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Social Networking Among Irish 9-16 year olds

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Summary

- **Social networking is massively popular among Irish teens:** 9 out of every 10 teenagers have a social networking profile. One third of 9-16 year olds have more than one profile.

- **Facebook is the most popular social networking service (57%)** among Irish kids. Bebo is also popular, particularly among younger users (37%)

- **There are many underage users on SNS:** One fifth of 9-10 year olds, 42% of 11 year olds and 61% of 12 year olds use SNS, in contravention of the terms of service for these platforms.

- **Parents appear to go along with their children's SNS use.** There are strong parental restrictions strong for the youngest users but parental attitudes are more mixed for 11-12 year olds. Just under half of parents do not allow 11-12 year olds to use social networking; one third allow it under supervision and nearly a quarter do allow it at any time.

- **Most young people keep their SNS profiles private (63%) or partially private (22%).** This is among the highest in Europe and suggests that education and awareness-raising efforts have paid off. Girls are more privacy conscious than boys. A tenth of 11-12 year olds, however, have their profiles set to public.

- **Most teenagers (80%) report good safety skills** but less than one third of 11-12 years old can manage privacy settings.
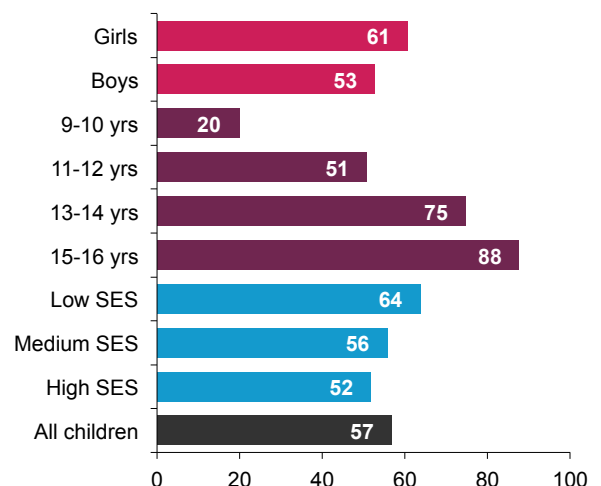
Popularity of social networking

Social networking is a hugely popular and fast-growing online activity for young people in Ireland. In the EU Kids Online survey, while SNS use was not the most frequently mentioned online activity ('watching video clips' and 'playing computer games' were the most often cited items), it features across all age groups, and particularly so for teenagers.

Figure 1 presents the main findings for use of social networking among 9-16 year olds in Ireland:

- **Social networking use is a near universal feature of teenage life and increasingly a part of younger children's lives as well.** About 3 in 5 of all children overall have a profile on a social networking site: at nine years of age this includes 1 in 5 children quickly rising to over half of 11-12 year olds, three quarters of 13-14 year olds and nearly nine in ten of all 15-16 year olds.

- **Social networking appears to be somewhat more popular with girls than boys** (61% compared to 53%).

- **Social networking would also appear to be more popular among children from lower SES households (64%)** compared to higher SES homes (52%).

Figure 1: Children who have a profile on a social networking site

QC 313: Do you have your own profile on a social networking site that you currently use or not?

Base: All children who use the internet.

Social networking is popular among all kinds of internet users. We identified in an earlier report six different *activity clusters* among young Irish internet

users.[1] In each cluster (with the exception of Cluster 1 - *Low use, low risk*), social networking features prominently within each group:

- *Cluster 1 – Low use, low risk*: This is a large group (39% of all users) and is characterised by low risk-taking. 18% use social networking.
- *Cluster 2 - Low use/gaming/entertainment-oriented*: 57% use SNS sites.
- *Cluster 3 - Learning-oriented*: 63% use social networking sites

In Clusters 4 to 6, however, social networking is a dominant element:

- *Cluster 4 - Moderate use, entertainment, communication-oriented*): Nearly all in this group (97%) use social networking sites.
- *Cluster 5 - High use, SNS-oriented* and
- *Cluster 6 – Focused Social Web*: as their names suggest are all characterised by high degrees of SNS use and online communication

Table 1 gives further detail about SNS use in each of these clusters. In the case of Clusters 4-6, greater social media use is correlated with having more than one profile and larger numbers of contacts. We can also see higher numbers of users from lower SES homes.

Table 1: Description of clusters representing patterns of SNS users

	CL1	CL2	CL3	CL4	CL5	CL6
% of case	**39**	**16**	**8**	**25**	**7**	**6**
Girls	62	56	66	48	35	44
Boys	38	44	34	52	65	57
Average age	13.4	11.9	13.9	11.3	12.7	13.9
Numbers of SNS profile						
One profile	80	65	77	48	70	61
More than one profile	20	35	23	52	30	39
Numbers of contacts in SNS profile						
Up to 10	39	20	32	12	13	11
11- 50	27	28	39	18	20	43
51- 100	18	22	12	20	19	22
101- 300	13	25	16	25	35	17
More than 300	3	4	1	25	13	7
SES status						
High SES	35	30	30	32	33	26
Medium SES	36	36	44	28	36	32
Low SES	29	34	26	40	31	42

Facebook vs. Bebo

In Ireland, as in Europe as a whole, Facebook is the most popular platform among young people. 57% of Irish young people use it as their only or most preferred SNS service.

As Figure 2 shows, it is not absolutely dominant, however, and a substantial minority in Ireland also uses the Bebo platform (37%) as its primary social networking service. While Facebook is the most popular social networking site in 17 of the 25 countries surveyed, Bebo has its highest market share in Ireland. This compares to 8.2% in the United Kingdom. Yahoo Europe, MySpace, MSN and the Polish service, Nsaza-Klasa, make up the other 5%.

Figure 2: Most popular SNS services in Ireland
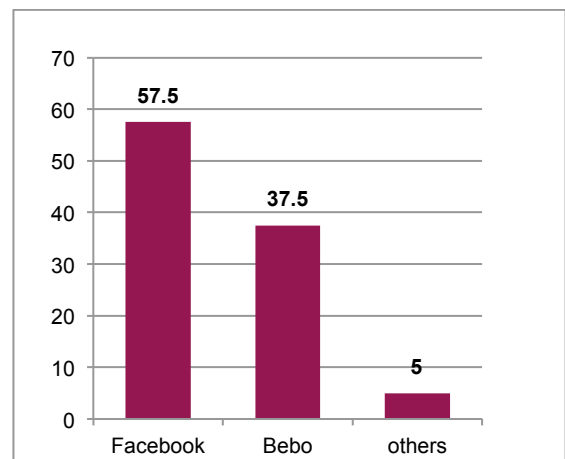
QC 315 Which social networking site do you use?
Base: All children who have a social networking profile

Most children have just one social networking profile (67%) though a third say that they have more than one. Figure 3 shows this in more detail, revealing that this proportion is broadly consistent across age groups though a higher proportion of 11-12 year olds use just one SNS platform.

SES differences in maintaining multiple social networking profiles are also marked with a higher proportion (39%) from lower SES homes having more than one profile.
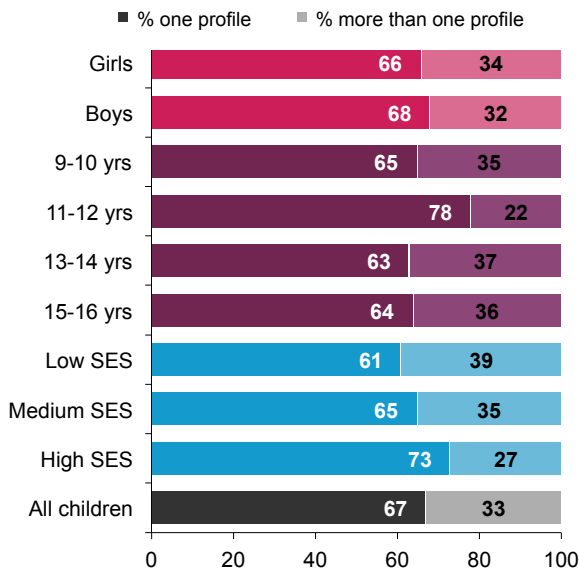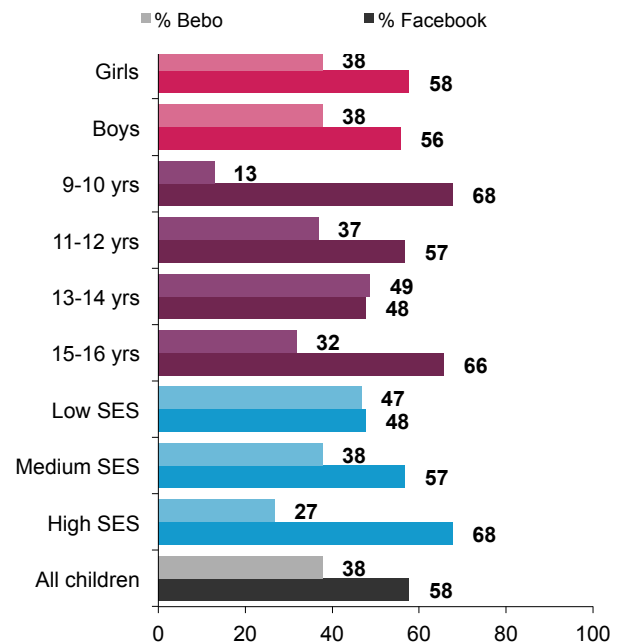
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[1] O'Neill, B., & Dinh, T. (2012). Digital Literacy, Digital Opportunities. *Digital Childhoods Working Paper Series* (No.2).

Figure 3: Number of SNS profiles children own

Legend: ■ % one profile ■ % more than one profile

	% one profile	% more than one profile
Girls	66	34
Boys	68	32
9-10 yrs	65	35
11-12 yrs	78	22
13-14 yrs	63	37
15-16 yrs	64	36
Low SES	61	39
Medium SES	65	35
High SES	73	27
All children	67	33

QC 314: Do you have one profile, or more than one?
Base: children who have a social networking profile

Figure 4: Facebook vs. Bebo users compared

Legend: ■ % Bebo ■ % Facebook

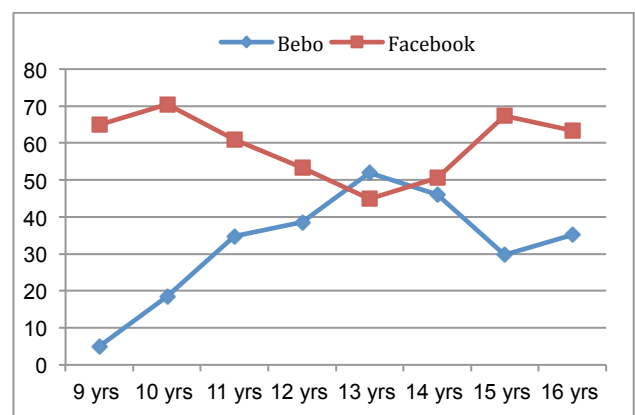|	% Bebo	% Facebook
Girls	38	58
Boys	38	56
9-10 yrs	13	68
11-12 yrs	37	57
13-14 yrs	49	48
15-16 yrs	32	66
Low SES	47	48
Medium SES	38	57
High SES	27	68
All children	38	58

QC 315 Which social networking site do you use? 315b Bebo and 315d Facebook
Base: All children who have a social networking profile.

When comparing Facebook and Bebo users (Figure 4) we find that:

- **Bebo users are predominantly younger teenagers and from lower SES households.**

- **Facebook use is predominant in two age-groups (9-10 year olds and 15-16 year olds)** - 68% and 66% respectively. As with Bebo, gender difference in using Facebook and Bebo is very small. However, a greater proportion of young people from high SES homes use Facebook.

- Among Irish teenagers, there is an interesting reverse in the choice of social networking service from **age 13-14 – where Bebo is the more popular platform** – to age 15-16 where Facebook is the dominant service.

- It is also interesting to see that among the 9-10 year olds who start to use social networking, that **Facebook outnumbers Bebo by about 3 to 1.**

The age profile of Bebo and Facebook users is highlighted in more detail in Figure 5. Facebook dominates as the more popular platform, except for 13 year olds where Bebo is marginally more popular. , illustrating the popularity. Older teenagers use Facebook over Bebo by a margin of 70:30.

Figure 5: Facebook and Bebo users by age

QC 315 Which social networking site do you use? 315b Bebo and 315d Facebook
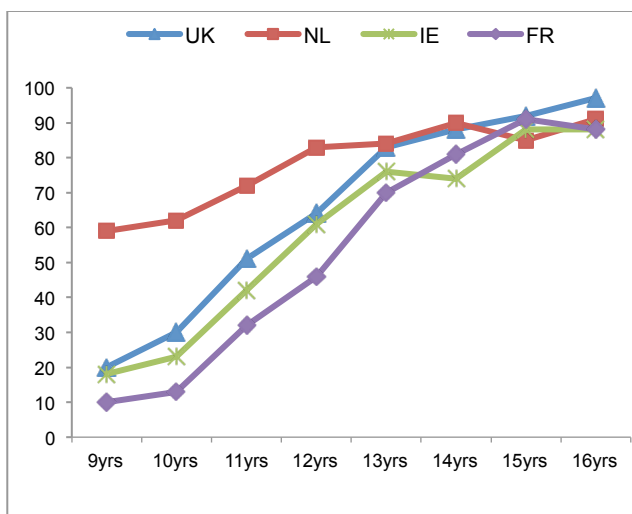Base: All children who have a social networking profile.

Age trends across Europe

Across Europe, social networking is one of the most popular activities online for young people. **On average, over one third of 9-12 year olds (38%) and three quarters of 13-16 olds (77%) has a social networking profile.**

Age trends vary significantly by country, however. Figure 6 compares age patterns in a select group of countries (United Kingdom, Netherlands, Ireland and France). Again, the steady increase in use of social networking by age is evident in nearly all countries. However, there are some marked differences between countries with regard to younger users (9-12 years old).

We see that Ireland and UK are fairly typical of the European profile with about 1 in 5 or 20% of 9 year olds using SNS, a figure that rises sharply after the age of 10.

Figure 6: Patterns of SNS use by age and country

QC 313: Do you have your own profile on a social networking site that you currently use or not?

Base: All children who use the internet.

In France, social networking use is much the same for teenage years but is marked by a much lower use for younger years.

The Netherlands, by contrast, shows much wider use of SNS across the years with nearly 60% of 9 year olds having a social networking profile. This is largely explained by the fact that *Hyves*, the most popular social networking platform in the Netherlands, does not have an age restriction.

Underage use

The topic of underage use of social networking sites has attracted considerable attention. Terms of use for both Facebook and Bebo state that users must be 13 years or older to access their service.[2]

Our data shows that substantial numbers of children under the age of 13 use social networking sites.

- 20% of 9-10 year olds have a social networking profile (Facebook 10%, Bebo 3%)
- **Just over half of 11-12 year olds also have a social networking profile with equal numbers using Bebo and Facebook.** This includes 42% of 11 year olds rising to 61% of 12 year olds.

A similar pattern across Europe whereby large numbers of young people use social networking services not designed for users under the age of 13.[3]

- Overall, **49% of 9-12 year olds in Ireland report that they display an incorrect age on an SNS profile.**
- **This is similar to the UK at 47%** and below other countries such as Denmark (64%), Spain (60%), Sweden (56%) and Norway (55%) with even higher proportions of underage SNS users.
- In countries such as Lithuania (8%), the Netherlands (4%) and Poland (4%), **reported underage use and display of an incorrect age is much rarer due to the popularity of SNS services without age restrictions (e.g. Hyves and Nasza-Klasa).**

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[2] In the United States, online collection of personal information for persons under the age of 13 must comply with COPPA - Children's Online Privacy Protection Act with strict rules regarding age verification and consent. For this reason, many internet services set their age limit at 13 and over. The age limit in some countries is higher, e.g. 14 in Spain and South Korea.

[3] See: Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K., & Staksrud, E. (2011). *Social Networking, Age and Privacy*. London, LSE: EU Kids Online.

Parental restrictions on SNS use

With such a high proportion of younger and underage users of social networking sites, the questions arises whether parents are aware of this or if young people are acting against parental wishes or restrictions. EU Kids Online asked children whether they were allowed or not to have their own profile, with or without permission and supervision.

Findings for Irish parental restriction on SNS use, where it is not allowed at all, are at the upper end of the European scale and consistent with findings of high overall restrictive mediation by parents in Ireland.[4] Figure 7 shows:

- **Parental regulation of SNS closely follows age**: prohibition or use of SNS only under supervision features strongly among younger years, with a steady decline in permission as children get older.

- **Over three quarters of 9-10 year olds are not allowed to have a social networking profile.** A smaller number (16%) can use SNS with permission.

- The situation for 11-12 years is more mixed: **just under half (47%) are not allowed at all to have a social networking profile. A third (30%) can do this under supervision and nearly a quarter (23%) are allowed to use SNS at any time.**

- **The least restriction is for older teenagers,** 15 and 16 years of age, very few of whom say they are not allowed and for whom few restrictions apply.

- **There are gender differences in parents' restriction of their children's SNS use.** Parents appear to be somewhat more lenient with girls and older teenagers. 41% of parents say their daughters can use SNS it at any time while 35% say their sons can do it at any time.

- **SES differences are also evident**: 34% of children from a high SES background can use SNS at any time while 41% of children from low SES homes are allowed, reflecting somewhat higher levels of internet restriction among parents from high SES homes.

Figure 7: Parents regulate their children SNS use
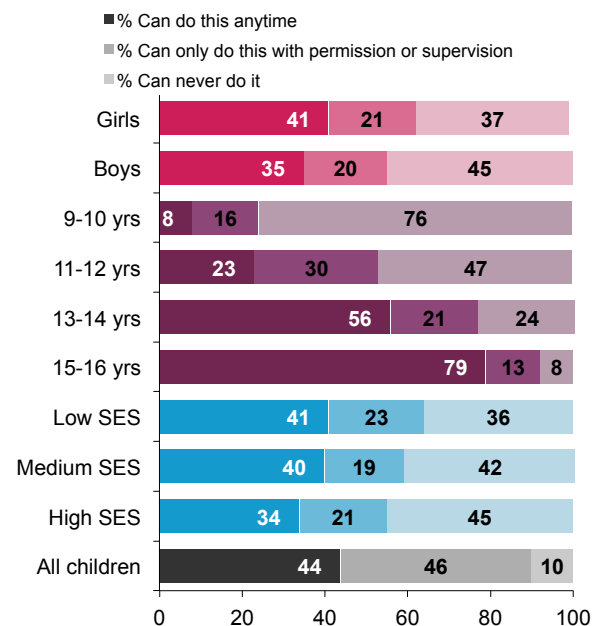
QP 221d: Whether child is allowed to do this all of the time, only with permission/supervision or never allowed: have his/her own profile on a social networking profile.

Base: all children aged 9-16 who use the internet and one of their parents.

Restriction on SNS use in Ireland is in the top five of 25 European countries (either banning it or allowing only under supervision). Greater levels of restriction apply in Germany, Turkey, France and Italy. Those countries where more parents actually prohibit the use of SNS include: Italy and Spain (41%), Greece (42%) and France (45%). EU Kids Online findings show that nearly half of all parents in Europe allow their children to use social networking sites without restriction. In Ireland, the figure is 42%.

How effective, then, is parental regulation, particularly of younger children's use of social networking? With some 51% of 11-12 year olds using SNS 'underage', and a similar proportion of parents either allowing children to use SNS freely (23%) or under supervision (30%), suggests that **many parents prefer to moderate their children's activities on SNS rather than to enforce the age restriction applied by service providers.**[5]

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[4] O'Neill, B., & Dinh, T. (2012). Irish Kids Online: Comparing Youth and Parent Perspectives. *Digital Childhoods Working Paper Series*(1).

[5] For a further discussion of this issue, see: boyd, d., Hargittai, E., Schultz, J., & Palfrey, J. (2011). Why parents help their children lie to Facebook about age: Unintended

Privacy settings

One of the main concerns that arises in relation to young people's use of social networking is whether they are able to protect their personal information online or if they expose themselves to greater risks through ineffective use of SNS privacy settings.

In asking about their use of privacy settings, the EU Kids Online survey first asked children whether their profile was set to 'private', 'partially private so that friends of friends can see their data', or 'public'.

Figure 8 shows that:

- **63% of all children with an SNS profile keep it private so that only their friends can see it.** This is highest for the youngest children (9-10 years) at 71% and still over half (57%) for 15 -16 year olds.

- **Only 12% overall keep their profile public so that anyone can see.** Worryingly, this is highest (18%) for the youngest users, 9-10 years of age, though the numbers are small. For the larger group (51%) of 11-12 year olds who use social networking, **10% say their profile is public for anyone to see.**

- **On average, one in five, keep their profile partially private and accessible to friends of friends.**

- In demographic terms, **the strongest difference in maintaining online privacy is that of gender:** 69% of girls compared to 57% of boys keep their profiles set to the maximum level of privacy.

The numbers of children with social networking profiles set to public is less than half the European average (IE12% - EU27%). Countries with much higher reports of public profiles (using Facebook for comparison) include Bulgaria (30%), Czech Republic (32%), Italy (35%), Greece (37%) and Turkey (47%). **In fact, the UK and Ireland are among the lowest in Europe for maintaining 'public' Facebook profiles, possibly as a result of effective awareness raising campaigns.**

Figure 8: Children's use of SNS privacy settings
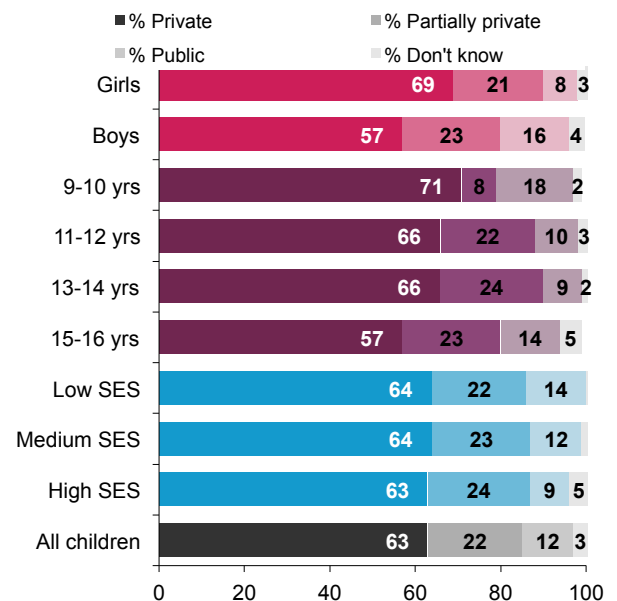
QC 317: Is your profile set too...? Public, so that everyone can see; partially private, so that friends of friends or your networkers can see; private so that only her friends can see; don't know.

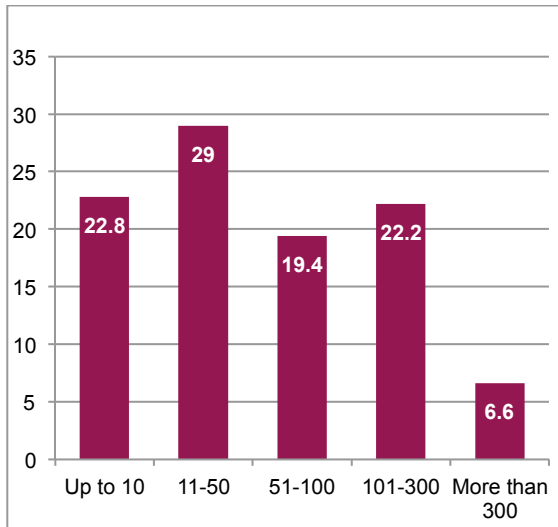Base: All children who have a profile on a social networking site

Risk factors: personal information disclosure

Irish young people appear to have heeded advice about keeping their social networking profiles as private as possible. Yet it is often claimed that young people accumulate large numbers of contacts as friends, even when they are not known to them. In addition, partially private profiles allow much wider networks, i.e., friends of friends, to access one's profile, thereby compromising privacy settings and potentially exposing young people to unwanted contact from strangers. In this context, the disclosure and sharing of personal information becomes a greater risk.

Having large numbers of contacts (i.e. more than 100) is one of a number of possible risk indicators in relation to management of personal information. To explore this further, we asked young people about the numbers of contacts they had on their social networking profiles (see Figure 9).

consequences of the 'Children's Online Privacy Protection Act'. *First Monday, 16*(11).

Figure 9: Number of contacts in SNS profile

QC 316 Roughly how many people are you in contact with when using SNS?
Base: All children who have a SNS profile

According to our findings, **only 1 in 5 or 22% has a contact list of more than one hundred friends.** A further one fifth have between 50 and 100 contacts and the remainder under 50 contacts. 23% of cases have a limited contact list of up to 10.

For 9-12 year olds, the number of children with social networking contacts of more than 100 is just 8%, compared to 35% for 13-16 year olds. Those with more than 100 contacts are below the European average of 29% (or 40% for teenagers 13-16).

Other risk factors include the nature of information young people display on their social networking profile. Safety advice typically advises users not to include identifying information such as last name, e-mail address, home address, phone number, place of work or school, on one's profile. Yet this information is often required for registering an account and users may be unaware of how to ensure it is not displayed publicly.

Table 2 provides details of identifying information displayed on social networking profiles, and gives an indication of the potential risks particularly faced by those who keep their profile set to public access.

Three quarters of Facebook users (76%) display a photo that clearly shows their face. This is somewhat higher to 68% of Bebo users. 67% of users with a public profile display a photo.

Table 2: Comparison of personal information disclosure (Facebook and Bebo)

Which of the bits information on this card does your profile	Facebook users	Bebo users	Those with public SNS profile
A photo that clearly shows your face	76	68	67
Your last name	77	52	68
Your address	8	6	6
Your phone number	2	2	0
Your school	40	43	44
An age that is not your real age	28	26	25
None of these	2	3	5
Your real age	39	40	44

QC 318 a-g Which of the bits of information on this card does your profile include about you?
Base: All children 9-16 with a profile on Facebook or Bebo

68% of SNS users who set their profile to "public" also display their real name on their profile (77% in Facebook users and 52% for Bebo users). Other identifying information contained in users' profiles includes school attended, displayed by over 40% of users.

Nearly one third of Facebook and a quarter of Bebo users lie about their age on their profile, including a quarter of those with a public profile.

Facebook users overall display more personal information than Bebo users and in comparison to profiles set to public. This may be due in part to the company's 'real names' policy. It may be too soon to conlude that these young social networkers have "trust" in the Facebook service but this can be good base for SNS services to make their websites "trustworthy" and "safe" for young social networkers.

Social networking skills

Given the risks involved and the fact that for young people social networking is an activity conducted away from adult supervision, children's own safety skills are of crucial importance. Social networking services include a range of safety features, including privacy settings, that allow the user to control who has access to their information, as well as features to block unwanted messages or contact. We asked children, age 11 years and older, about their ability to use two

specific safety features: changing privacy settings and blocking another user.

Figure 10: Change privacy settings on a SNS profile

■% Block message from someone you don't want to hear from
■% Change privacy settings on a social networking profile
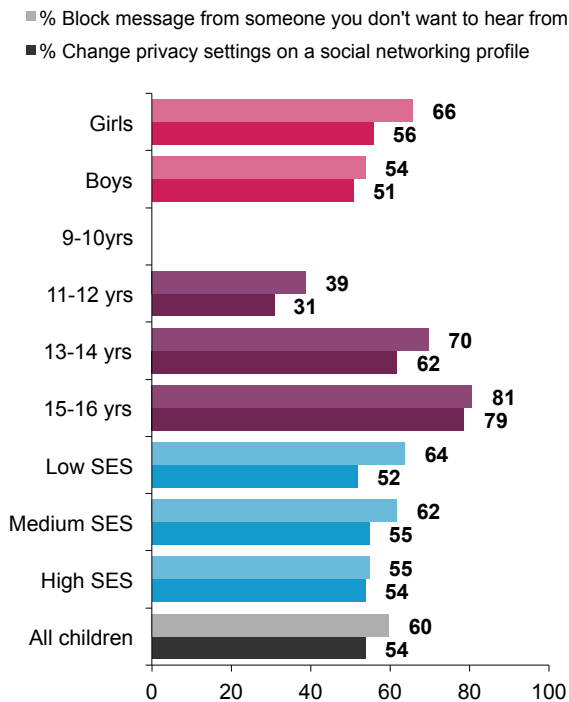
QC 320b Which of these things do you know how to do on the internet? Change the privacy settings on a SNS profile. Block message from someone you don't want to hear from

Base: children 11+ who use the internet.

Figure 10 shows that:

▪ **Overall, 60%** children **know how to block message from someone you don't want to hear from and 54% children know how to change the privacy settings on a SNS profile**.

▪ **15-16 year olds are the most confident in their safety skills: on average 80% say they are able to manage these safety features.**

▪ Younger users are much less confident: **less than a third of 11-12 year olds are able to change privacy settings. 39% say that they know how to block messages from people they do not wish to hear from.** With large numbers of 11 and 12 year olds using SNS, it is clear that many lack the basic skills to manage and protect their information online.

▪ **Girls report somewhat higher levels of safety skills than boys (10% more in the case of**

blocking messages). Differences in SES are slight with low and medium SES reporting marginally higher levels of confidence.

Self-assessed safety skills for children in Ireland are close to the European average for older teenagers. **However, Irish 11-12 year olds report substantially fewer safety skills than their European counterparts**: on average 55% of 11-12 year old Facebook users across Europe are able to change privacy settings (IE 31%) and 61% are able to block another user (IE 39%).

Conclusion and recommendations

▪ Social networking sites are now an integral element of youthful social communication and an essential part of teenagers' internet use. **Most appear to manage SNS effectively and to encounter few problems.**

▪ **The presence of large numbers of users under the minimum age of 13 poses significant policy challenges for industry, education, regulation as well as for parents' mediation of their children's internet use.** Setting aside the appropriateness of SNS use for younger children, current age restrictions appear not to be effective. As it is not possible for industry providers to identify which users are under 13, concerns must expressed for their online safety.

▪ As data privacy becomes more complex with increasing sophistication of social media services, **it is vital that more user-friendly and age-appropriate controls are made available.**

▪ Many parents of younger users (e.g. 11 and 12 years of age) appear willing to moderate their children's internet use. **Parental controls built in to SNS services could provide valuable assistance** and give parents more confidence in supervising younger children's internet use.

▪ Education efforts in promoting safety and privacy awareness appear to have been effective in the Irish context. However, **younger users, particularly in the primary sector need support** and are the least confident in managing safety features of social networking.

Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences
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