ICDL survey reveals UAE youth are at risk of online threats and calls for teaching social media and cyber safety in schools

86 per cent unsure whom to talk to when victimized on cyber space

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A recent survey of 883 youth from across the UAE was published by ICDL GCC Foundation- an advocate of digital skills and cyber safety for-all; and the sole operator of ICDL in the GCC and Iraq- revealed that 95 per cent of school students between the age of 14 and 18 are active on social media. While it is encouraging to see that the UAE youth is quickly adapting to the latest digital channels, the study also showed the dark side of the cyber world. One in every two respondents had faced some form of online threats including cyber bullying, identity theft, and harassment. Almost 20 per cent faced cyber bullying, 15 per cent identity theft, 13 per cent harassment.

An alarming 86 per cent of the surveyed students said that they do not know who to seek help from when faced with cyber-crime. The data clearly suggested that children are either too shy or scared to speak about their online harassment incidents. The survey also found that when faced with an online threat, children prefer to talk to their parents. Almost 42 per cent of surveyed youth approached parents, 27 per cent their friends and 13 per cent the concerned authorities. Only 7 per cent wanted to share their concerns with teachers and just 1 per cent with their school administration, emphasizing the dire need of raising awareness on social media and cyber safety in schools.

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The survey highlighted that most parents are aware about their children's social media activities and extend support to them as 86 per cent of the respondents replied that their parents are active on social networking sites. Seven out of 10 youth said that their parents supervise them when using social media platforms. About 71.5 per cent confirmed their parent's supervision on digital platform while 70.5 per cent said their parents know about all their accounts. More than a third of youth in UAE – 77.5 per cent - are friends with their own parents on social media platform.

Jamil Ezzo, Director General of ICDL GCC Foundation, said: "With today's youth highly reliant on the internet and social media channels for studies, information, entertainment and staying connected with the world, it becomes highly imperative to develop measures to protect them from the dangers posed by the Internet. Rather than preventing them from using these useful digital platforms, we should come up with guidelines and frameworks on safe and responsible practices of internet usage and educate them about dangers lurking on the web."

"ICDL GCC reiterates its belief that awareness is the first line of defence in battling cyber threats which when left unchecked, could have dire societal consequences. The respondents preferred to talk to parents (42 per cent) or friends (27 per cent) on these issues. Therefore, proactive involvement of parents and teachers in monitoring and reaching out to children is very crucial, as it could go a long way in averting all forms of online abuses," concluded Ezzo.

Twitter is the most popular platform among UAE youth at 36 per cent, followed by Facebook at 29 per cent. Nearly 50 per cent use social media for 'staying in touch with their friends,' followed by chatting and studying at 21 and 18 per cent, respectively. Only 5 per cent of the respondents were not allowed to use social media at home while 57 per cent were not permitted to access it at school. When asked to identify the importance placed on computer usage, the respondents rank schoolwork as the most important reason at 30.5 per cent, followed by gaming at 23 per cent and downloading music and videos at 18.7 per cent.

The comprehensive report was based on the response students from public schools of Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and the Northern Emirates (Ajman, Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah) and was prepared to understand the attitude of the younger generation towards online trends and cyber safety in the UAE. The research was conducted at the Annual Summer Camp program held between July and September 2013, which was attended by boys and girls, UAE Nationals as well as expatriates. The respondents were polled on daily social media usage, the types of social media platforms used and how it is accessed, awareness towards cyber safety and the extent to which parents and teachers are involved in their online presence.

The ICDL report highlights trends in social media usage and the rapidly changing attitudes of youths toward social media and cyber safety in the UAE. While online technologies are here to stay, children must be taught to exercise caution in sharing personal information online to avert cyber threats. ICDL GCC Foundation advocates the teaching of social media and cyber safety in schools at an early age. It believes that teachers and school administrators as well as with parents and guardians play vital roles in educating youth and helping them understand how to use the evolving technologies safely.

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