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PLAYING WITH RISK? SOCIAL NETWORKING AND THE NORMALISATION OF GAMBLING BEHAVIOURS

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Introduction

This paper grew out of an exploratory study into the ways young people are using Social Networking Sites (SNS) and whether accessing potentially risky activities such as virtual gambling might encourage actual gambling or increase the likelihood of risky behaviour amongst younger users (aged 8–18). This work led to a wider examination of SNS as a form of leisure and the ways it has been adopted by young people and adapted for use in ways that are often dissimilar to those predicted by academics and social commentators.

Online social networking belongs to a group of online activities known as computer mediated communication (CMC) that also includes blogging and micro-blogging (Twitter). Folksonomies such as You Tube, del.icio.us and Flickr are also a form of CMC but are not included here.[1] The rise and adoption of online social networking (SNS) has been rapid and worldwide, with the first SNS site launched in 1997 and the sites that have become most popular with British young people initiated between 2002 and 2005. SNS is not just a means of contacting friends: it offers a range of leisure activities to users, often downloaded as applications. One reason for the popularity of these sites may be that they are "technically based manifestations of human tendencies" (Neal, 2007). Young people have been early adopters of this new form of online leisure, suggesting that the human tendencies supported by SNS are especially important to that group. Recent research established that 49% of children aged 11-17 had a personalised space on one or more of the popular social networking sites (SNS) such as Bebo or Facebook (Ofcom, 2008).

Alongside the rapid acceptance of SNS as a new form of leisure activity amongst young people has been a degree of moral panic about

the impact of the activity. British Professor Susan Greenfield recently questioned the impact of SNS on young people, reflecting a widespread sense of unease about the ways in which this technology is being applied: "Why are social networking sites growing? What features of the young mind, if any, are being threatened by them?" (HL Deb, 12 February 2009, c1290). The need for research into SNS has also been noted by leading US SNS researchers boyd [sic] and Ellison who state that so far we have "a limited understanding of who is and who is not using these sites, why and for what purposes" (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 14). This paper reports the results of a preliminary investigation into the uses of SNS amongst a group of nine young people aged 8-18 over a three month period with the aim of establishing indicators for future research into the role of online content-generated risk.

Whilst "It is extremely predictable that any major new technology should be associated with a variety of human responses, some good and some not so good" (Yellowlees and Marks, 2007, 1452), the feature of SNS that has caused most public anxiety is the potential for inappropriate contact via SNS. This builds on the experience of open chat rooms where there were media-driven panics about online 'stranger danger'; and supports the assertion of Willett and Burn, (2005) that "Folkloric understandings of the dangers associated with the internet are deep rooted and persistent" and "overlap similar patterns of talk about stranger danger in general" (p.14). The widespread understanding that online dangers to young people reflect the dangers of the outside world led to a government funded high-profile investigation of the extent and nature of such risk, *Safer Children in a Digital World* (Byron, March 2008). But there has been far less research investigating content available to young people online and the choices they make when using that content as part of their personalised online leisure package.

The study reported here found that, in general, young people were aware of privacy risks, and noted a range of potential risks from content accessed by young people including pro-anorexia, self-harm, recreational drug use and pornography. This research concentrated on gambling-related content in particular because there is research consensus that exposure to gambling at a young age increases the likelihood that problem gambling will develop (Griffiths, 1990 not in refs list, 1995; Deverensky and Gupta not in refs list). In addition, a large-cohort study of youth gambling in the UK (Ipsos Mori, 2009) found that 28% of their sample had played virtual gambling games in the preceding seven days and concluded that virtual gambling was "the single most important predictor of whether a child had gambled for money in the period and one of the most important predictors of problem gambling if he or she were indeed a gambler" (p. 133).

This investigation of gambling via SNS highlighted the significance of virtual money and virtual goods in the development and maintenance of SNS spaces: young people were developing consumer and consumption behaviours that they believed could be funded by gambling-like activities. The study also showed that SNS use has developed far beyond the models envisaged by academic researchers. Young people were commonly tab browsing, using several sites simultaneously, perhaps chatting via instant messaging (IM) while using an application on Facebook and uploading a new 'skin' to Bebo. SNS also appeared as part of offline leisure with uploaded pictures and edits a topic of great interest alongside status updates and new applications or groups. Similarly, activities undertaken in the real world contained significant elements that were carefully choreographed and recorded for upload to the virtual world. This chapter explores the development of SNS and the theoretical frameworks that underpin this research before discussing the findings in detail.

The development of SNS

The main function of SNS for users has been articulated by danah boyd [sic] and Nicole Ellison as being

> … primarily [for] communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network. To emphasize this articulated social network as a critical organizing feature of these sites, we label them "social network sites".(boyd and Ellison, 2007)

The earliest effective SNS was sixdegrees.com, launched in 1997, and designed to allow individuals to make contacts and send messages. This rapidly achieved a membership of several million only to close in 2000 largely as a result of failure to commercialise the concept successfully. The popularity and potential of SNS was rapidly exploited by other developers, with many new sites being launched and achieving large followings over the period 1999-2001. These SNSs were primarily aimed at linking business communities (especially in the new technologies), supporting dating activity and allowing professional profiles to be shared (boyd and Ellison, 2007) and include LiveJournal, BlackPlanet and Ryze.com.

The opening of SNSs to young people really took off with the launch of MySpace in 2003 and Facebook and Bebo in 2005. MySpace differentiated itself from existing SNSs by making bands welcome. "Bands wanted to be able to contact fans, while fans desired attention from their favorite bands and used Friend connections to signal identity and affiliation" (boyd, 2007). A further advantage of MySpace was entirely

down to error. My Space HTML coding was not secure and this allowed users to personalise their space, changing their 'skin', using online tutorials and cutting and pasting code so that their pages were individualised, changing layout, colour, fonts and aspect. "By copying and pasting code from other websites, teens change their backgrounds, add video and images, change the color of their text, and otherwise turn their profiles into an explosion of animated chaos that resembles a stereotypical teenagers' bedroom" (boyd, 2007: p. 6). Habbo (previously Habbo Hotel) is also popular with young people, stating that 90% of its members are aged between 13 and 18 (Sulake Corporation Ltd. 2007,) but did not feature in the SNS use of the young people involved in this study.

Key Features of SNS

Research conducted amongst young people suggests that social networking is important to their social development through allowing access to social worlds and on-line communities (Livingstone, 2008).
For the young people in this study, SNS accounts offered a range of facilities that were important. While accessing a personal and personalise-able online web space that did not require any expenditure was a significant factor in getting young people to join, the initial impetus was the ability of an SNS account to facilitate communication with friends. In 2002 Mante and Piris noted that text messages (SMS) and Instant Messaging (IM) were hugely popular with teenagers:

> Hence communication devices that allow for contact with peers without parents or teachers interfering are very appropriate in this stage of life and explains the popularity of the mobile phone and SMS messaging.(Mante and Piris, 2002: p. 52)

Similarly, *UK Children Online* (Livingstone and Bober, 2005) found that one of the advantages of Internet use most valued by young people was contact with friends. Having an SNS presence allows young people to use the email and IM facility, to post messages on virtual walls and leave virtual post-it notes, to comment on pictures, video, music and blogs and develop ongoing conversational threads that can run over several days. Friendship is especially important to young people and all individuals "are socially and culturally determined by our friends" (Pahl, 2000: p. 172), Pahl also suggests that the influence of friends might be particularly strong during teenage years. In the context of the uses of SNS with its wider definitions of 'friend' it is important that "Friendship must be seen in context" (Pahl, 2002: p. 422): in the context of SNS, friendship is being experienced in a variety of ways that challenge our assumptions about how young people mediate their social spaces and lives. Here we could include the use of tagging, the role of the news-

feed, SNS as a tool for surveillance of friends, or potential friends and a range of activities, and for controlling access to a public image.

This study noted that an aspect of SNS use that appears important to young people and especially to older girls (13+) is social voyeurism, an activity ideally suited to the medium. Young people are interested in what their peers are doing and how they are doing it, and SNS fosters this interest, allowing new opportunities for gossip. Although this element of SNS has led to concerns about cyber bullying (Kowalski and Limber, 2007; Williams and Guerra, 2007),) gossip also has many positive facets, and as Wert and Salovey point out "is purposeful and, perhaps, necessary for healthy social functioning" (Wert and Salovey, 2004: p.122). Certainly within this research the development of a public persona on an SNS space was supported for older participants (12-18 age group) by the widespread ownership of camera phones which allow young people to capture photographic images at will. This facility encourages many to record significant segments of their daily life which are uploaded to their SNS space, annotated with tags and comments and, in effect, develop individualised 'photo-stories' of the type popularised by *Jackie* Magazine in the 1970s. The availability of these illustrated narratives allows both the creation of a managed public image of self, but also offers those able to view the profile the opportunity to comment on the nature of the narrative and make adjustments to the story by adding additional information. Further research is needed into this type of activity but it may prove to be important in the creation of an identity. Certainly the regular development and refinement of narrative accounts of life has been shown to support an individual's perceived sense of self and help with generating understanding and meaning of aspects of an individual's life (see the work of Koski-Jännes, 1998).

The communication and public image elements of SNS are supported by a range of functions developed either by the SNS host or by third parties. This category includes groups, for although these are apparently and often user-led it is clear that some are in fact organised by individuals acting on behalf of corporate organisations and use message threads to offer discounts and access to commercially provided services. Users can also add applications (these are games and activities).

Virtual Bedrooms? The fundamental theoretical concept underpinning this study is that of sub-cultural theory, especially youth subcultures **(Cohen, 1958; Clarke, Hall *et al.*, 1976; Hebdige, 1979).** The seminal work on bedroom cultures as a subculture in the lives of girls by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1976) has been developed by Bovill and Livingstone who noted that "Bedroom culture is developing to include boys alongside girls because of the perceived failures of a

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more public, outdoor leisure culture" (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001). This project took the idea of physical personal space in which identity can be explored and a friendship network maintained and applied it to the new virtual worlds inhabited and personalized as 'virtual bedrooms' (Lincoln and Hodkinson, 2008) where risk-consciousness may be reduced and users may experience a mistaken sense of security. Exploring this private virtual world where young people may be self-socializing (Arnett, 1995) in unexpected ways offers new information on the continuing evolution of youth sub-cultures in the twenty-first century. The other strand of theory that informs this research is that of dimensions of risk comprehension. These theories underpin a significant quantity of research and theorizing on risky health behaviours (Conner and Norman, 1996; Gardner and Steinberg, 2005; Gigerenzer, 2003; Sandman and Weinstein, 1993; Weinstein, 1998). The conjunction of these approaches in this study is important because, as France (2007) noted; "youth research has taken less interest in risk-taking as a cultural phenomenon" (France, 2007: p. 146). The realist position on the risk-taking behavior of young people — that risk-taking can be seen as part of a rational calculation by young people — may not be appropriate for the range of risks now accessible to young people. This is because it fails to take into account that the reasons for young people engaging in risky activities have a societal context that fits into youth culture, and that engaging in risky behavior is in itself a social product of wider patterns of social understandings of risk-taking.

The idea of bedroom cultures first described in Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's seminal work on the sub-cultures of teenage girls (1976) might be thought to have declined in importance as new leisure opportunities opened up and gendered barriers to more diverse forms of leisure diminished. Bedrooms are a significant physical space for young people and "an important haven for most teenagers, a private, personal space often decorated to reflect teens' emerging sense of themselves and where they fit in the larger culture"(Steele and Brown, 1995). However a fear of risk has led parents to embrace new technologies and site them in these physical spaces for young people so that, for both girls and boys, "bedroom culture is developing because of the perceived failures of a more public, outdoor leisure culture" (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001). Internet use at home is often away from living rooms or family hubs, and parents / carers may not be aware of how young people are using the Internet. For many young people, access to the Internet is part of bedroom technology alongside the iPod, mobile phone and television that 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). The media-rich bedroom and the increasing compartmentalization of family life means that young people who report spending up to 50% of their time in their bedroom (Bovill and Livingstone, 2001) may lose sense of increments of time as they are engrossed in new media. The anecdotal evidence that children are increasingly staying up very late to chat online or watch television in their rooms suggests that the media rich bedroom helps develop a sense of timelessness (Maurice Smith, Chief Inspector Ofsted, 2006 on BBC News). Creating a sense of timelessness is an important aim in leisure venues; the removal of this sensation from outside venues and into the media-rich bedrooms of many young people suggests that bedrooms may need to be considered a leisure venue in future. The potential of an increasingly isolated family life coupled with unregulated media access to lead to a process of 'self-socialization' of young people was noted by Arnett in 1995. The effect of unregulated access to unmediated content, via a mode of communication that is particularly suited to young people prevented from socializing in the real world, may have even greater impacts on the socio-cultural live of young people than those envisaged by Arnett.

McRobbie and Garber's work emphasized that the bedroom was a safe space in which girls could experiment. Just as the girls McRobbie and Garber studied were able to control their physical space through techniques such as limiting access, personalization, accessing consumer culture and negotiating friendship relationships in a safe space, so SNS creates a 'virtual bedroom' in which both boys and girls are able to undertake activities that are extraordinarily similar to those identified by McRobbie and Garber in the 1970s. This takes the notion of physical personal space in which identity can be explored and a friendship network maintained and applies it to the new virtual worlds inhabited and personalized as 'virtual bedrooms' (Lincoln and Hodkinson, 2008). With a virtual bedroom, online identities can be created as young people "type [themselves] into being" (SundÈn, 2003: p. 3). Indeed there was evidence in this study that young people also 'pictured' themselves into being, with photographic images created and manipulated via photo-editing software to fit the narratives, allowing only a carefully mediated persona to be displayed. However, there are two key differences between a virtual and physical bedroom: visibility leading to inappropriate contact, and access to unmediated content.

Understanding potential risks from unmediated content is particularly important when the use of SNS is considered as a virtual bedroom. Since (physical) bedrooms are an intrinsically safe space (McRobbie and Garber, 1976), the creation of 'virtual bedrooms' via SNS may generate a false sense of safety amongst users, especially if they

have set privacy controls to prevent strangers accessing their space. The girls McRobbie and Garber worked with and young people using SNS are all using a personal space as a place where they can experiment with risk, whether the risk is trying the effect of a shorter skirt and playing truth and dare in a real bedroom, or answering 'How Well Do you Know Me' quizzes, or playing virtual poker. However, while both groups of young people were playing with risk — and in fact need to be able to play with risk in order to develop important skills for living — it might be the case that the range and rapid development of online activities open to young people requires society to develop now new understandings of risk instead of transposing real world fears onto the virtual world.

The development of virtual bedrooms is locating in a public space that which in the real bedroom might be 'the private self' of contemporary youth culture. Just as the girls McRobbie and Garber wrote about generated new identities with make-up and clothes or tried out new activities such as kissing and dancing in their real bedrooms, a range of new activities and friendships can be explored via SNS. However in the real world this exploration takes place in a private space, which to young people often means a space with no adults. For young people a personal space where access is controllable often equates to freedom. In the virtual world the notions of public and private take on new dimensions, making exploration of a virtual bedroom a hazardous pursuit that may include potentially risky activities such as online friends promoting pro-anorexia views, sharing self-harm videos or playing gambling games.

Young people and gambling

Gambling in the UK has expanded into mainstream leisure since the first legal commercial casino opened on January 3rd 1961. Although legal in the UK gambling was tightly regulated, and was an activity that many participants would consider a mild vice rather than a legitimate leisure activity. Attitudes towards gambling remain ambivalent: the most recent prevalence study found that although 68% of the population had gambled, attitudes towards gambling in general were negative (Wardle *et al.*, 2007). However the implementation of the Gambling Act (2005) in September 2007 has increased the numbers of venues and gambling machines in the UK, allowed the advertising of gambling and led to a far higher profile for the pastime and in 2006/2007 turnover in the UK gambling industry was £84.2 billion (Gambling Commission, 2008). Alongside the development of land-based gambling opportunities, online or remote gambling has also expanded rapidly and in the six months to March 2008 the gross gambling yield for UK registered remote gambling operators was almost £620m (Gambling Commission,

2008).This does not include the many online gambling sites that are registered overseas and therefore not included in these figures.

A key aim of the recent legislation is the protection of children and vulnerable adults from gambling-related harm. In the UK, gambling for profit is only allowed for over-18s, with exceptions made for lotteries and the football pools where people aged 16 and over can participate. Gambling in the UK is regulated by the Gambling Commission and that organisation takes steps to prevent children from gambling. In policing commercial gambling a recent series of test purchases found that 98% of betting shops tested allowed under-age punters to place a bet (Gambling Commission, 2009). The Gambling Commission does not regulate virtual gambling — that is, gambling where virtual money or goods are traded — and virtual gambling is an activity that children are not prevented from participating in. Nevertheless, "playing free online gambling games in the past seven days was the single most important predictor of whether a child had gambled for money in the seven days preceding their interview, and one of the most important predictors of problem gambling among those who had gambled" (Ipsos Mori, 2009: p. 5). The Gambling Commission classify virtual online gambling as including free demonstration games on commercial gambling sites: these games generally offer more favourable odds than the games played using real money.

Research in Europe, the US, Canada and Australia has found that gambling amongst young people is a popular and prevalent activity (Derevensky and Gupta, 2004; Griffiths, 2002; Moodie and Finnegan, 2006). The recent British Survey of Children, the National Lottery and Gambling (2009) found a problem gambling rate of around 2% amongst adolescents in the UK and noted relatively high rates of participation in gambling by under-16s of over 20%. Other youth prevalence studies have consistently found higher rates of problem gambling amongst young people than adults, with an average rate of youth problem gambling in England and Wales of up to 4.9% (compared to an adult prevalence of problem gambling of about 1.8%) for the four surveys conducted over the last decade; and a prevalence of 9% youth problem gambling in Scotland has been reported (Moodie and Finnigan, 2006). Whatever the prevalence rate for problem gambling, there is consensus that "Problematic gambling among adolescents has shown results in increased delinquency and crime, the disruption of relationships, and impaired academic performance and work activities" (Ladouceur, DubÈ and Bujold, 1994). When considering youth gambling the impact of SNS-hosted virtual gambling-type games and the numbers of gambling-related groups available via SNS are not currently included in investigations, but yet these may alter patterns of access and socio-cultural attitudes towards gambling in the UK.

Patterns of youth gambling that have been noted by many researchers include that gambling is more attractive to young males than females and that young men appear to be more prone to developing problem or pathological gambling behaviours than adults exposed to similar types of gambling (Ladouceur *et al.,* 1994; Moodie and Finnegan, 2006; Stinchfield *et al.*, 1997; Wynne *et al.*, 1996). Studies by Shaffer *et al.* (1993) and Griffiths (1995) also suggested that young people could be more vulnerable to the harmful consequences of gambling than adults, a finding supported by the higher rates of problem gambling found amongst young people; while adolescent gamblers have been found to have an increased risk for the development of an addiction or multiple addictions (Gupta and Derevensky,1998a, 1998b; Winters and Anderson, 2005). The recent Gambling and Debt study found that 87.5% of gambler interviewees with problem debt had started gambling under the age of 16, and that just over one third of the sample had started gambling before they were aged 10 (Downs and Woolrych, 2009). Several studies by Derevensky and Gupta have found that one of the primary reasons for gambling is the excitement and enjoyment the pastime offers and its potential for lifting individuals out of the real world (Derevensky and Gupta 1996; Gupta and Derevensky 1998a; 1998b). It is also likely that virtual gambling is as risky as gambling for real money, as Clark (2009) has shown. There is a research consensus that early exposure to gambling can habituate young people to gambling and increases the likelihood of either high-risk or problem gambling developing in adulthood (Fisher, 1990; Griffiths, 1995; Griffiths and Wood, 2000). It is also recognized that types of gambling that allow rapid rates of play and frequent 'near win' experiences are more likely to cause problems in younger people than in adults (Clark, 2009; Griffiths and Wood, 2000; Wardle *et al.,* 2007). This body of research reveals the likelihood that early exposure to gambling will impact on later gambling behaviour, suggesting that if larger numbers of young people are gambling then there will be a rise in both habitual (non-problem) gamblers and in problem gambling. This paper will also consider whether the types of gambling-like games being accessed by girls has the potential to reverse the pattern of problem gambling being more prevalent among males than females.

SNSs and virtual gambling

Rubin(1984) pioneered the idea of media use falling into two categorisations: ritualised and instrumental. This work has important implications for the study of SNS use. Where the media are used as a means of filling time or for entertainment purposes, and has become habitual, Rubin described as ritualised use. This pattern of behaviour

was common amongst younger users who were using the Disney Club Penguin sites as a form of play, and indeed, although Club Penguin fulfils the function of SNS, it is mainly a massively multiplayer online game (MMOS). The more selective use of media observed in this study amongst older users (12+) more often falls under the categorisation Rubin described as instrumental; that is, goal-directed and selective. The goals Rubin saw as particularly significant were strongly individual in nature, such as information-seeking or the facilitation of communication needs; but there was also goal-directed use of SNS utilities that, while on the surface appear to be pastimes, in fact had a range of instrumental functions.

Social networking sites offer a range of downloadable utilities that allow gambling (with cyber-money rather than actual cash), links to commercial gambling websites via advertisements and message boards, large numbers of groups with gambling as the linking interest, and applications that are seemingly not related to gambling but include gambling activities as an option within the application.

Sony and Microsoft consoles (Playstation, PSP, Xbox etc) also have affiliated SNSs (Playstation Network and Xbox Live) that allow online play with significant gambling-like elements. There is a negative and positive points-based system in which winning points are traded for gifts, equipment and accessories. An example of a gambling-like feature is the Facebook 'Fluff Friends' utility. This was popular with girls in the study who, often on the recommendation of a friend, had acquired a 'virtual pet'. Upgrades to improve the habitat of the pet, food for the pet so that it can race more quickly, limited edition objects to decorate the habitat, gifts for friends with pets and virtual art equipment are some of the goods that can be purchased with "munny" or the limited edition currency 'fluff gold'. While small amounts can be earned slowly, rapid access to larger amounts of "munny" can be acquired by betting. In the FAQ section on "munny" it is suggested that; "By betting on (fluff) Races - payout based on odds — jackpots can be huge!". The more food a pet has eaten the faster it can race and the more likely it is to win. There is no visible race, players simply click on the race button, place a bet and get an instant result. In order to win the "munny" a player has to initiate the race. The limited edition currency 'fluff gold' is available for exchange, currently 500 "munny" gives 10 'fluff gold' or can be purchased (10 'fluff gold' for one US dollar. As David Beer noted "SNS are commercial spaces, even those that are free to access – indeed, it is where they are free to access that we need to remind ourselves of this most frequently" (Beer, 2008: p. 525). Fluff gold can also be earned through clicking on advertisements, but again the gambling link is there; both Gala Bingo and Deal or No Deal are offering large amounts of free fluff gold (both offer over 200 gold in comparison to the more

usual offer of less than 50 gold from other advertisers) for visiting their sites.[2]

Much Internet access by young people takes place away from the view of parents or carers, sometimes in regulated environments such as schools or libraries, often in bedrooms or rooms that are not the hub of the house and increasingly via 'web and walk' technology. As access to SNSs is now standard on many mobile phones, including the popular pay-as-you- go packages that are attractive to young people, it can be difficult even for the most IT-literate adults to be aware of young peoples' virtual activities: "Two-thirds of parents say they set rules about their child's use of social networking sites, although only 53% of children said that their parents set such rules" (Ofcom, 2008). Young people are increasingly sophisticated in their use of regulated Internet access; many now contact sites restricted by school servers via proxy servers to bypass controls. Gaining the relevant information about how to do this is something of a rite of passage: in this study no child under 12 knew about proxy servers, the older participants had found out about this from Internet use at home.

SNSs host gambling-related groups of which there are more than 2000 on Facebook, many with members apparently aged under 18. Initial investigations suggest that some online gambling company employees may establish these groups as a means of recruiting customers, although this is not made clear. Groups often have several thousand members: when one large group was surveyed, 15% of those declaring their age were under 18, and it appeared that a further 5% were under-18 but not declaring so. These groups often facilitate access to gambling websites via special offers.[3] The groups also give advice and tips to gamblers via message boards and can include 'hot-links' to special offers on commercial gambling sites as well as offering many gambling applications to download and other applications with gambling-like elements. There are more than 20 million regular players of virtual poker via Facebook, and initial investigations suggest that under-18s can access all gambling-related functions hosted on SNS. However, the extent to which young people actually use gambling-related applications and message boards cannot be ascertained without a much larger investigation.

Young people using SNS

This small study sampled nine young people who were listed as 'friends' on the investigator's Facebook profile prior to the investigation. Six were girls aged 8-18 and three were boys aged 12-14. All of the young people and their parents/carers consented to participating in the project. Using instant messaging as a tool for questions and answers, noting

comments made when online, observations of use, unstructured interviews and monitoring of patterns of access, discussion threads, tags, comments and group membership allowed a picture to be built up of what SNS meant to the young people in the group, how and where SNS was used, motivations for selection and use of applications (games) or membership of groups. In addition to this qualitative work a quantitative analysis of the number and types of gambling-related groups and applications was made and application usage statistics supplied by the SNS were noted.

boyd and Ellison (2007) delineated SNS spaces as not primarily for forming or maintaining social networks but rather as a space in which activities took place, and this was true of the small group who participated in this research. While there were large numbers of 'friends' listed, many of these were individuals at the same school. With youth groups being another connecting feature, it was unusual for 'friends' lists to contain anyone who the young people had not come into contact with in the real world, supporting the assessment of Haythornthwaite that:

> What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks … these meetings are frequently between "latent ties" who share some offline connection. (Haythornthwaite, 2005)

All of the young people were very aware of privacy risks and had used privacy settings to control access to their pages, with the youngest (age 8) member's page controlled and monitored by a sister who was 18 years old.

The young people in the study found SNS useful for a range of purposes. The boys in the sample had a band page on My Space alongside individual Bebo profiles. All the girls with the exception of the youngest (using Bebo) had both Bebo and Facebook. The activities that took place via SNS could be divided into pastimes, profile development, monitoring others, and socialising. The socialising tended to be with only a small proportion of the often large numbers of 'friends', with tab browsing being used by all participants to allow all their profiles to be open at the same time alongside MSN (and also pages of homework), so that at any one time an individual might be uploading new photographs and commentary to one SNS profile while chatting on a second and at the same time talking with other friends via MSN. The homework was completed alongside these other tasks and this meant Google might also be open, so that significant levels of online activity might be taking place. Monitoring others tended to take place through checking of email updates from the SNS: this alerted the young people that something had taken place and if they were interested they could

log-in and look at it. As most of the girls logged into their SNS several times daily this seemed an odd approach, but questioning showed that using email updates to filter out information meant that when they logged in they could delete much of the masses of information that appeared on their profiles daily without checking it all.

All participants were extremely sophisticated in profile development. Several of the girls were extremely proficient with photo-editing software and used their camera-phones to photograph themselves in a variety of daily situations. These shots can be extremely stylish: black and white and sepia effects are often used for atmosphere and then small touches of colour are added to highlight features (eyes and lips usually) while other photos are airbrushed to remove spots or even-out complexions. Slimming of waists electronically is also popular. That photos are edited is not a secret, and these skills are highly valued by friends unable to master the software and increase the status of the girls able to offer the service to their friend's photos. Apart from photographs, profiles are managed on Bebo and My Space by changing 'skins' (not possible on Facebook). Using HTML code, users can personalise their profile, add music, change fonts, and alter colours and layouts. Developing knowledge of how to change code and where to acquire new code is done via online help pages set up by other users, and individuals with a good 'skin' gain status and may help friends to make changes to their profiles. Technical knowledge confers a distinct status advantage in the virtual world.

There is no comprehensive baseline figure for SNS applications: groups of any sort and the gambling-related data cited here was collated in August 2008 and will have changed since then. At that time there were 35 Poker applications on Bebo with 5.5m users on the most popular application that month (although there was no information on individual visits); there were 100+ poker applications on Facebook at the same date with the most popular Facebook poker (Texas Hold 'em) achieving 4 million individual plays per month. In August 2009 the number of poker applications on Facebook had fallen slightly but the number of individual plays on the most popular application (Texas Hold 'em) had risen to 15,305,946. This form of poker is increasingly popular with young people and is available in many leading toy retailers both as a physical game (retailing at £4.99) and as a console game (retailing at £9.99). The game's popularity is perhaps fuelled by regular tournaments broadcast on satellite channels. The leading chip contestant on a Facebook poker application averages £4 billion reward tokens (Facebook, 2008).

The Texas Hold 'em poker applications on Facebook and Bebo were well known amongst the group, and all except the youngest child had heard of the game. All of the boys and three of the girls (aged 12 and

13) had downloaded the application: the boys played the game daily while the girls were less enthusiastic about it but had played. When the girls were asked why they had downloaded a game they were not really interested in, the consensus was that applications were recommended by friends and it was rude not to accept an invitation to try out a friend's suggestion. The Texas Hold 'em poker game offers free Facebook chips every day but players can replenish their stocks by buying additional Facebook chips. Facebook uses points to reward poker game winners and these can be won, lost or exchanged. The company running this application also host games on My Space, Bebo, My Yahoo, iPhone and Tagged. While there is no bar on under-18s playing virtual games, these can lead people into real play through a range of marketing techniques. Some of the virtual games offer real prizes or cash-play options while all have side-bar adverts highlighting the availability of free, trial games of commercial gambling sites. Trial games almost always have more favourable odds than real games, which can lead players to develop a false understanding of the risks involved in playing the games. Young people have a very poor understanding of odds, and only one of the group (the 18 year old) exhibited a secure understanding of odds and was able to relate this knowledge to natural frequencies.

While the girls in the group were not regular users of virtual poker sites they were all owners of virtual pets using the 'Fluff Friends' application. All of the girls enjoyed the game although they did not all participate in every activity available via 'Fluff Friends'. The least popular activity was 'Fluff Art' as it "costs too much "munny" and you never win" (girl, aged 11) although all of the girls liked the 'Fluff Challenges' such as Easter egg hunts. These activities allow the collection of various decorations that can be exchanged for "munny" or as decorations for the virtual habitat. The virtual money and virtual goods had real value to the group, and although the older participants said they were looking after a virtual pet only because, for example, "I don't want to upset my sister, she really loves her polar bear", they changed and bought new goods, fed their pets and petted both their pets and pets belonging to friends as regularly as the younger users. In order to acquire "munny" to equip pets with habitatsall except the oldest member of the group raced their pets daily and bet on the races as a means of earning additional "munny" in order to acquire virtual goods, with limited edition goods being especially sought after.

The girls talked about their 'fluff friends' gambling experiences in ways that suggested they saw the activity as an effective tool for the acquisition of goods rather than an exciting or interesting way of passing time. So that one 14 year old said, "I was well annoyed when I lost all my "munny", I only had another day to get the Christmas hat I wanted

and I had to start all over again". Another girl, aged 11, reported that if she lost "munny" by betting she would earn more by petting or filling in a survey and then do some more betting, "because it's quicker to get 'munny' and I got 6000 'munny' one time and I got gold then". Another 13-year-old said that she looked up how to earn "munny" and the page suggested filling in surveys and betting, but, "it kept saying there weren't surveys so I did betting. It's a quick way to get the 'munny'". The utility of gambling for these girls was very noticeable and in contrast to the boys who were using the poker application. While girls were quickly bored with poker, the boys enjoyed it. Boys used a range of positive words when describing the game; it was "exciting", "skilful", "fast" and "fun" and "a buzz when I win". They would log on to play poker when they were bored. The girls appeared to be playing for utility and were more likely to use negative, qualified or neutral words of description such as "annoyed", "unfair", "OK", "good for getting more 'munny'".

boyd and Ellison see offline and online living as separate entities, but this was not noticeably a feature of the way the young people in this study used SNS (Boyd and Ellison, 2007: p. 14). A closer understanding of the ways in which SNS was used by young people in this study was articulated by Anders: "The relation between cyberspace and physical spaces is interesting, since it demonstrates that online social networking is not only online" (Anders, 2008). The young people in this study used SNS as a tool to support friendship and leisure activities and the boundary between online and offline was fuzzy. Most of the young people in this study went to the same school and would use journeys to and from school and school breaks to chat about information that had been shared online or was relevant to their time online. Individuals will tell a friend to look at their new 'skin', report that new photos have been uploaded, and ask if they have joined a group. Where groups are set up for lobbying purposes (and this was fairly common) then the offline space of the school or school bus was used to promote the online group. An example was the campaign by the girls at a large comprehensive against compulsory school trousers. The girls established a Facebook group and a paper-based petition. They used the petition as an offline recruiting tool for the Facebook group and then, when the group had achieved a critical mass of members, alerted the local newspaper to the story, achieving a front-page headline.[4] Another facet of offline use was as a springboard for gossip. A group would gather at one house (in the bedroom usually) and would check each others SNS (one computer, several tabs) but then stop using the computer while they discussed pictures, comments, tags or discussion threads on mutual friends or their own profiles.

The work of Ellison *et al.* (2007) illustrated the fluidity of relationships that often run both online-to-offline and offline-to-online in

relation to the development and maintenance of friendship networks. This fluidity was a noticeable element of the ways in which SNS was incorporated into the lives and leisure of the young people in this study.

Conclusion

The 2009 conference of the Leisure Studies Association took as one of its themes 'risk in leisure'. Certainly there is a need for people to have the opportunity to experience risk, whether physical or virtual. Developing an individual understanding of risk is not something that can be taught: it needs to be experienced and is essential for learning how to avoid harm. Individuals do not generally understand how to calculate risk (Gigerenzer, 2003) and are not equipped to run complicated risk assessments each time they encounter a new situation. This leaves individuals reliant on risk perceptions — developed and codified in social settings, influenced by family, friends, media and internal, often unconscious, thought processes (Slovic, 1987) Without knowing what levels of risk are safe, individuals can either engage in risk to a dangerous extent or conversely shield themselves from all possible exposure to risk for fear of what might happen. In the developed world most people do not experience risk in their daily lives, so engaging in risky leisure offers a means through which risk can be experienced. However, the risks from early exposure to gambling and the extension of gambling-like behaviours to new forms of consumption, located in what may be considered a safe space (a virtual bedroom) may be greater because individuals do not perceive virtual leisure activities engaged in while safely in the home as potentially risky. Society sees a need to protect young people from risk in leisure and this is expressed in the development of health and safety requirements and child protection legislation.

In the virtual world there has been a transfer of the real world protection of children from risky contact, for example with warnings of the need to guard against 'online predatory paedophiles'. But there has been little consideration of the potential of content-generated harm. The exploration of virtual worlds needs to move forward with a consideration of a range of questions that go beyond those posed by Susan Greenfield (quoted here in the opening section). Finding out whether gambling with virtual money encourages positive attitudes towards gambling in young people, and understanding whether virtual gambling leads to an increased prevalence of actual gambling are both important especially given that — even before the effects of gambling liberalisation were added in — there were between 250,000 and 300,000 problem gamblers in the UK: a figure that is strikingly similar to Home Office estimates for problem drug users (Singleton *et al.*, 2006; Wardle

et al., 2007). While recreational gambling by adults is a safe way of playing with risk and offers the additional benefit over some other types of leisure of offering hope alongside excitement (Downs, 2008), problem gambling is currently a hidden addiction that has impacts on individuals, their families and society. As Poulin noted, the impacts of problem gambling, even after successful treatment, can last for generations (Poulin, 2006, p175) and it is for this reason that the potential of SNS use to allow, develop or encourage risky behaviours in young people needs to be examined in depth.

Notes

1 The term *folksonomy* was coined by Thomas Vander Wal. The creation of a folksonomy is based on the tagging and categorization of information for reference and retrieval leading to the development of a community (folk+taxonomy). In the case of You Tube this is video, del.icio.us users tag bookmarks and flickr users tag photos. Folksonomies are an effective means of managing online information as the user composes the tags to suit their particular needs. Folksonomies also confer a social benefit, allowing others to use those tags as a search tool and has resulted in the development of large online communities based around users' tags

2 Both sites require an account to be opened and money deposited. This in theory prevents under age people from accessing the sites as age verification procedures are in place. However, there have been a nu8mber of well-documented cases where under-age gamblers have accessed parents credit cards and lied to get onto gambling sites. Research by NCH, GamCare and Citizencard found only 7 of 37 sites prevented a sixteen year old from lying about her age and opening an account. http://www.gamcare.org.uk/news.php/27/press_release_underage_internet_gambling_study while the 2009 Ipsos Mori British Survey of Children, the National Lottery and Gambling noted that 21% of children had gambled online.

3 This was established by checking wheter members of gambling groups were also members of school groups. On Facebook membership of a school group is dependent on having a live email account at the school. All UK schools shut down these emails once students leave. While some school students are over 18 most are not.

4 Details available on application to the author.

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