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PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHILDREN'S USE OF FACEBOOK

Abstract:

As a result of the rapid developments in communication technologies, Internet usage has become widespread with each passing day and an integral part of daily life. Computer and internet as the need of the modern era have an important place in children's life as well as adults. Especially with the emergence of Facebook in 2004, internet usage began to increase especially among young people and children. Although the individual must be at least thirteen years old to be able to have a profile on Facebook, today many children under the age of thirteen have Facebook profile. According to the results of the research conducted by Telecommunications Communication Presidency (TIB) on the internet usage habits of children shows that 66% of the children use Social Sharing Sites at least once a day1. Results of EU Kids Online Project report related to children's Internet and Facebook in Turkey are as follows2:

• 85% of children use Facebook.

• 42% of children set their profile to Public on Facebook. Thus their Facebook account can be seen by anyone on or off Facebook.

• 9,6% of children says that they encountered with a sad situation on the web, the ratio of parents who says their children encountered with a sad situation on the web is just 4.5%.

• 15% of children stated that they visited websites including harmful information.

As indicated, Internet technology is an important part of children's lives as well as adults. It's a well-known fact that these technologies adversely affect the physical, social and psychological development of children and the importance of the role of parents on children's online behavior also accepted.

This study aims to reveal parents' awareness of, behavior and attitudes toward their children's use of Facebook. The research sample consists of 11 parents who have at least one child under 13 years and who has a facebook account. Individuals to be included in the sample is determined based on the using snowball sampling method. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with selected parents. Results show that parents feel uneasy about their children's Facebook usage especially when children get exposed to contents including obscene, political and bad words. All of them know the rule about age limitation to have a Facebook account. And parents think their children spent too much time on Facebook and say that they try to limit and control the time they spent on Facebook.

Keywords:

New media, parents, children, facebook

1. Introduction

By courtesy of the fast developments occured in communication technologies within the first decade of the 21st century, internet technologies and its usage have become an important part of human life. Along with internet access, has come the chance to access every kind of information, to utilize from services such as banking, health and education, and to contact with people using different social identities. Today, the quantity and the user numbers of social networks where people may have social relationships, make new friends, or maintain the existing friendships, share their knowledge, ability and likings have increased. Therefore by means of social networks, a new style of existence for millions of individual has occurred. There are many social networks that are available and actively used on earth. Facebook, one these many social networks, has been founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Andrew McCollum and Eduardo Saver, as a web site which was created as a directory including the photos and short information of Harvard University students. The website, which at first was called "Facemash" by the students of Harvard University, then named "thefacebook.com". In the August of 2005, its name was changed as "Facebook.com". By the September of 2006, everyone oer the age of 13 has had the possibility to create an account in Facebook, and today it has become the most commonly used social network of the world (Toprak, Yıldırım, Aygul, Binark, Borekci, Comu, 2009: 25-37).

It is not wrong to say that Facebook is the most common social network also in Turkey. According to the user numbers of 2015 revealed by Facebook itself, there are 34 million of registered Facebook users in Turkey where the total population is approximately 75 million. The vast majority of the mass who has internet access uses Facebook. This is almost the half f the general population of the country. 27 million of 34 million people access Facebook via mobile devices (www.birgun.net , access date: 21.04.2016). Facebook is a social network that is also popular and preferred among children. A researched executed by the Internet Board of the Ministry of Transportation also supports this argument.

According to the report of the research that aims to reveal the "Children's Habits of Using Social Networks", supported by the Internet Board of the Ministry of Transportation, Middle East Technical University (METU) and the Department of Telecommunication Communication of the Information and Communication Technologies Authority, 70% of children use internet at least once a day, and 66% of them use social networks at least once a day spending 72 minutes in average. This ratio shows that the time children spend on-line mostly is spent on social networks. Facebook, with a usage ratio of 99%, is the most common social network.

According to EU Kids Online 2010 report, children spend 74 minutes in average online, and they generally are sharing posts on social networks with their friends. The most preferred social network among children is Facebook. According to the 2012 report of the same research, even though social network membership requires at least the age of 13, in Turkey more than half of the children under the age of 13 already are

using Facebook. Furthermore, these children share their personal information (e.g. cell phone number, home address) more than European average. 85% of them claim to know so much about computers, though they have the lowest rate in Europe in terms of internet usage skills. More than 75% of mothers, even though they are unable to use internet, think that they provide enough help for their children. At this point, both families and children seem to have a self-confidence beyond the knowledge they actually have. At this stage, the method of prohibiting only unsafe internet sites is far from preventing many risks from internet. Therefore, it is significantly important to perform awareness-raising operations for both children and parents (http://eukidsonline.metu.edu.tr/ access date: 20.04.2016).

As a result, Facebook occurs as a medium for parent-child communication, bringing along the discussions about children's usage of Facebook under the age of 13. The parents' opinions about children's Facebook usage, the actual situations they are in, and the precautions they are trying to take are also quite important herein. This research is a qualitative study that aims to demonstrate parents' attitudes, awareness and behaviors about their children's Facebook usage.

2. Purpose and Method

This qualitative study aims to show parents' attitudes, awareness and behaviors about their children's Facebook usage. Interview, one of the qualitative methods, has been used in this study. The interview method has been preferred in this study to observe the subjects' perspectives and semantic worlds from their own point of view. Qualitative interviewers, by listening to examples, narrations, stories, explanations, learn about a specific matter and try to understand the culture (Kus, 2012: 87, 91).

Semi-structured interviews have been performed with the parents by asking them "open-ended" questions. These questions, though being open-ended, have been asked "within the scope of a systematic structure". The interviewees have provided detailed information, and unexpected random findings have been obtained during the interviews. Thus, much detailed information has been gathered (Glesne, 2013: 143; Demir, 2011: 279).

The sample of the research is composed of 11 mothers and fathers who have Facebook accounts of their own or their children's, and each of whom has (at least) one child under thirteen years of age Two participants, who match the research criteria, have been selected by researchers. Later on, other participants have been reached out using the information obtained from the first two participants. Hence, this study has been performed by using snowball sampling method (Erdogan, 2003:182).

The termination of interviews with 11 participants is a result of data saturation. The interviews have been terminated, when the same information has started to be gathered. Thus, the data have been saturated, and the number has been achieved (Punch, 2011: 183; Kumbetoglu, 2012: 97; Creswell, 2013: 189; Rubin and Rubin 2005: 67).

The data obtained have been inductively organized by the researchers; codes, categories and themes have been constructed from bottom to the top. During the process, the computer software which is designed for qualitative data analysis, Nvivo 10, has been used.

The interviews have been performed within the scope of the following questions:

- What do you think of Facebook usage in general?
- Do you think you have enough information about Facebook?
- What do you think about children's Facebook usage in general?
- How do you monitor your child's internet usage?
- How do you monitor your child's Facebook usage?
- How did your child create his/her Facebook account? Was it within your knowledge?
- Why did you allow your child to create a Facebook account?
- What do you think your child exactly is doing on Facebook?
- What kind of contents do you think your child is exposed to on Facebook?
- Does your child share with you what he/she encounters on Facebook?
- With whom does your child communicate? With whom is your child friends?
- Do you know your child's password?
- What do you think is the best way of controlling children's Facebook usage?
- What do you think would be the consequences of completely restricting the child's Facebook usage?
- How long does your child spend on Facebook a day?
- What do you think about this duration? (Short enough or too long?)
- Do you have any restriction about the duration? If yes, how?
- How do you think parents should direct the child's Facebook usage?
- What would you like the schools do about the issue?
- There is an age limit policy for signing up to Facebook. Are you aware of that? What do you think about this limitation?
- Have you ever encountered with a negative situation that arose from your child's Facebook usage? (Abuse, harassment, humiliation etc.) If yes, what have been through?
- Are you friends with your child on Facebook?
- How do you communicate with your child via Facebook?
- What are the favorable and unfavorable aspects of this situation?
- What do you think are the negative effects of Facebook over children? What are the positive ones?
- Do you think parents have enough information on what Facebook is, how it is used and what children do there

3. Findings and Conclusions

3. 1. The Participants' Opinions about the Facebook Usage

The participants generally state that people are extremely addicted to Facebook. They describe the act of sharing everything that happens in their life from morning to night, as an addiction. For instance, one of the participants says "What people eat in lunch and dinner doesn't concern me!". Another point of criticism is that people constantly check the news on the Facebook pages, even while communicating with others on the phone. This action disturbs the people with whom they spend time, and it is concerned as disrespectful. It is also regarded as an obstacle in the way of face to face communication. Moreover, keeping Facebook pages active on the computer screen during office hours even while working, creates negative effects over the participants.

Participants also stated that Facebook, according to its purpose of usage, can become a positive or negative medium. Especially for the female participants, it is extremely disturbing that there are people who try to harass others using Facebook.

Despite all these opinions, the participants explain that they are quite contented to find their old friends via Facebook. Having a connection with others, even not concurrently, is one of the positive features of Facebook. Facebook is also stated to provide an advantage of celebrating people's birthdays and special days. In addition, it is regarded to be a good medium for information sharing. Participants also say that it contributes to familiarizing people. One of the participants states that Facebook has a really different meaning for them. According to the participant, Facebook is "a way of communicating easily and facilitating the life". This particular participant uses Facebook in their business to contact with their business connections, and thinks that this eases the work.

Another participant of the research thinks that it is necessary to follow the new media, Facebook being in the first place; otherwise it is not possible to follow technological development.

3. 2. The Knowledge Level of the Participants about the Facebook Usage

5 of the 11 people who participates the research declares that they do not have enough knowledge about Facebook, while 3 of them state that they have enough information. The other 3 participants indicate that with their current knowledge about Facebook, they can do whatever they need to do. These latter 3 also add that they do not need to be assertive about having a very good level of information. The participants generally are worried about the security settings. They try to prevent people other than their friends to see what they share, by controlling security settings.

3. 3. Parents' Opinions about Children's Facebook Usage

Parents mostly mention that children use Facebook for games spending too much time doing so. Parents feel uncomfortable that children have access to the issues that can only be seen and spoken about by adults. Thus all the participants agree that it should be held in control. However, one of the participants states "they do not have

much knowledge about using internet based media, and they learn by experience. Besides, since children have their own judgement on right or wrong, it is important to consider how true is the point of view of parents." This very perspective underlines the parents' need for self-criticism.

3. 4. Parents' Control Mechanisms over Children's Facebook Usage

Only one of the participants of the research uses a joint account with their child. They say, by doing so, they can be in control. Only one of the other participant's states that they do not know their child's password, but have the child open the page to check it together. All of the other 9 participants know their children's passwords, so that they can log in the accounts to check the pages and messages. In addition, time limit is another way of control used by the parents.

Parents follow various paths to control their children's Facebook usage. The determination of one participant is quite remarkable: "In fact, the best way of the control is to give access as late as possible; that means to wait until the children reach a specific level of consciousness." Other parents also agree with this opinion. But this cannot always be possible. Children are born within the technology; and they also are influenced by their friends. So the parents limit the children's Facebook time, supervise the Facebook usage obtaining the passwords, and check the children's Facebook pages by having them open the pages. Parents also try to prevent children from going beyond the list of their family and friends. One of the parents prefers to use signal bleed to protect their child from harmful contents. Another participant who cannot prevent their children from spending time on internet and Facebook, has completely shut down the internet access. The participant also states that they can reactivate the internet access if their child ever learns to maintain self-control. The only one of the participants who shares a joint account with their children does not have this kind of a problem. Anytime they want, they can log in to see what their child does online. Another participant also thinks this option can make things easier. The participants are aware that this monitoring may pique children's curiosity even more. Therefore, to raise the awareness of their children, parents state that they repeatedly advise them consult with their parents about any situation. Furthermore, to avoid any abuse, parents forbid their children to be friends with no one other than their friends and relatives.

Most of the participants are friends with their children on Facebook in order to easily monitor what their children post.

3. 5. How Do Children Sign up for Facebook?

The child of one participant has not created an account, since the parent and the child use a joint account. Other participants have followed similar ways to create accounts. 3 parents created the accounts themselves when their children insisted. 4 participants gave their children permission to create an account. 3 parents accompanied their children while creating accounts. All participants have known in advance that their

children signed up to Facebook, except one. The child informed the latter after having created the account.

3. 6. Why Parents Allow Their Children to Create an Account on Facebook?

One of the participant states that they had to create the account because there is a group of their child's class on Facebook. The other participants mention that their children wanted to sign up because their friends already had accounts. Games are one of the most important reasons why children sign up for Facebook. Children insist to have an account to play games with their friends via Facebook. Parents allow their children to sign up because they do not want their children to fall behind their friends.

3. 7. How Do Children Use Facebook?

The participant who uses a joint account with their child says the child is present at this medium as an observer. The child follows what goes on on the page without sharing too much and playing games. The other participants state that the children generally play games and send messages to each other. Children, except for playing games, follow the actors and football players they admire, and "like" the pages of their favorite TV shows.

3. 8. Contents Which Children are Exposed to on Facebook.

Since people share too much of their private life, children may be exposed to many private contents. Because of Facebook's too many options for games, children may get game requests from too many unknown people, and thus their communication circle expands. One of the participants states that they have been quite uncomfortable with the photographs which are posted by their child's friend, so that they unfriend the people who share this kind of contents. Another participant mentions that their child is not that much of interested in the posts, but only playing games. Another one says their child likes the pages about favorite sports, so the child can be exposed to the posts that are coming from these pages. All of the participants point out that the children may encounter all kinds of contents on Facebook, and that it is too hard to keep them away from these.

3. 9. What Do Children Post about What They See on Facebook?

All the participants state that the children talk about what they see on Facebook. Parents also consider this useful, because they can keep up with the content to which their children are exposed. Thus, they have the chance to warn their children when necessary.

3. 10. With Whom Do the Children Communicate on Facebook?

Parents mention that the children generally communicate with relatives, friends and teachers. The participants state that children are not quite careful while accepting friendship requests, so that they can accept the requests from older or unknown people. Parents, as soon as realizing the situation, make the children block these kinds of people.

The participant says that when the children get together, they play games via Facebook; that the children bring their own computers while visiting; and that they give the internet password to the children. In other words, the children prefer to play games via Facebook even when they are physically together.

3. 11. How Much Time Do the Children Spent on Facebook?

The participants determine the children's Facebook usage time as 1 hour a day and 3 hours a week. This is the duration allowed by the parents. Most of the participants agree that the children would spend much more time on Facebook if there was no time limit. They also state that, since the school and after school activities take most of the time, the children cannot find the opportunity to log in to Facebook. But the participants are quite sure that if the children have the opportunity, the time they spent on Facebook will increase.

According to one participant, it may cause irreversible harm if children are not monitored. The participant's experience also supports the argument. A child who spends their time constantly on Facebook and internet has started to have epileptic seizures. Hours of internet usage has triggered a neurological illness that exists in the child's constitution. The participant mentions that this situation affects children not only psychologically, but also physically

3. 12. What Should Schools Do About Facebook Usage?

The parents want the schools to raise the children's awareness about Facebook on Science and Technology classes. Therefore, they need the help of the teachers. The participants also say that not only children but also the parents should have this kind of training at schools. The common thought is that, if the children's level of awareness is raised, then they will need no prohibitions and restrictions. According to the parents, teachers should have a much active role to raise children's awareness, because they can be much more influential over children.

3. 13. The Knowledge Level of the Participants about the Facebook User Age Requirements.

Most of the participants indicate that they aware of the age limit policy for signing up for Facebook. However, since their children are so insistent on creating an account, they have registered the children as older. Therefore, the age limit for Facebook does not seem to be effective in practice. Participants also think that the age limit should be raised over 13.

3. 14. Unfavorable Situations Children Experience While Using Facebook.

In their answers, most of the parents mentioned the bad language the children use in in-game messages. Parents also encountered the situation when the children insult each other while arguing about an issue.

3. 15. Why the Participants Need to Communicate with Their Children Via Facebook?

The parents mention that they communicate with their children via Facebook. While the parents are at work or outside, if the children exceed their online time limit on Facebook, they send messages to their children to send a warning. Furthermore, they try to attract the children's interests with posts which they think can be useful for children. One of the parents states that they play games via Facebook with their children from time to time; and that way they get the idea on the games which children play.

3. 16. What Do the Participants Think about Facebook's Influences over Children?

Parents think that contents like death and sickness influence children negatively. One of the participants thinks that the news shared via Facebook is much more influential on children than those learned from television. According to another participant, children manage to draw attention by using Facebook. It is stated that children become happy if any post of them gets a high level of "like". It is also same for the adults. Other participants also think that their children are vulnerable to any impact on Facebook. They mention that the children can be affected by any propaganda, but they are too young to be able to recognize the situation. The participants also state that Facebook, in fact, has positive effects on overcoming the prejudice of the children for each other. For instance, one of the participants mentions that their child's opinion has changed when the child communicated with a friend whom they dislike. Facebook became useful for changing the children's attitudes against each other. Parents, in one sense, think that it is positive for children to use Facebook to share their homework, sportive and other activities; still, on the other hand, they think it is unfavorable for children to spend too much time by Facebook.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

As a result of the analysis of semi-structured interview performed with the parents from different socio economic levels about Facebook usage, it can be said that it is inevitable for children to use generally new media, and specifically Facebook. Because children are born within this technology, it seems quite usual for them to use the new media.

Children meet this technology at early ages. They learn to use the technology very easily. On the other hand, parents have learned about the technologic development at middle ages. Therefore they can live without any need for this kind of a technology. However, this is quite out of the question for children. The parents who participated in the research have tried to hold their children back from meeting Facebook, but they have not quite succeed it. Though they know the age limit policy, they could not resist the insistence of their children about creating an account on Facebook. Children use their Facebook accounts for playing games, contacting and messaging with friends.

He participants do not disclaim the favorable aspects of Facebook. However, they also state the fact that it has unfavorable aspects. Parents mention that children are vulnerable while using Facebook, and that they are unaware of any negative situation that may happen to them. Therefore, there is a need to monitor children's Facebook usage.

The participants use similar methods of supervising. The most common ways of supervision are having the password information, having the child log in to check the page, limiting the Facebook usage duration, and adding their children into their Facebook friend list. However, the parents state that these methods are not enough, and the children should gain self-discipline. It seems to be an unsolved problem that children cannot control themselves and spend too much of their time using Facebook.

The parents who participated in the research have different educational levels and socio-economic status. Nevertheless, they all control their children's Facebook usage using similar methods, and they try to inform their children as best as they can. Moreover, they try to convince their children to come and share with them in case of any trouble.

Furthermore, it is quite remarkable that children play games via Facebook on computers even though they physically get together. Facebook has changed children's game playing styles as well as their way of communication. Instead of playing with toys and setting plays, they now are playing on computers. It can be said that this situation effects their ways of communication and their creativeness.

Another point on which the parents all agree is that it will be harder to control the children as their age increase. At that point, the parents feel helpless. They also expect from the schools and teachers to provide more information and education on this issue. They also think that parents should also be educated at schools, in this way they may feel more competent about Facebook which comes with new features day after day.

As a result of the interviews, it is not quite wrong to say that children's and adults' communication styles have fundamentally changed with the use of new media. In any social environment, the Wi-Fi password is the first thing to be asked. It is not easy to control themselves for the children who are surrounded by adults who share every location they are in, every food they eat and every special moment.

In fact, according to Turkish traditions, it is not favorable to share things about private life or to talk about the food that has been eaten. It is considered to be a shame. These kinds of posts are commonly shared using Facebook or similar new media. Consequently, it can be said that new media usage is rapidly changing the traditions that come from past to the present, within the social structure.

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