CYBERSPACE AND THE ADOLESCENTS'
SELF-AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR
COMMUNICATION AND ETHICS

Katarzyna Ziębakowska-Cecot[*]

Kazimierz Pulaski University of Technology and Humanities in Radom, Faculty of Philology and Pedagogy, Department of Pedagogy and Psychology, ul. Malczewskiego 29, 26-600 Radom, Poland

Abstract

The statistical data prove that Polish adolescents are the most 'immersed' age group from Poland, in the cyberspace (according to the number of possessed digital devices). This confirms the scale to which teenagers and young adults are being exposed to a content in the Internet which has a harmful potential for shaping attitudes and life patterns, especially crucial during a period of adolescence. Risky behaviours, presented on-line, may evoke self-aggression (e.g. anorexia, bulimia) or self-harm (i.a. scarification, tattoos and piercing).

Keywords: cyberspace, adolescence, self-aggression, anorexia, self-harm

1. Introduction

Internet and digital media have been influencing people's private and professional life in the last decades. This impact may be seen as positive, when talking about e.g. advantages in the process of teaching and learning, and also as negative because of the harmful content easy to get for Internet users which sometimes results in youth's problematic conduct. However, according to Jessor's Problem Behavior Theory, the risky behaviours (i.a. alcohol and drug addiction, and nowadays also phonoholism) as well as the conventional ones (e.g. religious practices like church attendance, high academic performance) may be treated as a way for realising teenagers' developmental tasks and addressing their key psychological needs [1].

There are many factors which might determine the impact of digital reality on the real-life aspects, i.e. maturity and personality of surfers, their digital competences, immersion in the cyberspace, possession and usage of digital devices. To prove the scale of Polish adolescents' immersion into the virtual world it's advisable to cite some of the statistical data concerning Poland. In 2015, according to 'Diagnoza Społeczna 2015', almost 95% of Polish families

[*]E-mail: ziebakowska@uthrad.pl

with kids declared having a computer and Internet connection. Moreover, people aged 16-24, in comparison to other age cohorts, were the most 'immersed' population with 97.2% using computers, 97.5% - Internet, 99.1% - cellular phones, 79.4% - smartphones and 35.9% - mobile Internet [2].

In the years following 2015 99.3% teenagers declared using Internet at home and 82.2% at school. This high accessibility in numerous social environments correlates with huge amount of time spent in the cyberspace and thus enormous 'screen time'. To stay online Polish teenagers used mobile phones for 188 minutes a day, laptops for 70 minutes and desktop computers for 62 minutes [3].

2. Growing up in a new hostile reality

Adolescence is a very demanding and problematic period of the ontogenesis [4], for the teenagers themselves, as well as for their parents, families and educators. Almost half a century ago pope Paul VI promulgated in the constitution 'Gaudium et spes' that a rapidly changing world may be a source of great distress for young people thus becoming rebels and causing many difficulties for parents and educators in discharging their tasks [Pope Paul VI, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Gaudium Et Spes*, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ ii_vatican_council/ documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html].

Nowadays, bringing up the children may seem for the adults to be a huge challenge to perform but the parenthood's main concept concerns being responsible for them. Now, responsibility is the fundamental imperative in the civilization and a value of significant meaning. It acts as a criterion to evaluate human actions and supporting the others in their development. The responsibility has become the critical issue since we face new threats and crises in collective, social, and global dimension (e.g. dangers in the cyberspace as consequences of technological revolution). Moreover, many scientists state that being responsible is a measure of our ethical attitude. In this day and age, "ethics of responsibility […] has become a fundamental issue for the modern world and our civilization" [5]. Therefore, this kind of ethics induces adults to act for the wellbeing of present and future generations.

Parents and educators should support the youth during the adolescence phase by helping them to cope with new problems, getting mature, becoming digitally literate, etc. Young people, in the cohort ranging from the age of 12-13 years till 20-21, are intensively developing in the physical, mental, social and emotional spheres. They can also experience various states of rebellion and negation. This may take place when adolescents do not accept the proceeding changes, particularly those concerning their 'physis'. Physical appearance can be the source of low self-esteem and lack of self-acceptance resulting in negative emotional responses leading to anger, resentment and frustration. This situational coincidence is perceived by many researchers as multiple factors triggering risky behaviours, especially acts of aggression and self-aggression.

Although risky behaviours are inherent part of the adolescence process many problematic acts often have the negative and detrimental impact on the individual's health and psyche [1]. Considering the risky behaviours of the adolescents it is usually associated with drug, nicotine and alcohol abuse. In Poland in 2015, according to 'Diagnoza Społeczna 2015' report, among young people aged 16-24 3.5% respondents admitted drug use (4.1% in 2013 and 4.6% in 2011), 15.5% - nicotine use (18.1% in 2013 and 19.4% in 2011) and 6% - alcohol abuse or use while stressful life situation (6.5% in 2013 and 7.1% in 2011) [2, p. 274-281]. There is a noticeable slight decline in these statistics in comparison to 2011. However, nowadays problematic behaviours may be also associated with behavioural addictions which include addiction to computers, information, games, or smartphones (i.e. phonoholism).

The digital world, as a radically modified environment, may elicit the dysfunctions of the psychological mechanisms with a bigger probability. The tendency to suddenly occurring changes in the stimuli coming from the outside environment may result in lack of adaptive mechanism, its appearance in inadequate situations or lack of interaction between liaised mechanisms [6]. Therefore, the frequent and intensive use of ICT tools has an impact on the surfers' hobbies, interests, lifestyles and even perception of themselves and other people. "The media influence our perception of the world and thus the value structure that we create." [7] The Internet users create cyber-culture by presenting values, beliefs and attitudes which can differ from the society standards. Thus cyber-culture may be evaluated as harmful and dangerous for the on-line and off-line citizens [8].

Moreover, for kids and teenagers staying online means meeting 5C pentad of threats, where the origins of unsafe situations are connected with content, conduct, contact, confidentiality and commercialisation [Fundacja Uniwersytet Dzieci, *Jak zadbać o bezpieczeństwo dziecka w sieci?*, https://www.scenarius zelekcji.edu.pl/scenariusz/jak-zadbac-o-swoj-wizerunek-w-scieci].   Teenagers treat the digital world as a new educational environment. Therefore, they quickly and easily absorb life patterns and behavioural models which are often improper, unsuitable and harmful for the adequate process of adolescence.

3. Problem of teen aggression and self-aggression

Aggression has been presented in mass media and popular culture for decades. Now its presence in the digital world is obvious for the society but the range of its expansion, influence and diversity is reckoned as overwhelming and much more socially detrimental than in other traditional analogue media.

The seeming anonymity of Internet users and commercial 'value' of aggression result in massive occurrence of hate speech, flaming and other quarrelsome acts published online which easily get recognition and attention. Even the show business, producing films, series and games with cruel, vicious main characters (e.g. 'Braking Bad', 'Dexter', 'Angry Birds'), seems to foster the socially improper individuals and acts. The increased presence of violent

content in mass media may also influence the growth of the audience's aggressiveness. This is facilitated and accelerated by mechanisms concerning social correctness, desensitization and social learning [9].

With the higher level of aggressiveness it is more probable to transfer the 'screen' aggression into the real world in the verbal, physical, psychological or virtual forms. (In 2014 in Poland a young couple, aged 18, killed the boy's parents who were adverse to the son's relation. Teenagers were inspired by the film 'American Psycho' and looked for thrills and fame in social media (e.g the girl on her Facebook profile presented images how to stab a man).)

Moreover, together with the felt frustration this may elicit self-aggressive incidents among the adolescents (e.g. anorexia [10], bulimia, suicidal attempts, scarification, tattoos and piercing). The aetiology of acts against their body is complex and complicated. Many suffer from the low self-acceptance and low self-assessment. The immersion into the cyberspace may be also perceived as the important and crucial factor. The communication in digital media may model and shape teenagers' opinions, views and behaviours. "Mediated communication despite advantages such as speed, efficiency, saving time and energy heads to the depersonalization of humans and a weakening of social ties." [7, p. 76] It can also impair the objective perception of the 'self I', especially the 'physis', resulting in unrealistic concepts of ideal image and increased motivation for 'managing' their bodies [11]. Taking control over the body, the image and the fate may give teenagers a false or transient sense of comfort and safety.

4. Eating disorders in mass culture

A risky behaviour recorded frequently among teenagers, particularly young girls, is related to eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia. In majority of cases adolescents suffer from the obsessive will to lose weight. A growing body of research finds the aetiology of eating disorders in a combination of biological (genes, personality traits, thinking styles, puberty) and cultural factors (particularly in industrialised countries) [12], where the last ones may vary according to the tradition and religions [13].

The motives for this are various and complex. Among probable sources there are mass media favouring a cult of beauty and a pressure to stay imperishable young and fit. This results in a false self-perception by teenagers which is treated in the literature as the example of the media presentation and global communication disorders [11].

Mass media, especially digital social media and commercials, usually promote slim, fresh and happy persons. The trend to stay slender is not a new one. In the 1960's there was a fashion to become like 'Twiggy', the British model Lesley Hornby. She was a cultural icon and a prominent model well-known all around the globe for the thin body, long legs and androgynous look (big eyes, long eyelashes, short hair).

The recurrence of this trend was observed in 2004-2007 when mass media and Internet indorsed and praised celebrities such as Nicole Richie, Paris Hilton, Cheryl Cole and Victoria Beckham, glamorised for their 'heroin look'. It was 'chic to look like the walking dead'. Not only eating disorders were then at the top, but also drug addiction and self-hurting were treated among some adolescents as being en vogue. Moreover, such a look and a lifestyle earned money, where the example can be Kate Moss. She is another British model who became recognised as a 'London girl', a style icon for other girls and women promoted by many fashion designers despite her attenuated body and incidents with addicting substances.

The factor contributing to this unhealthy and dangerous lifestyle was pro-ana movement, promoted by many websites, blogs and fora created at this period of time in the cyberspace. Pro-ana members, often named as 'porcelain butterflies', usually are anorexics searching for emotional support and validation. Particularly social media facilitate collective normalization of their condition and glorification of accomplishing such a self-control method. Pro-ana can be perceived then as the 'professional' anorexia which is a specific lifestyle choice, not an illness. For many socially isolated anorexics or teenagers suffering from other eating disorders and unrealistic concepts of the image pro-ana members seem to provide them with support and advocacy for their problems and problematic behaviours.

On-line pro-ana groups, mostly hidden and frequently migrating, try to share tips on diets (drastic and irresponsible), ways of refusing food or purging (with laxatives or emetics), methods of denying to parents and doctors. 'Butterflies' comment each other, appreciate weight loss, give 'likes' to new posts and pictures uploaded by anorexics. Their deeds, which should be kept concealed from the eyewitnesses in the real world, in the cyberspace are widespread disseminated and gain audience, applause and acceptance, thus encouraging an individual to continue her/his self-aggressive behaviour.

The majority of pro-ana members present on-line 'thinspirations' which could be photos, songs, videos or drawings as motivators for the others willing to lose weight. Such inspiration could be e.g. pictures of Olsen sisters, Paris Hilton or another 'butterfly'. In the research of by A. Gwizdek, K. Gwizdek and A. Koszowska from 50 Internet pro-ana sources, which content was analysed, 82% presented "thinspirations" [14]. All of them featured anorexia as an attractive way of living and a lifestyle.

5. Research on self-aggression among online adolescents

Self-aggressive behaviours were the object of many researches, including those done at Kazimierz Pulaski University of Technology and Humanities in Radom. In 2016 there was a survey, held under the author's guidance, concerning teenagers' self-assessment and inspirations for their image (27 girls and 25 boys aged 12-20) [15]. A significant group of girls (41%) had a complex about the weight. When looking for ideas about image changes the respondents

mostly used the Web (58%), while only 29% talked to friends. They hardly spoke to parents or teachers about such issues which showed resistance and lack of trust to adults in this important sphere of their life and the crucial phase of ontogenesis.

The vast majority knew pro-ana websites (81% girls, 48% boys) and some visited them at least once a month (41% girls, 12% boys). For half of respondents the pictures of thin, slim or muscled persons presented on-line were 'rather' or 'definitely' an inspiration and motivation for working over their own body. This confirms the fact that especially young girls are vulnerable to digital media communication which has a crucial impact on their body image. The more they read and see pro-ana content the less they are satisfied with their body and life, the more they want changes, even drastic ones. Frequent observation of thinspirations on Instagram or Facebook profiles may lead young girls to fixation with their appearance.

While doing an own netography on teenagers' attitude towards self-aggression on the Web the author found many articles, comments and posts about the influence of digital media on adolescent problems. An anorexic girl confessed where her obsession came from: "It comes partly from the media and the fashion industry that won't acknowledge that there are different ways a woman should look, and from the pro-anorexic communities […]. Even Facebook had endless updates of thin celebrities. Social media has a huge effect on my body confidence, because it cannot be ignored." [A.E. Ademiju, *Does social media influence teens to have an eating disorders? Does social media impact on body image?*, http://buzz.bournemouth.ac.uk]

The cyberspace also elicits pro-ana groups pressure to be muscular which triggers mostly young boys' body disapproval. The more they try to lose weight and gain muscle mass, the lower gets their self-esteem. Eating disorders are considered in the society mainly as a typical female problem and illness. That is the reason many boys and men are ashamed and loath to confess about their problem with body shaping and self-acceptance. It is hard to encourage adolescents or adults to admit that they lost control over body and life. When Sven Hannawald, a German great ski jumper, shocked the audience confessing about his anorexia, depression and the burn-out syndrome, many people felt compassion for him. It also made them understand that even champions, celebrities can suffer from similar disorder and illnesses and they also must ask for professional help.

6. Other self-aggressive behaviours

Risky behaviours concerning adolescents' self-aggression may also include self-harm (e.g. scarification, tattoos and piercing) and suicide. These acts are considered as the major public health problems among young people. "Self-harm can be suicidal act, but not everyone who self-harms is suicidal." [12, p. 333].

Self-harm is a symptom of underlying emotional problems which teenagers want to cope with. It's a way of expressing very deep distress, sometimes without knowing the clear reasons for an individual. This negative phenomenon is broadening not only in Poland but also in other countries. ChildLine, the organisation supporting children and teenagers in UK, reported in 2012/2013 a 41% year-on-year increase in the number of young people contacting with the counsellors about self-harm (girls were 15 times more likely than boys to notify it). Moreover, there was also noticed a 33% rise in contacts related to adolescents' suicidal thoughts and feelings in the similar period of time [ChildLine, *What's Affecting Children in 2013. Can I tell you something?*, https://www.nspcc.org.uk].

Some girls and boys who self-harm conceal their deeds rather than draw attention to it. Unfortunately, the contemporary digital media give a broad range of possibilities for people to publicize every moment of their life, even these most tragic, intimate and private. Similar to anorexia sufferers, they gather in the cyberspace forming groups, discussing fora, create and upload specific content on Facebook or Instagram profiles. In the virtual reality they share pictures of their scars or burns which would be strictly concealed in the real world. Comparing with pro-ana internauts they act alike. They are commented, get 'likes' and appreciation for the deeds hidden among the relatives but boasted on-line. The sympathy felt from the Net may make their self-esteem higher.

The need for acceptance and admiration is not the only trigger to self-harming by adolescents. The other source may be found in teenagers' tattooed and 'modified' idols who often have problems with their life and hide dramatic memories from a difficult childhood. In Poland one rapper known as Popek (celebrity, mixed martial arts fighter) has broadly informed about his modifications, e.g. tattooed eyes and two crossed scars on both cheeks. His pictures and videos published in the Internet were motivators for young people to copy his image. One adolescent (men, Karol) let do the same scarification which resulted in hate and critics in social media. The other (woman, Aleksandra) got her eyes tattooed ending with the loss of vision in one eye and the decrease in another.

7. Conclusions

J.C. Arnold, a Christian writer and pastor, states that the young generation born at the turn of the twenty-first century, often labelled as 'Z generation', "can navigate distant worlds from their video game controllers, but are not equipped with an understanding of the real world outside the window […]. The accessibility of screen devices has caused a significant decline in children's resilience, self-determination, desire for hard work, and sense of pride in achievement […]. They have spent their growing years using several different personas or 'avatars' in various imaginary worlds […], [thus] we should not be surprised that they come to hate themselves. This leads to desperation, depression, and in all too many cases, suicide." [16]

Parents and specialists should give teenagers support and time to develop more helpful and less risky, less self-destructive coping skills with distress than self-aggression. Interventions can aim at increasing knowledge, awareness raising and developing resilience and emotional literacy [12, p. 335-338]. Moreover, the stronger ability to anticipate consequences concerning the threats in the cyberspace and the problematic time of adolescence, the bigger responsibility is put on adults. They are morally responsible for the youth's wellbeing and minimising the possible risk of dangerous situations occurring in the information society. The latter concerns prevention from i.a. alienation, cybercrime, risky behaviours, privacy violation, etc. [5].

A specific role of parents and family itself in the youth's upbringing was described by Pope John Paul II in his 'Letter to Families'. When a child or an adolescent is abandoned or lacking a family this may result in their painful and disturbing breach [Pope John Paul II, *Letter To Families. Gratissimam Sane*, 1994, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_02021994_families.html]. Therefore special counselling and support should be given to parents and other educators both by secular and religious organisations.

Help can be offered both in the real world and the cyberspace. There is a social movement trying to aid people suffering from eating disorders called 'Anty-pro Ana'. In contrary to Pro-Ana bloggers and discussion groups its aim is to show the real consequences of 'hurting' the body and to give support to people in need. Anty-pro Ana activists avoid estimation or being critic to someone's risky behaviours. Their role is to present and encourage the others to use positive ways of coping with current distress, show communication solutions to inform about the problems occurring during the adolescence.

It is not an easy task for parents and educators to relieve the burden placed on the youth by the technology. Adults should support children and teenagers, but also give them 'white space'. This means providing the adolescents with 'off-line' time, space and flexibility needed to develop at their own pace which is hard to execute at the cyberspace.

Acknowledgement

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