Virtual communities play an increasing role in the lives of today’s adolescents. Most adolescents have Internet access, most report daily use, and up to 97% of U.S. college students report having a social networking site (SNS) profile. Profile content is created and posted by the profile owner and may include audio, images (eg, pictures and video) and text (eg, blogs and personal descriptions). A widely used feature of some SNS, such as Facebook, is called “status updates,” which allow users to share a short text description of their current location, emotion, or activity. Examples of status updates include, “Jeff is feeling pretty tired” or “Erika got good news today!”

SNS often allow profile owners to create online photo albums and to share photographs with other profile owners. SNS also provide a venue for communication with other profile owners via e-mail, instant messaging, and publicly displayed comments.

Finally, SNS provide opportunities to link one’s profile into a social network

Educational Objectives

1. Determine the current level of social networking site usage among the adolescent population.
2. Describe the types of information and health references profiled on social networking sites by adolescents.
3. Discuss future directions for research and clinical care using social networking sites.

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References to one risk behavior, such as substance use, are displayed in patterns consistent with those seen in self-report studies. For example, profiles that display references to one risk behavior, such as substance use, are more likely to display references to other risk behaviors, such as sex. Further, references to health risk behaviors are profiled in similar patterns among adolescents’ online “friend” groups.5

SNS PROFILES: INFLUENCING OTHER TEENS?

Regardless of the truthfulness of profiled information, other teens may respond to an adolescent’s disclosures as if they were real, and this in turn may influence the teens’ intentions and behaviors. A previous study found that adolescents viewed displayed alcohol references on SNS profiles as accurate and influential representations of alcohol use. Given the popularity of SNS, these websites may function as a media super-peer, promoting and establishing norms of behavior among other adolescents.

For example, alcohol references on SNS may promote the illusion that drinking is without risk and may promote alcohol initiation, a process known as media cultivation. Further, social
BENEFITS AND RISKS OF SNS

Social networking sites, like any other form of media, are tools that present potential benefits as well as potential risks for the user. For teens who feel isolated, such as adolescents with interests outside the mainstream culture, SNS may provide a social outlet that is otherwise unavailable. A previous study found a positive relationship between increased self-esteem and satisfaction with Facebook use. Anecdotal reports suggest that some adolescents use SNS to organize potentially beneficial activities, such as class assignments, social justice efforts, or support groups for peers in distress.

Despite these potential benefits, there may be risks associated with adolescents’ profile content. Displaying health-risk behavior information on a personal Web profile, such as information about sexual activity or substance use, displays this information in a globally public venue. Content displayed on a Facebook profile can be copied, downloaded, or distributed by any profile viewer. Therefore, this information is published, public, persuasive, and permanent. This information may then become accessible to people whom the profile owner would prefer not have view it, such as potential employers. Many employers currently screen potential job candidates using social media tools, such as Facebook. Recent media have highlighted concerns with SNS with regard to cyberbullying, as well as risks of online sexual predation using SNS.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Given the immense popularity of SNS among teens, these websites have become an integral part of adolescents’ lives, and therefore their health and safety. Researchers are increasingly recognizing the contributions of SNS to understanding behavior and as a potential public health tool. As SNS provide information about a profile owner, there is potential for this information to be used for a targeted intervention. Early studies have suggested that SNS may be feasible to incorporate into health intervention efforts via targeted messaging or blogs.

Although these early studies are promising, research involving SNS and adolescent health is still in its infancy. Further study is needed to assess the accuracy and effects of SNS disclosures and how to provide targeted messages or interventions using SNS.

SNS may also present new opportunities to enhance patient care. First, SNS provide new opportunities for patients to seek support from other patients. Several SNS provide profile owners the ability to join online groups around various topics, including medical condition-related groups. By joining such a group, patients may be able to seek information and support from this online community.

Second, SNS technology may someday replace other traditional forms of patient-provider communication, such as the telephone, or even newer forms of communication, such as e-mail. Recent studies suggest that adolescents prefer communicating via SNS rather than traditional e-mail. Many questions remain as to how medical providers can integrate their own SNS identities into their professional lives. It is unclear how physicians should approach SNS “friend requests” from patients or patient’s parents. This has emerged as an issue of medical professionalism and raises new questions about the boundaries between physicians’ public and private lives. Further, physicians must also now consider the displayed content of their own SNS profiles to ensure that no patient information is present, which may violate HIPPA guidelines.

Finally, SNS may provide a new venue to identify adolescents who are considering or engaging in health-risk behaviors. As current methods fail to identify many adolescents who are at risk for or engaging in health-risk behaviors, innovative approaches are clearly needed. Given the popularity of SNS among teens and the high prevalence of risk behaviors by profile owners, SNS can be explored as a tool to identify, screen, and potentially intervene with adolescents who display risk behavior information. It has been suggested that viewing an adolescent’s SNS profile in the context of an office visit may provide a novel method to discuss health issues raised by profile references to health risk, as well as health promoting behaviors.

SNS present potential risks and benefits associated with their use. These risks and benefits include, but are not limited to, health. Current research efforts involving SNS include fields, such as medicine, psychology, computer science, and criminal justice. Through this work, we will develop a better understanding of how best to address the challenges and opportunities presented by this new technology.
REFERENCES


