PROTECTING CHILDREN ONLINE: IDENTIFYING REGISTERED SEX OFFENDERS’ PRESENCE ON THE INTERNET AND CONSEQUENT ONLINE SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Research regarding the threat of registered sex offenders has highlighted their reentry into society and the threat they pose to vulnerable populations such as the children in society. However, the research regarding the presence of registered sex offenders on the Internet is focused mainly on societal fears and incidents of unwanted sexual solicitation of youth. Currently, Internet users are unable to identify registered sex offenders online, which create an environment of insecurity online. The paper presents the concept of a transparent sex offender online presence and a proposed research model for studying the impact of this transparency on individuals’ online social behaviors.

Keywords: Registered sex offender, children’s safety online, Internet, online social behaviors, protection-motivation theory, social identity, online threat
Introduction

The ability to be unidentifiable or to remain anonymous on the Internet has been integral to the surfing experience for most Internet users. Although this anonymity has its benefits specifically from a privacy protection perspective, the ability to be unidentifiable on the Internet has created a new public threat: a virtual world in which sex offenders can hide and prey on children and other vulnerable populations. In a national survey of 2,500 law enforcement agencies, it was found that in sex offenses that originated online and were specifically against juveniles, 75% of the victims “were primarily 13-through 15-year-old teenage girls...who met adult offenders (76% older than 25) in Internet chat rooms” (Wolak Finkelhor, and Mitchell, 2004, pg. 424e15). It was also revealed that in 74% of the cases the initial online contact was followed by face-to-face meetings, of which 93% involved illegal sexual contact between the youth and the offender (Wolak, et.al, 2004). In 2006, the social networking site MySpace came under fire when the profiles of two girls, 14 and 16 years old, were used by predators to find their physical location for the purpose of perpetrating sexual assault (Williams, 2006). The Youth Internet Safety Survey found that in 2005, youth were 1.7 times more likely to be victims of aggressive sexual solicitations than they were in 2000, indicating a rise in potential victimization of youth using the Internet. Aggressive solicitations include “solicitors who established or attempted to establish offline contact by asking youth to meet them in person, calling them on the telephone, or sending them regular mail, money, or gifts” (Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak, 2007, pg. 534) and often lead to offline instances of illegal sexual contact between the solicitor and the youth (Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak, 2007). These statistics point to the existence of a threat to the nation’s children and youth, rooted in the ability of individuals to utilize the Internet to hide the reality of who they are in an attempt to solicit children for illegal sexual purposes. A societal fear of sex offenders and their presence online has received much attention in sociology research over the past ten years. Generally, there is concern that sex offenders utilize the Internet to gain access to young victims, lurking in online locations typically accessed by children or young people. There is significant concern that the information divulged on social networking sites is being used by sex offenders to identify potential victims (Quayle, 2002; Quayle and Taylor, 2003; Wolak, et. al., 2004).

Our inability to identify online predators creates an online public threat similar to the real world public threat posed by sexual predators which prompted the passing of Megan’s Law in 1996 (Welchans, 2005). This law requires that law enforcement agencies provide information collected in their sex offender registries to communities when sex offenders are released from prison. The motivation behind its enactment was the abuse and murder of a seven year old girl by a twice-convicted sex offender who lived in her neighborhood. At the time of her abduction, her family had no idea that this sex offender lived in their neighborhood. A similar scenario is developing on the Internet where the interaction between registered sex offenders and children is not readily identifiable by parents and those responsible for the care of children. Currently a parent can go online and check a sex offender registry to determine where sex offenders are in physical proximity to a child (Tewksbury and Lees 2006; Welchans 2005). However, determining if the individual a child is communicating with online is a registered sex offender is not as easy. The Keeping the Internet Devoid of Sexual Predators (KIDS) Act of 2008 requires that convicted sex offenders register their online identifiers and provides for social networking sites to match the national registry against their membership list. Unfortunately, it does not allow for the same type of use by the public. Although, one fifth of the states do provide a reverse email look up on their sex offender registry websites to allow Internet users to determine if they or someone they care for is interacting with a registered sex offender.

Research in sociology and psychiatry has addressed this issue through study of the vulnerabilities of children and youth to the threat of online sexual solicitation (Mitchell, et. al., 2007; Mitchell et al., 2008; Wolak, et. al., 2004), characteristics of online predators (Elliott, Beech, Mandeville-Norden, and Hayes, 2009; Quayle 2002; Quayle and Taylor 2003), and the pervasiveness of sexual solicitations on particular types of websites (Mitchell, et. al., 2008; Ybarra and Mitchell, 2008). Additionally, research has addressed the use of undercover police offers to smoke out online predators (Mitchell, Wolak, and Finkelhor, 2005) and youth perspective of online privacy concerns (Youn, 2005, 2009). Engaging in online social behaviors such as social networking, blogging, posting pictures, IM conversations, email and online gaming are common practices (Ybarra and Mitchell 2008) as the Internet becomes a “fully integrated component of the lives of teenagers” (Mitchell, et.al., 2007). These online social behaviors are
exploitable by unidentifiable registered sex offenders utilizing the Internet. As Dombrowski, LeMasney, Ahia, and Dickson, 2004 stated “[t]he cost to children and society of sexual perpetration is too great to overlook the hazards of online solicitation” (pg. 71). Information systems (IS) literature, however, has remained largely silent on this critical area of research which has significant implications for the well-being of children and the larger society. We address this gap in the extant IS literature through the following research question: How might the online social behaviors of adult Internet users be altered by the ability to identify the online presence of registered sex offenders? This question addresses how adult Internet users may change their online social behaviors if provided with information regarding the virtual proximity of registered sex offenders to themselves or their children. Providing information about registered sex offenders’ online presence would allow individuals to make decisions about online social behaviors which affect the safety of themselves and their children. Until this knowledge is placed into the hands of Internet users, they maintain a degree of ignorance with regard to the threat of registered sex offenders online. New information regarding the threat of registered sex offenders’ online presence will alter individuals’ fear appraisal and coping mechanisms, constructs presented in protection-motivation theory (PMT). Protection-Motivation Theory has been applied in various disciplines to understand how people respond to various threat and threat inducing contexts. Drawing from IS (Johnston and Warkentin, 2010), health (Prentice-Dunn and Rogers, 1986; Milne, Sheeran, and Orbell, 2000; Norman, Boer, and Seydel, 2005) and psychology literature (Rogers, 1975; Wolf, Gregory, and Stephen, 1986; Milne, Orbell, and Sheeran, 2002), we are using PMT to develop a theoretical model of threat perception by online adults to the potential threat to themselves or their children from the online presence of registered sex offenders. In addressing this phenomenon, the current study synthesizes research in online identification with theories of fear and coping within the protection-motivation theory as well as social identity theory.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: first, we present the theoretical foundation and proposed research model, in which we introduce the concept of transparency of online sex offender presence. Within the theoretical foundation we present a brief synopsis of the theories of protection-motivation, inclusive of fear and coping, and social identity. Next we discuss the research plans to validate and test the proposed research model. The paper concludes with a dialog of potential contributions this study could make to sociology and IS research as well as public policy.

**Theoretical Foundation and Proposed Research Model**

**Transparency of Online Presence of Registered Sex Offenders**

Transparency of the online presence of registered sex offenders would alter the current online environment. This alteration could impact the manner in which adult Internet users perceive the threat of sex offender presence online. In turn, the creation of those new perceptions could then cause those individuals to change their online social behaviors. This change process is represented in Figure 1.

As previously noted, common online social behaviors include the use of email, chat rooms, social networking sites, IMs, and online gaming venues. Convicted sex offenders are required by the KIDS Act to register online identifiers used in any of these settings in the National Sex Offender Registry (NSOR). So the question becomes how can those online identities be made transparent to the public so that the public will have the needed information to protect themselves and more importantly protect the children? Currently, sites like Facebook and Match.com match their membership list against the NSOR and remove individuals who are a match to the list. However, this is not a full-proof solution to the problem (Stone, 2011; Walker, 2009). This method of control as well as the employment of undercover sting operations places little locus of control in the hands of potential victims. Internet users can engage in identity protection through such techniques as installation of firewalls and anti-virus and anti-Trojan software,
The ability of registered sex offenders to be online in an unidentifiable fashion limits the degree to which children can be protected. Again, this is similar to cases which prompted the enactment of child protection laws in the physical world (Tewksbury and Lees 2006; Welchans 2005). Currently there are 565,127 convicted sex offenders listed on the NSOR. This means that general Internet users are unable to identify where their online presence potentially intersects with about a half a million convicted sex offenders many of whom are online. Additionally, it is not possible to determine if the individual communicating with a child is a registered sex offender who lives on the next street. We must understand that under many federal and state laws, convicted sex offenders have limited privacy protection due to the nature of the crime. They are subject to mandatory registration, release of their information to communities and vulnerable populations upon their reentry into the community, availability of their conviction information and physical location on registry websites and, in some states, electronic monitoring (Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Demichele, Payne, & Button, 2008; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2007).

The proposed transparency of sex offenders’ online identities carries heavy legal implications. Individuals have come to perceive anonymity on the Internet as the equivalent of free speech and forcing sex offenders to allow the revelation of their identity as a violation of the First Amendment (Davenport, 2002; Ekstrand, 2003). It is important to consider the nature of the conviction in this case and how it is dealt with by society. Within the United States, convicted sex offenders are not a protected class. Radial restrictions are enacted which prevent convicted sex offenders from working and living where children gather. Those places can include “schools, day care centers, playgrounds, public swimming pools, and in some communities school bus stops” (Tewksbury and Mustaine 2007, 116). These radial restrictions and the ability of individuals to go online and find out where sex offenders live provide a means to hold them accountable. They know that others are aware of them and watching their actions. What society needs to accept is that the Internet has become the new place where children and youth gather. It is where they engage in online social behaviors with strangers, behaviors that make them potential victims. By allowing sex offenders to maintain an unidentifiable online presence, we are basically sending the message that while they are held accountable in the physical world, they are free to interact in any manner online until such time as they are caught by law enforcement. The conundrum then becomes protecting the unidentifiable presence of sex offenders online or protecting the children. Addressing this conundrum can begin with an examination of individual perceptions of the threat posed by the ability to identify registered sex offenders online.

**Threat Perceptions of Online Presence of Registered Sex Offenders**

**Threat to Self**

The transparency of the online presence of registered sex offenders would increase the information available regarding this threat, impacting adult Internet users’ perceptions of the threat. Protection-motivation theory addresses these perceptions and an individual’s fear appraisal and coping mechanisms in response to a threat. PMT decomposes fear appraisals and coping mechanisms into four constructs: perceived severity, perceived susceptibility, response efficacy, and self-efficacy (Johnston & Warkentin, 2010; Rogers, 1975). The section titled “Threat to Self of Sex Offenders Online” in Figure 2 depicts the four constructs as presented in PMT situated in the current phenomenon. Perceived threat severity and perceived threat susceptibility occur in what Lazarus and Folkman (1984) refer to as an individual’s primary appraisal of a situation. During this situational analysis a person “is concerned with the motivational relevance of what is happening, that is, whether something germane to [his or her] well-being is involved” (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987, pg. 145). The threat posed to one’s self by the online presence of sex offenders carries different degrees of potential harm. It can manifest itself through receipt of unwanted sexual solicitations, or in the most serious of cases, being groomed through declarations of love only to be lured into a face-to-face meeting which ends in illegal sexual contact. Threat susceptibility addresses the chance of which individuals believe they will experience the threat (Floyd, Prentice-Dunn, & Rogers, 2000; Johnston & Warkentin, 2010; Liang & Xue, 2009; Rogers, 1975). In the current study,
perceived threat susceptibility refers to the chance that an individual believes he or she will be victimized by a sex offender via his or her online presence. For example, it could be an individual’s perception of his or her chances of receiving unwanted sexual solicitations. Studies within the context of public health have found that as individuals receive more information regarding a threat, they feel more susceptible to falling victims of the threat (Johnston & Warkentin, 2010). Research in virtual communities has found that increased identity sharing among members can improve trust and increase the desire for interaction with those members (Ma and Agarwal, 2007). In this study, however, the identity sharing proposed would not be a voluntarily revelation by the registered sex offenders, but rather mandated availability of information about them and their convictions (as permitted under the law). In the context of identifying registered sex offenders online, we expect that increased information will decrease adult Internet users' feelings of their personal susceptibility to the threat. This expectation mirrors a study in which protection-motivation theory was applied to test women’s motivation to be genetically tested to determine their risk of breast cancer. In this study, it was found that the more information women obtained regarding the test and risk, the less likely they were to undergo testing (Helmes, 2002). Following this argument the following hypothesis emerges:

H1: The transparency of registered sex offenders’ online presence will decrease adult Internet users’ perceptions of their susceptibility to the threat of online sex offenders.

A decrease in personal susceptibility is expected to positively impact perceptions of self and response efficacy. Providing a means for adult Internet users to identify the threat could help them protect themselves and therefore perceive themselves less susceptible to harm from this threat. From these expectations we derive two hypotheses:

H2: Perceptions of susceptibility of an adult Internet users’ well-being to the threat of online sex offenders will positively impact perceptions of self-efficacy.
H3: Perceptions of susceptibility of an adult Internet users’ well-being to the threat of online sex offenders will positively impact perceptions of response efficacy.

The second component of the primary appraisal, severity of the threat, refers to the degree of harm that individuals believe the threat presents. Within the current study, perceived threat severity refers to the degree to which an individual believes that the online presence of sex offenders is a personal threat. In the context of identifying registered sex offenders online, however, we expect that an increased understanding of the reality of the threat severity will lower perceptions of the severity. The following hypothesis forms from this expectation:

H4: The transparency of registered sex offenders’ online presence will decrease adult Internet users’ perceptions of the severity of the threat of online sex offenders.

The decrease in perceptions of threat severity would then positively impact perceptions of self and response efficacy. Providing a means for adult Internet users to identify the threat could improve their feelings regarding their ability to protective themselves and the effectiveness of the mechanisms they can employ to do so. From these possibilities we derive two hypotheses:

H5: Perceptions of the severity of the threat of online sex offenders to an adult Internet users’ well-being will positively impact perceptions of self-efficacy.
H6: Perceptions of the severity of the threat of online sex offenders to an adult Internet users’ well-being will positively impact perceptions of response efficacy.

**Threat to Social Identity**

Social influence emerges from sociological studies of the self and how self-perception forms. Stets and Burke (2002) noted “[a]lthough some of our self-views are gained by direct experience with our environment, most of what we know about ourselves is derived from others” (pg. 5). These experiences within one’s environment are manifested in the role relationships and/or positions in which individuals function in society. For example, a man may be a father, a husband, a son, etc. Each of these positions embodies meaning specific to the context in which it performs. Consequently, each meaning is an identity
for the individual in the position. Collectively, those meanings form an individual’s social identity (Stets & Burke, 2000, 2002).

Figure 2. Proposed Research Model to Assess Impact of the Transparency of Online Sex Offender Presence on Internet Users

Within the context of this work, social influence manifests in its influence on an individual’s social identity. The section titled “Threat to Self of Sex Offenders Online” in Figure 2 depicts the additional constructs: perceived susceptibility of social identity to threat and perceived severity of threat to social identity. This differs from personal susceptibility to and severity of the threat in that social influence allows for the possibility that others could find out that an adult Internet user is interacting with registered sex offenders online. Classic social identity theory specifies “how beliefs about the nature of relationships between groups (status, stability, permeability, legitimacy) influence the way that individuals or groups pursue positive social identity” (Hogg and Terry, 2000). The threat in this case is to the meanings pressed upon individuals by the groups in which they participate and the perceptions of others who have relationships within those groups. For example, if a man is a father, what might others who have a relationship with him in his role as father think of him if they found out he was interacting with a sex offender online? How could they react through self-efficacy and response efficacy to pursue or maintain a positive social identity? Thus, one’s social identity would be susceptible to the threat of registered sex offenders online. When knowledge is made public which impacts others’ perceptions about one’s self, that knowledge can be seen as a threat to one’s social identity. In the case of the transparency of registered sex offenders’ online presence, if others learned that one was associated with an individual of this group online, it could potentially have a negative impact on one’s social identity. The more information is made public, the greater the chance that someone will make the connections and learn of one’s online associations. This relationship between the transparency of registered sex offenders’ online presence and the perceived susceptibility of one’s online social identity is explored in this hypothesis:

H7: The transparency of registered sex offenders’ online presence will increase adult Internet
users’ perceptions of the susceptibility of their social identity to the threat of online sex offenders.

It follows that their user perceptions of susceptibility to that threat would impact their perceptions of self and response efficacy. As previously noted, research has shown that perceived increased susceptibility to threat decreases perceptions of self and response efficacy. Following this argument, the following hypotheses emerge:

*H8: Perceptions of susceptibility of social identity to the threat of online sex offenders will negatively impact adult Internet users’ perceptions of self-efficacy.*

*H9: Perceptions of susceptibility of social identity to the threat of online sex offenders will negatively impact adult Internet users’ perceptions of response efficacy.*

It follows suit that the transparency of registered sex offenders’ online presence would have a positive relationship with perceptions of the severity of the threat. As it stands now, an adult Internet user could be interacting with a registered sex offender online and neither he nor those close to him are aware of the fact. If that information were to be made available online, it could increase the severity of the threat to an adult Internet user’s social identity. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formed:

*H10: The transparency of registered sex offenders’ online presence will increase adult Internet users’ perceptions of the severity of the threat of online sex offenders to their social identity.*

This increase in perceived severity of threat would have a negative relationship with one’s self-efficacy and response efficacy to the threat. From this relationship the following hypotheses emerge:

*H11: Perceptions of the severity of the threat of online sex offenders to an individual’s social identity will negatively impact adult Internet users’ perceptions of self-efficacy.*

*H12: Perceptions of the severity of the threat of online sex offenders to an individual’s social identity will negatively impact adult Internet users’ perceptions of response efficacy.*

**Threat to Others**

In addition to the fear an individual experiences for him or herself, human beings also perceive threats to the safety of others, be it family, friends, their community or even society as a whole. The issue of sex offenders presents a situation which invokes this type of fear, as evidenced by the enactment of state and federal laws which stemmed from the experiences of parents whose children were abducted and killed by sex offenders. Each of these laws demonstrates a reaction to threat and society’s actions toward the protection of its citizens. Additionally, research into optimistic bias has shown that individuals tend to view others as more susceptible to threats than themselves (Chapin and Coleman, 2009; Gold, 2008).

Gold (2008) explains that fear of threat can cause people to distort their thinking so as to arrive at the conclusion that their risk is actually less than that of the average person. Those who employ optimistic bias do so to allay their fears and reassure themselves of their security. Given the nature of an online public threat, society’s fear for others, and the possible utilization of optimistic bias, it is important to consider how the constructs of PMT apply when the perceived threat is for the overall safety of others. The section titled “Threat to Others of Sex Offenders Online” in Figure 2 depicts those constructs which are generalized to include all possible manifestations of this threat to safety of others.

As fear for others applies to the current work, perceived susceptibility of others to the threat is an individual’s perception that others may fall victim to a sex offender via his or her online presence. For example, what are the chances that a child will be lured into a face-to-face meeting with a registered sex offender through online communications? Perceived severity of threat to others refers to an individual’s perception of how much harm may come to others due to the online presence of sex offenders. An example would be how much harm a parent thinks would be caused if his or her child was lured into a face-to-face meeting with a registered sex offender. In the case of fear for others, an individual has limited control over how much protection can be provided for another person due to the other person’s ability to choose his or her own behaviors. Therefore, it may hold true that improving an individual’s knowledge
regarding a threat may increase perceptions of the susceptibility of others to the threat and the severity of that threat for others. From this, the following hypotheses are formed:

**H13:** The transparency of registered sex offenders’ online presence will increase adult Internet users’ perceptions of the susceptibility of others to the threat of online sex offenders.

**H14:** The transparency of registered sex offenders’ online presence will increase adult Internet users’ perceptions of the severity of the threat of online sex offenders for others.

The increase in perceptions of susceptibility to and severity of the threat would then negatively impact his or her perceptions of personal ability to protect others and/or the effectiveness of the mechanisms used to protect others. From this perspective the following hypotheses emerge:

**H15:** Perceptions of susceptibility of others to the threat of online sex offenders will negatively impact adult Internet users’ perceptions of self-efficacy protecting others.

**H16:** Perceptions of susceptibility of others to the threat of online sex offenders will negatively impact adult Internet users’ perceptions of response efficacy for protecting others.

**H17:** Perceptions of the severity of the threat of online sex offenders to others will negatively impact adult Internet users’ perceptions of self-efficacy.

**H18:** Perceptions of the severity of the threat of online sex offenders to others will negatively impact adult Internet users’ perceptions of response efficacy.

### Online Social Behaviors

The secondary appraisal conducted by an individual includes the analyses of perceived response efficacy and perceived self-efficacy (Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987; Rogers, 1975). Lazarus and Folkman noted that “[s]econdary appraisal is a crucial supplement to primary appraisal since harm, threat, challenge, and benefit depend also on how much control we think we can exert over outcomes” (pg. 146). Perceived self-efficacy is the individual’s perception of his or her ability to engage in behaviors which will protect him or her from the threat posed by the online presence of sex offenders. The individual’s perception of the effectiveness of those behaviors in protecting him or herself from the threat posed by the online presence of sex offenders is the perceived response efficacy. In this study, perceptions of an individual’s self-efficacy and response efficacy regarding protecting themselves and their social identities from the threat of registered sex offenders’ presence online could affect how an individual behaves socially online. This presents the following hypothesis:

**H19a:** Adult Internet user perceptions regarding their self-efficacy to cope with the threat to self in identifying sex offenders online positively impacts online social behaviors.

**H19b:** Adult Internet user perceptions regarding their response efficacy to cope with the threat to self in identifying sex offenders online positively impacts online social behaviors.

**H20a:** Adult Internet user perceptions regarding their self-efficacy to cope with the threat to their social identity in identifying sex offenders online positively impacts online social behaviors.

**H20b:** Adult Internet user perceptions regarding their response efficacy to cope with the threat to their social identity in identifying sex offenders online positively impacts online social behaviors.

Similarly, perceived response efficacy and perceived self-efficacy in protecting others through the identification of sex offenders online could affect how an individual behaves socially online. Individuals may check email addresses of unknown individuals who are contacting their children to ensure they are not online identifiers for registered sex offenders. The impact of these perceptions presents the following hypothesis:

**H21a:** Adult Internet user perceptions of self-efficacy regarding the threat to others in identifying sex offenders online positively impacts online social behaviors.

**H21b:** Adult Internet user perceptions of response efficacy regarding the threat to others in identifying sex offenders online positively impacts online social behaviors.
Research Plan

This study will be conducted with an experimental design approach. This method is established in IS research to test predictions derived from theory (Dennis and Valacich, 2001). Multiple treatments will be applied utilizing a website prototype, affording the use of three levels of transparency of registered sex offenders online: full treatment group receiving access to maximum transparency, a hybrid treatment group receiving access to limited transparency, and a control group receiving access to no transparency. Participants will be randomly assigned to groups. Responses to threat susceptibility and severity, assessment of efficacy and online behavioral intent are expected to provide the necessary metrics for testing the research model and hypotheses (Johnston and Warkentin, 2010).

Implication

The proposed framework provides a mechanism with which to study individual behaviors and social influence with regard to the threat of transparency of registered sex offenders online. Online identifiers of convicted sex offenders are currently collected via mandated sex offender registration. This study of online social behaviors in response to utilizing that information publicly provides the initial proponent for a change in policy that puts a degree of the locus of control into the hands of individuals.

Future Research

Additionally, adult Internet users are not the only group of individuals with a stake in this study. It would also benefit the public to understand how teenage children view their susceptibility to the threat of registered sex offenders online and if their view differs from that of their parents. Interestingly, research has found that individuals who solicit children for sex via the Internet typically reveal that they are an adult and that their intentions are to have sex with the minor. Also, the teens that choose to meet them in person often do so repeatedly (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2008). In those cases, increased knowledge about the individual soliciting them increased their susceptibility but a severe threat was not recognized. The study of this phenomenon would shed light on how online solicitations of minors turn into physical actions against minors. It may be that this phenomenon would cause a false sense of security. Secondly, groups such as the registered sex offenders and law enforcement would have perceptions that may differ regarding the perceived susceptibility of adolescents to this threat. The literature and public policy could also benefit from studying the similarities and differences between how adults and teenagers create, sustain and secure their online social identities.

Future research for the information technology practitioners include developing tools for creating transparency of registered sex offenders’ online presence as well as how to deploy the tools in collaboration with the existing National Sex Offender Registry. Heer and boyd (2005), found that different software had been employed to study such online networks as email communications, IM exchanges, and blogging sites but felt the software was limiting in their results. The authors noted the need for further research “enabling information visualization technologies to take on an increasingly important role in both mediating and making sense of our shared social landscape” (Heer and Boyd 2005, pg. 39). The shared social landscape addressed in the current study is suited for this type of research.

Conclusion

In this research-in-progress, we present a theoretical framework to examine the change that may occur in Internet user social behaviors if the identities of sex offenders were identifiable online. The framework integrates theories of protection-motivation, coping, fear and social identity. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to build a theory which addresses the impact of the threat of the identifiable online presence of sex offenders on the social behaviors of Internet users. This paper creates a foundation for research to test and/or extend the theoretical framework for future research in this important topic of interest in our society – protection of children from online registered sex predators. Additionally, it provides opportunities for researchers and practitioners to examine online public threats and enhance the capabilities of individuals within society to engage in online protective behaviors.


References


