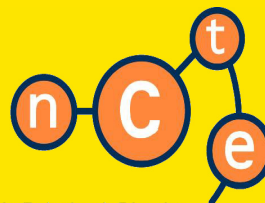


**WATCH\_YOUR\_SPACE**

**Survey of  
Irish  
Teenagers  
Use of  
Social  
Networking  
Websites**

# **2008 WATCH YOUR SPACE Survey**

“The 2008 WATCH\_YOUR\_SPACE Survey” is the second annual survey of how Irish teenagers (13 to 18 years old inclusive) are using social networking websites (SNWs) such as Bebo, My Space and Facebook. It was conducted by the National Centre for Technology in Education with assistance from the members of the Anchor Youth Centre at the Young Scientist Exhibition in January 2008. A short survey on young people’s use of social networking websites was administered by members of the Anchor Youth Centre. The Anchor members distributed 510 questionnaire sheets to their peers from around Ireland who were visiting the exhibition. 447 of the questionnaires passed the controls for the survey and were entered into a database by the Anchor members.



National Centre for Technology in Education  
Ionad Náisiúnta don Teicneolaíocht s. n Oideachas

## Summary

This short survey indicates that the popularity of social networking websites shows no signs of waning. Overall levels of usage in January 2008 were similar to those found in 2007 in terms of frequency of access. However, teenagers appear to be spending less time on these sites.

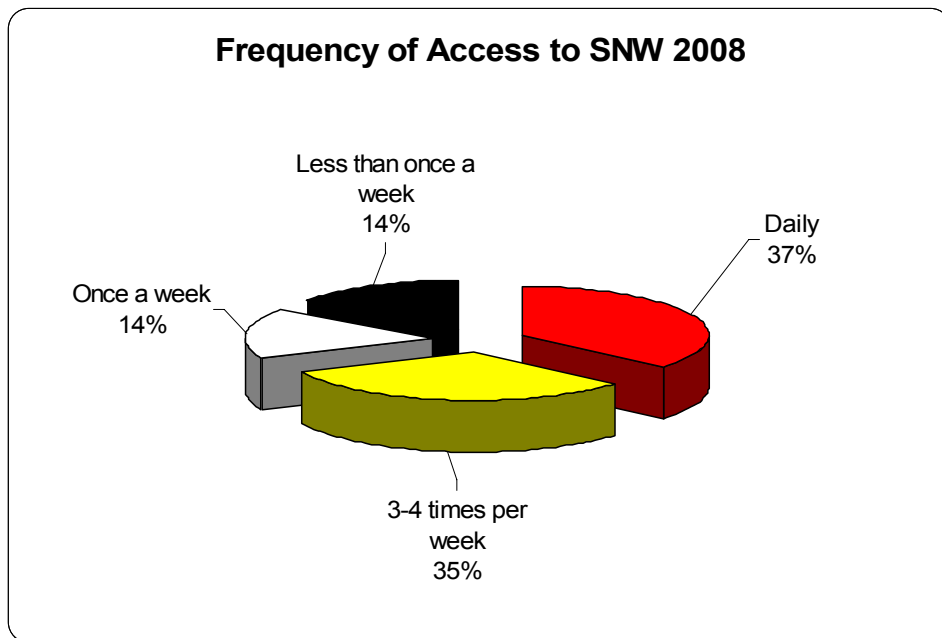
That teenagers are engaging in shorter sessions on Social Networking Websites (SNWs) is indicative of more mature usage patterns. The nature of online social networking leads to intensive initial usage patterns as users spend time developing their profiles, searching for friends and acquaintances, and exploring their profiles. Overtime users seem to move to less time consuming activities such as viewing updates to friends' profiles, organising social events, and reviewing pictures and videos of significant social occasions.

We also found indications that a combination of successful awareness raising activities in Ireland and improvements in the child protection aspects of the technical features of the Bebo website has led to a reduction in risk behaviour by Irish teenagers. Fewer teens are: using these sites primarily to make new friends, adding as friends lots of people they don't know, publishing personal information on their profiles. More of them are keeping their profiles 'private'. There are also signs that the systems for user-moderation of content are starting to lead to reductions in the amount of harmful content on SNWs. Significantly, it seems more difficult to encounter pornography or violent content on these sites than it a year ago.

The 2008 survey for the first time asked teenagers about meeting people face-to-face that they first met online. 40% of responding to this questionnaire had done this on a least one occasion. It appears that this behaviour has become much more prevalent since the advent of these sites.

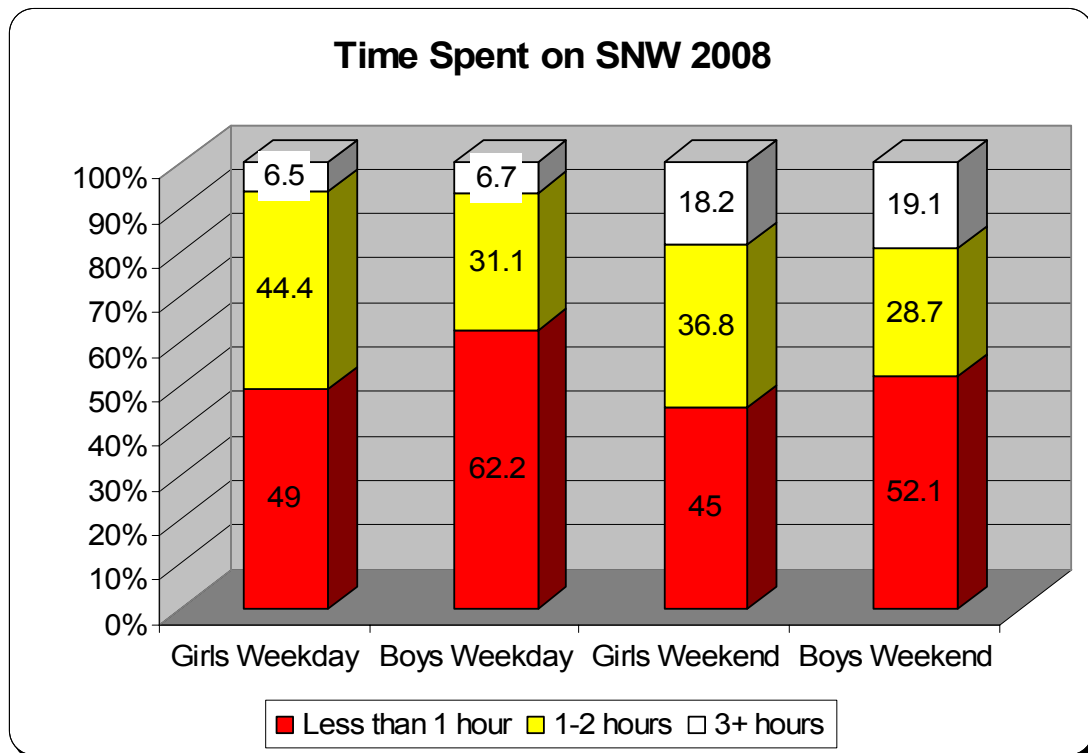
## Social Networking Website Access and Usage

There can be no doubt that the use of SNWs has been integrated in to the lives of young people in Ireland. Up from 69% in 2007, 72% of young people with profiles on social networking websites surveyed were accessing them more than 3 times a week, 37% (+3 from 2007) were doing this on a daily basis.

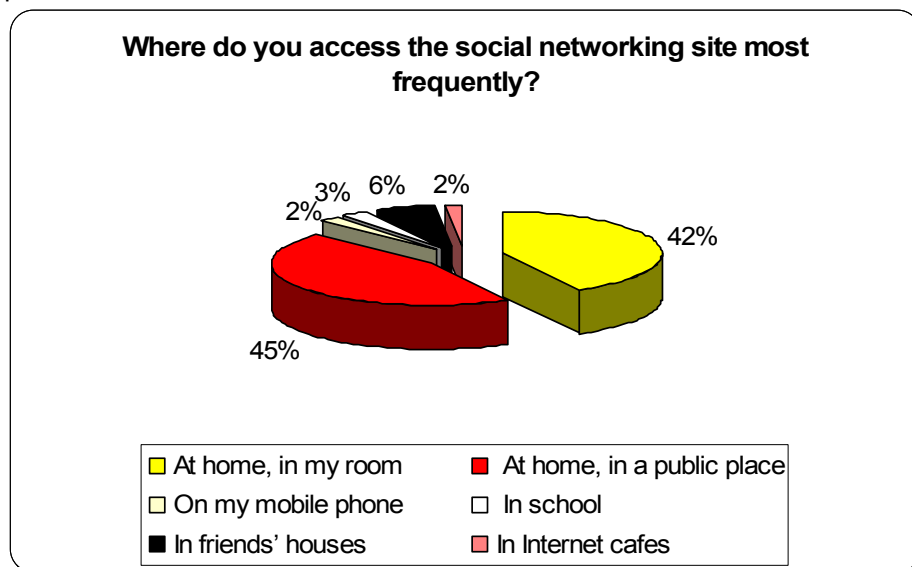


There was no difference between boys and girls in terms of the frequency that they were accessing these sites. However, boys were more likely to engage in shorter sessions than girls with most boys spending less than an hour online both during the week and at weekends (62.2% <1 hour weekday and 52.1% <1 hour weekend). 51% of girls were spending more

than an hour-a-day on these sites during the week rising to 55% on the weekend. This is a significant change from 2007 when 70% of girls engaged in sessions of over 1 hour on the weekend. The most significant change is in the number of girls engaging in sessions of more than 3 hours, on weekdays the number has dropped from %13.7 to %6.5 and on weekends from %34 to %18.2.

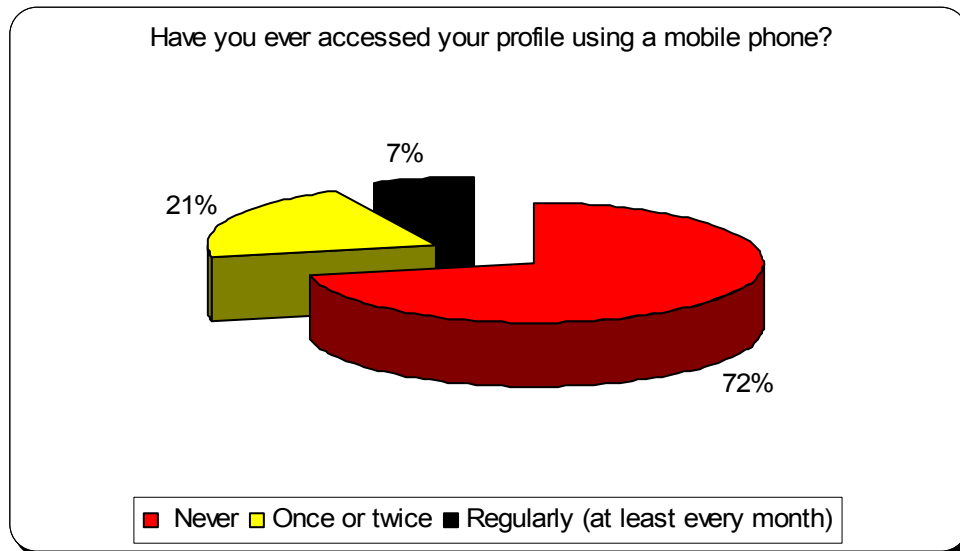


The home is by far the most popular place for accessing social networking websites with 87% saying this is where they accessed these sites most often. An increased number of teens (42% up from 36% in 2007) were doing this from their bedrooms. This is disappointing both because it means that they are spending considerable amounts of time detached from the general life of the family but also because it reduces the potential for parental engagement and monitoring of their online lives. Girls were more likely than boys to access SNWs from a public space in the home.



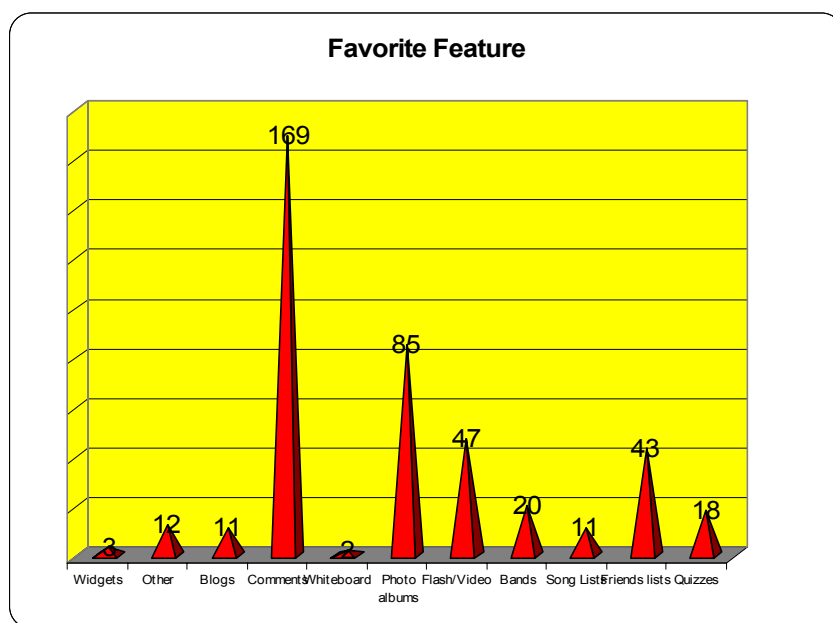
While only 2% of those surveyed said that using a mobile phone was their most frequent method for accessing SNWs, one third said that they had accessed their profile using a

mobile phone. Boys were twice as likely as girls to do this on a weekly basis. Only one mobile phone network in Ireland offered access to Bebo (the most popular site with teens) in the months before the survey. In the months before the survey they promoted this offering heavily and sold lots of handsets in the Christmas market with exclusive access to Bebo. We can assume that these are the early stages in the availability of access to SNWs from mobile devices. We expect to see significant developments in this area in the future as more mobile networks develop offerings in this area and more hand-held wifi devices, such as the i-touch become available.



Bebo is still by some distance the social networking website that was used most frequently by teenagers. My Space and Facebook were also frequently used by a significant group of teenagers and a small number (2%) said they used Nimble the Irish social networking site. This means that the functionality of the Bebo site will have a significant impact on how Irish children use SNWs.

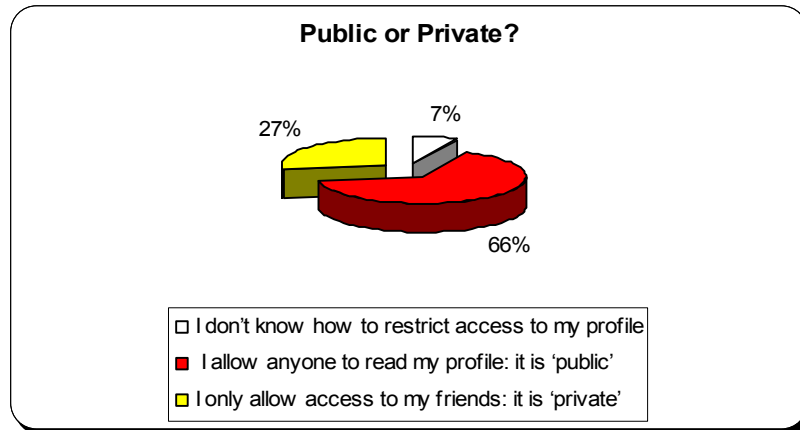
Despite the multimedia capabilities of these sites the 'comments' feature is by the far the most popular feature for teens. Photos have overtaken video as the second most popular feature. This is consistent with our contention that teens are using these sites primarily for interacting with each other, for organising social events, and for sharing pictures and videos of significant social occasions. Blogs were identified as the least popular feature.



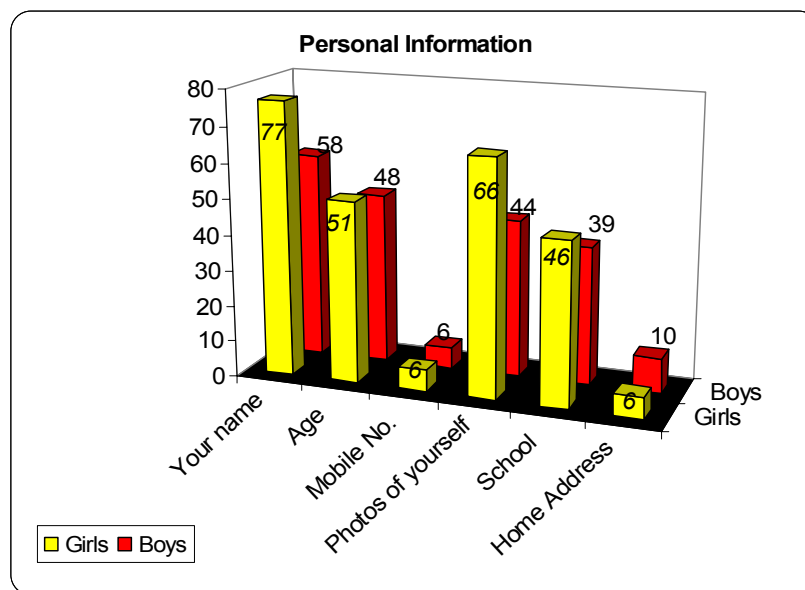
Considering the popularity of comments and sharing photos on SNWs and the text and photo capability of mobile phones we can expect further integration of these features in the future. Features such as the instant uploading of photos from mobile phones to profile pages and sending text messages from profile pages directly to phones are already available but not widely used. Partnership arrangements between mobile operators and SNW should see these features become easier to use and subsequently more popular.

## Personal Information

We asked young people if their web profiles were 'public' or 'private'. This is standard terminology on all the social networking sites they used. Setting their profile as 'Private' means that the user chooses to restrict access to information on their profile to their 'friends', it also means that their profiles are not searchable through standard search engines.



Two thirds of teens (down from 71% in 2007) allow anyone to read their profiles. This reduction in the number of public profiles brings us almost in line with the 66% of US teenagers<sup>1</sup> with online profiles public but ahead of the 56% of young Europeans<sup>2</sup> with the same. We can assume that the reduction in the number of teenagers with public profiles is attributable to a combination of successful awareness raising campaigns and changes in the Bebo registration process.



<sup>1</sup> Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview" by Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden (Jan. 7, 2007)

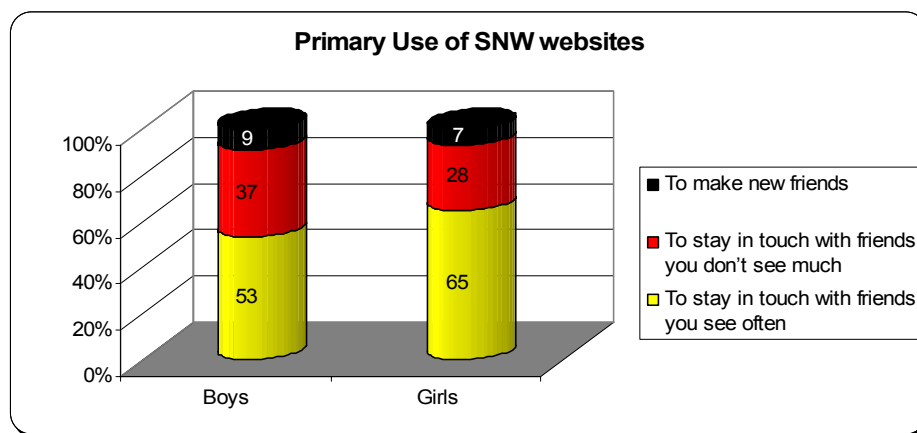
<sup>2</sup> Insafe survey of more than 12,000 under 18 year-olds ([www.saferinternet.org](http://www.saferinternet.org))

Boys (71%) are more likely than girls (63%) to have a public profile, and younger teens are more likely to have private profiles (34%) than older teens (18%). Girls are justified in restricting access to their profiles as they are more likely to share photos (66%) of themselves than boys (44%), they are also more likely to publish their full name on their profile.

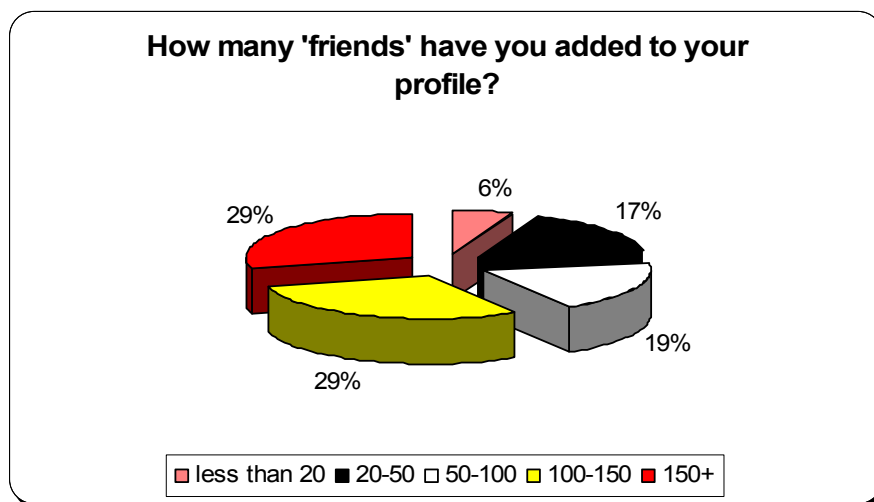
The widespread use of social networking websites seems to have had a dramatic impact on how young people share personal information. The most notable change is in the disclosure of their full names. In the Webwise survey of children's use of the Internet in January 2006 only 28% of those surveyed said that they disclosed their full name online. This year 75% said that they published it in full on their profile. It is worth noting that despite high figures for disclosure of personal information by Irish children, risk figures for a range of risks are generally similar to those in other European countries. In other words, disclosing information such as their full name doesn't seem to putting children at higher levels of risk of victimisation.

## Friends

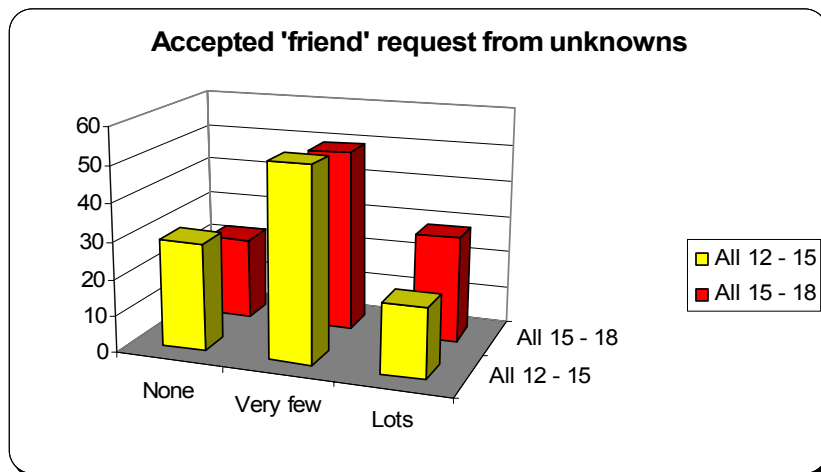
Most personal profiles on SNWs include a comment section where other users can leave a message, and a list of the user's friends. When an account is created the profile is usually private, which restricts access to the profile to friends that the user has specifically added. The primary use of SNWs by Irish teens is to stay in touch with friends they already have, only 8% said that they mainly use these sites to make new friends.



The nature of communication on social networking sites seems to encourage lots of weak ties between users rather than a small number of intimate connections. More than half the teens surveyed had added over 100 friends to their profile.

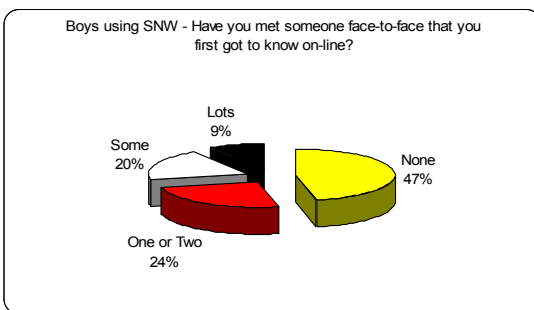
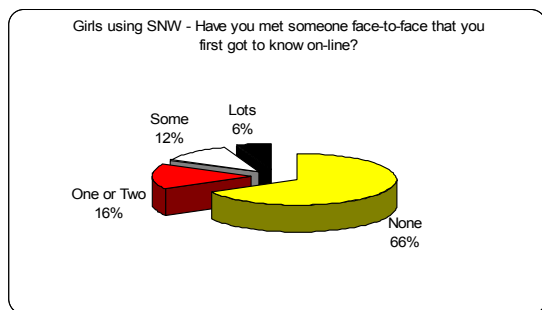


Most had accepted as 'friends' people you had not met in real life although less than quarter had done this more than a few times. Adding "strangers" as friends compromises the capacity of the user to restrict access to their personal information. Setting a profile as private restricts access to the profile to approved friends. Digital content on profiles can be easily copied and distributed widely. As more than three quarters of the children had added people that they had not met they are in effected reducing their capacity to control who sees there personal information and in what context they see it. We should also note at this point that it is possible to add celebrities, bands, movies, cartoon characters, as 'friends'.



The transition between socialising online and offline appears to be very fluid with most using the sites to communicate with their offline friends. Over 40% said that they met someone face-to-face that they first got to know on-line, boys were considerably more likely than girls to do this. SNWs use the 'Circle of Friends' technique for connecting people; in other words users can connect to anyone who is in any of their friends' circle of friends. In this context, it isn't surprising that many children will meet friends-of-friends at social events having first encountered them online. Indeed it is plausible that a teenager who is invited to a neighbour's birthday party might connect with their neighbour's school friends as part of the preparations for the event or to prepare themselves to meet at the event. The most current research indicates that deception is usually not a factor in child victimisation crimes that are initiated online, however communicating online can be anonymous and can facilitate deception. Meeting people that you first get to know online can be a risky behaviour and it is a behaviour that might have become more prevalent since the advent of SNWs, for these reasons there is a need to carry-out more in-depth quantitative and qualitative research into this aspect of teen behaviour.

In the 2006 Webwise Survey of Children's Use of the Internet report 20% of those who chatted online had met someone in real life that you first met on the Internet. There is nothing in this survey to suggest that this should be of concern, however it is an area for more detailed research.

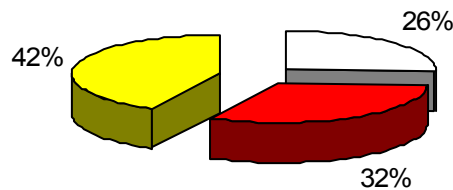


## Issues

Another sign of maturity in the use of SNWs is the dramatic increase in the number of people who found it hard to find pornography or violent content on their preferred SNW. This

indicates that the report abuse structures on Bebo are having a degree of success in removing pornography from the site. The deterrent effect of cancelling the profile of those posting pornography is also likely to increase over time. The longer the user spends developing their profile and using to connect to others, the greater the inconvenience from having it cancelled.

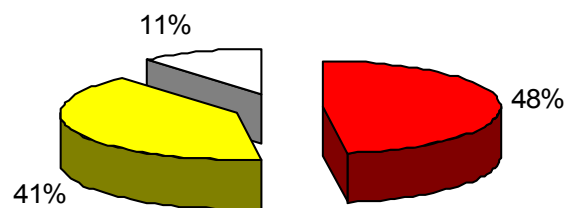
**Is it easy for you to gain access to adult material in this social networking site? e.g. porn pictures and conversations, abusive language, violence.**



□ Arrives to me unsolicited ■ Easy: I can find it ■ Hard: I can't find it if I try

The numbers of those who had witnessed or suffered from cyberbullying didn't change much from 2007, there was a 1% increase in this who never encountered any. Because of the way content and comments on SNWs are so visible and easily shared it is difficult to make any deductions from this question about the prevalence of bullying on SNWs. We can say that indications are that boys are more likely than girls to receive harmful posts. Again receiving harmful posts while potentially a bullying behaviour does not in itself constitute bullying. Technically, bullying is defined as this kind of harassment but only where it is persistent over time and where there is a disparity in power between both parties.

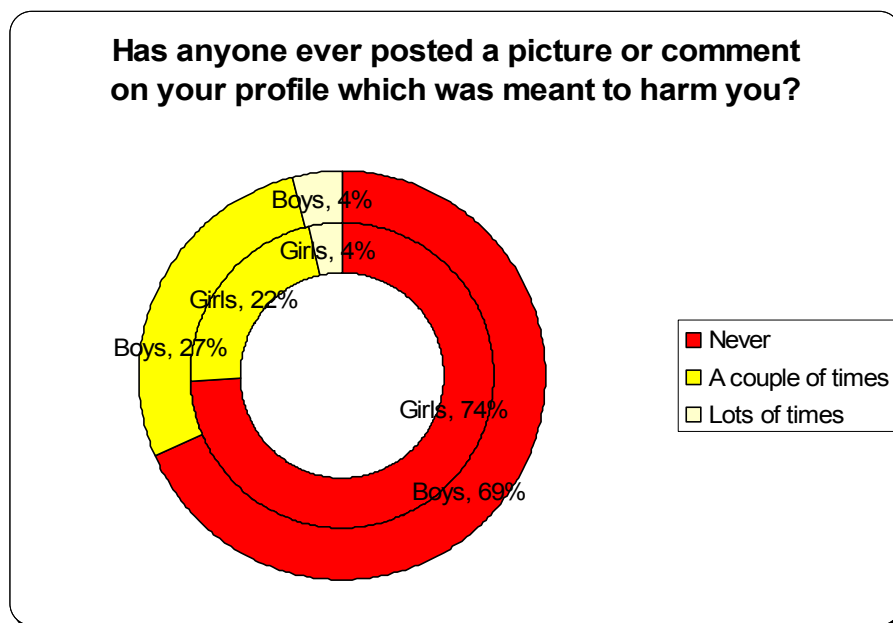
**Have you ever suffered or witnessed cases of cyber-bullying on this website? e.g. hate messages, unsolicited porn, threats, abusive solicitations**



■ Never ■ A couple of times □ Lots of times

This survey does not go far enough to make any findings on the bullying. The most we can say is that the number of children who received harassing posts (26.6%) on SNWs in 2008 is less than the number of children in the 2006 Webwise survey that said they had received a message on their mobile phone that threatened or frightened them. SNW websites have developed technical solutions that empower users to block and report those harassing them; these features aren't available on mobile phones. Also, considering the fact that communication on mobile phones tends to be more intimate, more hidden from view and

available children around the clock; we do not need to be unduly concerned about the potential for children to use SNWs to harass each other.



## Recommendations


Social networking websites are just one of the technologies that are allowing children to connect with each other and engage with society in ways that were unimaginable two years ago. We are also seeing how the anonymous, instant, and far reaching communication capabilities of the Internet have brought a new dimension to child protection issues such as bullying, anorexia, suicide, and sexual exploitation.

Consequently, young people need to develop skills to establish supportive relationships, to enjoy the company of others, and to resolve conflicts in appropriate ways. They need to be aware of and sensitive to their role in influencing the behaviour of others through their online lives. Students require the skills to identify when they are subject to influence or manipulation, whether overt or subtle, and the self-confidence to resist these pressures.

Education plays a central role in communicating risks and effective reduction strategies to children, young people, and parents. Effective educational approaches integrate parents as active facilitators of their children's media literacy and foster an ability in their children to self-manage potential risks in online environments. Parents and schools both have a key role to play in protecting children and educating them in the responsible use of new technologies. This is why teacher and parent training are the foundations of our integrated internet safety initiative at the NCTE.

There is widespread agreement that internet safety efforts work best when industry, educators, and policy makers work in concert. The most significant reduction in risk behaviour identified in this survey resulted from a combination of awareness raising activities and technical measures taken by the website owners. Since the last WYS Survey, Bebo increased its capacity to deal with reports of abuse, simultaneously awareness campaigns in schools by the NCTE drew attention to the reporting functionality on popular websites and promoted their use amongst teenagers; as a consequence we have seen a significant reduction in the availability of harmful content on the site. The combination of Industry implementing technical solutions to make their products safer for children to use and trusted parties, such as teachers and leaders, raising awareness of how to use them effectively seems to be a template for successful internet safety campaigns targeting the hard-to-reach teens segment..

The fact that most of our children spend most of their time online using a small amount of websites provides unprecedented opportunities to intervene to make their experience of the



Internet safer. We must accept that it is impossible to restrict the availability of inappropriate content on the Internet. Content can be hosted in multiple jurisdictions and can easily be moved between jurisdictions to avoid controls. However services like Bebo, MySpace, Facebook etc. are where most children spend most of their time. By focusing on influencing this small number of services, we can have a significant impact on how children experience the Internet.

Risks associated with using social networking websites can be minimised or prevented through education, awareness and by responsible actions by website owners. Risk management should involve all key partners in developing a clear understanding of the risks and responsibilities associated with young people's use of Internet technologies and services and appropriate responses to these risks.

## **Further Information:**

### **National Centre for Technology in Education**

The NCTE is a fully-funded agency of the Department of Education and Science. It was established in 1998. The centre has a wide remit in the area of ICT (information & communications technology) and education, extending beyond the use of ICT in schools to cover all educational ICT issues. Its main tasks are managing the implementation of the Government's ICT in Schools Programme, the development of ICT policy proposals and providing policy advice to the Department of Education and Science.

### **Webwise**

Webwise is an Internet safety awareness initiative, developed by the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) and comprising a range of online and printed information and advice publications for teachers, parents and students. It seeks to address key issues and findings arising from research conducted by the NCTE in Ireland over the past number of years relating to concerns about safety in regard to student use of and access to the Internet. The objectives of this initiative are:

- To promote the safe use of the Internet among school children (ages 4-18), their parents & teachers.
- To transform actual dangers into risks that they can master as autonomous, responsible users.

### **WATCH\_YOUR\_SPACE**

WATCH\_YOUR\_SPACE is a campaign to raise awareness and promote safe, responsible practice by young people when using online interactive services such as Bebo, MySpace and YouTube. The key messages of the campaign are:

- be creative.
- be yourself
- but be in control

The campaign has a strong peer-to-peer perspective and centres on an interactive online service, [www.watchyourspace.ie](http://www.watchyourspace.ie) developed by the National Centre Technology in Education (NCTE). This site offers practical tips and advice and supports teenagers who use the web.