REAL OR VIRTUAL RELATIONSHIPS: DOES IT MATTER TO TEENS?

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SUMMARY

Background: Social networks are taking over teenagers' lives and altering the way they relate to others. They are creating their own and changing culture. Which is a cause for concern for adults, who do not understand it. Moreover, usage peaks at a pivotal time in life: adolescence. Therefore it seems important to understand these new habits, and the reasons why social networks are such an important part of the life of adolescents. Furthermore, we looked into the question if virtual relationships have an impact on real-life relationships, and vice versa.

Subjects and methods: This literature review examined studies published between 2008 and September 2019. Twenty-five articles were selected from PubMed, Scopus, PsychINFO and Cochrane databases.

Results: Above all, teenagers are motivated to use social networks because they can develop an identity based on an idealized profile. This profile must be at least as good as those of their peers, in order to obtain the latter's approval. This is notably the case in a context where changes to the family structure give a greater weight to the opinion of peers. Young people are driven to seek refuge on the Internet by a lack of family support, and parents who are less emotionally present. This effect could be limited by encouraging communication between teenagers and their parents. Finally, romantic relationships are impacted by the availability of pornography. Viewing pornography is increasingly seen as a normal stage of development and is linked to poorer attachment to peers and family.

Conclusions: The Internet seems to support a gradual detachment from family life and a move towards greater inclusion in the peer group. This is all the more evident in a context where family structures are changing.

Key words: *teenager – internet – relationships - virtual*

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INTRODUCTION

An indisputable first observation is that, in recent years, the Internet and social networks (SN) have greatly altered the relationships of adolescents (teens) (Belfort & Miller 2018, Chin-Hooi Soh et al. 2018, Lissak 2018, Mullan & Chatzitheochari 2019, Wang et al. 2019). They have become an integral part of day-to-day life, to the point where they are considered an indispensable communication tool (Bottino et al. 2015, Throuvala et al. 2019). With the advent of smartphones, teens can even conduct several conversations in parallel, and access any type of information, anywhere and at any time (Bottino et al. 2015, Lissak 2018). Sociologists have labelled these first generations who have never known life without the Internet, and who have developed these new lifestyle habits as Generation Z (those born between 1995 and 2012) and Generation Alpha (those who were born, or will be born between 2013 and 2025) (Throuvala et al. 2019). These generations have created a lifestyle and culture of their own that is unlike that of their parents, with different codes and rules that we hardly understand (Throuvala et al. 2019). The task of researchers is made even more complicated by the fact that this world is relentlessly changing. New platforms are constantly emerging, and their popularity vary. For example, Facebook was the most popular site a few years ago, but has been replaced by Snapchat or Twitter for the youngest (Throuvala et al. 2019).

Obviously, the emulation around the SN leads to the realization of studies to measure and understand their impact on our daily lives (Arundell et al. 2019, Chin-Hooi Soh et al. 2018, El Asam et al. 2019, Lissak 2018, Wang et al. 2019). It is clear that, although SN have many benefits, they can also generate new pathologies. Examples include Internet addiction (Belfort & Miller 2018, Casalo & Escario 2019, Chin-Hooi Soh et al. 2018, Fuchs et al. 2018, Karaer & Akdemir 2019, Lissak 2018), cyberstalking (Belfort & Miller 2018, Bottino et al. 2015, Khatcherian & Zdanowicz 2018, Lissak 2018) or changes in suicidal behaviour (Belfort & Miller 2018, Biddle et al. 2008, Kolves & De Leo 2014, Lee & Kwon 2018, Lupariello et al. 2019). It is unlikely that it is by chance that SN are so important to teens. During this pivotal time, they experience significant changes to their body and relationships (Khatcherian & Zdanowicz 2018). This fragile, transition period allows the young person to 'create' his or her adult identity and detach himself or herself from his or her parents in order to create extra-clanic bonds with peers (Belfort & Miller 2018, Throuvala et al. 2019).

These observations underpin our research. First, it seems important to understand the new habits of adolescents, and the reasons for their use of SN. This initial analysis forms the basis for studying the impact of SN on teen relationships. Do real-life relationships have an impact on virtual relationships, and vice versa? We therefore explored the three main emotional domains of teens: friends, family and love.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Our literature review focused on studies published between 2008 and September 2019. Studies were drawn from the PubMed, Scopus, PsychINFO and Cochrane databases. The research focused on adolescents' relationships in the virtual world and used the keywords 'adolescents', 'Internet', 'relationships' and 'virtual'. A total of 25 articles were selected.

RESULTS

Adolescence, SN and peers

The first question we address is what motivates teens to use SN? Adult curiosity is important and many studies have been carried out on this topic and provide some answers. First, there is a unanimous consensus among authors according to which SN are used in the context of identity development. SN offer a space to grow, watched by their peers, supported by a group that the teen seeks to feel a part of (Belfort & Miller 2018, Khatcherian & Zdanowicz 2018). This need to belong is a key motivator: he or she seeks the approval of their peers and their virtual profile is a way to obtain it, all the more so as there may be a certain degree of anonymity (Khatcherian & Zdanowicz 2018, Throuvala et al. 2019). Peer approval seems to have become more important as family structures have changed (divorces, separations, blended families) (Throuvala et al. 2019). As a result, the teen invests a significant amount of time in creating a profile that compares favourably with that of others (Throuvala et al. 2019). The comparison is important to the point that, if unfavourable, it can lead to a decrease in self-esteem (closely related to social acceptance), or even depression (Throuvala et al. 2019).

Of course, the creation of an idealized avatar is not the only reason adolescents use SN. Studies also note issues such as entertainment, information-seeking, communication, the need to conform, or simple boredom (Throuvala et al. 2019). They also report more negative motivations, such as the need to be constantly connected to avoid missing out on events or information. Which relates to nomophobia: the fear of not having a mobile phone (Throuvala et al. 2019). This seems to be a new pathological behaviour.

It is clear that the opinion of their peers is crucial to adolescents. In practice, adolescence sees the emergence of two phenomena: separation from parents - in order to be able to relate to peers (Chin-Hooi Soh et al. 2018, Karaer & Akdemir 2019, Khatcherian & Zdanowicz 2018, Mullan & Chatzitheochari 2019, Throuvala et al. 2019). This has been described for a long time. However, changes have appeared: SN make it possible to create or maintain friendships despite time and distance (Throuvala et al. 2019). How the teens virtual network forms around him or her has been investigated in various studies, and two models are most often mentioned.

The first, observes that adolescents who have a good offline network strengthen it online, provided that they maintain a constant presence (Belfort & Miller 2018, Throuvala et al. 2019). This constant connection generates significant pressure for messages to be read immediately and young people describe this as suffering (Throuvala et al. 2019). Paradoxically, the idea of disconnecting to relieve the pressure has the opposite effect, leading to an anxiety-inducing feeling of loss of control (Throuvala et al. 2019). The second model is rather based on an idea of compensation: marginalized young people or those suffering from a mental pathology could compensate for their lack of social skills online. However, this depends on the teens disorders (Belfort & Miller 2018, Dufour et al. 2018, Throuvala et al. 2019). For example, anxious patients will benefit from SN. While young people with an IQ above 130 will always have fewer friends, whether in real or virtual life (Belfort & Miller 2018, Lacour & Zdanowicz 2019). The current understanding is that if a teen is unable to form friendships and receives little support from friends, he or she suffers from lower self-esteem and uses the Internet to meet his or her social needs to cope with loneliness, especially in the context of an insecure family attachment (Cacioppo et al. 2019, Karaer & Akdemir 2019, Lissak 2018, Wang et al. 2019). In any case, the pervasiveness of online contacts is perceived by teens as interfering with real life interactions (Throuvala et al. 2019).

The above observations underline that the virtual and real-life relationships of teens are interconnected and mutually supportive. But what about family relationships?

Adolescence, SN and family

SN can be considered as having a twofold impact on family life. On the one hand, they can facilitate the coordination of family activities: extracurricular activities, food. On the other hand, they can result in each member of the family being engaged in their own activity, even when the whole family is in the same room (Mullan & Chatzitheochari 2019). For example, studies find that the constant interruptions to real-life interactions, caused by our devices, means that we no longer eat together in the same way as our parents (Mullan & Chatzitheochari 2019).

We see the influence of virtual relationships on family life, as well as the negative impact due to excessive use of SN; but is there an inverse relationship (Cacioppo et al. 2019, Dufour et al. 2018)? Parenting style appears to affect how adolescents use SN. One study reports reduced pathological use among young people who communicate well with their parents about SN (Cacioppo et al. 2019). Overall, good relationships with their parents are predictive of young people's self-esteem and life satisfaction (Karaer & Akdemir 2019). The benefits of secure attachment during childhood are also seen during adolescence, and are inversely correlated with anti-social behaviour, including Internet de-

pendence - unless the parenting style is too authoritarian (Casalo & Escario 2019, Chin-Hooi Soh et al. 2018). Initially, that parents set rules is considered positive, but when they seem excessive, they have the opposite effect (Casalo & Escario 2019). Indeed, they decrease the perception of freedom of teenagers, and when teens perceive that their freedom has been restricted, they may react in order to regain that freedom (Casalo & Escario 2019).

Unfortunately, at least one study notes that parents have little knowledge of their teens' virtual activities (Sorbring & Lundin 2012). Notably, problems with Internet use are associated with less-functional families, where parents may be poorly educated, less emotionally available, and felt to be insufficiently present (Cacioppo et al. 2019, Casalo & Escario 2019, Karaer & Akdemir 2019). Chin-Hooi Soh et al. (2018) observed that, in this situation, adolescents can seek approval from their peers to compensate for unmet needs within the family. The authors see this as a competition between friends and family. At the same time, the quality of peer relationships is modelled on the quality of the parent–child relationship and we could therefore see, a certain degree of complementarity.

Adolescence, SN and romantic relationships

We now turn to the third sphere: romantic and sexual relationships. Here, we have decided to focus on the impact of pornography on the emotional life of teens. Pornographic material is becoming increasingly accessible (Alexandraki et al. 2018, Stanley et al. 2016). At the present time, it is considered an ordinary part of adolescent development, as it seems to be consistent with their normal narcissistic preoccupations (Alexandraki et al. 2018, Wilson 2018). According to a recent study, 53% of American boys and 28% of girls aged 12 to 15 view pornography, mostly on the Internet (Alexandraki et al. 2018). However, this does not seem to be without consequences for relationships. Often, teens who consume large amounts of pornography are less related to their peers (while they are more in need of their approval) and they have more difficult relationships with their parents, have lower self-esteem, excessive sexual interest and become sexually active at a younger age (Alexandraki et al. 2018, Chin-Hooi Soh et al. 2018). The latter study suggests that this is consistent with a more permissive sexual attitude, sexual harassment, depressive symptoms and sensation seeking. According to Wilson (2018), it may be that pornography offers an escape from everyday frustrations, giving a sense of omnipotence, as the world can be controlled via a screen.

DISCUSSION

This study examined whether there is a link between the real life of teens and their virtual lives. A second aim was to highlight the interactions between these two

lives. However, the SN phenomenon is fairly recent, and there are few published studies available on the topic. Most current studies provide psychodynamic explanations of the interrelations between the two relationships and they are performed by adults. They give little voice to adolescents themselves. It would be interesting, in future work, to conduct prospective studies that ask teens about their own experiences, so that comparisons can be made.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a consensus in the literature that SN offer a new way for adolescents to develop their adult identity. They support detachment from parents to form attachments to peers and foster the need for group membership. But this new way of relating creates new stressors and new pathologies, such as nomophobia. Typically, problems seem to arise in unsupportive family contexts, with parents who are less emotionally present. When young people no longer find the support they need in their family, they try to compensate by seeking greater approval from the peer group. The Internet offers them a way to be in constant communication with their peers, to the detriment of their real-life family relationships.

On the other hand, there is a divergence of opinions regarding how the peer network is formed online. For some authors, the young people with good real-life social skills, they will continue to express these online. Whereas others take the line that the Internet enables teens with poorer social skills to create better social network.

With regard to relationships, the regular use of pornography via the Internet seems to trivialize the beginning of sexual life. Which appears to allow young people to escape the frustrations of real life, and take refuge in 'romantic' relationships that are completely under their control.

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