Adolescents and identity formation in a risky online environment. The role of negative user-generated and xenophobic websites.

Ionela-Maria Răcătău, PhD Student

Faculty of Sociology and Social Work
Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: ionela_racatau@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The great expansion of the internet over the last years and the changing nature of media use have produced several concerns among scholars, varying from the potential risks that this new medium has brought, to the way it could possibly interfere in adolescents' processes of identity formation. Since the internet use is associated with accessing- more or less willingly- various types of information within various websites, this paper aims to explore the factors that stand for adolescent's browsing negative contents in the online environment, such as harmful user-generated and xenophobic contents. Different approaches of identity formation are put into perspective arguing that such risky experiences can incorporate notable benefits for young people, leading to identity construction. The way they present themselves, perform and interact in the virtual space might be indications of the fact that they actually search for experiences that cross over the protective boundaries in order to escape from the common and usual contexts in which they live, constructing in this way an identity that is more complex and more helpful when it comes to facing negative situation. Following this perspective, adolescents should not be perceived as victims of the virtual space but rather, they should be considered resourceful persons who are able to protect themselves from the dangers that might occur online.*

Keywords*: identity formation, online risks, online performance, negative user-generated content, xenophobic content.*

Introduction

The internet has become an integral part of people's lives over the past 20 years due to its multiple functions of entertainment, communication and information seeking. When it comes to children, the virtual space has become so habitual and regular that social networking profiles, visiting websites, chatting, gaming, uploading or downloading music, films, videos, photographs or other information, cannot stand outside their online activities. While there is no doubt that the internet has brought great and undeniable benefits for young people in terms of social inclusion, communication and educational attainment, still, some dangers have also come into evidence, which resulted in online risks of different kind- content, contact, conduct (Livingstone and Haddon, 2009)- that defy boundaries like age, gender, socioeconomic status or geographic location. Even if these negative experiences are new, such as grooming, aggressive sexual harassment or "sexting", personal data loss and tracking, harmful user-generated and xenophobic content, or rather familiar ones which are present in the real offline world as well, such as pornography, sexual exploitation, bullying, racism, they are not a topic of much concern for children as they are for adults (Optem, 2007), probably because of youngers' high digital skills and self-confidence in their internet abilities.

Concerns about the impact of technology and internet use tend to increase significantly when they are perceived in relation to childhood and youth. On the one hand, significant attention is paid to the ways in which internet technology is threatening childhood (Livingstone et al., 2011; OECD, 2011, Valcke et al., 2011; Cho and Cheon, 2005). Young people are seen to be at risk, not only from more obvious dangers such as pornography, online pedophiles, bullying or personal information misuse, but also from a wide range of negative physical and psychological consequences that derive from their engagement with technology (Marwick et al., 2010; Ybarra and Mitchell, 2007a; Kim et. al., 2005; Cho and Cheon, 2005). On the other hand, though, advocates in favor of the internet use have started to make significant points on this topic, arguing that children's experiences of dangers are normal activities within their identity formation processes (Buckingham, 2008; Hope, 2007; Madge and Barker, 2007; Marcia, 1980). As David Buckingham (2008) noticed, as opposed to those who see children as victims of the technological advance and who complain the media's destruction of childhood innocence, supporters of the new digital natives' generation regard technology as a "force of liberation for young people- a means for them to reach past the constraining influence of their elders, and to create new, autonomous forms of communication and community" (p. 13). Instead of damaging or corrupting the young, technology stands for the creation of a complex young generation that in comparison with their parents' generation is more open, more democratic, more creative, and more innovative. Children's vulnerability to

negative experiences results from their lack of experience and understanding of the afferent possible consequences (Online Safety and Technology Working Group-OSTWG, 2010).

While other kinds of risks have all been explored in some depth, there are some online experiences that, although identified as potentially harmful to children (Livingstone et al. 2011, Valcke et al. 2011, Livingstone and Haddon, 2009) have attracted little research as yet. These include negative user-generated and hateful content which gained considerable popular attention since the widespread use of YouTube and similar peer-to-peer sites. There are very few studies that deal with children's experiences and motivations of accessing content such as harmful advice and hate websites (Mitchell and Ybarra, 2007; Whitlock et al., 2006). Moreover, there is no recent evidence of the factors that favor the likelihood of accessing this kind of content and the effectiveness of particular approaches such as parental rules. Therefore, having all these scarcities into account, the aim of this article is to explore and put in perspective the risk factors associated with young people's accessing negative contents in the online environment. Emphasis is put on adolescents' need to engage in activities- such as browsing negative user-generated and xenophobic websites-that might help them experiment various kinds of experiences, including risks, in their pursuit of self-discovery within the process of identity formation.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

While the internet can be an important source of education, creativity and self-expression for children and adolescents, it can also stand for a large blend of risks generating harm, vulnerability and public anxiety. Content risks including accessing negative user-generated and xenophobic information are some examples of negative experiences that young people might take up while exploring the virtual world.

From a broader perspective, these kinds of risks refer to the situation in which "the child passively receives or is exposed to content available to all internet users in a one-to-many relationship" (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development- OECD 2011, p. 17). Put it in other words, content risks are related to exposure to information that might be harmful to youngsters, examples of such experiences including: age-inappropriate materials (pornography, hate messages, violent behavior) and harmful advice (eating disorders, drug consumption and addiction, suicide). Such content can be provided by various sources (commercial and user-generated websites, social networking websites, news pages, video games containing explicit violence etc.), children can accidentally or even deliberately search for them (Livingstone et al. 2005). Cho and Cheon (2005, p.490) made an overview of the studies dealing with the negative effects of such risks. They found out that children might face very serious and long-time consequences that may destroy

their development, such as increased aggression, fear, desensitization, poor school performance, prevalence of symptoms of psychological trauma, antisocial behavior, negative self-perception, low self-esteem, lack of reality or identity confusion. Another research on youth's exposure to unwanted material on the internet revealed that about 19% indicated they felt stressful during the days after the negative experience (Mitchell et al. 2003, p. 346).

Browsing hate websites and accessing *xenophobic content* is a kind of problematic and understudied topic that raises concerns among public authority representatives (OSCE, 2004). Hate speech is meant to threaten certain groups publicly and act as propaganda for offline organizations. These hate groups- also called "extremist groups" use the internet for a variety of purposes starting from communicating with current members, to recruiting new ones, linking to similar groups, advocating violence or publishing the groups' views (Gerstenfeld et al. 2003). Moreover, as Duffy (2003, p. 292) points, these kind of groups "are able to package their message in a visually persuasive manner, and in the interactive environment of the medium, the recipient of a persuasive message may become desensitized and more accepting the message". This view that hate groups promote effective and persuasive storytelling is also enhanced by Lee and Leets (2002) who showed in one of their studies that children and adolescents are more likely to be persuaded by this kind of harmful messages and therefore, they became the target of new member recruitment of many hate groups. As Chau and Xu (2007) point, recently, these groups have started to make themselves noticed in different blogs which are based on high-narrative messages and which are the ideal medium for spreading hate due to their characteristic of attracting other teenagers with similar beliefs and ideologies. They argue (p. 58) that "the Web has allowed these groups to reach much further into society than ever before. Young people, the major group of bloggers, are more likely to be affected and even "brainwashed" by ideas propagated through the Web as a global medium. Hatred and extremism ideas could easily be embedded into their minds to make them become members of these hate groups or even conduct hate crimes". How often it happens, the nature and impact of hate speech on teen are unknown but taking into account the evidence, it appears that such content is not limited to websites which are created in such a manner so as to be attractive to young people. Gestenfeld et al (2003, p. 39) reported a finding of great concern stating that there are webpages dedicated for children and youth which contain appealing multimedia materials including hate games and music. Across Europe, 12% of adolescents have seen hate websites (Livingstone et al. 2011, p. 7).

Another type of content risk refers to wrong or untrustworthy advice and information (*negative-user generated risks*) which can result in negative behavior such as suicide, consumption of illegal products (drugs) or physical disorders (anorexia, bulimia etc.). While this kind of content can be uploaded, accessed and downloaded

by both minors and adults with either good or bad intentions, it appears to be rarely questioned by children. A survey conducted in the UK in 2004 (Livinstone and Bober, p. 4) whose results are supported by the findings of Ofcom (2012) showed that children trust the online contents they come across with, especially if they are more skilled in using the internet. The OECD (2011, p. 20) report points to the fact that generally, there is very limited data available on risks related to online exposure to harmful advice. Moreover, less little is known about the interplay between youth searching for self-harming websites and actual participation in self-harm (Internet Safety Technical Task Force-ISTTF 2008, p. 33). What is known though is the fact that children and young people turning to this kind of acts are predisposed to having psychological problems, a history of physical or mental abuse, poor relationship with parents, and because of these, they are more likely to engage in other risky online behaviors (Mitchell and Ybarra 2007; Ybarra et al. 2007). Moreover, they are predominantly female users aged 16- 23, the majority of them having around 18 years old (Whitlock et al., 2006). Across Europe, 21% of the 11-16 years old teens have seen one or more types of potentially harmful user-generated websites: pro-anorexia (10%), self-harm (7%), drug-taking (7%) and suicide (5%) (Livingstone et al. 2011, p. 7).

In what concerns the content related to physical disorders, it is prevalent on communities such as "pro-ana" or "pro-mia" that discuss these topics as a way of life without even mentioning anorexia or bulimia (ISTTF 2008, p. 34) and argue that anorexic behavior should be seen as a special lifestyle and achievement rather than a disease. Limited data is available on this kind of online risk, as well as on other self-injury ones. Still, it seems that females are at higher risk than males regarding anorexia and self-injury, and the age at which they start self-harming is 13 years (Murray, Warm and Fox 2005).

The fact that young people nowadays are immersed in a mediated environment is not of a surprise anymore. Scholars and researchers have noted the extent to which individuals, especially adolescents use the new media these days and the way these have got embedded into their daily lives (Lenhart et al. 2013; Haddon et al. 2012; Ofcom 2012; Hasebrink et al. 2011; Kotilainen, 2011; Livingstone et al. 2011; Valcke et al. 2011; Lenhart and Madden, 2007). Still, the ways in which media use changes youngsters' lives and help them construct their identities in an environment interspersed with risks are subjects that need further examination. Generally, at this age, adolescents are believed to be at a key period of transformations, or in a stage in which biological changes of puberty are mingled with transitions to adulthood, emerging sexuality and peer relationships needs. It is generally a time of transitions and responsibilities that they have to go through in order to become adults, a period of storm and stress characterized by intergenerational conflicts, mood swings and an enthusiasm for risky behavior (Buckingham 2008, p. 2). This perspective can be

extrapolated into views of adolescence as a period of drug-taking, delinquency, depression, and sexual deviance.

The mixture of physical, cognitive, and social changes that occur during adolescence, along with the life choices that have to be made in this period, integrate into what Erik Erikson (1968, cited in Buckingham 2008) called "identity crisis". By this, he referred to a turning point in young people's lives, which finally leads to identity formation. His developmental theory extends Piaget's account of "ages and stages" into adulthood and old age. Each of the eight stages is characterized by a fundamental psychological conflict, which once overcame allows progression to the next stage. The personality characteristics accumulated in each stage form some vital virtues or strengths which prove to be useful when it comes to solving conflicts. These characteristics also enable the young person to move further or progress to early adulthood and to form the intimate attachments that are the key tasks of that stage. When the child is not able to develop a proper balance between the positive and negative virtue characteristics, some "maladaptations" may appear in his formation process.

Erikson pays great importance to identity and adolescence, since identity formation completes in this period and lasts over time. He portrays this stage as a critical one of identity formation, in which youth overcome uncertainty, become more self-aware of their strengths and weaknesses, become more confident in their own unique qualities, learn how to self-reflect and define themselves, separate from their families and form social competences (cited by Buckingham 2008, p. 2-3). Even though this process is mostly psychological and cognitive, and developed by the adolescent himself, it is also encouraged and recognized by interaction with peers and family. Buckingham (2008) further synthesizes Erikson's work which argued that achieving a solid identity requires a period of "psychosocial moratorium", which is a time when the adolescent is in search for his or her pursuit of self-discovery. It includes engaging in activities that might help them experiment different potential identities and situations, including risks of various kinds.

James Marcia (1980) is another author preoccupied with the topic of identity formation. He proposes another way of perceiving identity, as a period of "identity crisis" or, in his terms, "as a self-structure – an internal self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history" (Marcia 1980, p. 159). According to him, "the better developed this structure is the more aware individuals appear to be of their own uniqueness and similarity to others and of their own strengths and weaknesses in making their way in the world. The less developed this structure is, the more confused individuals seem about their own distinctiveness from others and the more they have to rely on external sources to evaluate themselves" (p. 159). With regards to the identity process, he considers

that it neither begins nor ends with adolescence. Rather, it begins at infancy and reaches its final phase at old ages.

Marcia's work builds on Erikson's theoretical perspective of identity formation, to which he adds four modes of dealing with the identity issue characteristic of late adolescents: identity achievement, foreclosure, identity diffusion and moratorium. Those belonging to these statuses are defined in terms of the presence or absence of a period of crisis and the extent of commitment in occupation and ideology. In the case of "identity achievement", adolescents have already passed through the crisis and made choices about who they want to become. In "foreclosure", other's expectations and decisions count, even though commitment to their lives starts to become noted. The crisis is not evident in this period. "Identity diffusions" are young people who have no directions, regardless of whether or not they may have experienced a decision-making period. In "moratorium", adolescents are currently trying to pass over the crisis period, experiencing various alternative commitments, including risk situations. This account, next to that made by Erikson, can be transposed into the topic of this paper, referring to children's and young people's use of the internet and their need for risk-taking, as activities useful for identity formation.

Even though generally, the association of risk with internet activities is perceived as a rather negative experience capable of producing significant harm to children and young people, there are though some perspectives arguing that risk might bring certain benefits within youngsters' lives (Hope, 2007; Madge and Barker, 2007). Going beyond boundaries, for instance, is seen as an escape from the daily tedious activities and may be a central element in identity construction, as it implies low levels of dangers (Hope, 2007). Lyng (1990, 2004) emphasizes the fact that risk-taking may have an appealing character which can offer particular sensations, emotions, pleasures and a sense of escaping from the everyday life routines for those involved in such experiences. Besides these sensations, risk-taking, also perceived as "action" defining a behavior that brings problematic outcomes (Goffman 1967, cited in Lyng 1990, p. 862), can offer a sense of control over the activities that are undertaken and over some sort of labile circumstances. People need to feel they can control things, no matter the activities they are engaged in. This sense of control-holding may offer a sense of psychological comfort and even self-confidence in relation to the fact that things can be managed properly, according to people's own will. Applied to the internet use, it can give away boredom or loneliness and induce positive feelings of happiness or joy while surfing the World Wide Web, accessing different social networking sites or blogs, or performing internet connections and relationships. As Lyng (1990, p. 858) pointed, "with the increasingly sophisticated nature of modern technology, individuals must sometimes push themselves to the outer limits of human performance in order to reach the performance limits of the technology under their control".

While crossing boundaries is perceived as having less negative effects (Hope, 2007) and implies going beyond the commonly accepted limits in reversible ways, children who engage in risky behaviors need to make themselves noted and somehow appreciated for their acts. Additionally, they may be easily accepted and integrated in groups, may form a notorious reputation between peers and may develop and define themselves outside the limits of the protective environment in which they live. The emotional motivation is the aspect that lies behind the risky acts that they perform. Whether they adopt this behavior online or offline, they are in search for activities that can help them define their self-images. Anthony Giddens (cited in Hope, 2007) pointed that late modernity is defined by risk and that it is an increasingly important part of the process of identity formation. From this perspective, engaging in dangerous activities can be seen as beneficial for children because it may allow the self to develop in ways that are restricted by an individual's everyday environment. Moreover, engagement in risk could lead to the development of a positive reputation as daring or skillful, and risk takers might develop a sense of belonging to a particular group (Hope 2007, p. 89).

Performance is also a characteristic that might be associated with risk-taking. According to Hope (2007, p. 90), it defines actions that need skills, courage or a formal public presentation that involves some audience. While performance comprises entertainment, efficacy, learned skills or creativity, the presence of an audience is an essential and defining characteristic. In this sense, Ervin Goffman's classic framework (1959) of self-presentation in the everyday life appears to be applicable in the process of understanding children's engagement in risky online and offline activities. His theory is helpful when it comes to interpreting online social interactions in terms of a performance that include actors, audience, front stage and backstage, and offers a different perspective on the way people's acts may change according to the setting in which they are placed and according the viewers around. He points to the defining role of the every day's social contexts and environments that allow people to construct different roles and images of themselves in a way that helps them be perceived from a positive and beneficial light. Every key concept presented in Goffman's work can have corresponding equivalents in the exploration of young-aged online users. The performers are children themselves who engage in interaction with others and present themselves according to the roles they want to play; the front stage is the online context; the backstage area is the offline environment; the audience is made out of the peers and friends from the virtual space; and the outsiders can be the parents or caretakers. Kernaghan and Elwood (2013), Ross (2007) and Miller (1995) acknowledge through their studies and comparisons that parallels between Goffman's work and online-related actors are suitable and valid when trying to frame and analyze online interactions and their emerging consequences.

In mediated environments, bodies are not necessarily visible and the skills people need in order to manage impressions and evaluate situations are different. In these contexts, texts, messages, posts, images, audios or videos stand for tools of presentation. The distinction between impression management online and offline consists in the fact that while being connected, people have the possibility to control and choose the information they upload. Therefore, it is easier for them to avoid the unintended gestures that might occur in the real life, especially since in the electronic environment it is much easier to misinterpret some behaviors, and much harder to repair a broken image and identity. The depth, intensity and complexity of the everyday interaction is also not entirely applicable in case of electronic communication but the aim of presenting and maintaining an acceptable self is encouraged through the multitude of existing devices and resources. Users may choose to present themselves in front of some known audiences however they want through instant messages or e-mails, or in front of some unknown public through chat rooms, social networking sites or blogs (Kernaghan and Elwood, 2013). Based on this perspective, one can find reasons to reconsider the protectionist paradigm, pleading for the idea that children are well-skilled and knowledgeable actors who are able to extricate themselves from difficult contexts and that they should not be considered anymore as some innocent victims and targets of the online dangers. Due to their evident great use of the internet and because of its customary character crowned with public authorities' aims to develop strategies meant to ensure that every children becomes digital and online skilled (European Commission Digital Agenda, 2013), youngsters have gained enough competencies and strategies so as to keep themselves free from online risks and even handle them when the case.

Having all these characteristics into account, an analysis of the negative outcomes that the internet use among children provides- focusing on accessing negative websites- will be done in the following section. Accent is put on the characteristics that encourage and define children's online performances, such as having a social networking profile, acquiring online skills, engaging in various online activities, as well as time spent online. It is argued that the way they present themselves, the way they perform in the online environment, and also the way in which they use the internet to communicate and interact may expose them to the dangers that glide online. Moreover, in line with Livingstone and Helsper (2010), and Livingstone et al. (2011) it is argued that children who use the internet more often have access not only to many online benefits but also to more online risks, and through this broad process of online connectivity, they may learn how to deal with these dangers in such a way as not to harm themselves. The "outsider's" supervision, in line with Goffman's approach (1959), is made out of parents who can intervene in ways that are able to keep adolescents aside from the imminent dangers, affecting their electronic

self-presentation. Moreover, building on the notion of "crossing boundaries" that is intrinsically connected to risk in the sense that children need to go beyond limits in order to make themselves noted and even escape the tedious daily routines, it is argued that the online and offline risky activities that children engage in are able to willingly attract risks. These experiences might offer youngsters a sense of emotional comfort suggesting that they are able to control and handle things properly, bringing even more other benefits, such as gaining a notorious reputation among peer groups. The "emotional motivation" is another concept that will be explored in the following section, pointing to the fact that children's need for sensation-seeking, their self-efficacy in using the internet and their psychological characteristics may attract more negative content risks that can stand for constructing their identities.

Following the theoretical perspectives previously summarized in this section, three hypotheses where stated. They argue that children who have high online performance, who are more emotionally engaged in their online explorations and who favor experiences such as crossing boundaries are more likely to access more negative user-generated and xenophobic content in the virtual space than those who lack these characteristics. More specific, each of the items mentioned above is detailed as follows:

H1: Online performance hypothesis.

Children who have a personal profile on a social networking site, those who use the internet more frequently, broadly and those who have acquired more online skills are expected to see more harmful and negative information-based websites than children who do not enjoy these benefits. More time online and having a personal profile on a social networking site are expected to count more in the case of xenophobic content rather than in the case of negative user-generated content risks, since xenophobic websites seem to be more spread, appealing and child-oriented (Gestenfeld et. al., 2003), and therefore more likely to be present on the SNS pages.

H2: Emotional motivation hypothesis.

Those who enjoy experiencing sensation-seeking, who consider themselves effective and confident in their abilities to handle unexpected and new situations (self-efficacy), and those with psychological difficulties, are more likely to access more harmful and hateful websites online than the other children. Psychological difficulties are expected to count more for negative user-generated risks since this kind of content attracts adolescents who are predisposed to having psychological problems (Mitchell and Ybarra 2007; Ybarra et al. 2007).

H3. Crossing boundaries hypothesis.

Those who are risk-oriented online and offline are more exposed to online negative messages and information than children who lack these characteristics.

Method

The analyses are based on the data collected in 2010 by the EU Kids Online II project. This was a pan-European project that aimed to investigate the internet practices of children across twenty-five European countries[1], with a representative sample of 1,000 children aged 9–16 who use the internet, and one of their parents in each of the partner countries. For sensitive questions there was used a self-completion section.

Because the self-completion questionnaire for those aged 9-10 did not contain several items as they were considered inappropriate or difficult to understand for children of this age (including seeing negative user-generated websites and xenophobic content), this category of respondents was not taken into account for this paper. With regards to the other category, 11-16, it was split into groups, meaning 11-13 and 14-16 year olds respondents, based on the recent recommendations of the Safer Internet Centers (Insafe Good Practive Guide, 2012) that aim at providing age-appropriate safety support for children; also, the fact that various applications or social networking sites have age limits regarding the terms of use, which is set at 14 years of age, counted for this division (Internet Safety Technical Task Force, 2008).

The dependent variables were constructed as follows:

– *Negative user-generated content*. It was made up of the following variables: "I have seen websites where people discuss ways to be very thin (such as being anorexic or bulimic)"- 9%; "I have seen websites where people discuss ways of physically harming or hurting themselves"- 6%; "I have seen websites where people talk about or share their experiences of taking drugs"- 6%; "I have seen websites where people discuss ways of committing suicide"- 3%. A factor analysis was conducted in order to test whether these variables fit together. Since the eigenvalue was high- 2.115, and the explained variance was 52.87%, it was concluded that these variables fulfill the basic statistical requirements for being put together in complex analysis. These variable were summed up and afterwards dichotomized into "0=the adolescent did not see any of the negative user-generated websites" and "1= the adolescent saw at least one negative user-generated website". N= 3668.

– *Xenophobic content*: one single dummy variable – "I have seen websites were people discuss hate messages that attack certain groups or individuals"- 10%. It was dichotomized into "0= the adolescent did not come across xenophobic content" and "1= the adolescent came across xenophobic content". N= 2404.

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1 The 25 countries involved in this study were: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and United Kingdom.

The explicative measures of online performance for H1 include:
- *Hours online per day*. M= 1.56, SD= 1.03; estimated from the question "About how long do you spend using the internet on a normal school day/normal non-school day?".
- *Having a profile on a social networking site*. N=15420, 61.3%; "Do you have your own profile on a social networking site that you currently use, or not?".
- *Online skills*. M=4.43, SD=2.58; the number out of eight response options, after being tested for correlations: "Compare different websites to decide if information is true"- 57.3%, "Change filter preferences"- 30.2%, "Bookmark a website"- 68.8%, "Block unwanted adverts or junk mail/ spam"- 52.8%, "Delete the record of which sites you have visited"- 57.1%, "Change privacy settings on a social networking profile"- 61.5%, "Block messages from someone you don't want to hear from"- 68.7%, "Find information on how to use the internet safely"- 65.3%.
- *Online activities*. M= 7.26, SD= 3.67; the number out of seventeen response options, after being tested for correlations: "Used the internet for school work"- 77.8%, "Played internet games on your own or against the computer"- 86.1%, "Watched video clips"-79.6%, "Visited a social networking profile"- 63.3%, "Used instant messaging"- 63.3%, "Sent/Received email"- 60.5%, "Read/Watched the news on the internet"- 41.3%, "Played games with other people on the internet"- 47.8%, "Downloaded music or films"-45.1%, "Put (or posted) photos, videos or music to share with others"- 39.6%, "Used a webcam"-29.1%, "Put (or posted) a message on a website"- 30.2%, "Visited a chat room"- 23.0%, "Used file sharing sites"- 20.0%, "Created a character, pet or avatar"- 20.3%, "Spent time in a virtual world"- 17.8%, "Written a blog or online diary"- 10.7%.

The measures of psychological characteristics for H2 include:
- *Self-efficacy*. M= 2.18, SD= 0.46 (scale adapted from Schwarzer and Jerusalem 1995, four items, a = 0.63, and used in the EU Kids Online questionnaire, explained in Livingstone et al. 2011a); The variables are: "It's easy for me to stick to my aims and achieve my goals"- 86.8%, "I am confident that I can deal with unexpected problems"- 84.2%, "I can generally work out how to handle new situations"- 87.3%, "If I am in trouble I can usually think of something to do"- 85.3%.
- *Sensation seeking*. An interaction variable (N= 5135) was created by multiplying "I do dangerous things for fun"- 24.5% and "I do exciting things even if they are dangerous"- 34.7%.
- *Psychological difficulties*. M =1.40, SD =0.25 (adapted from Goodman et al., 1998; 16 items, a=0.73 and used in the EU Kids Online questionnaire, explained in Livingstone et al. 2011a); included five subscales (emotional

problems, conduct problems, peer relationship problems, hyperactivity/inattention) and one assessing strength (pro-social behavior).

The measures of crossing boundaries for H3 include:

– *Risky online activities*. Children had to respond whether they had done each of the following activities: "Looked for new friends on the internet"- 42.4%, "Added people to my friends list or address book who I have never met face to face"- 36.4%, "Pretended to be a different kind of person on the internet from who I really am"- 14.8%, "Sent personal information to someone who I have never met face to face"- 15.6%, "Sent a photo or video of myself to someone that I have never met face to face"- 12.3%. The categories were tested for correlations and afterwards dichotomized into 0= "children have not done any of the risky online activities", and 1= "children have done at least one of the risky online activities"; M=0.49, SD=0.5

– *Risky offline activities*. Children had to respond whether they had done any of the following activities: "Missed school lessons without my parents knowing"- 11.8%, "Been in trouble with my teachers for bad behavior"- 14.6%, "Been in trouble with the police"- 3.3%, "Had sexual intercourse"- 6.0%, "Had so much alcohol that I got really drunk"- 9.5%. The categories were tested for correlations and afterwards dichotomized into 0= "children have not done any of the risky offline activities", and 1= "children have done at least one of the risky offline activities"; M=0.28, SD=0.45.

Other variables which were introduced in the analyses and which were expected to count for the types of risk analyzed include:

– *Internet access from own bedroom*. N=13307, 52.9%; "Where do you use the internet these days? Your bedroom (or other private room) at home" (Yes/No).

– *Internet access from public spaces*. N=4057; measure formed out of two variables: "Where do you use the internet these days? Please say yes or no to each of the following: in an internet café (cybercafé); when out and about (eg. via a mobile phone, Ipod Touch, Blackberry etc.)". They were summed up and dichotomized into 0= "no access from public spaces" and 1= "access from at least one public space".

Besides these measures, others were used as well, such as socio-economic status- SES (high, medium, low) and parental restrictive mediation, as declared by the child. This latter variable was dichotomized into 0= "no restrictive rules" and 1= "at least one restrictive rule" from the following response options referring to the things children were allowed to only under parental permission or supervision: "use instant messaging", "download music or films on the internet", "watch video clips on the internet", "have your own social networking profile", "give out personal information to others on the internet", "upload photos, videos or music to share with others".

Results and discussion

In order to see how all these variables work together and if they can be used in further analyses, some correlations were conducted. They are shown in Table 1. As it can be noticed, there is a significant negative correlation between age and most of the variables (only the category 11-13 was introduced in this model). This reveals the fact that age matters when it comes to risk-taking and that the younger the children, the less negative websites they access. This is in line with Erik Erikson's (as cited in Buckingham, 2008) and James Marcia's (1980) concepts of "identity crisis" and "moratorium" which argue that at these ages, adolescents pass through a sort of turning points in their lives trying to define their identities. By doing this, they need to experience various kinds of situations and commitments, including risks.

Gender (0= female; 1= male) is negatively correlated with negative user-generated content, suggesting that males face less often this kind of risk. High SES, as older age-group was left outside the matrix as reference category. Medium SES appears to have no statistical significance with these two kinds of risks. The measures of internet use characteristics (breadth, depth and skills), emotional characteristics and crossing boundaries correlate significantly and almost all positively with the other variables considered for analysis.

Table 1. Correlations among the predictors of negative user-generated and xenophobic content

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Age	1	.00	.00	-.01*	-.07*	-.03*	.01*	-.35*	-.01	-.47*	.00	-.01*	-.04*	-.26*	.11*	-.04*	-.03*	-.05*
Gender (0=female)		1	.00	.01*	.05*	.01*	-.05*	.05*	.04*	.15*	.04*	-.01	.00	.09*	-.04*	.05*	-.05*	.00
Low SES			1	-.41*	-.05*	-.07*	-.04*	-.09*	-.07*	-.01*	-.07*	.08*	-.04*	.01	.00	.03*	-.23*	-.03*
Medium SES				1	.06*	-.00	.01*	.01*	.03*	.02*	-.01*	.00	.03*	.01	-.02*	-.02*	.01	.00
Time online					1	.29*	.32*	.31*	.46*	.15*	.13*	.07*	.32*	.20*	-.20*	.15*	.21*	.20*
Bedroom use						1	.25*	.26*	.32*	.08*	.10*	-.01*	.19*	.10*	-.10*	.08*	.12*	.10*
Own profile							1	.40*	.56*	.13*	.18*	.00	.40*	.16*	-.14*	.15*	.19*	.16*
Online skills								1	.53*	.18*	.26*	-.03*	.32*	.24*	-.15*	.13*	.20*	.19*
Online activities									1	.21*	.22*	.05*	.47*	.24*	-.15*	.20*	.26*	.23*
Sensation seeking										1	.13*	.20*	.19*	.34*	-.12*	.11*	.18*	.17*
Self-efficacy											1	-.13*	.14*	.07*	-.05*	.08*	.09*	.10*
Psychological difficulties												1	.10*	.19*	-.04*	.05*	.13*	.09*
Risky online activities													1	.24*	-.16*	.13*	.25*	.21*
Risky offline activities														1	-.16*	.14*	.24*	.22*
Restrictive mediation															1	-.10*	-.14*	-.10*
Public spaces access																1	.14*	.13*
Negative user-generated																	1	.44*
Xenophobic content																		1

Note: * Correlation is significant and the .05 level (2-tailed).
Base: EU Kids Online database, all children 11-16 who use the internet.

Parental restrictive mediation is negatively correlated with risks, showing that adult supervision- or "outsider's" intervention, to use Goffman's concept (1959) - has an influence on the way young people perform online, reducing their incidence of risk. Having an own personal profile on a social networking site is strongly positively correlated with children's engaging in risky online activities, pointing once again to the fact that risk-taking is not such an unusual activity among young people who sometimes engage voluntarily in online explorations that can help them feel emotions of control and joy while escaping from the daily routines in the virtual space (Cohen and Taylor, 1992; Hope, 2007). The breadth of online activities undertaken by youngsters is also strongly positively related with risky online activities, reinforcing the idea that adolescents are in search of diverse experiences during this period of time. Sensation-seeking online is positively correlated with risky offline activities that children take up, showing again youngsters' need of explorations at this stage of development.

All these variables were introduced into logistic regression analysis, for each of the two types of risk analyzed. Therefore, a number of 2 such regressions where conducted, which are shown in Table 2.

As concerns age in both models, while controlling for the other variables, it appears that younger adolescents aged 11-13 are less likely to see negative websites than older internet users aged 14-16. Results for gender are in line with the findings of Whitlock and colleagues (2006) who argue that girls are more likely to visit negative user-generated websites than boys. The same appears to be true in the case of xenophobic content, where boys seem to have 22% less odds than girls to access such content. Low socio-economic status stands for a less likelihood of seeing harmful and negative websites as compared to high SES. This might be because of young people's fewer devices used to connect to the internet, which prevent them from coming across a larger number of online risks. In the case of negative user-generated content, medium SES is not statistically significant.

With regards to the first hypothesis, logistic regression shows it can be partly confirmed. While time spent online accounts for greater odds of seeing more xenophobic than negative information, having a personal profile on a social networking site is not statistically significant in this model, controlling for the other variables. Adolescents who have more online skills have 9% more chances to access at least one negative user-generated website, and 14% more chances to see xenophobic content. The breadth of online activities that young people undertake produces a 4% increase in the likelihood of browsing both risks.

The predictors for the second hypothesis show greater chances for adolescents to see both kinds of information online. Having psychological difficulties is the factor that produces the greatest changes in the dependent variables. Those youngsters who have these problems are 3.6 time more likely to access at least one negative

Table 2. Logistic regressions on the risks of accessing negative user-generated and xenophobic contents.

	Negative user-generated content		Xenophobic content	
	B	(Exp)B	B	(Exp)B
Demographics				
Age (14-16 reference group)	-0.32	.72*	-0.37	.68*
Gender (0=girl)	-0.59	.55*	-0.24	.78*
SES (low)	-0.17	.84*	-0.35	.70*
SES (medium)	-0.07	.92	-0.25	.77*
Online performance				
Time online	0.09	1.09*	0.131	1.14*
Personal profile on a SNS	-0.08	0.91	0.05	1.05
Online skills	0.08	1.09*	0.11	1.12*
Online activities	0.04	1.04*	0.04	1.04*
Emotional motivation				
Sensation seeking	0.37	1.44*	0.41	1.51*
Self-efficacy	0.15	1.16*	0.31	1.36*
Psychological difficulties	1.28	3.62*	1.04	2.84*
Crossing boundaries				
Risky online activities	0.72	2.07*	0.69	2.01*
Risky offline activities	0.57	1.78*	0.58	1.79*
Mediation				
Parental restrictive mediation	-0.21	.80*	0.03	1.03
Other variables				
Bedroom use	0.05	1.05	-0.06	0.94
Internet access from public spaces	0.28	1.33*	0.27	1.31*
Constant	-4.78	.00*	-5.84	.00*
% correct	81.90%		87.10%	

Note 1: Dependent variables: negative user-generated (Nagelkerke R Square= .218) and xenophobic content (Nagelkerke R Square= .199). Both models are significant; method= enter.
Note 2: * Statistically significant.
Base: EU Kids Online dataset, all children 11-16 who use the internet.

harmful website and 2.8 times more likely to access hateful content. These results are in line with previous conclusions stated by Mitchell and Ybarra (2007) and Ybarra and colleagues (2007).

Engaging in at least one risky online activity increases the odds of accessing at least one negative website by 200%. It means that having a risky- oriented online behavior is a characteristic that attracts more such content risks in the virtual space. Also, taking risks in the offline environment, which was considered to be transposed in similar behavior online, offers 78% more chances to access the first kind of information and 79% more odds to access the second type of websites. Therefore, the third hypothesis was confirmed as well.

Parental restrictive mediation seems to be relevant only in the case of negative user-generated content, where it accounts for 20% less odds that adolescents see this kind of information. Using the internet from young people's own bedroom is

not significant in this model but instead, going online from public spaces such as internet cafes, offers around 30% more chances that adolescents access harmful and hateful internet pages. This might happen because while being in such places, adults' supervision and monitoring does not come into play and therefore, teenagers are free to explore all kinds of contents, including negative user-generated and xenophobic materials.

Conclusions

This article analyzed the risk factors associated with adolescents' accessing negative contents in the online environment. It was argued that their need to engage in activities such as browsing negative user-generated and xenophobic websites might help them go through various kinds of experiences, including risks, in their pursuit of self-discovery within the process of identity formation. Three hypotheses were tested- online performance, emotional motivation for engaging in the risky situations of accessing these types of contents, and crossing over boundaries of safety while using the internet- which showed that age and gender matter when it comes of visiting websites that offer misleading advice and hateful information. Girls are more likely to access such contents. The amount of time spent online, the skills that young people have and the activities they engage in, either risky or not, or performed online or not, account for more odds that the users see at least one negative user-generated and xenophobic website. Having a personal profile on a social networking site, which was considered an instrument of presentation and performance online, was not significantly statistic in these models of logistic regressions, controlling for the other variables. Going online from adolescents' own bedrooms was in the same situation. Instead, accessing the internet from public spaces that lack adults' supervision stood for more chances that respondents would see harmful and hateful contents. Parental restrictions on using the internet proved significant only in the case of accessing negative user-generated websites. It seems to reduce by 20% the likelihood of browsing such content online. The emotional motivation for engaging in risky situations was the hypothesis that accounted the most for seeing these kinds of information. Adolescents with psychological difficulties seem to be more likely to visit such pages.

Limitations

An important limitation that has to be mentioned is that all these risk assessments are based on children's responses while filling in the applied and the self-completion questionnaire under some other family member's supervision (parent, care-keeper, other children etc.), therefore they must be treated with caution. The differences in responses between adolescents who were supervised and those who were not, by

age groups show that older children were more likely to underreport the answers. Even though the mean differences between groups are rather small, they still exist in spite the large sample surveyed. Significant differences exist in the negative user-generated and xenophobic content risks, probably due to questions' sensitive character which might have enforced children to be less sincere regarding the display of their real online experiences while having another member of the family around.

Another limitation refers to the fact that the questionnaire did not ask about youngsters' feelings after seeing these kinds of websites, nor about their ways of dealing with such contents. Therefore, there is no information on the outcomes that these activities might have produced on young people's behaviors.

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