

How schools can counter the insidious rise of 'honesty apps'

The last two years have witnessed the meteoric rise amongst teenagers of so-called 'honesty apps'. These apps, the most prolific of which are called Sarahah and Tellonym, allow anonymous posters to write 'constructive' and 'honest' feedback on other user's public profile page. However, the apps do not allow a right to respond nor the ability to discover the poster's identity. Unsurprisingly, they have become a forum for bullying and harassment. As a result, parents, schools and teachers alike have been struggling to combat their ubiquitous and harmful impact, writes Rory Lynch.

The apps first emerged in 2017 and quickly took hold amongst teenagers, with Sarahah being the most downloaded iPhone app in the US in August of that year. Although users have to be at least 17 years old to use these apps, this is via 'self-certification' on the registration page. In fact, my 13-year old niece informs me that the majority of the girls in her school year use the app and many in the years below too. She also informed me it is causing havoc, with many girls suffering serious mental health issues as a result of sustained bullying. Understandably, some schools are struggling to cope with the fall-out, both administratively and pastorally.

Sadly, these apps feed into the teenage obsession with, and need for, social validation from their peer group. The trend is for teenagers to put a link on their public Instagram page to their honesty app profile, which means that they are easy to find. The apps promote themselves as providing an opportunity for friends, 'admirers' and colleagues to provide you with honest and constructive feedback to help you 'grow and develop' as a person.

The reason given for these posters retaining their anonymity is that

it provides an opportunity to say things they may otherwise be too shy or reluctant to address face-to-face. While seemingly an honourable concept, it has become a bully's paradise, with reports claiming that the vast majority of comments are negative or abusive.

The cyberpsychologist, Dr. Dawn Bradley, told New Statesman that: 'the drama created by anonymity helps to make the apps more appealing'. This no doubt partly explains their prodigious ascent. However, she goes on to ask: 'does this short-term entertainment come at the price of potential long-term distress?' Indeed, reports abound of suicidal thoughts in teenagers, and even deaths, being linked to the pressures of social media.

The fallout has not gone unnoticed. The Manchester Evening News reported in July 2018 that two schools in the area, Urmston Grammar and Abraham Moss, have been forced to warn parents about these apps. They told parents that:

'we have been made aware of the potential dangers associated with the use of the application Tellonym. It allows anonymous postings, often inappropriate messages, comments and photographs which have caused

upset and distress to young people. We are aware that some of these posts have required intervention from the police and other services'.

It was also reported in the Irish Independent in May 2019 that a girl's school in Dublin, which asked to stay anonymous for privacy reasons, had also raised concerns with parents. Their message was stark:

'please check your daughter's phone for the Sarahah app. This app is used to send anonymous messages, some of which may be nasty. Your daughters were asked to delete this app to ensure the wellbeing of all the students'.

The controversy has now reached more official channels, with the government's publication of a White Paper in April which addresses online harms and calls for tech giants to be bound by a mandatory duty of care to protect their users from abuse.

In May, the children's charity NSPCC was minded to publicly warn against the latest new honesty app craze sweeping schools, known as 'Yolo'. A NSPCC representative remarked to the press that: "apps such as Yolo that allow anonymous comments could be easily misused to send abusive or upsetting images".



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So what practical measures can schools take? In our view, a prudent initial course of action would be:

- to officially ban the apps as school policy;
- inform all pupils of the policy, explaining that the apps encourage bullying and are therefore banned and should be deleted from their phones;
- inform parents of the policy, advising them of the dangers and age restriction of the apps and ask that parents: (i) explain the issues to their children; (ii) delete the app from their children's phones, and (iii) regularly check their children's phones for similar apps;
- provide workshops for pupils explaining the dangers of cyber bullying; and
- continue to monitor the situation and encourage teachers and pupils to report instances of bullying or abuse via the apps.

If further issues persist which start to impact the school's reputation, then legal advice should be sought. No doubt similar apps will surface, but good preventative policies should help combat their impact and protect pupils.