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Downs, C

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PLAYING IN A VIRTUAL BEDROOM: YOUTH LEISURE IN THE FACEBOOK GENERATION

Carloyn Downs

Introduction

In the United Kingdom social networking sites (SNS) have developed an impressive level of market penetration amongst young people. The most popular SNS in the UK is Facebook, with My Space, and Bebo use less prevalent (Ofcom, 2010). Seventy percent of 12–15 year olds and twenty-five percent of 8–11 year olds in the UK have an active SNS profile (Ofcom, 2010: p.6). Amongst even younger children the same study found that 37% of 5–7 year olds had visited Facebook sites in the week before the survey, although it had not asked whether this age group had SNS profiles. The adoption of SNS by younger children is despite SNS providers having age controls in place that set the lowest age as 13. The rapid price falls in web-and-walk technology and its availability on pay-as-you-go mobile phone packages has also increased the numbers of children using this as a means of accessing the Internet away from a PC or laptop (Ofcom, 2010: p.9).

The rise of SNS in the UK has been accompanied by worries expressed in the media and reflected in Parliament about the potential for adverse impacts as a result of exposure to various aspects of online use amongst young people. The greatest degree of concern has been reserved for inappropriate contact via open chat rooms, instant messaging and social networking sites. This 'stranger danger' discourse expresses fears for the physical safety of children and young people — that they will be 'groomed' by predatory paedophiles, or encouraged to meet in the real world inappropriate people, and as a result come to harm. There have been several tragic cases that have received significant publicity and as a result a number of initiatives have been developed to assist parents in keeping children safe from this type of risk in the online world. In the UK the government commissioned a review of Internet safety, led by child

psychologist Dr Tanya Byron, *Safer Children in a Digital World* (2008) which explored issues including predatory paedophiles, online bullying and harassment and the impact of violent video games on the behaviour of children and young people. This review however did not cover the types of content available to children and young people via SNS sites, nor did it explore how young people were using SNS sites in their daily lives.

The regulatory body for telecoms and other communication media, Ofcom, reports biennially on digital literacy. The Ofcom study of children and digital media includes the only large-scale data collection on SNS use amongst young people in the UK, showing how rapidly coverage has increased over the period 2008–2010 as well as indicating how much younger children's exposure to and use of SNS is rising quickly (Ofcom 2010). The need to develop a multi-agency approach to the real and perceived threat to the physical safety of children as a result of both their own use of the Internet (SNS, IM and open chat rooms) as well as the exploitation of children and young people by adult (child pornography in particular) led to the establishment of the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Unit (CEOP) in 2006 and the gradual introduction of 'panic buttons' on sites commonly used by children and young people (<http://www.ceop.police.uk/>).

The discourse around online 'stranger danger' and young people online has led to the development of research, policy and practice aimed at generating an understanding of the phenomenon and providing a practical framework of support and control. However the content available on SNS and the rapidly evolving ways in which young people are using third-party applications, self-generated content and SNS-provider developed features — such as Facebook messenger — is generating far less interest. Neurologist Baroness Susan Greenfield has noted that there is much we do not know about SNS. In a 2009 debate in the House of Lords she suggested that discovering the answer to questions such as, 'Why are social networking sites growing?' and 'What features of the young mind, if any, are being threatened by them?' were urgent issues (HL Deb, 12 February 2009, c1290). The research gap between contact via SNS and SNS content continues to grow. Greenfield pointed out in a speech at the 2010 British Science Festival that the Internet and in particular the ability to be always online and communicating may be generating what she has termed 'Mind change' and 'We should acknowledge that it is bringing an unprecedented change in our lives and we have to work out whether it is for good or bad' (Baroness Greenfield, *Guardian*, September 14, 2010).

Youth leisure in a digital world

Research has confirmed that the majority of young people in the UK (99%) have access to a range of digital media in their homes and that a

X significant proportion has internet access in their bedroom; usually alongside a range of other media hardware (Ofcom, 2010: p.15). These technology-equipped homes and bedrooms provide young people with a virtual world of leisure activities to replace a real world considered full of risk (Furedi, 2001, 2002). Bovill and Livingstone noted that the “nature of such private space may be transformed as the media-rich bedroom increasingly becomes the focus of peer activity and as the media through their contents, bring the outside world indoors” (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001: p. ???). Arnett (1995) identified the potential of an increasingly privatized family life coupled with unregulated media access (television) to lead to a process of ‘self-socialization’ of young people. The effect of unregulated access to unmediated content, via the Internet, may have even greater impacts on the socio-cultural lives of young people than those envisaged by Arnett.

For young people the role and importance of a private space, separate from adults, often used for leisure activities has been noted in a number of studies from a variety of disciplines. This space may be used as a coping mechanism for some young people as they work through the issues of adolescence and the pressures of an increasingly fast-paced world (Mathews, Limb and Smith, 1998; McKinney 1998; Skelton and Valentine, 1998). The development of the ‘digital bedroom’ has been documented by Sonia Livingstone and colleagues who note that fear of harm has led parents to embrace new technologies and site them in these physical spaces such as bedrooms (Furedi, 2001). Increasingly for young people “bedroom culture is developing because of the perceived failures of a more public, outdoor leisure culture” (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001: p. ???). X In many senses the Internet offers the archetypal private space for young people. The activities that they enjoy, chatting to friends, engaging in games, trying out new identities, listening to music, social voyeurism are all available online and without the problem of persuading parents and carers that you should be allowed out to engage in these activities.

As the data from Ofcom shows, not only is use of SNS endemic amongst teenagers, it is increasingly a significant amongst younger children. In part this may be because SNS virtually replicates activities and behaviours that are familiar and enjoyed in the real world. The front page acts as a bedroom door, setting out identity markers in the way that the decorations on a teen’s real bedroom door invite in or attempt to prevent the entry of various people. This profile is based on a form that although prescriptive in some ways, requiring answers to questions about demographic and personal details such as name, date of birth and location also allows for some self-authored text. The profile can also contain images, links, video, music, lists of friends, answers to questions (favourite television programme, films, bands) details of siblings (these are often NOT biological siblings but signal a significant friendship) and relationship

status. Third-party applications, which play a significant role in funding SNS sites and themselves generate income by selling credits that allow extended play of virtual games or the purchase of virtual goods, appear as icons on the front page, alerting visitors to the type of activities being undertaken by the space owner while targeted advertisements appear in side-bars, pop-ups and scrolling marquee.

The SNS user is also encouraged to upload email contacts to invite friends to join the SNS space and once friends have accepted the invitation they are displayed on the individuals profile in a searchable list, which depending on the privacy settings can be either seen by friends, friends of friends or every member of the SNS. In SNS space, "friends" can be a very loose term: a goal of users is to collect as many friends as possible and Facebook recommends new people to send a friend invite to each time a member logs in. Often young people will send a friend invite to these suggestions even if they have never met the person suggested, as this allows them to build up the number of friends on their profile and thus gain status as a popular person. A recent Guardian article included an interview with a sixteen-year-old who has 639 Facebook friends: she commented, "I don't want to be big-headed or anything, but I am quite popular" (Guardian, 16th July, 2010). The point is also made that she does not have a social life away from her bedroom and computer, highlighting the worries of Baroness Greenfield about the potential impact of SNS use on young people, and also confirming the findings of Frank Furedi and Sonia Livingstone that increasingly young people are confined, either by choice or as a result of parental concerns, to home-based leisure, much of which is based around the use of digital media, with a significant percentage of time being spent online.

Thus we can see that SNS is a site for leisure that allows variations of traditional youth leisure in a virtual space: providing a forum for peer-to-peer relationships, sociability (including gossip, friendship maintenance, sharing news), social voyeurism, status negotiation and a place for identity development and experimentation with new looks and styles, games and activities and membership of groups. However, there are also significant differences to the way these activities are carried out in a virtual world which may lead young people to engage in risky behaviours or to put themselves at risk of developing harmful behaviours, of being harmed or of harming others. SNS conversations are recorded for posterity (via the wall) and can be copied and replicated; the casual unkind comment may not be sidelined, or ignored by the few people who read it but may be passed on and passed around, spreading to a far wider group of people and that way causing harm. Indiscreet pictures will be shared with friends and can be copied and modified, appearing in unwanted settings and even used for advertising without permission, for content uploaded to SNS and passed on will survive in cyber-space even after a profile has been taken

down. Further, young people may be at risk of addiction to the activities they download as applications, such as virtual poker, and they can join groups that support harmful behaviours — there are many gambling and alcohol related groups, as well as groups encouraging anorexia and recreational drug use.

Identity, Leisure and SNS Use

That there is a period in the lives of young people when they develop an identity has been agreed by psychologists and sociologists since at least the work of pioneering child psychologist G. Stanley Hall (1906). Profound identity-related questions are posed, sometimes unconsciously, by all people, in all stages of life, but adolescence is commonly seen as a period when such questions as ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Who will I become?’ coincide with rapid hormonal changes, exposure to alcohol and recreational drug and significant life events such as transition to high school or a first romantic relationship, making this a potentially and often actually turbulent stage of life.

Developmental theory postulates that personal identity is developed as a result of processes of individuation and social relatedness (Josselson, 1980). The search for oneself is an easily recognisable element of identity generation, although individuation is related to marking a separation of self from others with the emphasis being on achieving differentiation from family and perhaps also authority figures more generally, and related to developing decision-making agency and autonomy. Social relatedness is linked to group identification, relationships with a wider social circle and developing a self-image that is located in a particular social world. Waterman (1985) is amongst those theorists who suggest that the processes of individuation and social relatedness require experimentation with alternatives. This approach suggests that eventual identity achievement will be achieved once a range of alternatives have been tried the individual is satisfied with the sense of self that has been created (Waterman, 1985).

While there is agreement that the development of an independent identity is one of the central developmental stages of adolescence, it is more difficult to establish agreement on when and how identity changes and develops as young people progress through adolescence to adulthood and beyond. Some academics have suggested more-or-less uniform stages that must follow logically one from the other and that this is a process that can be universalised (G. Stanley-Hall, 1906; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). Others point to evidence for an individual process of incremental change that has wide variations, and suggest that physiological and social factors such as gender and environment are as important as or more important than psychological factors (Gilligan, 1982). Sociologists add to the debate on identity, pointing to the difference between being and

becoming as central when trying to pinpoint the process of identity formation (Lee, 2001). The role of socio-cultural factors in identity formation, and most particularly the significance of leisure to the formation of a coherent sense of identity was well-articulated by Shaw, Kleiber and Caldwell (1995) and has become a developing strand within leisure studies. Sociologists and social psychologists also note the role of identity development in social interaction, group formation and sub-cultural development (Griffin, 1993; McRobbie and Garbor, 1976; Ulrich and Harris, 2003) and that identity development can be seen as a social construction of self (Tait, 1993). All of these attempts at capturing the nature of identity formation amongst young people offer important insights into this topic on the individual level. However, the role of groups in identity formation is another part of the puzzle about what goes into the mixture that makes individuals change from being into becoming. Exploring the ways in which young people use and interact via SNS as part of their leisure time may add important insights into the place of leisure and digital technologies in identity formation in adolescence.

It has been postulated that the identity development process is likely to be context-specific (Lavoie, 1994). The daily activities of life, experiences and social relationships with others all have the potential to affect identity development. Accordingly, the availability of social and leisure settings that allow young people chances to try out different personas, activities or interact with a range of outlooks and perspectives is central to the development of identity in young people as they experiment with a range of different identities (Kleiber and Kirshnit, 1991). Young people like to socialise with their friends and this is an important part of growing up (Putnam, 1995; Smith, 1999). In the last decade the ways in which young people socialise have been assisted by new technologies. Mobile phones and SMS use are almost universal amongst young people (Davie *et al.*, 2004; Ofcom, 2008) while access to the Internet either via the web-and-walk technology of 3G mobile phones or in the home and school allows young people to maintain high levels of contact with friends using instant messaging (IM) and Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Bebo, and MySpace. These are virtual leisure spaces where a wide range of leisure activities and socialising take place in an environment largely free from adult oversight and are central to the focus of this chapter.

Girls and SNS

The place of bedrooms in the cultures and sub-cultures of girls was first identified in the work of McRobbie and Garbor (1976) and it remains the case that leisure for girls even today often revolves round the home and their bedroom. The work of Sian Lincoln (2004) on teenage girls' bedrooms identifies clear gender differences in the ways girls and boys use their

bedrooms and show that bedrooms remain a significant physical space for young people, albeit a space that may now perhaps be seen as a gateway to a virtual world and one that offers the potential of 24/7 communication with friends. Lincoln has more recently been applying her work on teen's bedrooms to blogs, which she has seen as 'virtual bedrooms', spaces which can be decorated to reflect and affirm the identity of the owner, to which friends can be invited and with which the owner can mark out a personal space. As the blogs on which Sian Lincoln has worked with Paul Hodkinson have been those produced by young people within the youth Goth subculture, the work has particularly noted how these virtual spaces provide a safe place in which the young adult can develop their identity, work through issues such as prejudice within non-Goth society, and come to terms with who they are (Lincoln and Hodkinson, 2008).

Certainly the UK data supports the notion that virtual spaces offer some young people a place where they feel safe; Ofcom found that amongst young people aged 12–15 the statement, It's easier to talk about personal things on the internet was agreed with by 18% of respondents, with almost 15% of the same age group stating that they felt more confident online than in real life (Ofcom, 2010: p. 58). Ofcom have also found marked gender differences in the ways young people use the Internet and there are several activities that girls are significantly more likely to have undertaken than boys: these include establishing an SNS profile (75% vs. 65% for 12–15s) and using the Internet mainly for SNS and communication via instant messaging and email (Ofcom, 2010: p. 32). As this article will show, SNS is in fact used almost entirely as a form of communication concurrently with being a form of expression for the young people who have profiles. Uploading photos to a website (31% vs. 23% for 8–11s), setting up their own website (26% vs. 19% for 12–15s) and setting up their own blog (18% vs. 12% among 12–15s) were also more common amongst girls than boys (Ofcom, 2010: p.71).

Research into gendered aspects of identity formation by Gilligan *et al.* (1988) noted that for girls social aspects of identity development were closely related to ideas of intimacy, connectedness and caring, all aspects of being that are clearly facilitated by SNS with its ability to allow 24/7 contact with a network and the sharing of images and text that illustrate the connectedness and shared aims and values of the friendship group in social settings while at the same time offering the opportunity of private intimacy via instant messaging. Gilligan *et al.* (1988) found that in contrast boys identity-forming behaviours were more focused on achievement of aims and goals and competition with friends (Gilligan *et al.* 1988). Although gendered aspects of identity is not the focus of this chapter it is worth noting from the findings of the wider study that gendered differences were marked in why Facebook is liked and used and in the ways

in which Facebook is used. Girls typically responded with variations on these actual comments: 'stalking people I vaguely know and judging them' (social voyeurism); 'to get the goss' and 'for being nosey' (gossip / social knowledge); 'The photos and comments are the best bit' (identity formation and social voyeurism); 'so I can socialize at night / when grounded' (stranger danger avoidance). Boys had a far more restricted range of responses that related to 'spying on girls' (social voyeurism), 'free games' (entertainment) and 'arranging to meet mates' (organizing offline contacts / leisure). The level of girls' involvement with and commitment to Facebook was, without exception, stronger than that of the boys in the study, supporting the findings of Ofcom that SNS offers an environment that is more attractive to girls than boys.

SNS self-generated content: methodology and ethical considerations

The study reported here first started in the summer of 2007 as an investigation into the incidence of gambling via SNS amongst children and young people (Downs, 2010) and has now moved into a second stage. Stage one involved nine young people (aged 8–18) who were already listed as Facebook "friends" of the researcher agreeing to send screen-shots of their SNS-based games playing and taking part in unstructured interviews. The interviews were conducted as online chat, via message boards and email and face-to-face. All participants and all parents / carers of the young people involved gave permission. Safeguards included making it explicit that they could leave the study at any time. All material relating to their Facebook activity that would be included in the study was checked with the young people and was only used after they gave permission. While material relating to the young participants activities is included in the research there was a concern that Facebook allows material (images, messages, activities) from 'friends of friends' to be seen. It was decided that this material could not be used in the study, even if it was relevant. The reason for that decision was that in recruiting study participants discussions about the issues of putting personal material in the public domain had taken place with the young people and their parents/carers. This ensured confidence that they understood how to keep safe on Facebook, both in general terms of risky contacts but also what "public" meant in the context of the study. However, 'friends of friends' had not given permission for their material to be used and even though they had placed material in a public domain there was no way to be certain they had understood the risks.

The young people in the Gambling and SNS stage of this research were early adopters of Facebook. The opening of this SNS to anyone aged

over 13 with an email address occurred on the 26th September 2006, and this study started in June 2007 with participants who had mostly began using Facebook early in 2007. In the first stages of the gambling study Facebook was mostly used as a source of entertainment. It did not offer a chat facility until April 2008, and the users taking part in the study used tab-browsing to chat with friends via MSN and Facebook for games. At first it was common for the girls in the cohort to also maintain a personal site on rival SNS, Bebo. The attraction of Bebo was that, in contrast to the apparently restrictive template of Facebook, it offered facilities that allowed personalisation of the pages. However, it was noticeable that as the cohort became older and more familiar with Facebook the use of Bebo declined and stopped, and the six girls in the study in particular developed ways of using Facebook that made it become more personalised to them.

By early 2009 the development of Facebook into a tool used by the study participants for picturing their lives had become so much a feature of their activity on the site that this became the focus of the study. In addition, over the time that the work had been ongoing, another eleven young people (aged 14–17) had asked if they could take part in the research and joined the project with the same safeguards as outlined above. The age range is 11–18 and there are fourteen girls and eight boys. This stage of the project proceeded (and continues) as participant observation supported by unstructured interviews. These were greatly facilitated by the development of Facebook Chat (from April 2008), as this often allowed almost instant questions / responses about new images and motivations for edited images as well as clarification to be obtained rapidly about some of the series of images that told stories, or comment threads as they were developing. While there is a legitimate question of how much of the material might be influenced by the researcher's presence, there are two factors that mitigate somewhat against such influence. As Joinson (2001) noted, computer mediated communication has been shown to encourage high levels of self-disclosure and also, while no 'friend-of friend' material has been included in any of the material published about this research, it does act as a triangulation point. Behaviours observed amongst the cohort participating in this research were also observed amongst the 'friends of friends' who were of similar age to the participants.

The place of self-generated content in young people's Facebook use

Danah Boyd has commented that an SNS profile could be seen as a form of digital body, "where individuals must write themselves into being" (Boyd, 2008: p. 129), making the link with identity formation. A similar analogy was drawn in the case of blogging by Jenny Sundén (Sundén, 2003: p. 3), and there is evidence that text is also an important element

of what has been observed in this study. However although the much more striking aspect of SNS use has been the extensive use of photography, photo-editing and photo-staging to create an image of self. The link between picture and text suggests more a visualisation, a picturing of selfhood, with self being drawn, re-drawn and recreated to fit into the visual culture of the world in which the young people live. The significance of photography in identity creation, re-creation and experimentation with different ideas of self appeared to be the tool or vehicle through which text was developed and delivered on SNS space, especially amongst girls. The significance of a process of creation in the development of self or identity by young people was well-articulated by John Thompson:

It is a project that the individual constructs out of the symbolic materials which are available to him or her, materials which the individual weaves into a coherent account of who he or she is, a narrative of self-identity. (Thompson, 1995: p. 210)

For users of SNS the materials available are the template provided by the SNS host, a blank canvas that gaining expertise in HTML allows users to develop at will on My Space or Bebo, but one which appears rather rigid in the case of Facebook. However, even the apparently prescriptive format of Facebook is personalised to an extensive degree by the use of photographs, comments and via the development of applications that are downloaded as activities to use while online.

For the young people in this study SNS allows personal expression alongside networking and instant communication as well as relationship building and maintenance. The rigid template is almost an irrelevance to many girls who use their own albums of photographs and downloaded images with associated narrative threads to provide individuality. As the Digital Girls study in Canada (Weber and Mitchell, 2008: p. 27) noted, digital technologies as used by girls in particular in this study were the tool that allowed them to develop and present their identities. The presentation of identity via Facebook had significant fluidity despite the apparent rigidity of the template provided by Facebook and was linked to offline leisure preferences in many respects, with music, fashion and leisure activities widely recorded and then commented on. The audience for the identity being presented had an important role in the development of an individual identity as friends commented on images, added in details of shared experiences or developed a narrative thread. This then permitted the images initially presented without comment or with only a short phrase of explanation to subsequently develop into a presentation of identity that was in part co-constructed by the wider social group with particular input from significant others. The role of 'bezzies' (best friends) in this process amongst younger girls seemed particularly significant. With older girls, best friends retained significance but boyfriends and a wider

range of external influences could also be seen impacting on the developing narrative. These are often rapidly changing expressions of self as new ways of being can be tried out, feedback obtained and discarded in a short space of time.

Of particular note is the use of photo-editing software that allows young people to control their virtual bodies in a way that is often not possible during adolescence. Unsightly spots and blemishes are easily removed, girls may also control their shape, engaging in virtual slimming and augmentation by altering disliked aspects of their bodies, almost invariably so that they reflect more closely media depictions of the desirable female, such as slimming waists and hips, increasing bust size, lightening, dying or lengthening hair. This process is sometimes done with subtlety, in an attempt to present an image that appears unaltered, but that the presenter considers improved. However, images may often be altered dramatically, sometimes presented without comment, sometimes asking for approval. Friends are quick to respond to these images by suggesting modifications or offering opinions. The comments can be lovely, and self-affirming for the presenter; 'Noooooo! Not bleached blond. Yur sooo cute!'. But they can sometimes be casually unkind, with a simple 'lol' or 'lmao' ('laughing out loud' and 'laughing my arse off') being responses that have the potential to dent young people's desired image of self. This may be an aspect of identity formation that needs further investigation as development of disordered body image in adolescence is well-documented as potentially leading to longer term problems (Massey-Stokes, 2008). Photos are also often carefully posed, with current idol images in mind. Thus images are staged to show a version of Britney Spears or Taylor Swift or to display new acquisitions that refer to the style of the favoured icon. This in turn allows friends to show that they recognise the cultural referencing taking place, and to place themselves as part of the group. A third type of images are those with photo-shopped additions, e.g. an idol, or an image that reflects how they feel at that time.

Other significant uses of photography as identity affirmation and creation are the story-telling series and the images of significant places and spaces, often of their real bedroom or of artwork they have created. The story-telling series images can be divided into two types — semi-staged or diary. The staged series may look on the surface very similar to the diary type of story-telling series but the commentary will show that it has been deliberately created, perhaps copying a music video format, a You Tube video or something that the presenter wants to try out. These photos may start out as being taken while 'hanging out', then inspiration will strike and the series is developed. So one interesting staged series originated on a local beach after school, but developed into a set of sand sculptures, shadow photos and message writing that told of a developing relationship.

An example of the diary-type includes accounts of leisure events such as gigs, where the initial series of pictures are largely accompanied with comments from the poster of the circumstances of the taking, or their impressions or feelings while taking the image and these develop into a narrative strand, with other friends who attended the event adding in their version. These co-constructed photo-diaries seem to perform a group-cohesion and identity-affirmation function. A second type of photo-diary is the series of individual photos uploaded to show friends what the presenter has been doing in her leisure life. These albums can contain up to 150 images of a short period of time, and if looked through quickly almost resemble the old-fashioned flip-books that seemed animated when flipped through quickly. A series of 147 pictures of a 20 minute bus journey offered a striking example of this, but similar sets are common and would include trips to the park, family outings and events, school lunch breaks. A series of a girl re-applying make-up that teachers have ordered removed generated a large number of comments, very supportive of the girl in question and her style and image. The comments suggested very strong resentment of attempts by staff to control the images teenage girls wanted to present: “[Name of teacher] wd be ugly even with some slap shes sooo jelous of you”, “u look fab without makeup but its not fair to make you take it off”; as well as suggesting that girls felt they needed their make-up in order to feel more in control of who they were: “If they give me detention I am not going without [eye] liner n bronzer cos I feel naked on my face n I want to hide”. It can be seen then that the comments are an integral part of the photography and the creation of a narrative understanding of the events that take place within the lives of the girls involved. What is not clear is whether simply posting a comment about reapplying makeup in the girls toilets at lunch time and nearly being caught by the duty teacher would generate such a volume of comments and support. It appears that the visual image acts as a stimulus, prompting more comments than a simple text posting — but the sample is not large enough to be in any way certain of this.

All of these uses of photography within SNS use are a result of the widespread availability of mobile phones with in-built good-quality digital cameras. These are such an ubiquitous accompaniment to teenage life that the taking of images to record an event and the almost immediate uploading to Facebook is second nature. It seems that to some users the daily events of life are not really real unless viewed through the lens of Facebook and their friends. Greenfield (2010) argued that it is not known if SNS use is changing the ways young people think, but there are suggestions in the way photography is being used that it might be changing the way young people generate and mediate their identity during an important period of their lives. All of the young people in this study have privacy controls set so that only friends can see their profiles, and that

is an important safeguard. However, this does not prevent their images and associated comments travelling beyond their control. Photos uploaded to an SNS can be easily and quickly copied to another location and distributed onwards, as can text. In addition, friends of the young people who are associated with this study often do not have their privacy controls set to friends only, but allow their SNS space to be seen by friends of friends. This allows a wider circle to see comments and images on their SNS space. Accordingly, comments and images that are extraordinarily personal, comments that refer to illegal behaviour or are in other ways incriminating, have been seen by the research team while viewing SNS spaces that they are linked with. Therein lays a clear risk to personal safety and future life chances. Employers and universities are increasingly searching SNS spaces to check up on the behaviour and private lives of individuals applying to them. The widespread photo-diarising of social events and behaviours by young people can be copied and spread beyond the audience it was intended for and this can easily have unforeseen consequences that can be devastating.

Conclusions

Facebook and other SNSs provide young people with a virtual world to explore alongside the real one as they become independent social actors, try out new ideas and activities and develop their young adult identities. Using SNS is clearly seen as a leisure activity by young people, but this is leisure taking place in an environment that is not monitored by authority or regulated by statute. This is in contrast to their explorations of the real world and its physical spaces, which are adult-mediated, adult-constrained and adult-owned. The adult response to these new virtual worlds has been largely based on ideas of risk that they have transposed directly from adult understandings of the real world. Online stranger danger has received much media coverage and accordingly responses to the virtual have been framed in the light of knowledge of the real world.

The recent campaign by CEOP to force Facebook to install a panic button on their pages, in common with My Space, Bebo and MS Instant Messenger, reflects the widespread common understanding of adults that the greatest risk to young people exploring virtual worlds alone comes from strangers wishing to cause physical harm. Facebook resisted CEOP demands for a panic button on each of its 26 million unique UK user-profiles but did develop a CEOP application that could be downloaded as a result of this media-driven campaign (*Guardian*, 12th August, 2010). Certainly there are stranger dangers in the online world but, as Ofcom (2010) found, the great majority of parents and young people are now aware of, and using, privacy settings to control access to SNS profiles and know about the panic button to CEOP. In contrast there is almost no

awareness amongst parents, carers, young people or children of the potential to access content via an SNS that might cause long-term harm to an individual. The possibility of risks from activities such as unregulated virtual gambling games or participation in groups supporting harmful behaviours has not been explored, nor has there been much attention given to the potential for user-generated content to both damage the individual who uploaded it and hurt others.

However, there are many positive aspects to SNS that should not be ignored. The uploading to SNS of images from mobile camera-phones that has enabled the massive development of the creative potential in SNS by young users is an exciting advance in mass, popular culture. This combination of technologies has allowed photography to be democratized far beyond what was possible when cash was required to buy film and develop the photographs. Young people have the freedom to experiment with photographic creativity in a way that has not been possible before, and can exhibit their work in an interactive forum. This development is far more than an online slide-show — it offers a space and means for the exploration of events and issues within the lives of users. This type of SNS use within the leisure lives of girls in particular offers young people the chance to experience liminality, and “‘play’ with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them” (Turner, 1982: p. 28), an activity Turner believed to be important in escaping from the pressures of the real world. SNS appears to offer the potential for a place where ‘escape experiences’ can be created and thus may be important in developing identity and maintaining friendship groups in a society where young people are increasingly seen as a threat and moved on from public spaces. What is clear is that to young people SNS offers a world of endless possibilities and unmeasured risks, and little likelihood that adults will catch up enough to understand exactly what is taking place. The greatest danger from youth leisure within an SNS world perhaps lies in adults not even bothering to try to find out what is going on.

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