

Investigating the impact of new social media  
on the social behaviour of young people.

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## **Abstract**

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The emergence of social media tools and the enthusiasm by which young people have embraced these tools as one of their primary modes of interaction is well documented in many current studies. The over-arching focus of this study considers what impacts if any the influence of social media is having on the behaviour of young people.

Drawing on findings and insights gained through the delivery of the HUWY project, this study of the attitudes and perceptions of young people was grounded in an in-depth and critical review of academic and practice based literature. Following from this and guided by it, the primary research consisted of a series of seven focus groups working with young people aged between fourteen and sixteen years of age. The study was conducted in a variety of urban and rural locations across Ireland. An approach incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data was used in order to analyse the results. Core themes of Internet Use, Behaviour and Online Risk were used throughout the study and were framed by including social identity theory.

The findings indicate that the use of social media tools have both positive and negative impacts on the social behaviour of young people. There is a need for a deeper understanding of the impacts of social media usage on the behaviour of young people and a more nuanced and multi-faceted response by youth work professionals. The study concludes by identifying some of the challenges that face young people, parents and professionals with regard to the increasing popularity of on line tools and in doing so there is a need to foreground the voices of young people.

## **Declaration**

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for the Degree of Master of Business Studies (Research), is entirely my own work and has not been obtained from the work of any other, except any work that has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Gareth Gibson

## **Preface and Acknowledgements**

This study would not have been possible without the help and support of many people to whom I wish to express my gratitude.

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# **Chapter 1**

## **1.0 Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The primary aim of this research project is to investigate the impact that new social media tools have on the social behaviour of young people. This impact will be examined under the following research questions:

1. What changes, if any, in the social behaviour of young people have been identified in academic and professional publications?
2. What aspects of these changes are attributable to the influence of new social media?
3. How have the perceived changes been experienced by young people in Ireland in terms of their social interaction with others, their use of language and their lived social norms and values?

The study focuses on young people aged between 14 and 16 years of age.

The study consisted of 43 participants who were recruited into seven groups



within youth projects under the affiliation of Youth Work Ireland across the counties of Donegal, Sligo, Monaghan and Dublin.

## **1.2 Background to the Study**

An EU project entitled HUWY; standing for hub websites for young people which concluded in 2010 was the catalyst for this study. The project implemented a distributed discussion model that facilitated communication among young people, which was used to get young people talking about policies and laws which affect the Internet and channel this to people in governments and parliaments, working on such policies. The young people and youth groups were supported by the project to investigate specific topics such as Cyber bullying, Privacy, Child Abuse and File Sharing. One of the most telling findings was that young people had difficulty defining what privacy meant to them, and that their online behaviour may not correlate to their perceived attitudes to privacy.

The influence of the Internet as an agent of social change has been well documented in academic research and appears to offer a large array of benefits whilst also harbouring many negative characteristics. The emergence of new social media tools such as Facebook and the enthusiastic response that young people appear to have to each new development in which technology is involved requires an investigation into the possible impacts of a lifestyle heavily dependent on technology. Technology can be

perceived as a tool to help shape our lives, an issue argued by Tully (2003, p 450) who states that:

"Young people using technologies give structure to their everyday lives. Technologies facilitate and at the same time set limits for social action. *Technology is shaping society* is the formula used in socioconstructivist technology research. In German-speaking countries, the notion that technology shapes society is not considered to be differentiated enough. Nevertheless, social action changes when everyday life is awash with technology."

It is these potential changes to social actions that are of particular interest in this study. The potential for the negative aspects associated with Internet use to affect social actions is a consideration that will be investigated. This concept can be categorised in two strands: the User, (in this instance the child) and the Provider. Furthermore, the online risk can be considered in terms of content, contact and conduct, with the motives falling within the bands of commercial, aggressive, sexual and values as detailed by Hasebrink et al (2008).

The researcher's professional background and experience of working directly with young people within the developmental education context of youth work proved to be the catalyst for the research topic. Observational evidence suggested that identity creation within an online context mirrored to some extent the traits of the offline process. However, the differentials of behaviour between young people's use offline and online arenas witnessed, suggested the need for further investigation.

### **1.3 Rationale and Significance of the Study**

A widely held view by authors such as Mesch (2003), Tully (2003), Berson (2005) and Cheong (2008) is that young people are classified as early adopters of the Internet and online tools. An inevitable consequence of this behaviour is that there are a lot of unknowns surrounding new technology in terms of its impact. Therefore, the potential exists for them to be subject to both the positive and negative dimensions of online activity. The focus of this study is Social Identity and how the use of online tools is impacting on how young people see themselves and how they create a sense of self within society. This investigation was constructed using the following themes:

- Internet Use
- Behaviour / Social Norms
- Attitude to risk

The study considered young people's specific Internet usage patterns and analysed the results in relation to time spent on social networking compared to the other uses of the Internet. Additionally, attitudes towards behaviour, and what, if anything is more acceptable online were considered in relation to young people's attitude towards risk taking behaviour. By utilising a thematic approach within a theoretical framework the study incorporated a triangulated analysis with regard to social identity and how the three themes impact individually and collectively on identity when embedded in an online

dimension. Furthermore, the study examined the potential for risk embracing online behaviour to affect offline social behaviour.

The existence of the ongoing debate among educators, youth work practitioners and other professionals with regard to dangers associated with social networking and the potential for harm to young people, not to mention the concern among parents, endorses the relevance this area of study is relevant.

The speed of innovation and momentum that the development of online tools has compared to the development of associated policies, procedures and mechanisms is considered. How sufficiently prepared and resourced are organisations and individuals working with young people in order to assist young people in this developmental phase? Previously, a culture of 'banning social networking' in schools, youth projects and in the home had arisen which apparently did not deal with the issue. The results of this study will be of interest and benefit to those working with young people in any capacity. Inevitably the results will lead to recommendations for further research. Furthermore, it could be argued that the outcomes from this study could be used to develop procedures and operational plans to address the issues by working with young people and empowering them to continue embracing new technologies in a responsible and informed manner in conjunction with a youth participation approach. Additionally, with regard to social identity, we can continue to embrace the Internet in a meaningful way that acknowledges the Internet as part of everyday society with associated

consequences, rather than it being seen as a virtual playground and detached from real life. The young people who participated in the study, have themselves made recommendations and suggestions as can be seen in later Chapters that would go some way to developing improved personal governance in relation to Internet use.

## **1.4 An overview of the methodology employed**

While this study is primarily qualitative in nature, the dynamic structures employed via the focus groups also generated statistical data more commonly associated with quantitative research. An approach using both qualitative and quantitative analysis was used, in keeping with the work of Cresswell and Clark (2011) who are advocates of combining elements of qualitative and quantitative research. Social research investigating the impact that a particular technology has on the social behaviour of individuals requires in-depth analysis. A theoretical framework was required to guide the study. The work of Tajfel and Turner in the area of Social Identity Theory presented a suitable framework from which to consider the process whereby individuals select "in-groups" and "out-groups". This concept will be considered in greater depth in Chapter Two.

A strategy for the primary data collection was designed around a series of focus groups which were conducted in various locations across Ireland in both urban and rural settings. Pre-existing structures within Youth Work

Ireland, a federal collection of youth services from across Ireland were utilised where the researcher had contacts with professional youth work practitioners who facilitated the recruitment of the focus group participants. By working with pre-existing structures possible concerns around creating a favourable environment for the focus groups were alleviated. This also allowed a peer referencing element to be incorporated in the dynamics of the groups which utilised the relationship and rapport already developed between practitioner and participant. Careful attention was given to the construction of the focus groups in order to foster a methodical and sound base from which to draw conclusions.

## **1.5 Ethical Approval**

This study will concentrate on young people aged between fourteen and sixteen years of age. Therefore, ethical approval will be obtained from LYIT via the Institute Research Ethics Committee. The principles of good research as set out by the committee will be adhered to in order to ensure that all research will be conducted on the basis of respect and adherence to guidelines.

## 1.6 Thesis Outline

This research project consists of six chapters each focusing on specific aspect that collectively produces a comprehensive overview of the research topic.

**Chapter One:** The introduction offers a broad overview of the context of the study focusing on how social identity theory can be used as a lens to investigate the impact that social media can have on young people's behaviour. The themes that will be used throughout the investigation are highlighted whilst incorporating details in relation to the rationale and professional significance of the study. This section introduces the foundations of the study and considers the influence that new social media tools are having as an instrument of social change.

**Chapter Two:** This Chapter encompasses a review of recent literature in relation to Internet usage trends of young people, their understanding of online risks and how they perceive the potential impact of using online media tools has on their social behaviour. This Chapter introduces the theoretical framework of "Social Identity" on which the study is built around.

**Chapter Three:** This Chapter outlines the research approach and describes the rationale underpinning the methodological approach adopted in order to investigate the study's three key research questions. The study adopts an approach, utilising elements that are both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The Chapter provides an explanation of how and why focus groups

were selected as the method of choice for collecting data. Participant selections, access, consent and environmental issues are among the key variables affecting studies of this nature. Details are provided that outline how such issues were dealt with in this study. One unique area of interest is a discussion on peer referencing and how this influenced the selection of participants. Additionally, details are outlined in relation the preparation of the focus groups and the techniques utilised in the analysis of the data.

**Chapter Four:** This Chapter analyses the quantitative data generated from the empirical work with seven focus groups. The opinions of the young people are evident in the results which incorporate attitudinal findings in relation to time spent online, how online socialising is carried out, and to what extent this impacts on the lifestyles of young people. These findings are detailed in relation to the study's core themes of: Internet Use; Behaviour and Online Risks and incorporate graphical representation.

**Chapter Five:** The Discussion Chapter provides a qualitative analysis of the results described in the previous Chapter and offers a systematic consideration of the potential implications of the findings within the overall theoretical framework. The core themes of Internet Usage, Behaviour and Online Risk will continue to form the structure for this Chapter and the lens of 'social identity' which is central when analysing the direct opinions and voices of the young people. The data set obtained from the focus groups is used to create a section that considers protection strategies, many of which suggested by young people, that have the potential to guard against some of



the more negative aspects associated with online activity as outlined by the participants.

**Chapter Six:** The conclusion Chapter provides a synopsis of the main findings in line with the theoretical context whilst incorporating recommendations for young people, parents, professionals and policy makers. Furthermore, recommendations will be made for areas of future research.

## **Chapter 2**

### **2.0 Literature Review**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The first research question in this study asks what changes, if any, in the social behaviour of young people have been identified in academic and professional publications? This chapter will answer this question by carrying out a review of recent literature pertinent to the topic of the research. A theoretical footing to underpin the research is provided by utilising the work of Tajfel and Turner in relation to Social Identity Theory. Furthermore, the concept of how people select 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' will be considered. The relevant literature will be reviewed in the context of the overarching themes of behaviour and online risk. The influence of protection strategies and the importance of relationships will also be evaluated.

#### **2.2 Social Identity**

The process by which individuals identify with others in society and the associated behavioural norms enacted within a group setting is referred to as "social identity". Social Identity is also thought to be relevant to the analysis

of relations and interactions with other group members and also members of alternative groups. Social Identity theory was first devised and articulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979) social identity relates to the elements of an individual's perceived self-image which they acquire from the social groupings that they consider themselves as belonging to. Associated theoretical principles devised by Tajfel and Turner, assert that individuals continually attempt to obtain and preserve a positive Social Identity. Within Social Identity reference is made to "in-groups", identifying the group of choice that an individual identifies with and has a sense of belonging to. Alternatively, the term "out-group" refers to a group that an individual does not belong to nor has any affinity with. With regard to the use of focus groups in the empirical research in this study, (to be detailed in chapter 3) consideration will be given to the relationship dynamics between members of each focus group and how perceived affiliation to any "in-group" is manifested in their online social interaction. Positive social identity is based on an encouraging comparison between the in-group and another out-group. The in-group is perceived to be the identity of choice and positively divergent from other groups. When a situation results in negative social identity, individuals tend to leave that group and join another positively perceived group and/or alter their existing group in such a way as to make it positively noticeable.

There can be an explorative and investigative nature in the development of young people in how they communicate and interact. This manifests in a manner that suggests that young people operate in a constant state of flux. The Internet and associated social media tools have become an important and integral aspect of youth culture that is embedded into everyday social interactions. According to Leiner et al. (2010) during the 1990's the Internet experienced a continual growth away from its origins in research and into wide stream public access through worldwide browsing. In this same period a generation born after the invention of the Internet was coming of age, leading to the children of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century being the first generation not to have an experience of life without an online dimension. Young people more than any other segment of the population dominate the use of new interactive social network sites such as Facebook and MySpace according to Hodkinson and Lincoln, (2008). In more recent studies, Valkenburg and Jochen (2011, p121) continue to argue this point:

“Adolescents far outnumber adults in their use of e-communication technologies.”

With the rapid developments of online tools, increases in broadband connection speeds and comprehensive adoption of the Internet by young people, it is important to investigate the positive and negative impacts online social networking tools are having on the social behaviour of young people. Much of what is now available online is based on the fact that the user operates within a group culture. For example, when using Facebook young

people appear to sign up, create an account and adopt the styles and behaviours of the desired in-group in order to be part of that group and fit in. They also create graphical representation of an alter ego known as an Avatar. When we see ourselves as being part of a group our individual sense of self appears to be influenced by the group and comparisons are often made with those outside of the group. Tully (2003) suggests that new technologies offer credibility and as a result affect the thought process of peers. The possession or utilisation of new technology can contribute to social integration, which has benefits beyond the actual purpose of the technology, when possession or usage of such provides group identity and integration. This theory appears to be just as relevant today, as the speed of technological advancement continues and the ownership of the latest gadget has connotations of power and influence within a group, which is obviously materialised in what could be referred to as the Blackberry Phenomenon.

According to Elm (2007) the Internet is responsible for providing new socialising opportunities that are of particular interest to young people. This trend continues well beyond the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. These opportunities, it can be argued, have the potential to be both positive and negative. Osgerby (cited in Lee, 2005) believes that the identities of young people are intricate and adaptable, a belief that was earlier maintained by Turkle (1994) who in commenting on the topic of 'constructions of self in virtual reality' suggests that new media offers an incomparable opportunity for users to be flexible with their self-identity and even experiment with new

or multiple identities a vision that is comparable to the lens of social identity put forward by Tajfel and Turner (1979). This also may concur with the fluidity of determining what grouping will become the "in-group" of choice.

What makes this issue more interesting is to consider if the average young person's online behaviour is a mirror of actual offline behaviour or does the perceived anonymous nature of the online realm offer young people an opportunity to present themselves, and behave in a different way? If so, is the online behaviour starting to appear in, and influence the offline social behaviour of young people? McMillan and Morrison (2006) cite the work of Facer et al. and Gross et al. who report that various studies have argued that the social lives that young people live online reflect that of their offline relationships, whereby support for offline acquaintances is taken from online IT activities. It could be argued that their offline activities are being affected or influenced by the way they operate online. The work by McMillan and Morrison is consistent with other research that suggests that the identities young people develop online are not dissimilar to those developed offline. However this research will investigate if the associated behaviour of young people offline is being affected by the behaviour patterns displayed online. One particular study identified by McMillan and Morrison found that young people create public and private identities in the interactive online environment and that, 'their online lives are no less real than those they live offline'.

It is important to acknowledge that in all our interactions we are influenced by the opinion and views of those we interact with, as suggested by Smith and Kollock (1999). When we interact off-line we benefit from a variety of indicators that suggest an identity. We are in a position where we can identify who to trust and rely on by making judgements based on clothing, voices, gestures and signals. Online interaction removes many of the indicators that we rely on during face-to-face communication. Lack of signals can be both a disadvantage and an advantage, making it more difficult to interact but also allowing the opportunity to be creative with one's identity.

The views of Smith & Kollock, are consistent with that of other authors. For example, Donath (1999) contends that identity is important in virtual communities of online interaction. In communication, information on the identity of those you interact with is imperative in order to assess and understand the interaction, yet in this virtual community many of the tangible signals of identity are absent, leaving identity ambiguous.

The work on Identity carried out by Donath (1999) suggests that with regard to the physical realm of face-to-face interaction, identity is accepted as one body, one identity, whereas with the online virtual realm the one body comprises of the user behind a keyboard and a monitor, enabling the user to create and maintain multiple identities, with the common denominator behind the identities being the single user. Furthermore, developments in

online tools over the years since 1999 have apparently not altered the opinion on this issue as multiple and varied identities as referred to by Davis (2012, p4) are acknowledged as being synonymous with young people's fluid interaction styles within multiple user domains and online chat-rooms and the anonymity that is achieved.

"While the technology has made it possible to fashion diverse and fluid identities, this research suggests, the motivation to do so is propelled by the feeling of anonymity that is fostered by some forms of computer-mediated communication."  
(Davis 2012, p4)

Moreover, Donath (1999) argues that while identity signals are scarce in the virtual world, they are not absent completely. Users become aware of the use of email addresses and signatures. Certain phrases and words or slang prevail and identify users as members of a particular group. Reduced levels of ambiguity and identity gives users have greater freedom to be whoever they want and say what they like. With this obscure view of the differentiation between identity creations online as opposed to offline, could young people develop a lack of awareness of the consequences of their online actions? As this trait becomes more prevalent, the potential for carefree attitudes and disregard of the traditional social norms may increase. Many of the negative aspects of this could be observed in studies reviewing trends in moral decision making and maturity development patterns, which have the potential to influence how young people may view the world around them in terms of developing bigoted, deluded and stereotyped opinions.



## **2.3 Behaviour / Social Norms**

To develop an understanding of online social interaction a critical awareness of the developmental process of social norms as suggested by Stromer-Galley and Martey (2009) is required. How and when young people develop behavioural norms, will incorporate primary, secondary and tertiary education, together with informal experiences in society and the home. It appears that young people who have grown up with the Internet, and have no experience of what life was like prior to the creation of the World Wide Web, have developed, in some instances, a belief that all activity online is carried out in the virtual realm, with little or no consequences for their actions. The Internet is yet another vehicle that people use to interact, according to Mesch (2001), who also believes that, offline associations often drift online and vice-versa. This is a belief that is still pertinent almost ten years on. Furthermore, one question is: how much of their fluid online characters/identities and attitudes are spilling over into the offline world? In addition, their attitude towards risk and their growing dependency on the Internet provides an opportunity for understanding exactly how any perceived change in social behaviour of young people can be attributed to the impact of online activity. Modern technology, as highlighted by Tully (2003), has created new lenses through which people alter their assessment of the world and how they interact with it. Can young people differentiate

between their real life experiences and their activities online? Is it possible for an argument to exist that suggests that the technology affects the person, rather than the person affecting the technology? The study in relation to modern technologies by Tully (2003), suggests that in certain circumstances we cannot be sure whether the actions of people are influenced by the technology or if the people themselves have the ability to control their own actions? This study is almost 10 years old and technological developments have progressed since then. Nevertheless, the concerns of how technologies shape everyday life highlighted by Lanier (2010), continue to be applicable and the issue that extended time spent online cannot be incorporated into our daily routines without expecting to observe some alterations to our behaviour.

Technology and the way in which it develops, impinges on social development as each new gadget becomes available. Young people appear to embrace this concept more readily than others. As Tully (2003, p444) states:

"No generation before them owned so many artefacts"

This was an accurate statement in 2003, and considering the innovative developments in the ICT field since then, it would appear reasonable to suggest that this surely has increased. For example, the Apple iPhone avalanche since 2007, Nintendo DSi launched in 2008 and the Apple iPad

generation since 2010. Prensky(2001) describes this generation of young people who have grown up with computer games, e-mail, internet and instant messaging as integral to their lives as 'digital natives'. The generation born between 1980 and 1994 have also been described as the 'net generation' (Tapscott, 1998). More recently, social researchers Howe and Strauss (2000,2003) have labelled the generation of young people the 'millennials'. The challenges for researchers trying to understand and evaluate what the impacts technology may have on this generation are complex. Bennett et al (2008) caution against rushing to assumptions that there 'is a distinctive new generation of students in possession of sophisticated technology skills'. Instead they argue that researchers should begin with a detailed investigation of the views of young people. Helsper and Enyon (2011) stress the need to consider the diversity of use of new technologies by young people and not to attempt analysis as though it were homogenous.

The requirement of an investigation into the ability of online activity to positively and/or negatively hold implications for the alteration of people's life experience is an argument proposed by Hargittai and Hinnant (2008). This can incorporate changes to their human, psychological, cultural and social constructs. They stress the point that this particularly applies to youth as the latter is the most heavily connected online group. This claim is substantiated by recent figures from the Internet Access Quarterly Update 2011 Q3, which reported that the most connected age group among Internet users in the UK is the segment of those between 16 and 24 age group, with

98.6% accessing the Internet. This data shows an increase of 15.6% in this age group since 2006 as highlighted by UK Internet Usage Statistics 2006.

Research is inconclusive regarding the potential of the Internet in developing relationships among young people. Some studies suggest that the Internet is a positive tool used by young people in the development of peer to peer relations, while others believe that the Internet has the potential to create a negative approach to friendship. According to McPherson et al. (2006) a group of sociologists argued that Americans have fewer friends now than they did 20 years ago. Boyd (2008) considers "whether social media may be detrimental to friendship maintenance." Boyd (2008,p 17) also suggests that:

"If social information is easily available, it seems that people would tune in. Yet, if social information is the human equivalent of grooming, what happens when a computer provides information asynchronously without reciprocity?"

The way in which young people engage with the Internet and online tools is influenced by the perceptions of social norms in the online context. Boyd (2008, p 18) uses the metaphor of:

"How one behaves in a pub differs from how one behaves in a family park, even though both are ostensibly public."

Stromer-Galley and Martey (2009) believe that social processes theories have made notable progress in describing how individual and group information are attributed to social norm development. According to Spears

et al., Tidwell and Walters (Cited in Stromer-Galley and Martey, 2009) up to date research and current theories concur that online communication can have a stronger influence on normative behaviour as opposed to traditional face-to-face communication.

According to Boase and Wellman (2006) studies have revealed that email helps people maintain both strong and weak relations due to the ease of communication. Can this same argument be valid with social media as it allows contact without reciprocal communication? The volume and accessibility of social media has the potential to make people believe that they have a level of intimacy with 'friends' they do not really know. As a social networking researcher, Boyd (2007) is of the opinion that teenagers are no longer afforded as much access to public spaces and that traditional 'hanging out' activities have been replaced by online activity. This opinion is fuelled by the concerns held by adults and parents in particular. As a result of the concerns over the safety of their children in the 'real' world, parents have facilitated the online engagement of their children, in the perception that they are safer indoors and online. Consequently, young people today have "come of age" with the Internet. McMillan & Morrison (2006) identify that there is an escalating reliance on the Internet among young people for activities ranging from the management of daily routines to the creation and maintenance of online virtual identities and communities.

Malone (2000) points out, the challenge that continually exists for us to in some way attempt to gain an understanding of that which essentially alters the way we approach things. Malone (2000) cites the work of Rich who identifies the power of the "way things are", and how this concept can confine our peripheral vision in a way that conceals the importance of the larger changes, even as they unfold. Such a paradigm shift is possibly most relevant in current research on the briskly developing virtual realm: the Internet.

With reference to the use of computer mediated communication systems, the development in technology as suggested by Davis (2012) has enabled the creation of fluid and diverse identities, whereby the desire to maintain such is driven by the feeling of anonymity. As early as 1999, Kiesler et al. cited in Reid (1999) observed that:

"people in computer-mediated groups were more uninhibited than they were in face to face groups."

This type of behaviour appears to very similar over a decade on, with the work of Valkenburg and Jochen (2011) who claim that while traditionally young people learn how to express themselves in face to face communication, recent studies suggest that self-expression particularly among peer groups, is increasingly occurring online. Furthermore, the study by Davis (2012, p13) argues that online spaces give people the opportunity:

“to express themselves more freely than they might in offline contexts like school.”

Young people use their on-line time for a variety of different purposes. Lenhart and Madden’s study (2005) on digital citizenship identified the ways in which young people create content which is shared with others online. The 12- 17 year olds participating in the study developed content for webpages, online art work, photos, stories and videos and online journals and blogs (Lenhart, 2012).

Young people’s on-line activities alter over time (Lenhart, Purcell at al 2010). Blogging has declined in popularity whereas the use of social networking websites has increased. Researchers must not assume that the nature of on-line activity is fixed nor that every new development is embraced by young people with equal enthusiasm. For example, Lenhart and Purcell (2010) identified that while internet usage is all but ubiquitous and the primary source of information for current events and politics the use of Twitter is not popular.

According to Miller (cited in Berson 2005) the Internet is available and widely embraced by young people and claims that offline behaviours and choices are not replicated in the online environment. As the availability of the Internet increases the amount of time young people spend accessing online material, there is an increased risk for exposure to unsuitable information.

Therefore, if offline behaviour is not replicated online, and young people are increasingly being exposed to unsuitable information and behaviours, at what point will or do online behaviours impact on the offline identities and social behaviours? This will be further examined and considered within the framework of the next section entitled: Online Risk.

## **2.4 Online Risk**

Embedded among the social, informational and educational benefits provided by the Internet, numerous risks reside. It appears necessary to develop strategies to manage such risks and mitigate any potential harm that could arise. In order to accomplish this risk need to be identified and framed. A brief summary of the negative aspects of Internet use particularly for young people is provided by Guan and Subrahmanyam (2009, p351) who suggest that:

“For youth, the negative aspects of the Internet include Internet addiction as well as online risks such as exposure to sexually explicit material and online victimization including harassment or cyber bullying and sexual solicitation.”

Very little is known about the affect of Internet addiction in relation to online risks. However, in order to understand the term, Leung and Lee (2012, p 120) cite a definition by Young (1998) that:

“...requires that individuals meet five of eight criteria for internet addiction to qualify as an addict. These criteria include (1) preoccupation with the internet, (2) need for longer amounts of time online, (3) repeated attempts to reduce internet use, (4) withdrawal when reducing internet use, (5) time management issues, (6) environmental distress (family, school, work, friends), (7) deception around time spent online, and (8) mood modification through internet use.”



Internet addiction is viewed as major factor by Leung and Lee (2012, p15) when considering a young person's propensity to be subject to negative influences, risks and harassment from their engagement with the Internet when compared to healthier individuals.

"...internet addiction symptoms are key indicators for internet risks, especially for being the target of harassment."

In a report from the EU Kids Online network published in 2008, Hasebrink et al., 2008 address the issue of the online risks experienced by young people across the European Union and make comparisons of how the risks materialise in various countries. They also provide an analysis that considers the risks under the "three C's Approach" which classifies the risks to the child in terms of Content, Contact and Conduct.

The following table outlines their findings:

<b>Online Risks</b>	<b>Providers Motives</b>			
Child's role	<b>Commercial</b>	<b>Aggressive</b>	<b>Sexual</b>	<b>Values</b>
<b>Content</b> Child as recipient	Advertising, spam, sponsorship	Violent, hateful content	Pornographic or unwelcome sexual content	Racism, biased or misleading info/advice (e.g.drugs)
<b>Contact</b> Child as participant	Tracking/ harvesting personal information	Being bullied harassed or stalked	Received unwanted sexual comments, being groomed, meeting strangers	Self-harm, unwelcome persuasion
<b>Conduct</b> Child as actor	Illegal downloads, hacking, gambling	Bullying or harassing another	Sending or posting porn, sexual harassment	Providing advice e.g. suicide/pro-anorexic chat

The above table asserts that the online risks that young people face can be classified under four broad headings of commercial, aggressive, sexual and values. Whilst the variety of specific risks can be numerous and some are outlined in the table, the view is that specific risks can change with time, but the broad categories remain constant.

Hasebrink et al., (2008) puts forward a number of hypotheses including:

“As children get older they are exposed to a greater amount and range of online risks.”

“As younger children gain online access they are increasingly exposed to risk.”

When considering these hypotheses it appears that a chain of causality exists in relation to online interaction, with every action having a reaction. The potential to generate levels of unease when focusing on the negative aspects of online interaction with the evidence that increases in certain types of online activity result in associated increases in the propensity for exposure to risky behaviour or environments. Guan et al, (2009, p 353) refer to specific online risks that young people face, which include exposure to explicit sexual material as well as being victims of cyber bullying or online victimisation:

“Exposure to sexually explicit Internet material is an important concern as there is evidence that such exposure is related to greater sexual uncertainty and more positive attitudes towards uncommitted sexual exploration among youth.”

Other links established by Guan et al (2009) include, the evidence that a young person’s risk of being bullied online will be increased in line with any increases in their time spent online, which could be considered to be obvious. Frequency of use may not be the real issue but rather the type of use and the behaviour traits of the user. Additionally Guan et al (2009) suggest that there is no direct correlation between the uploading of personal information and young people’s propensity to be subjected to online solicitation. This opinion is endorsed by Mitchell et al (2008) stating that any

increase in the potential to be a victim of solicitation crimes is not directly associated to the availability of young people's personal details online. Instead they suggest that it is more aligned to the individual's readiness to engage in relations with unknown individuals they encounter online.

With regard to the impact that the Internet and social networking has on young people, the previous explanation of risks on a categorical basis is a starting point in developing an understanding. The subsequent consequences that can exist are equally important. For example Guan et al (2009) indicate that increases in social anxiety can be traced back to that person being a victim of cyber bullying. The evidence from the study by Guan et al (2009) suggests that in cyber bullying, both the victim and the perpetrator have increased potential to develop maladaptive behaviour such as assaults, school problems and substance use.

In order to further explore the impact of the Internet on the lives of young people, it is imperative that the attitude of the young person towards risk and online risk taking behaviour is investigated. A triangulation process would be beneficial, whereby focus will be given to young people, youth work practitioners and parents.

The perception and willingness, of young people to engage in risky activity, both online and offline is a noteworthy and relevant factor. It is suggested by Livingstone et al (2008) that it appears that young people will openly, without reservation, engage in online activity relating to content, contact and

conduct that for an adult would present too much risk. Indeed, such risky activity appears to be just the opportunity that young people crave.

"Cyberspace has become a venue for leisure and educational activities of many youth, offering new opportunities to enrich and extend life experiences. However, along with these enhancements come unanticipated costs that can detrimentally affect the lives of young people." (Berson, 2005, p29)

It is through our interaction with others that norms and perceptions are developed as suggested by Weick (1995). From there individuals make sense of and create a viewpoint of the world in which they interact. This viewpoint is amplified by Wall and Olofsson (2008), who believe that for an individual to develop a perception of things such as potential risk, social relations and group interaction is vital.

Anderson (cited in Berson 2005) argues that young people are surrounded with advanced technological devices that communicate via a combination of words, graphics and audio. However, cognitive resources are challenged by the pressure of a variety of sensory inputs, which can detrimentally affect young people's ability to make calculated decisions. As the Internet embeds itself into the lives of young people, Berson (2003a) believes that it can bring them into contact with unsuitable information and notions that defy positive behaviours and holds less restrictions with regard to time or space and therefore, requires the constant development of skills such as discernment, communication and observation which are necessary to enable young people to embrace the technology in an informed a responsible manner. Many of these necessary skills can be obtained from peer groups, the formal and

informal educational providers. Professionals working with young people are in a privileged position in terms of their opportunity to empower young people, by further developing service provision to incorporate elements of technological advances into programme planning.

The World Wide Web and specifically the advent of broadband opened the doors to a high-tech, high-speed global village that while offering much potential, also harbours potential dangers. Many of the traditional means of engaging young people are no longer sufficient to deal with the fast developing norms of interaction utilised by young people in today's Internet era. The huge challenge that confronts the youth work sector is the necessity to attempt to understand what essentially changes the way things are done. Rich (cited in Malone, 2000, p 695) suggests that:

"the power of the 'way things are' can keep us trapped in ways of seeing that obscure the significance of larger changes, even as they are occurring."

"The ways things are" would appear to be an issue in the development of youth work over recent years. Often youth work organisations adapted to the perceived needs of young people on an ad-hoc basis, whether that be over a game of pool or free Internet access. In many circumstances the developments, with particular reference to the Internet, appeared unstructured. For example, as the popularity and speed of the Internet grew, many youth drop-in facilities installed computers. This may have appeared to be innovative and forward thinking in terms of service provision,

however, a common factor was that much initial thought was given to the hardware and the necessary safety software was overlooked. Furthermore, the level of adaptation towards Information Technology was primarily driven by the personal interest, ability and understanding of individual staff members. The trend in relation to how youth work service providers embraced the onslaught of the Internet, particularly those with a drop-in facility shows an initial welcoming approach to the Internet. However as the technology developed, the fear culture also developed and the initial welcoming approach was demoted. Ultimately, this reactionary developmental phase lacked any formalised national structure or policy and procedures.

One consideration, suggested by Lister et al. (2003), is that parents evaluated the cost of calls in relation to monitoring and restricting their children's access to the Internet. However, this factor has now been outdated by the advent of broadband. Another factor, not outdated, is the fear of the potential dangers that lurk online, including bullying, grooming, access to dangerous material such as pornography and paedophilia. The irony pointed out by Lister et al (2003), is that, parents have supplied computers in the home to prevent their children from being exposed to the dangers that lurk outside.

"As the permeable boundaries of domestic space are made apparent in the introduction of the Internet (and television before it) into the home, the space of the networked home computer becomes a site of surveillance in which children's activities are monitored in not dissimilar ways to those employed in the space outside the front door." (Facer et al. 2001)

Bovill and Livingstone (2001) noted that the bedroom environment depicts the interests of young people and also acts as a space which is often unlikely to be regulated and monitored by parents, which is a factor in the amount of and type of Internet use by young people.

The study by Lee (2005, p322) identifies

"a construction of the Internet as a point of tension, not in terms of its dangers but rather as a disruption to daily family practices."

In the home environment, constraints tended to relate to parental concerns over the impact any use had on normal family routines and the costs associated with Internet connections, a belief shared by other author, such as Lister (2003). There appeared to be little concern or constraint on the type of Internet use. As the young person is likely to be the only respondent who has not known life without the Internet, it would seem apparent that fear of the unknown and the concern for potential harm associated with the negative aspects of online life will be more prevalent in the mind adults, particularly parents.

## **2.5 Protection Strategies**

It can be maintained that the Internet and new social media represent opportunities and threats as well as possessing strengths and weaknesses.



The dichotomy that exists is how to enable young people to be as active online as they are, whilst remaining safe and having the risks they face minimised. This issue is acknowledged by McMillan and Morrison (2006) who suggest that an understanding of the current impact that new technology is having on all aspects of young people's lives, offers a glimpse of what the Internet may hold in store for generations of young people to come.

Kruat et al (1998) comment that in times of stress and difficulty it is strong ties that cushion people, and that such strong ties are more aligned to the relationships established and maintained by physical proximity. This is a view supported by Slouka (cited by Mesch, 2001) who believes that as people embrace the Internet they are submersed in a virtual reality that does not have the ability to sustain real social relationships. The Internet has the potential to make it difficult to establish and maintain such strong ties based on close physical proximity. This opinion is particularly relevant in the lives of young people who by nature are in a period of transition, which has the potential to be somewhat unstable. Therefore, as more and more young people are becoming avid online participants, they are likely to need protecting. Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) discuss the nature of identity and how young people interact online and suggest that the process is quite fluid and transitory, which adds to an already volatile period of development for young people. This transitory period sees young people as suggested by Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) operating in an experimental manner with

various aspects of life including identity. Therefore, does the Internet provide an outlet which fosters experimental attitudes?

Some young people appear, to have a difficulty in differentiating the virtual from the real leading them to display quite casual approaches and attitudes to Internet safety and their online privacy. This issue is discussed by Steeves & Webster (2008) who suggest that the attractive nature and lure of the Internet is responsible.

Tynes (2007) suggests that media reports warn of the "digital dangers" that teens inevitably face. Experts also recommend parents to keep their children away from using social networking sites and chat rooms, where predators often lurk. This attitude, it could be argued, is taking the safety aspect a step too far at the inevitable expense of the positive connotations associated with the Internet. Indeed, Tynes (2007, p 575) acknowledges this point, in that:

“...we may do adolescents a disservice when we curtail their participation in these spaces, because the educational and psychosocial benefits of this type of communication can far outweigh the potential dangers.”

The benefits that are referred to are in the area of cognitive skills perspective-taking skills. Furthermore, when discussing Internet safety, Tynes (2007) argues that the IT discernment and experience of young people should be an integral consideration in the development of complementary approaches for maintaining young people's safety online.

Many parents are in a position where their children are more IT literate and Internet aware than they are, yet the safety concerns lay more with the parent. To this end, parental supervision is often used as the vehicle for protection. A study conducted by Mesch (2009) with the parents of over 900 American teenagers indicated that methods of regulating Internet use were employed by 86% of parents with 66% using a system that limited online time and 56% using some form of filtering facility. Steeves and Webster (2008) suggest that parental supervision is an important tool in the protection of the online privacy of children. They found that as a result of parental supervision, young people are more aware of the need to protect their online privacy and refrain from sharing personal information. However, Steeve's and Webster's study found that whilst parental supervision is of benefit, it is not viewed as an adequate approach for the protection of young people in their online activities. According to Subrahmanyam et al. (2000) parents are worried that because of the Internet their children are missing out on developmental activities such as social relationships. However, a study by Mesch (2001) concluded that "contrary to popular perceptions it appears that among the adolescent population of Israel, Internet use is not displacing other social activities.

This concern is integral in the developing work of both informal and formal education providers, where they strive to formulate policies and work practices that will involve young people and be the catalyst for empowering young people to be responsible Internet users, thus complimenting parental

supervision. This strategy would appear to be accurate given the extent and availability of Internet connection in society today. Livingston et al. (cited in Cheong, 2008) found that research conducted by UK Children Go Online showed that the majority of young people aged between 9 and 19 years have Internet access in the home and virtually all have access to the Internet when at school. These findings would concur that Internet protection strategies for young people require an integrated approach, incorporating policy makers, educators, parents and also the young people. The concerns held by parents such as cyber bullying and solicitation for example, are reasonable in the eyes of Tynes (2007) who has empathy for such parents, but believes banning young people from using online social networking tools or even excessive monitoring is not the answer, as potential opportunities for psychosocial and cognitive development are obtainable for young people via the online social community.

The youth work professional and those working closely with young people are in an important position, as they will have the experience of developing social norms and behaviours with and without the influence of the Internet, coupled with an insight into the nature of the relationships fostered between the Internet and the young people. This insight can be utilised to bring about change in the prospective role of youth work, by taking previously accepted approaches and altering them to incorporate more positive steps, such as the "Safe Social Networking" guidelines for those working with young people, produced by Youth Work Ireland, to improving online

behaviour, ultimately focusing on affecting social behaviours and norms for the better.

Embracing the Internet involves preparing young people for both positive and negative outcomes. Moreover, this can be achieved by the development of programmes and interventions that aim to generate awareness in the mind of adolescents, that the Internet is real and presents risks and consequences. It would appear that we can work with young people and empower an attitude towards the management of online risks using the analogy of a lion and a cage. The lion will always represent a risk, but the lion's potential to cause harm can be reduced by the introduction of a cage. Many youth work practitioners have in the past facilitated personal development programmes for young people, incorporating effective decision making. This same approach is still relevant, but it is essential that the online realm is incorporated into future strategies by these practitioners.

The nature of the development of the Internet and the negative aspects associated with young people's interaction with the technology has received great attention in recent studies. Nevertheless, whilst there are negative aspects to the Internet and how young people embrace it, there is huge potential for the practitioners who directly work with young people to be a catalyst for positive online experiences which can impact the social behaviour of our youth. This dichotomy was highlighted by Kraut et al (1998) while studying the impact of a social technology on social involvement and psychological well-being. This study was carried out in the infancy of the

Internet, but nonetheless is still relevant. Moreover, Kraut et al. (1998, p 1030) went on to state that:

"Use of the Internet can be both entertaining and useful, but if it causes too much disengagement from real life, it can also be harmful. Until the technology evolves to be more beneficial, people should moderate how much time they use the Internet and monitor the uses to which they put it."

## **2.6 Relationships**

*"Growing up in Technological Worlds: How modern Technologies Shape the Everyday Lives of Young People"* is the title of a study by Tully (2003, p 444) who argued that:

"Modern technology changes the perceptions that people have of the world and the way they act within the world."

Can this argument be true in relation to how young people develop and maintain relationships in a technologically dominant 21<sup>st</sup> Century? The answer from various research studies would appear to suggest that this is true with regard to peer to peer relationships. As the study by Subrahmanyam, et al. (2000) identifies that for the majority of young people the Internet and access to it offers additional opportunities to communicate with their peers. In recent years we have witnessed the advent of social networking via sites such as bebo, Facebook and twitter, which have been extensively adopted by the youth population. When considering young people's relationships with their peers, the use of online social networking

has added to the potential for communication, as young people can continue relations with existing friends and develop new friendships regardless of geographic limitations. When online communication is utilised as a tool to maintain contact with close friends and family, acknowledged as 'strong ties' by Subrahmanyam, et al. (2000), it can be argued that the individual can benefit from convincing social supports similar to that obtained from offline relations. In addition, the use of online tools to interact with 'weak-ties' such as distant friends and strangers appear to offer less social supports compared to offline family and close friend relationships. However, Greenfield et al, (cited in Tynes 2007, p 579) suggests that:

"Online social networking can facilitate identity exploration, provide social cognitive skills such as perspective taking, and fulfil the need for social support, intimacy, and autonomy."

They also assert that teens are constantly creating, recreating and honing their identities - a primary goal of adolescent development, which apparently concurs with Tajfel and Turner (1979) and their theory on social identity and how efforts are made to determine group characteristics that are more desirable and can be associated as the "in-group" at the expense of the "out-group". Nevertheless, while there are positives to be taken from the use of the Internet, it is necessary to address the negatives. For example, the two year study conducted by Subrahmanyam, et al. (2000) identified that despite using the Internet for social activities like communication, there is a correlation between the length of time spent online and the decline in social

and psychological well-being, particularly during their first year of using the Internet. Similarly the proposal from Tully 2003 (p449), suggesting:

"Whoever has dealt with technology from childhood on develops skills according to digital requirements."

Therefore, if young people are developing specific skills to contend with the online realm, are these skills transferable offline, or is the offline skills set diminishing? The effects of Internet use by young people over time is also addressed by Subrahmanyam, et al. (2000), who point out that the declines in social and psychological well-being experienced in the first year of Internet use are not as evident. Their argument is based on the perception that young people become more mature in their use of the Internet and veer towards maintaining more 'strong-tie' relationships. This synopsis is echoed by Tynes (2007, p 583) and accompanied with some interesting recommendations, when stating that:

"As teens prepare to enter the adult social world, online social environments provide training wheels, allowing young people to practice interaction with others in the safety of their homes. Educators should try to provide a balanced view of this process. Rather than sensationalizing the dangers, we need to educate parents about the positive aspects of the Internet as well as about the necessary precautions that they and their adolescents can take. Banning social networking sites is unnecessary and would close off adolescents' access to an important space in which to meet their developmental and educational needs."



## **Summary**

This chapter has examined the current literature on social identity theory and internet usage of young people with specific reference to new social media.

Social identity theory underpinned the literature review with particular reference to "in-group" versus the "out-group" mentality. The lens of social identity theory is further explored in the following chapters where it supports analysis of the behaviour and thoughts of young people.

The analysis identified key themes of Internet Use, Behaviour and Online Risk. It also highlighted how people create and maintain their own identity online as well as how they understand the impacts on their behaviour that can be attributed to online activity and the identified risks that are associated with online activity. The fluid nature of the online behaviour identified coupled with the high level of use among teenagers will be incorporated into the empirical research in the investigations on how online use can impact social behaviour

Chapter 3 will outline the decision to conduct primarily qualitative empirical research and the methodology employed within this study in order to ascertain what aspects of these changes can be associated with the influence of new social media tools.

## **Chapter 3**

### **3.0 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The following chapter offers an overview of the strategies and methods employed in this study. The reasons for the specific choices are provided. The study incorporates an approach, both qualitative and quantitative in nature to gathering data on how new social media is impacting on the social behaviour of young people. A series of seven focus groups were implemented to gather this data. All aspects relating to the design implementation and evaluation of the focus groups are described.

#### **Qualitative and Quantitative data**

The methodology was framed around the collection of empirical data from a series of seven focus groups of young people. Research traditionally involves taking either a qualitative or quantitative perspective. However, progression has resulted in more researchers taking a view that a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches can generate detailed results. This viewpoint is echoed by Cresswell and Clark (2011, p1) who refer to combined methods as:

“... it is an intuitive way of doing research that is consistently being displayed through our everyday lives.”

The nature and process involved in qualitative and quantitative research have distinctive differences and yet some similarities as outlined by Punch (1998) who maintains that quantitative data views society in numerical form, whereas qualitative data provides a narrative form. This research project required the harvesting of thoughts and opinions of young people which by nature are difficult to measure using methods associated with traditional quantitative means. Therefore, the strategy selected was primarily qualitative, in that the subtle thought patterns, opinions and reactions of young people within a small group setting could be observed and recorded. However, the opportunity to develop a mixed method approach arose where the study analysed the responses over the series of focus groups. A standardised question route was used and the variety of responses to the same questions were mapped to provide statistical/quantitative results.

The research project will investigate 3 key questions. Chapter 2 provides a detailed, critical literature review exploring aspects of question 1: What changes, if any, in the social behaviour of young people have been identified in academic and professional publication? This provides a context on which to examine our final two research questions detailed below. The nature of these questions lend themselves to be explored using a combined methods approach as described by Cresswell and Clark (2011) in so much as the research design recognised that several types of data collection approaches would be necessary: quantitative data would be required to provide context

and to boundary the research area and qualitative data would be necessary to provide in-depth analysis and insight needed. The overarching aim of this primary data phase is to create a forum that allows the voices of young people to be heard within the appropriate context. These questions are:

- What aspects of these changes are attributable to the influence of new social media?
- How have the perceived changes been experienced by young people in Ireland in terms of their social interaction with others, their use of language and their lived social norms and values?

This chapter describes the focus group approach primarily used in the data collection phase of this empirical research and ultimately progresses to acquaint the reader with the philosophy that underpins this approach. Furthermore, the decision to direct the study using both qualitative and quantitative analysis can be justified in that the research questions relate to the perceptions of young people. However, it was important to site these opinions within a broader context so as to identify and quantify possible trends in such opinions.

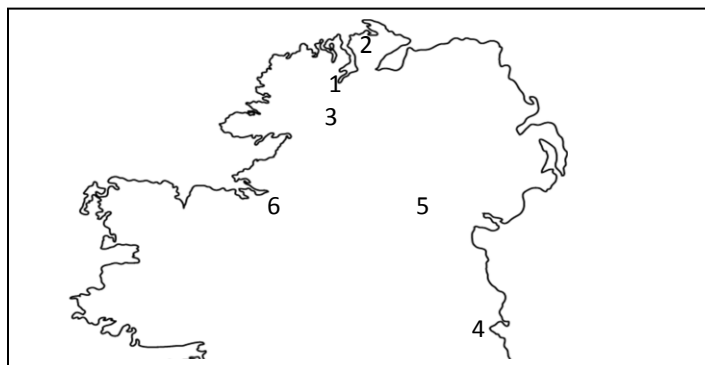
The qualitative data collection strategy was designed to provide a methodical and sound base from which to draw conclusions. The primary data collection strategy gathers the perceptions from young people relating to Internet and social networking use and also how they might respond to

differing viewpoints within a peer group setting. Therefore the data collection required a method that was intrinsically personable in order to adequately harvest the opinions of individuals. Validity and reliability are integral to the success of this study, as outlined in the work of Miller (1991) who states validity of the research is based upon thoroughness, responsibility and collaboration.

In order to generate data that can be justified and rigorous, the study employed a thorough series of seven focus groups. Validity and reliability of the results was an intrinsic consideration at the design stage which is evident in that these focus groups, as outlined later in this section, are spread across a wide geographic region, with each of the focus groups having an average of six participants. The design criterion for the focus groups was stratified clustering based on the national structures already developed by Youth Work Ireland.

The actual locations of the focus groups where:

1. Letterkenny x2
2. Buncrana
3. Castlefinn
4. Clondalkin
5. Castleblaney
6. Sligo



Participants were recruited on the basis of age and gender and also on a geographic basis as outlined in the map above. A strategy of employing cluster sampling appeared relevant due to the natural groupings of the sample frame that were evident, due to the existence of the collaboration of the Youth Work Ireland network of member services. In as far as possible each group was peer referenced, where each participant was to some extent aware of the others and had some degree of previous interaction. The principle of thoroughness as outlined by Miller (1991) is mirrored in the facilitated capture of a diversity of perspectives within each group, from individuals who are not total strangers but not necessarily friends or close acquaintances. The topic of peer referencing will be discussed in greater details later in this section.

The research focused on the relationship and social interaction behaviours of young people and whether the increasing uses of social networks and other online communication tools have any impact on their social behaviour. A starting point for consideration was to contemplate a theoretical framework to guide the research. Social Identity theory and particularly the work of Tajfel and Turner, who refer to process whereby individuals make decisions that, determine their "in-group" of choice was particularly relevant to the demographics of this study. By nature of personal development, young people strive to find and establish their place in society. The process of amending and adapting individual identity is ubiquitous in today's society as argued by Amiot et al, (2007) who identify that identity alterations are forced upon individuals as a result of organisational change, migration,

natural disasters and other changes to the social context. Notable transitional periods in the life of young people, such as puberty and transition from secondary to tertiary education for example, are potentially subject to similar forces.

Tajfel and Turner's theory of social identity is centred on longings of individuals to maintain or improve their self-confidence and esteem: "they strive for a positive self-concept" (Tajfel and Turner 1979 p59). Specifically, Tajfel and Turner point out that with regard to social cataloguing individuals don't just systematise society but also create an opportunity of a course for self-reference, in which the individual establishes and develops their personal place in society. The individual achieves this by engaging in a series of comparative measures to assess and differentiate various 'in-groups' and 'out-groups', and subsequently aligning themselves with a favourable 'in-group' and forming positive opinions of that group. This assertion influenced the methodology in terms of attempting to gather data from individuals within a group setting and observing the group dynamics. Exactly how any perceived positive and negative evaluations are communicated across and within groups would appear to have changed with the incorporation of online interactive social networks. The fluid nature of identity creation and maintenance via the Internet was an interesting factor for this research in its attempts to interpret how the Internet is affecting the social interactions of young people both online and offline. If the Internet is now classified as society or part of society and it has propensity to affect societal

development, then the notion put forward by Cooley (1902, p16) is pertinent when he states that:

“...that persons make society would be generally admitted as matter of course; but that society makes persons would strike many as a startling notion.”

As the Internet is now so embedded in daily society, the social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner is still well positioned to conceptualise how people place themselves in the world around them. However, this study considers the prospect of young people utilising the wide parameters of the Internet to potentially create and maintain several identities and be aligned to several “in-groups” simultaneously. The perceived concept of mixed loyalty combined with the impersonal nature of online relations could be central in the investigation of the behaviour patterns of young people when offline, if there is evidence of offline behaviour traits being influenced by the behaviour that is more associated with the fluid nature of online interaction.

With regard to the collection of qualitative data, the fundamental methods as suggested by Morgan (1997) that are employed in the social sciences are interviews, focus groups and observations. Interviews tend to refer to obtaining data from an individual, whilst observations habitually take place with groups of people. Additionally, Morgan identifies that focus groups, due to their parameters of small groups and limited time constraints fall somewhere in-between interviews, carried out on a one to one basis and observational studies of larger groups and over longer time frames, focus



groups appearing to combine the benefits of both. It is for this reason that focus groups were chosen. Also the researchers professional experience of group facilitation in the youth work sector, suggested that the benefits of dynamic group interaction was an important consideration in an attempt to gather data from young people, due mainly to the ease at which data can be obtained by working with the strength of a group rather than individuals. Moreover, this experience has shown that the levels of quality interaction appear to improve when careful and responsible consideration is given to the make-up of the group and the motivational methods employed. According to Gibson (2007) the quantity of published sources that have incorporated the use of focus group research with children and young people has only notably increased in the previous ten years. It would appear that in relation to studies of this nature focus group methodologies will increase in popularity.

Wilkinson (2004, p 177) defines focus groups as

“a way of collecting qualitative data, which – essentially – involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion (or discussions), ‘focused’ around a particular topic or set of issues.”

Whilst focus groups appear to be increasing in popularity in the social sciences, it is important to note that they are not new. Wilkinson (2004) maintains that by using focus groups, a researcher can examine and comprehend a topic from the viewpoint of the group members. The researcher, by utilising the dynamics of group interaction, can analyse ‘how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social

interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms' (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999 p5).

Other methods, such as questionnaires, surveys and individual interviews were considered, however, the qualitative research in question appeared to be more aligned to a methodology that incorporated a data collection strategy that paid attention to the interaction of the participants, as opposed to just individual opinion. This was important as the analysis would benefit from an understanding of group behaviour and how participants reacted or responded to comments from their peers, whilst also watching for any silences. The statements made by the individuals and the following comments from the rest of the group would be observed and monitored across the geographic spread covered by the various focus groups to ascertain if similar thought patterns existed across the country. The obvious benefit associated with focus groups is that they provided the opportunity to gather a large volume of data moderately quickly which was a key factor in this research given the time constraints involved.

### **3.2 Selection of Participants** (Age, consent, ethics etc)

This research focused on young people aged between 14 and 16 years of age from both urban and rural settings. The national organisation Youth Work Ireland represents a federation of twenty two member youth services across Ireland, with the researcher being an employee of one, namely Donegal Youth Service Ltd. This network of youth work practitioners is

comprehensive and diverse with regard to geography, experience and professionalism, and proved to be a valuable asset due to its accessibility to the researcher.

Morgan (cited by Gibson 2007) states that the most common cause of unsuccessful focus groups is that of recruitment of participants. This study successfully dealt with the recruitment issue due to the pre-existing relationships within the Youth Work Ireland Network. The research benefited from the approach of embedding familiarity in the eyes of the participants in the focus groups by incorporating a youth worker known to the groups. Workshops are a resource commonly used in the youth work field, which are received well by young people, as they often feel more at ease in a group environment with people they are aware of. Therefore focus groups presented as a suitable option for this study due to the characteristics being similar.

Another issue that requires consideration is location. (Gibson, 2007) The pre-existing structures that are available through Youth Work Ireland were considered to be an advantage in terms of mitigating the concerns associated with the recruitment of participants and also diminishing any potential difficulties in relation to obtaining suitable, familiar locations that the participants would feel comfortable with. Getting a satisfactory balance between accessibility and familiarity in regard to a sense of ownership in relation the environment and the research relationship, as suggested by Gibson (2007) can have a notable impact on attendance and contribution.

Therefore, the utilisation of the relationships that have been developed in the past between the youth work practitioners and the young people, proved to be a valuable asset.

The actual size of a focus group as pointed out by Wibeck et.al (2007) requires consideration and is critical for a successful outcome. This outlook is appropriate given that the aim of the focus groups in this research was to generate group interaction, and it appeared that group size was a contributing factor. Additionally the amount of potential data obtainable from the group was considered. For this to be optimised, the local knowledge and relationships that have been developed by youth practitioners around the country was again utilised. These professionals provided the gateway to recruiting groups of on average six peer referenced young people of similar age, who have respect for each other. This opinion is echoed by Morgan (1997) who suggests that focus groups are most successful when the participants possess a level of mutual respect and shared interest in the research topic.

### **3.3 Peer Referencing**

The composition of each focus group was considered in order to foster high-quality group dynamics. Youth Work Practitioners in each area were instructed to recruit peer referenced participants, who are somewhat familiar with each other and of similar age. A structure of pre-formed groups was

preferred, consisting of young people who previously knew each other and have experience of group work in similar scenarios. Consideration was given to the potential outcomes from the focus groups and it was decided not to incorporate total strangers into the group dynamic. The idea of recruiting peer referenced young people appeared to be a beneficial strategy in attempting to minimise potential conflict within the group. Implementing methods to assist and enable positive results from focus groups is a thought shared by Wibeck et.al (2007, p 259) who suggests that:

“to encourage the elaboration and co-construction of knowledge in focus groups, a certain amount of homogeneity among group members is desirable.”

Weibeck (2007) also argues that some level of heterogeneity within a focus group should be considered to facilitate active discussion. Whilst this opinion was indeed valid, the construct of the focus groups on average was more homogenous, particularly when the sizes of the focus groups were small, with 5-8 young people in each group.

It could be suggested that when young people encounter a situation that requires them to make a decision that affects everyday life; they tend to rely on peers for direction. Peer groups by nature attract individuals with common traits, and/or a desire to acquire or share similar characteristics. Within the context of this research it was considered relevant to have peer referenced focus groups in order to study the dynamics of such a group of young people and to interpret the social behaviour norms within group activity, in an attempt to gain further understanding of how one young

person's social behaviour can and is being influenced by their peers and whether this is being accelerated by online social networking.

### **3.4 Access & Consent**

When conducting any research, consideration must be given to the role played by the participants in the data collection phase, especially when the research involves working with children or young people under the age of 18, due to the perceived vulnerability of this age group. For example one such vulnerability that is often associated with young people and research identified by Long (2007) is the suggestion that young people may feel constrained to conform to the requests of adults. This is a concern that could equally be associated with research among adults, but nonetheless required attention to address the possibility. Each of the focus groups carried out during this research were engineered to include a youth worker known to the peer referenced group of young people. This person's role was to act as a common denominator between the researcher and the young people. This manifested itself in that the youth worker was previously aware of the nature of the research and primed to look out for individuals who were not as actively involved as others and help include them in discussion. Additionally, they provided as level of comfort the group, which helped maintain confidence levels. Furthermore, as each focus group included a

youth worker known to the participants, the concern of young people feeling vulnerable in the company of a researcher was mitigated.

The dynamic created in this research between the young participants and the researcher was built upon the principals of youth work where empowerment and participation is developed within flexible constraints as opposed to teacher/pupil relations in the formal education sector, centred on a curriculum. Such principals allowed for an effective rapport within the group by employing simple approaches, for example the incorporation of “ice-breaking” activities and the use of first names creating a catalyst for enthusiastic responses and debate.

As the participants of the focus groups were in the range of 14 – 16 years of age, parental/guardian consent was an intrinsic requirement. Relevant documentation was produced and circulated via the youth work practitioners to the young people in advance of the focus groups. Satisfactory completion of the required consent form was provided by all young people before they were considered for inclusion in the focus groups. Permission was also obtained in order to record the dialogue from the focus group for use in the dissemination of the research results, which is built upon the ethical approval granted by LYIT.

### **3.5 Focus group preparation**

In order to foster interaction and create the catalyst for collaborative learning within a focus group setting is an issue investigated by Wibeck et.al (2007), who are of the opinion that the style of questioning and stimulus material utilised should be intricate and open-ended, but still allow the opportunity to provoke an emotional response.

Focus groups are a type of group interview, which suggests a two-way discussion or conversation incorporating questioning that requires a moderator or facilitator to employ a method for eliciting contributions from the participants. This particular research employed a variety of methods that many youth work practitioners use on a daily basis when working with young people. Youth work incorporates a developmental education framework which utilises techniques such as ice-breaking activities and debates with significant emphasis on communication and active listening skills.

The focus groups in this empirical research incorporated a variety of methods to stimulate discussion, which included: metaphor; scenario and fallacies. An approach whereby the focus groups are facilitated in understanding one thing in terms of another, or using a hypothetical explanation of an event or issue was constructed. Additionally, by design the research incorporated the use of fallacies or rather "an instance of poor reasoning" according to Baggini and Fosl (2003, p21). It was envisaged that this approach would target potential emotional triggers in the peer referenced participants, and build upon the existing strong social ties.



The primary objective of the focus groups was to enable quality in-depth conversation, resulting in an opportunity for capturing input from all participants. In order to achieve this, the researcher was required to create a neutral but friendly atmosphere, allowing the participants to feel at ease, but yet have the opportunity to concentrate and consider issues. This view point appears to be echoed by Weibeck et.al (2007, p 263) who argues that:

“...it is important that the moderator, even at the beginning of the session, help create an atmosphere of trust, in which participants believe that their contributions are important, and that there are no ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ to be assessed by the researchers.”

This approach was the channel for a balance of intelligent in-depth discussion and a level of natural everyday conversation, which featured a series of predetermined questions, incorporating metaphors etc, an approach endorsed by Krueger and Casey (2000). However, it was crucial that the researcher had the ability to diverge from the predetermined strategy in order to maintain the flow of conversation as provided by the participants, instilling a freedom in the participants to respond and add to each other’s comments without feeling the need to continually responding directly to the researcher. Nevertheless it was important for continuity across the focus groups and also for the comparative analysis of the focus groups that the research returned to the planned questioning route and not allowing the discussion to go off on a tangent.

Each of the focus groups was scheduled to last between one and one and half hours, a timeframe recommended by Rabiee (2004). This time allocation

enabled enough flexibility to capture sufficient data in relation to the specific research questions, whilst also allowing for the group to go into more depth on particular issues that were of particular interest and relevance to the target groups. Rabiee (2004, p656) identifies that:

"It is therefore, ethical and good practice to warn the participants about their time commitment."

This recommendation was implemented considered and adhered to during the recruitment phase of this research, whereby both the participants and their parents/guardians were informed on all aspects of the research in advance via the consent process.

With regard to the questioning route the researcher constructed a series of questions that specifically related to: Internet Usage; Behaviour and Risk. Carefull consideration was given in order to link the questions from one theme to another to allow the participants thought process to be aligned to the flow of the questions. Also it was important to consider the time frame in order to generate sufficient responses for each question. In addition, the 'ice-breaking' characteristics of the moving debate that initiated each focus group were designed around four questions that acted as a precursor to the main questioning route of the focus group. Both the moving debate questions and the focus group questions are available in the appendices.

### **3.6 Environment**

As this particular study focused specifically on young people aged between 14 and 16 years of age, noteworthy considerations of parental consent, convenient time, transport options, other commitments and the recruitment of co-facilitators were taken into account. Care was taken to schedule focus groups at a time that was convenient for the parents and guardians of the participants, whilst also being mindful to not interfere with school commitments. Research carried out into young people's perceptions and awareness of digital technology carried out by Hundley and Shyles (2010) also employed a focus group approach which suggests that young people can sometimes feel awkward and embarrassed when questioned by older people. Many of the same issues were considered in this research and like Hundley and Shyles strategies to address these issues were implemented with regard to locations, environment and peer referencing as already discussed.

There are constraints or limitations on the uses and benefits of focus groups as suggested by Morgan (1997) who points out that the environment in which the focus groups are conducted tend to be controlled by the moderator or researcher, and it is not evident whether or not the participants would respond better in a natural environment. With this view point in mind, the researcher organised for the focus groups to take place in locations that were well known to the participants and spaces that they

regularly frequented and felt comfortable with. The focus groups were conducted in youth clubs or youth centres and the arrangements were made with the cooperation of local youth work practitioners whom the participants were familiar with and had a previously developed a working relationship. This pre-existing relationship was crucial to the establishment of an atmosphere that led to the success of the focus groups and is an outlook supported by Gibson (2007, p477) who argues that:

“Making children and young people feel welcome and reducing their anxiety about participating begins at the stage of recruitment.”

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

Qualitative data as defined by Saunders et, al. (2007, p470) is:

“refers to all non-numeric data or data that have not been quantified and can be a product of all research strategies. It can range from a short list of responses to open-ended questions in an online questionnaire to more complex data such as transcripts of in-depth interviews or entire policy documents.”

In this research the primary qualitative data has been gathered from a series of focus groups. The identification, scrutiny and evaluation of themes and patterns are referred to by Hair et, al. (2007) as the primary objective of qualitative data analysis. The contents and outputs of the focus groups was, with consent, recorded on a Zoom H4 Digital audio recorder, stored on SD Card, backed-up to a hard drive and subsequently transcribed to a Microsoft Word document for purpose of analysis, in order to capture exactly what was

said by the participants. Moreover, considerable attention was given, not just to what was said, but rather the way in which it was said, and also to the understanding of silences. This aspect was made easier by the use of the digital recording equipment which enabled actual playback facilities at any time during analysis. This facility proved valuable, in that the researcher was able to make notes during the focus group which were subsequently considered when the dialogue was played back. Furthermore, as the various focus groups took a few months to complete, it would have been impossible to maintain mental notes with regard to the nature of responses, whereas the playback facilities combined with any note-taking enabled a comprehensive analysis.

In their discussion on discourse analysis, Phillips and Hardy (2002, p 2) consider the composition of society and state:

"The things that make up the social world-including our very identities-appear out of discourse." "...Without discourse, there is no social reality, and without understanding discourse, we cannot understand our reality, our experiences, or ourselves."

According to Gergen (cited in Phillips and Hardy, 2002) discourse analysis is considered to be a methodological approach and not just a method and for this reason it was employed in this research to build an understanding of the responses from the focus group participants and the context in which those responses were gathered.

A wealth of content was produced from the focus groups and was recorded in an audio format. This data was subsequently transcribed and in order to

comprehensively analyse the results a software package was sought and employed. Nvivo 9, a qualitative data analysis tool was utilised, where all relevant empirical data was imported from SD Cards. The software provided a platform where the unstructured data generated from the focus groups was brought together and managed in one place. The system enabled all responses to chronological questions from each focus group to be gathered together and analysed collectively, whereby specific analytical thoughts could be recorded as the process evolved as well as identifying various trends across the collective focus groups. Moreover, Nvivo 9 offered a drag-and-drop facility that allowed for data to be coded into themes or 'nodes', therefore assisting to unearth meanings or related patterns. Such patterns or themes were then visualised using the software, for example word trees and tag clouds, which prioritised and then highlighted the common threads that ran throughout the data.

In addition to the themes and patterns unearthed via Nvivo analysis, valuable results were gathered by understanding the meanings behind periods of silences or pauses that are evident from the audio recordings, that when matched to the specific questions added value to the results.

By incorporating a co-facilitator who was known to the group the researcher was enabled to illicit comprehensive and coherent responses from quiet or shy individuals, who may not have been so forthcoming if the focus groups had been facilitated solely by strangers.

### **3.8 Limitations**

Even though this research was cautiously considered, planned and implemented, inevitably some limitations have been identified, which if considered for future research would enhance validity. The research study was carried out over a two year period, and conducted by the primary researcher on a part-time basis. Therefore, this constraint impacted on the research scope, permitting a small number of focus groups sourced from a number of regional areas in Ireland. For the research to be more comprehensive a larger research team would allow for a larger number of focus groups involving more participants from more regions of the country, resulting in a larger research population with the propensity for wider and more accurate representation.

Furthermore, the research participants were recruited from within youth work structures, known to the researcher. However, a common characteristic when working with young people in a youth work context is that they are more accessible at certain times of the year, predominantly during the holiday periods and outside school time. With this in mind, whilst the structure provided convenient and reliable access to young people, it was limited to periods outside of school commitments. This resulted in a shorter window of opportunity for access to participants. This could have been counteracted by establishing links with other agencies and educational

establishments that are frequented by young people during academic periods.

The research study employed a methodology of focus groups, for reasons explained earlier in this chapter. Considering the aims of the research, greater understanding of the results could be achieved if an observational study were to be combined with the focus groups. However, in order to incorporate an observational dimension to the study resulting in the additional benefit of more comprehensive results the financial and time parameters of any such study would inevitably increase.

## **Summary**

This chapter has considered the decision to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative analysis in an approach to research within the guiding theoretical framework of social identity theory.

Focus group was the method of choice for the data collection phase of the study due to the subtle nature of the thoughts and opinions of young people within the context of peer referenced groups. All aspects pertinent to such a method were outlined. These include participant selection, peer referencing, access and consent, preparation, environment and data analysis.



With regard to preparation the use of moving debate and questioning was implemented with the design being centred on the core themes of Internet Usage, Behaviour and Online Risk.

A wealth of recorded data obtained from the focus groups was succinctly analysed to yield clear results in relation to the specific themes of the study, whilst also observing the characteristics of how young people respond to each other's opinions, which are highlighted in both a quantitative and qualitative nature in chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

## **Chapter 4**

### **4.0 Quantitative Findings**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This study explored 3 main themes in relation to Internet use, within the context of youth groups aged between 14 and 16 years of age and in both urban and rural settings across the country of Ireland. The themes were:

- Internet Usage
- Behaviour
- Online Risks

The findings are reported in line with the structure of the focus groups that were conducted. Initially a moving debate with four simple but yet strategic questions was utilised as an ice-breaking technique, which had the purpose of surveying in broad terms the main themes.

The combined results from all seven focus groups are as follows:

Statement	Agree	Disagree	Not Sure
1. Young people spend too much time online	70%	26%	4%
2. Young people are aware of the risks of social networking	44%	42%	14%
3. Online friendships are better than offline friendships	5%	86%	9%
4. I could survive without the Internet	35%	49%	16%

Figure 1: Moving debate results

These initial findings will be further analysed and discussed in chapter 5 along with the findings from the more in-depth conversations that follow in this chapter.

## 4.2 Internet Usage

With regard to how young people aged between 14 and 16 years of age are using the Internet, this research has shown that when asked: how are young people accessing the Internet? There was an eclectic response, ranging from traditional methods to modern mobile methods.

Outside of the traditional methods of personal computer or laptop which accounted for 26% of responses, the most popular method utilised by 14 to 16 year old young people is the modern mobile wireless devices combined with gaming consoles, such as Nintendo, Xbox or Sony Play station which accounted for 54%

The table below outlines the variety and frequency of all responses:

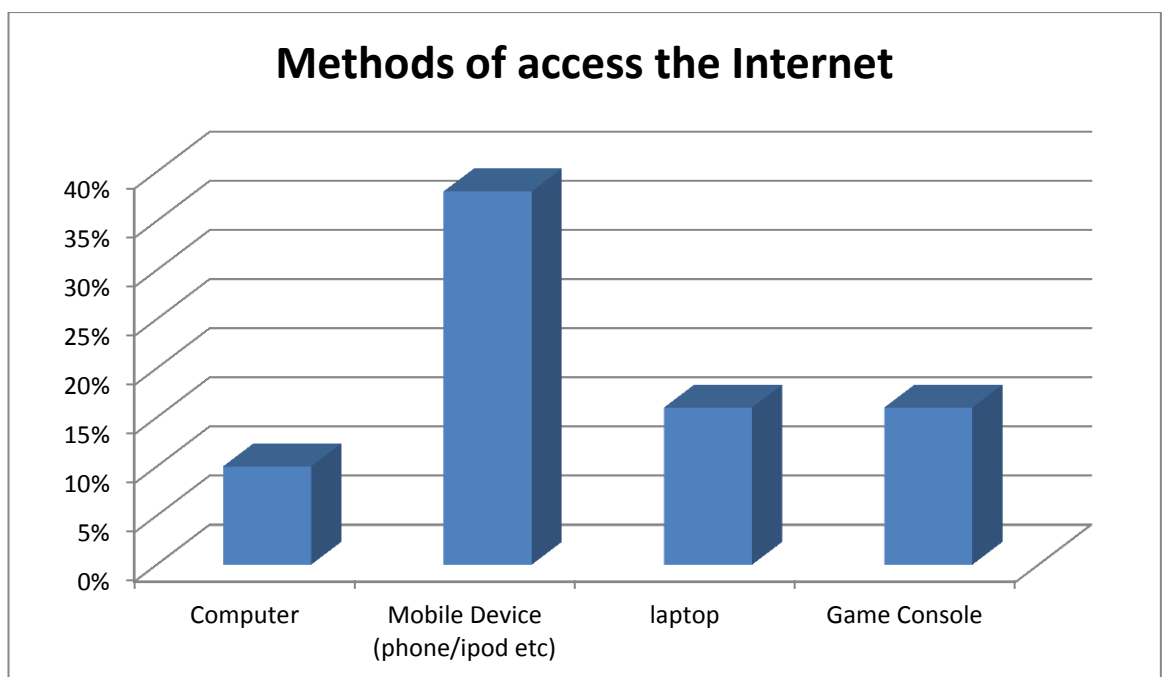


Figure 2: Main methods of accessing online content

By taking this a step further and investigating what young people do when online, additional intriguing information came to light. In all seven focus groups which incorporated young people from urban and rural locations in a variety of areas from Donegal to Dublin the first response in relation to online activity was unanimously: Facebook / Social Networking. Other

popular responses were in the area of Homework, and video/music.

Nevertheless, the quantity of references to social networking prevalence was noteworthy. Moreover, this outcome is in keeping with the direction of this study and will influence the discussion in chapter 5.

An understanding of the amount of time that young people are engaged in online activity was intrinsic to this research. Differing attitudes emerged as to what constituted being online: was it just time spent on the computer or does it include online gaming on Play stations and Xboxes etc? Additionally a flexible interpretation of what it means to be connected via mobile wireless devices was detected through the focus group discussions. The chart below gives a visual representation of the amount of time 14-16 year olds allocate to activities that incorporate an online dimension.

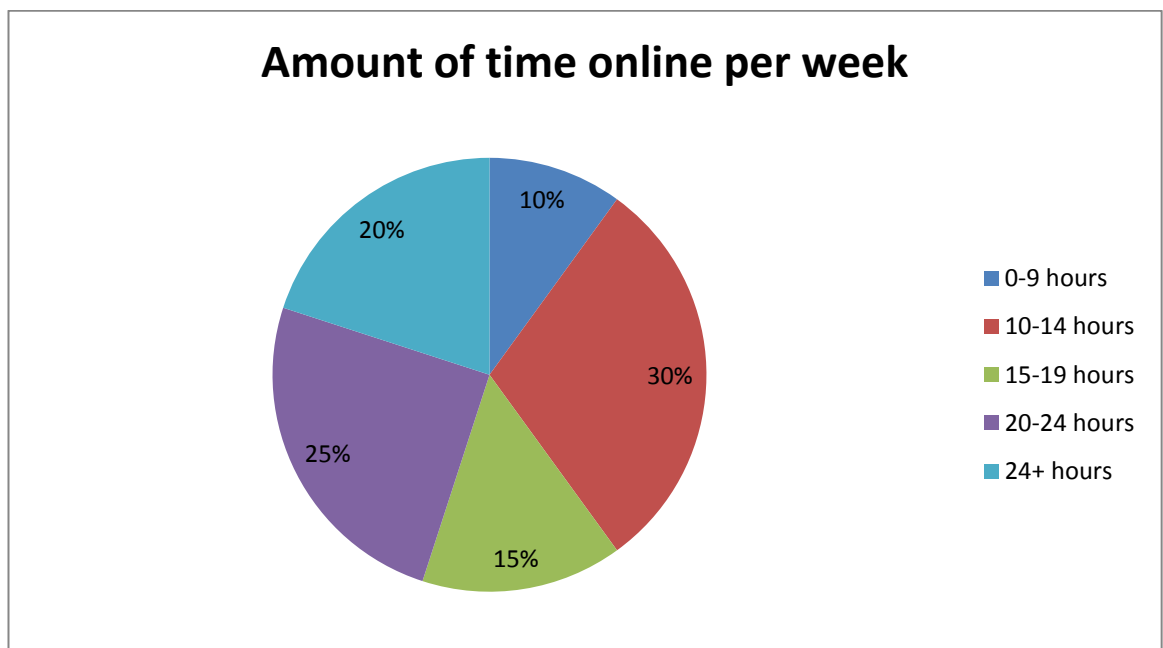


Figure 3: Time spent online

The researcher anticipated that social networking/Facebook would be a fundamental factor in the focus group discussion, therefore in order to ascertain exactly how prevalent this area of online activity is among 14 – 16 year old the participants in the research were asked to consider what percentage of the time they spend online is on social networking sites such as Facebook. The proportional results as shown below are consistent across the geographic area covered by the research, incorporating both urban and rural locations and will feature more predominantly in the discussion chapter to follow. Furthermore, ISPC research in 2011 found that young people of this age are online for between 1 and 3 hours daily and that 75% use the Internet for social networking sites.

([http://www.ispcc.ie/uploads/files/dir4/12\\_0.php](http://www.ispcc.ie/uploads/files/dir4/12_0.php))

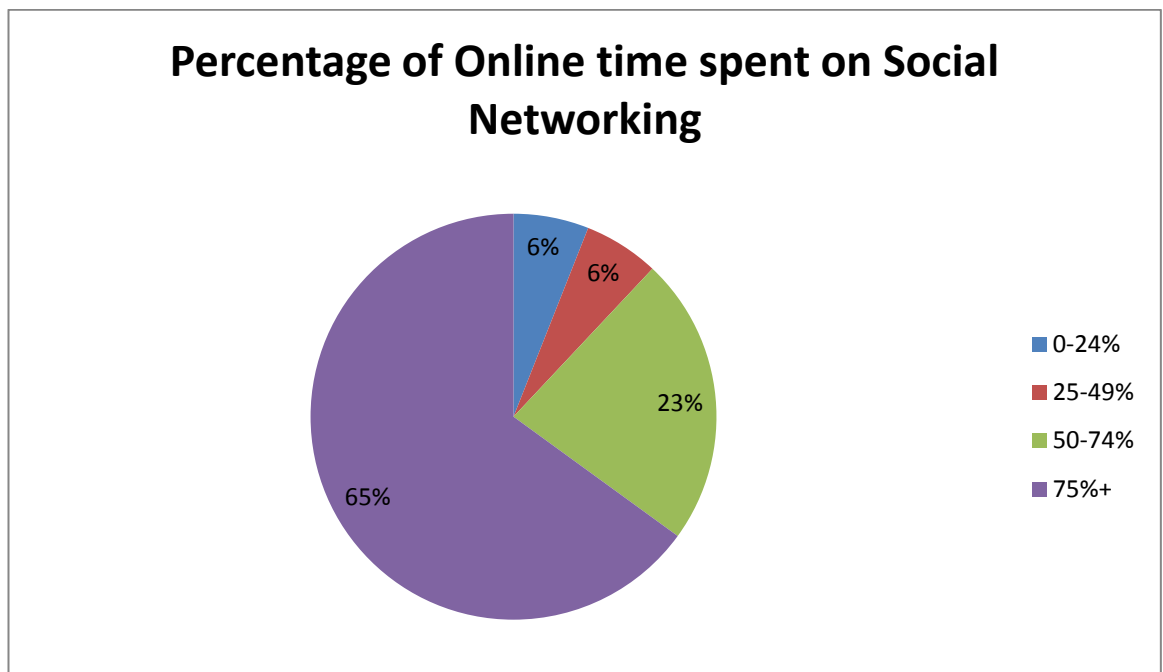


Figure 4: Percentage of Internet time allocated to Social Networking

### **4.3 Behaviour**

Gaining an appreciation of how and why young people engage with online technology lays the foundations from which to build an insight into how the Internet and social networking impacts on their social behaviour. Even though the age group in question; 14 to 16 year olds, occupy large percentages of their time with online activities, 78% of those consulted during this research project are of the opinion that with increase access opportunities young people spend too much time on the Internet. Moreover, considering that this research has shown that the 60% of respondents spent over 15 hours online per week and 20% spending over 24 hours online per week, it is interesting to note that 86% suggest that 2 hours per day or less, would be an appropriate amount of time to spend online.

Using the Internet can present a variety of both positive and negative impacts on the lives of young people, some of which can be observed, but are open to interpretation. However, when the young people in the focus groups discussed what they considered to be the impacts of time spent online, most issues identified hold negative connotations.

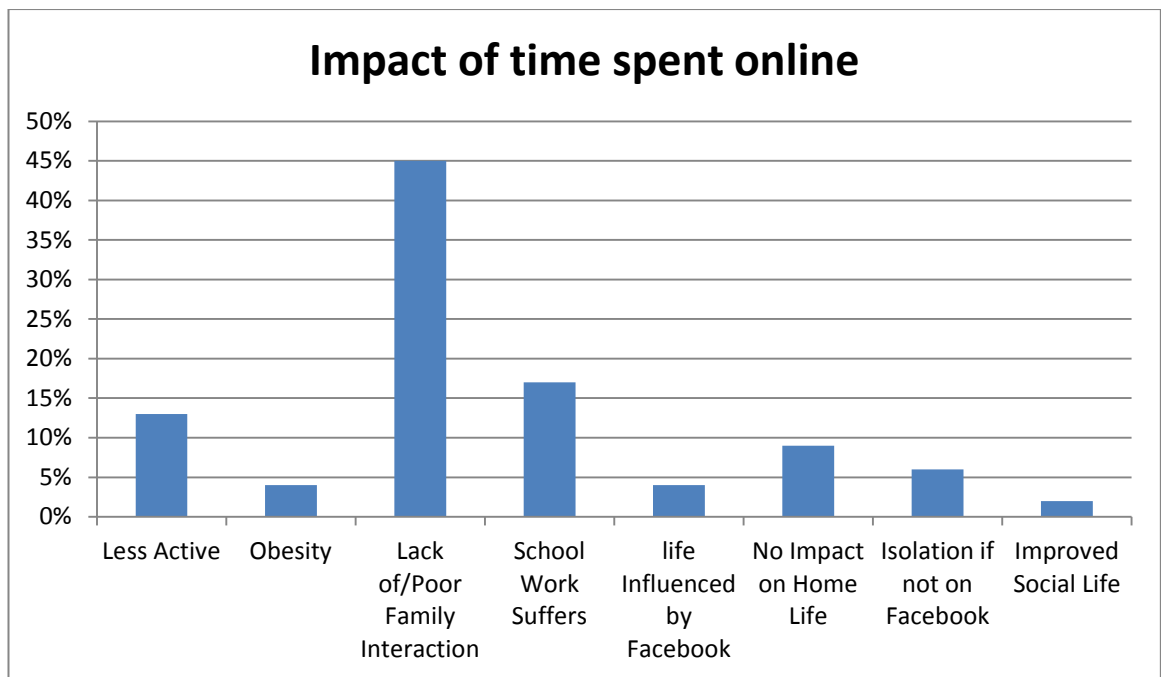


Figure 5: Impacts of time spent on the Internet

The findings suggest that traditional family values especially in relation to interaction and communication are evolving. Interestingly, social networking and sites like Facebook are the catalyst to a perceived improvement in the socialising capacity of young people, albeit in an online/virtual dimension. This online improvement in socialising ability and opportunity appears to flourish in the absence of real face to face interaction, where young people present themselves online with high self-esteem and confidence which is not mirrored in normal face to face interactions. This coupled with the high levels of acceptance that home life and social interaction with one's family forecasts a worrying trend.

In addition, as young people are identifying that the time they spend online is negatively affecting their studies, could it be argued that the educational



prospects of young people are under threat from the growing trend of social networking? This highlights the dichotomy that exists whereby the Internet offers huge benefits for students who use it to enhance their learning experience; however, social networking still commands more attention from the students compared to the online educational tools that have the capacity to be of huge benefit for the more academically focused individuals.

In order to delve deeper into the behaviour of young people in relation to their use of the Internet and how it may be impacting on their lives, the participants were asked to consider what in their opinion would be the perceptions of parents with regard to young people and their Internet use. There were 3 distinct themes that emerged. These can be summarised as: being protective and worried; no interest and apathetic; and lack of knowledge and awareness.

It was apparent that some young people had personal experience of parental interaction that incorporated a limited, and in some instances an absence of any knowledge of the Internet and its capabilities, whilst also suggesting a limited awareness of any potential risks or dangers associated with young people's internet use. This theme accounted for 16% of responses.

Secondly, 27% of responses alluded to perception that parents whilst having some personal experience and knowledge of the Internet displayed an attitude that suggests they have little or no interest in what their young people are doing online and are apathetic in relation to any concerns. This statistic appears to contrast slightly with the study of American parents

carried out by Mesch (2009) who reports that 86% of parents of American teenagers regulate Internet use, suggesting that 14% don't which is almost 50% less than what is perceived by Irish teenagers.

Moreover, the third and most common theme to emerge from the focus group research is that parents are concerned, protective and worried about the activities that their young people are engaging in while online. Of the responses received, 57% identified with this theme.

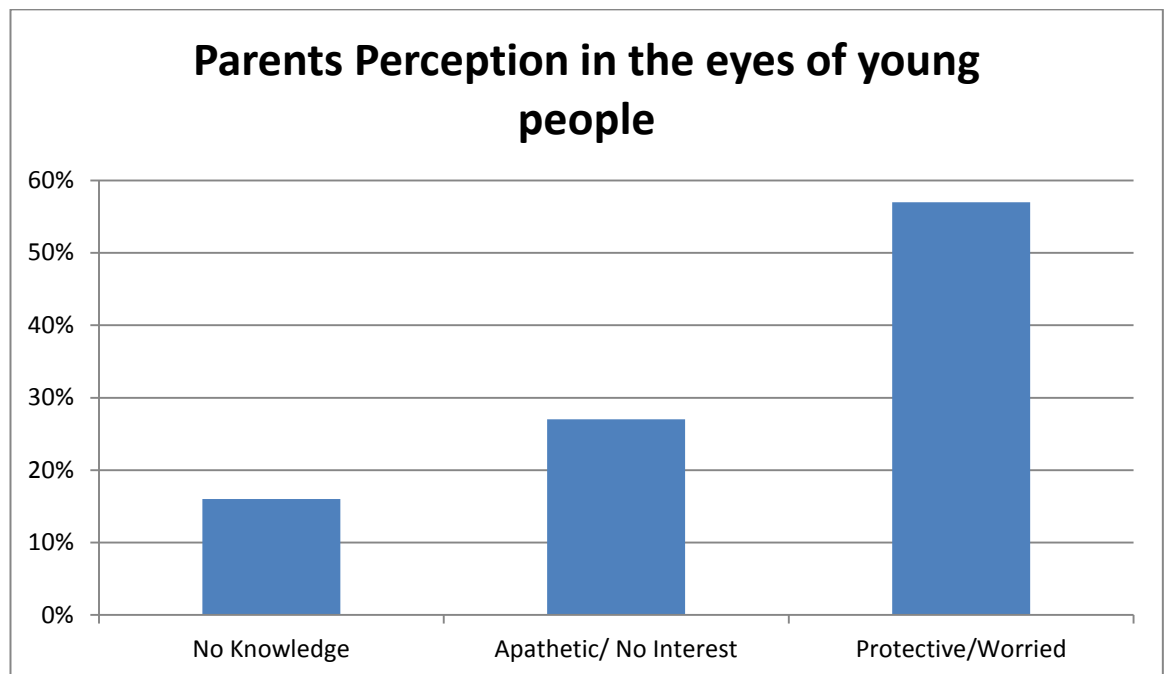


Figure 6: Young People's opinion of parent's attitude to their online activity

A question that often arises is; why do people socialise online? The 14 to 16 year olds consulted in this research suggested a variety of reasons that have been summarised in the graph below.

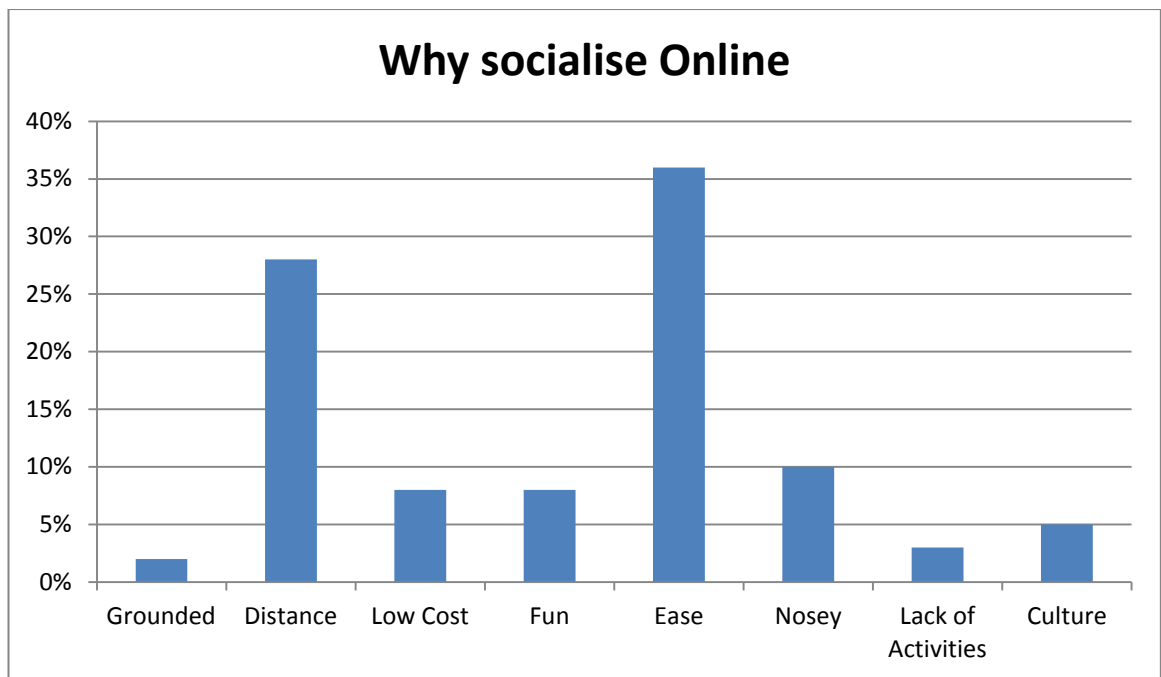


Figure 7: Reasons why Young people socialise online

Distance issues relates to instances where young people have friends and family living in different towns, counties and countries, which makes face to face socialising difficult if not impossible. Therefore, social networking sites such as Facebook enable people to maintain frequent contact. Even though distance related issues were cited as a major reason why people socialise online, the main reason was ease of use. The convenience aspect of social networking enables ongoing socialising with the advent of mobile devices and higher speed broadband connections. Nevertheless, young people argue that whilst social networking sites like Facebook are used due to their ease of use and ability to bridge geographic distances, they are not used as a replacement, but rather as complimentary to traditional methods.

Additionally, young people categorically agreed that online socialising enables the end user to present themselves as being more confident and

less shy than they would normally be in face to face interactions.

Furthermore, when considering why young people socialise online, it could be a common assumption that it is fun. However, in this example fun was only referred to in 8% of cases. Further research would be required to focus on the core reasons why the fun element is not referred to by more young people.

Young people have identified that the Internet provides a catalyst to maintaining contact with friends and family. However, the research has highlighted that young people allude to having large numbers of online friends compared to offline friendship. Moreover this is an issue that would require further research, beyond the limitations of this study. Nevertheless when the young people aged 14-16 years were asked to quantify the number of social networking friends that they have, the results were stark. The graph below emphasises this

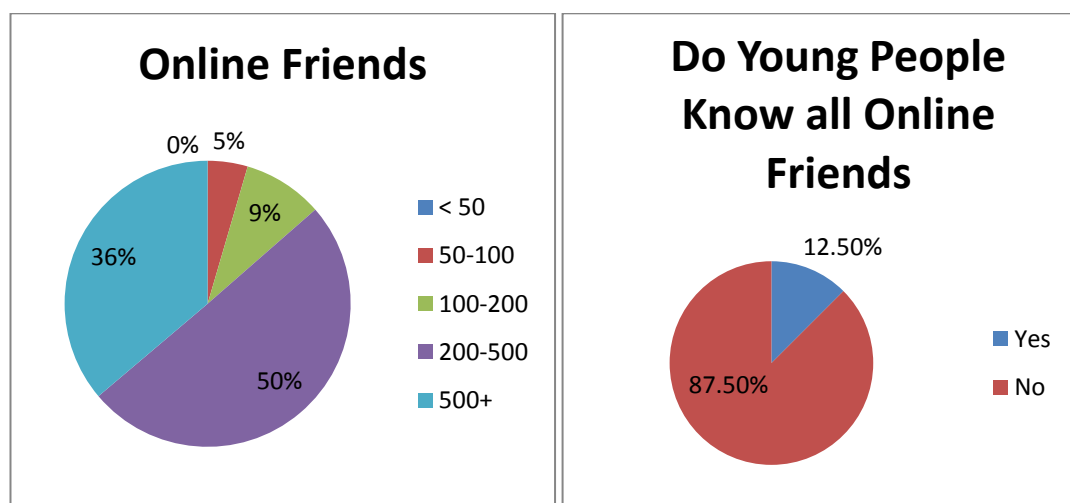


Figure 8: Number of online friends and relationship to

In addition, given the large number of online friends that young people refer to, with 86% of 14-16 year olds having over 200 friends and 36% having over 500, the question arose: Do young people know all these people? The graph above highlights that 87.5% of those involved in the focus groups do not know all the people that they have accepted as online friends. The difference between befriending people you know and people you don't is referred to by Subrahmanyam (2000) as discussed in chapter 2 were the concept of online relations are categorised as either "strong ties or weak ties."

Why would people accept friend requests from people unknown to them and share, what can be personal information furnishes a concern? This is an issue that will require further research. Nevertheless, the result from the focus groups suggests that the main reasons behind this behaviour can be categorised as:

- A Competition
- Fun
- Viewing others profiles
- Self Esteem/Confidence Boost

Two participants in separate focus groups made the following comments when considering why they accept friend requests from people unknown to them:

"It is a competition to see who has the most friends, who is the most popular."

"People say like, how many friends have you got? I've got say 600, ah I've got 800"

With regard to how young people use the Internet and specifically focusing on the issue of behaviour, 6 out of 7 focus groups shared the general opinion that young people aged between 14 and 16 years of age do behave differently online vis a vis offline. It was noted within the research that the behavioural differences that young people refer to are associated with the construct of social interaction and what is deemed acceptable. In addition the same ratio within the focus groups; 86% of focus groups believe that certain things, action or behaviour are more acceptable when used or displayed in an online dimension. This concept will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

In order to ascertain how much impact the Internet and Social Networking is having on the lives of young people, it was important to gauge what, if any, are the things that they are making less time for during their free-time in order to make time for Internet related activities. There were a variety of responses that have been categorised in the graph below. Even with some notable impacts, it appeared that 30% of respondents suggest that there is nothing that they do less of, or have given up in order to make time for social networking. Nevertheless, as young people are identifying that they are spending less time studying, exercising and going outside, and subsequently allocating more time to engaging in online/social networking activities, could it be suggested that such behaviour trends appear to contribute to degradation in traditional health and social skills?

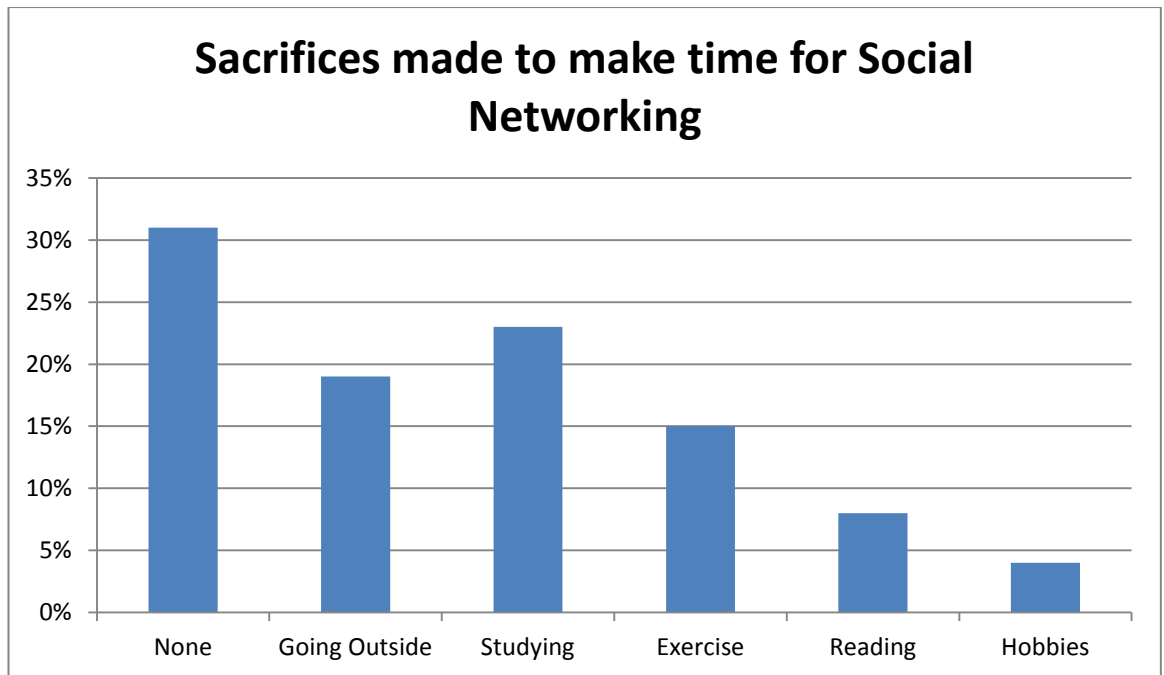


Figure 8: Sacrifices made to make time for social networking.

#### 4.4 Risk

Young people's perception of the term risk is a much researched area and topical debate (Subrahmanyam 2000, Linvinstone 2008, Hasebrink et al 2008, and Guan 2009). Moreover, when risk is mentioned in association with the Internet, results suggest that young people are generally aware of certain risk. However, the issue that still exists, and requires further research is in relation to how young people transfer their perceived knowledge and awareness of risk and dangers into modified behaviour patterns in order to mitigate potential risk. The focus groups in the research project discussed the issue of potential online risks and have identified the following risks that

14-16 year olds are associating with their use of the Internet and Social Networking. The categories of risk outlined were not provided to the young people, but rather subsequently created to represent their opinions. Furthermore the risks associated with social networking identified in this study are concurrent with the report from the EU kids Online network published in 2008.

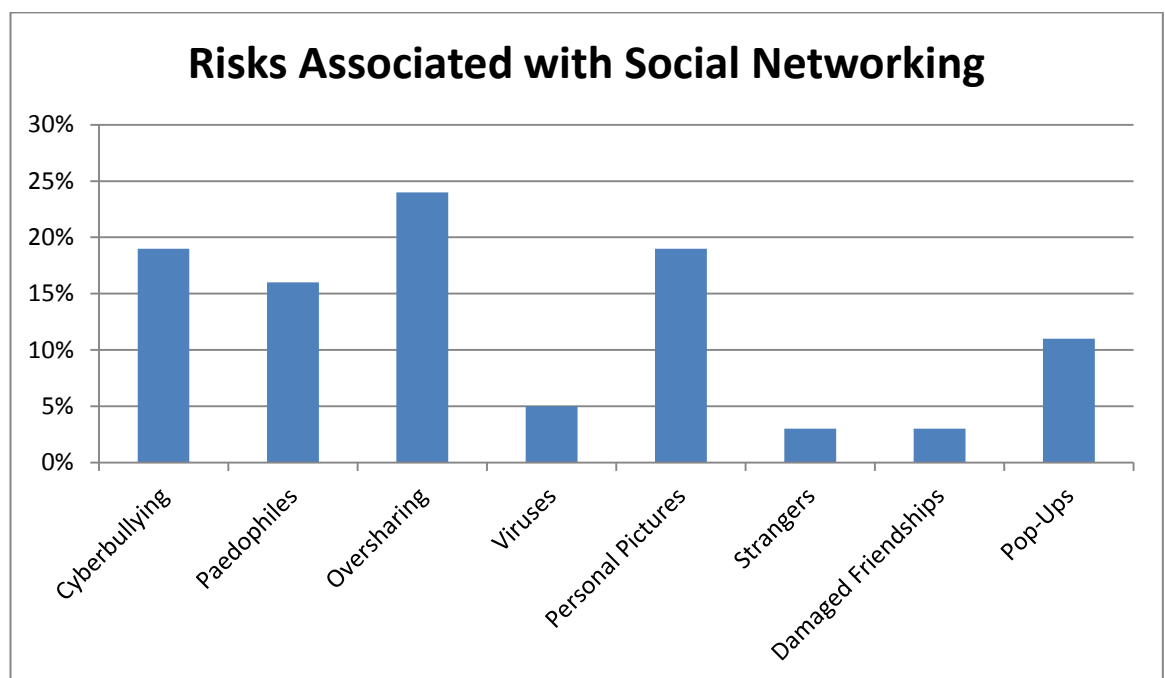


Figure 10: Risks Associated with Social Networking

From the focus groups it appeared that in general young people do not consider the same things risky compared to their parents. Upon further discussion, it emerged that many of the specific risks mentioned in the graph above, are on the radar of both young people and parents. However, the level of importance or priority placed on each is not on a par between parents and young people. By their own admission young people whilst being aware of many of the risks they are not overly concerned by the risk:



they just don't think about it. How young people process risk and potential of associated risks was considered by Berson (2005, p30) who maintains:

"... adolescents typically underestimate the influence of digital technologies on their behaviour and the potential for risk."

This behaviour is an area where the young people themselves identify that in their opinion they differ in attitude to their parents. Interestingly, some young people concur that in some cases the parents and young people are equally aware of the risks, but that in most cases the balance of power in relation to knowledge of how any given risk may be manifested lays with the young person, which in turn influences how their attitude to it develops. In addition, an aspect that endorses this position is that when the young people were asked: Do young people take chances online that they wouldn't offline? This question refers to behaviour such as liaising with strangers, sharing personal details or posting rude or threatening comments. The response from all focus groups was a resounding 100% Yes.

This represents a summary of the main findings. It has become apparent from this research that young people are of the opinion that they as a demographic grouping spend too much time online, whilst also holding opinions in relation to what would constitute an appropriate amount of time to spend online.

Furthermore, the findings with regard to risk are consistent with other studies for example Berson (2005) with young people apparently showing an awareness of potential online risks but somewhat underestimating the

potential for harm. The next chapter will offer a deeper qualitative discussion of the results in relation to the core themes of the study.

## **Chapter 5**

### **5.0 Discussion**

#### **5.1 Usage**

The approach that society in general takes with regard to how and where they connect to and use the Internet has evolved distinctively and expeditiously in recent years. The majority of people can relate to the changes that have occurred since the advent of the world-wide-web by means of comparison with the experiences of the past. However, with specific reference to the target age group of this research; 14 to 16 years old, they are among the first generation to grow up in an age that has become synonymous with the Internet. With the commercialisation of the Internet occurring in the mid 1990's, this age group of society do not by definition have an experience of life without the Internet. Whereas previous generations possess knowledge of researching, communicating and gaming etc, that does not involve a smart phone, a wifi connection or a laptop.

Moreover, whilst everyone has witnessed and to some degree embraced the evolution of the Internet and all that has become possible with the advent of high speed broadband connections, those aged between 14 and 16 years of age embrace these developments with, as it appears, little or no concern to potential risks and dangers vis-a-vis older adults who appear to be more

conservative and cautious. As each new development or software pack arrives on the shelf, it would appear that the younger generation are less weary of it and more eager to embrace it, unlike adults who seem to possess a more risk adverse attitude.

The development of our personal identity can be influenced in many ways including online interaction and it appears that the Internet is will continue to affect identity development. Nevertheless, the influence that the internet has on 14 to 16 year olds cannot be diluted by the traditional characteristics associated with identity development in pre-Internet times. Therefore, it could be argued that the behaviour traits synonymous with online activity and social networking in particular may have an exaggerated level of influence on the identity development of young people and the social behaviour that is now common place and accepted. With the mobile phone being identified as the most popular device among 14 – 16 year olds when it comes to accessing the Internet, the sheer ease of access and mobility of the device offers the potential for an 'always on, always connected' demographic.

During the focus groups, by self-admission, 70% of the participants agreed that young people in general spend too much time online. The same participants quantified their online commitment which showed that 45% are online for over 20 hours per week. It is important to note the many positive attributes of the internet and what they can bring to the educational and personal development of individuals and that this aspect is incorporated into

the level of time spent online. However, this research shows that 65% of those consulted spend 75% of their online time engaged in social networking pursuits. Traditionally, young people take their development cues from parents, family, school and other aspects of their lives that captivate large percentages of their time, a theory echoed by Allen and Cowdry (2012) who state that:

“Children learn both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour by watching what is modelled on television, in the classroom or neighbourhood and by parents and family members.”

This notion was revealed in the research when young people were discussing the amount of time they spend online, which in most cases was as stated earlier, at over 20 hours per week. One respondent for example went on to say that it doesn't matter how much time they spend on Facebook because:

“My mum doesn't care because she's on it 24/7. My parents don't mind.”

Although the consensus was that parents have an influence on the nature and level of the Internet use of the participants in the study, this disengaged attitude was reflective of the majority view.

As stated in the findings chapter, across all focus groups conducted during this research, Facebook (social networking) was the word/term that was first mentioned by all groups when asked what they do online. With so many young people spending so much of their time on social networking sites, it appears fair to assume that the nature of this type of communication and the characteristics involved, will be a key influencer in the behaviour traits of

the young people and the propensity for such traits to transcend dimensions from the online world to the offline face to face interactions that take place. This concept will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter when considering a behaviour theme.

Social Networking offers the end-user an opportunity to develop and maintain correspondence and relationships over vast distances. This attribute has been identified and enthusiastically embraced by the young people in the age bracket of this research. The results from the focus groups highlight that young people appreciate having the opportunity to link, in real time with family and friends across the globe via Skype, Facebook and other social networking platforms. Some of the young people have suggested that the Internet has allowed them to be closer to friends and family, an opinion that was echoed via the majority of focus groups:

*"Closer, like if you have distant family in another country or whatever you can just talk to them, like I've an aunty in England and I talk to her on Facebook."*

There appears to be an opinion that the Internet is bringing families closer. This position originates in the context of geographical distance and maintaining relations with those members of the extended family who live or study in other parts of the world etc. However this research has identified that with regard to enhancing quality family time and improvements in communication within the home for example, the Internet represents an area of concern that has the potential for adverse impacts on family interaction. The attraction of the online tools for young people often centres

on the opportunity to communicate and network with people both in close proximity to each other as well as further afield and overseas. This issue will be developed further when considering additional behavioural aspects.

## **5.2 Behaviour**

The findings from this research study have acknowledged that young people devote a lot of their time to online pursuits and that 78% of respondents concur that they spend too much time on the Internet. The fact that phones are identified as the most popular device for connecting to the Internet suggests that young people welcome the opportunity to increase their time spent online. There are of course health implications that could be considered which may or may not be having an impact of people who spend considerable time online. Nevertheless, this not a priority topic for this study, but rather one for further research.

The amount of access to and usage of the Internet is part of the issue. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding it is imperative that consideration is given to the type of use. For example 86% of participants in the focus groups believe that certain things, action or behaviour are more acceptable when used or displayed in an online dimension. Concerns arise whenever such a dominant user group are themselves suggesting that some

of their online behaviour would not be as acceptable offline. Therefore, the question arises: Are we as a society mellowing in terms of what we deem acceptable online? If so, why should the parameters for behaviour be any more flexible in an online dimension?

Much of the behavioural difference can be categorised as personal traits. The feedback from the focus groups paints a portrayal of young people feeling more confident when communicating via social networks, due to the perception of safety when positioned in the virtual safety of their home or bedroom. There was a consensus that most young people have experience of individuals communicating using certain words, statements or claims that such individuals would never use in face to face interactions.

“yeah, more cocky, thinking they can get away with stuff on the Internet.”

“you could be very shy and then just because you’re on the Internet and don’t see the person face to face you could have more confidence just to write something because you know you’re not talking to that person directly, so it could give you more confidence.”

The propensity for online behaviour traits to transcend dimensions and become common place in face to face interactions is a concept that can be both welcomed and feared. In the cases where young people opt to use social networking as a coping mechanism for low self-esteem or lack of confidence, any transfer of behaviour to face to face interaction would signal an improvement in their perception of self-worth, therefore a potentially welcomed outcome. Alternatively, if a young person is displaying online characteristics that are more negative in nature, which could be for example



more aligned to violent or bullying behaviour, then, any transfer or manifestation of such behaviour in face to face interaction would not be welcomed.

“...if you’re in an argument with someone it would give you more confidence, so you would find it easier to say bad things about them or you could start something you really didn’t want to.”

Nevertheless, if young people can clearly identify that in their mind some things are more acceptable online compared to offline, this would suggest that behaviour can be moderated and controlled, particular in the mind of the individual who can differentiate between the online and offline realms. Moreover, the concern will still exist, in that, why such behaviour is accepted online, especially with regard to pre-meditated actions. On the other hand, the negative behaviour of some individuals which appears to develop as a result of coincidence, is a concern that is possibly more difficult to legislate for, as such individual’s present different personas online without realising, a view echoed by one particular respondent:

“I think it might be different and the person being different mightn’t even know they’re being different. But it’s just like you might find it easier to maybe say something that you wish you hadn’t or because you’re not face to face or anything, so like you might be different but sometimes you don’t even know you’re being different.”

In addition, the results from the focus groups suggest that young people are developing and maintaining multiple online identities. In all cases with one exception the participants were referring to other people they knew or were aware off. This may suggest that the maintenance of multiple identities is

not overly prevalent or that the participants did not want to admit to such behaviour. One particular respondent noted that:

“Yeah, I know a couple of people who have more than one facebook page. They use different names. They should be ashamed of themselves.”

The nature of the online tools that are easily accessible enables any end user to create a variety of personas with ease. Interventions and restrictions are created and available online however it appears that the only barrier to creating and maintaining multiple identities is that of personal conscience. The platforms that young people engage with are not by design encouraging multiple identities, however, the levels of security that commonly exist appears to be minimal, and therefore many young people will frequently maintain different personas on the one platform. In addition, some online tools are designed for specific age groups, but the only perceived barrier to participation is in the mind of the end user, particularly those who are not in that age group but are happy to fabricate the truth. The evidence exists that young people are being flexible with the truth by developing multiple identities that are conveniently managed in an online dimension. Furthermore, a question that will arise and require further philosophical research is that of: Why will some young people be content to operate online under multiple identities? One comment from a focus group participant initiates the thought process on this topic, when he suggests:

“It’s like, a lot of people create like separate personas for going on different websites just to get more friends or to act cooler around them and a lot of them are actually not like that in real life. They are normally very shy and then they talk to almost everybody on it but they wouldn’t really talk to them face to face.”

This opinion was echoed in other focus groups and suggests that in some instances the multiple identity concepts are employed whereby an individual is one person offline and a different person online. This can be in all aspects of society where individuals are more comfortable in certain environments. However, when one individual attempts to effectively be one person offline and a host of identities online, the potential for that trait to cause harm is concerning.

Also what will the consequences be for society if this attribute like many others transcends from the online realm to the offline. Will young people or are young people already contemplating the concept of trying to maintain multiple identities in “real life”?

It could be argued that online behaviour can be as easily influenced by offline behaviour traits in a similar way to online behaviour characteristics progressing offline. Among the age group in question, the influence that social networking and Facebook in particular has on their social engagement with peers is in some ways disproportionate in terms of the communication channels open to young people. Nevertheless, it would suggest that Facebook has created a brand appeal among 14 to 16 year olds that installs a desire to be part of the phenomenon and succumb to the associated peer pressure. This process can be related Tajfel and Turners theory of identity,

whereby young people are developing a Facebook identity online but yet more importantly wanting to be part of the Facebook culture in order to obtain and maintain their identity within the "in group". This thought is endorsed by a focus group participant who states:

"I think that because I'm not on facebook or I don't have an Xbox or whatever, a lot of conversations between some people in school are influenced too much by facebook, what's happening on facebook or whatever they did on Xbox last night or whatever. I think it has too much influence, kind off. You feel, kind off then left out or whatever."

This participants who is not a Facebook user refers to the power of social networking and how it has the potential to influence behaviour can be endorsed by the comment from another participant from the same focus group who is a Facebook user:

"You feel like if you're out with your friends and when you go home straight away you need to put every single detail of what happened or else someone else will, there is a conversation about it for weeks and stuff, but like if you weren't at that time it's kind of like you feel left out if they're talking about it in real life and on facebook as well."

Within society an opinion appears to exist that all young people are social networking on sites such as Facebook. However, by not challenging this statement would only allow a generalisation to exist and flourish. Therefore, it is important to gain a truer picture and an understanding of why some young people are not following the trend. Effectively, this issue would require further research beyond the parameters of this particular study. Nevertheless, an interesting, but not anticipated result came from one focus group, where some respondents identified that they do not have a Facebook

presence and don't engage in online social networking. Captivatingly, the reason behind this decision not to succumb to the pressure of the Facebook culture is grounded on a certain level of independence and confidence in their own identity, coupled with an honourable respect for their parents.

"Well the reason I'm not on facebook is because my Mam doesn't let me, so my mam doesn't really think well of facebook and social networking sites. She'd rather me just go into school and make friends that way or go out on the road or whatever. She doesn't think that because I have a phone that I should need facebook. She thinks I'm better off without it."

"I chose not to be on it, so I don't know if whether my parents would mind me being on it because it has never come up."

The research has shown that young people have the ability to display independence and a level of respect for their parents, even though to do so can have consequences for their social identity and position within their peer group. Additionally, it would be easy for any young person to dishonour their parents' wishes and maintain a secret online presence under an anonymous persona.

As we encounter and embrace each stage of life from pre-school, primary school, secondary and up to third level education combined with the various social interaction events, new environments, people and opinion are to some degree contributing to shape our individuality. We all have the propensity to develop our personal attributes and developmental triggers from people of influence in our lives, such as parents, it is important to emphasis the impact that this can have. As stated previously, some young people will have a conservative personal position with regard to online social networking based on the opinions of the parent. Alternatively, other respondents have

identified that their parents have little or no interest in online tools of any sort, and likewise have a very liberal position with regard to how their children interact with any such tools. In addition, some young people have identified that their parents are aware of the potential of social networking and the associated risks and are themselves avid users, which contributes in some instances to mixed messages with regard to regulating their children's use of sites such as Facebook.

"I'm always getting told that I spend too much time on it, but I may spend an hour or two on Facebook and the rest of the time my Stepmom would be on her Facebook. So it's her telling me to get off because she wants to go on it, just because she can go on it. She's always giving out about me being on it too much and she's on it way more."

Parental involvement in the lives of young people can have mixed results depending on the level and nature of the inputs. Nevertheless, parents have a vital role to play. Parents, in many instances are the people who introduce their children to the technology. They may or may not have a working knowledge of the devices or platforms; however, they provide the financial investment required in order to obtain the latest laptop, smart phone, or gaming console and the utility contract that enables broadband connectivity to enter the home. Therefore, parental involvement and responsibilities are intrinsic to shaping the online behaviour of young people.

The Internet and in particular social networking sites like Facebook appear to have a certain lure that attracts all people including young people. However, this research suggests that society in general is contributing to growing levels of engagement of teenagers. Young people have recognised that

within society there is an assumption that young people should not congregate in public spaces and that when they do, they are up to no good. Obviously negative media coverage of young people has contributed to this viewpoint. Nevertheless, when young people feel stereotyped and alienated by society, it results in either a rebellious response or a search for an alternative space. Therefore, for some young people, they will and have decided to revert more to an online presence for socialising rather than socialising in public with their peers at the risk of being associated with any negative press.

"You might be more inclined to stay at home because of what people think about other groups and then you get their name, even though if you want to go out and play football, just because you're 16 and you're that age group that name is pushed onto you, even though you might have never done anything wrong. So you might be more inclined to stay at home so you're not getting that name, so you can talk to your friends in that way."

In the words of another respondent, with regard to the proliferation of online activity:

"Society has sort of just made it worse."

Since the arrival of the Internet, communication opportunities and capabilities have continually evolved. This has had profound impacts in the creation of and development of friendships. From the relatively slow email communications to the now common-place real time online conversations that occur seamlessly regardless of traditional geographic boundaries, friendships or acquaintances have always been central to the online activity.

However, traditional communication in terms of, the now 'old-fashioned' email, generally involved both parties being familiar with each other. In recent times the benefits of social networking are evident in the communication links between friends, colleagues, family etc. However, the fundamental difference that has arrived is based on the ability presented by sites such as Facebook, for one user to be-friend any individual who will accept their friend request. As stated in the findings chapter 50% of young people consulted have more than 200 online friends and 36% have more than 500. This contrasts sharply with the traditional concept of friends whereby most people had a much lower number of friends and even less close friends. These same young people acknowledge that over 87% of them do not know all the people they have identified as Facebook friends. This behaviour presents a concern that young people are no longer concerned about privacy and that they are happy for personal details to be available to people who effectively are strangers to them. Furthermore, when the snowball effect of Facebook is factored in and when you consider that if you had 500 online friends accessing your profile and then the potential for their friends to view as well, very quickly your information is widely available in the public domain. Even though the focus groups conducted represent both urban and rural positions, the opinions remained similar. Moreover, it is important to note that social networking sites such as Facebook do have security and privacy settings. Nevertheless, if this casual approach to friendships transcend to the "real" world it has potentially far reaching consequences for the safety of all people, but especially our



children. Even the teenagers in the study had the foresight to enable them to assess the potential impacts that social networking may have on young people. One issue identified is the diminishing levels of traditional social interaction skills:

"I think that sometimes it can affect people's skills whereas like you know when my Mam was younger they didn't have facebook or whatever so she'd be able to make friends by going over to someone saying how are you and all that, but people are so used talking on facebook they could find that way very difficult and then the only friends they might have are on facebook."

Among the many perceived benefits of social network sites is the opportunity to log in and observe/monitor the development of individual's online profiles etc. This is an area identified by the teenagers in this study as one of the top three reasons why young people socialise on line. They refer to it as an opportunity to be nosey. However, it could be suggested that nosey behaviour could be the catalyst to more concerning stalking behaviour which presents a concerning risk to the end users. Nevertheless, the term stalking has been used by young people but not necessarily in the context of risk and harm.

"So many people like stalk me on facebook. A few people actually admitted to it. It's just kind of weird. One of the first years, he comes up to me like every second day and asks if he can have my number."

Therefore depending on the privacy settings and also the strategy employed towards friend requests, the social networking user can become very susceptible to relative strangers gaining unnecessary and in some cases an unhealthy level of familiarity to the lives of others. This issue is considerable

when assuming that the Facebook users are logged on and viewing alone. Furthermore, the issue is escalated when multiple young people are viewing from one connection. This research identified that particularly among girls it is not uncommon for young people to congregate and use one persons' profile to communicate collectively with someone else and in some cases the other individual can be unaware that they are communicating with a group of people instead of the person named in the profile. In addition, the obvious concern exist that just because a name is on the profile, the correspondence is not necessarily coming from them. This is echoed by some participants who described social networking at parties:

"On facebook as well you don't know who's in their house with them. When we have parties, the first 4 or 5 hours, we go on facebook and someone would sign into theirs and someone else would take the laptop and like mess with their friends and you are talking to someone you don't even know and if you're saying stuff really personal there could be like 100's of people in their house and you don't really know you are talking to them."

As stated earlier, the young people consulted in this study fall into the category of the first generation to have no practical knowledge of life before the Internet. Nevertheless, they have the ability to interpret the impact that online activity is or can have on their lives. Interestingly, they appear to view the impact in two ways: the impact on family life and the impact on social life.

"Family life, personally from experience a lot of time on the Internet makes me personally a very, very, very nasty person and so for family life it would probably make my family life a lot worse for a little while and then it gets better. And social life not so much now, I don't really let the Internet intrude on my social life, but every once and a while it does but mostly just family life that's affected."

"I would say it would have a really great effect on family life as it would cut in with your time with your family so you'd be on that there instead of the time you could be spending with your family. Social life, emh, in a sense it would probably help it as you are communicating with your friends through social networking and stuff like that, but at the same time you are not really actually communicating properly."

Furthermore, the focus groups unearthed the issue that the social behaviour construct of the family is evolving in the face of wireless technology. In many homes wireless broadband has resulted in various members of the family being connected simultaneously to the Internet in various areas of the home, a situation that was recognisable to the majority of focus group participants. Inadvertently, in one particular focus group the issue of faulty Internet connections arose. Refreshingly, the young people concerned identified the positive experience they encountered when their Internet was down. Instead of spending up to 4 hours on Facebook, or arguing over who gets to use the laptop they reverted to watching TV in the company of the whole family, and acknowledging how enjoyable it was. In addition some participants explained how they really did notice the difference when they attended a summer camp that had no Internet access, so much so that as the week developed they didn't feel the need for a computer. Although, this outcome may not necessarily be in line with the moving debate results at the start of the focus groups which showed that 49% of the young people felt that they could not survive without the Internet, it suggests that attitudes towards the use of the Internet and social networking can be altered.

## Alternatives

In addition to the impact that online activity has on family life, the results of the focus groups reveal that young people are making choices relating to how they spend their free time, which subsequently means they are sacrificing other interests in order to make time for their online activities. Furthermore, the prioritisation of Internet time is having further negative impacts on their lives.

"I used to read a lot and then I got my own laptop and I've been on, I just kind of given up on reading."

"Swimming on a Saturday, but since I only get on the Internet on a Saturday and maybe 2 hours on a Sunday, that's it, so I don't really go swimming anymore or read as many books and stuff."

Obviously, for anyone who seeks to have an active social life or committed free time there are always going to be choices to be made and sacrifices to make. However, when the choices made result in negative or worrying consequences the choice made comes into question. This is summed up by a focus group participant who states:

"You don't talk to your parents as much definitely. And maybe when you're in school you don't really concentrate in classes, you talk about what you found out about in the Internet or what you've done or if you've seen any videos and stuff or if you've talked to someone you haven't seen in while. You talk more about that than concentrating on school work."

The Internet and social networking do present a rewarding opportunity for users when operated and embraced in controlled and manageable fashion. The need for sacrifices in terms of what we fill our time with might always

exist, however the requirement for good decision making and coping mechanisms in order to minimise the negative impacts becomes more important. Whenever the equation is not in a state of balance, consequences will arise, as highlighted in one focus group:

“Less time for hobbies and things that you’re really good at, so maybe you could be lacking that and maybe you could forget all of a sudden what you used to be like. You’re just completely different then.”

### **5.3 Risk**

Individual perceptions of risk and also the attitudes towards risk are variable. This study aimed to investigate the impact that social networking has on social behaviour of young people. Therefore, it was apparent that an understanding of what constitutes a risk in the eye of the young person was integral to the study. In addition, the young people consulted were asked to consider the potential for differentiation between people of different age cohorts.

With regard to using online technologies, the study revealed that young people’s perception of the risks associated with the Internet fall into two broad categories: risks to the technology or equipment; and the risks to end-user. The focus groups showed that there was some reference towards the dangers that online activity can present to your technology or computer for example.

“Advertisements that are up, maybe things for competitions like there’s some that come up, shoot the iPhones and win one, and you go on and it’s a virus and it completely ruins your computer or laptop and then there’s chain messages that you think are from your friends and sometimes they’re threatening and they scare you and sometimes it comes on to advertisements or pictures and stuff and you can’t get rid of them on your emails.”

When the young people in the focus groups were asked to list risks that they associate with the Internet and Social Networking, only 5% of responses related to threats to hardware such as viruses. It could be argued that young people are indeed very aware of the threats to equipment etc., but more importantly they don’t consider these threats as a significant risk. This could be as a result of risk management strategies such as virus protection and Internet security software that exists and therefore the young people are less concerned and feel protected from the potential harm that is associated with these risks. Alternatively, it could be argued that any risk to hardware is not seen as a tangible risk, in that if a laptop gets a virus it can be fixed. Whereas the risks that carry a potential threat to the person are viewed more seriously, as negative physical and psychological outcomes are more worrying and harmful.

Common trends that surfaced from both the literature review and the focus groups during the research centred on a few very distinctive issues. These issues or concerns can be classified as Cyber bullying; Over-sharing personal info; and Online Predatory behaviour.

Within all focus groups conducted through this research the issue of Cyber bullying was raised and discussed. In all cases young people have

suggested that they are aware of the phenomenon, the associated risks and the potential for harm. One respondent made a comment that was echoed by his peers, highlighting the peer pressure that appears to influence such negative online behaviour:

"I know from experience there are people who think they are real popular and take pictures of people who mightn't be, that goes up on Facebook and all of a sudden there are 100's of people commenting on them: 'oh that person's a loser' but some of the names aren't that nice. I'm not going to say what they call them."

Unfortunately, bullying is not a new problem, rather one that has existed for a long time. The additional element is the inclusion of technologies including social networking, bringing bullying to a new dimension in cyber-space, resulting in an increased capacity for negative behaviour in an environment that is perceived to hold little or no consequences for the perpetrator but yet increased impact on the victim. Interestingly, some young people eluded to the fact that while most young teenagers are aware of the risk associated with Cyber bullying, most are not making the link between what they consider to be fun and humorous activity and the potential for this to evolve into dangerous bullying behaviour.

"Most teenagers are aware of the risks, but then when it comes to maybe putting a picture up they wouldn't really associate that risk with the thing they are doing, so maybe they knew Cyber bullying is really really bad and they knew that they would be doing this by putting a picture up of someone, it just wouldn't really cop in their head that what they're doing could really hurt this person."

Regardless of the incidences of poor decision making by young people in relation to online behaviour that ultimately results in other young people becoming victims of Cyber bullying as a secondary outcome, there are off

course occasions where the online platform is being utilised for pre-mediated bullying activity. One particular example shows the potential for issues to escalate:

"I remember in school before, someone was having a fight with someone and one of the people but the others phone number up on facebook and then the next thing you know that person was getting loads of text messages saying: 'oh your this, that, whatever and then it kind of destroyed the persons reputation."

Additionally, bullying behaviour that is presently implemented offline is now also appearing online, with the proliferation of hand held mobile devices that have the capability to record footage and then upload the content instantly to social networking sites:

"Camera phones now. If they sneak up on someone and did something to them and someone took a video of it, it could be on you tube which can be linked to facebook. That means by the end of the day 100's of people could have seen it and it could destroy that person."

This evidence illuminates the point that the Internet provides the technology and the opportunity for bullying and other negative behaviour that originated offline to appear online as well. It could be argued that the Internet is a catalyst and offers a perceived level of safety to the perpetrator, whereby they feel protected by hiding behind the monitor and an online identity or alias, enabling behaviour to exist that may not appear offline. Moreover the online tools that now exist appear to provide the opportunity for people to display negative and damaging comments and behaviour towards others from the perceived safety of their personal space. Therefore, it is clear that with regard to bullying the Internet and social networking is having a



negative impact on young people's social behaviour. It remains to be seen, if the bullying techniques are transcending the virtual/real divide in both directions.

When analysing the risks that young people associate with social networking, the issue that had the highest response and accounted for 24% of all responses was 'Over-sharing'. Over-sharing is basically the term used to describe the problem of posting too much personal information online and openly sharing it with, in many cases, people unknown to you. Moreover, when the statistics for the risks relating to posting personal pictures are factored into the equation, the research shows that 43% of the risks identified by the young people fall into this overall category.

The youth cultures that appears to exist, as discussed earlier with regard to behaviour suggest that young people are actively sharing personal information on a daily basis and in some instances more frequent than that. The onset of online social networking tools certainly offers the opportunity for individuals to let unimaginable numbers of people know every aspect of their lives. This in itself is a risk identified by the young people. For example one young person suggests that this issue is the main worry of his mother:

"My Mam's main problem with facebook and all is she doesn't feel there is enough security on it, because I think she feels that there are too many people on it and too many people that would cause trouble or too many people that you don't know who could look at your page, so she doesn't feel that it's secure and private enough."

Nevertheless, an associate factor that is mentioned here and must be considered is that of privacy. This issue has also been discussed previously, however, it is important to consider that social networking sites like Facebook offer security and privacy settings that allow the user to restrict access to their page so that only those who they accept as friends can view their material. Nonetheless, when we consider that the age group in question clearly identify that they actively accept friend requests from people they do not know results in any potential safety offered from privacy setting being reduced. This can also be escalated by the behaviour traits of young people who acknowledge that they occasionally view their profiles in the company of their friends. Furthermore, the focus groups point out that even-though young people are aware of privacy settings, whether they use them or not, many feel that nothing is ever private.

"I think it's more that nothing is personal or nothing is private, once something goes up on facebook, it's completely open and you can't even if you take it off, people have still seen it."

Therefore, when combining an attitude that is risk embracing and not concerned with privacy, the phenomenon of over-sharing and the potential risks is clearly a concern. This concern is further intensified by the risks posed by online predators, as outlined by Hasebrink et al., (2008) and detailed in the literature review, which shows the potential for young people to be both a recipient/victim and actor in online risks that are listed as sexual. Although, social networking sites are designed for generally positive purposes and incorporate guidelines, rules and regulation, the opportunity is

there for anyone to freely fabricate details to generate plausible profiles. In many cases young people who are under the lower age limit for certain social networking sites lie about their age in order to open a profile. This apparently simple process has the ability to allow anyone to create an online identity for sinister motives. Online predators often camouflage themselves behind apparently genuine profiles, and then link in with young people and attempt to establish online friendships. The focus groups reveal that young people do take risks online and the issue of predatory style behaviour is highlighted in the words of one respondent:

“People take risks too like, if it was like a girl, some boy might start writing to them, they might end up trusting them and they could be telling them a whole pack of lies saying they are from Ballybofey and they could be from Derry. And saying they’re like 15 when they could be 20 odd.”

Therefore, as identified earlier, many young people accept friend requests from people they do not know, which suggests that predators with sinister motives can quite easily gain access to young people. Furthermore, when there is a relaxed attitude to privacy and providing personal information including contact numbers, the concerns multiply.

“It’s very risky putting personal information on it though, because anything can happen once you put it up on the site.”

Even though the various risks that young people associate with social networking are by their own admission shared by their parents, young people concur that it would be the parents who would worry more about the

dangers and thus be more risk adverse. This position is echoed from one focus group participant who stated:

"Like everyone knows what can go on but because you're on so much you don't really think about it but parents would. Like everyone does know what can happen and stories they heard about it and stuff but you don't really think about it. But parents know and they know it can happen to you as well like. They're definitely more protective over you anyway."

Evidently, the research has shown that the young people in the 14-16 year old age bracket are equally aware of the risks of online activity and in particular social networking. However, it is attitude towards the risk and the perceived levels of maturity that appear to differ. Therefore, can we assume that with age comes a greater respect for the risks? Some young people seem to agree with this thought:

"...personally I realise that there is predators out there, but I believe I'm sensible enough to not fall for any of that stuff and my dad seems to think that they're all criminal masterminds who can convince you to do anything for any reason, so I suppose there is being over protective, which is healthy but I think that, agh, first hand your probably a lot more able to manage it, as long as you're being safe enough like realising what limits there are and stuff."

On numerous occasions during the various focus groups the young people who are aged 14 to 16 years suggest that they are more mature and that it is younger children who are more susceptible to online risks.

"Around our age the risks aren't as serious because we start to get more common sense and more realising what's risky, but children of a younger age, they're still being told everything and still have got this follow what they're told to do thing. It's dangerous for them as they wouldn't really know to use common sense..."

It would seem fair to conclude that we are all on a conveyor belt with regard to awareness and attitude towards risk, given that research shows that young people in general are more risk adverse. Therefore younger children definitely need to be educated with regard to online dangers and risks in an age appropriate manner. This research clearly points to young people who are of the opinion that they are in control of their internet use and can manage the risks. Nevertheless, with regard to young people taking chances online that they wouldn't offline, 100% of participants suggest that this is normal behaviour for young people. Furthermore, if this stance is to be believed, it holds worrying consequences should the online behaviour of young people begin to appear in offline interactions.

## **5.4 Protection Strategies**

It can be a common assumption when considering protection strategies of any sort that involves the protection of young people that the responsibility lays with parents and guardians. However, whilst responsible adults have a role to play in protecting young people in relation to Internet safety, the young person themselves have a huge part to play. Moreover, in order to achieve an effective outcome there needs to be a considered, coordinated approach of mutual interest and benefit.

In many cases the balance of power with regard to IT literacy is in the hand of the young person. Nevertheless, the adult can enhance the situation by

improving their awareness of the Internet and increasing their technological knowledge, which can then be incorporated with their discernment.

Therefore, the onus is with the adults to empower their young people to work collectively towards creating a safer approach to Internet use, which in some instances will require the parents to enrol themselves in an IT class for their personal development.

This study suggests that the relationship between parent and young person with regard to the Internet is critical when it comes to protection strategies.

The results show that the young people have mixed perceptions of what their parents think about the Internet and their use of it. Within the focus groups comments range from both ends of the continuum, where for example respondent stated:

“They don’t know what the Internet is”, or “Na to be honest mammy doesn’t know anything about it so she doesn’t really care like, well she cares like and then daddy would come in and look and say what are you at there? Nothing Daddy just go away! Leave.”

The interaction within the family relations is integral, and the rapport that is built has the power to be very influential in the behaviour of the young person. In the previous example, the level of parental interest is evident, but the engagement is not effective. However, this is not always the case. A separate respondent commented:

“Well I think that my parents are very careful as to what I look at because whenever they come in they’d ask me what are you looking at , and I would just say you tube, facebook or something else. It’s just, you know, they’re very careful, they’re weary of it I think. I don’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing because if they weren’t God knows what else could happen.”

In these two examples, the scenario is very similar, however, the position taken by the young person is very different and their opinions suggest differing levels of parental involvement. It could be argued that the approach taken by the parent or responsible adult is crucial in relation to developing a harmonious rapport that highlights a concerning rather than interfering agenda, which has the potential to influence the attitudinal development of the young person. Creating ground rules with the participation of young people at an early stage can be an important catalyst in the development of positive behaviour. Both parents and young people being mutually aware of the situation and associated factors has the potential to create a degree of confidence in both parties with regard to the mature approach to each scenario and also with regard to dealing with any unsavoury situation that may arise. On the contrary, situations that commonly exist as evidenced in the focus groups is summarised in one particular response:

"Like, I have a facebook site and my Ma wanted me to get rid of it but I didn't. She has given up on me now, because she knows I won't get rid of it. But when I wanted Xbox Live for the first time, My Ma and Da where worried about who'd be on it and what times and what could happen to you on it and they wouldn't let me get it for about a year, until I convinced them that there was nothing wrong with it."

It is apparent that young people will desire the next new thing and peer pressure will always be a factor. However, working with rather than against young people will inevitable reap better results. In the case of online tools such as social networking, the ease of access and use, as described earlier, means that to a huge extent trust is an intrinsic issue. Additionally, 'age

appropriateness' is an area that should be considered along with trust. Parents, guardians, and youth work professionals all collectively but not exhaustively have a responsibility to only provide access to material and platforms that are age appropriate and ultimately encourage young people to operate in the same mind-set. Therefore, as in the case above the dialogue needs to be in the line of working within the age limits, for example Facebook and not merely attempting to deny use, as the element of trust is all that exist, due to the fact that Wi-Fi broadband service are so prevalent. Furthermore, trust requires investment and also appropriate discussions and openness. One respondent in a focus groups acknowledged that:

"My Mam's user account on my home computer, like she's always trying to look at my facebook and look at my brothers facebook, but I think she thinks it's really dangerous."

Parental involvement in the social networking profile of their young people is not necessarily a bad thing. However, if trust is to be established in line with appropriate and safe use, the parental involvement will have more potential for success if carried out in the full knowledge of the young people rather than in a detached monitoring manner. This point is echoed in the statement from another focus group which provides evidence of how overly assertive parental instruction can be received:

"I deleted my stepmom and dad as friends and they didn't find out for about 4 months and then they found out and I got given out for a bit. They made me add them back in again. So normally, when I write status updates I normally block their names."



If successful strategies are employed at the appropriate age and time, then the trust that is developed has more depth. Particularly with regard to social networking age appropriateness is an issue that requires management. This study unearthed examples of good and bad practices and results from utilising social networks in an appropriate manner. One young person felt that his parents aren't worried about his use of Facebook:

"that's because they know I'm older, I'm a bit more responsible, but when my 12 year old brother wanted it, they wouldn't let him because they thought he was too young and they just thought there wasn't enough security on it but because I'm a bit older and they just think I'm a bit more responsible."

Here we see an example of a 12 year old not getting parental permission to create a profile on Facebook, which is in keeping with the rules of the site. Furthermore, the positive outcome from this approach can only truly be measured if carried out in an open and transparent manner, with the involvement and participation of the 12 year old.

Moreover, in response to the previous statement, the retort from a fellow focus group participant outlined the dangers that lurk for young people to engage in social networking that is not age appropriate. It is evident that the lower age limit of site like Facebook is there for particular reasons; one of which is to protect the innocence of the children and young people who do not have the maturity or discernment to make informed and safe decisions.

"My little sister's friend. My sister is 9 and her friend made her a facebook page and she's not allowed because she's too young and so she's added somebody from 'one direction', it wasn't actually him, she thought it was him and she's like only 9."

Even when issues such as responsibility, age appropriateness, trust and relationships are considered and incorporated into protection strategies for the online lives of young people, there are always going to be elements that require behavioural re-alignment. When we consider the identity development of anyone, not just young people, using the Internet and social networking the profile creation and the content therein is integral to the identity of that person. Furthermore, the levels of security and privacy that each user opts for can be worrying, especially when considered in line with the number of online friends that is the norm. Furthermore, when Facebook users as young as 9 are maintaining online profiles, in the same dimension as millions of older users, the concern escalates in relation to the personal content that is potentially available. Ultimately, it is understandable when some parents place restraints on the internet use of their children, especially when we reflect on previous section relating to risk.

“My Mam doesn’t let me on facebook because she thinks I’m going to go adding god knows who and everyone and they’re just going to stalk my page, but I wouldn’t see that as a risk because I consider myself a bit more responsible as in like I wouldn’t go adding some complete stranger who I’ve never heard off and the just give them access to all my page and if I have pictures of myself up there, whereas my Mam would see that as a big risk that some stranger would look at my page and look at the pictures and save them on his phone or whatever.”

The term ‘over-sharing’ is now used to describe the behaviour of posting too much personal information on social networks, even to small networks of actual friends. However, the situation is even more dangerous when linked to the theory of keeping a profile public for all to see.

In recent decades individual personal safety has increased in importance to the extent that many parents seem to prefer that their children and young people would play or socialise in the 'safety' of the home, rather than occupy the public outdoor arenas that present many perceived risks. It is this attitude that has developed to where parents feel the young people are safe in the home or bedroom, but yet they are freely accessing the Internet where many of the same risks are present, and in some instances more prolific. Therefore, protection strategies are equally as important for young people regardless of whether they occupy an online or offline realm, or more realistically both.

Furthermore, it would appear important to consider both the online and offline dimensions when framing protection strategies as many of the traits of both dimensions have and are transcending dimensions. This study would also suggest that the responsible adults have an obligation to young people and society to install acceptable behavioural codes for online behaviour as much as offline. This is particularly important when we acknowledge the comments from young people who identify that something's appear to them to be more acceptable online compared to offline, particularly within the context that with increased habitual use of the Internet it would seem logical to assume that online behaviour will begin to appear more in offline interactions if correction measures are not taken.

## **Summary**

This chapter is the result of considering the data obtained from the series of focus groups in the context of qualitative research.

The core themes continue to flow throughout the study and are used to frame the findings in a discussion that echoes the voices of the young people. With regard to Internet Use, young people appear to be of the opinion that as a demographic group many are spending too much time online. Furthermore, the young people consulted are consistent in their thoughts on a suitable amount of time that 14-16 year olds should be accessing online content.

Attitudes towards behaviour are consistent across the focus groups with many young people identifying that certain things are more acceptable online compared to offline. Additionally, with regard to social interaction, young people are more confident socialising online.

With regard to risk, young people appear to be aware of the various online risks. However, in their opinion, they do not seem to have the same level of concern or worry in relation to these risks, and acknowledge that young people would take risks online that they wouldn't offline.

The qualitative data obtained from the focus group which was considered in depth in this chapter will be condensed in order to formulate conclusions and recommendations for the future in the final chapter.

## **Chapter 6**

### **6.0 Conclusion**

#### **Introduction**

This study relates to young people aged between 14 and 16 years of age investigating what changes, if any, in the social behaviour of young people as a result of new social media have been identified in academic and professional publications?

The methodology is designed to explore what aspects of these changes are attributable to the influence of new social media. Finally the research explored the thoughts of the young people in relation to how they perceive social networking has impacted on their lives and social norms.

The results of this study indicates that young people aged 14 to 16 years are comprehensively embracing the Internet, with 45% of those consulted spending over 20 hours online per week. This statistic appears to be in keeping with the results of research carried out by the ISPCC (2011) which found that young people spent between 1 and 3 hours online daily. ([http://www.ispcc.ie/uploads/files/dir4/12\\_0.php](http://www.ispcc.ie/uploads/files/dir4/12_0.php))

Interestingly, this study found that of the time spent online 65% of young people dedicate over 75% of their online time to social networking. This type of online usage and associated behaviour has been further enabled by

the increased opportunities offered and available via mobile wireless technology.

It has become evident that young people appreciate the opportunity provided by social networking to maintain relationships online that cannot otherwise be readily maintained due to the geographic and financial implications. However, the study has also concludes that relationship maintenance does not appear to extend to the home environment; with 45% of participants indicating a lack of/poor family interaction as a major impact of time spend online. Additionally, educational attainment appears to suffer according to 15% of those consulted who are of the opinion that the Internet is a negative influence on their performance in school.

Behaviour is an important theme in this study, concluding that young people's behaviour is different online compared to offline. The study discovered that young people deem certain things such as use of bad language, aggressive and bullying type behaviour as well as engaging in risky behaviour more acceptable online. The process of how young people create friendships is just one area that indicates a differentiation in behaviour online compared to offline. 86% of young people acknowledge that they have more than 200 online friends with 36% having more than 500. Regardless of the obvious limitations and difficulties associated with maintaining friendships with up to 500 people, a concerning result of the research shows that 87.5% of young people do not know all the people that they have befriended online. Social networking by nature suggests that

participants will be sharing information. However, could it be argued that a certain amount of apprehension surfaces when young people are sharing information that is particularly personal with people they do not know? This issue is echoed by young people where 43% of those consulted identify over sharing and posting personal pictures as risks associated with social networking. Interestingly, even though the young people acknowledge this as a risk, their behaviour does not appear to be altered in order to mitigate the risk.

As an introduction to all focus groups the young people were presented with the statement: Young people are aware of the risks of social networking. 44% of all young people consulted agreed with this statement. However, after discussing issues of internet use, behaviour and risk during the focus groups, 100% of participants agreed that young people take chances online that they wouldn't offline. Therefore, the study concludes that young people are relatively aware of the risks associated with the Internet and social networking, but yet appear to be either unconcerned by the risk or just willing to take that risk. This would lead to some concern over the apparent limited levels of personal governance that young people exert in relation to their online behaviour.

The study identifies that there was no formal evidence to suggest that online behaviour is influencing offline behaviour with regard to social norms and risk taking attitudes. Young people appear to, in some instances, maintain separate identities for both online and offline interactions. Nevertheless, the

study concludes that there are negative impacts on the social life of young people as a result of increased time spent online. To some degree, issues such as bullying are escalated as a result of new social media. It appears that rather than having our offline lives influenced by online behaviour, the traditional offline interactions are reducing and more and more of young people's existence is being lived out online. For example, increased confidence is a benefit of social networking identified by young people, but this increase in confidence appears to relate only to online interactions rather than transcending to the offline interactions. Therefore will young people increase online activity in order to maintain and increase confident and self-esteem that is only evident online?

## **Recommendations**

This study considers many behavioural aspects of young people that are not unique. However, the strategic use of Social Identity theory as a new lens in which to view aspect of youth behaviour in relation to social media has proved successful. It appears to be a useful tool to assess these issues which yielded results that might not otherwise have been found.

The recommendations of this study are particularly relevant to young people parents, professionals working with young people and policy makers

This research identifies that young people appear to be among the heaviest users of online tools. Young people themselves feel that increased use of the Internet results in increased propensity for negative impacts. The range



of impacts include a reduction in physical activity levels, adverse effects on health and well-being, as well as reduced focus on academics and impacts on social interactions. The study identifies that a dichotomy exist where young people face a choice of the opportunity to improve one's social life by embracing online social networking tools or decline the use of such tools and face isolation if not on Facebook for example.

Nevertheless, it appears that with regard to recommendations, a starting point would need to be in relation managing an appropriate Internet usage strategy that will allow young people to reap the benefits of the Internet as part of a balance lifestyle. This would mean addressing the number of hours that some young people allocate to online activities. This study consults young people in relation to their thoughts of what they consider to be an appropriate amount of time to spend online per day. The unanimous response was: no more than 2 hours per day on average, with many suggesting less. This suggestion of no more than 2 hours per day or 14 hours per week does not correlate with the results of the research which shows that 60% of those consulted spend more than 15 hours online per week.

In addition, given that the study highlights that young people are of the opinion that some things are more acceptable online compared to offline, behaviour is an issue that needs to be addressed. Educational programmes have the propensity to address online behaviour at the point when children and young people are being introduced to the Internet. Work needs to be

done in order to develop attitudes at an early stage that reflect that the Internet is a real part of everyday life and not merely a virtual realm with little or no consequences.

Recommendation in the area of both usage levels and behaviour as previously mentioned are most definitely required. However, it will be extremely difficult to achieve favourable outcomes from such recommendations if addressed in isolation. The outcomes will be more attainable if built on a foundation that is focused on positive relationships. Parents, teachers, youth work practitioners and other responsible adults present in the lives of children and young people have a huge responsibility in the development of young people. These responsibilities extend to why and how we use and embrace the Internet, and are centred on the empowerment of young people, where they develop their online skills and behaviour patterns in the support and guidance of concerned adults.

In order to assist this approach, investment will be required in a variety of ways. Firstly, parents will need to invest time and effort to become Internet aware, by educating themselves and also by developing positive relations with their children in a way that displays their interest in the activities of their children and in some instances learning from them. Secondly, with regard to the formal and non-formal education sector, investment will be required in both a financial and developmental ways. The sector will require investment in relation to training teachers and youth workers etc in relation to the Internet and online tools. Moreover, society would benefit from an

investment in terms of how we embrace these technologies. At present, IT classes for instance focus on the technical aspects: the how to approach. However, if we are to see a sustainable approach to our use of the Internet, the way in which we use the technology needs to be addressed. This is where the teachers and practitioners in the youth sector are perfectly positioned to formulate strategies that implement programmes and courses that focus on the Internet and social networking, whilst incorporating a focus on the behavioural aspect of online activity.

With regard to the future, the use of a theoretical framework such as social identity theory would be recommended due to its effectiveness as an analytical lens to guide research pertinent to young people and behavioural traits. This approach builds upon our existing understanding of young people's behaviour and adds depth to our understanding of the new and fact moving online activities. In addition, further research into the governance controls that policy makers can influence would be required to help manage the dangers presented by online risks.

## **Final Reflections**

The Internet and social networking tools in particular appear to be developing at a pace previously unimaginable. This phenomenon has the ability to be very captivating to all sections of society, but especially young people. This study has investigated some of the impacts that new social media has on the social behaviour of young people. However, when

considering the scale of the issues involved and the interest level among society and academia in relation to the general topic, it would appear that more in-depth studies will be required.

Nevertheless, this study has succeeded in cultivating a topic and highlighting issues that could be developed, especially within the youth work sector in order to construct developmental education programmes that can address the behavioural aspects associated with young people's attitudes towards their level of Internet use and their approach to assessing and dealing with the perceived risks on online activity.

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## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Letter to youth work practitioners

Appendix B: Consent Form

Appendix C: Moving Debate – Statements

Appendix D: Focus Group Questions

**Appendix A:** Letter to youth work practitioners

C/O Donegal Youth  
Service ltd  
16 – 18 Port Road  
Letterkenny  
Co. Donegal  
16<sup>th</sup> March 2011

Xxxxx xxxxxx  
Clondalkin Youth Service  
Monastery Road  
Clondalkin  
Dublin 22

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Following our recent telephone conversation I wish to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to you for facilitating my request to conduct focus group research with a group of your young people. I can confirm that I will visit your premises on \_\_\_\_\_ to conduct the focus group with a small group recruited from your contacts. As discussed, the session will benefit from the inclusion of a youth worker who is known to the young people. I will schedule a short meeting with this person prior to the focus group.

I have attached consent forms relating to the research, which highlights the details of the research and that the session will be recorded, only for the use of the research team. It would be appreciated if you can circulate the consent forms on my behalf and ensure that all young people involved have returned a completed consent form prior to the focus group.

I wish to thank you for your cooperation and assistance in these matters, and I look forward to working with you to obtain some valuable data for my research. Should you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely

Gareth Gibson

# Consent Form

## Research Involving Human Participants

Project Title:

**Investigating the impact of new social media on the social behaviour of young people.**

Principal Investigator: **Gareth Gibson**

The aim of this proposed research is to investigate the positive and negative effects of the increasing use of new social media on the social behaviour of young people in Ireland. The primary data collection strategy involves the convening of 8 focus groups. The design criteria for the focus groups will be stratified clustering based on the national structures already developed by Youth Work Ireland. Participants will be recruited on the basis of age and gender. The identity of subjects will remain anonymous and information used for the purpose of the research only. The focus group will be recorded on audio recorders and all data gathered will be stored securely and accessed only by the principal researcher and supervisor.

Declaration: I \_\_\_\_\_, acknowledge that:

- I have been informed about the research and have an opportunity to ask questions
- I consent to partake in this study
- My participation is voluntary
- I can withdraw at any time
- I consent to the publication of results.

**Participant's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Details:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Signature (if over 18):** \_\_\_\_\_

In the event that the subject is under 18 years, consent must be submitted by the parent or guardians, acknowledging that the issues covered in the declaration are understood.

**Name of (Parent/Guardian):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_



**Appendix C:** Moving Debate – Statements

**Statement 1:**

Young people spend too much time online

**Statement 2:**

Young people are aware of the risks of social networking

**Statement 3:**

Online friendships are better than offline friendships

**Statement 4:**

I could survive without the Internet

## **Focus Group Questions**

### **Themes**

#### **Usage**

1. How are young people accessing the Internet? (e.g. laptop, Home PC, School, Phone etc)
2. What do young people do online?
3. How much time do young people spend on the Internet?
4. How much of that is on social networking sites? (e.g. Face book)
5. Do you think young people spend too much time on the Internet? What do you consider as an appropriate amount of time?

#### **Behaviour**

1. What affect is the time spent online having on other aspects of life/family life?
2. What is your perception of what your parents think about the Internet and your use of it?
3. Why do people choose to socialise online?
4. How many online friends do young people have on average?
5. Do they know all these people? Why do young people accept/send so many friend request?
6. Do young people behave differently online compared to offline? (In what ways?)
7. Are some things/actions/behaviour etc more acceptable online?
8. How has the Internet affected your behaviour in day to day life?
9. Are there things that you no longer do, or do less, to make time for social networking?

#### **Risk**

1. What risks do you think people of your age associate with Internet/Social Networking use?
2. Do young people consider the same things risky compared to parents?