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*Teens in control: Young teenagers' use of social networking sites in Norway and the UK*

Young people's uses of social networking sites (SNSs) are surrounded by various public discourses, raising concern from parents, various children's charities and government departments; as well as questions about what teenagers, the 'Net Generation', might be gaining from these online interactions. SNSs such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo frequently feature in news reports in relation to high profile concerns such as harmful contact and content, as well as issues around 'identity management' where discussions centre on users' awareness of their public image being available online and how that is used for surveillance purposes, for example, by universities, police and potential employers. In addition to the discursive construction of teenagers as both vulnerable to online risk and enabled as natural cybernauts, online spaces are seen to be offering resources for working through adolescence – a 'life stage' marked by a developing need for independence, a growing dependence on peers for support and advice on decision making and 'par excellence a time of identity exploration' (Coleman 2008).

This paper examines SNSs from the viewpoint of the users, to see how they are positioning themselves as shapers of the technology as well as being shaped by the technology. This paper presents findings from qualitative studies conducted in Norway and the UK, in which focus groups and individuals were interviewed about their use of SNSs. The 14-16 year-olds who are the focus of this study position themselves as using age-appropriate SNSs in very specific ways, and as knowledgeable users who are in control of their online interactions and presentation of themselves online.

The interviewees discuss various strategies for avoiding commonly discussed online risks (mainly contact), and also discuss the benefit of SNSs for taking risks by communicating with people in their school with whom they otherwise do not socialise. Furthermore, they discuss SNSs as spaces to display different aspects of their personalities, and spaces that allow particular forms of personal risk-taking. We argue that young teenagers are using SNSs in very specific ways as part of a range of modes of communication with different audiences, and often their use of social networking sites is quite banal, highlighting the possibility that adults (parents, researchers, educators, members of government/NGOs) over-invest in the meaning of SNSs for young teens.