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A&M group seeks new avenues for anti-cyberbullying research

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Cyber bullying

A&M's sketch recognition lab receives grant that allows further research into the way children under 13 communicate online.

Posted: Tuesday, November 29, 2016 9:34 pm | Updated: 12:25 pm, Thu Dec 1, 2016.

Pranav Kannan

A group of A&M researchers that has made it their mission to understand human behavior just received a National Science Foundation grant to fight cyberbullying.

Researchers in A&M's Sketch Recognition Lab recently received the Early-concept Grants for Exploratory Research (EAGER), which supports new approaches for scientific exploratory research. Aggies have used this grant to develop KidGab, a social network platform for children that allows researchers to collect data to design safe online spaces for children and artificial-intelligence-based protection systems.

Tracy Hammond, A&M professor, director of the Sketch Recognition Lab and principal investigator of the grant, said the lab is focused on human computer-interaction and artificial intelligence.

"Children are particularly interesting, and the way that they text is very different from the way adults text or chat online," Hammond said. "That was a very intriguing problem for me, and I thought it aligns very well with our lab."

Stephanie Valentine, research scientist at the Sketch Recognition Lab and chief architect of the KidGab social network, said she wanted to do research with a big societal impact — cyberbullying.

"It got me so upset that all of these people were working on cyberbullying, but no one was actually doing anything about it," Valentine said. "I decided that I wanted to do something about it — I'd fill that gap in research."

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Hammond said the grant's objectives are to create a sustainable network for engaging children to allow researchers to study their interactions.

"There are essentially no studies done on how kids seven to 13 interact online socially," Hammond said.

Valentine said while the device is not aimed to encourage children to be on social networks, KidGab trains children on how to do it safely by providing a safe space online.

"We cannot see to stop them from going online, instead we are providing them a safe space to go," Valentine said.

Hammond said one part of the EAGER grant is to obtain preliminary data on how conformity works in children, something not done in children under 13. The team hopes to learn more about the interaction between kids to gain insights on bullying.

"We think that this is tightly related to bullying behavior," Hammond said. "Bullying behavior is a form of groupthink. A lot of cyber bullying is about this groupthink and following the leader."

Valentine said KidGab currently has about 400 users and are working with the Girl Scouts of Central Texas to grow the user base to 10,000 by the spring of 2018. Emily Magnotta, program specialist for Girl Scouts of Central Texas, said the now three-year collaboration with KidGab started with volunteering.

"By creating the specific social network, our girls learn different things and [Hammond] collects data and uses it for different projects," Magnotta said.

Magnotta said KidGab educates the Girl Scouts on good digital friendship and allows interaction with their friends in a safe online environment.

"It is a really great opportunity for our girls to have so we want to make sure we continue to provide something like that," Magnotta said. "Eventually, when the site can get developed and we can put more things on it, we can encourage and develop their knowledge of coding, computer science, graphic design and things in that category."

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