Social Networking

A quantitative and qualitative research report into attitudes, behaviours and use

Research Document

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Section 1

Introduction

1.1   Background

The rapid growth of social networking that has been observed over the last two to three years is indicative of its entry into mainstream culture and its integration into the daily lives of many people. In parallel with this, there has also been considerable media coverage of the growth of social networking, its potential positive outcomes and concerns about the way that some people are engaging with it.

Social networking sites offer people new and varied ways to communicate via the internet, whether through their PC or their mobile phone. They allow people to easily and simply create their own online page or profile and to construct and display an online network of contacts, often called 'friends'. Users of these sites can communicate via their profile both with their 'friends' and with people outside their list of contacts. This can be on a one-to-one basis (much like an email), or in a more public way such as a comment posted for all to see.

For the purpose of this research report we have purposely focused on the social and communications aspects of social networking sites. We have deliberately not included either online networks dedicated to business networking, or user-generated content (UGC) sites (as the latter's primary focus is on content creation and sharing rather than the development of online social networks).

Like other communications tools, social networking sites have certain rules, conventions and practices which users have to navigate to make themselves understood and avoid difficulties. These range from the etiquette of commenting on other peoples profiles to understanding who one does and doesn't add as a 'friend'. Social networking sites also have some potential pitfalls to negotiate, such as the unintended consequences of publicly posting sensitive personal information, confusion over privacy settings, and contact with people one doesn't know.

Several of the issues around the use of social networking sites are important from a media literacy standpoint. Section 11 of the Communications Act 2003 requires Ofcom to promote media literacy. We define media literacy as 'the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts'. In practice, this means that we are seeking to bring about and encourage better public understanding and awareness of the digital media in use today.

One element of Ofcom's Media Literacy Strategy is to provide a robust evidence base to help define future priorities for Ofcom. Research helps us identify the issues, direct our activity and inform progress towards achieving our goals. The purpose of this report is therefore to provide evidence-based insights into the social networking phenomenon which can be used to inform current understanding of usage and behaviour in the UK, and to help identify some of the current and potential future issues around people's use of social networking sites.

1.2   Objectives

This report is the first dedicated look at social networking that Ofcom has undertaken. It seeks to understand how people are using social networking sites as well as their attitudes to this form of communication.

The objectives of this report are as follows:

- to set social networking sites in the wider media literacy, online and communications context;

- to profile the use of sites;

- to understand people's use of sites; and

- to investigate concerns about privacy and safety.

1.3 The research basis of the report

This report draws on a variety of qualitative and quantitative research sources. These are detailed in the box below. Full details of the Ofcom research used in this report are available in Annex 2.

Social Networking research: A qualitative look at behaviours, attitudes and barriers (September – October 2007)

This in-depth qualitative research project investigated behaviours, attitudes and barriers to the use of social networking sites among 39 users and 13 non-users. The study included children and adults, users and non-users, and covered each of the four nations of the UK. While the qualitative nature of this research means that findings are not necessarily representative of all those who use or do not use social networking sites, the results do present us with rich insights around people's use of, and attitudes to, social networking.

All quotes in blue boxes are taken from this piece of research.

Children, young people and online content research (October 2007)

This quantitative research was carried out to inform Ofcom's submission to the Byron Review[1] on the risks to children and young people from exposure to potentially harmful or inappropriate material on the internet and in video games. This survey looked at current exposure to potentially harmful or inappropriate online content as well as differences in online behaviour between parents and children. The survey looked at 653 parents, 653 children from the same households and 279 non-parents.

Ofcom's submission to the Byron Review Annex 6: Literary Review[2]

As part of Ofcom's submission to the Byron Review, Andrea Millwood Hargrave, Sonia Livingstone and David Brake compiled this review of the literature on harm and offence in media content.

Ofcom Media Literacy Audit research (September – December 2007)

This report includes quantitative data relating to social networking taken from Ofcom's Audit of Media Literacy among adults and ethnic minority groups . The Audit looked in detail at

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[1] The Byron Review is an independent review commissioned by the government looking at the risks to children from exposure to potentially harmful or inappropriate material on the internet and in video games. Full details can be found at http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2007_0158.

[2] Ofcom's submission to the Byron Review can be found at http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/telecoms/reports/byron/.

ownership, use and understanding of media among 2905 UK adults aged 16+, and 2068 children aged 8-15.[3]

Ofcom Communications Tracking Survey (Q3 2007)

This continuous research provides Ofcom with continued understanding of consumer behaviour in the UK communications market. 2235 adults were surveyed across Q3 2007.

Ofcom Young People and Media Tracking Survey (Wave 3 2007)

This survey provides Ofcom with continuous trend data on children and the media market. The report uses data from 1047 children across wave 3 (Sept 2007) of this survey.

Nielsen Online (August 2007)

All audience data referenced in this report are taken from Nielsen Online.

Third-party research

This report also draws on several other pieces of third-party research:

Withers, K, 'Young People and Social Networking Sites: Briefing to guide policy responses' Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR, 2007).

Boyd, Dana. 'Why Youth Love Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Buckingham, D (ed.), Teenage Social Life' *Youth, Identity and Digital Media'*, The John D and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: (The MIT Press, 2008) pp. 119-142.

Boyd, D and Ellison, N, 'Social Network Sites, Definition, History and Scholarship', *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication (October, 2007),* http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html.

Lenhart A. and Madden M. (2007) Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview. Pew Internet and American Life Project

Goad, R and Mooney, T, 'The impact of Social Networking in the UK' (Hitwise Experian, 2007), http://mel.hemstone.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/01/hitwise-social-networking-report-2008.pdf

OECD 2007 'Participative Web and User-Created Content: Web 2.0, Wikis and Social Networking' ISBN 978-92-64-03746-5

Get Safe Online Report 2007 http://www.getsafeonline.org/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=1469

Williamson, A. (2004, Apr). Getting ready for eDemocracy: A five-stage maturity model. Paper presented at the Australian Electronic Governance Conference, Centre for Public Policy, Melbourne, VIC.

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[3] The media literacy audit research used in this report relates only to findings about social networking for adults and ethnic minority groups. It forms part of a much wider body of research among several different groups and across a range of media platforms. The full audit will be published in several parts in spring and summer 2008.

1.4   Structure of the report

Section 3 places social networking sites within a wider structural and societal context and looks at the origins of social networking sites, their development and recent events.

Section 4 looks quantitatively at people's engagement with social networking. It includes awareness of social networking sites, use (looking at users and non-users) and the types of sites used.

Building on this, section 5 uses Ofcom's qualitative study to look at the behaviours and attitudes towards social networking sites and the wider issues that arise from this.

Section 6 draws on qualitative and third-party research to look at how people use social networking sites, and also explores some of the benefits and concerns about social networking sites.

Section 7 specifically examines the privacy and safety issues relating to social networking sites. Using quantitative, qualitative and third-party research, it looks in particular at what site users themselves think about privacy and safety issues.

Finally, section 8 provides a summary of a literature review of issues of potential harm and offence which was compiled by Andrea Millwood Hargrave, Sonia Livingstone and David Brake.

Throughout this report we have been conscious that social networking is a fairly recent development and a dynamic communication tool. In this constantly evolving landscape it is challenging to predict how social networking sites will develop; therefore we have focused on evidence of change from the current situation. Where this report does consider potential developments, we have made clear where this is evidence-based and where it is hypothesis-based.

1.5   Statistical reliability and data comparability

Significance testing at the 95% confidence level was carried out on the quantitative results reported here. This means that where findings are reported as 'significant', there is only a 5% or less probability that the difference between the samples is by chance, and is different from the main population.

Our data come from a variety of sources, each with different methodologies. As a result it is important to use caution when comparing different sets of figures. We have highlighted where this is the case.

This report includes findings from a programme of qualitative research - while it is believed that these findings will make a useful contribution to the debate in this area, the results of the qualitative research should not be used to draw statistically robust conclusions.

Executive summary

2.1   Engaging with social networking sites

Social networking sites offer people new and varied ways to communicate via the internet, whether through their PC or their mobile phone. Examples include MySpace, Facebook and Bebo. They allow people to easily and simply create their own online page or profile and to construct and display an online network of contacts, often called 'friends'. Users of these sites can communicate via their profile both with their 'friends' and with people outside their list of contacts.

The rapid growth of social networking sites in recent years indicates that they are now a mainstream communications technology for many people.

Social networking sites are most popular with teenagers and young adults

Ofcom research shows that just over one fifth (22%) of adult internet users aged 16+ and almost half (49%) of children aged 8-17 who use the internet have set up their own profile on a social networking site.[4] For adults, the likelihood of setting up a profile is highest among 16-24 year olds (54%) and decreases with age.[5]

Some under-13s are by-passing the age restrictions on social networking sites

Despite the fact that the minimum age for most major social networking sites is usually 13 (14 on MySpace), 27% of 8-11 year olds who are aware of social networking sites say that they have a profile on a site. While some of these younger users are on sites intended for younger children, the presence of underage users on social networking sites intended for those aged 13 or over was also confirmed by qualitative research conducted by Ofcom.

The average adult social networker has profiles on 1.6 sites, and most users check their profile at least every other day

Adult social networkers use a variety of sites, with the main ones being Bebo, Facebook and MySpace. It is common for adults to have a profile on more than one site - on average each adult with a social networking page or profile has profiles on 1.6 sites, and 39% of adults have profiles on two or more sites. Half of all current adult social networkers say that they access their profiles at least every other day.

The site people choose to use varies depending on the user. Children are more likely to use Bebo (63% of those who have a social networking site profile), and the most popular site for adults is Facebook (62% of those who have a social networking profile). There is also a difference between socio-economic groups: ABC1s with a social networking profile were more likely to use Facebook than C2DEs, who were more likely to have a profile on MySpace.

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[4] Unless otherwise stated, this report uses the term 'children' to include all young people aged 8-17.
[5] 16 and 17 year olds are classed as adults for the purposes of the media literacy audit, but children for the purposes of the Children, young people and online content research.

Two-thirds of parents claim to set rules on their child's use of social networking sites, although only 53% of children said that their parents set such rules

For many children, the rules and restrictions that their parents set on social networking site usage are an important influencing factor in the child's use of social networking sites. Two-thirds of parents whose children have a social networking page say they set rules on their child's use of these sites. Most commonly these concerned meeting new people online and giving out personal details. However, significantly fewer children (53% of those with social networking profiles) say that their parents set rules on their use of these sites.

2.2   Attitudes and behaviours towards social networking sites

Social networkers fall into distinct groups

Social networkers differ in their attitudes to social networking sites and in their behaviour while using them. Ofcom's *qualitative* research indicates that site users tend to fall into five distinct groups based on their behaviours and attitudes. These are as follows:

- Alpha Socialisers – (a minority) people who used sites in intense short bursts to flirt, meet new people, and be entertained.

- Attention Seekers – (some) people who craved attention and comments from others, often by posting photos and customising their profiles.

- Followers – (many) people who joined sites to keep up with what their peers were doing.

- Faithfuls – (many) people who typically used social networking sites to rekindle old friendships, often from school or university.

- Functionals – (a minority) people who tended to be single-minded in using sites for a particular purpose.

Non-users of social networking sites also fall into distinct groups

Non-users also appear to fall into distinct groups; these groups are based on their reasons for not using social networking sites:

- Concerned about safety – people concerned about safety online, in particular making personal details available online.

- Technically inexperienced – people who lack confidence in using the internet and computers.

- Intellectual rejecters – people who have no interest in social networking sites and see them as a waste of time.

2.3   How people use social networking sites

Users create well-developed profiles as the basis of their online presence

The qualitative research confirmed the importance of a well-developed profile to people's use of these sites. Profiles often contain very detailed information about the user, even

though it is not compulsory to provide this. Users also enjoy customising their profiles, posting photos, watching video content, playing online games, and in some circumstances, experimenting with aspects of their personalities.

Building a profile in this way enables users to efficiently develop a wide online social network by making the most of the communications opportunities that social networking offers. Users derive significant enjoyment from the process of building a social network, collecting a list of their friends and using this list of friends to browse others' profiles.

Users share personal information with a wide range of 'friends'

Although contact lists on sites talk about 'friends', social networking sites stretch the traditional meaning of 'friends' to mean anyone with whom a user has an online connection. Therefore the term can include people who the user has never actually met or spoken to. Unlike offline (or 'real world') friendship, online friendships and connections are also displayed in a public and visible way via friend lists.

The public display of friend lists means that users often share their personal details online with people they may not know at all well. These details include religion, political views, sexuality and date of birth that in the offline world a person might only share only with close friends.

While communication with known contacts was the most popular social networking activity, 17 % of adults used their profile to communicate with people they do not know. This increases among younger adults

Both quantitative and qualitative research showed that communication was the most popular activity on social networking sites. Users communicated mainly with people with whom they had at least some form of pre-existing relationship. Sixty-nine per cent of adults who have a social networking page or profile used social networking sites to talk to friends or family who they saw regularly anyway, compared to 17% of adults who used sites to talk to those they didn't already know. In particular users of all ages appreciated social networking sites as a means to manage their existing relationships, and particularly for getting back in contact with old friends.

Among those who reported talking to people they didn't know, there were significant variations in age, but those who talked to people they didn't know were significantly more likely to be aged 16-24 (22% of those with a social networking page or profile) than 25-34 (7% of those with a profile). In our qualitative sample, several people reported using sites in this way to look for romantic interests.

Only a few users highlighted negative aspects to social networking

The majority of comments in our qualitative sample were positive about social networking. A few users did mention negative aspects to social networking, and these included annoyance at others using sites for self-promotion, parties organised online getting out of hand, and online bullying.

2.4 Privacy and safety

From Ofcom's qualitative research it appears that concerns about privacy and safety are not 'top of mind' for most users

The people who use social networking sites see them as a fun and easy leisure activity. Although the subject of much discussion in the media, in Ofcom's qualitative research

privacy and safety issues on social networking sites did not emerge as 'top of mind' for most users. In discussion, and after prompting, some users in the qualitative study did think of some privacy and safety issues, although on the whole they were unconcerned about them.

In addition, our qualitative study found that all users, even those who were confident with ICT found the settings on most of the major social networking sites difficult to understand and manipulate.

Several areas of potentially risky behaviour are suggested by the qualitative and/or quantitative research. These include:

- **leaving privacy settings as default 'open'** (Ofcom Social Networking qualitative research) – 41% of children aged 8-17 who had a visible profile had their profile set so that it was visible to anyone (Children, young people and online content quantitative research) and 44% of adults who had a current profile said their profile could be seen by anyone[6] (this was more likely among those aged 18-24) (Adult Media Literacy Audit 2008);

- **giving out sensitive personal information, photographs and other content** (Ofcom social networking sites research/Get Safe Online Report 2007). Our qualitative research found that some users willingly gave out sensitive personal information. This was supported by the *Get Safe Online* research which found that 25% of registered social networking users had posted sensitive personal data about themselves on their profiles. This included details such as their phone number, home address or email address. Younger adults are even more likely to do this, with 34% of 16-24 year olds willingly posting this information;

- **posting content (especially photos) that could be reputationally damaging** (Ofcom Social Networking qualitative research). Examples ranged from posting provocative photos to photographs of teachers drinking and smoking being seen by their pupils and pupils' parents; and

- **contacting people they didn't know (and/or didn't know well) online/accepting people they didn't know as 'friends'** (Ofcom Social Networking qualitative research) – 17% of adult users said they talked to people on social networking sites that they didn't know and 35% spoke to people who were "friends of friends" (Adult Media Literacy Audit 2008).

Our qualitative research indicates that some people are more likely than others to engage in potentially risky behaviour. This suggests that communications about the implications of potentially risky behaviour may need to be looked at in different ways for different groups of people.

Our qualitative research also showed that on the whole users appeared unconcerned about these risks. There are several reasons for this, which include, in no particular order:

- a lack of awareness of the issues;

- an assumption that privacy and safety issues have been taken care of by the sites themselves;

- low levels of confidence among users in their ability to manipulate privacy settings;

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[6] The result for adult privacy settings is not directly comparable to that of children due to different questions and sample size in the studies

- information on privacy and safety being hard to find on sites;

- a feeling among younger users that they are invincible;

- a perception that social networking sites are less dangerous than other online activities, such as internet banking; and, for some,

- having consciously evaluated the risks, making the decision that they could be managed.

Discussions with children and adults using social networking sites highlighted an important point. This was that there is a clear overlap between the benefits and risks of some online social networking activities. For example, the underlying point of social networking is to share information. However the risk is that leaving privacy settings open means that the user cannot control who sees their information or how they use it. Forty-four per cent of adults with current social networking profiles said that their profile was visible to anyone, while 41% of 8-17 year olds with visible profiles said their profile could be seen by anyone.

The potential risks that we have highlighted raise a number of issues for industry and policy makers. These include how best to enforce the minimum age limits, how to ensure accessible and easy-to-understand privacy and safety policies, educating children, parents and adults about the privacy and safety implications of social networking sites, and the issue of privacy settings being set to default 'open'.

2.5   Research on risk and harm

Our findings are consistent with other existing research on risk and harm. *Harm and Offence in Media Content,* a literature review of research compiled for Ofcom's submission to the Byron Review by Andrea Millwood Hargrave, Sonia Livingstone and David Brake shows that there is a lack of information about any actual harm (as opposed to risk of harm) experienced by users of social networking sites. They state that 'much of the research reviewed here deals with the risk of harm (by measuring incidence of exposure to risk, risky behaviour, or the use of certain media contents which may be harmful to some, etc.). Some of the evidence does demonstrate a link from exposure to 'actual' ill effect, although this is generally measured either experimentally in the short-term or by using correlational methods which cannot rule out all confounding factors.'[7]

Much of the research that does exist is from the US and does not map exactly to the situation in the UK. More research will need to be done to fill gaps in the current research base before a clearer picture of actual harm and the negative aspects of social networking in the long term emerges.

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[7] The full literature review can be found at
http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/telecoms/reports/byron/annex6.pdf

Overview of social networking sites

This section of the report provides an overview of social networking sites to put them in the context of recent developments in internet and communications technology. To provide a foundation for the rest of the report, it looks both at the historical background of social networking and at recent issues that have arisen concerning the sites.

3.1   What is a social networking site?

At the most basic level social networking sites are sites which allow users to set up online profiles or personal homepages, and develop an online social network. The profile page functions as the user's own webpage and includes profile information ranging from their date of birth, gender, religion, politics and hometown, to their favourite films, books quotes and what they like doing in their spare time. In addition to profile information, users can design the appearance of their page, and add content such as photos, video clips and music files.

Users are able to build a network of connections that they can display as a list of friends. These friends may be offline actual friends or acquaintances, or people they only know or have met online, and with whom they have no other link. It is important to note that the term 'friend', as used on a social networking site, is different from the traditional meaning given to the term in the offline world. In this report we will use the term as it is used on a social networking site: anyone who has invited, or been invited by, another user, to be their 'friend'.

There are many applications and types of content that can be used on social networking sites, and these are covered in detail in Section 6.

3.2   Development of social networking sites

In many ways the ideas behind social networking sites are not new. It has been possible since the early days of the internet to do many of the things which social networking site users do now, such as creating personal web pages and communicating with others through interfaces such as chat rooms, internet forums, message boards, web communities and blogs.

Several sites combining functions of today's social networking sites appeared in the late 1990s. In worldwide terms many people see Friendster as the first to make a serious impact. It launched in 2002 before falling back relative to other sites in 2004.[8] In the UK many people first heard about social networking sites through the media coverage of Friends Reunited (launched in 2000), and especially ITV's decision to buy the site for £120m in 2005.[9]

A wave of other sites soon followed, and this has continued up to the present, as Figure 1 shows:

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[8] Boyd, D and Ellison, N, 'Social Network Sites, Definition, History and Scholarship', *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication (October, 2007),* http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html.
[9] *http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4502550.stm*

Figure 1: Simplified timeline of select social networking sites (2000-2007)[10]

2000	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Friends Reunited	Friendster	LinkedIn, MySpace, Hi5	Flickr, Piczo, Facebook (Harvard only)	Bebo, Facebook (school networks)	Facebook (everyone)	Sagazone

As the number of sites grew, so they have diversified in terms of focus. Alongside more general sites such as MySpace, Bebo and Facebook, other niche sites have sprung up. Examples include LinkedIn, which was founded in 2003 and is based on developing business and employment networks, and Flickr, which is based on photo-sharing.

New sites continue to emerge. In October 2007 Saga announced that it was launching Sagazone, a social networking site aimed exclusively at the over-50s.

There are several factors that help to explain the recent growth of today's social networking sites and the mainstream use of similar technologies. The following is a brief outline of some of the biggest changes; it is by no means an exhaustive list.

Home internet penetration has increased as have connection speeds

It is likely that increasing home internet access facilitates the use of social networking sites. Although potential users often have alternative points of internet access (for example at school or at work), they are less likely to be subject to restrictions on using social networking sites at home. Furthermore, increased connection speeds and the wider availability of broadband enable richer use of the internet, including uploading as well as viewing content. Whereas social networking site profiles were previously simple and text-based, they can now support images, site customisation, audio and even video content.

Increasing ICT confidence

There are an increasing number of people who have basic computer and internet skills and the confidence to use them. These people are much more likely to take to new online communication technology such as social networking sites.

User-friendly programmes

In the past, setting up one's own blog or webpage involved a relatively sophisticated knowledge of computer programming. While this has changed over the years, social networking sites have developed a system that, at its most basic, simply involves filling in the gaps or using drop-down boxes.

Even on MySpace, where users can design their own sites using html or java, knowledge of programming is not essential. Other users have set up help sites where people can copy and paste script to design their site.[11]

Communication based around social relationships

 An important difference between social networking sites and earlier forms of many-to-many conversations such as chat rooms and blogs is that social networking sites are predominantly based on social relationships and connections with people, rather than a

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[10] Boyd & Ellison, 'Social Network Sites' (2007).
[11] Boyd, Dana. 'Why Youth Love Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics (2008) pp. 119-142.

shared interest. Online communication has changed from being merely task-based or for sharing information and is increasingly an end in itself.

Social networking sites are part of the wider Web 2.0 context

The specific technology that has enabled this growth in the number and popularity of social networking sites is part of a wider online phenomenon, enabling self-expression, communication and user interaction online, known as Web 2.0.

This technology is not unique to social networking sites and has helped the development of other interactive applications such as user-generated content (UGC) sites (like YouTube), file-sharing sites and Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as Second Life, World of Warcraft and Runescape, all sites typical of Web 2.0.[12]

Applications have increased the versatility of social networking sites

Social networking sites are not limited to messaging, communicating and displaying networks. Nearly all sites allow users to post photos, video and often music on their profiles and share them with others. Started by Facebook, sites have increasingly opened their interfaces to third-party applications.[13] This has led to an expansion in what users can do on social networking sites, from taking part in film trivia quizzes to playing mini games.

Established applications and functions have also found their way onto social networking sites in recent years. It is now possible to make voice calls through certain sites using Skype,[14] while Bebo has led the way in incorporating video drama with its *KateModern* series.[15] Bebo has also signed a deal with the BBC and Channel 4, among others, to provide some of their broadcast content to Bebo users.[16]

3.3   Recent developments

The rapid growth of social networking sites, their popularity among young people and their relative success in retaining users has ensured that social networking is never far from the news.

The level of concern in society about privacy and safety, particularly with regard to social networking sites, is evidenced by the focus in 2007 on these issues by governments in the UK and the US.

In the US, the New York state attorney-general challenged Facebook and reached a deal with it to introduce safeguards to reduce the risks to minors from use of the site.[17] Recently MySpace followed suit by agreeing voluntary privacy rules with state authorities in the US. These included setting the default of the profiles of under-16s to private and blocking adults from contacting under-18s unless they knew their surname or email address.[18]

In the UK, the Prime Minister commissioned child psychologist Dr Tanya Byron to investigate the risks to children from exposure to potentially harmful or inappropriate material on the

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[12] It should be noted that Web 2.0 is a technical term that is not widely recognised by most people.

[13] http://developers.facebook.com/news.php?blog=1&story=21
[14] http://www.myspace.com/myspaceim
[15] http://www.bebo.com/KateModern
[16] http://media.guardian.co.uk/trends08/story/0,,2237886,00.html
[17] http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/17/nyregion/17facebook.html
[18] http://www.guardian.co.uk/worldlatest/story/0,,-7225071,00.html

internet and in video games. Ofcom was invited to contribute evidence to this review, which reported in March 2008. Some of the bespoke research commissioned for the Byron Review is referenced in later chapters of this report.

It is clear from the development of social networking sites to date that the sites' further evolution is uncharted territory for stakeholders and it is difficult to accurately predict what impact this will have on communications, ICT skills and social issues. As users, policy makers, businesses, educators and parents seek to understand many-to-many communication such as social networking sites, it is essential we understand current usage and behaviour and identify potential problems so that they can be addressed.

Engaging with social networking sites

This section of the report gives a context to social networking by exploring internet take-up (in particular broadband) in the home as well as the rules and restrictions that parents and their children say are in place for using the internet and other media. The second half of this section addresses the use of social networking sites as well as the demographic and behavioural profiles of users, and the attitudinal profiles of those who have not used social networking sites.

4.1 Internet penetration and access

Social networking sites can be accessed through any internet connection; however, having the internet at home, and, in particular, broadband access, increases participation in social networking sites. Research by Boyd (2008) showed that young people (16 or younger) were more likely to access social networking sites on the internet at home than anywhere else. Media reports have suggested that some schools, libraries and work places have banned access to these sites. If these reports reflect widespread practice, it is likely that access to the internet at home will become an increasingly important factor in use of social networking sites.[19].

Figure 2 shows the levels of home internet and broadband take-up in the UK. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of people have access to the internet at home, although this varies by age and socio-economic group. In particular levels of take-up peak among 45-54 year olds and decrease significantly among over-65s (33%) and DEs (38%).

Figure 2: Take-up of internet and broadband by age and socio-economic group
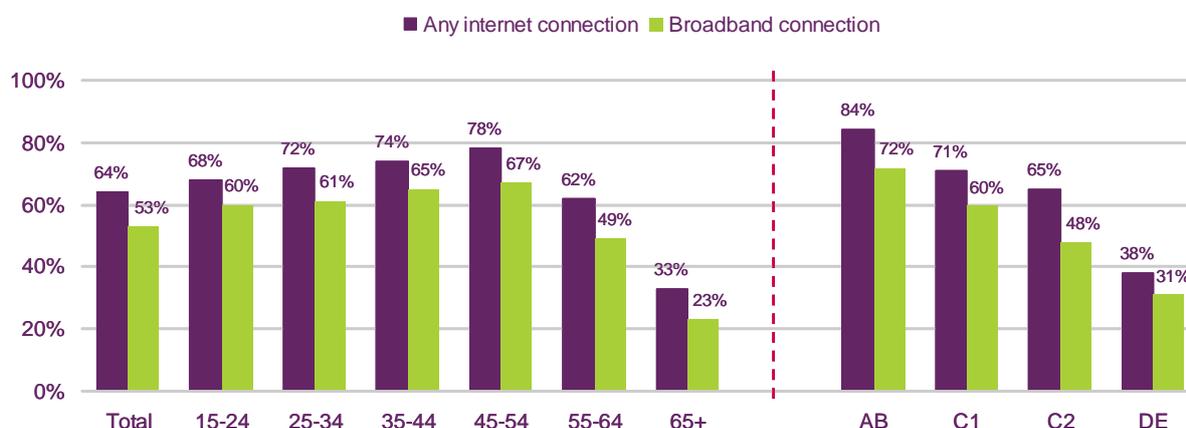
Q. Do you or does anyone in your household have access to the internet at home/Does your household use broadband to connect to the internet at home?
Base: All adults – 2235
Source: Ofcom communications tracking survey Q3 2007

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[19] http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/aug/07/digitalmedia.facebook1.

Home take-up of the internet is higher in households with children than in those where children are not present (73% vs. 60%). We see a similar pattern for broadband take-up (61% vs. 50%).[20]

Broadband connections make social networking sites easier to use, as a faster connection allows more creative use of the site, such as streaming video and music, as well as performing basic tasks such as uploading photos.

Eighty-three per cent of home internet access is via a broadband connection; this translates to 53% of the UK population.

Just over half of all adults in the UK have broadband at home (53%). Broadband take-up by age-group is broadly similar among 15-64s but decreases significantly among over-65s with a take-up level of 23%.

There are also differences in take-up by socio-economic group. Take-up is highest among ABs (72%) and lowest among DEs (31%).

While broadband take-up has increased over time,[21] those who do not have access to the internet, and in particular broadband, at home will be less likely either to take advantage of online social networking, or to use social networking sites to the extent that they might wish. It remains to be seen how mobile phone access to sites could affect this.

Children

Ofcom's Young People and Media tracking survey showed that nearly two-thirds (67%) of children reported having broadband at home, compared with just over half of adults (53%). Older children were more likely to have access to broadband, with 72% of 12-15 year olds having broadband at home compared to 60% of 5-7 year olds.

Socio-economic variations in broadband access for children are similar to those already reported among adults. Penetration is highest among AB children, at 87%, and lowest among DEs (47%).

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[20] Data from Ofcom communications tracking survey Q3 2007. 'Do you/does anyone in your household have access to the internet at home/does your household use broadband to connect to the internet at home? Base: all households with children aged 0-15 (703); all households without children (1532)

[21] See Ofcom Consumer Experience Report for changes in take-up over time. The report can be found at http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/tce/ce07/research07.pdf.

Figure 3: Broadband penetration by age and social group among children
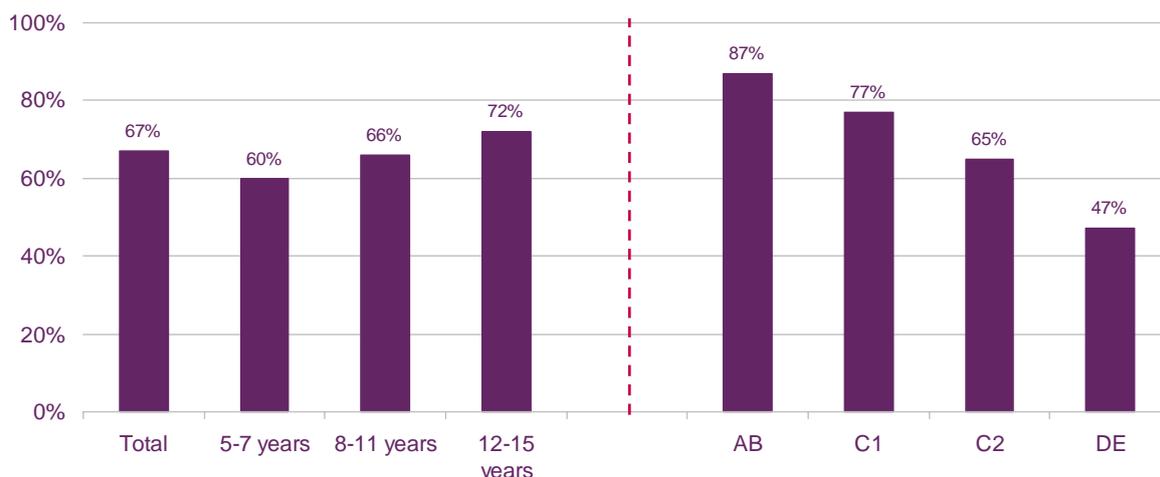
Q. Which of these ways of accessing the internet does your household have?
Base: all children aged 5-15 (n=1047)
Source: Ofcom young people and media tracking survey, wave 3 September 2007

4.2   Awareness of social networking sites and profile of users

Given the recent and rapid growth of sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo, and the fast pace of change in this area in general, data on awareness and use quickly become out of date. However, it is still useful to report data for such measures, as they provide an insight into the extent of social networking at a particular point in time.

Awareness of social networking sites is generally high, although people are not necessarily familiar with the term

Figure 4 shows that while 90% of parents of 8-17 year olds were aware of social networking sites once they had been given a description and an example, only 50% were aware of the generic term 'social networking sites'.

Figure 4: Awareness of social networking sites – parents vs. children
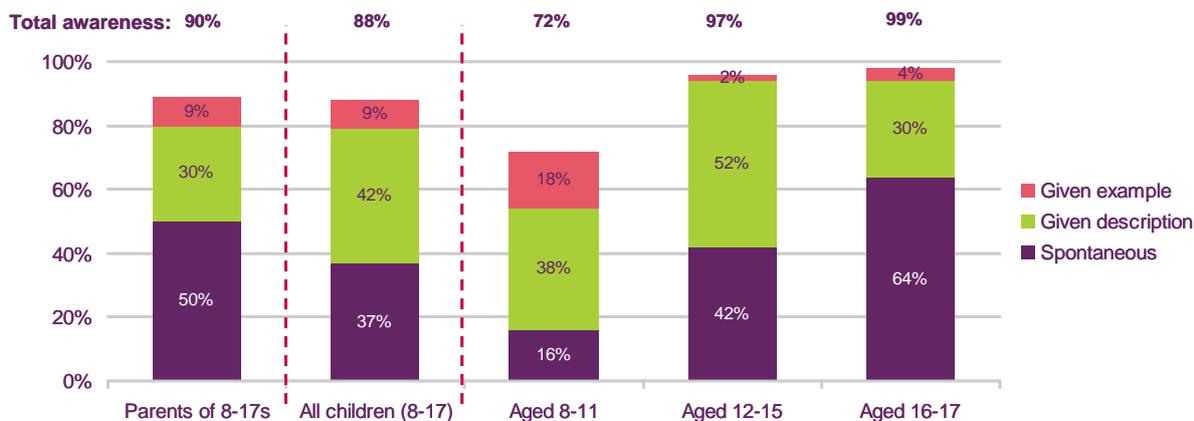
Q. Are you familiar with the term 'Social Networking Sites'?
Base: Parents of 8-17s (537), children aged 8-11 (198), 12-15 (208), 16-17 (107)
Source: Ofcom – Children, Young People & Online Content, October 2007

Despite young people being a core market of social networking sites, their spontaneous awareness of the generic term 'social networking sites' was significantly lower than that of their parents (37% vs. 50%). Once the term was explained, overall awareness was similar to that of their parents. Most children over 12 are aware of social networking sites.

These findings showed that the generic term 'social networking site' is not used by the general population; people tend to use the sites' brand names.

Everyone is talking about Facebook at college, that is just what we call it, I hadn't heard of the term social networking sites until you mentioned them – Girl 14, urban/suburban

Use of social networking sites

Although press coverage and academic studies have largely focused on social networking sites and young people, and use is particularly prevalent among younger people (children and under-34s), use of social networking sites cuts across all age groups.

Figure 5 illustrates[22] that while just over half (51%) of the unique audience of member communities were under 35, nearly a quarter of those who logged on to a member community in August 2007 were over 50.

The launch in October 2007 of the Sagazone social networking site which targets over-50s, illustrated the relevance of social networking sites to older people. By January 2008 30,000 people had set up profiles on the site.[23]

Figure 5: Member communities' audience broken down by age, August 2007

Source: Nielsen Online, August 2007 (based on home use only)[24]

To use a social networking site the user needs to set up his or her own profile or page on the website.[25] Figure 6 shows that just over one-fifth of adults in Ofcom's Media Literacy Audit

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[22] Nielsen data measure the number of people who access specific websites. This is expressed as a unique audience, i.e. each individual person is counted once, it does not count multiple visits from the same person. 'Member communities' is a term used by Nielsen Online to categorise websites that are approximate, though not identical, to the sites included in the term 'social networking sites'.
[23] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2008/01/04/nsaga104.xml.
[24] These are the standard age breaks reported by Nielsen Online.

2008 who use the internet at home reported that they had already set up their own profile or page. A further one in ten said they were interested in doing so.

Initial analysis from Ofcom's audit of media literacy among ethnic minority groups shows some divergence from these figures. While the base sizes are small, and so the results are indicative rather than robust, there are notable differences. Respondents who use the internet from Indian (31%), Black Caribbean (40%) or Black African (41%) ethnic minority groups were more likely to have set up a social networking profile compared to all UK adults who use the internet (22%). One of the reasons for this is likely to be the generally younger profile of ethnic minority groups – although this is not the only explanation.[26]

Figure 6: Participation of adults in social networking sites
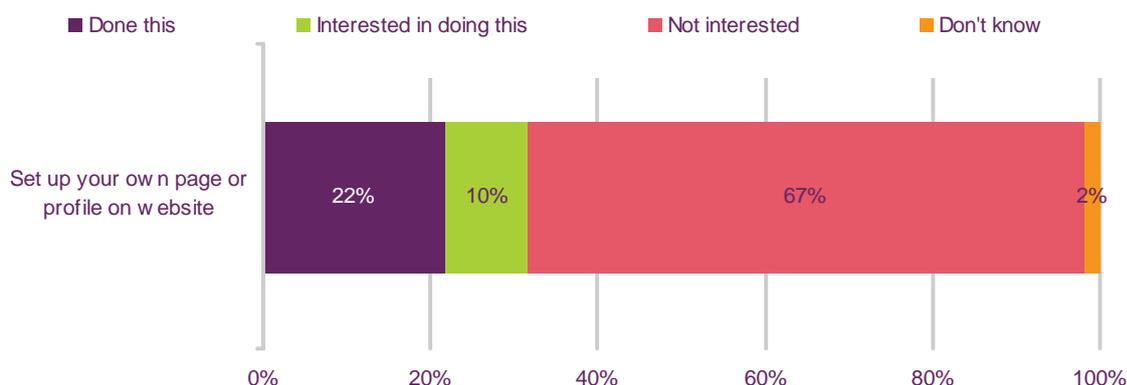
Q. I'd like to read out a number of things people might do. For each one, could you please tell me if you've done it, you'd be interested in doing it, or not interested?
Base: Adults aged 16+ who use the internet at home or elsewhere (n=1723)
Source: Ofcom media literacy audit October-December 2007

A breakdown of those who already had a profile showed that there were age and socio-economic group variations among users. Figure 7 shows that younger adults were more likely to have already set up their own profile than other age groups. Over half (54%) of 16-24 year olds said they had done so, as well as over one quarter (28%) of 24-35 year olds. While penetration of setting up one's own page or profile on a website decreased significantly among over-35s, a minority of respondents across the older age groups had done so.

The only significant difference in terms of socio-economic group was that C1s were more likely than ABs to have set up a profile, by 24% to 19%.

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[25] The following figures illustrating social networking sites use are based on survey data which differ from the Nielsen Online data presented above. Please note Nielsen Online data will differ from survey data reported below for a number of reasons including:
- different surveys have been used at different times (Nielsen Online data are from August 2007 while Ofcom survey data are from October to December 2007);
- Nielsen Online is based on a panel and records actual use of the internet, whereas Ofcom survey data record what people claim to do or not do online; and
- Nielsen Online data define the category as member communities, which although similar, is not an exact match to social networking sites.

[26] These are initial findings only. The full audit of media literacy among ethnic minority groups will be published in summer 2008.

Interestingly, while home take-up of broadband (and thus the ability to easily access social networking sites) varies by socio-economic group, Figure 7 also shows that actual use of the sites appears to vary little between socio-economic groups. This is consistent with other research in this area, including qualitative research from the Ofcom Consumer Panel, which has shown that some teenagers from low-income households value social networking sites because it helps develop and communicate their social identity, and that not having access to social networking sites is an issue for them. However, lack of access to social networking sites in these circumstances is predominantly due to lack of internet access.[27]

**Figure 7: Take-up by adults who have set up their own page or profile on a social networking site**
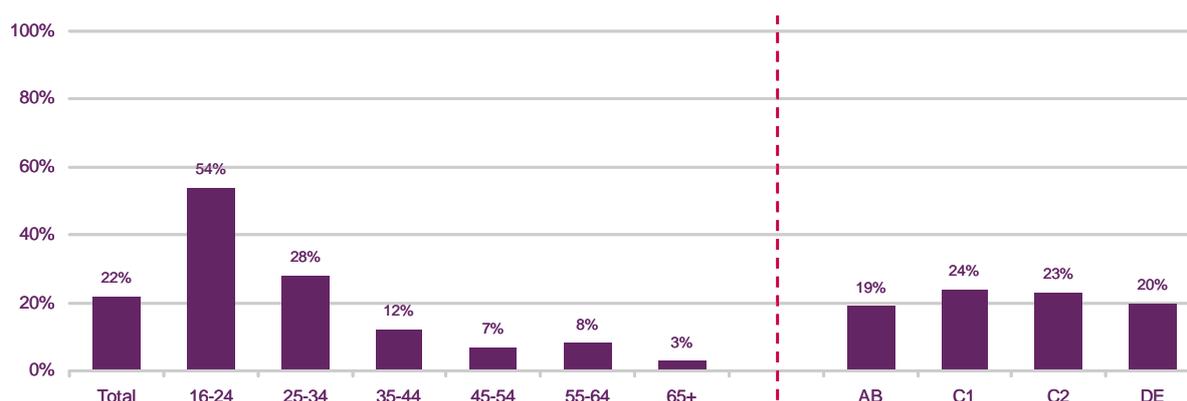
Q. Have you set up your own page or profile on a website such as Piczo, Bebo, hi5, Facebook or MySpace?
Base: All adults who use the internet (1723), 16-24 (336), 25-34 (332), 35-44 (473), 45-54 (319), 55-64 (156), 65+ (103), AB (584), C1 (613), C2 (307), DE (296)
Source: Ofcom media literacy audit December 2007

A separate study commissioned by Ofcom among parents and children found that 15% of parents of 8-17 year olds who are aware of social networking sites reported having a profile. They were less likely to have a profile than their children – around half (49%) of children aged 8-17 who are aware of social networking sites reported having a profile.

When parents with children aged 8-17 were asked whether they thought their child had a profile on a social networking site, 37% of parents who were aware of these sites said they thought this was the case. This compares to 49% of 8-17 year olds who said they had a profile and suggests that around a quarter of the parents of children who have a site either think their child doesn't have a profile, or say that they don't know.

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[27] http://www.ofcomconsumerpanel.org.uk/information/documents/Children_and_the_internet.pdf

Figure 8: Percentage of parents and children saying they have a profile on a social networking site
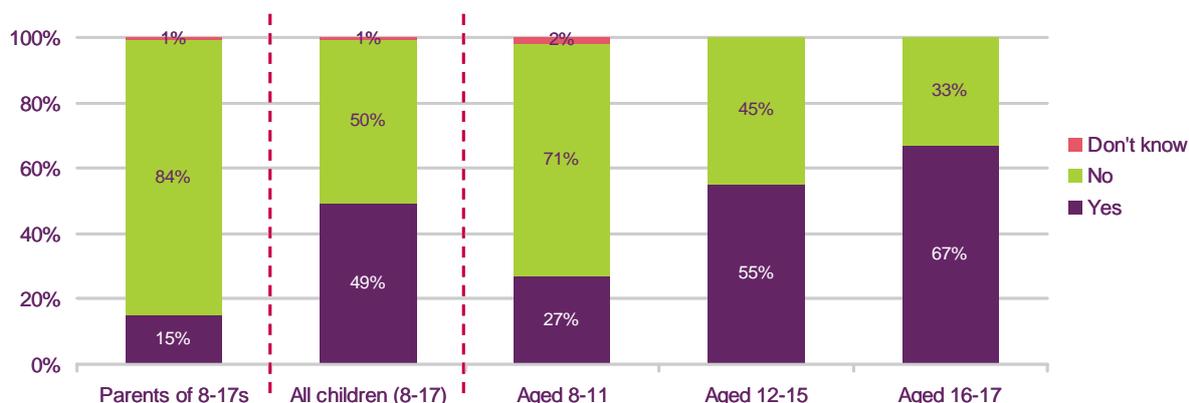
Q. Do you have a page or profile on a social network site?
Base: All aware of social networking sites/whose child uses the internet: Parents of 8-17s
(481),Children aged 8-11 (143), 12-15 (202), 16-17 (106)
Source: Ofcom – Children, Young People & Online Content, October 2007

Figure 8 also shows that 27% of children aged 8-11 who are aware of social networking reported that they had set up their own profile on a social networking site. This is noteworthy as, while there are some sites such as Disney's Club Penguin designed for younger children, most of the main sites such as Facebook and Bebo require users to be at least 13 years old. In the case of MySpace the lower age limit is 14.

While some of these younger users are on sites intended for younger children, the presence of underage users on social networking sites intended for those aged 13 or over was confirmed by qualitative research conducted by Ofcom (see Sections 5 & 6). In addition, Nielsen data from August 2007 shows that 15% of internet users aged 6-11 have used Bebo, 4% have used Facebook, and 8% have used MySpace.[28]

4.3   International comparisons

Set within an international context, the UK has a comparatively high level of social networking site take-up. In an international quantitative survey conducted by Ofcom, the UK had a higher proportion of site users than France, Germany, Italy, the US, and Japan. Canada was the only country included in the survey where social networking sites were more popular.[29]

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[28] Nielsen Online August 2007.
[29] http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/cm/icmr07/

Figure 9: Those with an internet connection who use social networking sites

% of adults with internet access
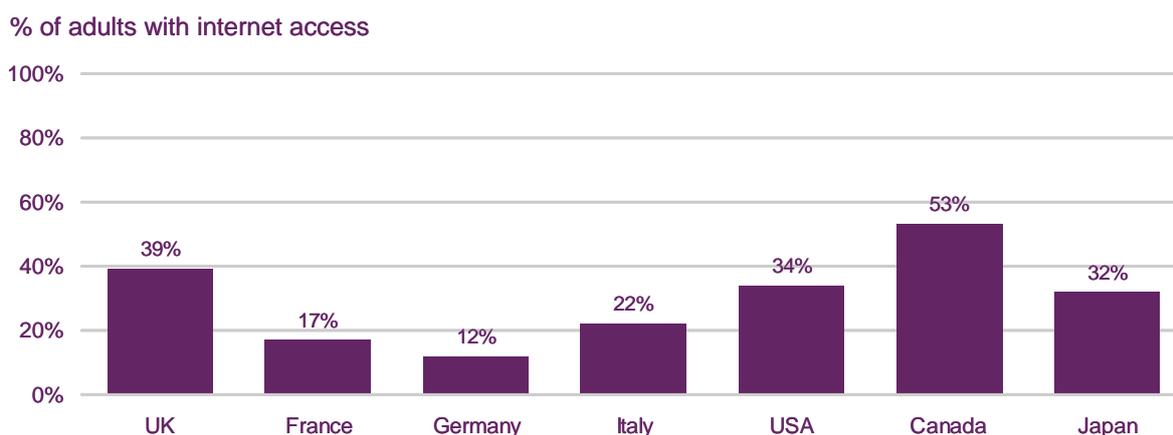
Q: Do you use your internet connection for social networking sites?
Source: Ofcom international ad hoc research October 2007

## 4.4   Main social networking sites that people are using

MySpace, Facebook and Bebo are the most popular sites

Consistent with numerous media reports, the top three sites in Ofcom's quantitative and qualitative research were Facebook, MySpace and Bebo.[30] The majority of adults who had used a social networking site had a profile on Facebook (62%) and this was the most mentioned main social networking site (49%). Nearly half of all respondents reported having a profile on MySpace and one-third had one on Bebo. On average, adults reported having profiles on 1.6 sites. Thirty-nine per cent of adults had two or more profiles.

There were insufficient social networking users aged over 35 to examine whether there were any differences in the choice of site among this age group. However, among those aged under 35, there were no variations between the 16-24s and the 25-34s.

There was some socio-economic variation, with ABC1s more likely to have a profile on Facebook than C2DEs, who were more likely to have a profile on MySpace.

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[30] See for example http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2007/09/25/nface125.xml

Figure 10: Social networking sites used by adults
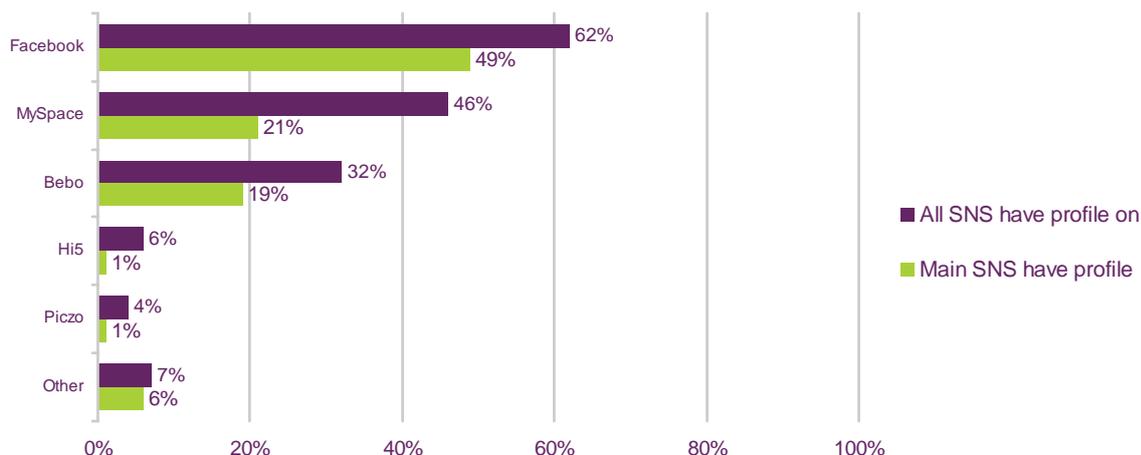
Q. And where is the profile you use or update most often?
Base: All adults who have a social networking site profile (391)
Source: Ofcom media literacy audit October-December 2007

A comparison of the different sites that parents and children use provides another view on the popularity of different social networking sites among different groups. Figure 11 shows that children were twice as likely to use Bebo as their parents (63% to 32%), while parents were more than twice as likely to use Facebook as their children (41% to 18%). By contrast, the gap between the two groups was much smaller for both MySpace and MSN Groups.

Figure 11: social networking sites used by parents and children
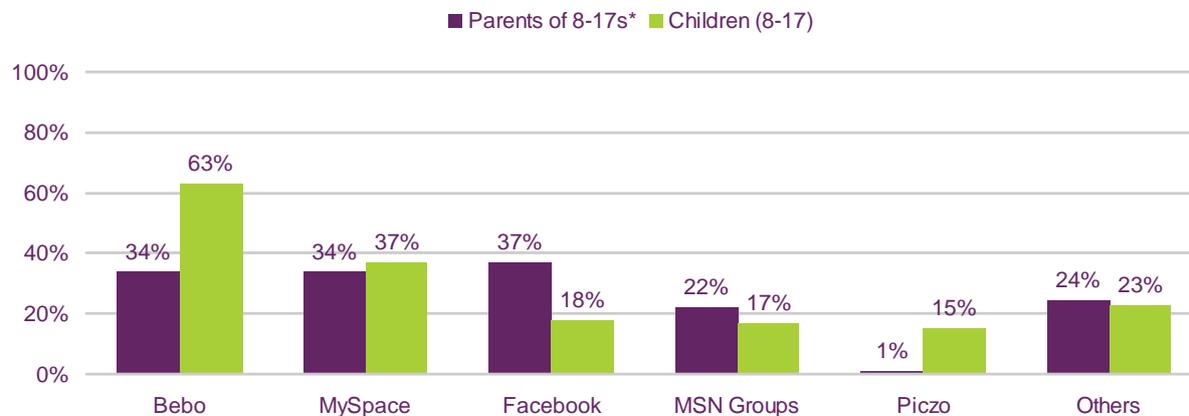
Q: Where do you have a page or profile
Base: Parents of 8-17s who have a page/profile on a social networking site (74); All children (8-17) who have a profile on a social networking site (220)
Source: Ofcom – Children, Young People & Online Content, October 2007
*Caution – low sample size.

Audience analysis from Nielsen Online showed significant age variations among users of MySpace, Bebo and Facebook. One-third of Bebo users were under 18 (33%), while 16% of MySpace and 6% of Facebook users were under 18.

Figure 12: Audience age breakdown of individual social networking sites: August 2007

■ 2-11 yrs ■ 12-17 yrs ■ 18-24 yrs ■ 25-34 yrs ■ 35-49 yrs ■ 50-64 yrs ■ 65+ yrs
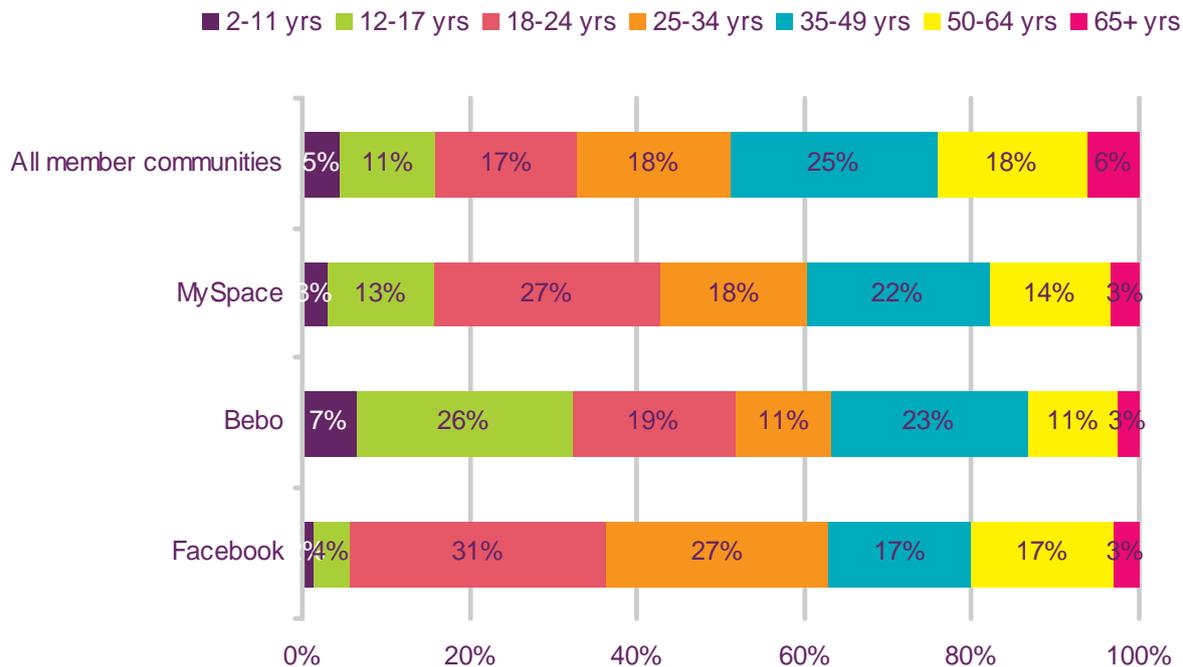
Source: Nielsen Online, August 2007 (based on home use only)[31]

As trends surrounding social networking move rapidly, these audience figures have inevitably changed slightly since their publication in August 2007. The figures provided by Nielsen Online for January 2008 show that there has been little substantial change in age breakdown for member communities generally.

However, each of the big three social networking sites (MySpace, Bebo and Facebook) have shown interesting changes in their age breakdown. Each of these sites has seen 18-24 year olds decrease as a proportion of their unique audience. The smallest change was for Bebo, which saw 18-24s drop from 19% to 17% of its unique audience, while on MySpace this group dropped from 27% to 22%. The biggest change was on Facebook, where 18-24 year olds dropped from 31% to 24% of the unique audience. There was no single age group which rose in direct proportion to the drop seen among 18-24 year olds.

Nielsen data from January 2008 also showed, for the first time a decline in Facebook's unique audience. This decline was just over 5%, and stands in contrast to Facebook's recent rapid growth. MySpace and Bebo have both seen declines since August 2007, of 16% and 8% respectively.[32] At this stage it is too early to say whether this is a seasonal variation, or whether this is the start of a new period in the development of social networking sites.

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[31] These are the standard age breaks reported by Nielsen Online.
[32] Source: Nielsen Online, January 2008.

4.5   Frequency of using social networking sites

Half of all users access social networking sites at least every other day

Respondents with a profile on a social networking site claimed to use the sites fairly frequently, with 87% accessing their profile at least once a week, and 50% at least every other day. Frequency of visiting a social networking site did not appear to vary by socio-economic group.

Figure 13: Frequency of visiting a social networking site
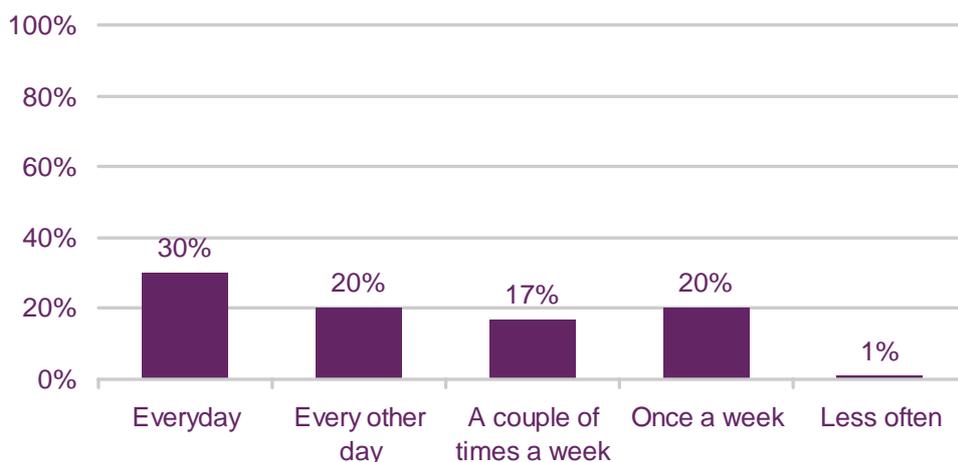
Q. How often do you visit any sites like Piczo, Bebo, Hi5, Facebook or MySpace?
Base: All adults with a current profile or page on a social networking site (347)
Source: Ofcom media literacy audit October-December 2007

Some teenagers and adults in their early twenties, interviewed in our qualitative research, reported feeling 'addicted' to social networking sites and were aware that their usage was squeezing their study time. Some users described how they might plan to go onto their site to check for messages and then emerge a few hours later – having been drawn into commenting, searching and generally having fun.

I know someone who had to repeat their A-levels because they'd spent so much time on MySpace. There's even a song someone wrote called 'MySpace Is Ruining My Life' - Girl 15, urban/suburban

At the end of the day, I work full time and have two kids and a husband to run around after, it is a miracle that I am not asleep by 9 o'clock in the evening and if I'm not, then maybe I will have a little play on MySpace – Female 37, rural/semirural

4.6   Rules and restrictions on social networking site use

Two-thirds of parents say they set rules about their child's use of social networking sites, although only 53% of children said that their parents set such rules

For many children, the rules and restrictions that their parents set on social networking use were an important factor in the child's use of social networking sites. The majority of parents

we spoke to (65%) claimed to limit their child's use of social networking sites by setting rules and restrictions. Despite this, significantly fewer children reported that their parents had set rules on their use of social networking sites. Some of this difference may be due to parents overstating, or to children underplaying the extent of parental control, or because restrictions are not being recognised as such by children.

Figure 14: Rules for social networking site use – parents vs. children
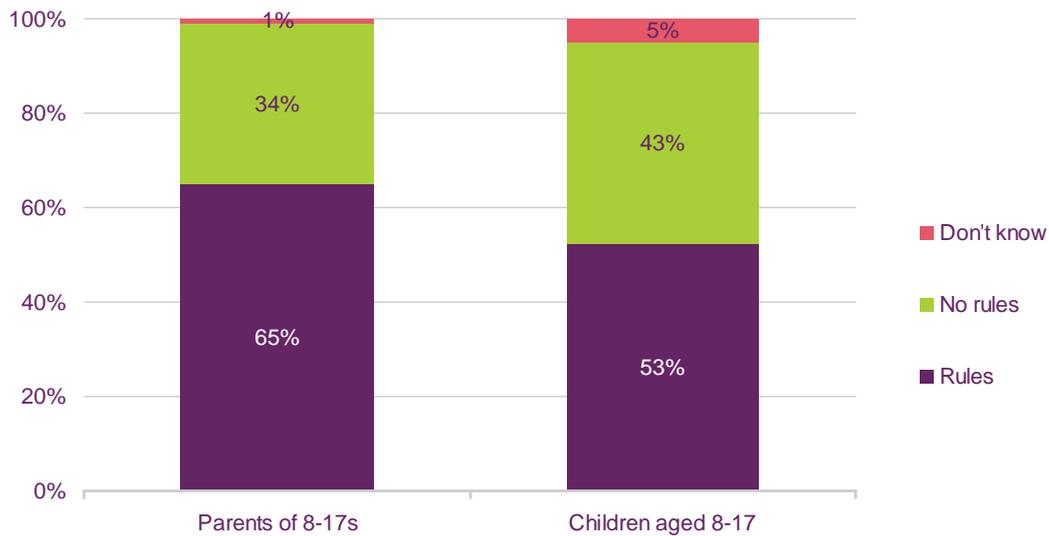
Q. Do you have any rules around the use of social networking sites? / Do your parents have any rules…?
Base: All who/whose children have a page/profile on social networking sites: Parents of 8-17s (175), children aged 8-17 (220)
Source: Ofcom – Children, Young People & Online Content, October 2007

The key rules that were mentioned were to do with meeting new people online (30% of parents, 13% of 8-17 year olds); giving out personal details (27% of parents, 26% of 8-17 year olds), and rules about meeting in person new people users had met through these sites (17% of parents, 10% of 8-17 year olds). These figures suggest that although rules about, for example, giving out personal information on these sites may be well understood by children, the importance parents place on rules about meeting new people is not being communicated to children as effectively.

Figure 15: Rules and restrictions on what children use social networking sites for – parents vs. children
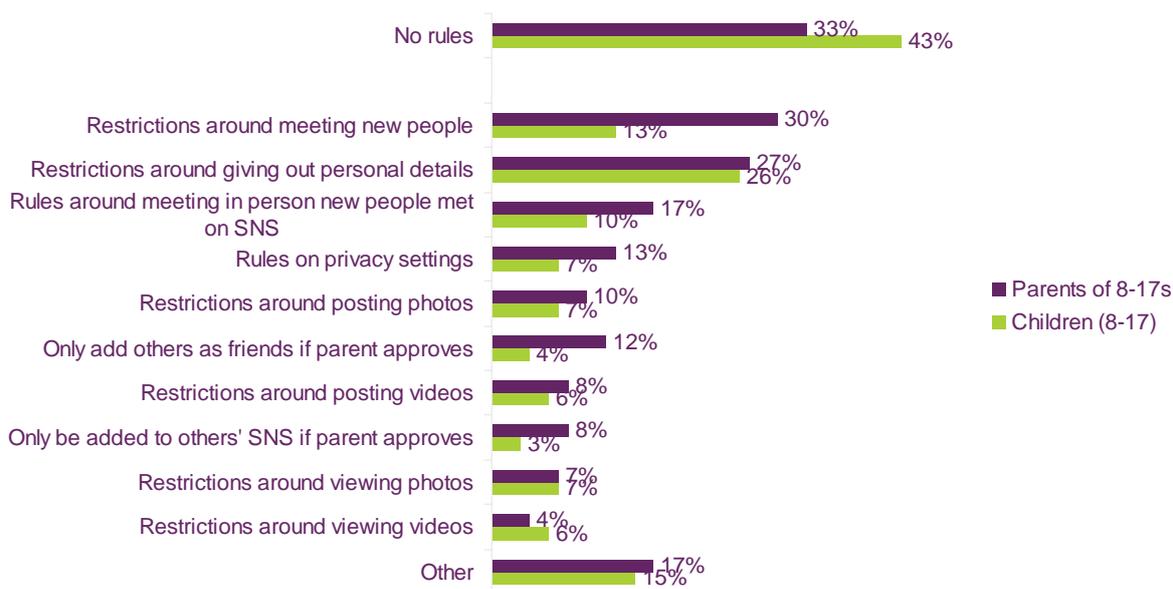
Q. Do you/your parents have any rules around the use of social networking sites?
Base: All parents of 8-17s whose child has a page/profile on a social networking site (175)/all children (8-17) who have a page/profile on social networking sites (220).
Source: Ofcom – Children, Young People & Online Content, October 2007.

Figure 16 shows that 68% of parents reported having rules and restrictions about the internet generally. This was similar to the number who reported setting rules specifically about social networking sites (Figure 14).[33] This may indicate that in terms of rules and restrictions, parents see social networking sites as just another activity that their children do online. Accordingly, it seems that the rules that parents set for using social networking sites fit within the wider context of the rules they set for the internet more generally.

However, this did not appear to be the case among children. Sixty-four per cent of children said that they had rules and restrictions on their internet use, but only 53% reported having rules on their use of social networking sites.

[33] Caution should be used in comparing the two charts as they have different base sizes.

Figure 16: Rules around internet use – parents vs. children
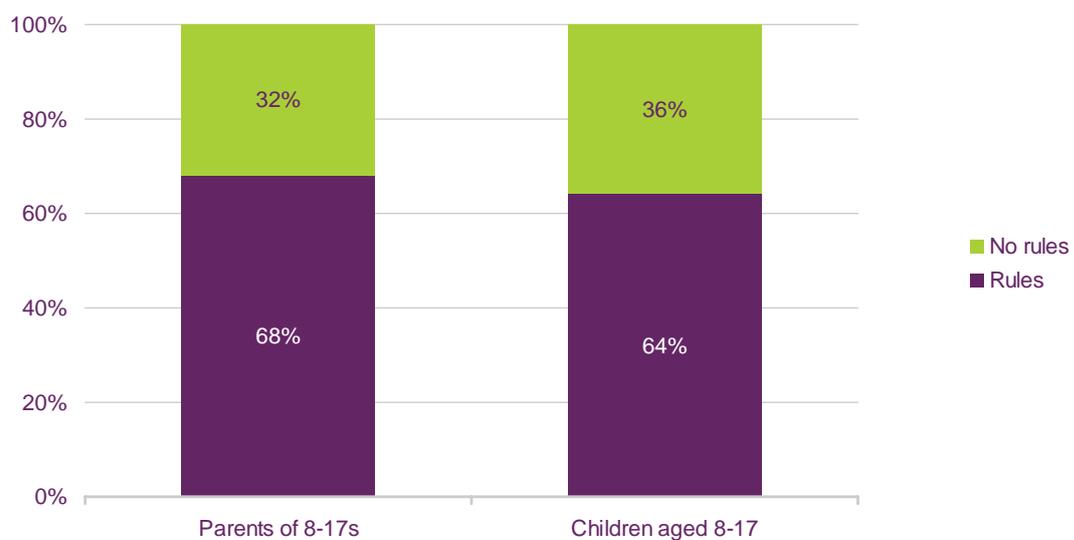
Q. Do you/your parents have any rules or restrictions about using the internet?
Base: All who/whose children use the internet: Parents of 8-17s (526), children aged 8-17 (513)
Source: Ofcom – Children, Young People & Online Content, October 2007

Understanding behaviours and attitudes towards social networking sites

Ofcom commissioned a piece of qualitative research to examine in depth people's attitudes to online social networking, their behaviours while using social networking sites, and the reasons why they used the sites. This section contains an analysis of this research based around several distinct user and non-user segments.

Ofcom's qualitative research found that use of, and attitudes towards social networking sites (both for users and non-users) fell into several distinct segments. Although qualitative in nature, these segments provide an interesting insight into how people currently use and view social networking sites. They also help to highlight that site users are not a uniform group in terms of use, attitudes or behaviour. Further information, including detailed case studies, can be found in Annex 3.[34]

It is important to note that the segments for users and non-users had different bases. User segments were organised on the basis of how users behaved when using social networking sites. The non-user segments were drawn up using the basis of non-users' reasons for not using the sites.

5.1   User segments

The qualitative research found that users fell into five distinct segments based upon how they used social networking sites, and in particular, how they interacted with others on these sites. The following table summarises the segments:

Figure 17: Table summarising social networking site user segments

	Style of use	Gender	Age	Socio-economic group	Typical sites	Number of people
Alpha socialisers	Flirting, meeting new people	Mostly male	Under 25s	C1C2D	Bebo, MySpace, Hi5	Minority
Attention seekers	Posting photos to get comments from others	Mostly female	Teens to 35+ (esp. mothers)	C1C2D	Bebo, MySpace, ICQ	Some
Followers	Keeping up with friends	Male & female	All	ABC1C2D	Bebo, MySpace, Facebook, Hi5, ICQ	Many
Faithfuls	Finding old friends	Male & female	Older 20+	ABC1	Facebook	Many
Functionals	Pursuing interests & hobbies	Mostly male	Older 20+	ABC1C2D	Facebook, MySpace, Bebo	Minority

Source: Ofcom Social Networking Sites research, September-October 2007

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[34] Published separately online at www.ofcom.org.uk

Alpha Socialisers (Male, under 25, C1C2D, a minority of the sample)

This group consisted of regular users who went on social networking sites often, but for short bursts of time. They searched through the profiles of people they didn't know (usually those of the opposite sex), commented on their pictures in flirtatious ways and added them as friends. For Alpha Socialisers, 'friends' on social networking sites were anybody they had added to their friends' list.

> *I'd add anyone who is fit. [How would you find them?] Through friends, I'd look through friends and add them like that - Male 17, rural/semi-rural*
>
> *It's a great way to socialise and to get known, I like being centre of attention and this is a wicked and fun way of doing it – Boy 20, rural/semi-rural*

For this type of user the focus was very much on entertainment and on casual communication with others, usually people they didn't know. It was common for users to search through the online friends of their existing contacts to find new people to contact. Through contacting friends of friends, and even friends of friends of friends, it was possible for their networks to be very large.

Some of these users reported meeting in person people they had met online, and saw meeting 'friends of friends' as safer than meeting complete strangers.

Attention Seekers (Female, teens to 35+, C1C2D, some of the sample)

This group comprised social networking site users who craved interaction with others, often from the Alpha Socialisers. Most of these users had posted photos of themselves and friends in provocative poses, partying, drinking and portraying glamorous lifestyles.

This type of user was keen to customise their profile. They regularly updated their 'skins' (the style, colours, and design of their site home pages) to reflect an aspirational image, e.g. glitter and sparkle and images of 'hunky' men. Attention Seekers were willing to collect friends from all over the world, but tended to have actual online interaction with only a few people.

Attention Seekers' profiles had a big effect on their social identity. They were typically quite insecure, and for them social networking sites were all about entertainment and ego. It was important to them that others commented on the photos they posted. This gave them a sense of acceptance and increased their self-esteem.

Users from other groups could be quite dismissive of Attention Seekers, as these quotes show:

> *She seems really vain; 20 pictures of herself but no pictures of her friends – Boy 16, rural/semi-rural*
>
> *I think some [girls] feel self-conscious…so they'll put explicit pictures on and hope people will say they look good, and then they'll feel better about themselves – Girl 15, urban/suburban*

Followers (male and female, all ages, ABC1C2D, many in the sample)

Users in this group tended not to be early adopters of social networking sites but instead followed trends in order to be part of what was going on with their peers. For Followers, it was crucial to behave and look like their friends online – it gave them access to the 'in-crowd'. They tended to have an intensive relationship with social networking sites initially, which then diluted over time as they were not as passionate about the sites as were the other typologies.

Users in this group were much less likely than Alpha Socialisers or Attention Seekers to contact or meet people who they did not know.

> *I joined because most of my friends were joining and I didn't want to feel left out, once I joined I realised how fun it was, before that I was only really doing it because most my friends were- Girl 13, rural/semi-rural*
>
> *One of my friends suggested that I become a member of Bebo so I did. To begin with I was on it most nights, now it depends what it going on in my street and what is on the TV – Boy 14, rural/semi-rural*
>
> *I do spend quite a lot of time on it, some of my friends are really outrageous with the photos they post and the things they say, I find it funny to look at but wouldn't do it myself – Female 29, urban/suburban*

Faithfuls (male and female, older 20+, ABC1, many in the sample)

These social networking site users had high self-esteem, tended to be settled in their lives and social worlds, and did not crave external affirmation as strongly as the Attention Seekers. Their most regular use of social networking sites consisted of finding old friends rather than making new ones, as they saw social networking sites as an efficient way of keeping in touch with friends and maintaining diverse networks. For Faithfuls, social networking site use was part of their wider social and cultural experience.

> *It is such a brilliant way to re-kindle old friendships which have fizzled out for no other reason but that you are busy and you live in different parts if the country – Female 25, rural/semi-rural*

These users were less likely to add people they didn't know as friends. For them social networking sites were useful tools to strengthen existing offline networks rather than to create new, virtual ones. Some of our sample appeared to be using Facebook and other social networks in much the same way as Friends Reunited – to look for old school and university friends.

Functionals (male, older 20+, ABC1C2D, minority of the sample)

This last group was single-minded in their use of social networking sites. They logged on for a purpose, such as looking for music and bands, rather than conducting small talk, flirting or looking at others' pictures and leaving comments. They reported being pestered to join social networking sites by friends who were more involved in the sites, but were themselves more occasional users, generally logging on for short visits.

If I want to find out about when my favourite band is playing then I check out MySpace - Male 14, rural/semi-rural

I am not that bothered with chit chat, it is just a few friends who have moved away and I want to keep in contact with – Female 30, urban/suburban

I think it is best when you can find out about activities that you can do – Male 25, rural/semi-rural

For Functionals, 'friends' on social networking sites were simply people they knew and with whom they shared common interests or hobbies. At a base level, social networking sites served a certain purpose and only at a certain time.

5.2   Non-user segments

Ofcom quantitative research found that non-users made up 78% of adults and 51% of children (see Figures 7 & 8 above). The qualitative research specifically included a small portion of non-users to explore their attitudes to social networking sites and reasons for not using them.[35]

However, several broad reasons emerged why non-users did not currently use social networking sites. These were:

- simply having no interest in using social networking sites as an activity;

- not having the time available to commit to using the sites;

- not wanting to 'jump on board' the social networking craze;

- preferring to rely on face-to-face and other forms of communications;

- witnessing the negative side of using social networking sites among friends and choosing to 'steer clear'; and

- concerns around safety and being stalked by other users (on and offline).

The reasons given for not using social networking sites could be categorised broadly into three groups: concerned about safety, technically inexperienced, and intellectual rejecters. These are summarised in the following table:

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[35] These findings should be treated as indicative only due to the qualitative nature of the study, and further quantitative research would be required to validate them.

Figure 18: Table summarising social networking sites non-user segments

	Gender	Age	Reason for non-use
Concerned about safety	Male and female	Often older and parents	Anxious about safety risks to themselves and/or their children
Technically inexperienced	Male and female	Often older and parents	Lack of confidence with the internet and computers generally
Intellectual rejecters	Male and female	Older teens and young adults	Thought that SNS were a waste of time and beneath them

Source: Ofcom Social Networking Sites research, September-October 2007

Concerned about safety and security

This was the largest non-user group in the sample and was more likely to include older respondents, and particularly parents. It included both men and women. Parents were anxious about safety risks online relating to their children and particularly the perceived dangers that teenage girls might be stalked, either online or offline. Some parents in this category who were not themselves users said that they might sometimes allow their children to have access to social networking sites. However, they would often control the amount of time their children spent on these sites. They also wanted more privacy and safety education about social networking sites.

Younger respondents who fitted into this group were concerned that they would be approached by 'stalkers' and also feared that other users could get access to their personal details.

I would never join a site like that. It doesn't matter how much security is on it, you never know. I think people just go on and find out things about you, and the next thing it's like they know you - Girl 15, urban/suburban

By putting up photos of herself, I feel that my daughter is asking for trouble, I try and monitor as much as possible what she does on her Bebo site, but I can't be watching her all the time - Male 39, urban/suburban

Some people do like to have everybody seeing their photos and information but I just don't…I would prefer just to keep it private. I worry what could happen if people got hold of my information and what they could do with it - Female 22, urban/suburban

Technically inexperienced

This group was smaller than the 'concerned about safety' group. Most of the people in this group were over 30. They felt a general lack of confidence with computers and preferred traditional means of communication. Most of the people in this group had manual jobs and were time-poor, with little access to, or experience of, the internet.

The type of guy I am and the guys I'm friends with – builders and plumbers – all tend to rather go to the pub than be on a computer - Male 34, urban/suburban

Personally I prefer to go down the pub meet a few guys, have a drink and socialise that way and pretty much I don't understand [social networking sites] so maybe future times to come

possibly…. But also the security side of things I don't really trust them, it's all a bit worrying really – Male 32, urban/suburban

There were also some in this group who wanted to use social networking sites but just did not know where to start. They were often embarrassed to ask for help from their friends.

Intellectual rejecters

This was the smallest group in our sample and was mostly older teens and young adults. Most people in this group thought that social networking sites were a waste of time, something for people who were preoccupied with self-promotion, and something that was beneath them. Many in this group were confident individualistic teenagers who spent much of their free time outside the home, rather than inside with technology. Their mobile phone, rather than their computer, was crucial to maintaining their social life.

Several of this group had heard about or witnessed problems with using social networking sites, such as bullying, that they did not want to involve themselves with.

I don't feel that I need social networking sites to maintain friendships and keep in contact with my circle of friends, because I do that through other means…it doesn't add that social connectivity to my group - Male 23, rural/semi-rural

But this is reaching out to try to impress strangers, which I don't see the point of - Male 30+, urban/suburban

I don't see the point – why go on [social networking sites] and write about what you're doing, instead of just going out and doing it? - Girl 17, urban/suburban

Section 6

How people use social networking sites

This section introduces social networking sites, covers the process of setting up one's own profile and explores how social networking sites are used. It looks at the tangible and intangible benefits of participating in social networking sites, as well as the concerns that have been raised, both by users and non-users and in recent media coverage. Where appropriate, it includes third-party research.

6.1   Setting up a profile

The building blocks of social networking sites are the individual members' profiles. No two profiles are identical, but they typically contain basic information about the user such as name, sex, home town/country and contact details as well as other information such as race, religion and politics. Alongside this basic information, most social networking sites also allow users to write potted biographies about themselves and to go into great detail about their likes and dislikes. For example, on MySpace these are termed 'blurbs'.

Very few of these categories, with the exception of the user's name, are compulsory to display on one's profile. However, many users do fill in their profiles in great detail, not least because they enjoy doing so.

> *I just filled them in because I thought I had to - Boy 11, rural/semi-rural*
>
> *It is sort of fun filling all the sections out, you feel important – Female 42, rural/semi-rural*

Other users reasoned that if they entered all their personal details then this could help them to get in touch with others and project their identity. This was common across all of the user typologies that emerged (see Section 5), the only exception being Functionals.

Users can also personalise the appearance of their profiles. This can take the form of changing the background or 'skin' by adding glitter, pictures or different wallpaper. Some users, usually the younger ones, put a lot of effort into customising their profiles in this way, as it is another way for them to express themselves. Some sites, including MySpace and Piczo, allow a high degree of profile customisation.

For many users, a site profile is like a blank canvas. It allows its owner, within certain constraints, to create a unique profile which reveals aspects of his or her character.

Fun and engaging leisure activity

It is clear that for the majority of people we spoke to, using social networking sites was much more than just a functional activity. Many users gained significant emotional rewards from contacting their friends and taking part in various online activities and games.

For younger people an important feature of social networking sites is the ability to contact others in a playful way, using 'pokes' or similar gestures. These gestures are a feature of most social networking sites and, depending on the site are called names like Pokes, Fives, Love or something similar. They are a way of gesturing to other users and getting their attention.

There is always something to do…like Poking each other or sending them a fish or Zombie-ing them! – Male 17, rural/semi-rural

These gestures, or symbolic cues, are fun for many users and provide a level of excitement as people log on to see what messages they have. They can also provide social status or reassurance, depending on the number received and who they were received from. A study by Lenhart and Madden (2007) explored the activities teens do on social networking sites.[36] The majority of respondents who used a social networking site (55%) had communicated with people they knew, posted public messages on a friend's profile page or sent a private message. One-third had sent visual messages such as a wink, poke, given e-props or kudos to their friends.

Posting photos

Users can post photos and videos on their social networking sites, in addition to their profile photo. Photos are important both for constructing and revealing one's identity, and for sharing important events and moments with a wide group of people (especially family and friends).

You feel really excited when you know you have got a message or someone has commented on one of your photos – Girl 15, urban/suburban

I went on Facebook primarily because I knew both my children had got their pages on it…and you could go and see their photo albums – Female 60, rural/semi-rural

An opportunity to experiment and play about with one's identity online

Social networking sites allowed more confident users to experiment with their online personality. Generally speaking, such users' online personalities were exaggerated extensions of their offline ones. Social networking sites allowed these people a degree of detachment from their offline lives to portray an alternative version of their identity.

However, a minority of younger female users reported creating fake profiles for fun. Some of them had pretended to be older males in their thirties and forties and had set up profile pages as these 'men', including posting fake photographs. They said they enjoyed pretending to be someone they were not and experiencing what it was like to be a different gender and age. They simply viewed it as harmless fun.

It also emerged that some fake sites could be used to bully friends they had fallen out with. This issue is expanded on in section 6.3.

You can pretend to be anyone, you can trick someone. A friend of mine told someone she was gay! We could do anything and we changed our name and someone thought we were boys and we were gay and we played a trick on this girl - Girl 15, urban/suburban

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[36] Lenhart A. and Madden M. (2007) Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview. Pew Internet and American Life Project. The study questioned 935 young people aged 12-17.

As noted above, the personality that people displayed on their profile was usually largely influenced by their offline personality, although sometimes it was exaggerated or more freely expressed. For less confident people this could be liberating:

> *I am quite quiet and shy in real life, but on Bebo I can be somebody who is more confident and cheeky because nobody has to see my face. I like that and it does feel like people are treating me differently. Or maybe it is just my imagination – Female 18, urban/suburban*

Exaggerating personality

Although some users enjoyed the opportunity to play around with their online identity, others found this tendency annoying. Our research found a strong degree of cynicism in some people about the things that others posted on their profiles and the ways in which they depicted themselves.

> *Really confident people often lie [on social networking sites]. You put what you want on Bebo. You portray your own image; basically you're selling yourself. Bebo is advertisement – Male 24, urban/suburban*

This quote shows that some users are aware, however cynically, of the potential that people have to manipulate and create their online identities.

A few users highlighted the problematic aspects of expressing an aspect of their personality in photos in this way, especially if it contrasted with the behaviour that was expected of them in other areas of their life, such as work. This was particularly mentioned by teachers.

> *I am a primary school teacher and all it takes is for one of my parents to get hold of a picture of me drinking and smoking and the respect they have for me is gone – Female 27, rural/semi-rural*

6.2   Building a social network

Once the profile is set up, the user can begin social networking; that is, they can invite people to be their friends and accept friendship invitations from others to build up their friends list.

Having such a potentially large network of friends has a number of benefits for users; keeping in touch with friends and family, keeping in touch with people not seen on a regular basis, finding old friends, contacting friends of friends, and contacting people they didn't previously know at all. By extending their social networks, users have the opportunity to communicate with people who share their interests, and with people from different countries, cultures and backgrounds. This is the fundamental principle of social networking.

Research by Withers (2006) and Boyd (2007) highlights that a lot of the network building and communication taking place on social networking sites resembles familiar offline behaviour. Withers (2006) states that the difference between managing friendships online and in the offline world is that social networking sites display one's relationships with other people in a very public way.

Social networking sites also stretch the definition of what we have conventionally called 'friends'. On a site a friend is anyone who either accepts an invitation, or has their invitation accepted, to be friends. They can be offline friends, family, people a user had lost touch with, friends of friends or complete strangers. Some users even accept as friends people who they do not like or do not wish to talk to, as they feel it would be socially awkward to reject them.

Compare this with the conventional understanding of offline friends. Offline friendship is necessarily more personal and usually based around factors such as shared interests, experiences or compatible personalities. These factors do not have to be present in an online friendship.

Friend connections are much more clearly and publicly displayed online. Online friends provide a much more visible reference point for others to judge one by, than is the case in the real world. Boyd (2007) has highlighted the importance of identity through network for teenagers online.[37] In this way people are judged by their associations, and their networks provide meaningful information for others.

Boyd[38] also writes about teenagers using social networking sites to carry out online the social situations that are traditionally offline; hanging out, flirting, trying to build social status, deciding the image they want to present and taking risks which will ultimately help them to assess their boundaries in the real world.

Aside from the physical benefits of communicating with others and expressing oneself, site users describe emotional benefits, including feeling part of a group and getting attention. They also talk about the joy of getting feedback from their peers when they log on and have a friend invitation, messages or comments on their photos.[39]

While these are clear benefits to communication, media coverage and third-party research has often focussed on the potential pitfalls of this key element of social networking sites.

It seems clear that the public display of friend lists provides a fun aspect of networking online. However, when users collect multiple friends it doesn't just make it possible for others to connect with their friends. It also means that people who they don't know have access to personal information about them. In addition, if the privacy settings on their profile are open, then anyone can see their personal details regardless of who the viewer is. The risk is that others may use these data, such as their date of birth or address, to commit identity theft, fraud or stalking.

Browsing profiles and collecting friends are popular activities

After directly communicating with others, browsing profiles (their own as well as other people's) was the most popular activity for users. This was especially the case among the younger users we spoke to. For them, using social networking sites generally, and browsing in particular, were serious leisure activities to rival other forms of entertainment such as television.

Like this girl will come into school and she'll be like "Oh my God you were on Bebo yesterday I loved your message" and give it a rate. I love that – Girl 15, urban/suburban

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[37] Boyd, Dana. Why Youth Love Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life, (2007).
[38] Ibid.
[39] Lenhart and Madden (2007), p. 15.

And then you go to their friends and see if their friends are cool, you know, based on the way they dress and the way they pose – Girl 15, urban/suburban

Younger users also reported that collecting 'friends' and competing with their offline friends to have the highest number of online friends was a high priority. In qualitative discussions females of all ages, and younger males, mentioned the competitive nature of collecting friends.

My friend started first and had quite a few friends, it made me want to join and get more friends than her. How childish is that at 27! - Female 27, rural/semi-rural

Yeah how many friends have you got mate?...I have one more than you - Boy 12, rural/semi-rural

The reason I have so many friends on my site is that I wanna be popular and cool – Girl 15, urban/suburban

Along with publicly showing the number of friends, some social networking sites also allow users to display their 'top' friends, and to rank their friends on this basis. Again this taps into Boyd's (2008) observation of social status and jockeying for social position. However, the public display also has consequences for people trying to navigate social relationships in an online environment.

I deleted my friend from Bebo because she only put me 8th on her Top Friends list, and I felt upset and betrayed. She put [pop star] before me! I was really hurt - Girl 14, urban/suburban

An efficient way to manage existing relationships

Ofcom's qualitative research showed that for respondents of all ages and both genders, social networking sites were an efficient way to manage existing social relationships in a fun and colourful way. Users liked the fact that their friend lists were instantly accessible to them.

It is a fun and social way to keep up with all your friends - Female 27, rural/semi-rural

If you have a party to organise, you can do it within a couple of minutes – Male 18, rural/semi-rural

I think it was the basic premise of social networking is about managing your relationships and it has developed from there – Female 32, urban/suburban

The ability to send messages instantly to a wide circle of friends was a significant advantage, as it was cheaper than texting and easier than email.

Lenhart and Madden (2007) reported that social networking sites helped teens to manage their friendships, although there were some differences between boys and girls in how this was achieved. The majority of all social networking teens surveyed said they used social networking sites to stay in touch with friends they saw a lot, as well as those they rarely saw,

although girls were more likely to say this than boys. The level of contact with friends is consistent with Ofcom's quantitative research (see Figure 20).

An easy way to link up with old friends

Users in their late twenties and thirties enjoyed the chance to link up with old friends they had lost touch with, often from school, university or travelling. Facebook was the most popular site for this purpose. Facebook's popularity among students and the fact that many of its networks are based around universities, schools and colleges has contributed to this. Many of the Facebook users we spoke to mentioned that they were aware that it was originally founded as a service for students.

> *The other night I got a message from an old friend I met whilst I was travelling on my gap year, we had lost touch for the past 5 years, and it was so wonderful to hear from her again. She had got married and had a baby in that time - Female 25, urban/suburban*

However, for some people, social networking sites have become an important way of meeting new people and developing new and existing relationships. This tool was not available to nearly the same extent before social networking sites were widespread.

For several years people have been able to catch up with old friends using sites like Friends Reunited. Those looking for romance have also been able to use online dating sites. Social networking sites combine both these facilities on one site – with the added benefit that they are free at the point of use.

This may help partly to explain the popularity of social networking sites among adults. Many people said they enjoyed renewing friendships with people they had lost contact with. Also, some people who found it difficult to get out of the house to meet people thought that social networking sites were a great way to meet new people and be sociable.

Further information on the use of social networking sites in these ways can be found in section 6.3.

A tool to build confidence

Younger and less confident users reported that the virtual nature of the communication they had through these sites had allowed them to express themselves more confidently. These users also reported using MSN and texting in a similar way. Social networking sites appeared to allow less confident individuals, particularly teenage boys and girls and older single women, to express themselves in new ways and to talk confidently to people they knew, and also to contact people they didn't know.

> *I moved to a new school and I am quite shy, but through Bebo I have made friends with loads of new people and it is so much easier to approach them when I have chatted with them online - Female 17, urban/suburban*
>
> *People can get to know folks [on social networking sites] and they can see past the façade of what they look like; you're actually getting to know what the person's all about - Male 35, urban/suburban*

Shy or introverted people can feel that they are able to communicate more easily via online fora such as social networking sites than face-to-face; this is known as the social compensation theory. Withers (2007) discusses this and contrasts it with the theory that those who are already rich in communication skills and confidence get richer; i.e. social networking sites benefit only those who already have confidence and/or are extrovert and whose communication on these sites is simply an extension of this trait.

Consistent with Withers' research analysis, Ofcom's qualitative research does not find evidence to support unequivocally either of these theories. While the majority of users interviewed were relatively confident, and portrayed this confidence in their communications, a few respondents felt that the online environment allowed them to meet people they wouldn't be able to meet face-to-face, because of their shyness. Similarly, people have the opportunity to project the image they want to, free from the constraints that they may feel in their physical environment.

Treating profiles as a tool for self-promotion

This was not a drawback that people recognised for their own profiles. However, several users we spoke to were highly critical of others who spent a lot of time personalising their pages and who placed a lot of significance on the way they portrayed themselves on their profiles.

For many users, others' efforts at 'self-promotion' made their own use of social networking sites less enjoyable. They reported finding such behaviour 'distasteful and annoying'. This was particularly the case among users aged 20+.

It's so embarrassing when people I know try too hard to make themselves look a certain way; it really changes my opinion of them! - Female 26, rural/semi-rural

Basically making themselves look popular, centre of attraction, look at me, I go to this night or I go here, look how popular I am I've had eighteen visits and things like that, they're just creating this kind of feel-good factor about themselves - Male 30+, urban/suburban

Spending too much time on social networking sites

Some teenagers and adults in their early twenties reported feeling 'addicted' to social networking sites and were aware that their use was squeezing their study time. Many users had experienced this drawback, although to differing degrees.

Some users described how they might go onto their site just to check for messages and then emerge a few hours later – having been drawn into commenting, searching and generally having fun.

6.3   Communicating with others

Building one's social network is an ongoing process.   However, after setting up a site one can start communicating with whoever has access to one's site (the level of access others have depends on the level of privacy settings, covered in section 7).

As previously mentioned, communication can be in many forms, including sending symbolic cues, or putting photos and videos on one's site which others can comment on. Social networkers can also send emails which are private between the sender and the recipient(s) of the email. Written communication can also be in a public forum, such as writing on

someone's 'wall', or comment board. This communication can then be seen by anyone who has access to the user's profile.

Communicating is the most-mentioned activity on social networking sites - talking to friends and family who users see often, those they see rarely, and looking for old friends who they have lost touch with.

It is worth noting that when people communicate through social networking sites it is mostly with people they know in some way. About two-thirds reported talking to friends and family, 47% looked for old friends and 35% talked to people who were friends of friends. In comparison, 17% talked to people they didn't know. However, those who reported talking to people they didn't know were significantly more likely to be 16-24 (22%) year olds than 25-34 (7%) year olds. In terms of ethnic minority users, Black Caribbean and Black African users are more likely to talk to people that they don't know via the sites.[40]

However, using social networking sites is not exclusively about communication. Respondents also reported looking at others' sites without leaving messages (40%) and listening to music/finding out about bands (29%). 16-24 year olds (42%) and males (34%) were more likely than others (29% UK average) to say they used social networking sites to listen to music.

Figure 19: Features people use on social networking sites
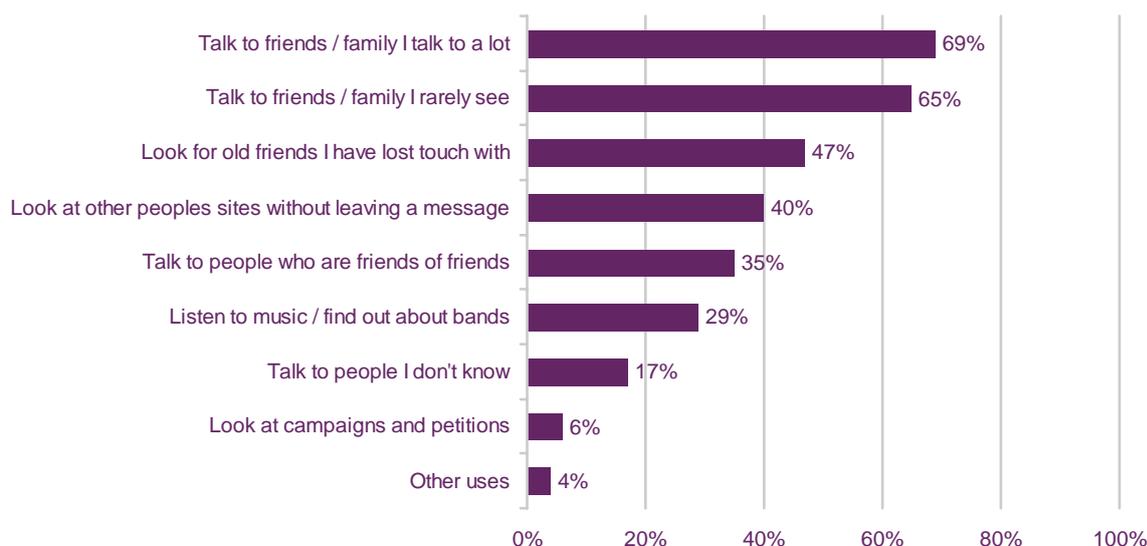
Q. Do you regularly use these sites for any of the things shown on this card?
Base: All adults who have a current social networking page or profile (347)
*Source: Ofcom media literacy audit December 2007*

Figure 20 shows that more than nine out of ten children use social networking sites to stay in touch with friends or family with whom they are in regular contact and 79% use the sites to communicate with friends and family who they rarely see.[41]

For children, browsing their own and others' profiles is also a key reason behind their social networking site use, and 92% reported doing this.

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[40] Source: Ofcom Media Literacy Audit among Ethnic Minority Groups (to be published in summer 2008).
[41] Caution should be exercised in comparing Figures 19 and 20. They are not directly comparable due to differences in the question asked.

The majority of children (59%) reported that they had used social networking sites to make new friends. Although this was significantly lower than for other activities such as communicating with friends and family, and browsing profiles, it showed that many children saw this as an important use of social networking sites.

Fig 20: Reasons for using social networking sites – children
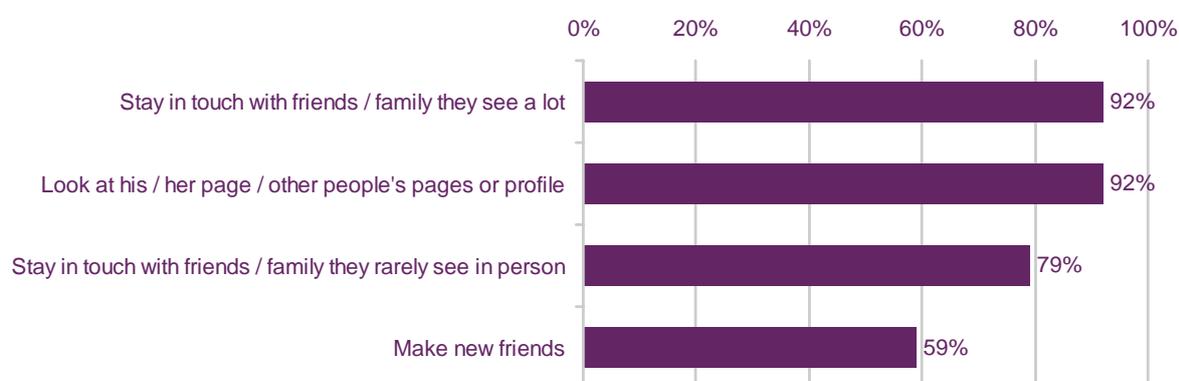
Q: Do you ever use social networking sites for any of the following?
Base: All children who have a page/profile on a social networking site (220)
Source: Ofcom – Children, Young People & Online Content, October 2007

Qualitative discussions with social networkers confirmed that communicating with known contacts is the primary reason that most people use social networking sites. This was true across the range of age groups we spoke to. For children, due to differences in survey questions it is not possible to say what proportion use social networking sites to contact people they don't already know. However, our research for Ofcom's submission to the Byron Review did show that 59% of children who used social networking sites claimed to do so to make new friends, without specifying whether these were people previously unknown to them or not.

Sometimes there is a real buzz when you get to school about what happened on Bebo the night before – Boy 15, rural/semi-rural

It's good that you can stay in touch with people. There's no way that certain people from uni I'd be in touch with, but luckily by being on Facebook, they were able to get back in touch so that was really good. It's kind of; if you're not on one of those sites then you're missing out – Female 26, rural/semi-rural

People using social networking sites to bully, lie, start rumours and set up fake profiles

While it is clear that there are many benefits to communicating on social networking sites, whether keeping in touch, managing relationships or receiving positive feedback from peers, there is also the potential for people to make negative or upsetting comments in a very public way.

In interviews this was a common drawback mentioned by younger users of social networking sites, although only a minority had actually witnessed it. Unlike in the real world, younger users felt that social networking sites did not have firm rules, social conventions or obvious boundaries. This meant that users could behave in whatever way they liked without any

formal constraints. A few users reported that, in their experience, some people abused that freedom.

Some younger respondents who were committed users of these sites reported using them 'to get back at people they had fallen out with', by posting rude or abusive message on their sites or even going so far as to set up a fake site in the person's name and posting obscene messages about them.

We set up a fake page for a girl at school who we fell out with; we only did it for a laugh and took it down after about a week – Girl 14, rural/semi-rural

It was going round the school, [that this girl] had had an argument with another girl and she took her picture and put it on her site but she didn't tell the girl she had and she wrote bad things about her to other people and the site went round school and they had another big argument - Girl 15, urban/suburban

Contact with old offline friends

Second only to maintaining contact with friends and family seen at least occasionally, regaining contact with old friends is a main reason for adults to use social networking sites. For some people this contact is positive and provides a way to stay in touch that they consider would be impossible otherwise.

However, there is a flipside to this. Not every long-lost acquaintance is necessarily welcome as a 'friend'. A social networking site user might easily receive requests for contact from people they would prefer to forget.

Older users (aged over 30, and often within the Faithful segment), were most likely to mention this drawback. While they enjoyed being contacted by old friends who they liked, they dreaded being contacted by people from their past who they were happy to have lost touch with. For some people this was particularly the case with regard to their ex-partners.

What do I do? I really worry that certain people from school will just come back and haunt me - Female 26, rural/semi-rural

In some of these cases an interesting tension emerged. While users often had no wish to be contacted by certain people from their past, some users were reluctant to take the step of blocking them from being their 'friend'. This was because 'they didn't want to hurt the individual's feelings' by not accepting them as their 'friend'.

Some, although not the majority, did mention using social networking sites to communicate with people they didn't already know

Those who had communicated with people they did not know offline appeared to participate in this communication in two different ways: using social networking sites to communicate with, and eventually meet, new people, or using the sites just to talk to new people without meeting them.

Most people we spoke to who used social networking sites to meet people they didn't know in person did so for dating purposes. Single people of all ages and both genders claimed

that social networking sites were exciting venues for meeting new romantic interests. Older single users were more interested in meeting people who shared their interests rather than those who just looked attractive - this was more frequently a criterion among younger users. Social networking sites were felt to offer great opportunities and a cheap alternative to online dating.

I used to be a member of Match.com [a paid-subscription dating site], but there is no reason to pay anymore as you can use Facebook for free – Female 29, rural/semi-rural

I'm a single mum and at home with the kids most of the time, it's a great way to meet new people – Female 32, urban/suburban

While using social networking sites in this way emerged as a strong characteristic among teenagers and people in their early 20s, it was also evident among older users, particularly female single parents, who found it difficult to get out and meet new people.

Case study

Alice is a single mother, aged 36, living in an urban/suburban area, who receives little support with childcare. She spends much of her time in the evening chatting to people she has met in chat rooms or through social networking sites *and MSN. She has had an affair with one man she met online which lasted eight months. They would talk to each other daily and their avatars would go and 'get a room' at the Habbo Hotel.[42] After eight months they met in public and she learnt that he was married, so she finished the online relationship, although she really felt they 'had something special'. Despite her experience, she still feels that* social networking sites *are a much easier way for single mothers to meet people, especially as they are not able to go out very much and it gives them a chance to talk to lots of people and feel less isolated.*

The motivations were different for those who just wanted to talk to new people. For teenagers and 20-somethings, there seemed to be a prestige factor associated with the number of friends they had (often in the hundreds). In reality, most only knew about 50 of these friends offline and were willing to accept people they did not know to 'boost their numbers.' This was a strong characteristic of Alpha Socialisers, Attention Seekers and some Followers. Faithfuls, on the other hand, tended not to do this.

It's sort of weird but good when you make friends with people that you don't know – Male 21, rural/semi-rural

However, as mentioned above this tended to be true only for a minority of users we spoke to, and many reported that they communicated only with people they had some sort of connection with, whether knowing them offline or through a friend.

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[42] See glossary in Annex 1.

Even though my friends just add random people, I tend only to add people I know. I don't tend to add people down in London or in America. I don't see the point as I'm never going to meet them and it's like making conversation for the sake of it – Male 17, rural/semi-rural

Parties organised through social networking sites getting out of hand

In section 6.2 we identified that users felt that social networking sites enabled them to manage their relationships efficiently, because the sites enabled them to communicate with many people at the same time. If privacy settings are open, these communications can be seen by anyone who is a user of the specific website, or in some cases anyone who uses the internet. Furthermore, there is nothing to prevent anyone copying information or photos from one user's site to another.

This lack of control over who sees information or passes it on can result in a situation in which someone has announced a party at their house, and many people, not necessarily known to the social networker, have turned up, with unwanted consequences. This type of incident has been reported in the media over the last 12 months.

A number of users in our qualitative sample had either been to or had heard about, parties that had been organised via a social networking site and which had subsequently got out of hand. This was usually due to the fact that the organiser had publicly announced the party to their entire network and therefore had little or no control over who attended. Some users recounted stories where homes had been 'trashed,' possessions damaged and the police called to disperse the party.

I went to a party which was advertised on MySpace and loads of people turned up that he didn't know. His Mum and Dad were upstairs and they called the police in the end because it got so out of hand. The word can get round so much quicker on these sites. People don't realise until it happens to them. – Male 20, rural/semi-rural

No one in our sample had actually hosted such a party but many people mentioned this as a concern. Some users had closely followed similar stories of out-of-control parties in the media.

6.4   Other functions on social networking sites

Social networking sites have numerous other functions, in addition to setting up profiles, communicating with friends and loading personal photos and videos. It is not possible to outline all of the potential uses in this report, and in such a dynamic industry, any list of functions would quickly be out of date.

The purpose of this sub-section is to introduce some of the other functions that were mentioned in Ofcom's research, and to look at some of the themes explored in recent third-party research.

Applications add versatility to social networking sites

Social networking sites have become increasingly versatile. Beyond basic communication and networking, users can keep up with favourite bands and add applications such as games, quizzes and virtual gift giving.

> *It's really versatile; you can not only keep up with friends, but play games and meet new people – Female 27, urban/suburban*

There are a vast number of computer applications which users can add to their profiles at the click of a button. This has been made possible because sites such as Facebook and MySpace have opened up their interfaces to third-party developers who design applications for use on the site. Each social networking site has its own brand of games and activities which the user can download. These range from applications which let you turn your friends into zombies, to maps on which you can record all the places that you have visited. Some of these applications have proved very popular among site users and have helped to maintain the momentum of social networking sites use.

Two other features of social networking sites that have proved very popular are the ability to add music and video content. Most social networking site profiles can have music players or video players embedded into them. These players let users listen to or watch an almost limitless number of songs and videos while they browse their profile.

Unsigned and new music artists have been a key driver in the popularity of certain sites, notably MySpace. The popularity of some of today's artists such as Lily Allen has been widely reported to have been assisted by the interest generated on MySpace.[43]

Bebo has pioneered development of broadcast video on social networking sites with its signature show *KateModern*. This is a video drama series, funded by product placement. It has attracted 27 million views since it was launched in August 2007.[44]

6.5   Using social networking sites to engage in political and social issues

A common complaint about people generally, and young people in particular, is that they are increasingly apathetic about politics, and due to the popularity of social networking among this group, some see social networking sites as an ideal way of reaching them.

Aside from individuals' profiles, some social networking sites allow users to set up their own interest group profiles, which individuals can add as 'friends', receive updates from and be involved with the group. There is a wide range of groups on social networking sites including groups based on brand appreciation, geographic location, music bands, activities, charities, social issues, political issues and political parties.

Very few respondents in the Ofcom qualitative sample used social networking sites for the purpose of taking part in social or political issues. A minority (mostly older users) acknowledged that social networking sites could have a wider application beyond their social communication purpose and that they could be used to bring about positive social or political change. No one had yet done this themselves, although one respondent reported using his page to raise awareness about the charity that he ran.

Despite the lack of actual participation, many people in the sample though that this was a good idea and should be encouraged.

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[43] http://observer.guardian.co.uk/omm/story/0,,1776732,00.html
[44] http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/tv_and_radio/article3198167.ece

Case Study

Brian is 36 and lives in an urban/suburban area. His wife introduced him to social networking sites and he has since set up a page to raise awareness about his charity.

He does not use social networking sites for making new friends, nor does he spend much time catching up with old ones – 'That's my wife's job' – but he does use his site to raise money and awareness of his charity and to find out what's the latest in the vintage car world. He only tends to access his account when he has a specific need and is quite negative about people who spend hours socialising through these types of sites. He wishes that people would use them more for positive social good.

Despite social networkers' comparatively low participation in social and political activities, compared with other activities such as communicating with friends, the media and social literature do give examples of this happening.

An example of a charity using a social networking site in practice is the Facebook group set up to support the poppy appeal. An article by Hitwise Experian (2007) stated that the Royal British Legion had set up the Facebook group *Poppy People* with the aim of encouraging young people to volunteer their time to the poppy appeal. By early 2007 it had received 300 volunteers in the group.

Hitwise Experian reported on the further success of the campaign in increasing web traffic for the Legion. [45] While the Legion's homepage received less than 2% of its traffic from Facebook during the campaign, the micro-site it set up specifically for the Poppy Appeal (www.poppy.org.uk) received over 10% of its visitors from Facebook.

As noted by Williamson (2004)[46] "…the internet is a powerful tool for connecting people with information. ICT is valuable when harnessed (like other media) for communicating a message, however, it also extends the traditional concepts of media into an interactive experience, where the views of many can be expressed and potentially disseminated widely. It is this potential that sets ICT apart from traditional print and electronic media and which offers great potential for citizens to become more involved in the political and democratic processes."

Campaigning networks and social networking site groups have been set up by organisations such as Amnesty International and Stop the Traffik.[47] And hundreds of pressure groups have been set up by grass-roots activists - over 400,000 people joined a group set up to support the protests of the Burmese monks against military rule in October 2007.[48]

While registered organisations can benefit from social networking communities, individuals are also using social networking sites to organise support for their causes. A recent example of this is a protest campaign launched on Facebook to stop the Bristol and Bath Railway

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[45] Hitwise Experian, The Impact of Social Networking in the UK (2007), p. 5.

[46] Williamson, A. (2004, Apr). Getting ready for eDemocracy: A five-stage maturity model. Paper presented at the Australian Electronic Governance Conference, Centre for Public Policy, Melbourne, VIC.

[47] http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2007/oct/09/news.uknews. See also http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=233860517 and http://www.myspace.com/stopthetraffik

[48] http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/pm/weblog.php?id=P309

being used as a bus lane.[49] The site aims to raise awareness of the issue among interested parties as well as to bring the protest to the attention of decision-makers.

On a national political level, the use of social networking sites in the 2008 US elections demonstrates some of the potential for using social networking sites to mobilise young people to participate in politics and as a tool for promoting individual candidates. There are several ways in which politics and social networking sites have come together, including:

- politicians establishing a social networking site profile and using this to communicate with supporters;

- fora set up by the site to allow users to debate issues, post comments and take part in polls or offer political content; and

- on Facebook, ABC news reports and videos are streamed onto the forum and the news reports have their own profiles

6.6   Advertising, marketing and information mining

This report has already established that social networking sites have uses over and above individuals setting up profiles and communicating with other individuals. In addition to organised groups for bands, charities, political, social and interest groups, there are commercial opportunities for businesses on social networking sites.

As already mentioned, almost all respondents in Ofcom's qualitative research used social networking sites for personal communications purposes, but we also spoke to a very small number who used it for other purposes. One respondent gave an example of how he had used his profile for a small-scale commercial purpose.

I do a bit of gardening on the side and have a small advert sort of thing about it on my MySpace page – Male 24, rural/semi-rural

The benefit is that this is a very cheap way of reaching a potentially very large audience. Although only a single comment, we have mentioned this to draw attention to the potential use of social networking sites in this way in the future, and how individuals as well as organisations can use them to their advantage.[50]

Media coverage of social networking sites being used for commercial reasons tends to focus on large-scale operations and well-known brands. The advantages of using social networking sites for these organisations are numerous, although there are potential risks as well.

The huge numbers involved in social networking, and the dominance of the traditionally hard-to-reach cohort of 18 - 24 year olds, raise companies' interest in marketing to social networkers. The enormous amount of information that sites hold about their users enables marketers to target their message to specific demographics or interest groups in a much more precise way than is possible through search engines or traditional advertising

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[49]

http://www.thisisbristol.co.uk/displayNode.jsp?nodeId=145365&command=displayContent&sourceNode=145191&contentPK=19622574&folderPk=83726&pNodeId=144922.
[50] It should be noted that some social networking sites prohibit the use of their site for commercial purposes.

channels. For example, a marketer could target 40-45 year old women living in Newcastle and interested in tennis.

Another way of reaching consumers is for brands to set up their own profiles on social networking sites, accepting 'friends' who they can keep up to date with the latest brand news. An example of this is Warner Bros. who set up a profile for the film *300* which attracted 200,000 friends.[51] These friends were then able to view trailers and discuss the film.

Experian Integrated Marketing and Hitwise[52] reported that social networking sites are becoming an important source of traffic for other websites, particularly websites in the entertainment industry. They described this as being due to organic growth, such as a local band building a following, as well as more organised growth, such as brand campaigns or support groups.

The appeal of many of these sites comes from the fact that they are not corporate spaces; organisations will need to bear this in mind if they have or are planning to have a presence on social networking sites.

Social networking sites are a potential mine of information for others to explore

Although incidence rates are not available, anecdotal reports exist of people using social networking sites to look for, and collect, information or impressions of people based on their site. There are many reasons why someone might want to search for information about another person, with media reports and research suggesting the following:

- employers and recruitment agents looking up prospective employees;

- users looking up colleagues, candidates, bosses, ex-partners (Get Safe Online[53] reported that 29% of social networkers have looked up colleagues, candidates or their boss); and

- educational facilities checking prospective and current students.

Recently there has been some debate about the use of publicly-available information on social networking sites being used outside the social networking context. For example, in the aftermath of the assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, journalists were able to use Facebook to find out personal information about her son and heir Bilawal, a student at Oxford University.[54] This information was then used by the media in its reporting.

Profile information can also be accessed by people who intend to use it for illegal reasons such as identify theft and financial fraud. Depending on the level of information disclosed, this information could also be used to locate the user, resulting in concerns about stalking and paedophiles.

Concerns about privacy, fraud and safety have been referred to throughout this report in connection with social networking activities such as filling out profile information,

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[51] Conversational marketing: Word of Mouse. Will Facebook, MySpace, and other social networking sites transform advertising http://www.economist.com/business/displaystory.cfm?story_id=10102992
[52] Hitwise Experian, The Impact of Social Networking in the UK (2007).
[53] Get Safe Online Report 2007 http://www.getsafeonline.org/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=1469.
[54] http://www.guardian.co.uk/pakistan/Story/0,,2237211,00.html

understanding privacy settings and building friend lists. The following chapter will explore these issues in more detail.

Section 7

Privacy and safety

7.1 Privacy and safety concerns

The privacy and safety of users and users' information on social networking sites has been covered extensively in the media recently as well as in third-party reports from organisations such as the Pew Foundation, the OECD and the academic community. While the majority of the research focuses on children, these are issues relevant to adults as well.

Ofcom's qualitative research on social networking sites showed that privacy and safety issues did not emerge as 'top of mind' for the majority of users. Social networking sites were associated with the respondents' homes and leisure time and promoted a sense of ease and fun. Most users were less aware and seemingly unwilling to consider that there could be a more serious side to this activity.

The OECD, in its report *Participative Web and User-Created Content* outlined several privacy problems with social networking sites and user-created content sites (which in this report are referred to as UGC sites) which included: privacy violations identity theft (phishing),[55] as well as the use of social networking sites by employers to check potential employees.

The *Get Safe Online Report 2007* stated that users had reported looking up their ex-boyfriends and girlfriends, colleagues, candidates or their boss.[56] The report also highlighted the possibility of information being passed on without consent. It stated that 27% of 18-24 year olds had posted information or photos of other people without their consent and 7% of people had passed on contact details from someone else's online profile without their consent.

Ofcom's quantitative research investigated awareness of privacy settings among users, along with other media literacy issues. Users' understanding of, and concern about potential risks were also investigated qualitatively.

7.2 Awareness of privacy settings

Almost all respondents were able to say what the privacy status of their profile was; only 3% were unable to say. Figure 21 illustrates that the privacy settings of adult social networkers were fairly evenly divided - 48% reported that their profile was able to be seen only by their friends and 44% said their profile could be seen by anyone.

25-34 year olds were more likely than younger (18-24) people to say that only their friends could see their profile. Due to low base sizes it is possible to look only at the age profile of users aged under 35.

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[55] OECD 2007 'Participative Web and User-Created Content: Web 2.0, Wikis and Social Networking' ISBN 978-92-64-03746-5, page 95
[56] Get Safe Online Report 2007 http://www.getsafeonline.org/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=1469.

Figure 21: Awareness of who can see social networking profile
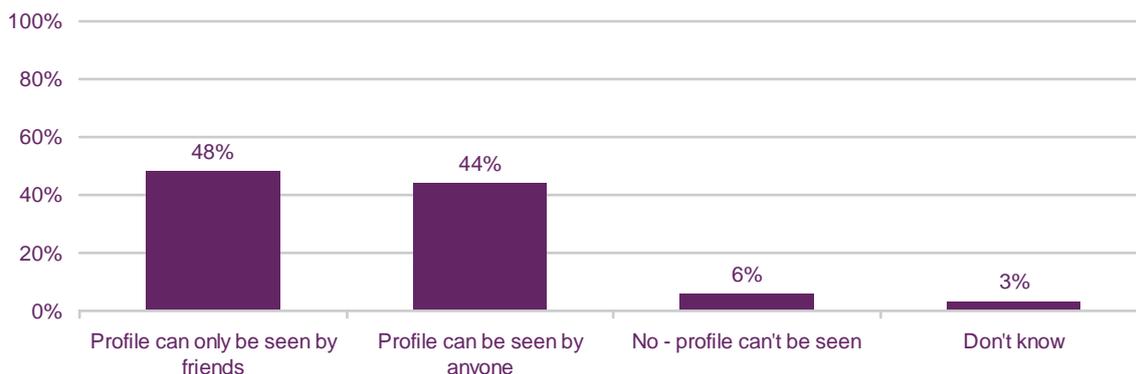
Q. And do you know if this profile can be seen by other people?
Base: All adults who have a current social networking page or profile (347)
Source: Ofcom media literacy audit October- December 2007

Although not directly comparable, due to different questions and sample sizes, the results for children appeared to be similar to those for adults. Forty-one per cent of children aged 8-17 who had a visible profile had their profile set so that it was visible to anyone.

Data used in Ofcom's submission to the Byron Review also suggested that parents tended to underestimate whether their child's profile was visible to anyone. Figure 22 shows that 30% of parents thought that their child's profile was visible to anyone, whereas 41% of children said that anyone could view their profile. It is possible that much of this was due to the fact that a significant minority (16%) of parents didn't know the visibility status of their child's profile.

Figure 22: Visibility of social networking sites profile – parents vs. children
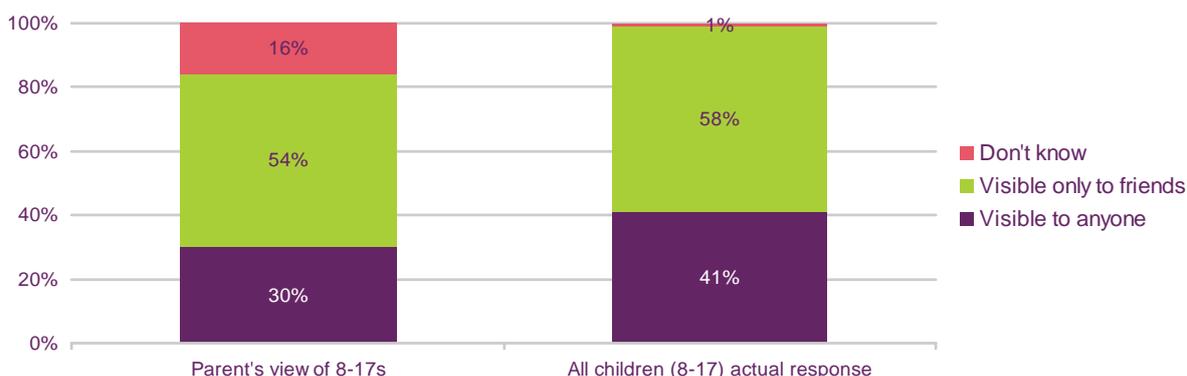
Q: Who is your child's/your profile visible to?
Base: All parents of 8-17s whose child had a visible profile (124); all children aged 8-17 who had a visible profile (183).
Source: Ofcom – Children, Young People & Online Content, October 2007.

Research conducted by *Get Safe Online,*[57] supports the view that many people willingly post sensitive personal details about themselves online. This report stated that 25% of all people using social networking sites have posted data such as their personal phone number, home address or email address on their site profile. According to the research, younger people were more likely to have reported posting this information; 34% of 18-24 year olds and 30% of 25-34 year olds had posted their personal details on their profile.

7.3 Areas of potential risk

While the potential risk is well documented, there appears to be a lack of research on the actual incidence of crimes such as identity theft as a result of the publication of personal details on these sites. There also seems to be a lack of research into what UK social networking site users are and are not posting online. In the US the Pew Foundation has published several reports on how teenagers are using social networking sites.[58] In contrast to a commonly-held belief, Lenhart and Madden (2006 Pew Foundation) reported that most teenagers were taking steps to protect themselves online. Protection involved a variety of measures including: listing fake details on their profile, not filling out details they perceived could allow a stranger to locate them, and only allowing friends to view their details.

Research suggests that users' views, and in particular teenage users' views, are quite different from those of industry commentators and governing bodies. The premise of social networking sites is sharing details and communicating with others, and therefore many users do not see what the problem is. Ofcom's qualitative research illustrates that some younger users can be suspicious of people who don't allow free access to their site. They wonder, when the whole purpose is to find people and communicate, why anyone would hide personal details, and are suspicious of what such a person has to hide.

Boyd (2007) illustrated that teenagers were using several strategies to protect themselves, not from strangers as they are often encouraged to do, but from their parents. Examples of strategies they used are:

- entering false details (such as name, age, location);

- changing privacy settings so only friends can see the profile; and

- setting up a duplicate site, for content not intended to be seen by parents.

There is an inherent tension for people who use tactics like these about whether to limit access to their profile. If they make it difficult for specific people (whether parents, fraudsters or employers) to contact them, they also make it difficult for everyone else to find them. For many people this is a considerable drawback.

Through in-depth discussions on the issues of privacy and safety, social networkers in the Ofcom qualitative research highlighted a number of possible risk areas:

- **Leaving the privacy settings 'open' as default**. Some users, while unaware that this was the default setting, were not concerned that people they did not know could see their page and their personal details. Other users, however, had presumed that only those in their friendship network could see their details.

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[57] http://www.getsafeonline.org/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=1469.
[58] Pew Internet and American Life project. Lenhart A. and Madden M. (2006) Teens, Privacy and Online Social Networks; How teens manage their online identities and personal information in the age of MySpace

> *Anybody could find out who you are. But I wouldn't know how to make it so people couldn't see me – Boy 11, rural/semi-rural*
>
> *Before tonight I couldn't be bothered to look at things like that, but now I am worried what people I don't know can see – Female 32, urban/suburban*

- **Giving out personal information**. Many users didn't conceal their personal details and often included their name, where they lived, the school(s) they attended or their place of employment. Some of them also included their MSN account details.

- The apparent contradiction between protecting privacy and the activity of social networking was expressed by some respondents.

> *How else are people going to get in contact with you, it is the whole point I would have thought? – Male 22, rural/semi-rural*

- A minority of users were aware that their personal details could be stolen and fall into the hands of criminals, who could use them to build up a profile of an individual and go on to impersonate them. In discussion some users felt that one way of dealing with this would be to post few, or fake, details in their profile. They did not feel that this would be a significant drawback. However, there was no evidence that these people were actually doing this, despite making the suggestion.

> *The security thing … it made me kind of wee bit more aware now that I would look at that a bit more and watch what I'm doing cos I didn't realise, I did have my kids' ages on there, and it does sit at the bottom of the page, updates with the date, so they can work out how old your kids are and all that kind of stuff - Male 30+, urban/suburban*

- **Posting personal photographs**. A number of issues were raised in relation to this point. Firstly, that some teenage girls and young women were posting sexually provocative photographs to seek attention. This appeared to be detrimentally affecting these young women's reputations. Secondly, that some older users with children were sharing their private family photographs with their entire social networking site, when they thought that only their friendship network could see them.

> *I am single and it is nice to get the attention of men. Some of the photos I post are a bit racy, but really they aren't meant to be that serious and are a bit of a giggle – Girl 15, urban/suburban*
>
> *I had no idea that the whole of Facebook could see my little girl in the bath – Female 34, urban/suburban*

- **Becoming online friends with people they did not know**. This included accepting people they did not know to boost their number of friends overall. They recognised that by accepting people they didn't know, they could be opening up their profile to inappropriate and unpleasant comments. However, most users were not particularly

concerned about this. Such comments were often considered to be more amusing than alarming and users generally did not deem it necessary to report them to the site.

> *What can they do to you? They can't harm you physically, so I don't get wound up by it – Female 52, urban/suburban*

- **Meeting people they didn't know**. A number of teenagers and older users had done this and felt that they had mitigated any risks by meeting in a public place and bringing friends along. In essence, many were using social networking sites as a form of free online dating.

> *It happens all the time nowadays it is just how people meet – Female 24, urban/suburban*

Our qualitative research indicates that some people are more likely than others to engage in potentially risky behaviour. This suggests that communications about the implications of potentially risky behaviour may need to be looked at in different ways for different groups of people.

7.4   Reasons why users are not doing more to mitigate risk

As mentioned previously, many respondents in the Ofcom qualitative research did not think about the potential drawbacks of sharing information; they only tended to discuss this when prompted. There were several reasons for such low levels of concern, and these are listed below.

- **A reasoned judgement that the risks on social networking sites were manageable and outweighed by the positive aspects.** Our research suggested that some users had consciously weighed up the risks of social networking sites and decided that they were manageable.

> *What can they do to you? They can't harm you physically, so I don't get wound up by it – Female 52, urban/suburban*

- **Lack of awareness of the issues.** Some users were unaware that their behaviour could be seen as putting them at risk. When these issues were discussed in the research sessions, many respondents expressed a desire to protect themselves more fully.

> *How can we come to any harm when we are sitting at home, nothing really bad can happen – Girl 15, urban/suburban*

- **There was an assumption that the social networking site had taken care of any privacy and safety issues.** Some users thought that the sites moderated content.

> *I would imagine they are watching what is going on and would not let certain types of material be posted – Male 37, urban/suburban*

- **Levels of information communication technology (ICT) confidence**. Users who were less confident with ICT were more resistant to changing their personal settings or exploring the more technical aspects of social networking sites.

- **Privacy and safety information was difficult to find and use**. All users, even those who were confident with ICT, found the settings on most of the major social networking sites difficult to understand and manipulate. Facebook, in particular, was mentioned in this context by a number of respondents.

> *It seems very difficult to make your profile private, so I just wouldn't bother – Female 23, urban/suburban*

- **Other online sites and facilities were perceived to have more obvious threats**. For example, online dating sites, which encouraged individuals to meet, and online banking and shopping sites which involved the transfer of money, were both thought to carry more obvious and concerning risks.

> *What could happen, nothing bad, it is not like internet banking where they can steal all your money – Male 25, urban/suburban*

- **Younger users felt that they were 'invincible,'** and that even if they were affected by the risks discussed, they would be able to deal with them.

- **The need for interaction and attention outweighed the need to be safety conscious**. This was particularly the case for younger female users who in some cases appeared to have low self-esteem and craved attention.

> *A lot of people wouldn't listen to [Bebo's privacy video]. Most people couldn't be bothered, they'd just go straight on and start talking to people – Boy 12, rural/semi-rural*

Discussions with children and adults using social networking sites highlighted an important point. This was that there is a clear overlap between the benefits and risks of some online social networking activities. For example, the underlying point of social networking is to share information. The benefit is that users can find each other easily. The risk is that users cannot control who sees their information. Our research found that forty-four per cent of adults with current social networking profiles said that their profile was visible to anyone, while 41% of 8-17 year olds with visible profiles said their profile can be seen by anyone.

Section 8

Literature review of harm and offence in social networking

This section is a summary of the literature review compiled by Andrea Millwood Hargrave, Sonia Livingstone and David Brake, which forms part of Ofcom's submission to the Byron Review. The review can be found at
http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/telecoms/reports/byron/annex6.pdf

Most research regarding potential internet-related harm relates to risky contact rather than content, primarily that involving interaction with other internet users. Indeed, this update found a number of studies that addressed the risk of inappropriate contact (e.g. bullying - for which more research exists than for the first review, and also online contact with strangers). The research suggests that such contact may put users at risk of harm, either directly (as in meeting strangers in dangerous situations) or indirectly, from the consequences of their online behaviour.

Research on social networking sites has concentrated on the internet, although these are also available on mobile telephony as a delivery platform. There are differences in the principal sites used – in the UK, Bebo (and then MySpace) is currently more popular while in the US much of the research has looked at Facebook, among others, partly because of relative popularity, partly because US research tends to concentrate on university students (who use Facebook). Research on the risk of harm has concentrated on social networking sites (raising issues of privacy) rather than information uploaded onto user-generated content sites. For social networking especially, the issue of verifiability and anonymity is a problem. A significant proportion of young people communicate with strangers online and post material about themselves which would be considered 'private' in most circumstances. The ability to restrict access to sites is known about but not always used. Thus, knowingly, some young people give away inappropriate (private) information publicly (allowing access to 'anyone'). However, it seems likely that many more also do so inadvertently, as a result of limitations in both internet literacy and interface design.

This leads to concerns about the possibility of underestimating the unanticipated or future consequences of making private information public, especially since it appears that many young people have an inadequate understanding of the long-term consequences of publishing such information (e.g. employers are reported to look at social networking sites when considering employees) The risk of inappropriate contact (especially in relation to sexual predation), harassment and bullying (including the easy dissemination of harassment or bullying content to others in the network) represent significant and growing policy concerns when considering the regulation of the internet.

Research suggests that young people may be aware of the risks, especially regarding social networking sites, but this awareness of these issues and problems is not always translated into action. Thus there is growing evidence that, notwithstanding their many advantages and pleasures, social networking sites permit young people to create profiles that expose the individual or that ridicule or harass others, that using such sites for extensive periods of time (as is common) may isolate users of these sites from contact with 'real' people, albeit only for a few, addicted users.

In short, the widespread accessibility of the internet, along with its affordability, anonymity and convenience appears to increase the likelihood of media harm; although some argue that there is little new about online content, familiar content

merely having moved online, most disagree, expressing concern about the accessibility of more extreme forms of content that are, potentially, harmful and offensive.

It also appears likely that when children receive hostile, bullying or hateful messages, they are generally ill-equipped to respond appropriately or to cope with the emotional upset this causes; similarly, parents are unclear how they can know about, or intervene in, risky behaviours undertaken – deliberately or inadvertently – by their children. In general, the case for further research seems clear, firstly in relation to the characteristics of vulnerable groups (including strategies for intervention) and secondly in relation to the ways in which the internet seems to support or facilitate certain kinds of harmful peer-to-peer activity.

The Joint Information Systems Committee in the UK commissioned the market research organisation, MORI, to conduct an online survey among 500 16-18 year olds who hope to go to university, and a small qualitative project. Among the research findings relating to the use of ICT as a learning tool, were the findings:

- Only 5% of this sample claim never to use social networking websites; 65% use them regularly.

- Three-fifths (62%) use wikis, blogs or online networks; 44% maintain their own blog or website.

- Only a fifth (21%) are part of an online community such as Second Life.

- The group thinks technology is very important to their social lives but not a substitute for face-to-face interaction.

A survey in the US conducted as part of the ongoing Pew Internet and American Life project in late November 2006 (Lenhart and Madden, 2007) found that more than half of all teenagers in the USA who have access to the internet use social networking sites.[59] Of these most (66%) say their site is restricted or 'private'. Frequency of use is high with nearly half of the sample (48%) saying they visit the site at least once a day. There is a clear gender bias with 70% of older girls (15-17 year olds) more likely to have used a social networking site and created online profiles, while just over half of the boys have done so (54% say they have used a social networking site while 57% of boys say they have created an online profile).

Teens & Friends on Social Networking Sites

As we will see echoed in other surveys, the Pew Internet survey finds that most young people (91%) use social networking sites to stay in touch with their circle of friends; 82% say they stay in touch with their wider circle. Hargittai (2007) suggests that the choice of social networking site used may increase both digital and social inequality.[60] Digital inequality is a consideration as those who do not have access to the Internet at a friend's or family members' home are far les likely to use such sites.

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[59] Lenhart, A. and M. Madden (2007) "Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview" Pew Internet and American Life Project
http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/198/report_display.asp
[60] Hargittai, E. (2007) "Whose Space? Differences among Users and Non-Users of Social Network Sites ", Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13 (1). http://www.blackwellsynergy.com/toc/jcmc/

Further, Hargittai finds that high and low social status users in the US cluster together around certain sites. Hinduja and Patchin (2007) undertook a content analysis of publicly available, but randomised, MySpace profile pages (N=2423) produced by those under 18 years old.[61] On average they found that teenage users of the profiles they surveyed have 65 friends. They also examined frequency of visiting the sites and found that about one-third of users had not logged on in the three months prior to the coding period. Over a third (38%) had logged on in the previous three days. The researchers question therefore the suggested high frequency of use of these sites as a staple for young people. In contrast with the Lenhart and Madden findings above, Hinduja and Patchin find that a smaller percentage of users, about 40%, restrict access to their site.

In the Anchor Watch Your Space survey in Ireland,[62] 82.5% of the sample of 10-20 year olds say they have used social networking sites, and 36% are daily users. The difference in gender found is a difference in the length of time of each session in the site, with girls more likely to spend more time on the sites. Within the sample 15% say they have more than one profile. This survey found that 71% of the respondents have not set their profiles to private - this is a higher proportion the researchers say, than that found either in the UK or US. They suggest this is a technical issue related to the complexities of the architecture of Bebo, the most popular social networking site in Ireland.

A search of the literature (cited in Livingstone, 2007) shows certain trends in the way social networking sites are used[63]:

- Most contact on social networking sites is with people known to the user, or with whom there is a shared interest

- There is some evidence that while social networking sites are displacing certain forms of electronic communication such as emails and chat rooms, other forms of communication are being developed (such as instant messaging) although direct contact is still preferred.

- The distinction between online and offline communications becomes less clear as technologies are increasingly incorporated into daily life.

- For young people such as teenagers, social networking sites allow them to take 'safe' risks or to use the risks as opportunities to test various adolescent behaviours.

Livingstone (2007) interviewed a small number of British teenagers (16 teenagers aged 13-16) in an ethnographic study, looking at their use of and behaviour within social networking sites.[64] She found that the technologies did not in fact sustain the needs and desires of these teenagers. They had a sophisticated gradation of friendship and this could not be supported by the social networking sites they used, as these generally do not permit distinctions among levels of friendship or intimacy.

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[61] Hinduja, S. and J. Patchin, W. (in press) "Personal Information of Adolescents on the Internet: A Quantitative Content Analysis of MySpace", Journal of Adolescence, (2007) (doi.10.1016/j.adolescence.2007.05.004)
[62] The Anchor Watch Your Space Survey: Survey of the Irish teenagers use of social networking websites (2007) Anchor Youth Centre. http://www.watchyourspace.ie/article.aspx?id=7816
[63] Livingstone, S Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression (in press)
[64] Livingstone, S. (in press) Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation on the internet. *New Media and Society*.

Mesch and Talmud (2007) in Israel found that relationships developed offline are stronger than those created online, again supporting the view that offline interactions are not seen by respondents as replacements for actual relationships and friendships.[65] Other research also suggests that these technologies are used to enable social relationships – and the entire variety of devices available is used.[66] Participants in Dwyer's study (2007) in the US switched between devices and communication systems as they wished. Similarly, Ellison et al (2007) show that social networking sites in the US are used to develop social relationships and may be a positive force from those who otherwise have weak ties with people on the site they used (in this case the site studied was Facebook).[67]

As this report is concerned mainly with harm, this is not explored further here but it does underline the finding that users of social networking sites tend to communicate and interact predominantly with those within their social circle, although the radius of that circle is rather wider than it might be in an offline world. In short, social networking sites have a definite place in the lexicon of social interaction by providing insights into, for example, one's own identity through the actual presentation of self and through the way in which the network of relationships (of which such sites are one node) is developed:

Each profile gains its meaning from the network to which it is connected and these links provide the basis for trust (Livingstone, 2007)

Livingstone finds that teenagers present themselves in different ways, based on their ages. Younger participants present '*a highly decorated, stylistically elaborate identity*' while older participants aim to create '*a notion of identity lived through authentic relationships with others*' (Livingstone, 2007). The creation of these identities, she argues, contains an element of risk which public policy may try and manage.

Boyd and Heer (2006) also conducted ethnographic studies on the profile segment of the social networking sites, Friendster.[68] They found that the presentation of one's self is determined and given structure by the identities of those with whom one is connected.

The previously mentioned issues of verifiability and anonymity are studied by Boyd (2004). She describes the growth of 'Fakester', a false set of 'friends' collected on Friendster sites, which grew out of frustrations with the site's technological difficulties.[69] As a result it is often unclear who is and is not 'real' on Friendster, Boyd argues, which can lead to confusion (at its mildest).

The value of social networking sites is clear, both as an entertainment tool but also as a way of creating and giving oneself identity. Importantly the identities and profiles presented are generally constrained by social expectations. However, teenagers will continue also to practice what Hope (2007) calls 'boundary performance' risk taking activities to push

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[65] Mesch, G. S. and I. Talmud (2007) "Similarity and the Quality of Online and Offline Social Relationships among Adolescents in Israel", Journal of Research on Adolescence, 17 (2), pp. 455-466

[66] Dwyer, C. (2007) "Digital Relationships in the 'MySpace' Generation: Results from a Qualitative Study". in 40th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS'07), Hawaii, http://doi.ieeecomputersociety.org/10.1109/HICSS.2007.176

[67] Ellison, N., C. Steinfield and C. Lampe (2007) "The Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites", Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12 (4). http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/loi/jcmc

[68] Boyd, D. and J. Heer (2006) "Profiles as Conversation: Networked Identity and Performance on Friendster". in International Conference on System Sciences, Kauai, Hawaii,January 4-7, 2006, IEEE Computer Society

[69] Boyd, D.. (2004) "Friendster and Publicly Articulated Social Networks." *Conference on Human Factors and Computing Systems (CHI 2004)*. Vienna: ACM, April 24-29, 2004.

normative boundaries, something that is often publicly performed rather than secret, as part of the process of identity construction.[70] Moreover, even when the potential misuse social rules or norms is quite well-understood, it is not always acted upon.

Social networking and privacy

Definitions of what it means to be private appear to be changed by social networking sites. Certainly teenagers in the Livingstone research (2007) keep much of their personal information and communication private and their interactions are determined by social mores. Yet they nonetheless share what might be thought of as 'intimate' information with many hundreds of people that they know very casually, if at all. Barnes (2006) in a discursive article also refers to the potential exploitation of young people's privacy which they may have given up, unwittingly[71]:

"*Currently social responses to privacy in social networks do not tend to deal with the potential misuse of personal information. Instead the response is based on the protection of children against predators, which is only one aspect of the privacy paradox. Similarly, a legal response has been the proposal of a bill to protect underage children. The government and industry responses tend to focus on the issue of predators and this focus distracts from the actual privacy issue — the social behavior of teenagers on the Internet and the use and misuse of their private information.*" (Barnes, 2006).[72]

A recent survey from Get Safe Online found that

"*Over 10.8 million people across the UK are registered to a social networking site. Of these, one in four have posted confidential or personal information such as their phone number, address or email, on their online profile, making them vulnerable to identity fraud. The research also found that 13% of social networkers have posted information or photos of other people online without their consent. This trend is strongest amongst younger users, with 27% of 18-24 year-olds admitting that they have posted information, photos of other people without their consent online.*"[73]

A large scale online market opinion study (of nearly 2,500 adults) among potential employers and internet users in the UK conducted by YouGov (2007) found that: 15% of 18+ year olds say they have posted "personal information" on MySpace, 7% on Facebook, 3% on Flickr, 6% on YouTube , and 3% on Wikipedia

- There is a definite effect of age with a greater proportion of 18-24 year olds havingposted such information - 45% of 18-24 year olds say they have posted personal information on MySpace, 44% on Facebook and 17% on YouTube

- 19% of respondents have posted holiday pictures online

- 19% have a profile on a social or business social networking website

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[70] Hope, A. (2007). Risk taking, boundary performance and intentional school internet 'misuse'. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 28*(1), 87-99.
[71] Barnes, S. B. (2006) "A Privacy Paradox: Social Networking in the United States", First Monday, 11 (9). http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue11_9/barnes/index.html
[72] Barnes, S.B. (2006) ibid, also expresses concern about marketers' use of private information teens make public on such sites: "Marketers who target teen consumers can use stated, personal information gathered from social networking sites for purposes other than what users intend. Today, the commoditization of information has made it necessary to consider the invasion of privacy by corporations."
[73] See http://www.getsafeonline.org/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=1469

- 11% "have written a personal online blog"

- 54% of 18-24 year olds say images of them had been posted online without their consent.

Just under one in five potential employers (18%) say they have found information about job candidates that had not been volunteered. (The study did not ask if employers always or often searched for information about potential employees as a matter of course.)

Hinduja and Patchin (2007), cited above, sought to examine empirically what information young people are posting about themselves and if this justified the concerns about the increase of sexual predation on these sites, or other forms of victimisation. The key finding was that a substantial minority of young people (almost 40%) set their profiles to 'private' so that visitors to their sites had to be invited in initially. However this leaves just under 60% that did not do so. Within this majority the researchers outline the content of the profiles:

- 81% listed their city

- 28% listed their city and school

- Under 9% included their full name

- 57% included a photograph of themselves

- 5% of these were seen in a swimsuit or underwear

- 18% admitted to use of alcohol

- 8% to using tobacco

- 2% to using marijuana

While Hinduja and Patchin accept that these overall percentages might be lower than anecdote would suggest, they do say that "26*% of the youth in the sample listed the school they attend and included a picture of themselves. This information alone could easily be used to contact the individual offline."* (Hinduja and Patchin, 2007, p.14). Alcohol, tobacco and marijuana use are just three of many possible behaviours mentioned online which might also be used to harm teenagers' reputations or career prospects in later life.

They also accept, as we have seen above, that it is difficult to verify the accuracy or veracity of the profile pages – and this of course remains a prime concern of those involved in the consideration of the protection of (particularly) minors from harm.

Inappropriate contact

Smith used the Pew Internet and American Life Project (as did Lenhart and Madden above) to look at the contacts made by subjects who create profiles on social networking sites (Smith, 2007).[74] Smith found that seven per cent of this American sample said they had been contacted 'by a stranger who made them feel scared or uncomfortable'. Teenage girls (the sample was aged 12-17) are more likely than boys to say this (11% and 4% respectively).

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[74] Smith, A (2007) "Teens & Online Stranger Contact" Pew Internet & American Life Project http://www.pewinternet.org/

Further those who have posted photographs are far more likely to experience this (10% compared with 4% who had not posted photographs) although the absolute proportions are small.

The survey found that nearly a third of the sample have been contacted by a stranger; again girls are more likely to say this than boys (39% vs. 24% respectively). Smith does note that there appears to be no consistent association between stranger contact and the type of information posted (other than photographs) or between stranger contact and the public/private nature of the profile. It is also noted that teenagers who say they use social networking sites to flirt are more likely to be contacted by strangers – which is not surprising, perhaps.

Boyd (2006) found that teenagers in the US are aware of adults on their sites, but that they ignore them.[75] Their attention is taken by those whom they 'know' and for whom they are trying to look cool: *Having to simultaneously negotiate youth culture and adult surveillance is not desirable to most youth, but their response is typically to ignore the issue.* So these teenagers may post pictures of themselves scantily clad or drunk, but these are images designed for their peers, not for the adults who may happen upon them. These subjects in the research are not able to fast-forward to the possible regrets they may have about these images at a later date, as – Boyd suggests – adults might.

In a study looking at video blogging, Lange (2007) notes that women who share levels of intimacy through their video blogs feel they are connecting with other people and with other people's ideas.[76] The video blogs allow communities to be formed and for experiences to be shared.

The research evidence shows that social networking sites are used widely and are used to support and maintain relationships, although not generally to create them. However a significant proportion of young people communicate with strangers online and post material about themselves which may be considered 'private' in most circumstances. The ability to restrict access to sites is known about but not always used.

We note, finally, that an authoritative position paper recently released by ENISA (European Network and Information Security Agency) outlines a series of commercial, corporate and social/individual '*threats*' raised by social networking sites. [77] They describe the threats in technological terms and raise the issue of the difficulty of deleting entries, identity theft as well as cyberstalking and cyber bullying. Their recommendations to combat the effect of these potential threats include raising awareness and increasing the transparency of data handling practices so that users understand the way in which content is stored and may be used.

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[75] Boyd, d. (2006) "Identity Production in a Networked Culture: Why Youth Heart MySpace". in American Association for the Advancement of Science,
http://www.danah.org/papers/AAAS2006.html
[76] Lange, P. G. (2007) "The Vulnerable Video Blogger: Promoting Social Change through Intimacy", The Scholar and Feminist Online, 5 (2).
http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/blogs/lange_01.htm
[77] See http://www.enisa.europa.eu/doc/pdf/deliverables/enisa_pp_social_networks.pdf.

Annex 1

Glossary of terms and definitions

Applications Pieces of software usually created by third party developers that interact with the core features of a social networking site. Examples include mini-games, film trivia quizzes and online travel maps.

Avatar A computer user's graphical representation of him or herself. An avatar can be two or three-dimensional.

Bebo One of the three most popular social networking sites in the UK, founded in 2005.

Blog Blog is short for weblog. A weblog is a journal (or newsletter) that is frequently updated and intended for general public consumption. Blogs generally represent the personality of the author or the Web site.

Blurb MySpace's term for a short summary about a user on their profile

Cyberbullying Term used to describe bullying committed on the internet.

Early adopter Someone who embraces new technologies before the majority of the rest of the population do.

Facebook One of the three most popular social networking sites in the UK, founded in 2004.

Flickr A social networking site based around photo sharing.

Friend Anyone who either accepts an invitation from another social networking site user to be friends, or who accepts an invitation from another user. When a user adds someone as a friend, their connection is displayed on the user's friend list. On social networking sites a friend can be an offline friend, a family member, an acquaintance, a friend of a friend, or someone who you have never met before.

Friends Reunited A group of social networking sites based around the theme of getting back in contact with old school friends. The main site was founded in 1999.

Friendster An initially very popular social networking site founded in 2002.

Habbo (or the Habbo Hotel) A social networking site aimed at teenagers, which is based around virtual hotel rooms. Each user has a customisable avatar to represent them.

ICT Information and communications technology.

KateModern An interactive video drama hosted on Bebo. Fans are able to use the tools on Bebo to influence the storyline and fully interact with the series. The production is funded via fully integrated product placement.

LinkedIn A social networking site based around business networking.

Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) An online computer game which is capable of supporting hundreds or thousands of players simultaneously. Examples include Second Life, Runescape and World of Warcraft.

Media literacy According to Ofcom, media literacy is 'the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts'.

Member community A category of website used by Nielsen Online. Examples include Bebo, Facebook, MySpace and Blogger.

MSN groups An online community site created by Microsoft in 1995

MySpace One of the three most popular social networking sites in the UK, founded in 2003.

Nielsen Online Internet media and market research firm that provides online audience figures.

Piczo a social networking site launched in 2004 based around photos and website building. Popular among teenagers.

Poke A gesture or symbolic cue on Facebook. A user who is poked by their friend receives a message saying 'you have been poked by…'. Other sites have similar features such as nudges, giving five, or giving love.

Profile The personal homepage on a social networking site, usually including information about a user, photos, and their friend list. Profiles form the basis of social networking sites.

Sagazone A social networking site for the over-50s launched in 2007 by Saga.

Second Life A Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game based around a virtual world. Users create an avatar and meet others, socialise and create and trade items. Launched in 2003.

Skin The background or texture of a users profile. It can include patterns, animations, photos and other formatting. Many social networking sites allow users to edit their profile skin using html code.

Skype A software programme that allows users to make telephone calls over the internet.

Social Networking Site (SNS) A site which allows users to create a personal page or profile and construct and display a social network of their online contacts.[78]

User-Generated Content (UGC) Online content that is produced by the users or consumers of the site. Examples of UGC include blogs, and photos and videos that users upload.

Web 2.0 A technical term describing a perceived second generation of web-based communities and hosted services - such as social networking sites and wikis, which facilitate collaboration and sharing between users.

YouTube A popular video sharing site founded in 2005.

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[78] This is the definition used in this report. However, there is no agreed definition of social networking sites. For example some people include user-generated content in their definition.

Research methodologies

Social Networking research: qualitative research into attitudes, behaviours and use

Methodology	Qualitative face-to-face survey. This included 12 two-hour in-depth, paired accompanied surfs; four 90-minute triads; four 90-minute quads; four two hour follow-up online social networking sessions with respondents selected from the triad and quad sessions. Respondents who used social networking sites were also asked to complete a pre-task exercise
Core objective	To identify, explore and understand the behaviours, attitudes and barriers to people's use of social networking sites
Sample size	52 (39 users and 13 non-users)
Fieldwork period	September - October 2007
Sample definition	Social networking site users and non-users aged 11+. The sample included a respondents from each UK nation, and a mix of, rural and urban, socio-economic groups and gender

Children, young people and online content research (October 2007)

Methodology	Face-to-face Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing survey (CAPI)
Core objective	To understand the level of current exposure to harmful or inappropriate content[79] and differences in behaviour between parents and children
Sample size	653 parents, 653 children aged between 5 and 17 from the same households, 279 non-parents
Fieldwork period	October – November 2007
Sample definition	Interviews with parents aged 16-59 and children aged 5-17. The parent and child were recruited from the same household. Only one child was interviewed per household. Quotas were set on the age of the child (interviews were split approximately equally between those aged 5-7, 8-11, 12-15 and 16-17), plus gender of parent and gender of child. Scotland, Wales

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[79] The survey asked if they had come across harmful or inappropriate material in the past six months and if they had, they were asked the open-ended question 'What type of content was it?' Thus these findings relate to self-reported harmful or inappropriate material.

and Northern Ireland were boosted to ensure robust base sizes for analysis.

Interviews with non-parents aged 16+ who do not live at home with their parents.

In this instance, non-parents were defined as those without children aged 17 or under living with them.

Quotas were set on age and gender of the respondent, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland again boosted

Weighting   Where necessary, the data were weighted to the 2001 census data

Ofcom Media Literacy Adult Audit research

Methodology   Face-to-face in home interviews

Core objective   To monitor the extent of media literacy, i.e. the ability of people to access, understand and create communications across key platforms including TV, the internet, mobile phones and radio

Sample size   2905

Fieldwork period   October – December 2007

Sample definition   UK adults aged 16+

Weighting   Where necessary, the data were weighted to the 2001 census data

Ofcom Communications Tracking Survey

Methodology   Continuous face-to-face survey

Core objective   To provide Ofcom with continued understanding of consumer behaviour in the UK communications markets to help monitor changes and assess the degree and success of competition

Sample size   700+ per month (2235 Q3 2007)

Fieldwork period   Q3 2007 (July, August, September)

Sample definition   UK adults aged 15+, reflective of the UK profile by sex, age, socio-economic group, region, employment status, cabled/non-cabled areas, rural/urban areas and levels of deprivation

Weighting   Where necessary, the data were weighted to ensure they are representative of the UK adult population

Ofcom Young People and Media Tracking Survey

Methodology	Tracking study
Core objective	To measure media access, usage, and attitudes of parents and children aged 5-15 years
Sample size	1047 Wave 3 2007
Fieldwork period	Wave 3, September 2007
Sample definition	UK children aged 5-15, reflective of the UK profile by sex, age, socio-economic group, and nation.
Weighting	Where necessary, the data were weighted to the 2001 census data

Annex 3

Ofcom Social Networking Sites research

Published separately at: www.ofcom.org.uk