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**Primary children's use of social  
networking sites: Children's perspective**

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## TITLE

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Primary children's use of social networking sites: Children's perspective

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## ABSTRACT

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*This paper explores the use of social networking sites (SNS) by primary children. Most of the research on SNS used by youth has focused on teenagers and has been interpreted through the eyes of the researchers; little is known about primary children. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how primary children use SNS and make sense of their experiences. Individual and group interviews were initially conducted with 34 Year 5 and 6 students from two schools in Cambridgeshire. Afterwards, 19 children from one of these schools participated in focus groups, where they discussed and reflected on the findings from the individual and group interviews. Almost one third of the participants used SNS and girls especially seemed to use them thoughtfully. Overall, the participants appeared well-informed about the benefits and dangers associated with SNS use. Interestingly, they referred to the negative aspects of SNS more often than the positive ones, since, as they explained, they stand out more. In light of the findings of the current study, it would be constructive if parents placed more emphasis on discussion about SNS activities and if the SNS settings were private by default given children's confusion about their management. Further research with a more representative sample and employing method triangulation is needed to complement the findings of the current study.*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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During the last decade, the use of social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook and Twitter, has rapidly increased (Perrin, 2015) and an intense public anxiety surrounds SNS use by youth. Having been working as a primary teacher and been approached by parents anxious about their children's online behaviour, I decided to gain a deeper understanding of children's SNS use in order to provide advice to my students, their parents and other teachers.

Having reviewed the literature, I observed that it has mainly addressed teenagers' and adults' use of SNS; primary children's use remains under-examined and has been approached through researchers' lenses. The present study aims to fill this gap by illuminating *how* primary children make sense of their experiences. Exploring SNS from children's perspectives could act as a basis for the development of measures aiming at the maximisation of SNS-related opportunities and the minimisation of risks. At the same time, it will add more information to what is currently the most controversial issue in the field, namely, the usefulness of the 13-year-old age restriction imposed by popular SNS.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

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Having employed a systematic computerised search and established that the literature on primary children was scarce, I decided to include in the review studies examining teenagers' use of SNS, too. I placed more emphasis on recent studies though in view of the rapidly changing online environment, and on projects conducted in Europe, and the United Kingdom in particular, so that my study builds on these and the findings are more comparable.

Before moving on to studies addressing SNS usage patterns, it is important to clarify that SNS are:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi- public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211)

### 2.1 PATTERNS OF USE

The most useful studies are those conducted by the Office of Communications (Ofcom) and the Net Children Go Mobile project. Ofcom was commissioned by the government of the United Kingdom to investigate the online activities of children aged 3-15 years drawing on questionnaires and, to a lesser extent, interviews, while Net Children Go Mobile using questionnaires examined the online activities of

children aged 9-15 years in seven European countries<sup>1</sup> (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014) and in the United Kingdom in particular (Livingstone, Haddon, Vincent, Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014). The most controversial issue that I identified was the usefulness of the 13-year-old age requirement imposed by SNS, such as Facebook and Instagram.

### **2.1.1 Participation**

As the large-scale survey of Net Children Go Mobile showed, 27 per cent of European children aged 9-10 years use SNS (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014), while in the United Kingdom in particular 20 per cent of children aged 8-11 years use them (Ofcom, 2014). Facebook's popularity is striking, being used by 96 per cent of users aged 12-15 years, followed by Instagram and Twitter, being used by 36 and 28 per cent respectively (Ofcom, 2014).

According to large scale studies (Madden et al., 2013; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014), more than three in five children give a false age while using SNS due to the 13-year-old minimum age restriction. Boyd et al. (2011), using a stratified random sample of 1,007 parents in the United States, also showed that 64 per cent of parents who were aware when their child created a SNS account helped their offspring create their accounts.

### **2.1.2 Online activities**

A growing number of European and American studies indicate that children use SNS

to primarily communicate with their known network (Katz, Felix, & Gubernick, 2014;<sup>1</sup> Madden et al., 2014; Livingstone et al., 2014; Luckin et al., 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Only 17 per cent of children aged 9-16 years in the United Kingdom reported to have been in contact online with someone they had not previously met offline, while a minimal three per cent claimed to have met such a person face to face (Livingstone et al., 2014). This study also showed that a striking 83 per cent of children aged 9-10 years accept as online friends only people that they know very well.

Furthermore, over 80 per cent of English children aged 11-16 years reported to have participated in picture and video sharing activities (Luckin et al., 2009), while a study among Flemish teenagers showed that 41 per cent of the participants engaged in entertainment-oriented activities, such as games (Vandoninck, d'Haenens, De Cock, & Donoso, 2011).

It is noteworthy that the study of Livingstone et al. (2014) showed that a striking 89 per cent of children aged 9-10 years in the United Kingdom appeared to have set their SNS profiles to private. However, the figures are based on children's own accounts and may reflect perceived socially desirable responses more than the reality. Doubts are especially raised given that in the same study only 25 per cent of boys and 15 per cent of girls aged 9-12 years reported knowing how to change the privacy settings.

### **2.1.3 Negative experiences**

Lilley and Ball's (2013) large-scale survey revealed that almost a quarter of SNS users

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<sup>1</sup> Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania and the United Kingdom

aged 11-12 years in the United Kingdom experienced something on SNS which upset them during the preceding year, such as exposure to aggressive language, and over half of these were caused by strangers. However, in-depth interviews conducted by the EU Kids Online project (2014) showed that children may choose not to disclose negative experiences to their parents because the latter tend to criticise them and limit their online freedoms. Meanwhile, two other large-scale surveys added that more than one in three American teenagers feel pressure to post popular or flattering content (Lenhart, Smith, Anderson, Duggan & Perrin, 2015; Rideout, 2012)

It is noteworthy that girls consistently appear to be more careful than boys on SNS (Dowell, Burgess, & Cavanaugh, 2009; Livingstone et al., 2014, Vandoninck et al., 2011). For example, although teenage girls are nearly twice as likely as boys to report that they “love” posting photographs of themselves (Rideout, 2012), they are almost half as likely as boys to upload such photographs due to safety concerns (Livingstone et al., 2014).

## **2.2 EVALUATION OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE USE**

The positive and negative aspects of SNS have been interpreted almost exclusively through researchers’ eyes. Only the study conducted by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP, 2006) employing focus groups asked children aged 10-16 years directly what they regarded as benefits and threats of SNS. However, in this study, there is an absence of information on the recruitment strategy of the participants and on the way in which the data were analysed.

### **2.2.1 Positive aspects**

In the CEOP's (2006) study, SNS users reported enjoying five particular benefits of SNS: the facilitation of existing friendships and development of new relationships, their cost-effective nature in comparison to mobile phones, their entertainment-related value through games, their user-friendliness, and the opportunities for self-expression.

Relationship facilitation especially is an extensively reported benefit in the literature (Alloway, Horton, Alloway & Dawson, 2013; Byron, 2008; Ito et al, 2008; Ktoridou, Eteokleous & Zahariadou, 2012). For instance, more than half of SNS teenage users reported that SNS helped them feel more connected with family and friends (Rideout, 2012) or supported them through tough times (Lenhart et al., 2015).

Furthermore, as Rideout (2012) reported, 29 per cent of teenagers felt less shy and 19 per cent more popular on SNS compared to face-to-face interaction. There is also a general consensus in the literature that SNS allow children to construct, perform and experiment with identity (Byron, 2008; Carrington & Hodgetts, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Marsh, 2014; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008) as well as they facilitate the development of digital literacy skills (Blau, 2014; Carrington & Hodgetts, 2010).

### **2.2.2 Negative aspects**

Ofcom (2014) reports that contact risks (strangers) are perceived to be the most serious, especially by younger children. It further suggests that nearly one in three teenagers is concerned about the potential for bullying, while fewer children seem worried that people, such as teachers or future bosses, might access information (Ofcom, 2014). CEOP's study (2006) adds that children do not like the insecurity of information posted on these sites, the exposure to unwanted information, the visibility to an unknown audience and the difficulty in fostering trusting relationships.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that SNS afford the commercial world new possibilities for targeted and embedded marketing (Byron, 2008; Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Valcke, De Wever, Van Keer, & Schellens, 2011), while another potential danger is that of Internet addiction (Blau, 2014; Kalmus, Blinka, & Olafsson, 2015). Health-related concerns with regard to prolonged computer use in general, such as obesity, eye strain and poor posture, have also been raised in the literature (Karuppiah, 2015).

Finally, based on an online questionnaire completed by 3,657 Irish children aged 10-11 years, Devine and Lloyd (2012) suggested that high SNS use is related to poorer psychological well-being. However, the validity of the findings is limited due to the questionnaire questions. For instance, children were asked to respond to vague questions such as "Has your life been enjoyable?" or ambiguous ones in that they did not specify the time frame, such as "Have you felt sad?"

## **2.3SUMMARY**

With only a few exceptions, research on the use of SNS has been conducted among teenagers and adults, and when primary children are in question, the focus is on online activities in general. Nevertheless, the rigour of the research evidence is hindered by such a conflation of diverse forms of technology (Livingstone, 2012). Furthermore, the positive and negative aspects of SNS use have been almost exclusively reported through the eyes of the researchers; exploring primary children's use of SNS through the lens of children's perceptions could provide a more accurate insight and illustrate the complexity of the issue.

Finally, most research studies adopt quantitative analysis, as also confirmed by the search for evidence conducted by Ólafsson, Livingstone and Haddon (2014), according to which, around two thirds of studies on children's online activities apply only quantitative methods.

These observations shaped my research questions and methodological approach and I sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do primary children use SNS?
2. What do primary children regard as the positive and negative aspects of SNS?

Before justifying my methodological decisions in the next section, it is important to clarify that I conceptualise SNS use as the self-reported way in which the participants or their friends use SNS out of school. With regard to the second question, I will refer to children's interpretations and evaluations.



how the interviewed children make sense of the world.

## **3.2 DATA COLLECTION**

I employed interviews as they best served my research questions. To illustrate, questionnaires are usually less time-consuming both for conducting and analysing and enable a large sample. However, their structured nature does not pursue the respondents' points of view (Warwick & Chaplain, 2013). Meanwhile, observations of children's SNS use could be argued to provide a more accurate picture of SNS use compared to self-reported information. Nevertheless, they do not allow the participants to unfold their feelings, intentions and meanings of their experiences (Mears, 2009).

In contrast, interviews afford the interviewer the opportunity to rephrase questions and clarify answers and, thus, may comprise a more direct and trustworthy way to discover the interviewee's beliefs and way of thinking (Taber, 2013). Interviews seem particularly useful in this study as probing and prompting may encourage the participants to discuss sensitive issues, such as negative online experiences (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015; Denscombe, 2011). Finally, the few research studies that investigated primary children's use of SNS have collected quantitative data; these data could be complemented and illuminated by interviews. Remaining mindful of interviews' potential limitations, however, I tried to overcome these. For instance, recognising the potential for interviewer bias (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011), I took special care to enhance the validity and reliability of my study.

### **3.2.1 Sample**

Due to pragmatic considerations, I restricted the sample to 34 children, who I recruited from two schools in Cambridgeshire.

School A is a large, mixed-gender state school located in a middle-class area. Fifteen Year 5 children (seven boys and eight girls) from a class of 20 participated in the group interviews, as five parents opted their children out. School B is a small, mixed-gender state school located in a small village. I interviewed individually and in groups all the children from one mixed-year class: 19 children (eight girls and 11 boys), of whom eight were Year 5 and 11 Year 6. The participants comprised both SNS users and non-users so that I could gain diverse ideas, which would act as a stimulus for discussion in the group interviews.

### **3.2.2 Procedure**

I adopted a cumulative approach consisting of two stages; the first stage sought to answer my research questions in a more descriptive way while the second stage focused on how children come to these understandings. The interviews took place in each school's library and, with children's permission, I audio-recorded and transcribed them verbatim.

#### **First stage**

I firstly employed group interviews in School A with randomly allocated mixed-gender groups of four or five, and then individual interviews in School B. Each individual and group interview lasted 15 and 30 minutes approximately. Seeking depth in responses, I favoured semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and, for both individual and group interviews, I was equipped with the same interview questions, which I had formulated based on commonly reported themes in the literature.

#### **Second stage**

For the second stage, I had access only to school B and employed group interviews, as having

conducted both types of interviews reinforced my belief that group discussion better illustrates children's thoughts. Each interview lasted around 40 minutes and during this stage, I had less control over the process. This lesser degree of control differentiates "focus groups" from "group interviews" (Taber, 2013) and thus, I will subsequently refer to these interviews as "focus groups".

At this stage, I created cards displaying the main responses from the previous stage and I asked the participants to discuss these. I also sought children's rationalisations for an observation that, as I explained to them, I myself found a challenge to interpret: the consistent referencing of the negative aspects of SNS during the first stage.

### **3.3 DATA ANALYSIS**

I adopted qualitative thematic analysis without the use of computer software using my research and interview questions to produce the themes and subthemes respectively. I firstly organised the data into meaningful groups, the codes, which I then located within themes and subthemes. Afterwards, I constructed thematic networks and explored within and across the themes.

### **3.4 RESEARCHER'S ROLE**

Having reflected on my role, I realised that, having been approached by parents concerned about their offspring's risky online behaviour, I may have been more alert to threats. Furthermore, being an SNS user myself and having reviewed the relevant literature, I already had some ideas and pre-conceptions, which led me to concentrate on certain themes. However, during the data analysis, I relied on children's interpretations.

### **3.5 CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION**

In order to enhance the reliability of my study, I documented the data analysis procedures transparently (Schwandt, 2001), I was consistent in the definition of codes and, having ten per cent of the transcripts checked by an experienced doctoral candidate, I calculated an overall interrater reliability of 90 per cent. Concerning validity, I made transparent my philosophical assumptions and researcher's role and I went back to the participants with the findings in order to refine my interpretations in the light of student interactions (Silverman, 2013).

### **3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Adhering to the BERA (2011) guidelines, I obtained the voluntary informed consent of head teachers, parents and children, and I explained that, should harmful illegal behaviour arise, I would have to override my commitment to confidentiality and report the incident to the head teacher. Furthermore, the participants were assigned pseudonyms in the transcripts and I destroyed the recordings and transcripts after completion of the study. Finally, I sent the findings to the schools providing recommendations to the schools and parents.

### **3.7 SUMMARY**

Before presenting the findings of my study, a summary of the key features of each stage is provided in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1 Key features of Stage 1 and Stage 2**

	<b>Stage 1</b>		<b>Stage 2</b>
<b>Data collection technique</b>	Group interviews	Individual interviews	Focus groups
➤ <b>Items</b>	Interview schedule	Interview schedule	Discussion cards
➤ <b>Average duration per interview</b>	30 minutes	15 minutes	40 minutes
<b>School</b>	School A	School B	School B
<b>Number of</b>	15	19	19
➤ <b>Boys</b>	7	11	11
➤ <b>Girls</b>	8	8	8
➤ <b>Year 5</b>	15	8	8
➤ <b>Year 6</b>	-	11	11
<b>Example of codes</b>	Games, bad pictures, checking friend requests with parents	Funny things, private profile, immediately declining, swear words	Hacking, bullying, support from online friends

## 4. FINDINGS

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This section presents the key findings in two subsections closely related to my research questions (see Table 4.1). The findings from both stages will be presented together, as they both sought to answer the same research questions and significant differences in the findings between these stages were not observed.

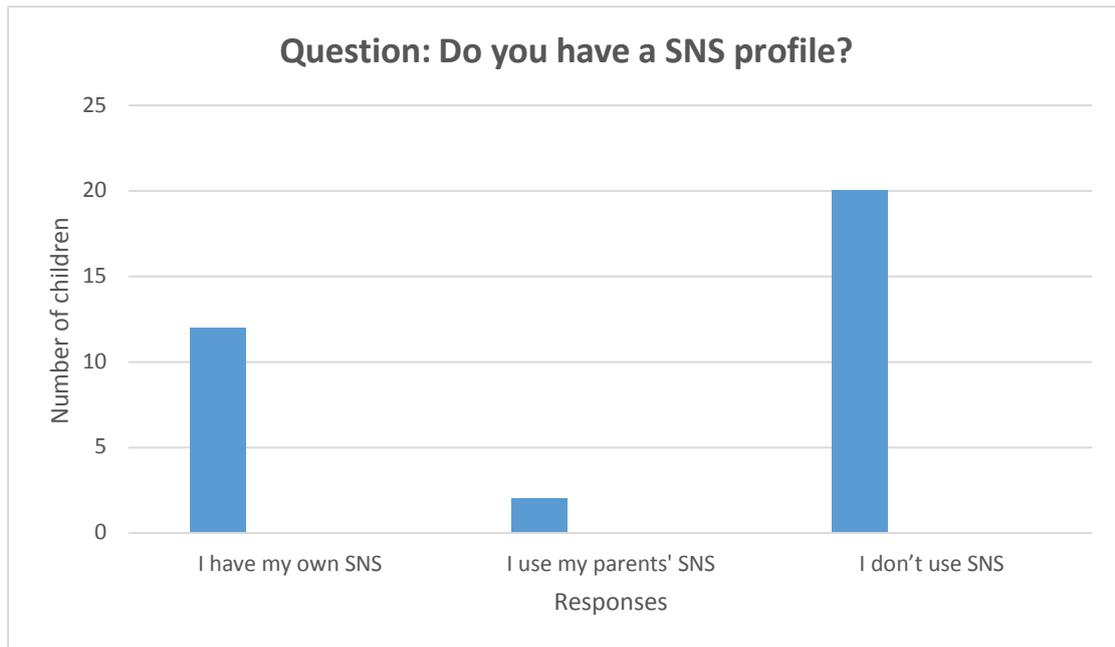
**Table 4.1 Themes and subthemes from Stage 1 and Stage 2**

Themes	Subthemes	Description
<b>Patterns of use</b>	Participation	Statements that refer to how the children themselves or their friends use SNS and to their experiences
	Activities on SNS	
	Online friends	
	Management of privacy settings	
	Negative experiences	
<b>Evaluation</b>	Positive aspects	Statements that describe children's judgements about the positive and negative aspects of SNS and SNS- related advice that they would give to their peers in order for the latter to stay safe
	Negative aspects	

## 4.1 PATTERNS OF USE

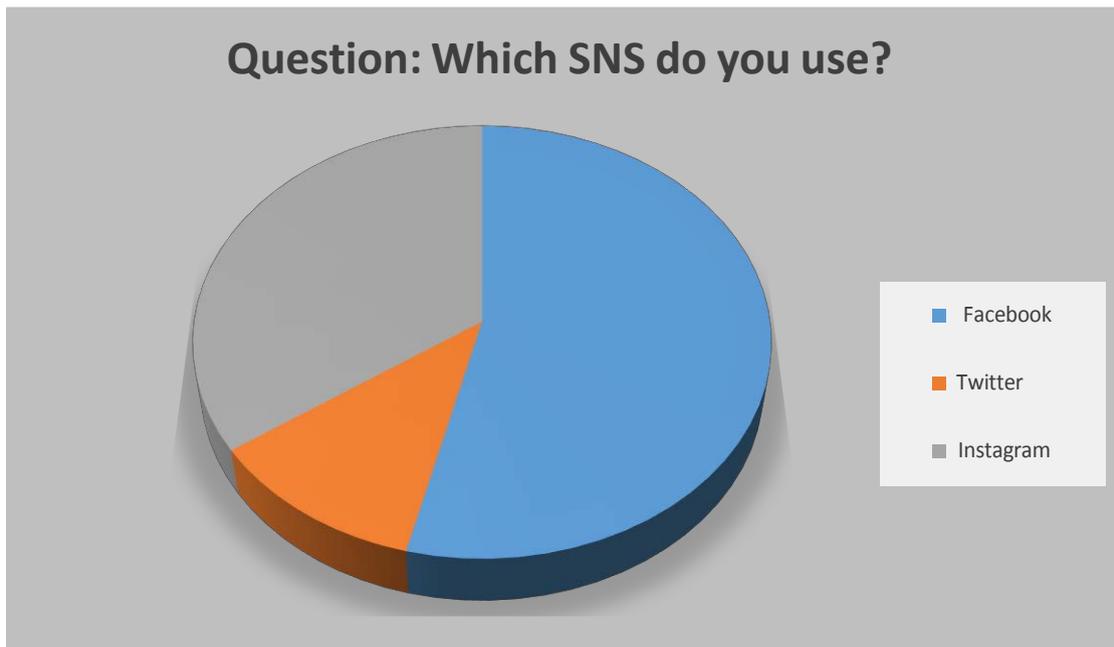
### 4.1.1 Participation

Twelve children had their own SNS profile, two used their parents' profile and twenty children did not use SNS (see Figure 4.1).



**Figure 4.1 Participation in social networking sites**

Facebook was by far the most popular SNS, being used by fourteen children, followed by Instagram and Twitter, being used by nine and three children respectively (see Figure 4.2). The majority of children claimed to use SNS “sometimes” or “almost never”, while one boy mentioned “I should not use Facebook that much”.



**Figure 4.2 Social networking sites where the participants have a profile**

Of the non-users, the majority reported that they did not have a profile due to parental restrictions. Interestingly, one girl suggested that some children may not use SNS as they “don’t really have anyone to communicate with”, while in sharp contrast, one girl in another group mentioned:

*There might be other people that don’t see them [their friends] and want to make other friends on there.*

Only four of the 12 SNS users argued that their parents knew that they have a profile, two of whom reported that their parents frequently logged into their profiles; as one of these children explained, “I don’t mind because I don’t do anything inappropriate”. Overall, it appeared from the discussions that parents mostly check their offspring’s activities rather than discussing these together.

Interestingly, when I asked the participants whether they were aware of the minimum age requirement, many children appeared uncertain and mentioned casually that they just put a false age to gain access “because that is what people normally do”.

#### **4.1.2 Online activities**

The children consistently mentioned that either they themselves or their friends use SNS to talk to family members and friends and to see what they have been doing recently. Furthermore, although girls especially talked enthusiastically about posting photographs, they appeared less likely than boys to have uploaded pictures of themselves on SNS; as a girl claimed, “Strangers will know I am young”. Several children also reported that they use SNS in order to play games, while in the individual groups, two non-users mentioned that children use SNS to meet new people or to upload YouTube videos.

Most participants, girls especially, seemed to agree that children should set their privacy settings to private. However, during the focus groups most of the children mentioned a lack of familiarity with the process of changing the privacy settings and thus unsurprisingly they reported being unaware of whether their profiles are set to public or private.

#### **4.1.3 Online friends**

A consensus seemed to exist that the best way to respond to friend requests

from strangers is to decline them because “they might pretend to be someone else”. Most of the participants mentioned that they either immediately decline them or check them with their parents or siblings. The following excerpt illustrates how children co-constructed knowledge in this regard:

*Boy A: I would only ask their age and their name.*

*Girl: If you ask the question, they might be someone else, so I would be a bit more careful. Not just “Who are you?”*

*Boy B: I would do research into, I would look them up on the Internet and see if their name matches the picture.*

*Girl: It’s a good idea.*

#### **4.1.4 Negative experiences**

Almost half of the interviewed SNS users have been bothered online and most of the negative experiences stemmed from strangers, who may send swear words or “bad pictures”. One boy mentioned that he was so upset that, having blocked the “random people” who sent him “bad messages”, he ended up using Facebook only to play games. Another boy, showing signs of nervousness and agitation, mentioned that he does not seek advice from his parents:

*I didn’t tell my parents about the bad thing because I didn’t want them to know because they would shout at me, which I don’t like. So instead showing my mum it’s best to just forget about it.*

Not letting their parents know because of fears of freedom invasion was an issue

also raised by three other children. Many participants added that they would consult their friends as they “are probably more in touch with technology than parents” and, as a girl suggested:

*Because that may have happened to them, they will know and they will keep you safe. And if you tell them that it happened to you, if it happens to them, they will know what to do about it.*

However, some children reported that they do not feel upset when they receive “bad messages” because, as they mentioned, they also hear swear words offline or “because I don’t even know them”. Interestingly, during the focus groups, four children expressed negative experiences, namely swear words and hacking, not raised in the individual interviews, as illustrated by the following extract wherein a girl “investigated” the incident:

*Boy: I have been hacked by an ice cream guy.*

*Girl: Why was he an ice cream guy?*

*Boy: Because he had a picture showing an ice cream van.*

*Girl: He might have been somebody else pretending to be that.*

*Boy: He was the real one.*

*Girl: How do you know he was a real one?*

*Boy: Because I saw his photos.*

*Girl: You never know, people could post different photos and they might not be them.*

## **4.2 EVALUATION OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE USE**

This section refers to the second research question, namely the aspects of SNS that children regard as positive or negative.

#### **4.2.1 Positive aspects**

The discussion about the positive aspects of SNS was limited, especially during the individual interviews. Even when I asked the participants what they considered “good things” on SNS, they started mentioning “bad things”. For instance, a girl replied “There might be good things but there might be some bad things” and elaborated on the “bad things”. The most commonly mentioned benefit of SNS was talking to friends and family and seeing what they have been doing. More than half of the participants also referred to seeing “funny things” and playing games, while fewer children, girls especially, mentioned that they like showing what they do.

Two boys in the individual interviews appeared to cherish the opportunity to meet people, which appeared to be the most controversial topic. Although most children regarded it as a dangerous activity, the children in one group emphasised the support that online friends may offer, as the following exchange makes plain:

*Girl A: When you go there [on SNS] you always want to have friends that support you on there.*

*Girl B: Yes, a lot of people just accept friends so as to have more followers.*

#### **4.2.2 Negative aspects**

The discussion about SNS’s negative aspects was lively and revolved around strangers on Facebook in particular. Most of the participants argued that “mean people” may

send swear words. The following quote encapsulates children's preoccupation with swear words:

*If you are on Facebook and someone insulted you with swear words, I think they [the service providers] should either block it out or just put a line. They should disappear so that you don't know and you don't get upset.*

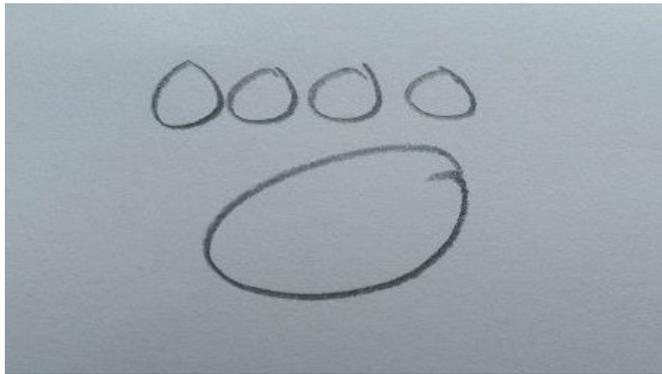
Several children also argued that strangers may edit children's photographs and make fun of them or pretend to be kids in order to stalk children, pick them up from the school or rob them. Concerns other than strangers were less common and were related to exposure to "disgusting" pictures or videos. The danger of cyber-bullying was also regarded as "one of the biggest dangers" because "if you are cyber-bullied you can't stop that and people can just carry on cyber-bullying".

Before the end of the focus groups in the second stage, I invited children's interpretations for an observation that emerged after having analysed their responses from the first stage and that I found myself a challenge to interpret: the consistent emphasis on the negative aspects of SNS. Contrary to my expectations, the children did not seem puzzled but attributed this emphasis to the fact that bad things "stand out a lot more than the better things". As one girl suggested:

*If you are looking on Facebook and you see lots of good things and then you see a bad thing that kind of overrides the good things. The bad things you keep them in your head. It seems that the bad thing you just keep thinking about it and then the good things just tend to go out normally.*

Interestingly, this girl made the drawing shown in Figure 4.3 to illustrate her point of view, mentioning that the small circles comprise the "good things" and the big

circle the “bad thing”.



**Figure 4.3** Girl’s drawing depicting the “good things” and the “bad thing”

### **4.3 SUMMARY**

The SNS users, and girls especially, appeared to carefully and thoughtfully browse SNS and their discussion was dominated by concerns about the negative aspects of SNS; only during the focus groups, the children discussed the positive aspects of SNS more keenly. Overall, the children seemed to have a relatively good understanding of both the benefits and threats arising from SNS use.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

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This section discusses and relates to the literature the most relevant to the research questions findings. Concerning the evaluation of SNS, seeking to identify whether researchers’ viewpoints align with children’s perspectives, I also considered what children did *not* mention.

## 5.1 PATTERNS OF USE

The number of SNS users in the current study was slightly higher compared to other studies among primary children in the United Kingdom (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014; Ofcom, 2014). Many children reported casually that they falsified their age in order to gain access “because that is what people normally do”, a finding that corroborates the results from large-scale studies (Madden et al., 2013; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014) and that supports Boyd et al.’s concern (2011) that the age limit may lead to the normalisation of rule violation since deception is the only means of access.

The present study also showed children to communicate primarily with their known social network and thus, consistent with a growing body of research studies (Katz et al., 2014; Livingstone et al., 2014; Luckin et al., 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), it refutes the public anxiety over children talking to strangers. Although children’s apparent caution seems positive, we should approach these low figures with caution due to the self-report nature of responses.

Significantly, girls were less likely than boys to report displaying potentially risky behaviour, such as uploading pictures of themselves. This finding is consistent with studies on children’s online activities (e.g. Vandoninck et al., 2011; Dowell et al., 2009; Livingstone et al., 2014) and with studies on children’s risk-taking behaviour in general, relying on either self-reported information (e.g. Langsford, Douglas, & Houghton, 1998) or on observed behaviour in naturalistic situations (e.g. Morrongiello, McArthur, Goodman, & Bell, 2015).

Given the emphasis that most of the current participants placed on the importance

of private profiles, their ignorance regarding their profile's privacy status seems surprising and supports Ofcom's argument (2014) that, while children know how they could be protected online, they do not necessarily act accordingly. Finally, the emphatic declaration by many children in the present study that they would not let their parents know if something troubled them strongly aligned with the findings of EU Kids Online (2014), where children worried about being criticised or having restrictions imposed.

## **5.2 EVALUATION OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE USE**

### **5.2.1 .1 Positive aspects**

Children's views about the positive aspects of SNS were on the whole in line with those given by the 10-16 year-old participants in the CEOP's (2006) study, such as talking to friends or playing games. The participants' comments that they like talking online to their friends and seeing what they have been doing may suggest that SNS contribute to social connectedness, which is commonly cited in the literature as a key benefit (Alloway et al., 2013; Rideout, 2012). Their emphasis on the advice and support obtained from online friends is also consistent with previous studies highlighting the potentially supportive online environment (Byron, 2008; Lenhart et al., 2015; Livingstone & Brake, 2010). Finally, although meeting new people has been consistently mentioned in the literature as one of the most important benefits of SNS (Byron, 2008; Ito et al, 2008; Ktoridou et al., 2012; Rideout, 2012), most of the current participants insisted that it is a dangerous activity.

Key benefits of SNS consistently suggested in the literature that were *not* raised by the current participants include the potentially more comfortable online environment compared to face-to-face communication (Dunkels, 2007; Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Rideout, 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), the opportunities for identity construction and experimentation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Lenhart & Madden 2007; Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Zhao et al., 2008) and the development of digital skills (Blau, 2014; Carrington & Hodgetts, 2010). A potential reason why they have not been addressed may be that the identification of such benefits require critical skills possibly beyond those typical of children at this age.

### **5.2.2 Negative aspects**

In line with Ofcom's study (2014), almost all the negative aspects of SNS reported concerned strangers, who, as children suggest, may disguise their identity to ultimately harm children. The participants strikingly emphasised the negative aspects of SNS and, while I initially interpreted such an emphasis as children's attempt to respond in perceived socially desirable ways, having invited children's interpretations, I regarded their explanation as more valid. As the participants eloquently explained, the negative experiences stand out more than the positive ones. Interestingly, this seems to be related with what is referred in the literature as "negativity bias" (Baltazar, Shutts, & Kinzler, 2012; Peeters & Czapinski, 1990; Vaish, Grossmann, & Woodward, 2008). For instance, having conducted three experiments, Baltazar et al. (2012) showed that young

children exhibited better memory for the details of negative actions compared to positive ones.

Finally, as was the case with the positive aspects, consistently mentioned in the literature threats were not raised by the current participants, probably due to their not straightforward nature, such as the danger of addiction (Blau, 2014; Kalmus et al., 2015), the threat of embedded marketing (Byron, 2008; Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Valcke et al., 2011) and health-related concerns, such as obesity, eye strain and poor posture (Karuppiyah, 2015).

### **5.3 REFLECTION ON METHODOLOGY**

The children seemed to have benefited from the focus groups as they collaboratively generated a new set of knowledge (Littleton & Mercer, 2013) and came to new understandings. This study also highlighted the pressing need to listen to children's voices, as the participants did not seem to value all the SNS-related benefits and threats suggested in the literature. Furthermore, inviting children's interpretations on the consistent emphasis of SNS reinforced my belief that, as the child-centered research suggests, far from being incomplete social actors, children can be reliable reporters of their experiences (Fraser, Ding, Kellett, & Robinson, 2004; Mayall, 2013).

### **5.4 IMPLICATIONS**

As many children choose not to disclose negative SNS experiences to their parents

due to fears of freedom invasion, it could be constructive if parents placed more emphasis on discussing their children's online activities rather than merely checking.

Furthermore, as teachers were the least reported source of SNS-related support, I would suggest that the topic of SNS be raised more frequently in schools. National governments could also provide teachers, parents and children with initiatives, such as free of charge seminars, aiming at developing their social media literacy. Furthermore, since most of the participants found the management of the privacy settings complicated, it would be beneficial if the SNS profiles were private by default.

Finally, I would suggest that the minimum age requirement be abandoned. Although Livingstone et al.'s (2013) argument that the number of SNS users would rise exponentially seems reasonable, I believe that the number of underage users is already alarmingly high. Not only children are not offered age-appropriate support, but, as the current study confirmed, they appear to consider falsifying their age, and subsequently lying, normal practice.

## **5.5 LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Due to time constraints, there was absence of method triangulation, while the small sample employed does not allow for statistical generalisations (Yin, 2014). Further research with a randomly selected large sample would allow for statistical comparisons and generalisations, while observations could establish whether children browse SNS as carefully as they reported. A theme that is worth

investigating is why children in some cases appear to know what they should do but do not behave accordingly, since, although children in the current study emphasised the importance of private profiles, they appeared uncertain about their profiles' privacy status. Finally, having shown that children have a good understanding of threats and opportunities and they are keen on protecting their peers, further research could ask primary children directly whether the age restriction should be abolished or not.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

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This study shed light on primary children's use of social networking sites, an under-researched topic. It confirmed previous studies showing that primary children are well informed about the dangers associated with SNS and that girls especially appear to use them in a relatively thoughtful manner. It also highlighted the need to listen to children's perspectives, as their perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of SNS appear to be different from those of the researchers. Exploring this area more systematically is of utmost importance in order to support, protect and ultimately empower children to become creative, confident and responsible online citizens.

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