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# Social Networking Patterns/Hazards Among Irish Teenagers

## Abstract:

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## Abstract

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have grown substantially, posing new hazards to teenagers. This study aimed to determine general patterns of Internet usage among Irish teenagers aged 11-16 years, and to identify potential hazards, including; bullying, inappropriate contact, overuse, addiction and invasion of users' privacy. A cross-sectional study design was employed to survey students at three Irish secondary schools, with a sample of 474 completing a questionnaire. 202(44%) (n=460) accessed the Internet using a shared home computer. Two hours or less were spent online daily by 285(62%), of whom 450(98%) were unsupervised. 306(72%) (n=425) reported frequent usage of SNSs, 403(95%) of whom were Facebook users. 42(10%) males and 51(12%) females experienced bullying online, while 114(27%) reported inappropriate contact from others. Concerning overuse and the risk of addiction, 140(33%) felt they accessed SNSs too often. These patterns among Irish teenagers suggest that SNS usage poses significant dangers, which are going largely unaddressed.

## Introduction

Social Networking Sites have attracted millions of users world-wide. Abbreviated as SNS a social networking site is the phrase used to describe any Website that enables users to create public profiles within that Website and form relationships with other users of the same Website who access their profile. Facebook, founded by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 is the most popular of the SNSs. More than 500 million people, or one-twelfth of the total world population, are currently members of the site. As such, Facebook has significantly changed the way human beings relate to each other on a global scale. Recent research conducted by Microsoft Ireland demonstrated that 79% of Irish adolescents actively access SNSs, with 66% believing it was completely safe to share personal information on SNSs. Irish adolescents may be vulnerable to experiencing adverse outcomes as a result of their Internet usage. This risk may be confounded by the apparent discrepancy between perceived and actual rates of parental supervision: while 62% of adolescents stated that their parents did nothing to encourage them to be safe online, 58% of parents said they were confident that their children were taking the necessary safety precautions, and 73% said they took measures to control their children's Internet usage. Following the publication of these results, EU Internet Safety Day was launched as an attempt to teach children to protect themselves online, and to remind parents to monitor their children's Internet usage. Therefore, this study aimed to profile the patterns of Internet use among Irish teenagers, and to determine the potential online hazards to which they may be exposed.

## Methods

A cross-sectional study of 474 students at three Irish secondary schools was carried out during February and March 2011. Students were surveyed to determine the general patterns and purpose of Internet usage, parental supervision and limitations, as well as hazards associated with SNS use, including; bullying, inappropriate and potentially predatory contact, overuse, risk of addiction and invasion of privacy by means of access to personal information. The survey comprised 19 questions. As the target population was the 11-16 year old age group, participants who were 17 or older were excluded, as were those who did not appropriately complete the questionnaire. Therefore, the total study cohort size was 460. Males, females, and combined males and females were compared with each other using Microsoft Excel.

## Results

SNSs were frequently accessed by 72% of the total cohort (n=460). Instant messaging (43%) was the next most frequent Internet activity, followed by watching TV/movies (41%), and email (21%). 72% stated that their parents did not limit their access. Of the 127 (28%) who said that their access was limited by their parents, 62 (49%) of them also had access on their mobile phones. Next, this study focused on questions that pertained to SNS usage specifically (see Table 1). Of the cohort (n=460), 425 (92%) were members of one or more SNS. The difference between overall male as compared to female membership of SNSs, was statistically significant (p=0.0009). 82% of Facebook members rated their usage as frequent, a higher figure than for those who answered the same for Bebo and Twitter combined (58%). The difference between females who rated their use as frequent, as compared to males, was statistically significant, with females being more frequent users than males (p=0.0014). The study then moved to an examination of the potential hazards associated with SNS use (see Table 2), including; bullying, inappropriate contact, overuse and the associated risk of addiction, as well as issues regarding disclosure of personal information and invasion of privacy. Of SNS users, 16% of males and 5% of females said they had bullied or purposely excluded others through SNSs. This difference between males and females was statistically significant (p=0.0003).

\*Note: Some participants were made to feel uncomfortable by both someone their own age/younger and an adult and the figures therefore sum to more than 100%.

Of the males who felt bullied, 45% also admitted to bullying/excluding others. Regarding those who had not been bullied, 13% admitted to bullying others. The coefficient value for this correlation was 0.2606. With respect to the females, of those who felt bullied, 8% admitted to bullying others. Concerning those who had not been bullied only 4% admitted to engaging in bullying through SNSs. The coefficient value for this correlation was 0.0508. Regarding overuse, 33% of users said that they thought they spent too much time using SNSs, 40% had tried to spend less time using SNSs, and 40% found it difficult to resist SNSs. Concerning accessibility of personal information, 42% of users shared their school, 25% their location (using mobile global positioning system), and 34% their photographs with persons potentially unknown to them.

## Discussion

Over the last decade, the use of SNSs has increased substantially, especially among the teenage population. This has subjected young people to hazards specifically associated with online culture in a way that differs from other forms of online communication. Children in this age group primarily use the Internet for the purpose of social networking; 92% are users of one or more SNS, with 72% reporting a high frequency of use of SNSs. Facebook specifically is frequently used by 82%, with 95% of SNS users being members of this site. Study participants primarily accessed the Internet using a shared computer in the home. Despite this, only 2% of these children said that they were supervised while using the Internet. 28% of the children surveyed said that their parents placed limitations on their usage. Of note however, 49% of these also had access on their mobile phones, which was consistent with the overall rate of mobile access (50%). This data suggests that a substantial proportion of children are not supervised while using the Internet, and that parental limitations on use are minimal. The high rate of mobile Internet access identified in this study presents inherent challenges to parents in terms of monitoring and supervision.

One in ten children in this study experienced bullying while using SNSs. Bullying through this medium is of particular concern, as problems faced by children online may not readily come to parents' attention. Nearly one third of children said that they had been made to feel uncomfortable while using SNSs and, of concern, the actions of adults were responsible for this in 37% of cases, highlighting the significant risk for predatory contact. In terms of quantifying usage, over one third of the cohort said that they used the Internet for more than two hours per day, and approximately 40% of 11-16 year olds displayed characteristics associated with risk of excessive use of SNSs. Increasing hours of screen time undoubtedly contribute to a sedentary lifestyle, which is of concern given the rising trend in childhood obesity. Finally, it is evident from the results that children in this age group are not hesitant to share specific personal information online, thereby exposing their private lives and increasing the potential for unintended invasion of their privacy. Furthermore, accessibility of such information potentially renders children vulnerable to unwanted contact from others.

A significant proportion of Irish children employ Internet access as a source of social interaction. A majority subscribe to SNSs, facilitating exposure to hazards potentially detrimental to youth engaging in this type of online culture. It is imperative that modern physicians are aware of this phenomenon, which is very much a part of young people's lives, and features so prominently in their parents' concerns.

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