform the children. The games would inform children about making decisions such as finding a solution to bullying. Moreover, familiar characters such as *Spongebob Squarepants* can be embedded in the website. Instead of building a new website, it is also possible to alter an already existing website. Furthermore, information about cyberbullying can be put on school websites, it is important that parents also know what cyberbullying is and how it can be prevented.

The children in both age groups pointed out that they don't feel comfortable talking to a teacher or principal about their problems. Therefore it would be a good idea to create a comfortable atmosphere at schools which allows children to open up and talk about

their problems. This could be done by appointing a school counselor, this way children have someone that they can trust in schools and talk to them whenever they have problems such as bullying.

Finally, a last recommendation is to create a 'buddy system'. All the children are assigned to another child in their class. This person should be someone they already feel comfortable with. They become each other's trustee. We feel that this is a good idea because the children stated that they feel comfortable telling a friend about their problems.

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