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Have You Asked for It?: an Exploratory Study About Maltese Adolescents' Use of Ask. fm

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Have you Asked for it? An Exploratory Study about Maltese Adolescents' use of Ask.fm

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Review

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Introduction

Adolescent development is characterised by numerous changes and continuous self-exploration in the physical, cognitive, and social domains of the individual. These result in a more distinct and organised self-concept (Steinberg & Morris, 2011). The context in which development occurs and the way in which it occurs has changed significantly as a result of online socialisation. The significance of this context for development (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007) becomes all the more important in light of the characteristics of online communication, in particular the possibility of the anonymity that it affords (Peter & Valkenburg, 2013), and the frequent use that adolescents make of social networking sites (SNS). These sites are online services where members can “(1) construct a public or semi-public profile..., (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, 20017, p. 211). Depending on the SNS in question and the features it offers, teens have various opportunities and modalities for interaction. For instance, endorsing content through ‘likes’, posting content that reflects their interests, and receiving comments from others can all be related to their self-presentation and exploration of their nascent identity (van Dijck, 2013, Manago, Guan & Greenfield, 2015). Roberts, Henriksen and Foehr (2004) propose integrating developmental and media theories to improve our understanding of how adolescent development and the online media environment interact and influence each other. Both Roberts et al. (2004) and Arnett (1995, 2014) propose Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973; McQuail, 1994) as a valid model to understand this bidirectional relationship (Vossen, Piotrowski & Valkenburg, 2014).

Uses and Gratifications on Social Networking Sites

Uses and Gratifications theory was first developed in 1969 by Blumler and Mc Quail in relation to content available on TV, radio and newspapers. The key assumption of the theory is that “the audience member makes a conscious and motivated choice among channels and content on offer” (McQuail, 1994, p. 318). Psychological, sociological and environmental factors influence the type of media use (Katz, et al., 1973) on the basis of how it gratifies the users’ needs. For instance, audience members can select specific programmes (such as soap operas) based on whether these reinforce value systems or not. Interest in this theory dwindled over time, but it was revived with the digital media revolution which brought about an exponential increase in media choices (Ruggiero, 2000). What was formerly referred to as audiences have now become ‘users’, emphasising their active role in the online world (Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

Whiting and Williams (2013) identify the following gratifications attainable from social media use: information seeking and sharing, social interaction, pastime, entertainment, relaxation, utility for communication and convenience, the possibility to express opinions and surveillance.

Identity Development in the New Media Ecology

Erikson’s (1963) theory of psychosocial development suggests that during adolescence, establishing identity through one’s social context is the main task. Identity is “the entity that gives one the power to move with satisfying direction in one’s life and to recognize and be recognized as a unique individual by others in the social context” (Kroger, 2015, p. 537). The process of identity development begins in childhood, and progresses through one's lifespan through explorations and commitments that contribute a sense of continuity along one’s life.

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3 Through social interactions, including online ones, adolescents construct their selves
4 (Manago, 2015). They use media to test aspects of their identity, and the feedback they obtain
5 from peers has a significant role. Those aspects of identity that receive positive feedback
6 from peers are integrated, while they seek alternatives for those aspects that are not validated
7 (Salimkhan, Manago & Greenfield, 2010). During adolescence, online communication often
8 happens through SNS. In a qualitative study with female adolescents, Dunne, Lawlor and
9 Rowley (2010) conclude that the Uses and Gratifications approach is specifically relevant to
10 studying SNS. They found that through SNS use, several gratifications were obtained. These
11 included “the portrayal of one’s ideal image, peer acceptance, relationship maintenance,
12 safety from embarrassment and rejection, and finally, engagement in playground politics”
13 (p.54). Adolescents also join SNS because their friends are there (Binns, 2014), and they
14 want to feel that they belong to their group of peers (Boyd, 2007). Friends teach each other
15 how to manage their self-image on SNS, and they often choose to put forward impressions
16 which are likely to be validated by peers. This also offers the possibility to change the way
17 they present themselves if an impression is not well received.
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35 The Media Practice Model put forward by Steele and Brown (1995) is based on Uses
36 and Gratifications Theory and highlights the role of identity when adolescents make media
37 choices. Identity is conceptualised as an active “process woven into the fabric of daily life”
38 (p.572) where the media encountered impact the individual's identity, which in turn
39 influences media choices. This “ongoing reciprocal” process (Brown, 2000, p. 35) occurs
40 within the context of the adolescents' lived experiences, which encompasses the interaction of
41 several factors, including that of cultural background. Identity motivates adolescents’ media
42 choices, directly impacting which media they attend to. Once this engagement happens, they
43 interact with the meanings present in the media and incorporate them or reject them, thus
44 feeding back into their developing sense of self. Although this model was devised prior to the
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3 proliferation of the internet and social media, it remains valid and applicable for
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5 understanding new media use in adolescence.
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7 Online interactions have nonetheless become a space where adolescent identity is
8
9 negotiated. Vásquez (2014) claims that self-presentation online happens not only through
10
11 one's profile, but also through texts, even when these are anonymous. Peter and Valkenburg
12
13 (2013) discuss five features through which adolescents can manage self-presentation and self-
14
15 disclosure. These are: anonymity, asynchronicity, cue management, accessibility and
16
17 retrievability. Each of these has positive and negative implications resulting in both
18
19 opportunities and risks for the adolescent. Anonymity allows control over what to disclose
20
21 and how to present themselves, giving them more freedom (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011;
22
23 Vásquez, 2014), and minimising the risk of not being accepted. Yet, it "may result in
24
25 disinhibited, aggressive, and insulting comments, as well as in cyberbullying and online
26
27 harassment of peers" (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011, p. 122). Asynchronicity and cue
28
29 management make it possible to reflect and edit before posting, but this can be used for
30
31 manipulation or for targeting others. Accessibility makes both friends and strangers
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33 accessible, and retrievability implies that anything shared online can have unintended
34
35 audiences (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2013).
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39 Online interactions can improve the quality of friendships, but this is not always the case,
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41 especially if anonymity is involved (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Adolescents are more likely
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43 to take risks, make mistakes and test the limits (Bradley, 2005; Boyd, 2007) when engaging
44
45 in self-disclosure as part of their search for social connections. This phenomenon often gives
46
47 rise to discussions about the risks of self-disclosure through the use of technology
48
49 (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). From the adolescents' point of view, the online
50
51 environment facilitates taking emotional risks, (Bradley, 2005) because it is easier to face
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53 negative outcomes. In an anonymous context, this risky behaviour might be exacerbated.
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Peter and Valkenburg (2011) present anonymous online communication as "the extreme form of protecting one's privacy" (p. 230). Withholding one's identity on a SNS allows the adolescent to choose and control what to show to others, thus facilitating the process of identity experimentation, self-disclosure and making new connections.

Anonymity and Ask.fm

Ask.fm is a social networking platform which uses a question and answer (Q&A) format to connect users with each other through conversational exchanges. Ask.fm's rapid growth since 2010 was in part due to the fact that such exchanges could be carried out anonymously, and that they could be cross-posted on Facebook and other platforms. However, Ask.fm also attracted significant adverse publicity due to its reputation for persistent cyberbullying and its association with up to five teenage suicides in the UK, Ireland and the USA (Vaughan, 2013; Blake, 2015). In 2014¹, new safety measures were introduced including a Safety Centre, the appointment of a Trust and Safety Officer and an Advisory Board (Perez, 2014). Safety controls were further enhanced in 2016². Other sites such as Anomo, Whisper, After School, Psst! Anonymous and Sarahah, also have anonymity as one of their main features.

Adolescents have more control over their self-presentation when they are online in comparison to face-to-face communication (Michikyan & Subrahmanyam, 2012). Anonymity provides the ultimate control over how they present themselves since they can portray only those aspects of themselves which they want to share. Anonymity has characterised Ask.fm since its inception, and it was retained as a key feature of the platform (Pollak, 2014). Similar to other social media services such as Secret and Whisper, anonymous self-expression and social interaction is facilitated by enabling questions to be posed anonymously. Q&A exchanges become public on a user's profile only once they are answered. Users can opt not to allow anonymous questions; they can also refuse to reply or delete such questions.

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3 Anonymity is particularly appealing to young people, as it allows them the freedom to
4
5 express themselves in different ways at a critical time in the development of their identity
6
7 (Boyd, 2014). Anonymity is one of several factors that gives rise to an online disinhibition
8
9 effect that can lead to taunting, cyberbullying and online harassment (Suler, 2004).
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11
12 In a quantitative study with female adolescents, Binns (2013) explored user
13
14 experiences on SNS, including Ask.fm and Formspring, that both support anonymity. The
15
16 study, which was undertaken when moderation of communication and safety features on
17
18 Ask.fm were limited, found that Ask.fm users received more personal abuse than users on
19
20 other social networks (Binns, 2013). Similarly, a comparison of Ask.fm and Instagram
21
22 undertaken by Hosseinmardi et al. (2014) found that negativity was more prevalent on
23
24 Ask.fm. This could imply that anonymity expedites the permeation of negativity.
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27 Adolescents, in Binns' research, mostly used Ask.fm for fun. The anonymity provided
28
29 by the site helped them avoid awkward face-to-face conversations (Binns, 2013). Yet,
30
31 anonymity has another facet. Although there is no conclusive evidence as to the factors
32
33 involved when cyberbullying occurs, the disinhibition related to anonymity and the lack of
34
35 direct confrontation can be enablers of this negative behaviour (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).
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37 In fact, a third of respondents in Binns' (2013) study also referred to the disinhibition and de-
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39 individuation they experienced on Ask.fm and similar sites. Participants seemed to assume
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41 that once active on such sites, online abuse is inevitable and that users had no right to
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43 complain about it. Some also blamed the victims of online abuse for answering hurtful or
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45 insulting comments and labelled them as attention-seeking, noting that rather than answering,
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47 victims should delete their account.
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51 In light of the adverse publicity it had received, Ask.fm's safety features were updated
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53 to enhance the users' experiences (ASKfm updates Q&A app to attract millennials, 2016).
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3 The facility for anonymous question and answer exchange remains, but it is presented as a
4 way for safe self-expression since it is not necessary to reveal one's identity.

7 **The current study**

9 This paper applies the Uses and Gratifications theory to identify why adolescents use
10 Ask.fm. Although identity development through social media use has been investigated
11 before, (e.g. Boyd, 2007, Peter & Valkenburg, 2013), this study is among the few qualitative
12 studies that report findings specific to an anonymous SNS. Albeit Ask.fm's media hype has
13 somewhat decreased, it is still used by many adolescents. Moreover, new sites are constantly
14 being developed making the following exploratory findings relevant to our understanding of
15 young people's development in the context of a widespread use of new media.
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24 **Method**

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26 This study is based on empirical data collected as part of a research initiative by the
27 EU Kids Online network³. In 2010, a survey was conducted in 25 European countries to
28 investigate key risks that children aged 9 to 16 years face online. Following that, a cross-
29 national qualitative study was carried out to further explore children's understanding of
30 problematic situations online. Nine European countries, including Malta, participated in this
31 qualitative research. Data was collected by means of focus groups and interviews which were
32 carried out in schools from each country. To enable cross-national comparison, a common
33 interview guide was used⁴. Further details about the methodology are available in Šmahel and
34 Wright (2014).
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46 The EU Kids Online research received ethical approval from the LSE Research Ethics
47 Committee (UK), and the Maltese ethics requirements were also fulfilled. All participants in
48 the study together with their parents signed an informed consent form prior to participation.
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3 Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded with the participants' permission and then
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5 transcribed verbatim.

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7 In this paper, the analysis will focus on the use of Ask.fm among Maltese adolescents.
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9 Malta is an island in the Mediterranean with a population of 445,000. The majority of young
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11 people live with their parents until they get married. Being a small island, they need not move
12
13 out of their parents' home to study and to work. It is in this sheltered context that the use of
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15 Ask.fm by adolescents is being studied. The platform's popularity was a noteworthy feature
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17 during the data collection, and it was intriguing that adolescents were so keen on a site that
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19 offers anonymity, when being anonymous in the context of a very small island is hardly
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21 possible. Thus, it was decided to explore the data in view of the interplay of the site's use
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23 with identity developmental issues. To do so, all the instances where Ask.fm was mentioned
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25 in the Maltese focus groups and interviews were analysed for the purpose of answering the
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27 question: why do adolescents use Ask.fm?
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31 For the current study, the data was collected from four focus groups comprising 18
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33 participants (9 males and 9 females) and four individual interviews (3 males and 1 female).
34
35 Table 1 shows the participants' ages and their pseudonyms. A pragmatic decision was taken
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37 to include data from both focus groups and interviews in the analysis, since both the focus
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39 groups and interviews were conducted by the main author, and were utilised to address the
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41 same research question, through very similar interviewing guides and contexts (schools), in
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43 the same time frame, and with no predetermined order. Participants also shared their
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45 experiences freely both during the interviews and the focus groups. During interviews,
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47 participants might have responded in a way they thought would please the researcher and
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49 during focus groups, they might have felt inhibited or pressured to conform by the group. The
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51 different dynamics present during each method of data collection could impact the validity of
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53 the study and they were kept in mind and addressed when necessary.
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3 Participants were asked about unpleasant experiences online and issues they found
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5 problematic when using the internet like for example “Have you experienced anything on the
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7 internet that was not very pleasant?”. Participants could use either Maltese or English when
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9 communicating, depending on which language they were most comfortable with as both
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11 languages are spoken in the country.
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14 To extract the data pertinent to Ask.fm, a text search for the word ‘Ask.fm’ was
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16 performed on all the data. Each instance was examined to identify the segments where the
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18 discussion about Ask.fm started and ended. These excerpts were then collated into a single
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20 data file and the process of Thematic Analysis as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was
21
22 used to analyse the data. Data was coded using a mixture of inductive and deductive coding.
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24 For inductive coding the discussions about the platform were analysed. Once such code was
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26 the reason why they removed their Ask.fm account. During deductive coding, the data from
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28 the focus groups and interviews were analysed in view of the gratifications of SNS identified
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30 by Whiting and Williams (2013) i.e. information seeking and sharing, social interaction,
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32 pastime, entertainment, relaxation, utility for communication and convenience, the possibility
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34 to express opinions and surveillance. Issues of inter-rater reliability in qualitative research
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36 (e.g. Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman & Marteau, 1997), were addressed. The authors
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38 discussed differences in coding, and decided to apply the one which best represented what
39
40 was being said. These codes were then clustered and further categorised into four themes
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42 which are presented in Table 2.
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46 Findings

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48 Analysis of the transcriptions was carried out with the aim of finding out why young
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50 people use Ask.fm. Table 2 presents the themes identified together with the codes from where
51
52 they were derived. Results show that participants used Ask.fm for killing time and
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54 recreational purposes. They also used it to be part of their network of peers who do so, and
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3 through self-presentation and social interaction, they engaged in identity exploration. The fact
4 that this platform offers the possibility of anonymity could be the reason why users put
5 forward aspects of their identity which they would not have otherwise revealed. This is often
6 done notwithstanding the risk involved. In the direct quotes presented in this section,
7 pseudonyms are used to protect the participants' anonymity.
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13 **Whiling away time, fun, intrigue**

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16 One reason mentioned by participants for using Ask.fm was to while away time: "I
17 spend some three hours of time on it" (Mark, FG⁵⁴). They also used it to have fun: "I use it to
18 have a laugh; sometimes I see some very funny questions and they make my day better"
19 (Deborah, I2). Participants enjoyed seeing their friends being asked and answering questions.
20 They enjoyed being asked questions about themselves: "I enjoy seeing them ask me" (Mark,
21 FG4).
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29 The possibility of being asked questions anonymously also seemed to be something
30 that the participants found appealing and tempting. Users described being 'thrilled' by the
31 possibility of someone whom they do not know asking them questions. Although it is
32 possible for questions to be signed, it would appear that participants were intrigued by
33 anonymous communication: "You feel more confident when you don't know who's writing to
34 you and he doesn't know who you are (Bob, FG4).
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41 **The need to be accepted**

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44 Participants felt the pressure to be accepted by their group of peers. Kevin reflects that
45 sometimes the pressure to feel liked and included could lead one to do things such as setting
46 up an Ask.fm account even if one would not really want to: "We are willing to do anything,
47 even if we disagree with it in order to be liked. I haven't gone to that extreme, but more or
48 less, I never used to like Ask.fm but I ended up joining anyway" (Kevin, I4). This pressure,
49 both external and internal made some of the participants get an Ask.fm account. He insists
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3 that even though he was aware that Ask.fm might be a passing fad, and that people might
4 regret saying some things they said online, he wanted to be like his peers. Deborah, (I2)
5 explains how she had deactivated her account for a while, but reactivated because she didn't
6 want to be left out: "Last time I had removed it because of... school; I had to study, but after
7 a week I had set it up again..... you miss it then".
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14 The possible problems that arise from going unnoticed were obvious from how the
15 research participants reacted. In the discussions, they mentioned their concerns when people
16 asked questions to others and not to them. When they did not receive questions or comments,
17 like others did, they asked themselves whether there was something wrong with them or
18 whether they were lacking something in comparison to others.
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24 ...but it's like you start questioning 'why aren't they asking me?' You start
25 wondering 'what is it that they see in others that they don't see in me?'" (Kevin, I4).
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28 When Deborah felt that questions were inappropriate or downright obscene,
29 she did not answer. However, this was not the case for all her peers. Rather than opting to
30 ignore an unpleasant question, Zafira, felt compelled to answer in spite of feeling very
31 uncomfortable. She argued "maybe you wouldn't want to show it [the answer] to the person
32 who wants to see it" (FG3). In spite of this, she still answered such questions. Liam's reaction
33 to how disempowered some young people feel online is a clear indication that although
34 young people often know how they ought to react, the decision to do so is not
35 straightforward. There seems to be stronger pressures that supersede what they know is right:
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45 As if when you unfriend someone you would be breaking some sacred law – I don't
46 know – there is a sort of connotation that saying no, I don't know – It's like there's
47 always that sort of thing where you have to say yes: if they ask you, you have to reply,
48 if they send something, you have to respond (Liam, I3).
49

50 Not everyone gives in to these pressures. Four of the participants said that resisting
51 the pressure to join Ask.fm or to deactivate their account is not always hard. The eldest two
52 participants reflected that they did not feel the need for it, indicating that age, and as
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3 participants themselves claimed, more maturity might be contributing factors to this
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5 exception. Another two girls had negative experiences on this site and decided to deactivate
6
7 their account. This could imply that once the costs outweighed the gratifications that justified
8
9 the continued use of the platform, they decided to stop using it.
10

11 **Identity exploration**

12
13 Participants engaged in self-presentation when answering questions online. Through
14
15 these social interactions (answering questions and commenting), they expressed their likes,
16
17 dislikes (e.g. make-up brands, football clubs, music artists, vlogging), opinions (e.g. current
18
19 events and politics), and commented about their relationships (e.g. crushes and friends). The
20
21 reactions obtained are a way of getting feedback about oneself.
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25 There are those who genuinely ask you a question because they want to know, and
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27 they would leave a nice comment (Kevin, I4).

28
29 Participants feel that through Ask.fm, both friends and people they do not know get to
30
31 know more about them. They seem to think that through answering questions they will get to
32
33 know more about themselves and what others think of them. Moreover, as content on Ask.fm
34
35 is frequently cross-posted to Facebook and other platforms, this provides an opportunity for
36
37 others to ask more questions and make comments.

38
39 Mark: It's like that. I enjoy seeing them ask me

40 Interviewer: Why?

41 Mark: So that they get to know me well... and whoever sees them says let me
42
43 ask him something (FG4)

44 **The risks of anonymity**

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46 Throughout the focus groups and interviews, references to the negative aspects of
47
48 Ask.fm like anonymous insults, negative comments and harassment were frequent.
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50 Participants were aware that anonymity on Ask.fm entailed risks. Rumours were easily
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52 spread around, as one of the participants said: "they invented a rumour that I am pregnant"
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3 (Melanie, FG3). Matters can also get complicated leading to escalating arguments when
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5 insulting comments or questions are mistakenly not set as anonymous:

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7 For instance, I know of a friend of mine, and people were insulting him and he didn't
8 know who they were. The person forgot to set it as anonymous and my friend
9 found out who he was (Ursula, FG3).

10
11 Under the cover of anonymity some users circulate links with sexual, pornographic, or scary
12
13 content:

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15 Melanie: Or else on Ask, they send you the porn links.
16 Zafira: Or something scary, that kind. (FG3)

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20 Anonymity was perceived as dangerous since users would not be able to find out who
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22 started rumours or who insulted them. Participants seemed to believe that once an Ask.fm
23
24 account is set up, they would be "asking for it" (Melanie, FG3) and "if I have something
25
26 against you, I would have the perfect opportunity to insult you" (Ursula, FG3). In spite of the
27
28 distress that this may bring about, the participants said that many were still willing to take the
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30 risk and go through the adventure: "Exactly, once you go for it you have to look at the
31
32 positive and negative things. As once the anonymous start asking you, you wouldn't know
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34 who they are and you have to say 'I asked for it'" (Mark, FG4).

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36
37 Participants referred to bullying on Ask.fm as "hate" (Markus, I1). Some participants
38
39 said they would not insult back as this was considered "stooping to their level" (e.g. Mark,
40
41 FG4) and in that case the person replying would be as appalling as the person sending the
42
43 insults.

44
45
46 While some users considered Ask.fm as a game, others got hurt. Deborah's brother
47
48 has a disability, and she expresses the hurt she felt when the anonymous insults she received
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50 on Ask.fm were about him: "I love my brother a lot, and ... to have someone insult me about
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52 my brother, who has done them no wrong, as my brother would never ever wrong anyone, it
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54 hurts" (I2). One participant refers to suicides that happened because of the hate received on
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3 this site:: “Because in the UK, there were some who committed suicide. It’s like, the problem
4 is not Ask.fm. Like, if you see people insulting you, you don’t have to necessarily answer the
5 question. Remove it!” (Liam, 13). He emphasises that users should feel empowered to take
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10 action.

11 **Discussion**

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13 The results show that Ask.fm provides leisure-oriented gratifications such as
14 recreation and amusement. The interactive nature of the platform seems to also enable
15
16 adolescents to engage in self-presentation when replying to questions about themselves. The
17
18 feedback received might aid their identity exploration, confirming or disconfirming their
19
20 perception of self. Identity formation and confirmation which McQuail (2005) attributes as
21
22 gratifications attainable from traditional media, seem to apply also to social media such as
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24 Ask.fm.
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29 Anonymity, gives the young person greater control (Boyd, 2007; Michikyan &
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31 Subrahmanyam, 2012) over their self-presentation. This control provides adolescents with a
32
33 sense of safety and security while experimenting with aspects of their identity. This finding
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35 was also outlined in Dunne et al. (2010).
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39 Adolescents knew insults, offences, bullying and drama were often experienced on
40
41 this platform. This was also a finding in Binns’ (2013) study, indicating that the abuse and
42
43 harassment on the platform were widespread (before safety was increased). Although
44
45 adolescents knew about the abusive behaviour on Ask.fm, they still used it to communicate
46
47 anonymously. Their need for privacy to explore and assess oneself (Peter & Valkenburg,
48
49 2011) could be the reason why they opt for anonymous online communication. Anonymity
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51 lowers their inhibition (Suler, 2004) and offers them safety from embarrassment and rejection
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53 (Dunne et al., 2010).
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3 Motivated by their interests and needs, adolescents select which media to attend to
4 (Steele & Brown, 1995). Ask.fm might be appealing to adolescents because their peers use it
5 and because anonymity provides a safe way for self-presentation and self-disclosure. This
6 would be followed by interacting and engaging with the platform: observing others, taking
7 part in the interactional exchanges, engaging in self-presentation and self-disclosure, and
8 processing their experiences. Part of this process involves evaluating and assigning meanings
9 to their experiences forming opinions, both positive and negative and labelling behaviours
10 (e.g. showing off). Despite these value judgements, they may decide not to stop using the
11 platforms because of the gratifications they gain and the developmental benefits they
12 perceive. The media use becomes part of their daily lives (appropriation) and internalised
13 (incorporation), or else it is discarded. This process becomes part of their sense of self, thus
14 closing the cyclical process feeding back into their identity.
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29 Based on this exploratory work, this is a tentative explanation that portrays how a
30 model that integrates developmental theory with media theory can be applied to new media.
31 To the authors' knowledge, this model has not been applied to understanding social media in
32 the developmental context. Further research would provide more insight into how this
33 process functions in relation to social media use and adolescence.
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41 An issue that emerges from the analysis of these findings is the need for increased
42 media literacy, particularly about what the implications of being anonymous online.
43 Adolescents might not be aware that there is no such thing as complete anonymity online.
44 Educating young people to think critically about their involvement with the new media from
45 a very young age could increase their ability to discern risk, self-regulate and feel empowered
46 when they need to take action. Self-regulation is particularly important since parental
47 mediation with adolescents can be a delicate matter and involvement from parents might be
48 perceived as an intrusion or an invasion of privacy and could backfire.
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Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Given the exploratory nature of this qualitative research there are a number of limitations to the current study. Emergent themes cannot be generalised due to the exploratory and qualitative nature of the work. Since the data was collected with the aim of understanding online activity, there was no specific focus on Ask.fm. This however could be a strength since participants were not guarded in what they said about this platform. One way to explore this further could be to involve adolescents who communicate anonymously online in a participatory research. Adolescents can observe and discuss their anonymous interactions to reflect on the role these have in establishing and maintaining their sense of self. The interplay between developmental tasks and Uses and Gratifications explored through the Media Practice Model can be followed up by testing the model to identify how developmental issues are impacted by anonymity on social media, and whether the pursuit of identity is indeed a motivator for media use (Brown & Steele, 1995). Carried out across different cultural contexts, such research would identify relevant cross-cultural differences in the use of anonymous sites.

Further research utilising Uses and Gratifications Theory would offer a deeper understanding of the role that other widely-used platforms have in the developmental processes of adolescence, particularly because it seems that different SNS are used for different needs (Hosseinmardi et al., 2014). It would also be informative to compare the differences in handling developmental tasks between those who use these platforms and those who choose not to do so. The framework could also be applied to understanding adolescents' sexualised communication when mediated by technology and anonymity, particularly with respect to gender differences and belonging to a minority group.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to understand the gratifications obtained by adolescents when using Ask.fm. Anonymity on Ask.fm is a double-edged sword for adolescents. It is appealing: it gives the users the possibility to explore their identity through social interaction. They can make use of anonymity as an opportunity to get feedback about themselves and others, which they would not get or give in a more traditional context. These are all important aspects of identity development occurring in an online context. On the other hand, this opportunity also exposes them to other risks, as anonymity is often used for insulting and abusing others on this platform. While participants get entertainment gratifications they sought out, they also seem to equate Ask.fm with negativity, being bullied, insulted or feeling offended. Despite the fact that adolescent Ask.fm users were aware of the potential for abuse, the gratifications they obtained overcame the risk of making themselves vulnerable and getting hurt. This finding could help understand why adolescents behave in risky ways online. Anonymity can be both a useful and powerful method for teens to deal with identity developmental. The fact that awareness of potential risks does little to negate indulgence, implies that in their quest for exploration, adolescents sacrifice safety for thrill-seeking.

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Footnotes

¹ In 2014, Ask.fm was acquired by IAC Publishing, LLC, the company that owns Ask.com

² Later that year Ask.fm was acquired by Noosphere Ventures albeit no significant changes were made to the platform as yet (Ask.fm changes hands once again, 2016).

³ EU Kids Online is a multinational network that aims to enhance knowledge of European children's online opportunities, risks and safety. The network was launched in 2006 and uses multiple methods to map children's and parents' experience of the internet, in dialogue with national and European policy stakeholders. The [research network](#) has published several reports and results based on empirical studies with the aim of informing policy and practice. This paper draws on the work of the EU Kids Online network.

⁴ The Focus Group Guide is available at this [link](#) and the Interview Guide is available [here](#).

⁵ From this point onwards, "FG" refers to Focus Group, and "I" refers to Interview.

Table 1 - Participants in Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus Groups								Interviews	
1 Females		2 Males		3 Females		4 Males		1-4	
Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age
Nadia	11	George	13	Zafira	14	Keith	14	Markus (M)	13
Anthea	11	Jeremy	13	Olivia	14	Jeremy	14	Deborah (F)	15
Janice	11	Edward	13	Melanie	14	Mark	14	Liam (M)	16
Nina	12	Hilary	12	Ursula	14	Saviour	14	Kevin (F)	16
Kelly	11					Bob	14		

For Peer Review

Table 2 – Thematic Analysis

Themes	Clustered Codes	Codes	Sample Quotes
Whiling away the time, fun, intrigue	Fills time	Fun	Funny questions
	Answering questions	Questions	Enjoyed seeing answers to questions
	Make the day better	Enjoy	The unknown
	Avoid boredom	Fascination	Challenge
	Intrigue	Interest	Game
The need to be accepted	Thrill	Facebook	I like not knowing who will ask me
		Pastime	
	Connecting with others	Fulfilled	Left out
	What is wrong with me?	Belong	Answering anyway
	Being popular	Peer influence	Popularity
	Feeling excluded	Sharing information	Being liked
		Be noticed	Social media norms
		Going unnoticed	Online community
		Obscene questions	Genuine questions
		Compelled	Pressure to fit in
	Connect	Passing fad	
	Tormented		
Identity Exploration	How others see them	Ask questions	Roles
	Comments	Reply to questions	Dating
	Feedback	Personal questions	Relationships
	Role experimentation	Self-disclosure	Sexuality
	Exploring identity	Negative Comments	
	Showing Off		
The risks of anonymity	Asking for it	Anonymous questions	Mentioning the past
	Inappropriate content	Avoiding confrontation	Hurt
	Inappropriate contact	Insults	Anger
	Arguments	“Hate”	Double bind
	Positive and negative	Bullying	Disempowered
		Suicide	Facebook
		Dangerous	Jealousy
			As once the anonymous start asking you, you wouldn't know who they are and you have to say 'I asked for it'
			Let's say God forbid something happens with his family and they would go to Ask.fm and start insulting him.