

Annex 3:  
Social Networking Qualitative research  
report

Research Document

Publication date: 2 April 2008

# Contents

| Section                                                  | Page |
|----------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Section 1: Research objectives and sample                | 3    |
| Section 2: Executive summary                             | 5    |
| Section 3: Why people use social networking sites        | 9    |
| Section 4: User and non-user segments                    | 23   |
| Section 5: Privacy and safety                            | 33   |
| Section 6: Why some users are putting themselves at risk | 41   |
| Section 7: Appendices                                    | 45   |

## Section 1

# Research objectives and sample

### Background and purpose of research

Ofcom has a duty under the 2003 Communications Act to promote media literacy, which it has defined as ‘the ability to access, understand, and create communications in a variety of contexts.’

Media literacy is an increasingly important skill in today’s complex, fast-moving, media-centric world. If children and teens are not versed in critical analysis skills, particularly in relation to the internet, they run the risk of falling behind, both socially and academically. Furthermore, adults in nearly every profession now benefit from having media skills, in order to stay ahead at work and to feel more informed and connected in their personal lives.

A recent and popular internet development is User Generated Content – that is, people making and publishing their own content rather than simply receiving traditionally-produced content. This includes blogs, video sharing sites such as YouTube, and, importantly for this study; social networking sites. These sites allow users to create personal homepages where they share their likes and dislikes, find old friends, post pictures, and communicate with others in a variety of ways for a variety of reasons. Social networking sites have brought social interaction to a new, virtual level; it is a unique culture with its own set of rules.

Ofcom commissioned Sherbert Research to carry out a qualitative study with young people and adults – both users and non-users of social networking sites – to understand the current position of social networking in people’s lives and people’s use of different types of sites, including how they think about, and deal with, privacy and safety issues on such sites.

### Research objectives

- To identify, explore and understand the reasons that people use or don’t use social networking sites.
- To identify which sites are used and for what purposes, covering:
  - gender differences;
  - age differences; and
  - socio-economic differences.
- To identify, explore and understand the wider social impacts (benefits and drawbacks) of social networking sites, including:
  - communication with friends and family;
  - a way to meet new people;
  - a medium for creative/ personal expression; and
  - peer group inclusion.
- To understand who people are networking with: friends, or people they don’t know
- To understand how privacy issues affect the role and use of social networking sites (both because of rules imposed by parents and through adults’ self-censoring for privacy reasons)

## Methodology

In total we spoke with 52 people; 39 social networking site users and 13 non-users.

- six two-hour, paired, in-depth accompanied surfs with 11 to 19 year olds (tweens/teens);
- six two-hour, paired, in-depth accompanied surfs with 20 to 30+ year olds;
- four one-and-a-half hour triads, with 14 to 19 year olds;
- four one-and-a-half hour quads, with 20 to 35+ year olds; and
- four two-hour follow-up online social networking sessions with respondents selected from the triad and quad sessions.

Within this:

- respondents who were users of social networking sites were required to complete a pre-task exercise (explained in the appendix). The quota tables are also included in the appendix.

## Research locations

The sample included locations across the UK to ensure that a mix of users was represented in terms of rural and urban habitation, socio-economic groups and sex. Research was carried out across the four nations of the UK.

- **Wales:** Cardiff (suburban) and Bridgend (semi-rural). Children were recruited from a rural area close to Bridgend
- **Northern Ireland:** Belfast (urban)
- **Scotland:** Glasgow (suburban/ urban)
- **England:** multiple locations
  - Newcastle, Northern England (suburban)
  - Kent, South East (semi-rural)
  - Astley, Leicestershire (rural)
  - Devon, South West (rural)
  - Croydon, South London (suburban)
  - Tottenham, North London (suburban/ urban)

## Section 2

# Executive Summary

*This research is based on fieldwork conducted in September and October 2007. At this time social networking sites were being widely reported in the media. Key stories included privacy concerns including child safety, identity theft and personal safety, employers banning the use of social networking sites, the financial value of social networking sites, niche social networking sites, such as a site for older people, and the use of social networking sites to promote political or social issues.*

### Users

Social networking sites have very quickly become highly popular means of communication and leisure activity for many people across the UK. At the time of this study it had become the method of choice for virtual communication for many (especially younger users), challenging MSN, texting and email. Users were attracted to the sites' easy-to-use interfaces which allowed them to communicate efficiently with friends and to express themselves, supporting a new and fun way to maintain and enlarge their social networks.

### Non users

A smaller portion of the sample focused on non-users of social networking sites. There were a number of reasons why these individuals did not feel a need for this type of site. In particular, they:

- simply had no interest in social networking sites as an activity;
- had no time available to commit to social networking sites;
- did not want to 'jump on board' the social networking site craze;
- preferred to rely on face-to-face and other forms of communications;
- had witnessed the negative side of social networking sites among friends and chose to 'steer clear';
- had concerns about safety and being stalked by other users (on and offline); or
- were not confident with technology (a barrier for people over 30, especially for those working in manual jobs).

### Factors affecting use

A number of characteristics informed how a user chose and interacted with a social networking site. These are summarised below:

- Most users chose sites which their close friends were on and had recommended.
- Younger users said they preferred sites which offered simplicity, visual fun and entertainment (e.g. Bebo and MySpace). They generally had more time to spend on these sites and tended to be more experimental in how they used them and what they posted.
- Older users expressed a preference for sites which were more discreet and appeared more 'mature' (e.g. Facebook). They tended to be more time-poor and had less time to 'play' on these sites. In addition, those over the age of 30 might be less confident with ICT (information communication technology) and therefore likely to be more cautious and reserved about how they used social networking sites.

- Users' online personalities seemed often to be exaggerated versions of their offline personas, although social networking sites did seem to allow quieter and shyer types to be more bold and experimental in the virtual world.
- Teenagers without internet access at home reported that they struggled to keep up with their peers because they lacked the social currency that social networking sites would give them within their peer sets. They did attempt to access the web at friends' houses and at the library, but their lack of regular screen time felt like a social hindrance to them.

### **Benefits and drawbacks of social networking sites**

Users of social networking sites talked more readily and confidently about the benefits associated with use, and could think of only a few drawbacks. These drawbacks seemed to emerge through discussion, after reflection on their behaviour, and when probed by the moderator during the research session. A certain degree of overlap emerged between the benefits and the drawbacks - what was perceived as a benefit by some users might be a drawback to others, and vice versa. Benefits and drawbacks included those which users had experienced themselves as well as those they perceived, or had seen others experience.

#### **The benefits of social networking sites, as defined by users in the sample**

- A fun and engaging leisure activity.
- An efficient way to manage existing relationships.
- A way to link up with old friends. This was especially the case for users in their thirties.
- A way to build new relationships - an attractive aspect to those who were looking for romance or to extend their social life.
- A tool to build confidence. This was especially appealing to the teenagers in the research group, who often found it difficult to communicate with the opposite sex, and for single parents who were often isolated at home in the evening.
- An opportunity to be 'someone they were not'. This involved setting up an account as another person. This could be done out of curiosity, although some were using social networking sites to impersonate other people they knew and to get them into trouble or to bully them. This behaviour illustrates the overlap between benefits and drawbacks and is explored below.
- For social good, such as campaigning, joining advocacy groups or fund-raising for charities.

#### **The drawbacks of social networking sites, as defined by users in the sample**

- Spending too much time on these sites. Some users, especially under-25s, reported feeling addicted to social networking sites and were worried that it was affecting their studies and other leisure activities.
- Using profiles for 'self-promotion'. There was a perception among some users that some people used their social networking pages to promote their own self-image; they found this distasteful.
- Being contacted by old friends who they did not like, and not wanting to hurt their feelings by not replying. This tended to be more of a fear among users in their late twenties and above, who had more extensive social networks.
- Bullying via social networking sites. This included lying, starting rumours and setting up fake sites in other people's names. These drawbacks had been directly experienced by some of the younger (under 25) respondents, who had seen their friends, or friends of friends, affected by this.
- Criminal damage at house parties. Social networking sites were frequently used by some younger members in the research sample to organise parties. They often invited their whole address book, which included people they did not know. Users reported that parties that others had organised in this way, which they had attended, had got out of hand and the police had become involved.

- Issues relating to identity theft. A minority of users had read in the media how criminals could use information gleaned from a social networking site profile to build up a profile of an individual, ultimately using this information to impersonate and defraud that person. None of the respondents in this sample had direct experience of this.

## Privacy and safety

Before conducting this research, Ofcom carried out desk research, which highlighted a number of potential risk areas in relation to social networking sites and users' behaviour. The moderators were briefed on these various potential risks and used this understanding to help them in the questioning and analysis process. However we did not prompt for privacy and safety issues when talking to users; instead we let these issues be discussion-led.

Privacy and safety issues did not emerge as 'top of mind' for the majority of users. Social networking sites were associated with their homes and leisure time, and promoted a sense of ease and fun. Most users were unaware, and seemingly unwilling to consider, that there could be a more serious side to this activity.

However, during discussion, a number of possible risk areas were highlighted by respondents:

- **Giving out personal information.** When completing their profile, many users did not conceal their personal details and often included their name, where they lived, the school(s) they attended or their place of employment. Some also included their MSN account details.
- **Posting personal photographs.** A number of issues were raised in relation to this point. Firstly, some teenage girls and young women were posting sexually suggestive photographs to seek the attention of the opposite sex. Many users, of all ages, commented on girls in their friend list who had done this; in some cases the photographs had lowered their opinion of them. It was evident in discussion that the reputations that some girls created online were spilling over into the real world.
- Secondly, some older users with children were sharing their private family photographs with the entire social networking site, when they thought that only their friendship network could see them.
- **Leaving privacy settings 'open'.** Some users, while unaware this was the default setting for many sites, were not concerned that people they did not know could see their page and their personal details. In fact for many, being 'open' and 'seen' on social networking sites was the whole point of being a member. (This is explored further in the next section). However, this was a problem for other users, who had presumed that only those in their friendship network could see their details.
- **Becoming online friends with people they did not know.** This included accepting people they did not know to boost their number of friends. Users recognised that by accepting people they didn't know they could open themselves up to inappropriate and unpleasant comments. Most users were not particularly concerned about this.
- **Meeting in real life people they did not know.** A number of teenagers and older users had done this and felt that they had mitigated any risks by meeting in a public place, bringing friends along, etc. In essence some users were using social networking sites as a form of free online dating.

## Why some users were putting themselves at potential risk

- Lack of awareness of the issues. Many users simply were not aware that their behaviour could be perceived as risky. When these issues were discussed in the research sessions, many respondents expressed a desire to do more to protect themselves.
- For many users, particularly those under the age of thirty, the whole point of being a member of a social networking site was to network beyond their real-life social networks - being open with their details and privacy settings allowed them to do this. Some felt that they would lose the whole point of social networking sites if they assumed a more private and cautious approach.
- The assumption that the social networking site itself took care of privacy and safety issues. Some users thought that sites moderated content.
- Levels of ICT confidence. Those who were less confident with ICT were more resistant to changing their personal settings or exploring the more technical aspects of sites.
- Privacy and safety information was difficult to find and use. All users, even those who were confident with ICT, found the settings on most of the major sites difficult to understand and manipulate. This was raised particularly by members of Facebook.
- Other online sites and facilities were perceived to have more obvious threats. For example, online dating sites, which by their nature encourage users to meet, and online banking and shopping sites which involved the transfer of money, were thought to carry more obvious and worrying risks.
- Younger users felt that they were 'invincible,' and that even if they were affected by the risks discussed, they would be able to deal with them.
- The need for attention outweighed the need to be safety conscious. This was particularly the case for younger female users, who often appeared to have low self-esteem and craved attention. While they were able logically to appreciate the potential safety issues, the emotional pull, the thrill associated with speaking to people they did not know, and the positive comments they received about their photographs, were far more compelling.

Having spent time discussing some of the above issues, many users felt that an education campaign about privacy and safety risks on social networking sites would be beneficial. Users also felt that the sites themselves could play a role in supporting their understanding of how to get the most out of online social networking safely. Suggestions included:

- Privacy and safety settings could be easier to find and more straightforward to use.
- When first joining, users could be alerted to some of the issues they might encounter on the site; for example, by watching a short video on how to sign up. Respondents felt that Bebo had some useful video material, but they would be unlikely to find it on their own.
- Adjusting and customising privacy and safety settings could become a more integral part of the sign-up process and users could be occasionally reminded of their status and options when they signed in.
- Some older users, and parents, said they would like information/ communications about how users can keep themselves safe on social networking sites. They felt that this might make them aware of the potential risks and give them pointers on how to keep safe on social networking sites while still having fun.



### Section 3

## Why people use social networking sites

Increasingly, many people now have, as standard, a mobile phone, an email address, MSN, and are members of at least one social networking site. These sites have become an important leisure activity for many people throughout the UK, across all ages, genders, ethnic and social groups.

*It is something that most people are getting – Girl 15, urban/suburban*

*It is what everyone is talking about, even my parents are talking about getting it – Boy 16, rural/semi-rural*

*It is the way communication is going – Male 22, rural/semi-rural*

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

The ease of keeping in contact with friends and reaching many people at the same time were key aspects of social networking sites' appeal. Respondents' use extended beyond basic networking with friends to meeting new people, keeping up with favourite bands and adding applications such as games, quizzes and virtual gift giving.

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

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

*I think it is so popular because it is easy to use – Male 18, urban/suburban*

For many users online social networking had become a hobby, and for a few it had become a bit of an obsession, taking up many hours of the day. Several users said that they simply could not imagine life without social networking sites.

*Imagining life without [social networking sites]? I don't know what I'd do. I'd go mad. You can be whoever you want to be. You can express yourself - Girl 14, urban/suburban*

*[When on the internet,] the only thing I wanna do is get on to Bebo - Girl 15, urban/suburban*

## A snapshot of behaviour on these sites

At the time of this research, three sites dominated usage in the UK: Bebo, MySpace and Facebook. (Profiles on each of the sites are provided in the appendices at the end of this report.) Other sites mentioned by some respondents included Piczo, Hi5, and ICQ.

Bebo, MySpace and Facebook have become strong and instantly recognisable global brands. In fact, most users did not use the term 'social networking site' to describe the phenomenon, but rather referred to the name of whichever site they mainly used.

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

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

*Loads of my friends are on Bebo, that's all we do on the internet now – Girl 15, urban/suburban*

When teenagers and adults first started using social networking sites, their choice of site was predominantly dictated by which site their friends were on. By choosing the same site, users felt they were keeping up with their friends. For some teenagers and young adults with more than one circle of friends, this could mean they joined more than one site.

*My friend kept on at me to join MySpace because he wanted to get in contact with me in that way, after lots of pestering I gave in and now I am on it all the time - Male twenty five, urban/suburban*

*You heard at school more people talking about Bebo and after a while I thought it would be a good idea to join - Boy 12, rural/semi-rural*

*I am on Bebo for my friends at school and then on Facebook to keep in contact with my brother who is at uni in Bristol - Girl 14, rural/semi-rural*

On average, users checked their sites at least a few times a week, and often once, or more than once, a day. Users said that they checked even more frequently when they first joined as they enjoyed the novelty of getting in contact with friends and learning how to use the different functions on the site. Some users reported spending hours in the evening looking at profiles, posting comments and managing their own profile. Photos seemed to encompass a huge part of the users' experience, including posting, organizing, looking at and commenting on other people's photos.

Finally, respondents in this research used social networking sites predominantly for social purposes. None was using a social networking site for political causes or advocacy, although mention was made of using it to raise awareness of local charities. Users in this sample did not use any specific business networking sites, although some reported that they used their social networking profile for business- and hobby-related purposes.

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

*I am into motorbikes and I found a club which meets every Tuesday night, and to keep in contact with all the members the club has a Facebook site. It is a really good idea and is a really great way for new members to find out about the club - Male 27, urban/suburban*

## Factors affecting use of social networking sites

Users' behaviour, attitudes towards, and use of, social networking sites were driven by a number of variables. These were:

- age;
- gender;
- personality type;
- relationship status;
- access to the internet; and
- geography (the least influential of all the factors).

### Age

In terms of age, the under-20s (who tended to be those without children or established careers) had more time and were more technologically able to explore and become proficient on social networking sites. They also faced significant social pressure to keep up with friends on social networking sites. Social networking sites were also a way for teenagers to make friends and develop their social skills in a less pressured setting than school.

Older respondents were juggling more responsibilities and had more demands on their time, and while they enjoyed using social networking sites, it tended to be lower on their list of priorities.

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

*I can't get access to it at work and by the time I have taken the kids to all their clubs there is not much of the evening left – Male 42, urban/suburban*

Some older users found social networking sites were replacing TV in the evening, especially single mothers who sometimes felt lonely and housebound. It was a way to be entertained while also being sociable, unlike watching television.

*The evenings can get a little bit lonely and once I have seen my soaps, I turn off the TV and spend a few hours checking out what has happened on Facebook, it's a bit of a giggle – Female 32, urban/suburban*

Users in their thirties and above, who did not work in offices, were often still learning the ropes with regard to ICT, and were therefore more tentative in their use of social networking sites.

*I have to keep asking my niece for advice because I am not sure that I am doing it right!  
Female 45, rural/semi-rural*

*Really social networking is for the kids, I am not really that good with computers and just tend to talk to a few of my friends and do not play all these games sort of things, to be honest I don't really understand it - Male 38, urban/suburban*

## **Gender**

Gender appeared to strongly affect usage patterns and attitudes to social networking sites. Women spent more time creating attractive online social networking profiles and their self-image was often influenced by the compliments they received on their page. While this tended to be a stronger characteristic among women under 25, it was also evident among women who were older and single. Discussions between some users, especially men, suggested that some female users were posting sexually suggestive photographs and comments in order to get noticed and receive comments. These male users believed that these women were aware that they were being suggestive, but were not always aware of the negative reputation they could be creating through their online profile.

Men tended to use social networking sites for far more functional purposes such as hobbies, making plans and learning more about their interests, such as music. They also used it to flirt with women and to find a partner, but not to the same extent, or with the same degree of commitment, as some women.

## **Personality type**

People's personalities appeared to influence their online persona and their use of social networking sites. In most cases a user's real-life personality was reflected in his or her behaviour online (e.g. leaders remained leaders, extroverts remained extroverts, and so on). However, it did emerge that social networking sites gave users the confidence to express themselves more freely and openly than in real life and that this was particularly liberating for shy or less confident people. They said that social networking sites enabled them to be more extrovert, and to take more risks, than they would in the real world.

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

## **Relationship status**

Relationship status came into play quite significantly in analysing social networking site use, with single people of all ages and both genders claiming social networking sites were exciting venues for meeting new romantic interests. Older single users were more interested in meeting people who shared their interests rather than those who just looked attractive - this was a more common criterion among younger users. The sites were felt to offer great opportunities and a cheap alternative to online dating.

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

### **Access to the internet**

This was a factor for a few teenage respondents who did not have access to the internet at home. Those without access said they often felt left out, and nervous about not being up to speed with what had been said and done on social networking sites. Although they found ways of getting access to the internet at their friends' houses and at the library, they did not have the convenience of logging on at home in the evening as many of their contemporaries did.

*I try and go on Bebo every couple of days, but it is more difficult for me as I don't have access to the internet at my mum's, which is where I live most of the time – Girl 14, rural/semi-rural*

*Sometimes you might miss out on things that people say about you because you don't have the chance to go onto it in the evening when most people are on it – Boy 11, rural/semi-rural*

### **Geography**

Some slight differences emerged between the different research locations in how people used social networking sites. This was the least influential of all the factors affecting behaviour.

Users in urban areas, perhaps because they were more used to multiculturalism, seemed more open to being contacted on social networking sites by people from overseas. Some younger users living in cities claimed that their parents preferred them to network on social networking sites as it was safer than being on the streets. Those in rural and semi-rural areas seemed to have friends, and to belong to shared-hobby groups, across a broader age range and a larger geographical area, perhaps because there were fewer people in their age group living locally.

*I talk to people in the Caribbean, and on Bebo it gives you a map of where all the people are - Girl 15, urban/suburban*

## Section 4

### The benefits and drawbacks of social networking sites

Users of social networking sites readily and confidently talked about the benefits of the sites; and while they could think of some drawbacks, these were not 'top of mind' and often emerged only when the topic was prompted by the moderator.

There was a degree of overlap between benefits and drawbacks. It became evident that what was perceived as a benefit to some users might be a drawback to others, and vice versa. Benefits and drawbacks included those which users had experienced themselves, as well as those they perceived, or had seen others experience.

#### The benefits of social networking sites fall into the following categories:

- A fun and engaging leisure activity
- An efficient way to manage existing relationships
- A way to link up with old friends
- A tool to build confidence
- An opportunity to adopt a different persona
- A way to build new relationships
- To gain support for charitable causes, (mention was made of doing this on a local level) and for other social good, such as campaigning and joining advocacy groups (though none had actually done this).

#### The benefits: A fun and engaging leisure activity

Social networking sites appeared to resemble a popular craze for many users, who gained significant emotional rewards from contacting their friends and taking part in various online activities and games.

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

*There is always something to do as people are constantly sending you applications which you can play on, like Poking each other or sending them a fish or Zombie-ing them! – Male 17, rural/semi-rural*

Collecting friends, and competing for the highest number of friends, seemed to be a high priority among younger female respondents.

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

### **The benefits: An efficient way to manage existing relationships**

For respondents of all ages and both genders, social networking sites were an efficient way to manage existing social relationships in a fun and colourful way.

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

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

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

### **The benefits: A way to link up with old friends**

Users in their late twenties and thirties were enjoying the chance to link up with friends they had lost touch with, often from school, university or travelling. Many of these reunions were taking place on Facebook, with many Facebook users aware that this was one of the primary objectives of this particular site when it was launched.

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

### **The benefits: A tool to build confidence**

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

*I moved to a new school and I am quite shy, but through Bebo I have made friends with loads of new people and it is so much easier to approach them when I have chatted with them online - Female 17, urban/suburban*

*People can get to know folks [on social networking sites] and they can see past the façade of what they look like; you're actually getting to know what the person's all about - Male 35, urban/suburban*

### **The benefits: An opportunity to adopt a different persona**

A minority of teenage female users also mentioned that they enjoyed setting up fake accounts. Some of them had pretended to be older males in their thirties and forties and had



set up profile pages as these 'men', including posting fake photographs. They said they enjoyed pretending to be someone they were not and experiencing what it was like to be a different gender and age. They simply viewed it as harmless fun. However, it did emerge that some of these fake sites could also be used to bully friends they had fallen out with. This issue is explored further in the section on drawbacks, below, and illustrates the blurring between benefits and drawbacks, depending on the user's perspective.

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

### **The benefits: A way to build new relationships**

Many single people reported using social networking sites to search out and build new social and romantic relationships. People who were using social networking sites in this way were quick to point out that this service was free, compared to online dating sites which charged for their services.

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

*I met this guy in Birmingham who is 50 and an ex-professional drummer...and my son [who is 23] is a drummer and they've become real good friends now, he is a great person and we are really glad we met him - Female 54, rural/semi-rural*

*I am a single mum and at home with the kids most of the time, it is a great way to meet new people - Female 32, urban/suburban*

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

### **Case study**

*Alice<sup>1</sup> is a single mother, aged 36, living in an urban/suburban area, who receives little support with childcare. She spends much of her time in the evening chatting to people she has met in chat rooms or through social networking sites and MSN. She has had an affair with one man she met online which lasted eight months. They would talk to each other daily and their avatars would go and 'get a room' at the Habbo Hotel. After eight months they met in public and she learnt that he was married, so she finished the relationship, although she*

<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to protect respondents' privacy

*felt they 'had something really special'. Despite her experience, she still feels that social networking sites are a much easier way for single mothers to meet people, especially as they are not able to go out very much, and it gives them a chance to talk to lots of people and feel less isolated.*

### **The benefits: Social good**

A minority (mostly older users) acknowledged that online social networking could have a wider application beyond its social purpose and that it could be used to bring about positive social or political change. None had actually ventured directly into this territory, although mention was made of using a social networking profile to promote local charities.

## **The drawbacks of social networking sites (perceived and experienced)**

Overall, the drawbacks of social networking sites were much less evident in the general discussions and tended to emerge only when the topic of drawbacks was raised. Significantly, users were more likely to accept inappropriate behaviour on social networking sites than in the offline world. The drawbacks comprised those that the users had directly experienced and others which they perceived to be potential risks. The drawbacks raised related closely to the reasons non-users gave for not becoming members.

### **The drawbacks of social networking sites can be grouped into the following categories:**

- spending too much time on these sites (experienced by many);
- using profiles for self-promotion (witnessed by many);
- being contacted by old friends they didn't like (experienced by some);
- other people using the sites to bully – lying, starting rumours and setting up fake sites (experienced by a minority);
- house parties organised through social networking sites getting out of hand (experienced by some); and
- issues relating to identity theft (a perceived risk).

### **The drawbacks: Spending too much time on social networking sites**

Some teenagers and adults in their early twenties reported feeling 'addicted' to social networking sites and were aware that their use was 'squeezing' their study time. Some users described how they might go onto their site to check for messages and then a few hours later emerge having been drawn into commenting, searching and generally having fun. This is an example of when a benefit of being on a social networking site can also 'tip' into becoming a drawback.

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

### **The drawbacks: Using profiles for self-promotion**

Some respondents were critical of people who spent a lot of time personalising their pages and who placed a lot of significance on the way they looked on their profile page and associated photographs. Many users found such 'self-promotion' distasteful and annoying. (On the other hand, personalisation represented a benefit for many users).

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

*I have a friend who got so involved pretending to be someone a lot younger than she was that she almost became this person; she got carried away and it was scary - Female 54, rural/semi-rural*

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

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

### **The drawbacks: Being contacted by old friends they don't like**

This tended to be a fear for older users (over-30s). While they liked being contacted by old friends who they liked, they dreaded being contacted by people from their past who they were happy to have lost touch with. In these instances they didn't want to hurt the individual's feelings by not accepting them, but dreaded too much contact.

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

### **The drawbacks: People bullying, lying, starting rumours and setting up fake sites**

This was a common theme mentioned by many younger users of social networking sites. The fact that the sites did not have rules or obvious boundaries implied that users could behave in whatever way they liked. Some younger respondents who were committed users of these sites reported using them 'to get back at people they had fallen out with', by posting rude or abusive message on their sites, or even setting up a fake site in the person's name and posting obscene messages about them.

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

*It's this whole gossip thing for girls. Who's got what pictures up, who looks silly, and a bit of bitching about who looks silly in what pictures - Male 23, rural/semi-rural*

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

### **The drawbacks: House parties organised through social networking sites getting out of hand**

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

*In the paper recently there was a story where a boy had organised a party on MySpace and over 300 people turned up, they completely trashed his garden and home. I bet his parents went mad - Girl 14, urban/suburban*

### **The drawbacks: Issues relating to identity theft**

A minority of users were aware that their personal details could be stolen and fall into the hands of criminals, who could use them to build up a profile of an individual and go on to impersonate them. These users simply would not put many personal details on their pages and had their privacy and safety settings set to private. However, many younger users were posting fake details or obscure nicknames. This appeared to be an inherited behaviour from their MSN accounts rather than being about privacy or safety. This issue will be explored further in the privacy and safety section ([Section 5](#)).

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

## Section 4

# Users and non-users: segments

The factors outlined in the previous chapters converge differently within each social networking site user to produce a variety of behaviour patterns and attitudes toward social networking sites. Over the course of the study, we noted that these behaviour patterns and attitudes began to cluster together, resulting in the emergence of several user segments.

These segments provide a discrete 'snapshot' of how users currently behave and think about social networking sites. In later sections they also show how they affected users' approaches to privacy and safety when on the sites.

(Please note that these segments are only indicative and are not necessarily representative of the UK population as a whole.)

## The user segments

### Alpha Socialisers (a few in the sample)

**Gender**

Predominately male (but some female)

**Age**

Under 25

**Socio-economic group**

C1C2D

**Sites used**

Bebo, MySpace, Hi5

This first segment consisted of regular users who went on social networking sites often, but for short bursts of time. They searched randomly for people, usually of the opposite sex, commented on their pictures in flirtatious ways and added them as friends. For Alpha Socialisers, social networking site 'friends' were anybody they had added to their friends' list. For this segment, the sites were all about voyeurism and entertainment.

*I'd add anyone who is fit. [How would you find them?] Through friends, I'd look through friends and add them like that - Male 17, rural/semi-rural*

*It's a great way to socialise and to get known, I like being centre of attention and this is a wicked and fun way of doing it – Boy 20, rural/semi-rural*

### Case study

*Gary, a 17- year old living in a rural/semi-rural area uses his Bebo account daily. He logs on to his profile page, looks for any new comments and if there are none will search randomly for 'fit' girls and send them messages, in order to receive messages back. He has posted many photos of himself and also added that he is in a band (although he isn't)!*

*The majority of people he adds as friends are young, pretty females that he does not know or have links to. His communication is flirtatious, commenting on how attractive he finds them and encouraging them to reply. He will often hand out his MSN address so they can more easily and quickly engage in 'chat'.*

*Gary has met 'friends' from his Bebo site in person and gone on dates, although the people he has met are friends of friends that he sees quite regularly. While he recognises the risks of doing this, he thinks it's lots of fun and a great way to meet girls.*



## Attention Seekers (some in the sample)

### Gender

Predominantly female

### Age

Teens to 35+ (especially mothers)

### Socio-economic group

C1C2D

### Sites used

Bebo, MySpace, ICQ

This second segment comprised social networking site users who primarily posted photos of themselves and friends in suggestive poses, partying, drinking and portraying 'glamorous' lifestyles. They regularly updated their 'skins' (the style, colour, and design of their social networking site home pages) to reflect an aspirational image, e.g. glitter and sparkle and images of 'hunky' men. Attention Seekers were willing to collect friends from all over the world, but tended to have actual online interactions with only a few people. For them, social networking sites were all about entertainment and ego.

*I like to look my best on Bebo and am always taking new pictures of myself, my mum nearly had a heart attack as one of them is just me in my pants from below the waist. I have told her that I have changed it, but I haven't! Girl 15, urban/suburban*

*I am blowing a kiss at the camera in my profile picture; it does get me loads of comments from boys which is nice. Girl 17, urban/suburban*

*She seems really vain; 20 pictures of herself but no pictures of her friends - Boy 16, rural/semi-rural*

*I've had social networking site parties where I've invited people I've met in chat rooms and on MySpace; it's been great fun - Female 35, rural/semi-rural*

### Case study

*Tashana is 14, lives in an urban/suburban area and is really into everything sparkly and 'cool'. She's very sociable and loves going out with her friends. She has made much effort with her Bebo page, including uploading a number of photo albums, which anyone can see. They contain photos of her on her own or with friends, posing in different outfits and with various hairstyles. She loves playing about with her profile page and updates the background (skin), song lists and images regularly to continue driving traffic to her page, to keep it interesting so that people will comment on her pictures in positive ways.*

*She says this makes her feel really good about herself and she really loves reading everyone's comments. She says that having lots of photos up is really important for her and although she knows that some people might copy them, it's better to have them up than not at all, as then no one would comment – "that's the best bit about Bebo".*

## Followers (many in the sample)

### Gender

Male and female

### Age

All

### Socio-economic group

ABC1C2D

### Sites used

Bebo, MySpace, Facebook, Hi5, ICQ

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

*I joined because most of my friends were joining and I didn't want to feel left out, once I joined I realised how fun it was, before that I was only really doing it because most my friends were- Girl 13, rural/semi-rural*

*One of my friends suggested that I become a member of Bebo so I did. To begin with I was on it most nights, now it depends what is going on in my street and what is on the TV – Boy, 14, rural/semi-rural*

*I do spend quite a lot of time on it, some of my friends are really outrageous with the photos they post and the things they say, I find it funny to look at but wouldn't do it myself – Female 29 urban/suburban*

### Case study

*Sam is 16 and from an urban/suburban area. He has recently left school to go to sixth form college. He's really involved in the Cadets and also plays the guitar in a band he has set up with friends. One of his friends got him into social networking sites and he admits to checking it everyday, but does not use it to contact people that he does not know. He uses social networking sites to keep in touch with school friends and other boys he has met in the Cadets.*

*Most of his 'friends' online are from his local area, so they know similar people, and he has met some of them or bumped into them at parties. He is not very interested in meeting up with complete strangers; he just doesn't see the point. He has posted photos but they are from things he has taken part in such as training or the school prom. He has also uploaded some music from his band and he enjoys receiving feedback from people on that.*

## Faithfuls (many in the sample)

### Gender

Male and female

### Age

Older 20+

### Social economic group

ABC1

### Sites used

Facebook

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

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

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

### Case study

*Beth is in her mid twenties and a secondary school teacher. She lives in a rural/semi-rural area with her boyfriend. She has an extensive network of friends, including many friends she went to school with. She studied and then travelled the world for a few years before working.*

*She was introduced to Facebook by a close friend and checks it a few times a week and on a daily basis if she has time. On a practical level she finds it a useful way to organise events with her immediate friends and enjoys the chance to look at photos of social events and parties she has attended. More broadly she has really enjoyed getting back in touch with friends (from university and travelling) through the site and for this she is extremely thankful.*

## Functionals (a few in the sample)

### Gender

Mostly male

### Age

Older users (20+)

### Socio-economic group

ABC1C2D

Bebo

### Sites used

Facebook, MySpace,

This last segment used social networking sites in a functional way. They logged on for a purpose, such as looking for music and bands, rather than conducting small talk, flirting or looking at others' pictures and leaving comments. They reported being pestered to join a social networking site by friends who were more 'into it', and as a result were more occasional users, generally logging on for short visits. For Functionals, 'friends' on these sites were simply people they knew and who shared common interests or hobbies with them.

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

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

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

### Case Study

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

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

## Non-user segments

Non-users comprised only a small proportion of the study's sample. These respondents were defined as those who did not currently use social networking sites (although some had joined in the past but not used the site), but did not reject using it in the future. A number of broad themes emerged regarding non-users' reasons for not currently using social networking sites. These were:

- simply having no interest in online social networking as an activity;
- not having the time available to commit to social networking sites;
- not wanting to 'jump on board' the online social networking craze;
- preferring to rely on face-to-face and other forms of communications;
- witnessing the negative side of social networking sites amongst friends and choosing to 'steer clear'; and
- having concerns about safety and being stalked by other users (on and offline).

Across the sample of non-users three clear segments emerged. These are described on the following pages.

## Concerned about Safety (many in the sample)

### Gender

Male and female

### Age

Often older, and parents

This segment was more likely to include older respondents, and particularly parents. Parents were anxious about safety risks online relating to their children, and particularly the perceived dangers that teenage girls might be stalked, either online or offline. While parents in this category might allow their children to have access to social networking sites, they would often control the amount of time their children spent on these sites and were eager for more privacy and safety education pertaining to social networking sites.

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

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

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

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

### Case study

*Lisa is 15 and from an urban/suburban area. She does not use social networking sites and is scared of what could happen if she joins. Her main fear is that old men will contact her. Her mum is also a non-user of social networking sites and is quite against Lisa joining a site, as she fears that the family's identity will be stolen and Lisa could be bullied. Lisa is one of the only ones of her peers without a Bebo page.*

*While she does feel able to keep up with her friends and with what is going on socially, she admits that sometimes she can feel a bit left out, if things have been discussed overnight. She imagines that she might join when she is a bit older.*

## Technically Inexperienced (some in the sample)

### Gender

Male and female

### Age

Often older, and parents

This segment included adults (mostly over 30) who felt a general lack of confidence with computers and a preference for 'old fashioned' means of communication. Most of the people in this group had manual jobs and were time-poor, with little access to, or experience of, the internet. However, some wanted to be part of a social networking site but just did not know where to start.

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

*Personally I prefer to go down the pub meet a few guys, have a drink and socialise that way and pretty much I don't understand [social networking sites] so maybe future times to come possibly.... But also the security side of things I don't really trust them, it's all a bit worrying really – Male 32, urban/suburban*

### Case study

*Siobhan is a 21 year old hairdresser living in an urban/suburban area. She left school at 15 and has always worked in hairdressing. She loves to party, is quite confident with lots of friends, but has limited ICT experience and no computer at home. All her friends and clients keep talking about Bebo and MySpace and she feels left out and wants to join in.*

*When she's been at friends' houses she's gone onto social networking sites with them, found it really good fun and would love to join, but is uncertain how to get started and embarrassed to ask for help. She is thinking that she might do a computer course in the New Year and that this might help her to get the skills that she needs to become a social networking site member in the next year or so.*

## Intellectual Rejecters (a few in the sample)

### Gender

Male and female

### Age

Older teens and young adults

Most respondents who fell into this segment perceived social networking sites to be a waste of time, a pointless pursuit, something for people who were preoccupied with self-promotion, and a pursuit they felt was beneath them. Many in this group were confident 'individualistic' teenagers who spent much of their free time outside the home, rather than inside with technology. Their mobile phone was crucial to maintaining their social life, not their computer, and several had witnessed problems with social networking sites, such as bullying, that they did not want to involve themselves with.

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

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

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

### Case Study

*John is 22, recently left university and is back at home with his parents in a rural/semi-rural area, going through the painstaking process of graduate interviews. He wants to be a planner in an advertising agency. John plays rugby in his spare time and he spends much of his time at his girlfriend's house.*

*While many of his friends and his girlfriend are members of Facebook, he totally rejects the idea of joining. He is fed up with his friends talking about Facebook and the amount of time his girlfriend spends 'playing' on this site. He perceives it to be a total waste of time, worries that people will not develop face-to-face communication skills and that society will become even more fragmented. He prefers to maintain his relationships by spending time with his friends or talking to them on his mobile.*



## Section 5

# Privacy and safety

Before conducting this research, Ofcom carried out desk research, which highlighted a number of potential risk areas in relation to social networking sites and users' behaviour. The moderators were briefed on these various potential risks and used this understanding to help them in the questioning and analysis process.

### Privacy and safety were not on most users' radar

Among respondents of all ages and subgroups, privacy and safety issues did not emerge as a spontaneous concern or part of the culture of social networking sites. In fact, most users assumed that there were few direct risks associated with using social networking sites.

*The only thing I don't like is people stealing pictures from my site – that's dead wrong. Other than that I don't care much about [the security and privacy settings]...you just use common sense – Girl 14, urban/suburban*

*I wouldn't share my full name, so I use a tag name, address and age. We were told that at school and from parents but it's really just common sense - Girl 15, urban/suburban*

Some expressed growing awareness after the group discussions, but not before the subject was broached.

*I really wasn't aware of this [privacy] stuff before you showed it to me. Now I feel a wee bit more aware - Boy 15, urban/suburban*

Most users trusted the site brands and their fellow users, and seemed to approach the sites openly and without concerns. This appeared to create a form of 'safety bubble' that surrounded their behaviour and perception of risk on social networking sites.

## A minority were aware of risks

A small number of users in the sample felt slightly concerned about the potential risks of social networking sites. These people tended to be older and appeared to be generally safety-conscious in the offline world. They were often quite private people who wanted to ensure that they were contacted only by people they knew or really liked. They were also aware and concerned about safety issues, including having their personal details stolen and the chance they might be stalked, either online or offline.

*I don't like the idea of people reading about me, I just wouldn't want anybody knowing anything – Male 35, urban/suburban*

*They can be really clever these days and from a little bit of information they can find out where you live. I have been stalked in the past and I suppose it does make me more nervous – Female 30, urban/suburban*

*I don't really like doing internet shopping because those hacker people can be really clever these days, I suppose I am nervous in the same way on these sites – Female 52, urban/suburban*

*I worry about the worst thing that could happen, like a girl thinking she's gonna meet up with a guy the same age and then finding out he's like a 40-year-old and he tries to pressure her into sex and rape her – Girl 14, urban/suburban*

*My brother told me that MySpace is for older people because I went on MySpace and then some older guy, I think he was 53, gave me a comment and said 'Hello Sexy', and from that day I did not go back on MySpace - Girl 15, urban/suburban*

Two teachers in the sample were aware of the risk of social networking sites to users' professional reputations; they were concerned that parents and / or their pupils could get hold of photographs of them when they were socialising and that this could affect their stature among colleagues and parents, and their position in the broader community. They were specifically concerned about images which showed them drinking or smoking. These teachers had received guidance/warning from their trades union relating to this specific risk, and were thinking of closing down their accounts as a result.

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

## Users often unknowingly put themselves potentially at risk on social networking sites

While many users perceived there to be few, if any, risks associated with online social networking, in reality many of them were exposing themselves to a number of potential risks. These are summarised below and are explored in more depth later in this chapter.

- giving out personal information;
- posting personal photographs;
- leaving the privacy settings as default 'open';
- developing a negative online reputation;
- becoming friends with people they did not know; and
- meeting people they did not know.

### Giving out personal information

Most users reported that they had posted at least their first name (with many posting their surname, particularly on Facebook), the area where they lived, the school they attended and/ or their place of employment. Many younger users, especially the Alpha Socialiser and Attention Seeker segments, had posted their MSN addresses too.

While some of this information-sharing could be deemed risky by some, users themselves did not necessarily think they were behaving in risky ways and felt comfortable with the information they were sharing.

When users first join a social networking site, the signing-up process involves building a home page and 'setting out their stall.' The 'standard details' section, which forms the basis of most social networking sites, were well liked by users as it provided them with a quick and easy way to start creating their online identity. For many, this was like filling in a form; for women especially, the process of filling in all their details was an enjoyable and satisfying process.

*I just filled them in because I thought I had to - Boy 11, rural/semi-rural*

*It is sort of fun filling all the sections out, you feel important – Female 42, rural/semi-rural*

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

Users in the Alpha Socialiser and Attention Seeker segments were particularly keen to enter all their personal details, to help people get in touch with them. This characteristic was also evident among the Follower and Faithful segments. For many younger users a big part of the social networking site experience was about being 'public' and 'contactable' by not posting their personal details they felt that these benefits would not be realised. Only the Functionals shared less information on social networking sites, as they were not as interested in promoting themselves or meeting new people.

There was also a belief among some users, especially younger teenagers and older users who were less proficient with ICT, that they needed to fill in all the sections in the profile to qualify for 'membership.' Many users were therefore sharing a number of personal details with the entire social networking site, if they had left their profile set to 'public'.

As respondents were unable to find guidelines on many of the popular social networking sites regarding what information they should or should not share in their profile, they simply used their own judgement.

### **Posting personal photographs**

Posting photographs on social networking sites emerged as one of the most compelling and enjoyable benefits of being a member, and were seen as a good way of personalising one's home page. Users also found it a convenient way to share photographs of holidays, weddings, etc. with their friends and family.

A number of privacy and safety issues emerged in relation to the content of some photographs and who could see them:

### **The posting of sexually suggestive photographs**

This was commonplace among female Attention Seekers of all ages and also among younger Followers. These users were keen to attract attention and comments and appeared to be using suggestive photographs to achieve this goal. As well as seeking attention online, they were also keen to stimulate interest off-line. Many of these users appeared to have low self-esteem and were willing to take risks with their reputation to guarantee comments and attention from the opposite sex. A few were also meeting up in the real world with people they had met through social networking sites.

Attention Seekers' behaviour online was often the butt of other users' jokes. Many were shocked and amused by the extreme nature of some of these girls' poses and the accompanying comments. The images and reputation that some girls were creating online were also affecting their off-line reputations; many of them were perceived to be 'easy' and willing to have casual sexual relationships. Young men in the Alpha Socialiser segment would actively seek out girls who behaved in this way online to add to their online collection or to meet up with in person.

*It's just a bit of fun, I know loads of girls who pose in their underwear, and it is not unusual on sites like these. It is no different than wearing a bikini on the beach - Girl 18, urban/suburban*

*I am single and it is nice to get the attention of men. Some of the pictures I post are a bit racy, but really they aren't meant to be that serious and are a bit of a giggle - Girl 15, urban/suburban*

*They are just after one thing and they are creating like an advert for it - Male 21, rural/semi-rural*

*I think some [girls] feel self-conscious...so they'll put explicit pictures on and hope people will say they look good, and then they'll feel better about themselves - Girl 15, urban/suburban*

Alpha Socialisers (mostly males), also posted photographs promoting themselves, including some sexually suggestive poses. They were doing this to elicit comments from others, inviting a lot of traffic onto their pages. The key difference between this group and the female

Attention Seekers and Followers described above, was that these males tended to post photos and accompanying comments in a more playful and less serious way.

## Sharing photographs publicly

While some users were keen to share their photographs with the entire membership of their social networking sites, many older users in the Followers and Faithful segments simply did not realise that they were doing this and were shocked that the 'entire world' could see their personal photographs. This was particularly worrying for those who had children.

*I had no idea that the whole of Facebook could see my little girl in the bath - Female 34, urban/suburban*

*I am not sure who can see my photos; I would probably be quite shocked if the entire world could see them - Female 27, rural/semi-rural*

## Leaving the privacy settings as default 'open'

Many users had left their privacy settings open. Some did this intentionally because they wanted to meet new people - this was particularly the case among younger users and those in the Alpha Socialiser and Attention Seeker segments.

Some younger users actually expressed suspicion of people who employed privacy settings, believing that they must have 'something to hide,' - in their minds, the main reason for the existence of social networking sites was to allow people to socialise openly.

However, some users simply had no idea which privacy setting their profile was set to. When individuals' privacy settings were checked, during the research sessions, some of the respondents were shocked to find that their profiles were public. They had assumed that an individual's profile would be automatically set to private unless the user sought to change it. Users who had the most concern tended to be over 25, and particularly those in the Faithful segment, who were only really interested in networking among their existing friends.

*I had just assumed that it was only my friends that could see me - Male 27, urban/suburban*

*Before tonight I couldn't be bothered to look at things like that, but now I am worried what people I don't know can see - Female 32, urban/suburban*

*Anybody could find out who you are. But I wouldn't know how to make it so people couldn't see me - Boy 11, rural/semi-rural*

The Functional segment tended to be the most security-conscious and had amended their privacy settings to suit their needs.

## Becoming friends online with people they did not know

Many of the users in this sample were friends with people, via social networking sites, that they knew distantly or did not know at all. For teenagers and 20-somethings, there seemed to be a prestige factor associated with the number of friends they had (often in the hundreds). In reality, most only knew about 50 of these friends off-line and were willing to accept people they did not know to 'boost their numbers.' This was a strong characteristic of Alpha Socialisers, Attention Seekers and some Followers. Users who were looking for new love interests or to extend their social lives were also willing to accept people as friends that they did not know.

Before accepting someone they did not know as a friend, most users employed a number of basic checks. These included:

- making some attempt to trace the individual back to a friend; and
- checking out their photographs, profile details and friends' comments, and then making a judgement on their suitability

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

Some users had received rude or suggestive messages from strangers who they had accepted as friends and had chosen to delete them from their friend lists. However, such comments were often considered to be more amusing than alarming and users generally did not deem it necessary to report them to the site.

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

*Really it is quite funny, just a bit of a giggle, if they kept contacting me then I would be a bit more worried - Female 41, urban/suburban*

*What are the sites going to do about it, they probably don't have the time to deal with weirdos like that and if it was really serious you would inform the Police I would suppose - Male 22, rural/semi-rural*

## Meeting up with people they did not know

A minority of users in this sample had physically met strangers they had first met through social networking sites. (Strangers were defined by these users as individuals they were unable to trace back to a friend or a distant acquaintance). Attention Seekers and Alpha Socialisers appeared to be the most willing to physically meet people who were either distant connections or complete strangers. They claimed to adopt similar safety precautions that they associated with online dating sites, including meeting in a public place or taking a friend or parent with them.

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

*It is great when your social circle has dried up. I have met new people through social networking sites Male, 25, urban/suburban*

*I told my mum and she told her mum and the four of us all met up and our mothers chatted. She is now my friend – Boy 12, rural/semi-rural*



## Section 6

# Why some users are putting themselves at potential risk

A number of issues, often inter-related, appeared to affect a user's propensity to put themselves potentially at risk. These are listed and explored in further detail below.

- No perceived risk
- Assumption that the social networking site had taken care of any privacy or safety issues
- Levels of ICT (information communication technology) confidence
- Privacy and safety information was often difficult to find and use
- Other online sites and facilities were perceived to have more obvious threats
- Younger users thought they were invincible
- The need for attention outweighed the need to be safety conscious

### No perceived risk

Most users of social networking sites simply did not perceive any significant risks associated with being a member. Users' sense of safety online seemed to stem from the commonly held belief that because they were networking among their friends and 'friends of friends,' they were in a safe environment. This was even the case with those users (usually Attention Seekers and Alpha Socialisers) who had hundreds of 'friends', some of whom they did not know and had no connection with.

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

*As long as you don't give out your address and telephone number you are safe – Female 54  
rural/semi-rural*

*Mostly I only ever talk to my friends and not people that I don't know who are in my friends  
list – Boy 11, rural/semi-rural*

## **Assumption that the social networking site had taken care of any privacy or safety issues**

Users appeared to place a great deal of trust in the sites themselves to safeguard their privacy and to protect them, saying they assumed the sites were taking responsibility for looking after users' privacy and safety. They also felt that social networking site would alert them if there were any real threats. Some users assumed that the sites were moderating content and that they would intervene if necessary.

*Surely if there was anything really wrong then they would let you know - Female 24, urban/suburban*

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

## **Levels of ICT confidence**

Those users who were more ICT-confident appeared more likely to explore the settings on social networking sites and felt more qualified to change these settings, whereas people who felt less confident with the internet seemed to assume they were safe in their 'social networking site bubble', deferring to the omniscience of the site and believing that the site would protect them, through filters and monitoring.

## **Privacy and safety information was often difficult to find and use**

Social networking site users felt that information relating to privacy and safety was often difficult to find on many sites and when they did find it, it was difficult to understand. A minority of users said that they had looked for and found privacy information, but had struggled to understand the language used. Subsequently, they tended to glance quickly through the privacy sections instead of reading them thoroughly.

Few users were aware of the different privacy settings. When they explored the settings options, they often found it too difficult to alter them, so often ignored them, and were then uncertain exactly which parts of their information were public or private.

*The security side of things is a bit worrying for me. Obviously you have to put safety first but I wouldn't know how to go about it – Girl 13, rural/semi-rural*

*How confusing does all that look? – Boy 18, urban/suburban*

*It seems very difficult to make your profile private, so I just wouldn't bother - Female 22, urban/suburban*

## **Other online sites and facilities were perceived to have more obvious threats**

Respondents tended to associate privacy and safety concerns more with chat rooms, dating sites and online banking. They were able to talk more confidently and comprehensively

about the privacy risks and dangers of these sites, which included personal details being stolen (online banking), being physically attacked (having met someone from a chat room or from an online dating site) or being stalked by a stranger online (chat rooms). They had gained this knowledge from a number of different sources including newspapers, advertising and word of mouth. They were unaware of any potential threats related to social networking sites.

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

### **Younger users thought they were invincible**

Younger users (under 25) often had light-hearted attitudes relating to privacy and safety and most did not believe 'serious' things could happen to them online. Risk and danger appeared remote to most younger users.

*I just want to go ahead and have fun and not worry about things like that, it's too boring – Boy 11, rural/semi-rural*

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

More specifically, the Followers segment, as later adopters of social networking, felt that any 'teething problems' relating to privacy and safety would have been pointed out by their friends who had introduced them to it. They therefore perceived that they were safe.

*My friend Joe who introduced me to MySpace would have let me know if there was anything to worry about, he knows these things - Boy 15, rural/semi-rural*

In contrast, the older users in the sample were more wary, as they tended to access the internet for more diverse uses (e.g., banking, shopping, booking travel and online dating) and were aware of some of the associated risks. For example, online dating sites, which encouraged individuals to meet, were felt to carry personal safety risks, and online banking and shopping sites were associated with online fraud.

### **The need for attention outweighed the need to be safety conscious**

For many younger users, particularly on Bebo and MySpace, a big part of being a member of a social networking site was about being seen, and self-promotion. Collecting compliments from 'friends' who might actually be total strangers, as referenced earlier in this report, was an important part of the experience, especially for the Attention Seeker and Alpha Socialiser segments.

*I'd add anyone who is fit - Male 17, rural/semi-rural*

In particular, for those in the Attention Seeker segment, privacy and safety was less important than being 'seen' and affirmed.

## Section 7

# Appendices

## Annex 1

# Recruitment criteria and sample

### **Internet access**

Mix throughout the sample of those who had:

- Broadband access at home
- Dial-up access at home
- No access at home (these respondents had regular access to the internet at school, work, or the library)

### **Users vs. non-users of social networking sites**

The sample was split according to whether the respondents were users of social networking sites or non-users. Users were defined as those who had signed up to a social networking site and had their own logins and pages on various sites, and who updated and used them regularly.

### **Social networking sites included the following:**

- Facebook
- MySpace
- Bebo
- Club Penguin
- Faceparty
- Yahoo 360
- Flickr
- Piczo

Non-users were defined as those who did not currently use social networking sites. They may have signed up/ had logins but never used them. Others had never actually been onto a social networking site. These respondents, however, were not rejecters of social networking sites or rejecters of the idea of joining one in the future.

## Pre-task exercise

Only for the respondents who were current users of Social Networking Sites. Respondents were required to complete a pre-task before their research session. They were asked to keep a daily record for a week before their session. The daily record included:

- How often they used social networking sites – including time of day
- Length of time spent on sites and features used
- How they felt before, during and after use

All respondents were aware that they needed to bring the completed pre-task to their research session.

## Follow-up online social networking sessions

Four respondents were selected from the triads and quad sessions (tweens/ teens and adults) to take part in a follow-up online session on a selected social networking site.

## Overview of sample

### Gender

Boys and girls  
Males and females

### School year

Tween/teen respondents recruited by age and school year

### Presence of younger siblings

The majority of tween/teen respondents had younger siblings.

### Social group

The sample was split between ABC1 and C2DE social groups.

### Ethnicity

We ensured that minority ethnic groups were recruited relevant to the areas we were working in.

### Miscellaneous

- None had attended a research group in the last six months
- None had ever been involved in any research in relation to the internet
- None worked or had family who worked in an industry to do with technology, media, advertising, PR, journalism, marketing or a related field

## Annex 2

# Quota Tables

### Six two-hour, paired, in-depth accompanied surfs with tweens/teens

| Accompanied surf | Age/School year                     | Gender | Social group | Users/non-users of SNS | Location and date                    |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|--------|--------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1                | 11 to 12<br>Year 7                  | Boys   | ABC1         | Non-users              | <i>rural/semi-rural</i><br>October   |
| 2                | 13 to 14<br>Year 9                  | Girls  | C2DE         | Users                  | <i>rural/semi-rural</i><br>September |
| 3                | 14 to 15<br>Year 10                 | Boys   | ABC1         | Users                  | <i>rural/semi-rural</i><br>October   |
| 4                | 15 to 16<br>Year 11                 | Girls  | C2DE         | Non-users              | <i>urban/suburban</i><br>October     |
| 5                | 16 to 17<br>Year 12                 | Boys   | C2DE         | Users                  | <i>rural/semi-rural</i><br>September |
| 6                | 17 to 19<br>A-level/uni<br>students | Girls  | ABC1         | Users                  | <i>urban/suburban</i><br>October     |

### Four one-and-a-half hour triads with 14 to 19 year olds

| Triad | Age/School year                     | Gender | Social group | Users/Non-users of SNS | Location and date                  |
|-------|-------------------------------------|--------|--------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1     | 14 to 15<br>Year 10                 | Girls  | C2DE         | Users                  | <i>urban/suburban</i><br>September |
| 2     | 15 to 16<br>Year 11                 | Boys   | ABC1         | Users                  | <i>urban/suburban</i><br>October   |
| 3     | 16 to 17<br>Year 12                 | Girls  | ABC1         | Non-users              | <i>urban/suburban</i><br>September |
| 4     | 17 to 19<br>A-level/uni<br>students | Boys   | C2DE         | Users                  | <i>urban/suburban</i><br>October   |

### Six two-hour, paired, in-depth accompanied surfs with adults

| Accompanied surf | Age               | Gender | Social group | Users/non-users of SNS | Location and date                  |
|------------------|-------------------|--------|--------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1                | 20 to 24          | Male   | ABC1         | Users                  | <i>rural/semi-rural</i><br>October |
| 2                | 20 to 24          | Female | C2DE         | Non-users              | <i>urban/suburban</i><br>October   |
| 3                | twenty five to 29 | Male   | C2DE         | Users                  | <i>urban/suburban</i><br>September |
| 4                | twenty five to 29 | Female | ABC1         | Users                  | <i>rural/semi-rural</i><br>October |
| 5                | 30+               | Male   | C2DE         | Non-users              | <i>urban/suburban</i><br>September |
| 6                | 30+               | Female | ABC1         | Users                  | <i>urban/suburban</i><br>October   |

### Four one-and-a-half hour quads with adults

| Quad | Age               | Gender | Social group | Users/non-users of SNS | Location and date                    |
|------|-------------------|--------|--------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1    | 20 to 24          | Male   | ABC1         | Non-users              | <i>rural/semi-rural</i><br>September |
| 2    | twenty five to 29 | Female | ABC1         | Users                  | <i>urban/suburban</i><br>October     |
| 3    | 35+               | Male   | C2DE         | Users                  | <i>urban/suburban</i><br>October     |
| 4    | 35+               | Female | C2DE         | Users                  | <i>rural/semi-rural</i><br>September |



## Annex 3

# Social networking site profiles

## Bebo

Users of Bebo described the site as being all about socializing with their immediate friends, associated social networks and occasionally strangers. Bebo users found it entertaining and fun, with a bit of an international flavour.

*I joined Bebo because everyone at school was doing it and it was a free way to talk to my friends without texting, which costs a lot of money - Girl 13, rural/semi-rural*

The user profile for Bebo appeared to encompass those in their early teens through to early twenties, with some users in their thirties, though this was a minority. It also seemed to function in many ways like an online youth club – where friends chatted with and ranked each other – rather than a place to express yourself deeply or have more extensive online conversations.

*Bebo is just dead easy. But it's more common, there are more interesting people on MySpace. It's hard to have a proper conversation on Bebo - Boy 16, rural/semi-rural*

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

Online appearance was essential on Bebo, including customisation of ones 'skin' (the background of a person's home page) and uploading photos. Popularity and traffic of visitors to this site was key, with young people perceiving the site to be 'cool' in large part because so many people used and visited it. Finally, users reported that Bebo was valued for being simple and straightforward to use, making it the preferred social networking site for many.

*We have a Bebo band page...and you get all these people who are fans. We've only been going 3 weeks and we already have 40 odd fans! - Male 17, urban/suburban*

## MySpace

MySpace was viewed as the original social networking site by many in the sample. It was evident that there was a broad scope for its use, quite often extending beyond basic social networking to include exploration of favourite bands and scheduling events.

*It's so easy to search for bands [on MySpace]. You click on their link and find out about the band and see a lot of their songs, listen to them, and find out which ones you like - Girl 13, rural/semi-rural*

Social networking still dominated its use, however. There was some criticism that the site was slow to use, as well as some criticism that some profiles were not genuine, which was off-putting to many. It appeared that other sites were becoming more appealing and popular than MySpace for many users, though it still had quite a loyal fan base.

The site encompassed users in their late teens to mid thirties. Self-promotion emerged as a strong characteristic of MySpace use, and customisation of one's profile to maximize perceived physical appeal was again very important.

*Some people on MySpace just want to be popular so they'll add almost anyone as a friend. And they put pictures of themselves that don't even look like them. Girl 14, urban/suburban*

For those social networking site users who did not start on MySpace, many grew out of Bebo into MySpace as it offered them more complex interactive abilities. Communication on MySpace, though perceived as 'deeper' than on Bebo, was still seen as light-hearted and fun.

## **Facebook**

Facebook emerged as the social networking site of the moment. For many users, Facebook introduced 20- and 30-somethings (and beyond) to the social networking phenomenon. It was perceived to be the most 'mature' and least chaotic of the popular sites, largely due to its relatively plain and no-nonsense design and easy-to-use style. In this sample, Facebook primarily appealed to older users as they said it felt less open and promiscuous than MySpace and Bebo, and felt like the most secure and safest site.

*Facebook is plain and simple to use, it is not as irritating and glitzy compared with the other sites - Female 26, rural/semi-rural*

*I don't go on Facebook very much – it's boring. I think it's for older people because none of my friends know about it - Girl 14, urban/suburban*

The user profile of Facebook included university students and beyond, with the primary appeal being keeping in touch with immediate and past social networks; finding old friends was a compelling part of Facebook's appeal.

*On Facebook, I recently heard about a distant friend who had a serious car accident and there's no way I would have heard about this otherwise, so it made our distant relationship more immediate - Male 22, rural/semi-rural*

In addition, Facebook users said they enjoyed sharing photos with friends (particularly of weddings and children), and using its easy messaging features. The site also seemed to feel intimate and warm to its users.

*I've not really made new friends on Facebook. I've found old friends from school that I haven't seen since I was 16 or 17, which has been wonderful. It's like a reunion! - Female 35, rural/semi-rural*