Website represents new frontier in cyberbullying, experts say

August 15 2010, By Daniela Bermea and Rebecca Ryan, The Dallas Morning News

It's new, it's exciting, it's quickly growing in popularity - it's also usually anonymous and potentially dangerous.

Formspring.me is a nine-month-old social networking website that allows users - nearly a third of whom are 17 or younger - to ask cruel, anonymous questions or make comments such as "Go kill yourself and make the world a better place," or "Is that you in your profile picture? It looks like a dead old man."

Experts acknowledge that while cyberbullying has been going on for a while now - the deaths this year of at least three teens have been linked to it - Formspring represents a new frontier.

"This site is essentially an anonymous way for teens to bully each other, and the danger in that is it, over time, becomes overwhelming," said Missy Wall, director of Teen Contact, a Dallas-based teen hotline. "Cyber bullying isn't new, but this sort of copy-paste teenager impulsiveness causes kids to make an account to try to be popular."

But Formspring officials say that the anonymous aspect is not necessarily harmful.

Sarahjane Sacchetti, director of communications for Formspring, said the site is giving people around the world "a new way to connect and express themselves." She said about 100 million questions are answered

each month.

"All of our users want to have a public platform for them to feel comfortable asking their friends questions or even asking their boss a question without the ramifications," she said.

Alexis Montes De Oca, the father of a 16-year-old Formspring user in Grapevine, Texas, said that he is concerned about what can happen when the users are not known to each other.

"With all the abuse and harassing that can go on, it can pose a real danger," De Oca said. "Kids are not always aware of the implications of their opinions. Sometimes these opinions are not shared lightly, and they do not know the effect they can have on somebody else."

Formspring is not always anonymous, though, and it's not always used in a nefarious fashion. Company officials say it's intended to give its 12 million regular users - more than 50 million people visit the site each month - the opportunity to "do what comes naturally: ask questions and give answers about anything and everything."

And some prominent individuals and companies, such as Marvel Comics executive editor Tom Brevoort and Red Bull energy drink, use the site to promote their businesses and strengthen their relationships with their audiences and supporters.

Many North Texas teens who use Formspring say they initially joined the site to stay connected with friends. But the comments eventually became more grave and hostile.

"When I made the account, everyone was being nice," said Elizabeth Kirby, a 17-year-old rising senior at Grapevine High School. "But then I began to get messages telling me I was fat and that I liked food and I

would respond, but in a classy way. It ended up getting to the point where I was horrified to check my Formspring because I would always get a mean question on it."

Kirby said her own self-confidence helps keep her from being devastated by the comments, but she knows that's not always the case for others.

"I have a relative amount of confidence, so I am able to ignore it, but people like my sister are crushed when people say those things," Kirby said. "The other day, someone called her an ugly, fat elephant on Facebook. She felt terrible."

Comments of that type are not surprising to cyberbullying experts, who say that online aggression can begin as young as 7 years old.

"The things that kids say to each other are beyond cruel," said Parry Aftab, founder of StopCyberbullying.org in Newark, N.J. "Kids actually get together in groups and decide which phrases would be the most hurtful to their intended victim. I've seen everything from 'You're sleeping with your sister' to 'Your mom wanted to abort you' and of course, 'You're fat, ugly, stupid, etc.' "

Kirby said she ended up blocking anonymous questions on her account to avoid harassment. Although many Formspring users accept anonymous questions, they have the option of blocking those when they set up their accounts. They can also block specific people or delete unwanted questions before they are made public.

Austin Keeler, 18, a recent graduate of St. Mark's School of Texas, said he is aware of the negative comments on Formspring, but he plans to continue using the site because it adds to his social networking experience.

"Obviously there are some bad things, but for the most part, it is good, addictive fun," Keeler said. "I know a lot of people who have a lot of bad things out there, but for the most part, the people who read it know those things aren't true. They are just wild accusations.

"Still, if push comes to shove, you can just delete your account."

Sacchetti hopes it won't come to that for most Form-spring users. She said the company will work with law enforcement and has the ability to trace a user's IP address if comments become too threatening or if a legal issue arises.

"We also have stricter policies for 13- to 17-year-olds," Sacchetti said. "For them, we have more private logins and settings for anonymity, where only logged-in users can ask anonymous questions."

Teenagers' Formspring accounts are automatically given "protected" status, which prevents them from being viewed or found by search engines. And, Sacchetti said, youngsters must grant access to users they want to share content with.

But any teenager can override those restrictions by selecting other readily available profile settings - and many often do.

The cyberbullying problem - and how to rectify it - may not be limited to young people, though. Anne Collier, co-director of ConnectSafely.org, said that while schools can play a large part in educating children about Internet safety, parents have a more significant role.

"We can't blame it all on children," said Collier, whose Web-based forum studies the impact of social websites. "If we as adults slander each other openly, it is learned behavior. This is a community effort. We have to be role models for our children."

Andrea Lair-Kirby, Elizabeth's mother, agreed and added that parents should know as much as possible about how their children are using the Internet and how that use is affecting them.

"Talk to your child and make them understand what they are doing," Lair-Kirby said. "Parents are often thinking, 'Well, not my child,' thinking it won't happen to them or that their kids aren't doing it. But they need to know it can happen and how to deal with it by talking to your child."

More information: (c) 2010, The Dallas Morning News.
Visit The Dallas Morning News on the World Wide Web at www.dallasnews.com/.
Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: Website represents new frontier in cyberbullying, experts say (2010, August 15) retrieved 10 April 2024 from
https://phys.org/news/2010-08-website-frontier-cyberbullying-experts.html