Cyberspace Behaviors Keep Researchers Busy

BY BETSY BATES

LOS ANGELES — Today's adolescents are so immersed in technology they multitask in their cyberspace lives, texting while listening to their iPods, talking on cell phones as they scope out each other's Facebook pages.

Even for adolescent medicine specialists, their worlds move fast—so fast, in fact, it's difficult for researchers to keep up with what teens are doing, what it all means, and whether these technologies can be tapped for the betterment of teen health.

Researchers at the annual meeting of the Society for Adolescent Medicine offered a mixed picture of teens and technology, but all agreed that the topic is a moving target.

"As soon as we figure out what they're doing, they're on to something else," said Amy B. Jordan, Ph.D., director of the media and the developing child sector of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

As of this moment, texting and instant messaging are in; e-mailing is out—the latter now just a relic "used to communicate with adults and institutions," said Patti M. Valkenburg, Ph.D., director of the center for research on children, adolescents, and the media at the University of Amsterdam.

"Sexting" is also a hot topic, with 20% of 12- to 17-year-olds texting messages with sexual content and/or explicit photographs of themselves, Dr. Jordan said.

Younger adolescents quickly "appropriated" the social networking site Facebook from college students, but now there are indications that the teens are moving on.

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In an aside, Dr. Jordan described her own 14-year-old daughter's horror at learning that her 74-year-old grandmother had a Facebook page and 11 "friends," "8 of whom she does not know!"

Dr. Valkenburg noted that American and European teenagers are virtually identical in their ravenous consumption of technology, with more than 90% of U.S. and Dutch teens logging onto the Internet.

Much of the appeal is understandable within the context of the developmental tasks of adolescence, including the need to develop self-esteem and social competency, she said.

In her research, one-third of teens said they prefer online self-disclosure to face-to-face conversations, finding a measure of comfort in a medium that doesn't expose their awkward facial and auditory cues (not to mention zits and blushing).

But while new media can provide a kinder, gentler avenue to budding teen friendships, there are pitfalls as well.

The reality of online life for teens means they are "one click away" from pornography, drug and alcohol messages, and hard-bitten marketing schemes bent on capitalizing on their impulsivity, Dr. Valkenburg said.

With that perspective in mind, it is useful to note that researchers are discovering that American and Dutch teenagers are fairly transparent on social networking sites.

A Pew Research Center study found that 82% of U.S. teenagers reveal their first names and 29%, their last names, on such sites.

Nearly 80% provide photos of themselves, and 61% reveal the city where they live.

Dr. Valkenburg found Dutch teenagers are even more sanguine, with 92% revealing their first names and 62% their last names.

Another technology expert, Kaveri Subrahmanyam, Ph.D., reported that, despite "exaggerated" online behaviors, few adolescents tread deeply into out-of-character, risky territory when they log on.

Troubled teens are troubled in all domains of their lives, while well-adjusted teens connect online with friends and those with similar interests.

"It does appear that teens' offline and online world are connected," said Dr. Subrahmanyam, director of the media and language lab at California State University, Los Angeles.

Her studies of cyberbullying, for example, reveal highly creative bullying techniques, from slam books to embedded pictures to sexting.

But the cast of characters holds few surprises.

"The majority of bullies know their victims. Their victims are victims of offline bullying at school," she said.

Indeed, for some victims, the Internet may provide a buffer in which they can avoid social rejection by connecting with online friends.

On the other hand, Dr. Subrahmanyam warned that some children and teens are vulnerable to harmful influences and manipulation online, often marked by a solitary retreat to the online world.

"For those of us who work with teenagers, it's important to consider that a discrepancy between offline and online life is probably a red flag," she said.

From a professional standpoint, it would behoove adolescent medicine professionals to get immersed in the fast-moving technological culture of adolescence in order to understand its influence on the teens they see, said Dr. Ellen Wartella, executive vice chancellor and provost for the University of California, Riverside.

From a public policy standpoint, physician voices are needed in the effort to monitor and control content, she maintained.

"You really need to experience it, not just listen to someone like me talk about it. Bring in some college students or teens . . . to actually walk you through Twitter and take you into Second Life [an online virtual world]," she advised.

Immersion in these environments can "go a long way" in gaining insight into how these new forms of communication are so very different from previous forms of adolescent communication, she said. ■

To view a video interview with Dr. Subrahmanyam, go to www.youtube.com/ClinPsychNews.