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Social networking among European children: new findings on privacy, identity and connection

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Social networking among European children:

New findings on privacy, identity and connection

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

Social networking is arguably the fastest growing online activity among youth. This article presents new pan-European findings from the *EU Kids Online* project on how children and young people navigate the peer-to-peer networking possibilities afforded by SNSs, based on a survey of around 25,000 children (1000 children in each of 25 countries). In all, 59% of European 9-16 year olds who use the internet have their own social networking profile. Despite popular anxieties of lives lived indiscriminately in public, half have fewer than 50 contacts, most contacts are people already known to the child in person, and over two thirds have their profiles either private or partially private. The focus of the analysis, then, is to understand when and why some children seek wider circles of online contacts, and why some favour self-disclosure rather than privacy. Demflivingographic differences among children, cultural factors across countries, and the specific affordances of social networking sites are all shown to make a difference in shaping the particularities of children's online practices of privacy, identity and connection.

Keywords

Social networking sites, children and youth, privacy, identity, risk, connection

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Youthful social networking – what's at stake?

Social networking is arguably the fastest growing online activity among youth, attracting widespread attention among children and young people, policy makers and the wider public. As a technological platform, social networking sites (SNS) exemplify the notion of convergence culture: by integrating chat, messaging, contacts, photo albums and blogging functions, SNSs potentially integrate diverse online and offline modes of communication more seamlessly than was previously possible (Jenkins, 2006). As social media, SNSs potentially mediate the social relations of everyday life: as children grow into teenagers and, then, adulthood, managing the balance between intimacy and privacy – what to reveal about oneself to whom, when and at what risk to the self – becomes an absorbing preoccupation, one that is increasingly played out, visible to all, on these new platforms for social communication and networking.

In this short article, we present new pan-European findings from the *EU Kids Online* project on how children and young people navigate the peer-to-peer networking possibilities afforded by SNSs. In this project, focused on European children's and parents' experiences of risky and safer use of the internet and new online technologies, a random stratified sample over 25,000 children aged 9-16 years, approximately 1000 in each country, were interviewed face to face, at home during spring and summer of 2010.

The present article explores how children negotiate and manage the balance between privacy and self-disclosure through their self-representations online, thereby maintaining and extending their social networks. It asks what accounts for this dramatic rise in a new communicative form? And why is it so appealing especially to teenagers?

New possibilities for identity and connection

Although online talk can appear vacuous to the outside observer – an endless repetition of 'how are you', 'what are you doing', 'you look nice', for those taking part this is a highly valued social activity. As Clark (2005) puts it, this is 'the constant contact generation'. But this is not merely phatic communication. Drotner (2000: 59) argues that 'for the young, the media are part of a range of cultural signs available for processes of interpretation that are situated in time and space and dependent on constraints of production, distribution and resources for reception'. In relation to social networking, it seems that the task of interpretation is highly focused on the developing self – to borrow Mead's terms (1934), both the 'I' as in, who am I in and for myself, and the 'me' as in, how do others see and respond to me, what community am I part of.

In negotiating the balance between the claim of recognizable uniqueness and the need for identification with others (Buckingham, 2008), the identity-construction process is achieved in practice in particular settings. These settings enable a dialectic between the staging of a performance, framed by social conventions and particular codes of self-representation, and the reflexivity developed through expected or actual feedback from audiences.

Identity displays in SNSs, and the particular conception of public and private that they promote, are dependent on the kind of audience that has been imagined by the subject (boyd, 2006) and are further shaped by the design of the website (Livingstone, 2008). Thus, to understand the cultural practices of self-development occurring in SNSs, a first step is the analysis of the specific "ecology" of social connections within which users act, focusing users' active management of the boundaries of their social network. This is what we explore below.

Children's use of social networking sites

Across the 25 countries researched by *EU Kids Online*, 59% of European 9-16 year olds who use the internet have their own social networking profile (Livingstone et al, 2010). Social networking varies little by gender (60% girls, 58% boys) or socioeconomic status (57% for children from low SES households to 61% for those from high SES households).

Most differentiated are the findings by age. Even though many popular social networking sites (e.g. *Facebook, MySpace*) are age-restricted, 26% of 9-10 year olds reports having their own profile, as do 49% of 11-12 year olds, 73% of 13-14 year olds and 82% of 15-16 year olds. It may be concluded that social networking is encompassing the entire peer group. Two questions for further research might be, what is the social trigger that leads children to join and a certain age, and why do some not join in?

Usage also varies considerably by country, as shown in Table 1. Though use of SNS tends to be lower than average in Southern European countries, there is no a clear-cut divide among Northern and Southern Europe. It appears that social networking is most popular in the Netherlands (80%), Lithuania (76%) and Denmark (75%), and least practiced in Romania (46%), Turkey (49%) and Germany (51%). Yet even in these latter countries, around half of the population aged 9-16 years old claims to have their own social networking profile, rising to three quarters in the 'leading' countries. Similar figures hold in the USA, with 73% of online American teenagers aged 12 to 17 years old using social networking sites in 2009 (Lenhart, et al., 2010).

Circles of online contacts

Popular preconceptions about social networking are often critical of young people, suggesting for instance that the notion of 'friend' has become meaningless – young people have hundreds of friends, it is said, and make little distinction among their online contacts. Yet the survey found that half have fewer than 50 friends on their social networking profile, and around one fifth has fewer than 10; still, nearly one third reports more than 100, with considerable national variation (see Table 1).

Are these contacts replacing face-to-face relationships, as also popularly feared? Figure 1 shows that the majority of online contacts maintained through social networking sites as well as email and instant messaging are localized in offline social circles. Overall, 87% of internet users are in touch with people they first met in person, 39% are in touch with people they first met on the internet but who are part of their friend/family circle, and 25% are in touch with those they know only via the internet.

But such behaviour varies among children. Substantially more boys (31%) than girls (20%) communicate online with people whom they only know online, possibly because they find face to face contacts more difficult, or because they take more risks or because these contacts are sustained through multiplayer games, also more common among boys. Differences of a similar scale are observed by age and socioeconomic status.

Although most friendship ties are 'multimedia' social relations (Baym et al. 2004; Mascheroni, 2010), some are afforded purely via online access. Indeed, 40% of European internet users say they have looked for new friends on the internet and 34% have added contacts they don't know face to face. Whether this replaces offline communication we cannot tell; whether it is associated with risky contacts is a question for further research.

Communicative situations on and offline

Why, one might wonder, do children supplement face to face communication with online communication? The survey invited children to compare communication online and offline, finding that, for 50% of 11-16 year old internet users across Europe, they find it a bit or even much easier to be themselves on the internet than when with other people face to face; further, 45% say they talk about different things on the internet than when speaking to people face to face, and 32% say that on the internet they talk about private things which they do not share with people face to face. For most children, then, face to face and online communication are not especially distinct, but for up to half, the internet offers possibilities for more varied, intimate or authentic communication – something qualitative research shows that teenagers especially can find difficult to manage in face to face situations (Livingstone, 2009).

Three applications provide the key means by which children communicate online with people they already know in person face to face. Of the 11-16 year olds who use email, 84% use it to contact people they know in person. For instant messaging, the figure is 82%; for social networking sites it is a little lower at 78%. For those who use virtual worlds, play games online or visit chat rooms, around six in ten are in touch with people they know in person (58%, 63% and 61%).

Each application is used by between a quarter and a third to communicate with people they have not met face to face but who are part of their social circle offline. For virtual worlds, game playing and chat rooms, over one quarter use these applications to communicate with people they have no other connection with than their contact via the internet. For email, instant messaging and social networking, such contacts are much fewer. However, it is not insignificant that 12% or one in eight of those using social networking sites are in touch this way with people they have no other connection with.

Privacy and self-disclosure

It is easily supposed, in popular discussion, that children lack a sense of privacy, supposedly posting anything and everything on their social networking profile. Yet, confirming qualitative findings that children care considerably about keeping certain kinds of information private, the survey shows that most keep their profile either private (just friends) or partially private (friends, friends of friend, networks). Less than one third (26%) has a public profile – more among boys and children from higher SES homes, fewer among girls and those from low SES homes; age makes surprisingly little difference.

Making new friends especially risks privacy and safety, and so decisions over what identifying features to reveal on an SNS profile can be especially fraught. Table 1 shows that on average children include around three of the six identifying features asked about, with one in seven posting their address or phone number. The one in six who post an incorrect age reveals a similar tension: children will claim to be older than they really are to gain access to age-restricted sites, though their peers will, of course, know their true age.

A simple correlation matrix of the variables shown in Table 1, conducted at the country level, reveals that in countries where children have more social networking contacts, their profiles are also likely to show more identifying features. Such countries include Belgium, Hungary, the Netherlands and the UK. The converse holds in Bulgaria, Romania and Germany.[4] Whether this implies that in some countries, with larger

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[4] For this country level correlation (N=25), r=0.494, p<0.012.

networks and more disclosure of personal information, children enjoy an online culture of fun and friendship or, rather, a culture of risky contacts and even harm remains to be seen.

A second pattern is revealed by the relations among three variables.[5] Where there are more children with public profiles in a country, this is associated with more public disclosure of the child's address/phone number and a greater likelihood of posting a correct age – examples include Hungary, Romania and Poland. By contrast, in countries where private profiles are more favoured, children tend to post an incorrect age but are less likely to post their address/phone number – examples include the UK, Ireland and Spain. In other words, although awareness-raisers hope that, in a culture where children's profiles are public, they would not post their address or phone number, in fact the opposite occurs: in 'public' social networking cultures, children are more likely to post their true age and other identifying information; whereas in 'private' social networking cultures, children are likely to post an incorrect age and keep other identifying information to themselves.

Conclusions

In conclusion, social networking sites have become a mainstream place for relational maintenance (Baym, 2010) and an integral part, along with email and instant messaging, of youth's online communication repertoires. By comparison with email and instant messaging, however, they are also sites of new relationship formation. This difference, we argue, is embedded in the affordances of SNS, namely the dominant identity pattern of 'through connection' with others (Livingstone, 2008), especially the way friendships are formed and displayed. Particularly noteworthy is how social networking more than any other platform sustains connection with 'latent ties' such as 'friends of friends' or those linked to people already known face to face (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

Interpreting practices of meeting new people online, especially when there is no link to an existing social circle, remains for more in depth research. If this is, indeed, is a risky practice, then awareness-raising efforts should focus on boys, older teenagers and those from high SES homes. On the other hand, communicating with new people not met face to face enables wider and/or more specialised networks; they may, therefore, depend on greater digital literacy and confidence, as one might expect from the greater cultural and social capital of boys, older teenagers and middle class children. Extending this supposition, qualitative research among older teenagers finds that some favour self-disclosure precisely freed from offline social contexts in order to achieve a more 'purified' or 'authentic' online experience of participation and expression (Murru, 2010).

Also intriguing is the ways in which the observed communication practices vary across Europe. For instance, the relations found among the privacy/self-disclosure variables suggest two separate circumstances under which children disclose personal information on social networking sites, at a country level – either a culture of many online contacts, and/or a culture of public profiles. Although a country may be distinctive in terms of both types of findings, above – for example Hungary, where circles of contacts are large and most profiles are both public and revealing - there is no significant correlation between the numbers of contacts and whether children have their profiles public or private.

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[5] Correlation between % public profile and % incorrect age, r=-0.499, p<0.011. Correlation between % public profile and % address/phone number, r=0.584, p<0.002. Correlation between % incorrect age and % address/phone number, r=-0.558, p<0.004.

Rather, in one type of SNS culture, children are embracing the potential of social networking by building large circles of contacts and disclosing personal information. In a second type of SNS culture, children appear to have learned both to keep their profile private and not to post identifying information; nonetheless, they appear more likely to lie about their age, presumably to gain access in the first place. One explanation for these differing online cultures may depend on social contexts offline. Another may depend on the specific affordances of the SNSs used by children in each country, for SNSs vary, one usually dominating in a particular country, and each enabling certain practices more than others. In short, privacy is far from dead but it is variably modulated by different digital cultures.

Linking the above points, one may begin to speculate that there is some kind of relationship between different styles of privacy management and the kind of expected public addressed by the identity disclosure, as indicated by the type of connections sustained via the particular affordances of different online platforms (Robinson, 2007). Although it is commonly assumed that more authentic communication is reserved for deeper contacts also known offline, the search for online intimacy evidenced here suggests some more complex hypotheses for future research.

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Figure 1: Nature of children's online contacts, by type of communication
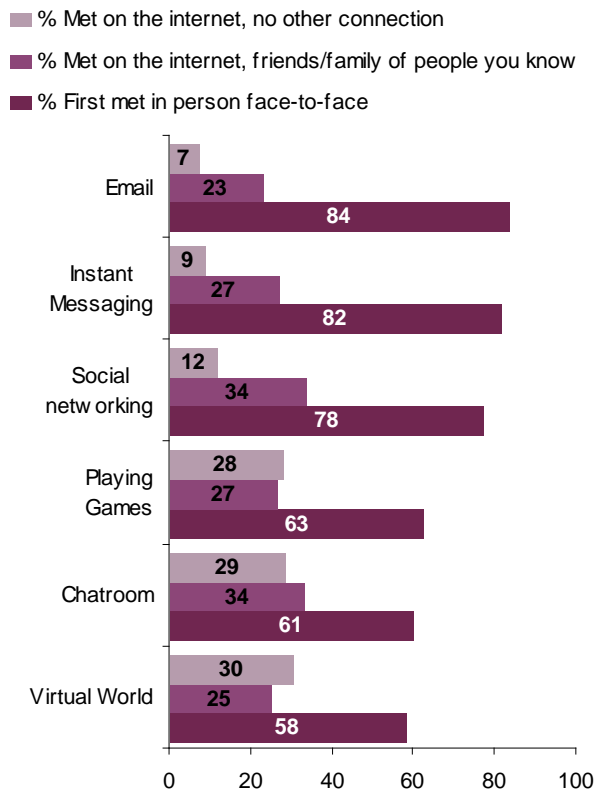
QC310: I am going to read out each of the things you have just told me you do (e.g. email or whatever). For each one, I'd like you to tell me the types of people you have had contact with when doing each of these things.
Base: All children aged 11-16 who communicate on the internet in each of the ways shown.
Source: Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., Ólafsson, K. (2010).

Table 1: Information children show on their social networking profile, by country

Country	% 9-16 years with own SNS profile	Among children with own SNS profile				
		% 100+ contacts on SNS profile	% whose SNS profile is public	% shows address or phone number	% shows incorrect age	Average (out of 6) features on profile
AT	62	24	19	15	14	2.7
BE	64	42	27	13	21	2.9
BG	51	7	30	10	10	2.3
CY	73	21	27	6	23	2.4
CZ	72	24	33	20	13	2.7
DE	51	11	22	12	9	2.6
DK	75	29	19	13	25	2.8
EE	71	17	29	27	20	2.7
EL	54	38	36	12	19	2.2
ES	56	29	13	10	27	2.4
FI	67	17	28	7	14	2.4
FR	54	34	21	8	18	2.6
HU	66	46	54	31	2	3.5
IE	59	31	12	8	24	2.4
IT	57	34	34	16	20	2.7
LT	76	19	30	35	9	2.8
NL	80	37	18	16	6	3.1
NO	69	35	19	16	17	2.8
PL	71	34	37	22	3	3.4
PT	59	29	25	7	25	2.1
RO	46	8	42	21	12	2.2
SE	67	36	30	9	19	2.6
SI	74	29	23	16	21	2.7
TR	49	21	44	22	18	2.8
UK	67	42	11	7	21	2.8
ALL	59	29	26	14	16	2.8

QC313: Do you have your OWN profile on a social networking site that you currently use, or not?
QC317: Is your profile set to …? Public, private or partially private.
QC318a-f: Which of the bits of information on this card does your profile include about you? The identifying features asked about, which are summed in the final column, were: a photo that clearly shows your face, your last name, your address, your phone number, your school, your correct age.
Base: All children aged 9-16 who use the internet. All who have a profile on a social networking site.
Source: Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., Ólafsson, K. (2010).