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Adolescent Online Safety: A matter of risk prevention or risk resilience?

ABSTRACT

Adolescent online safety is often equated to risk prevention, which focuses on reducing risk exposure (e.g., information privacy breaches, cyberbullying, sexual solicitations, and exposure to explicit content) by enhanced parental mediation, promoting privacy awareness, and invoking privacy invasive restriction and monitoring software that are designed to shield teens from encountering online risks. Such approaches tend to be very parent-centric and do not take into account the developmental needs and experiences of our youth. On one hand, we are telling teens they need to care about their online privacy in order to stay safe, and on the other, we are taking their privacy away. On all accounts, we assume teens have no personal agency when it comes to their own online safety, and that they cannot effectively manage online risks by themselves. In contrast, developmental psychologists have shown that some level of autonomy and risk-seeking behaviors are a natural and necessary part of adolescent developmental growth. In fact, shielding teens from any and all online risks may actually be detrimental to this process. Therefore, my research takes a more teen-centric approach to understanding adolescent online risk experiences, how teens cope with these risks, and ultimately challenges some of the assumptions that have been made about how to protect teens online. Further, my research shows that parents are not authoritative figures when it comes to the risks their teens are experiencing online; thus, an over-reliance on parental mediation to ensure teen online safety may be problematic. Thus, we may want to move toward new approaches that empower teens by enhancing their risk-coping, resilience, and self-regulatory behaviors, so that they can learn to more effectively protect themselves from online risks.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Pamela Wisniewski is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Central Florida. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte with a Ph.D. in Computing and Information Systems and was a Post Doctoral Scholar at the Pennsylvania State University. Dr. Wisniewski also has over 6 years of industry experience as a systems developer/business analyst in the IT industry. Her research expertise is situated at the juxtaposition of Human-Computer Interaction, Social Computing, and Privacy. An emerging theme across her research has been regulating the boundaries between how individuals manage their relationships with technology and how they manage their social interactions with others through the use of technology. Her goal is to frame privacy as a means to not only protect end users, but more importantly, to enrich online social interactions that individuals share with others. She is particularly interested in the interplay between social media, privacy, and online safety for adolescents. Her work has won best papers (top 1%) and best paper honorable mentions (top 5%) at premier conferences in her field, as well as being featured on *NPR*, *Forbes*, and *Science Daily*. She was recently inducted as an inaugural member of ACM's Future Computing Academy, which is an initiative developed "to support and foster the next generation of computing professionals."