

The use of the internet and social media by young people

Purpose

This is the first of three briefings about social media. It provides an overview of what social media is, what it is used for and how it affects children and young people. It is produced by the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales in response to requests from practitioners for more information in this area.

Introduction

Over the last 10 years the use and role of the internet in people's lives has changed considerably. With the prevalence of smartphones and tablets, the accessibility of Wi-Fi and 4G technology, and developments in social media websites - such as [Facebook](#) and apps - more and more people are accessing the internet to do more things.

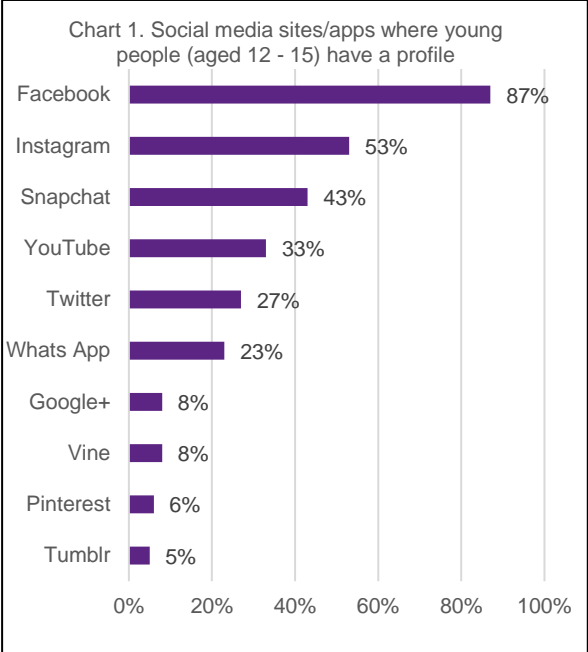
The largest proportion of users of the internet are people aged under 44 (with use equally high among 16-24 year olds and 35-44 year olds) ¹. This trend is also mirrored in the use of social media and

apps - with the majority of young people aged between 16 and 24 (87%) reporting using social media sites and apps in the previous three months². Public policy and research has therefore focussed on the impact of the internet and social media on young people.

What do young people use the internet for?

Different groups of young people use the internet for different reasons. Between the ages of 8-11 young people's online behaviour is regarded as "entertainment and fun", but as they get older this tends to change. At ages 11-14 their behaviour becomes characterised by "exploring and getting to grips with new freedom". At aged 14-17 they tend to use the internet for "staying in touch with their worlds and exploiting opportunities"³. At this age it is not uncommon for communication to dominate online activity, and the majority of these young people are using multiple social networking and messaging platforms. The most commonly used social media site by young people aged

12-15 is Facebook (with 87% of young people aged between 12 and 15 saying that they have a profile on the site), followed by Instagram (53%) and Snapchat (43%) - see Chart 1 below. A list of the most common social media sites and how they work can be found in Appendix 1 (at the end of this report).



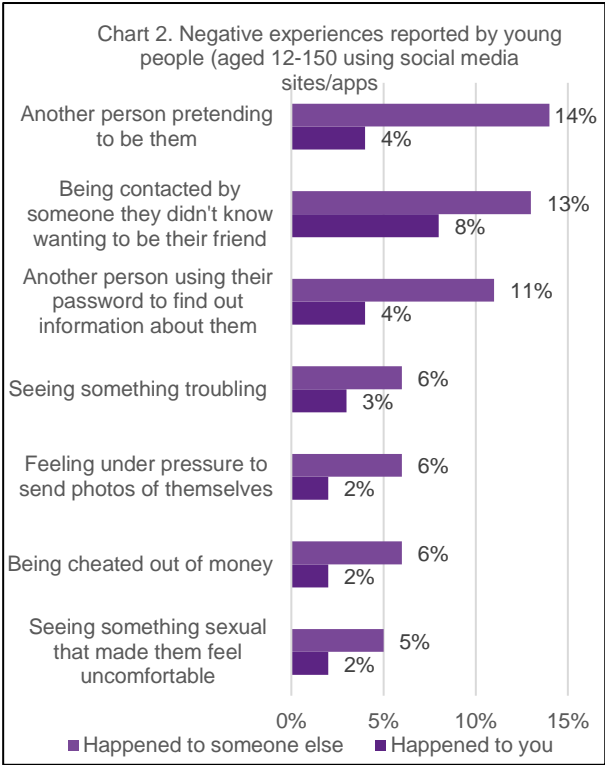
Ofcom (2015) Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report 2015. Ofcom, London, England.

While these are the most widely used sites and apps, new media are being constantly developed. The [NSPCC](#) and [Mumsnet](#) have previously developed the [Share Aware](#) campaign to provide information about staying safe online - while the NSPCC and O2 have also created [Net aware](#) which provides further information about the most popular apps and games.

What experiences do young people have on the internet?

For the majority of young people their online experience seems to be generally positive - they are able to develop a sense of belonging in their online lives and improve their social well-being.

However, a number of young people report having had negative experiences on the internet and on social media. Just over four in ten young people aged between 12 and 15 (41%) said that they knew of someone who had a negative experience while using the internet, with one in six 12 to 15 year olds (16%) reporting that they had at least one of these negative experiences in the past year. These negative experiences (and the proportion of young people reporting experiencing them) are listed in Chart 2.



Source: Ofcom (2014) Children's online behaviour: issues of risk and trust. Qualitative research findings. Ofcom, London, England

Potential risks associated with being online

Young people's increased presence on social media, along with more traditional adolescent traits such as experimentation, curiosity and impulsiveness, place them at an increased risk of becoming both victims and offenders online. It is therefore important for anyone working and spending time with young people to

understand the risks and potential benefits they can be exposed to as a result.

Online risks faced by young people have been categorised under the following headings - contact, content and conduct risks⁴. Benefits are presented after this.

Contact risks

Children and young people can be susceptible to contact risks in a number of ways, the most common of these are: Internet-initiated grooming for purposes of on and offline sexual abuse; the possession, production, and distribution of sexual content; and the use of internet based content to bully (and sometimes blackmail) a person. These Internet-related activities can directly or indirectly result in offline situations of abuse directed toward children⁵.

Grooming (To prepare (a child) for a meeting, especially via an Internet chat room, with the intention of committing a sexual offence)ⁱ

The term 'grooming' first appeared in UK legislation as part of section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act (2003). This meant that preparatory acts potentially leading to the abuse of young people became a criminal offence. However, while intended to be an act to convince a young person to meet offline, the harm in grooming is not just about the deception; the process itself is abusive.

Reviews of cases, and perpetrator and offender characteristics, have found that the large majority of cases are concerned with a male adult targeting a young person. However, not all offenders are adults, and children and young people have also been found to be

perpetrators of online grooming and online sexual offences⁶. This also suggests that these incidents may be on the increase.

A large scale analysis examining the differences between online and offline offenders found online offenders tended to be younger, more likely to be employed and more likely to be in a stable offline relationship⁷.

The [WePROTECT Global Alliance Board](#) has recently launched its new strategy to challenge the online sexual exploitation of children.

Catfishing (To lure into a relationship by adopting a fictional online persona)

Related to grooming is the comparatively new phenomena of catfishing. Catfishing may be more likely to take place or begin on sites which might have less strict identity controls. "While there are benefits to levels of anonymity and pseudo-identities, catfishing and its negative consequences create distrust and suspicion among users. Identity verification remains a critical component of trust building between users, particularly when engaging in relationships"⁸. It is also paramount to maintaining user's online safety.

Sexting (To send sexually explicit photographs or messages via mobile phone)

In recent years, with the increased use of smart phones, a trend has been identified for sending sexualised communication, or "sexting". Sexting can result in adverse outcomes such as "embarrassment, mental health problems, public dissemination of sexual photos and legal consequences ..."⁹. It has been estimated that 12% of young people aged 11-16 in the UK have seen

ⁱ The terms used in this briefing are new in the English language, and there is ongoing discussion about their precise definition. For clarity and consistency the definitions presented

here are taken from [Oxford Dictionaries](#). More detailed definitions are available in academic and grey literature sources examining these issues in more detail.

or received sexual messages online, with 2% reporting that they have seen them more than once a week.

The NSPCC recently published responses to an information request sent to police forces - finding that 1 in 6 people reported to police over indecent images are under 18¹⁰. The charity raises concerns that sexting may be becoming a factor in on and offline offences.

The issue of sexting has raised important questions about the development of media and the ability of the law to legislate appropriately, although it is hoped that the introduction of 'outcome 21' - a new crime recording code - in August 2016 will help to prevent the criminalisation of young people for sexting.

The UK Parliament's Communications Committee have presented a description of risks (including sexting) along with details of sentencing and offences related to [social media and the law](#).

The UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) have just developed [guidance for schools and colleges on sexting](#) and how to deal with incidents

Content risks

The development of the internet has also seen an exponential growth in the publication and presentation of highly explicit imagery.

Cyberporn (Pornography accessed via the Internet)

The challenge that Cyberporn or online pornography brings (compared to any other form of pornography) is that it is freely accessible to anyone with access to an internet connection (without the appropriate filters such as a parental block). While pornography is produced legally for people over the age of 18, it is

reported to have been viewed by people younger than this¹¹. However, with increased accessibility young people's exposure to online pornography can often be unintentional.

As elements of pornography have been incorporated into mainstream culture, some argue that it has altered social values and behaviour "sexualising children (which) prematurely places them at risk of a variety of harms"¹².

While pornography may affect the development of certain attitudes and behaviours, this relationship is not straightforward and requires further investigation.

Conduct risk

Perhaps the most widely researched and most well understood risk associated with social media has been cyber-bullying.

Cyber-bullying (The use of electronic communication to bully a person, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature)

Cyber-bullying may be coming from strangers met online or people known to the victim using social media to intensify the bullying. Estimates of the proportion of young people affected by cyber-bullying can vary quite widely, but it can lead to depression, isolation, self-harm and in severe cases suicide¹³.

Victims tend to use three main strategies to cope with cyber-bullying: responding to the cyber-bully directly; avoiding it by staying offline; or accepting it¹⁴.

However, while cyber-bullying is a comparatively new phenomenon there is strong overlap between those who carry it out and those who carry out face-to-face bullying. Perpetrators of cyber-bullying often know the victim, suffer from low levels of self-esteem, have

frequently been victims of bullying themselves, and report increased feelings of loneliness and lack of empathy.

Interventions which increase self-esteem and victim empathy can be effective in preventing or decreasing incidents of bullying, while offering social support to victims is fundamental in addressing the negative effects of bullying¹⁵.

Box 1: Which young people are most vulnerable online?

Girls are twice as likely to experience persistent cyber-bullying than boys

Chat room users are four times more likely to receive unwanted sexual attention than other young people

UK chat rooms are mostly used by lower socio-economic groups and older teenagers

Victims come from a range of backgrounds and may have a range of characteristics

However, young people with learning difficulties, those with mental health problems, and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual or transgender young people can also be particularly vulnerable online

Some victims of grooming would not be perceived as vulnerable offline

Over two thirds (69%) of online sexual contact involves no attempt at offline contact

Young people may be more vulnerable in early adolescence as they become more sexually curious

Young people defined as 'sensation seekers' are four times more likely to have met someone offline following online contact

Adapted from Munro (2011)¹⁶

Benefits of being online

While there are clearly risks associated with young people being online, the large majority of these risks are those they already face offline, such as child sexual abuse, identity theft, exposure to sexually explicit materials and bullying.

Box 2: Positive aspects of social media use for young people

A sense of belonging

Social media can help young people experience connectedness which fulfils their need to belong¹⁷

Social media can positively influence social integration and bonding by providing validation from peers¹⁸

Young people can use social media as a rehearsal for offline relationships¹⁹

Psycho social well-being

Social media can encourage isolated and socially anxious young people into seeking support²⁰

Young people reporting loneliness can feel less alone and less shy while chatting online²¹

Using the internet to connect with peers acts as an important moderator for young people's loneliness²²

Identity development

Online support can be used to moderate extreme views while facilitating pro-social views²³

Social media can be used by young people experiencing stigma for support²⁴

Online communication can have a positive, indirect effect on how a young person defines themselves²⁵

For every risk there are also opportunities for young people online such as: increased social support; reduced social anxiety; increased self-esteem; and reduced social isolation²⁶.

These benefits may be indirect and act by helping to raise the self-esteem of young people and increase their sense of belonging. This can help them with wanting to talk more and seek positive social feedback, supporting health seeking behaviour (on and offline), and increasing social support generally.

Limiting online interaction can also have a negative impact on young people's well-being. This can be particularly important in engaging young people who have traditionally been less visible to services. Young males for example are more likely to reveal and share personal information on social media than adults.

As a result, there seems to be an increasing amount of research aiming to consider the benefits of online environments for young people and what role they might play in supporting young people.

Conclusion

Social media is a value-free medium which facilitates communication between people. It does not seek to promote or demote good or bad behaviour or interaction. Young people have embraced this medium to explore and share aspects of their developing identity. This can expose them to risks, but these risks are extensions of those which are apparent in their everyday lives, and which they engage in during adolescence generally. However, a distinction needs to be made between general adolescent behaviour and more problematic risk taking behaviour and thrill seeking behaviour which may be indicative of vulnerability both online and offline.

What may be more challenging for young people is knowing the risks, or illegality, of their behaviour.

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Appendix 1: Most common social media sites

[Facebook](#) is a social media service where users registering for an account can post information about themselves and their lives. After registering, users can create a profile posting information about themselves and add other users as 'friends'. Once registered, users can exchange messages with others, post updates, share photos and videos. Users can also join with others to form groups. Facebook can be accessed from any device with an internet connection.

[Instagram](#) is a social networking service designed to be viewed on smartphones. Registered users can take pictures and videos, and share them either publicly or privately.

[Google+](#) is a social media website where registered users can share photos and videos, instant message or make video-calls. The site allows registered users to create 'circles' of contacts, where they can share content. It also has a 'Hangout' section, where they can make and receive online calls.

[Pinterest](#) is an online interactive pin board website. Registered users can create 'pin boards' of images, which they can comment on, as well as share messages and re-pin images and videos from other users.

[Snapchat](#) is an image messaging service and multimedia mobile app (short for application) for smartphones that lets registered users send photos or short videos to their 'connections'. The post appears on screen for only a few seconds before disappearing. There is also a feature called 'Snapchat Story' that lets registered users share a sequence of snaps for up to 24 hours.

[Tumblr](#) is a social networking website where registered users can share text, photos, audio and video clips. Users can customise their page and share other people's posts. They can also send private messages.

[Twitter](#) is a social networking service where registered users can post and read 140-character messages called 'tweets'. Registered users can also build networks by 'following' others and seeing their tweets on their 'news feed' - a scrolling list of tweets from their network. Users access Twitter through the website or mobile device.

[Whatsapp](#) is an instant messaging app which lets registered users send messages, images and videos to friends for free. The app can be used for one to one or group conversations.

[YouTube](#) is a website where any users can watch videos free on the internet. Users can also create accounts and produce their own 'channel', which means having a public profile. Being a registered user allows people to post, as well as comment, on videos and create 'playlists' of their favourite videos. For younger children there is a separate [YouTube for Kids site](#), intended to host more child friendly videos.