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Have You Asked for It?: an Exploratory Study About Maltese Adolescents' Use of Ask. fm

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Introduction

Adolescent development is characterised by numerous changes and continuous self-exploration in the physical, cognitive, and social domains of the individual. These result in a more distinct and organised self-concept (Steinberg & Morris, 2011). The context in which development occurs and the way in which it occurs has changed significantly as a result of online socialisation. The significance of this context for development (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007) becomes all the more important in light of the characteristics of online communication, in particular the possibility of the anonymity that it affords (Peter & Valkenburg, 2013), and the frequent use that adolescents make of social networking sites (SNS). These sites are online services where members can "(1) construct a public or semi-public profile…, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd & Ellison, 20017, p. 211). Depending on the SNS in question and the features it offers, teens have various opportunities and modalities for interaction. For instance, endorsing content through 'likes', posting content that reflects their interests, and receiving comments from others can all be related to their self-presentation and exploration of their nascent identity (van Dijck, 2013, Manago, Guan & Greenfield, 2015). Roberts, Henriksen and Foehr (2004) propose integrating developmental and media theories to improve our understanding of how adolescent development and the online media environment interact and influence each other. Both Roberts et al. (2004) and Arnett (1995, 2014) propose Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973; McQuail, 1994) as a valid model to understand this bidirectional relationship (Vossen, Piotrowski & Valkenburg, 2014).

Uses and Gratifications on Social Networking Sites

Uses and Gratifications theory was first developed in 1969 by Blumler and Mc Quail in relation to content available on TV, radio and newspapers. The key assumption of the theory is that "the audience member makes a conscious and motivated choice among channels and content on offer" (McQuail, 1994, p. 318). Psychological, sociological and environmental factors influence the type of media use (Katz, et al., 1973) on the basis of how it gratifies the users' needs. For instance, audience members can select specific programmes (such as soap operas) based on whether these reinforce value systems or not. Interest in this theory dwindled over time, but it was revived with the digital media revolution which brought about an exponential increase in media choices (Ruggiero, 2000). What was formerly referred to as audiences have now become 'users', emphasising their active role in the online world (Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

Whiting and Williams (2013) identify the following gratifications attainable from social media use: information seeking and sharing, social interaction, pastime, entertainment, relaxation, utility for communication and convenience, the possibility to express opinions and surveillance.

Identity Development in the New Media Ecology

Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development suggests that during adolescence, establishing identity through one's social context is the main task. Identity is "the entity that gives one the power to move with satisfying direction in one's life and to recognize and be recognized as a unique individual by others in the social context" (Kroger, 2015, p. 537). The process of identity development begins in childhood, and progresses through one's lifespan through explorations and commitments that contribute a sense of continuity along one's life.

Through social interactions, including online ones, adolescents construct their selves (Manago, 2015). They use media to test aspects of their identity, and the feedback they obtain from peers has a significant role. Those aspects of identity that receive positive feedback from peers are integrated, while they seek alternatives for those aspects that are not validated (Salimkhan, Manago & Greenfield, 2010). During adolescence, online communication often happens through SNS. In a qualitative study with female adolescents, Dunne, Lawlor and Rowley (2010) conclude that the Uses and Gratifications approach is specifically relevant to studying SNS. They found that through SNS use, several gratifications were obtained. These included "the portrayal of one's ideal image, peer acceptance, relationship maintenance, safety from embarrassment and rejection, and finally, engagement in playground politics" (p.54). Adolescents also join SNS because their friends are there (Binns, 2014), and they want to feel that they belong to their group of peers (Boyd, 2007). Friends teach each other how to manage their self-image on SNS, and they often choose to put forward impressions which are likely to be validated by peers. This also offers the possibility to change the way they present themselves if an impression is not well received.

The Media Practice Model put forward by Steele and Brown (1995) is based on Uses and Gratifications Theory and highlights the role of identity when adolescents make media choices. Identity is conceptualised as an active "process woven into the fabric of daily life" (p.572) where the media encountered impact the individual's identity, which in turn influences media choices. This "ongoing reciprocal" process (Brown, 2000, p. 35) occurs within the context of the adolescents' lived experiences, which encompasses the interaction of several factors, including that of cultural background. Identity motivates adolescents' media choices, directly impacting which media they attend to. Once this engagement happens, they interact with the meanings present in the media and incorporate them or reject them, thus feeding back into their developing sense of self. Although this model was devised prior to the

proliferation of the internet and social media, it remains valid and applicable for understanding new media use in adolescence.

Online interactions have nonetheless become a space where adolescent identity is negotiated. Vásquez (2014) claims that self-presentation online happens not only through one's profile, but also through texts, even when these are anonymous. Peter and Valkenburg (2013) discuss five features through which adolescents can manage self-presentation and self-disclosure. These are: anonymity, asynchronicity, cue management, accessibility and retrievability. Each of these has positive and negative implications resulting in both opportunities and risks for the adolescent. Anonymity allows control over what to disclose and how to present themselves, giving them more freedom (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Vásquez, 2014), and minimising the risk of not being accepted. Yet, it "may result in disinhibited, aggressive, and insulting comments, as well as in cyberbullying and online harassment of peers" (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011, p. 122). Asynchronicity and cue management make it possible to reflect and edit before posting, but this can be used for manipulation or for targeting others. Accessibility makes both friends and strangers accessible, and retrievability implies that anything shared online can have unintended audiences (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2013).

Online interactions can improve the quality of friendships, but this is not always the case, especially if anonymity is involved (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Adolescents are more likely to take risks, make mistakes and test the limits (Bradley, 2005; Boyd, 2007) when engaging in self-disclosure as part of their search for social connections. This phenomenon often gives rise to discussions about the risks of self-disclosure through the use of technology (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). From the adolescents' point of view, the online environment facilitates taking emotional risks, (Bradley, 2005) because it is easier to face negative outcomes. In an anonymous context, this risky behaviour might be exacerbated.

Peter and Valkenburg (2011) present anonymous online communication as "the extreme form of protecting one's privacy" (p. 230). Withholding one's identity on a SNS allows the adolescent to choose and control what to show to others, thus facilitating the process of identity experimentation, self-disclosure and making new connections.

Anonymity and Ask.fm

Ask.fm is a social networking platform which uses a question and answer (Q&A) format to connect users with each other through conversational exchanges. Ask.fm's rapid growth since 2010 was in part due to the fact that such exchanges could be carried out anonymously, and that they could be cross-posted on Facebook and other platforms. However, Ask.fm also attracted significant adverse publicity due to its reputation for persistent cyberbullying and its association with up to five teenage suicides in the UK, Ireland and the USA (Vaughan, 2013; Blake, 2015). In 2014[1], new safety measures were introduced including a Safety Centre, the appointment of a Trust and Safety Officer and an Advisory Board (Perez, 2014). Safety controls were further enhanced in 2016[2]. Other sites such as Anomo, Whisper, After School, Psst! Anonymous and Sarahah, also have anonymity as one of their main features.

Adolescents have more control over their self-presentation when they are online in comparison to face-to-face communication (Michikyan & Subrahmanyam, 2012). Anonymity provides the ultimate control over how they present themselves since they can portray only those aspects of themselves which they want to share. Anonymity has characterised Ask.fm since its inception, and it was retained as a key feature of the platform (Pollak, 2014). Similar to other social media services such as Secret and Whisper, anonymous self-expression and social interaction is facilitated by enabling questions to be posed anonymously. Q&A exchanges become public on a user's profile only once they are answered. Users can opt not to allow anonymous questions; they can also refuse to reply or delete such questions.

Anonymity is particularly appealing to young people, as it allows them the freedom to express themselves in different ways at a critical time in the development of their identity (Boyd, 2014). Anonymity is one of several factors that gives rise to an online disinhibition effect that can lead to taunting, cyberbullying and online harassment (Suler, 2004).

In a quantitative study with female adolescents, Binns (2013) explored user experiences on SNS, including Ask.fm and Formspring, that both support anonymity. The study, which was undertaken when moderation of communication and safety features on Ask.fm were limited, found that Ask.fm users received more personal abuse than users on other social networks (Binns, 2013). Similarly, a comparison of Ask.fm and Instagram undertaken by Hosseinmardi et al. (2014) found that negativity was more prevalent on Ask.fm. This could imply that anonymity expedites the permeation of negativity.

Adolescents, in Binns' research, mostly used Ask.fm for fun. The anonymity provided by the site helped them avoid awkward face-to-face conversations (Binns, 2013). Yet, anonymity has another facet. Although there is no conclusive evidence as to the factors involved when cyberbullying occurs, the disinhibition related to anonymity and the lack of direct confrontation can be enablers of this negative behaviour (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). In fact, a third of respondents in Binns' (2013) study also referred to the disinhibition and de-individuation they experienced on Ask.fm and similar sites. Participants seemed to assume that once active on such sites, online abuse is inevitable and that users had no right to complain about it. Some also blamed the victims of online abuse for answering hurtful or insulting comments and labelled them as attention-seeking, noting that rather than answering, victims should delete their account.

In light of the adverse publicity it had received, Ask.fm's safety features were updated to enhance the users' experiences (ASKfm updates Q&A app to attract millennials, 2016).

The facility for anonymous question and answer exchange remains, but it is presented as a

way for safe self-expression since it is not necessary to reveal one's identity.

The current study

This paper applies the Uses and Gratifications theory to identify why adolescents use

Ask.fm. Although identity development through social media use has been investigated

before, (e.g. Boyd, 2007, Peter & Valkenburg, 2013), this study is among the few qualitative

studies that report findings specific to an anonymous SNS. Albeit Ask.fm's media hype has

somewhat decreased, it is still used by many adolescents. Moreover, new sites are constantly

being developed making the following exploratory findings relevant to our understanding of

young people's development in the context of a widespread use of new media.

Method

This study is based on empirical data collected as part of a research initiative by the

EU Kids Online network[3]. In 2010, a survey was conducted in 25 European countries to

investigate key risks that children aged 9 to 16 years face online. Following that, a cross-

national qualitative study was carried out to further explore children's understanding of

problematic situations online. Nine European countries, including Malta, participated in this

qualitative research. Data was collected by means of focus groups and interviews which were

carried out in schools from each country. To enable cross-national comparison, a common

interview guide was used[4]. Further details about the methodology are available in Šmahel and

Wright (2014).

The EU Kids Online research received ethical approval from the LSE Research Ethics

Committee (UK), and the Maltese ethics requirements were also fulfilled. All participants in

the study together with their parents signed an informed consent form prior to participation.

Maltese participants were recruited from government, Church and independent schools.

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded with the participants' permission and then transcribed verbatim.

In this paper, the analysis will focus on the use of Ask.fm among Maltese adolescents. Malta is an island in the Mediterranean with a population of 445,000. The majority of young people live with their parents until they get married. Being a small island, they need not move out of their parents' home to study and to work. It is in this sheltered context that the use of Ask.fm by adolescents is being studied. The platform's popularity was a noteworthy feature during the data collection, and it was intriguing that adolescents were so keen on a site that offers anonymity, when being anonymous in the context of a very small island is hardly possible. Thus, it was decided to explore the data in view of the interplay of the site's use with identity developmental issues. To do so, all the instances where Ask.fm was mentioned in the Maltese focus groups and interviews were analysed for the purpose of answering the question: why do adolescents use Ask.fm?

For the current study, the data was collected from four focus groups comprising 18 participants (9 males and 9 females) and four individual interviews (3 males and 1 female). Table 1 shows the participants' ages and their pseudonyms. A pragmatic decision was taken to include data from both focus groups and interviews in the analysis, since both the focus groups and interviews were conducted by the main author, and were utilised to address the same research question, through very similar interviewing guides and contexts (schools), in the same time frame, and with no predetermined order. Participants also shared their experiences freely both during the interviews and the focus groups. During interviews, participants might have responded in a way they thought would please the researcher and during focus groups, they might have felt inhibited or pressured to conform by the group. The different dynamics present during each method of data collection could impact the validity of the study and they were kept in mind and addressed when necessary.

Participants were asked about unpleasant experiences online and issues they found

problematic when using the internet like for example "Have you experienced anything on the

internet that was not very pleasant?". Participants could use either Maltese or English when

communicating, depending on which language they were most comfortable with as both

languages are spoken in the country.

To extract the data pertinent to Ask.fm, a text search for the word 'Ask.fm' was

performed on all the data. Each instance was examined to identify the segments where the

discussion about Ask.fm started and ended. These excerpts were then collated into a single

data file and the process of Thematic Analysis as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was

used to analyse the data. Data was coded using a mixture of inductive and deductive coding.

For inductive coding the discussions about the platform were analysed. Once such code was

the reason why they removed their Ask.fm account. During deductive coding, the data from

the focus groups and interviews were analysed in view of the gratifications of SNS identified

by Whiting and Williams (2013) i.e. information seeking and sharing, social interaction,

pastime, entertainment, relaxation, utility for communication and convenience, the possibility

to express opinions and surveillance. Issues of inter-rater reliability in qualitative research

(e.g. Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman & Marteau, 1997), were addressed. The authors

discussed differences in coding, and decided to apply the one which best represented what

was being said. These codes were then clustered and further categorised into four themes

which are presented in Table 2.

Findings

Analysis of the transcriptions was carried out with the aim of finding out why young

people use Ask.fm. Table 2 presents the themes identified together with the codes from where

they were derived. Results show that participants used Ask.fm for killing time and

recreational purposes. They also used it to be part of their network of peers who do so, and

through self-presentation and social interaction, they engaged in identity exploration. The fact

that this platform offers the possibility of anonymity could be the reason why users put

forward aspects of their identity which they would not have otherwise revealed. This is often

done notwithstanding the risk involved. In the direct quotes presented in this section,

pseudonyms are used to protect the participants' anonymity.

Whiling away time, fun, intrigue

One reason mentioned by participants for using Ask.fm was to while away time: "I

spend some three hours of time on it" (Mark, FG[5]4). They also used it to have fun: "I use it to

have a laugh; sometimes I see some very funny questions and they make my day better"

(Deborah, I2). Participants enjoyed seeing their friends being asked and answering questions.

They enjoyed being asked questions about themselves: "I enjoy seeing them ask me" (Mark,

FG4).

The possibility of being asked questions anonymously also seemed to be something

that the participants found appealing and tempting. Users described being 'thrilled' by the

possibility of someone whom they do not know asking them questions. Although it is

possible for questions to be signed, it would appear that participants were intrigued by

anonymous communication: "You feel more confident when you don't know who's writing to

you and he doesn't know who you are (Bob, FG4).

The need to be accepted

Participants felt the pressure to be accepted by their group of peers. Kevin reflects that

sometimes the pressure to feel liked and included could lead one to do things such as setting

up an Ask.fm account even if one would not really want to: "We are willing to do anything,

even if we disagree with it in order to be liked. I haven't gone to that extreme, but more or

less, I never used to like Ask.fm but I ended up joining anyway" (Kevin, I4). This pressure,

both external and internal made some of the participants get an Ask.fm account. He insists

that even though he was aware that Ask.fm might be a passing fad, and that people might

regret saying some things they said online, he wanted to be like his peers. Deborah, (I2)

explains how she had deactivated her account for a while, but reactivated because she didn't

want to be left out: "Last time I had removed it because of… school; I had to study, but after

a week I had set it up again…… you miss it then".

The possible problems that arise from going unnoticed were obvious from how the

research participants reacted. In the discussions, they mentioned their concerns when people

asked questions to others and not to them. When they did not receive questions or comments,

like others did, they asked themselves whether there was something wrong with them or

whether they were lacking something in comparison to others.

> …but it's like you start questioning 'why aren't they asking me?'…. You start
> wondering 'what is it that they see in others that they don't see in me?'" (Kevin, I4).

When Deborah felt that questions were inappropriate or downright obscene,

she did not answer. However, this was not the case for all her peers. Rather than opting to

ignore an unpleasant question, Zafira, felt compelled to answer in spite of feeling very

uncomfortable. She argued "maybe you wouldn't want to show it [the answer] to the person

who wants to see it" (FG3). In spite of this, she still answered such questions. Liam's reaction

to how disempowered some young people feel online is a clear indication that although

young people often know how they ought to react, the decision to do so is not

straightforward. There seems to be stronger pressures that supersede what they know is right:

> As if when you unfriend someone you would be breaking some sacred law – I don't
> know – there is a sort of connotation that saying no, I don't know – It's like there's
> always that sort of thing where you have to say yes: if they ask you, you have to reply,
> if they send something, you have to respond (Liam, I3).

Not everyone gives in to these pressures. Four of the participants said that resisting

the pressure to join Ask.fm or to deactivate their account is not always hard. The eldest two

participants reflected that they did not feel the need for it, indicating that age, and as

participants themselves claimed, more maturity might be contributing factors to this

exception. Another two girls had negative experiences on this site and decided to deactivate

their account. This could imply that once the costs outweighed the gratifications that justified

the continued use of the platform, they decided to stop using it.

Identity exploration

Participants engaged in self-presentation when answering questions online. Through

these social interactions (answering questions and commenting), they expressed their likes,

dislikes (e.g. make-up brands, football clubs, music artists, vlogging), opinions (e.g. current

events and politics), and commented about their relationships (e.g. crushes and friends). The

reactions obtained are a way of getting feedback about oneself.

> There are those who genuinely ask you a question because they want to know, and
> they would leave a nice comment (Kevin, I4).

Participants feel that through Ask.fm, both friends and people they do not know get to

know more about them. They seem to think that through answering questions they will get to

know more about themselves and what others think of them. Moreover, as content on Ask.fm

is frequently cross-posted to Facebook and other platforms, this provides an opportunity for

others to ask more questions and make comments.

> Mark: It's like that. I enjoy seeing them ask me
> Interviewer: Why?
> Mark: So that they get to know me well… and whoever sees them says let me
>   ask him something (FG4)

The risks of anonymity

Throughout the focus groups and interviews, references to the negative aspects of

Ask.fm like anonymous insults, negative comments and harassment were frequent.

Participants were aware that anonymity on Ask.fm entailed risks. Rumours were easily

spread around, as one of the participants said: "they invented a rumour that I am pregnant"

(Melanie, FG3). Matters can also get complicated leading to escalating arguments when

insulting comments or questions are mistakenly not set as anonymous:

> For instance, I know of a friend of mine, and people were insulting him and he didn't
> know who they were. ….. The person forgot to set it as anonymous and my friend
> found out who he was (Ursula, FG3).

Under the cover of anonymity some users circulate links with sexual, pornographic, or scary

content:

Melanie: Or else on Ask, they send you the porn links.
Zafira: Or something scary, that kind. (FG3)

Anonymity was perceived as dangerous since users would not be able to find out who

started rumours or who insulted them. Participants seemed to believe that once an Ask.fm

account is set up, they would be "asking for it" (Melanie, FG3) and "if I have something

against you, I would have the perfect opportunity to insult you" (Ursula, FG3). In spite of the

distress that this may bring about, the participants said that many were still willing to take the

risk and go through the adventure: "Exactly, once you go for it you have to look at the

positive and negative things. As once the anonymous start asking you, you wouldn't know

who they are and you have to say 'I asked for it'" (Mark, FG4).

Participants referred to bullying on Ask.fm as "hate" (Markus, I1). Some participants

said they would not insult back as this was considered "stooping to their level" (e.g. Mark,

FG4) and in that case the person replying would be as appalling as the person sending the

insults.

While some users considered Ask.fm as a game, others got hurt. Deborah's brother

has a disability, and she expresses the hurt she felt when the anonymous insults she received

on Ask.fm were about him: "I love my brother a lot, and … to have someone insult me about

my brother, who has done them no wrong, as my brother would never ever wrong anyone, it

hurts" (I2). One participant refers to suicides that happened because of the hate received on

this site:: "Because in the UK, there were some who committed suicide. It's like, the problem

is not Ask.fm. Like, if you see people insulting you, you don't have to necessarily answer the

question. Remove it!" (Liam, I3). He emphasises that users should feel empowered to take

action.

Discussion

The results show that Ask.fm provides leisure-oriented gratifications such as

recreation and amusement. The interactive nature of the platform seems to also enable

adolescents to engage in self-presentation when replying to questions about themselves. The

feedback received might aid their identity exploration, confirming or disconfirming their

perception of self. Identity formation and confirmation which McQuail (2005) attributes as

gratifications attainable from traditional media, seem to apply also to social media such as

Ask.fm.

Anonymity, gives the young person greater control (Boyd, 2007; Michikyan &

Subrahmanyam, 2012) over their self-presentation. This control provides adolescents with a

sense of safety and security while experimenting with aspects of their identity. This finding

was also outlined in Dunne et al. (2010).

Adolescents knew insults, offences, bullying and drama were often experienced on

this platform. This was also a finding in Binns' (2013) study, indicating that the abuse and

harassment on the platform were widespread (before safety was increased). Although

adolescents knew about the abusive behaviour on Ask.fm, they still used it to communicate

anonymously. Their need for privacy to explore and assess oneself (Peter & Valkenburg,

2011) could be the reason why they opt for anonymous online communication. Anonymity

lowers their inhibition (Suler, 2004) and offers them safety from embarrassment and rejection

(Dunne et al., 2010).

Motivated by their interests and needs, adolescents select which media to attend to (Steele & Brown, 1995). Ask.fm might be appealing to adolescents because their peers use it and because anonymity provides a safe way for self-presentation and self-disclosure. This would be followed by interacting and engaging with the platform: observing others, taking part in the interactional exchanges, engaging in self-presentation and self-disclosure, and processing their experiences. Part of this process involves evaluating and assigning meanings to their experiences forming opinions, both positive and negative and labelling behaviours (e.g. showing off). Despite these value judgements, they may decide not to stop using the platforms because of the gratifications they gain and the developmental benefits they perceive. The media use becomes part of their daily lives (appropriation) and internalised (incorporation), or else it is discarded. This process becomes part of their sense of self, thus closing the cyclical process feeding back into their identity.

Based on this exploratory work, this is a tentative explanation that portrays how a model that integrates developmental theory with media theory can be applied to new media. To the authors' knowledge, this model has not been applied to understanding social media in the developmental context. Further research would provide more insight into how this process functions in relation to social media use and adolescence.

An issue that emerges from the analysis of these findings is the need for increased media literacy, particularly about what the implications of being anonymous online. Adolescents might not be aware that there is no such thing as complete anonymity online. Educating young people to think critically about their involvement with the new media from a very young age could increase their ability to discern risk, self-regulate and feel empowered when they need to take action. Self-regulation is particularly important since parental mediation with adolescents can be a delicate matter and involvement from parents might be perceived as an intrusion or an invasion of privacy and could backfire.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Given the exploratory nature of this qualitative research there are a number of limitations to the current study. Emergent themes cannot be generalised due to the exploratory and qualitative nature of the work. Since the data was collected with the aim of understanding online activity, there was no specific focus on Ask.fm. This however could be a strength since participants were not guarded in what they said about this platform. One way to explore this further could be to involve adolescents who communicate anonymously online in a participatory research. Adolescents can observe and discuss their anonymous interactions to reflect on the role these have in establishing and maintaining their sense of self. The interplay between developmental tasks and Uses and Gratifications explored through the Media Practice Model can be followed up by testing the model to identify how developmental issues are impacted by anonymity on social media, and whether the pursuit of identity is indeed a motivator for media use (Brown & Steele, 1995). Carried out across different cultural contexts, such research would identify relevant cross-cultural differences in the use of anonymous sites.

Further research utilising Uses and Gratifications Theory would offer a deeper understanding of the role that other widely-used platforms have in the developmental processes of adolescence, particularly because it seems that different SNS are used for different needs (Hosseinmardi et al., 2014). It would also be informative to compare the differences in handling developmental tasks between those who use these platforms and those who choose not to do so. The framework could also be applied to understanding adolescents' sexualised communication when mediated by technology and anonymity, particularly with respect to gender differences and belonging to a minority group.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to understand the gratifications obtained by adolescents when using Ask.fm. Anonymity on Ask.fm is a double-edged sword for adolescents. It is appealing: it gives the users the possibility to explore their identity through social interaction. They can make use of anonymity as an opportunity to get feedback about themselves and others, which they would not get or give in a more traditional context. These are all important aspects of identity development occurring in an online context. On the other hand, this opportunity also exposes them to other risks, as anonymity is often used for insulting and abusing others on this platform. While participants get entertainment gratifications they sought out, they also seem to equate Ask.fm with negativity, being bullied, insulted or feeling offended. Despite the fact that adolescent Ask.fm users were aware of the potential for abuse, the gratifications they obtained overcame the risk of making themselves vulnerable and getting hurt. This finding could to help understand why adolescents behave in risky ways online. Anonymity can be both a useful and powerful method for teens to deal with identity developmental. The fact that awareness of potential risks does little to negate indulgence, implies that in their quest for exploration, adolescents sacrifice safety for thrill-seeking.

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Footnotes

[1] In 2014, Ask.fm was acquired by IAC Publishing, LLC, the company that owns Ask.com

[2] Later that year Ask.fm was acquired by Noosphere Ventures albeit no significant changes

were made to the platform as yet (Ask.fm changes hands once again, 2016).

[3] EU Kids Online is a multinational network that aims to enhance knowledge of European

children's online opportunities, risks and safety. The network was launched in 2006 and uses

multiple methods to map children's and parents' experience of the internet, in dialogue with

national and European policy stakeholders. The research network has published several

reports and results based on empirical studies with the aim of informing policy and practice.

This paper draws on the work of the EU Kids Online network.

[4] The Focus Group Guide is available at this link and the Interview Guide is available here.

[5] From this point onwards, "FG" refers to Focus Group, and "I" refers to Interview.

Table 1 - Participants in Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus Groups								Interviews	
1		2		3		4		1-4	
Females		Males		Females		Males			
Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age
Nadia	11	George	13	Zafira	14	Keith	14	Markus (M)	13
Anthea	11	Jeremy	13	Olivia	14	Jeremy	14	Deborah (F)	15
Janice	11	Edward	13	Melanie	14	Mark	14	Liam (M)	16
Nina	12	Hilary	12	Ursula	14	Saviour	14	Kevin (F)	16
Kelly	11					Bob	14		

1
2   MALTESE ADOLESCENTS' USE OF ASK.FM   25
3
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5
6
7   **Table 2 – Thematic Analysis**
8

Themes	Clustered Codes	Codes		Sample Quotes
Whiling away the time, fun, intrigue	Fills time Answering questions Make the day better Avoid boredom Intrigue Thrill	Fun Questions Enjoy Fascination Interest Facebook Pastime	Funny questions Enjoyed seeing answers to questions The unknown Challenge Game	I enjoy seeing them ask me It's exciting to be asked questions anonymously I like not knowing who will ask me
The need to be accepted	Connecting with others What is wrong with me? Being popular Feeling excluded	Fulfilled Belong Peer influence Sharing information Be noticed Going unnoticed Obscene questions Compelled Connect Tormented	Left out Answering anyway Popularity Being liked Social media norms Online community Genuine questions Pressure to fit in Passing fad	You start questioning 'why aren't they asking me?'…. You start wondering 'what is it that they see in others that they don't see in me?'
Identity Exploration	How others see them Comments Feedback Role experimentation Exploring identity	Ask questions Reply to questions Personal questions Self-disclosure Negative Comments Showing Off	Roles Dating Relationships Sexuality	They ask you about your crushes I like the fact that they can ask me and I can reflect before I answer
The risks of anonymity	Asking for it Inappropriate content Inappropriate contact Arguments Positive and negative	Anonymous questions Avoiding confrontation Insults "Hate" Bullying Suicide Dangerous	Mentioning the past Hurt Anger Double bind Disempowered Facebook Jealousy	As once the anonymous start asking you, you wouldn't know who they are and you have to say 'I asked for it' Let's say God forbid something happens with his family and they would go to Ask.fm and start insulting him.