Fear of Missing Out: Is Voyeurism the Real Motive Behind Teen Consumption of Social Media?
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This paper examines the role of voyeurism in motivating everyday teen use of social network sites (SNS). We explore the benefits that teens derive from these voyeuristic practices and to what extent they re-enact “learned” behaviours of exhibitionism and voyeurism from Reality TV in SNSs.

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Fear of Missing Out: Is Voyeurism the Real Motive Behind Teen Consumption of Social Media?

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Teen consumption of social network sites (SNSs) has exploded over the last decade. UK teens spend an average of 8 hours/week on SNSs (ComScore, 2011), consulting them frequently (21% >10 times/day: OFCOM, 2011) wherever they are and whatever they are doing. As the most prolific users, teens are innovators and their behaviours are therefore of interest as they are likely to be replicated by subsequent adopters. Whilst teen behaviour is undoubtedly shaped by digital technology; teens are shaping technological developments and social norms in this medium (Boyd, 2007).

Social interaction has transformed in SNSs particularly amongst teenagers, self-disclosure levels have increased as has surveillance of others (Rosenblum, 2007). Moreover these activities are considered customary and acceptable. We sought to explore voyeuristic behaviour in SNSs in order to gain a deeper understanding of these social practices and teens habitual use of them. Normal voyeurism is defined as “a common (not solely sexual) pleasure derived from access to private details” (Metzl, 2004) or “the curious peeking into the private lives of others” (Calvert, 2004). Arguably exhibitionism and voyeurism are two sides of the same coin, without exhibitionism, voyeurs would have nothing to observe.

Web 2.0 and social media have enabled users to become content creators in their own right, thereby empowering exhibitionism and voyeurism. Voyeurism has been identified as a key gratification for other popular teen media such as reality TV (RTV) (Barton, 2009; Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2007) which incorporates voyeuristic type appeals (Baruah, 2009). RTV and SNSs offer safe and legitimate opportunities for exhibitionism and normal voyeurism. For young people this digitalised voyeurism parallels identity related behaviours such as social curiosity, social comparison and self-monitoring (Hill, 1992)

Unlike RTV, SNSs participants can both perform and observe, providing a “two-way gaze”, they also mostly interact with people that they that they know (Boyd, 2007) thus reducing the perceived distance between exhibitionist and voyeur. It seems likely therefore, that teens will re-enact behaviours observed in RTV in SNSs (Watson, 2008). In contrast to previous studies which focused on older participants (Stefanone et al, 2010), our study enlisted younger participants (16-18 years) and sought to gain an understanding of this phenomenon from the teen perspective

METHOD

We adopted an interpretivist approach (Saunders et al, 2007:106) utilising Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (1986) and Blumler and Katz’ (1974) Uses and Gratifications to explain individuals behaviours and gratifications. Participants were sourced from a UK school and ethical issues were appropriately addressed. 26 in-depth interviews were conducted with teenagers (16-18 years; 11M, 15F) for around 1hr plus a content analysis of their SNS activities for a fortnight. The data was systematically organised into categories and sub categories to develop meaningful interpretations (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

We focused on the following research questions

1. How important is voyeurism in motivating habitual teen consumption of SNSs?

2. What benefits do teens derive from voyeuristic practices in SNSs?

3. Do teens use SNSs as platforms to emulate behaviour observed in RTV?

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Three themes emerged from our data: voyeuristic motivations, gratifications and re-enactment

Voyeuristic Motivations: Normal voyeurism was the most commonly cited reason for using SNSs, teens were enthralled by acquiring knowledge about others’ lives. They developed labels to describe this: “FOMO” (Fear of Missing Out) and “Facebook stalking” It’s mainly for me to stalk people, not maliciously but if you really get to know a lot of stuff about a lot of people then you never know when it might come in handy and it just adds to your information about people (Boy, 18)

Gratifications: Teens reaped personal, social and fantastical voyeuristic gratifications from SNSs. Personal gratifications included nosiness, entertainment and relationships (c.p. Barton’s 2009). That’s why I’m still on it because it can be really entertaining. People in relationships breaking up and embarrassing pictures... (Girl, 17) I go on and literally look at his whole profile – see everyone he’s been talking to and read everything! (Girl, 18)

Furthermore voyeurism provided social gratifications as content for further social interactions both on and offline (c.p. Patino et al, 2011; Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2007). I’m a bit of a gossiper so... finding out about people and then the next day at school talking about what you’ve seen (Girl, 17)

Whilst much of their voyeurism focused on close friends, many also enjoying “stalking” subjects outside their immediate social circle, for instance older teens or celebrities. There was a fantastical gratification to this either in an aspirational or oppositional way. “The kind of people I love to stalk are people who are not like me!” (Girl, 17)

Re-enactment: SNSs provided the perfect environment for re-enactment of RTV behaviour (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2007). Teens regularly posted intimate aspects of their life and were equally happy to peek into the private moments of others. Interestingly most teens denied exhibitionism (our content analyses revealed otherwise) but admitted to normal voyeurism. Digital technology enabled users to become semi-professional content creators and utilise this to manage impressions favourably to others; blurring the ordinary with the celebrity (Stefanone et al, 2010). “...she’s very interesting to have on Facebook because she’s our age....she’s got a child… and a boyfriend….and literally, her life is all on Facebook. I know – we know everything.” (Boy, 18)

CONCLUSION

RTV and SNSs have contributed to changing social norms around privacy, disclosure and observation of others. They are complementary media with observed behaviour in RTV being re-enacted in SNS. Normal voyeurism has become a source of entertainment for teens and is a key motive for many teens’ habitual SNS consumption. In line with Rose and Wood (2005) we observed a blurring of boundaries between public and private; real and fantastical; tangible and intangible and celebrity and ordinary. SNSs may be part of the post-
modern quest for authenticity; from soap operas to RTV to SNSs, becoming steadily more real. However there was an element of playfulness in teen activities in SNSs, a shared understanding that not all content is real or authentic but is there to be enjoyed for what it is.

REFERENCES


