

# *Social Networking Sites and the Dangers They Pose to Youth: Some Australian Findings*

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## ***Abstract***

Social networking sites are increasingly being used by young people as a mode of social communication. Unfortunately, associated with the use of social networking sites come the risk of cyberbullying and the danger of sexual predation. This article uses a mixed methods approach to gain an understanding of the prevalence and perceptions of such risks among young people. The key focus of this article is not only to identify the prevalence of specific risks associated with social networking sites, but also to explore young people's understanding of these risks and how they manage them. This was accomplished by having a sample of South Australians complete a questionnaire about their experiences and perceptions of risk when using social networking sites. The implications of this study are that educating young people will hopefully minimise the likelihood that they will suffer harm if subjected to the twin intrusions of cyberbullying and sexual predation. A young person who has a sound knowledge of the risks of using social networking sites will be potentially less naïve, and therefore better equipped to deal with adverse communications they encounter when online.

## **Introduction: Young people, social networking and risk**

Often people say technology is bad. What's actually going on is it's not the technology, it's how individuals use that technology. (Hemanshu Nigam, US Online Safety Technology Working Group, in ABC 2010)

Social networking sites play a significant role in the lives of young and old alike. In today's fast-paced world, the internet is a crucial part of our society, and has 'revolutionised communication in the twenty first century' (ABC 2010). This form of technology has the power to change the way we relate to our self and to others. It can change the way we think, what we believe, the nature of our sexuality and even our sense of identity (Turkle 1996, cited in Hillier and Harrison 2007).

It is commonly assumed by adults, and in particular parents, that young people engage in risky, experimental behaviour offline and, where there is a medium where they can remain anonymous, the opportunity is there for young people to behave in a similarly risky manner

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online. The difference, however, is that they sometimes do not fully understand the risks involved, or that their behaviour is potentially harmful to others, as well as themselves.

Social networking sites can be defined as 'web-based services that allow individuals to, first, construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system and, second, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and third, view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system' (Boyd and Ellison 2008:211). While there are many forms of social networking sites, their most popular use is as a tool to connect with other people. Social networking sites have many features that make them popular, such as the ability to customise one's 'profile' with one's own information (with some websites allowing you to change the background and include pictures), the ability to publish photos and film images, and the ability to join groups filled with people with similar interests and beliefs. Most importantly, social networking sites facilitate the ability to connect with friends and readily update one's information. These features are particularly popular among young people, as it creates a mode for self-expression. This notion will be discussed in the literature review section of this article.

Research suggests that the use of social networking sites among young people is growing both in Australia and abroad. In a US study, Lenhart et al (2007, cited in Anderson-Butcher et al 2010:64) claim that 28% of adolescents have their own online diaries or journals, 27% have their own websites, and 55% have their own profiles on social networking sites. Furthermore, longitudinal research also in the US suggests that only 24.5% of students used the internet in 1996 compared to 79.5% in 2001 (Hendel and Harrold 2004, cited in Padilla-Walker et al 2010). Additionally, the popular site Facebook, first created in 2004, now holds over 400 million members worldwide (ABC 2010).

Aas (2007:161) has criticised academic criminology for its neglect of crime in the cyber realm. In keeping with this general trend, criminology in Australia has had relatively little to say about this area. Most studies have clustered around exploring other cyber harms like identify theft and hacking (as can be seen though the works of Peter Grabosky on virtual criminality in 2001, such as Smith and Grabosky 2001; Grabosky, Smith and Dempsey 2010), rather than the dangers that are associated with social networking. The study reported in this article, however, involves opinions and stories from young people about their social networking experiences, making it not only different to other studies, but also crucial to addressing the dearth of literature in this area.

While the internet may very well be a great tool for learning, socialising, and 'self-exploration', along with these freedoms comes risks of sexual predators as well as online harassment and cyberbullying (Internet Safety Technical Task Force 2008). This article will, accordingly, address the risks social networking sites pose to young people; specifically, the dangers of sexual predation and cyberbullying.

## Overview

Having established in the above introduction that young peoples' use of social networking sites is a contemporary issue that is worthy of criminological scrutiny, this article will now do four things. First, it will position the relevance of this article by discussing some recent cases highlighting the dangers of social networking sites. Second, it will survey some of the important literature that underpins the use of social networking sites. This will entail exploring both general understandings of the risks associated with using social networking sites, and the specific issues of cyberbullying and the dangers of sexual predation. Third,

this article will examine research conducted at Flinders University, in Adelaide, South Australia, which offers a rare insight into the ways that young people perceive and manage risk when using social networking sites. In this section, the scope of the study and its findings will be discussed. Finally, this article will use the research findings as a platform to consider implications. This will entail suggesting some future lines of criminological inquiry that might build on the valuable insights provided by the study reported here.

### **Some recent cases highlighting the dangers of social networking sites**

Reports in the media highlight the issues associated with social networking sites more visible to the public eye, making it seem as though social networking sites are suddenly more dangerous than they once were, and that paedophiles linger on every corner. While media reports are an indicator that crimes are occurring relating to social networking sites, they cannot be used to determine the prevalence of crime as they merely report isolated incidents. They do, however, situate the risks that exist. To that end, there have been numerous cases where a social networking site has been used as a medium to initiate criminal behaviour. A crime involving a social networking site that has been of particular interest and notoriety in Australia is that of the murder of Carly Ryan. Carly allegedly fell in love with an idyllic image of 'Brandon', whom she had met online. In reality, 'Brandon', did not exist, and reportedly was nothing more than the 'cyberspace alter-ego' created by a 50-year-old man and his 19-year-old son (Fewster 2009). Carly was subsequently murdered by these two men (Fewster 2009).

Similar to the tragedy of Carly Ryan's murder, in September 2009, a 17-year-old girl was murdered after meeting a serial rapist on a social networking site. Her killer posed as a teenage boy with a photograph not of his likeness as his display picture (Marcus 2010). These cases are the most serious because they resulted in murder. However, other serious crimes like sexual assault have occurred in Australia where false or duplicitous claims have been conveyed using social networking sites to lure young people into situations where their safety has been imperilled. In an article entitled "'Killed by the Internet": cyber homicides, cyber suicides and cyber sex crimes', Jewkes (2007) criticised the media for publishing alarmist news stories where the internet has been a conduit that has led to death or serious harm. Such stories, she implies, are at the extreme end of the spectrum of harms associated with internet use and they work to fuel anxiety in an already worried public. Notwithstanding that Jewkes is right to point out the role the media plays in exaggerating the risk and fuelling anxiety about becoming a victim of cybercrime, cases like these Australian murders and sexual assaults — however rare — are an important reminder that lethal violence and serious harm can ensue when young people encounter duplicitous users of social networking sites.

In terms of other harms, there have also been incidents where memorial sites have been bombarded with pornographic images (Caldwell 2010), as well as racist remarks in some cases (Harvey 2010). Memorial sites are online profiles that are set up in remembrance of people that have died, and commonly people will post loving messages or photographs on the page. There have been cases where people have taken advantage of this — for example, an article in *The Weekend Australian* by Lunn (2010) discussed the tragic deaths of two teenagers and how, within hours of tribute Facebook pages being set up, the memorial sites were swamped by pornographic images and racist comments. These kinds of incidents occur because there are limited controls on these sites, and the young people using them are sometimes not mature enough to understand the risks associated with such sites. It could be

also said that adults are the same, in that some people are not mature enough to safely navigate these sites and are just as likely to be fooled or mistreated online as young people. However, the risks associated are generally more prevalent among the younger generations. While it is clear that social networking sites come with the risks of cyberbullying and sexual predation, this is not to say that all young people are at risks of these harms. Some are indeed cautious with their behaviour, and thus it must be emphasised that this article does not seek to claim that all young people are naive and in great danger.

It is worthy of note that Facebook has improved its security settings so that users cannot post certain links on profiles if the security program considers it to be 'spam', and one can block another if they post hurtful comments. However, this does not stop young people initially posting hurtful messages and images on memorial sites. Damage can be done before the necessary steps are taken to stop such posts. These cases contributed to the impetus to conduct a study into the ways that young people perceive and manage risk when using social networking sites.

### **Some important literature underpinning the exploration of young peoples' use of social networking sites**

It is helpful to define each of the risks this article will explore: cyberbullying and the dangers of sexual predation. Cyberbullying, as defined by Erdur-Baker (2010:110), involves 'hurtful and intended communication activity using any form of technological device such as the internet or mobile phones.' It is of particular significance to note that while the definition provided above is clear and useful, there are issues associated with defining what is and what is not classified as cyberbullying. The specific behaviours that are considered to constitute bullying may vary from person to person. What one person believes to be a serious form of bullying, another may believe to be harmful child's play. Thus, it is important that a more specific, universal definition is agreed upon to ensure all opportunities for bullying are included. Furthermore, it is important to note that while the behaviours (bullying and sexual predation) to be discussed may occur on social networking sites, it must be clarified that these behaviours or crimes occur offline as well. Thus, it must be made clear that the internet is simply a new medium on or through which these behaviours can occur; these crimes are easier to commit on the internet and more repugnant, but are not created by it.

#### ***Cyberbullying***

The online community of social networking is the ideal environment for people to act without thinking. It is easy to remain completely anonymous, and thus young people are much less likely to inhibit their emotions online. Because of this, cyberbullying is more appealing to children these days than traditional bullying, as the bully's anonymity provides the opportunity to say or do things they would not be able to do in person, particularly at school in the presence of teachers (Pujazon-Zazik and Park 2010). Cyberbullying can include anything from making threats, to sending malicious messages and making derogatory comments. A study by Patchin and Hinduja (2006, cited in Erdur-Baker 2010) surveyed children under the age of 18, and found that 11% of participants reported being bullies online, 29% of participants reported being victims online and 47% have witnessed online bullying. Additionally, cyberbullying prevents the bully from seeing the impact their behaviour is having on the victim, as they cannot see how the victim responds. In this way cyberbullying may have longer lasting consequences than that of traditional bullying, as the

true impact of the bullying is frequently not seen and the bully will therefore not refrain from bullying. Furthermore, Guana and Subrahmanyamb (2009) suggest that cyberbullies and cybervictims are more likely to be involved in maladaptive behaviours offline than those not involved in cyberbullying, as well as having an increased social anxiety. Put simply, cyberbullying seems to have greater negative consequences than traditional bullying, and therefore requires more attention to combat it.

Cyberbullying is an issue that is becoming of greater concern in relation to bullying in schools as a whole. Another reason why cyberbullying is more dangerous than traditional bullying is that it can occur out of school hours. There was a time when children were bullied at school, but it would end there. Now, students go home with the worry of continuing to be bullied online, or through text messages. An article in an Adelaide community newspaper (*The Messenger*) supports this in stating that bullying, in the past, was simply face-to-face and could be managed in school, but now this sort of behaviour can happen at any time of the day or night (Nelligan 2010). To support this, Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2009) contend that for each type of traditional bullying there is a form of corresponding cyberbullying. For example, instead of damaging belongings, a virus can be spread; instead of exclusion at school, one can be excluded from online groups; and instead of being called names and being abused while on school grounds, false accounts can be set up and hurtful comments published through social networking sites (Vandebosch and Van Cleemput 2009).

Social networking sites are the ideal environment for young people to express themselves, as well as try and find some individuality. Cooler (1902, cited in Patchin and Hinduja 2006) explains the social acceptance model, and that self-esteem is formed from the perceptions others have of the individual. To support this, Livingstone (2008) explains that the online world is popular among young people as it represents their own private space where they can construct, experiment and present themselves in different ways. However, cyberbullying leads to low self-esteem, and has also been linked to suicidal ideation, eating disorders, chronic illness, and some victims running away from home (Patchin and Hinduja 2006:152 citing Borg 1998; Kaltiala-Heino et al 1999; Striegel-Moore et al 2002). In the more extreme cases, bullying can lead to depression, and even homicide, and it is suggested that victims of cyberbullying are more likely to be involved in criminal behaviour later in life (Patchin and Hinduja 2006). An example of where bullying can lead to extreme actions like homicide is school shootings, such as the 'Columbine High School Massacre' in the United States (US) in 1999. While this was an isolated incident, and was an example of traditional bullying and not cyberbullying, school shootings are no longer something that is unheard of. This incident shows that some victims of bullying can be so drastically affected that they resort to violence. If this is the harm that traditional bullying can cause, then cyberbullying could lead to similar extreme acts of retaliation by maladjusted victims with violent tendencies. The global infamy provided by the internet can encourage vengeful acts by the victims.

The problem here is that bullying behaviour cannot be controlled easily. Teachers cannot easily punish a student for bullying another student if the bullying did not occur on school grounds. Another issue in relation to studying and measuring cyberbullying is that the behaviour can be difficult to measure as many children do not perceive their behaviour to be bullying (Vandebosch and Van Cleemput 2009). Commonly, young people think what they are doing is funny or a joke, and are actually unaware of the hurtful consequences their actions may be having on the people involved. Thus, it is difficult to simply ask someone 'have you ever been cyberbullied?', or 'have you ever been involved in cyberbullying?', as the person may not believe what happened was bullying, whereas another person might.

Furthermore, Livingstone and Helsper (2007, cited in Livingstone 2008) support this by explaining that what for an adult may seem like risky and dangerous opportunities, for young people may be exactly the kind of opportunity they are looking for. Overall, cyberbullying is an increasingly troubling issue and must be addressed with great care.

### *Sexual predation*

The dangers of sexual predation involves the use of sexual solicitation, which, as defined by Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor (2006, cited in Guana and Subrahmanyamb 2009:353), involves 'requests to engage in sexual activities or sexual talk or to give personal sexual information that were unwanted or, whether wanted or not, made by an adult.' This article discusses mainly the risk of being exposed to such solicitation when using social networking sites and the risks associated with being contacted by unknown persons.

Young people today may be more technologically advanced than those of a decade ago, but this does not make them any more mature, nor do they necessarily understand abstract notions of risk any better. It is evident that, through social networking, young people are more likely to make rather personal information public (Hinduja and Patchin 2008, cited in Erdur-Baker 2010). Young people are likely to post personal information on their sites, as well as (physically) revealing photographs of themselves. This clearly is risky behaviour — as noted by cyber safety expert, Dr Julian Dooley, 'the more information that you put out there the greater the potential is for people to find that information and possibly people that you don't want to' (ABC 2010).

Further, research claims that these young people are also more likely to meet someone in person whom they have met online (but never actually met in person before), without their parents' knowledge (Erdur-Baker 2010). To adults, this may be seen as risky behaviour, but some young people do not understand this and are often putting themselves in danger of sexual predation. What is of concern is an estimate that over 50, 000 sexual predators are on the internet every minute of every day (Thomas 2006, cited in Patchin and Hinduja 2010). This indicates that users are at a high risk of being preyed upon by sexual predators.

Wells and Mitchell (2008) have suggested several factors that are associated with an increased likelihood of being a victim of sexual solicitation online. First, research suggests that those who have high levels of conflict within the family home — such as miscommunication with parents, supervision issues and other parent-child conflict — results in a greater vulnerability to internet related problems, such as being a victim to a sexual predator (Wells and Mitchell 2008). This could be due to the young person seeking solace online, or perhaps trying to find a friend or soulmate to talk to in order to escape the issues within the family. Second, young people who have experienced some sort of victimisation offline (such as sexual assault) are more likely to be a victim of sexual solicitation online (Wells and Mitchell 2008). This leads to the final point made by Wells and Mitchell (2008) — that those that have been a victim of some form of sexual abuse offline may be suffering from some sort of mental illness such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression, thus also making them more vulnerable online. This is an ever increasing problem, and young people need to be educated in this area to gain a better understanding of the dangers they face online. This is in keeping with calls in the United Kingdom to better educate young people about the risks posed by the internet so that they might enhance their safety when online (Atkinson, Furnell and Phippen 2009).

### *General internet use*

In terms of general internet use, one should acknowledge from the outset that there is nothing in inherently sinister about the internet itself. As Jewkes (2007:4) has observed: '[m]ost cyber-crimes are reasonably common offences; computer technologies have simply provided a new means to commit "old" crimes, and it is clearly not the case that if the Internet did not exist, neither would violent and sexual crimes'. Before discussing some of the problems associated with crime and the internet, it is thus imperative that one does not scapegoat the internet as a technology that creates crime, underwriting the impetus for moral panics (Jewkes 2007:5). Rather, the internet facilitates new ways for these age-old crimes to be perpetrated.

It is important to understand the types of behaviour young people are engaging in when they are online, as well as the reasons they use social networking sites in the first place. As discussed, young people commonly use risky behaviour online, and a study conducted by Hinduja and Patchin (2008, cited in Pujazon-Zazik and Park 2010:82) found that 20% of adolescents' profiles included swear words, 18% referenced alcohol use, 2% claimed marijuana use, 8% mentioned tobacco use, and 5% included revealing photographs in underwear or swimsuits. Furthermore, another study of social networking profiles of children under the age of 18 found that 54% contained information about engaging in risky behaviour, 24% referenced sexual behaviours, 41% referenced substance use, and 14% referenced violence (Pujazon-Zazik and Park 2010).

In the modern world, a paradox is that the 'private' self is made 'public' and is open to scrutiny by anyone, and digital media have more of an impact — on how children grow and learn, what they value, and ultimately who they become — than any other medium before (Moinian 2006). The internet offers a ground for self-exploration, the development of relationships, identity formation and self-expression and development, but with it can come depression, loneliness, isolation, distress, and, most importantly, an increased use of risky behaviours that leave young people vulnerable (Anderson-Butcher et al 2010). Similarly, Lee (2005) explains that the use of social networking sites within a family can lead to family tension, rather than connection, as there is a disruption in daily family practices. The internet forms a barrier to familial intimacy between the child and the parent, and as a result, usually some form of constraint is put in place to create a power and control balance between the parents and the child (Lee 2005). However, this constraint can sometimes create more conflict and tension between the parents and the child (Lee 2005).

It is clear that the internet is changing the way people interact with each other, and social networking sites are at the centre of this communication revolution. While they may be an ideal site for self-exploration and developing and maintaining relationships, these sites can have many negative consequences for the young people that are using them. Young people sometimes use risky behaviour on these sites due to the anonymity involved, and this results in them being exposed to risks of which they may have little understanding.

### *Risk and the sexual child*

The literature discussed so far has examined the risks that are associated with youth and socially networking sites, but what has not been discussed is why these risks are deemed 'harmful', particularly to youth. It is suggested that using social networking sites is risky, but one needs to focus back on youth themselves and why such things are viewed as particularly risky to them, rather than adults. Children are primarily seen as 'at risk' and commonly the victims of many situations. Jackson and Scott (1999) explain that risks are deemed more harmful when they threaten the well-being of children, and that childhood in

general is now viewed as a precious state that is either robbed from them or challenged by those children who refuse to remain 'childlike'. As such, children are seen as in need of protection and become a focus of risk anxiety.

Alongside this notion of risk comes theory on the age of consent. At what point are children able to give consent to behave how they want? In everyday language this would be viewed as the age at which young people are allowed to consume alcohol or drive. But what of their own sexuality? Young people are growing more interested in their sexuality at a younger age than previously, and this is further fuelled by the use of social networking sites. People as young as ten years old are creating social networking sites and exploring their sexual identity. This sparks a great deal of anxiety in adults, particularly parents, and thus parents should take appropriate measures to ensure their child's safety and regulate their children from using these sites if they are using them in a risky manner.

The regulation of young people's sexual behaviour sparks much conflict all around the world. It causes confusion and anxiety among adults, which underwrites a fierce sense of paternalism and protectionism (Waites 2005). The impetus to protect youth is partly a reaction to sociological constructions of childhood pertaining to the binary of the 'innocent child' juxtaposed with the figure of the malevolent 'paedophile'; a trope which is firmly lodged in the public imagination (Jewkes 2007). But the trope of the 'innocent child' is itself a social construct that delimits more nuanced understandings of how young people actually experiment with their sexuality and sexual identity. Waites (2005) explains that the maturing process of young people can be viewed in different ways, such as through a developmental approach by addressing the different developmental phases young people go through or through a social construction approach by addressing the many different factors that shape who they become. He explains that one's adolescence is commonly referred to as a 'difficult' or 'troublesome' phase that one must get through before maturing into a responsible adult. Furthermore, hormones are often blamed for the emotional manner in which young people often act, rather than viewing this behaviour as a response to some kind of social constraint (Waites 2005).

Social networking sites provide an ideal opportunity for young people to address their development needs and sexual exploration, but this is where the age of consent comes into question. Consent is viewed as the age at which young people can be involved in sexual behaviour, but one must draw the line between social norms and free will. Waites (2005) rightly notes the notion that young people are often seen as less understanding of issues compared to the knowledge of their parents. However, this is not always the case, as young people may sometimes have more knowledge than they are given credit for. Therefore, when addressing young people's age of consent for their own sexuality, their own competence and ability to reason must be taken into account before deeming them to be irresponsible.

It is important to discuss the theory associated with the sexual child in modernity. Egan and Hawkes (2010) discuss the modernisation of the sexual child and the many different viewpoints that have been taken when addressing the child from a sexual perspective. They discuss the different ways sexuality in children was once viewed. For instance, in the 1800s, a phobia of masturbation existed and those that took pleasure in masturbation or did it excessively required surgical treatment (Egan and Hawkes 2010). And so, there is this standpoint, and then there is the present, where young people willingly upload half naked photographs of themselves online, and act in a seemingly more promiscuous manner than those of the 1800s.

This literature review has touched upon many of the themes of risk and danger that cluster around young people's use of social networking sites. This sets the scene for the importance of the case study that took place at Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia, in 2010 — a case study that the next section will explore.

## Case study

### *Method*

Research was undertaken at Flinders University to address the dearth of Australian research and a desire to glean a clearer understanding of the ways that young people perceive of and manage the risks of using social networking sites. Students enrolled in first year Criminal Justice were asked to reflect on their past experiences with social networking sites when they were in their youth, so when they were between the age of 12 and approximately 17, in order to gain information about the prevalence of aforementioned risks, as well as the understanding of these risks.<sup>1</sup> A total of 144 participants completed the questionnaire, which took approximately 20 minutes. A mixed methods approach was used, involving a questionnaire that required a mixture of qualitative and quantitative responses, and was made up of 11 questions. This approach was seemed appropriate as the questions covered a range of topics that varied from quantitative measures to qualitative responses.

In this questionnaire, quantitative questions were required to determine specific data, such as about what age social networking sites were used, and the number of contacts or 'friends' each participant had. Qualitative questions were also required to gain firsthand accounts of personal experiences involving social networking sites. Qualitative questions are extremely useful as they allow the participants to put emotion and truth in their responses about their experiences, which is not possible with quantitative questions. Furthermore, several questions that required a quantitative nature were then followed by a qualitative question in order to give participants an opportunity to explain their answer.

### *Results and discussion*

The conclusions that can be drawn from the quantitative results are interesting and supportive of previous research. The results showed that a total of 73.61% of participants initially created a social networking site when they were under the age of 18. Even from this small sample of 144, this indicates that the main users of social networking sites are younger than 18.

It was suggested earlier that young people have the tendency to add contacts on social networking sites whom they have never actually met in person. The findings of this questionnaire support this notion. This questionnaire found that while 40.28% of participants claimed to have over 300 contacts on their site, only 27.08% had met over 300 of their contacts. In relation to this, one participant stated that: 'When I was younger I probably would have [accepted people I didn't know]'. Associated with this is the belief that social networking sites are very much like a popularity contest, with another participant noting that: 'People add randoms<sup>2</sup> so they look like they have more friends'.

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<sup>1</sup> Ethics approval was granted for the research reported in this article (project number 4814).

<sup>2</sup> 'Randoms' is a slang term given to strangers. So, 'adding a random' on a social networking site means becoming 'friends' with a stranger.

While it cannot be determined if these thought processes were ever present in the current participants, it is still an indication as to why people have more friends online than they have in person. This is supported by a study by Reich (2010), who surveyed college students about their social networking behaviour and explained that generally people try to appear ‘better’ online than they actually are in the offline world. This finding is supported by Buffardi and Campbell (2008), who suggest that social networking sites promote narcissistic qualities in people. The findings here suggest that this statement is not unfounded, it seems evident that many people act a certain way online to make themselves look better. Another young person remarked:

Some of my friends like people I know on Facebook have upwards of 1000 friends I don’t know about other people but there’s no way I could know like, know and remember 1000 people. I mean, like there’s only so many people you can kind of fit into your life. (ABC 2010)

Thus, it is evident that this belief is rather common. Young people commonly accept other people as ‘friends’ that they do not know to look like they have more friends, and thus be perceived as more ‘popular’ in the eyes of their peers. The results of this study show that this kind of behaviour — of adding unknown people — may be more prevalent than is believed.

It is intriguing that when participants were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale if they believed social networking sites are risky, only 4.17% strongly agreed with this statement. In fact, most participants (42.36%) circled the ‘Neutral’ option. Participants were then asked why they felt this way, and what they believed the risks of using social networking sites were, and a range of responses were present. Some participants indicated that they believed social networking sites were risky for your future, as employers can check their employees, either by attempting to determine the character of future employees, or by checking up on the behaviour of current employees outside of working hours. This belief is by no means unwarranted. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* states a new survey has found that 10% of admissions officers claimed to have looked at sites like Facebook and MySpace to evaluate college applicants, and that 38% of the profiles viewed resulted in a negative impact on the applicant (Fitzsimmons and Rubin 2008). Clearly, social networking sites can continue to cause significant damage to people’s lives even years after they created them. There is a risk of future harm based on the perceptions of those scrutinising people with online social networking sites.

In the present study, there were also several statements regarding privacy, and the fact that one does not know how much information about other people is actually truthful. However, the predominant themes were most certainly the risks of cyberbullying and sexual predators. Commonly, participants believed that these sites were only risky if you put too much personal information on your site, or if you meet up with a person who you met online and had never actually met in person before. For example, the following statements from three participants indicate that most people believe these sites are only risky if you do not think about your online conduct:

Young, naïve people put too much information on there.

...

It can be risky depending on you. You have the chances to change privacy settings and accept people you don’t know.

...

[Using social networking sites is] not risky as long as you keep your profile on private and don’t add people you don’t know or go meeting up with strangers.

It is clear that there are many risks online, but as this trio of responses demonstrate, the general belief is that if you are careful and do not put too much personal information about yourself online, you are relatively safe.

The findings varied markedly when participants were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale their beliefs about social networking sites involving a risk of sexual predation. Here, 61.11% indicated they agreed with the statement: ‘there is a risk of sexual predation when using social networking sites’. This could be a result of an awareness of the many cases in the media surrounding social networking sites, as mentioned earlier, as a majority of them involve some form of abuse of a sexual nature, or at least some form of predation.

When asked why this was their opinion, again, the predominant theme was that people believe sexual predation is only a risk if you are ‘stupid enough’, as expressed by one participant. A main theme that emerged, again, was that people believed that sexual predation is mainly a risk for young people, as they have the tendency to add random people they do not know, and to post revealing photos of themselves. Erdur-Baker (2010) suggested that young people are highly likely to make personal information public, and to become ‘friends’ with people they have never actually met. These findings support this, as the general opinion is that young people have the tendency to expose themselves online, physically and emotionally, as a means of self-exploration. What young people may not understand, however, is the risk this poses to them. Another theme that emerged was the belief that anyone can hide behind a computer screen, so there is generally a lack of understanding about with whom you are actually communicating. Associated with this is the belief that people can pose as someone else, and that people can lie about their age. For example, two participants stated:

On social networking sites you are not connecting to a person you are connecting to a perceived image of a person.

...

Sexual predators may exploit any means of reaching victims. Online, you are able to conceal your identity, and become whatever or whoever you like. Therefore, it would be easy enough to charm an individual into gaining your trust.

Despite the belief that the risk of sexual predation lies mainly with young, naïve people, there were many relevant comments from participants about their own experiences. The following statements from three participants show that sexual predators can target anyone, despite how careful social networking site users are.

I have had numerous random men add me on Facebook. These men then asked me to have “sex” with them. When I told them no, they either laughed at me, begged me or started abusing me. Some of them also had sexual images of themselves as their profile picture.

...

I myself have been contacted by strangers asking if I would like to be a “friend with benefits”<sup>3</sup> and have had people say strange things to me.

...

Why else do people use networking sites? — To hook up. It’s a way of flirting. Like Carly Ryan, an old man tried to seduce her and then killed her for refusing. I get dirty old men adding me just to have a perve or flirt with me.

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<sup>3</sup> A ‘friend with benefits’ is a slang term given to a person who has casual sexual relations with a friend.

One participant completed the questionnaire in regards to his/her children, as they did not have a social networking site, and stated:

One of my boys who is 14 was contacted by a girl, who it turned out never existed. There was an arrangement to meet, luckily he did not go and shared it with his older brother and then told me. We had to talk to him about having contact with people who you have never met in person and the possible dangers.

This statement indicates that some young people have a general lack of understanding of the risks of sexual predators online, and people in general. Young people may not realise that people may not be who they say they are, and most certainly may not think a person they talk to could actually be dangerous. It is evident that, to this sample of participants, there have been several minor incidents involving sexual predators that, fortunately, did not have dangerous consequences. However, to younger people, these incidents could have turned out much worse.

In support of this strong belief that social networking sites involve a risk of sexual predation, 61.80% of participants indicated that they had had someone they did not know make a personal comment about them through a social networking site. Furthermore, 52.08% of participants had had someone they did not know seek personal details from them through a social networking site. These findings are supportive of the past research discussed above in this article. The study by Patchin and Hinduja (2006, cited in Erdur-Baker 2010) supports the findings of the current study, as they found that up to 47% of their participants had witnessed online bullying. Thus, it is clear that cyberbullying is most certainly a predominant issue among young people who use social networking sites.

Similarly, according to participants, a great amount of bullying behaviour was witnessed or experienced by them, which supports previous research. The main behaviour was the sending of unwanted or cruel emails or comments, with 59.72% of participants indicating that this had happened to them or they had witnessed it. The second significant statistical finding was that of rumours being spread, with 53.47% of participants indicating that this had occurred to them or they had witnessed it. Though less of a significant percentage, it is relevant to note that 32.64% of participants had experienced or witnessed bullying emails sent to friends, 20.83% had had their personal details published or witnessed this occurring, and 20.83% had had personal details changed or witnessed this behaviour. It is evident that bullying behaviour is experienced or witnessed quite commonly by young people on social networking sites.

In terms of bullying that did not result in actual physical violence, several participants had witnessed friends being bullied online, or been a victim themselves. For example, the following statement indicates the very real presence of online bullying:

My friends and I have been "cyber bullied" by a couple of 15-year-old girls before because we refused to lend them our ID's so they could go out to clubs. When we refused they went on and called us 'slags', threatening to beat us up. In the end we just ignored it and they eventually went away. We found it rather hilarious.

This supports previous research that suggests young people do not understand the seriousness of their behaviour. Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2009) suggest that young people often do not perceive their behaviour to actually constitute bullying. Further, young people are more likely to be involved in risky behaviour as they do not perceive their behaviour to be risky, which is clearly the case in this particular scenario (Livingstone and Helsper 2007, cited in Livingstone 2008). To state that 'we found it rather hilarious' indicates a refusal to believe that the behaviour could have had negative consequences.

While in this scenario the bullying eventually stopped, there are other incidents that may have ended badly, and to trivialise or downplay the threat is exactly what may result in young people getting hurt.

In relation to other behaviour, not necessarily bullying, several participants told of incidents that had occurred to them and people that they knew that had negative consequences. One participant told the story of their friend, stating that:

I had a friend who met a guy in a tutorial once. He tracked her down on Facebook and added her over 50 times and sent her abusive emails when she declined.

This is an indication of the types of behaviour these sites sometimes facilitate, and that even some adults participate in bullying or harassing behaviour. Another survey participant described a situation involving a friend's online communication that ended in serious negative consequences:

My friend became really good friends with this girl in America and soon they were in love. When he decided to go meet her and see her in person, she rejected him in front of her house and told him he's so ugly that no one would want him. When he came back to Australia he fell into depression for 9 months.

This clearly is an extreme example of the consequences involved with socialising with people online whom you have never met in person before. Indeed, media reports about social networking sites indicate that such scenarios are not as uncommon as people might think.

Finally, only 14 participants indicated that a form of actual violence resulted from the use of social networking sites, with half of these participants indicating on a Likert Scale that the situation was serious. These incidents varied in level of seriousness. Several incidents revolved around school bullying and school fights, or physical violence resulting from rumours being spread. The following statements explain that events that occur online can sometimes lead to actual violence, even if only minor in nature:

Someone posted a comment or commented on another page and that person didn't like it, therefore he felt the need to confront and fight the person.

...

People made comments on other accounts and then took it from the computer to real life and they were involved in a fight.

...

Friendship between girls ganged up on each other over Facebook and found out which night club the victim was going to in order to fight. No one was badly hurt.

These statements were about incidents of a violent nature that were accelerated due to social networking. The following remarks further emphasise that social networking sites can lead to physical violence with very serious consequences:

On a social networking site on one girl's birthday her friend asked her what she wanted for her birthday. The reply was "I want you to bash [another person] up" and she did. Then there was a huge fight at a train station, the girl was left with a broken nose, a broken jaw, and her teeth were knocked out.

...

My friend was continually bullied through Facebook which then got so bad they brought a knife to school and tried to use it. They had to call the police to try and calm things down.

...

A friend's name on Facebook was exposed as being a "whore". Friends of hers went up to the person who put it up and has a large argument in a public place, it was boy vs. boy — and if another bystander hadn't stepped in I'm sure violence, and a physical fight, would have broken out.

It is evident that the results of this study show that the risks of cyberbullying and sexual predation through social networking sites are an issue for some young people in Australia. Not only did this study show that these incidents commonly occur, but the findings support those of past research. Research in the area of social networking sites is clearly of great importance as these sites play such a significant role in many lives. However, despite the findings of this study there are also several limitations, which is why further research in this area is crucial.

## Conclusion and implications for future research

The current study, combined with the findings of past research, clearly indicates that social networking sites can have negative impacts on young people. Young people have grown up with computers, yet the paradox lies in that their familiarity is what makes many of them less cautious with their online behaviour. This type of research is of extreme importance and must be continued to gain a greater understanding about the risks of social networking sites, and to educate young people about these risks in order to minimise their exposure to potential harm. The results of this study show that many people have social networking sites, and a majority of these people have experienced some form of negative behaviour (whether directly or indirectly), sometimes in the form of physical violence.

### *Study design*

The design of this study is different to previous research as it uses a mixed methods approach, whereas many studies in the past have either simply used quantitative data or qualitative data. Through the use of both quantitative and qualitative styled questions, the questionnaire was able to gain an array of interesting and relevant responses. Through the quantitative responses, it was possible to gain an understanding of the amount of people that use certain sites, as well as what age they began to use them and what behaviours they had been involved with. Through this data, we were able to obtain a 'snapshot' of the experiences of the sample group and were able to extrapolate a general idea about social networking behaviour from this.

Furthermore, the qualitative responses aided the quantitative data, in that it gave participants the opportunity to explain their responses. This is something that is not done often, and is of great significance in gaining relevant data. Specifically, with the Likert Scale questions, participants were able to indicate how strongly they felt about current issues, but then were able to indicate why they felt this way. This gave a clear indication of the beliefs and feelings of participants, as well as gaining insight into some personal accounts of experiences. Finally, through the qualitative responses, we were able to understand the impact that social networking sites are having on young people, and the presence of risks. These questions allowed people to discuss incidents that had occurred in their lives, and being able to recount the stories of these people is what makes the results of this study so important. It shows that these risks are *real*, and are happening to *real* people.

### *Limitations*

As with any research, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the survey responses reflected the memory of participants about past events and participants may not have accurately remembered an experience and/or the true extent of the damage it caused. Furthermore, they may have thought that an experience of theirs was not appropriate to mention, when in fact it was.

In relation to this, it was discussed earlier that people's views on what constitute bullying behaviour may vary. Thus, with this questionnaire some people may have actually experienced bullying but did not consider it serious enough to mention, or did not consider it to be bullying at all, when in fact it was. Furthermore, although participants were assured their responses would be anonymous and that they would not be identifiable in publication of the results, some participants may have been cyberbullies in their past and most likely would have been reluctant to admit this.

### *Risks*

This research shows that the risks of cyberbullying and sexual predation are present in people's lives today and, thus, are issues that require attention. The results indicate that a majority of participants had experienced or witnessed cyberbullying in some way, with many participants indicating they had either been hacked at some stage or had had personal details changed or personal details published. There were also a few instances where bullying behaviour led to actual physical violence. It would be of great benefit if schools, teachers and parents were given information on the prevalence and extent of cyberbullying, so that in turn young people can be informed about the negative consequences it can have on a person's life. Whilst this is already present to some extent through the Australian Government's Cybersmart initiative, there is more that could be done. Research such as the present questionnaire results could be used to show that this is a real issue and those that experience cyberbullying are not alone.

Furthermore, the risk of sexual predation was believed to only be a problem if young people were naive enough to put too much personal information online or talk to people that they have never actually met before. However, many participants indicated that they had had people online comment them or email them in a sexual way, and sometimes ask inappropriate things. The results of this research suggest that a majority of people believe that young people are at risk of sexual predation as they do not fully understand the risks of putting personal information about themselves online, nor do they understand that people you meet online are not always trustworthy, and are sometimes dangerous. Thus, it would be beneficial if young people received some kind of education in relation to the risks of sexual predators beyond that provided by current websites and initiatives. This is in keeping with a Florida (USA) study that concluded that educators should be prepared to 'educate youth about how to respond to online sexual solicitations' (Mitchell, Finkelhor and Wolak 2001).

Future research in this area is imperative. Indeed, a study is currently being conducted at Flinders University by Karklins involving six different high schools across South Australia and administering a questionnaire to students. It is crucial to gain an understanding of the behaviour of young people themselves on social networking sites, and the reasons behind their behaviour and thinking. While the research reported in this article gained some insight into the beliefs about, and prevalence of, risks on social networking sites, future research would further enhance this knowledge and possibly contribute to the education of young people on these risks. If young people understand that cyberbullying can leave long-lasting scars on another person, and that cyberbullying is a significant issue that is far worse in

nature than traditional bullying, then perhaps they will take measures to protect others from being bullied, or stop themselves from engaging in bullying behaviour. If young people are educated about the risks of sexual predators, including that communicating with people you do not know can have drastic consequences, then perhaps they will employ more caution when contemplating posting revealing photographs or personal information about themselves. Overall, if young people are educated and told about the risks involved with social networking, then perhaps they will change their behaviour and there will be fewer incidents of victimisation involving the internet. Then, maybe, some suffering can be avoided and — in extreme cases — some lives may be saved by increasing awareness of the dangers posed by engagement with social networking sites.

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