

Digital self-harm: teens tap out an online cry for help

By Nina Funnell

Teenagers are anonymously posting cruel remarks about themselves on social media.



Tragic: Hannah Smith, 14, took her own life. *Photo: Facebook*

In recent weeks, media outlets around the world have reported on the tragic case of Hannah Smith, a 14-year-old girl from Leicestershire, England, who committed suicide after receiving cruel and harassing messages - including to "drink bleach" and "die" - on the social media site Ask.fm.

Critics of the site have urged parents to keep their children off it, saying that the anonymous question/answer format leads to harassment, stalking and bullying.

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Now the case has taken another tragic turn. In an inquiry into the matter, Ask.fm has uncovered that 98 per cent of the abusive messages sent to Hannah came from the same IP address as her own computer. Only four of the abusive comments came from other IP addresses.



More than meets the eye: Hannah Smith. *Photo: Facebook*

While there are still a lot of unknowns in this case, it has now been reported that the abuse sent to Hannah appears to have come from Hannah herself. Following this latest development, many people online have expressed their utter bewilderment: what could drive a teenager to attack herself and then put it on display? Why would anyone self-sabotage in this way? And are other teenagers doing this?

Last year, researchers at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Centre found that up to 10 per cent of first-year university students had "falsely posted a cruel remark against themselves, or cyberbullied themselves, during high school".

And this is not the first time that online "self-harassment" or "self-cyberbullying" has been identified and written about. In 2010, Danah Boyd, a leading social media researcher, wrote about an emerging trend she had discovered on Formspring, where teens were "anonymously" posting vicious questions to themselves, before publicly answering them.

In a similar vein, research into the pro-anorexia community - a community set up by individuals with eating disorders - has discovered that it is not uncommon for members on these forums to be aggressive against themselves, by writing abusive, hateful and vicious letters and then attributing those letters to made-up personas known as either "Ana" or "Mia" (anorexia or bulimia).

So what motivates this phenomenon and why have we heard so little about it?

According to Boyd, online self-harassment like that observed on Formspring or Ask.fm may represent a cry for help, a grab for attention, an opportunity to demonstrate toughness and resilience or a way of fishing for compliments from friends who jump in to defend against the abuse. Boyd also describes the behaviour as a form of "digital self-harming", stressing that teens who are in pain do not always lash out at others; very often they lash out at themselves. And occasionally they invite an audience to watch on.

For the "digital self-harmer" the presence of an audience appears to serve other purposes too. Anonymously calling oneself a "loser" online allows them to test out other people's attitudes: do other people see me this way too? Is my perception of myself shared universally?

Second, by inflicting harm on themselves before an audience, it makes their pain visible and therefore more "real". Finally, by giving others the impression that they are "under attack", the afflicted individual is able to communicate to others exactly what they are feeling: overwhelmed and under siege. And they can achieve this without ever having to risk saying the words: "I'm in pain, I need your help."

What this means is that while the abusive comments might be manufactured, the feelings they speak to are very much real.

Looking back at my own high school years, it is clear that aspects of this behaviour are nothing new. Teens have always had a propensity to document their negative self-talk and self-loathing in one form or another, often in journals, angst-ridden poetry and other forms of art.

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For all of us, pain is not simply something we feel, it is something we "perform", often with the purpose of eliciting certain responses from others. For teenagers especially, these performances can become avenues through which they bond, ask for empathy or sympathy, and experience a sense of connectedness - something that most teenagers crave desperately. While this strategy might serve a need, it is also deeply dysfunctional.

Today this impulse is moving online. In recent months I have had two conversations with different mothers after they discovered that their children's friends were self-harming, then posting photographs of their injuries online for their peers to comment on. Perhaps most disturbing of all was that one of the children shrugged it off as "nothing new".

Experts are right to worry that by normalising or even glamorising self-harming behaviours, such overt displays might produce a contagion effect. This is why it's considered dangerous to even mention the issue in schools.

Despite this, it's important that researchers continue to look at why young people are externalising their self-hatred in this way and what can be done to help them. Moreover we must remember that sometimes the cruellest things a teen will ever hear are the comments they say to themselves.

Source: <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/digital-selfharm-teens-tap-out-an-online-cry-for-help-20130819-2s7av.html#ixzz2wxQ0QogP>