Internet Technologies and the Wellbeing of Youth in the Mid North of South Australia

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Aim
The aim of the research was to find out what youth services in the Mid North of South Australia are doing to engage with youth using Internet technologies and how they can use Internet technologies in the future.

Background
Youth of today have been coined “Digital Natives” because they have grown up immersed in digital technology and spent their lives surrounded by computers, cell phones and various other digital tools (Prensky, 2001). Youth use the Internet more than any other age group, with consumption decreasing roughly linearly with age, as is evident in Figure 1 (Székely & Nagy, 2011). In Australia, high school aged children use Internet 6.3 days/week for an average of 2.9 hours. For 16-17 year olds this consumption increases to 6.7 days/week for an average of 3.5 hours/day (AMCA, 2008). Given how Internet technology has permeated the lives of today’s youth, it is imperative that communities understand the impact Internet technology has on the wellbeing of its young people. In rural communities such as the Mid North, there is limited access to youth support services due to both physical access restrictions (the distance to travel and lack of transport options). This research looks at what youth services in the Mid North are doing and what they could do differently, to engage with youth digitally.

Methods
A literature review was conducted to investigate why it is important to utilise Internet technologies when engaging with youth, and what strategies youth services globally and nationally are using to promote well-being digitally. Next we conducted semi-structured interviews with four youth services in the Mid North to find out about their current online presence, if and how they utilise Internet technologies when engaging with youth, and what strategies youth services are using to promote well-being digitally. Finally we conducted a thematic analysis of the interview findings.

Results

Definition of Wellbeing: not just the absence of ill health but it also encompasses mental and physical health, involvement in the community and access to support and services.

Partnerships: There is significant importance placed on building and maintaining partnerships between agencies, councils and communities. The Internet plays a key role in building and maintaining these partnerships as the primary communication between organizations is via email. There is also significant information sharing between organizations, again via email but also through each other’s websites.

Communication: the primary medium of communication between the youths and youth services is information sharing via websites.

Future Internet Technologies Utilization: Youths would like to see the internet used more efficiently to interact with youth and share information. The organizations felt their websites were out-of-date and lacked information. None of the organizations had Social Network Page (e.g. Facebook) but would like to have one.

Obstacles preventing these technologies: The organizations we interviewed are part of larger organizations (e.g. councils) and are subject to their strict policies regarding what they can and cannot do online.

Recommendations

Social Network Sites (SNS’s): Building a presence on SNS’s (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) will allow youth services to communicate with youth on platforms that are familiar to them and that are their preferred communication medium. Many youth heading to an organization’s SNS before its website when searching for information. SNS’s allow organizations to build and expand their network rapidly, ultimately increasing the number of youths that have access to their services.

Interactive Websites
Websites are one of the first places youths will visit in search of information. Youth respond best to websites containing graphics, sound and videos as opposed to plain text and it is essential that websites are interactive, informative and up-to-date.

Central Portal
A central online portal would provide a streamlined approach to direct youth to relevant services in the Mid North.

Narrowing the Digital Divide
Youth services, councils & communities need to ensure there is a local centre for youth and the general public to be online. Based on evidence we suggest local drop-in computer centres. These centres should also provide mentors to educate the less "digitally able" youth on how to use the internet efficiently and safely (Hendry et al., 2011).

Challenges

Cyber-bullying
Cyber-bullying has been identified as a potential challenge when implementing the recommendations. Intensive use of the Internet has been shown to be a risk factor for cyber-bullying of children (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007).

Digital Literacy
The digital literacy of youths from different socioeconomic backgrounds must be addressed when implementing a youth orientated online service. Youths who are disadvantaged economically may not have sufficient access to the Internet in order to develop their contemporary media skills. As seen in figure 2, the Mid North has many areas of low quality broadband access, which may present a substantial challenge when implementing any recommendations.

Conclusions
In order to communicate with youth on a meaningful level it is vital speak their language. Youth of today are digital natives and hence engaging with them digitally should be a priority. In the Mid North in particular, physical access to support services can be problematic due to distance and transport constraints, the Internet provides a means of expanding the breadth of information and services available to them which ultimately promotes wellbeing.

References


