

## Profile Sites

### *A survey of young people and social networking sites*

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#### **Introduction**

More and more older people appear to be struggling with the integration of two separate worlds, the real world and the virtual one, as they see the advantages of new means of communication and want to keep up with the modern world. Young people of today have a different approach: for them there is only one world. Technology is such a matter of course that they no longer see where ICT plays a part and where it doesn't. It's 'just' there, and if it's fun or useful you should use it. The internet and mobile technology are simply tools to gather information, to communicate, to network and to have fun.

This fundamental difference in looking at and dealing with technology leads to various problems. The most important problem is that quite a number of parents and teachers feel no longer completely capable of guiding young people in their education and prepare them safely for life in society. For that's what happens when older people only guide young people in that part of the world where computers and cell phones don't play a part. Then you wrongly close your eyes for the exceptional range of digital environments in the development of young people. A lot is going on in the digital world that calls for some guidance and reflection! In short, parents and teachers who take themselves seriously should go to great lengths to find out more about what's going on in the digital worlds of young people, and how to deal with that.

This article is an attempt to provide more insight into a specific area of the digital world of young people: so-called profile sites, or social networking sites. It's based mainly on personal, exploratory research amongst Dutch college and secondary school students.

#### **The survey**

In March and April 2007, two students from the INHOLLAND School of Communication & Media Rotterdam, Olga van Rooijen and Jermo de Jong, did research into the use of profile sites. Their research was commissioned and supervised by the INHOLLAND eLearning Lectorate.

The object of the research was to collect data on the use of profile sites, their goal, their specific characteristics, and their benefits and disadvantages when compared to other instruments of communication. Another object was to find out whether users of profile sites (subconsciously) learn anything, and if so: what, and whether the field of education might in some way make use of such sites.

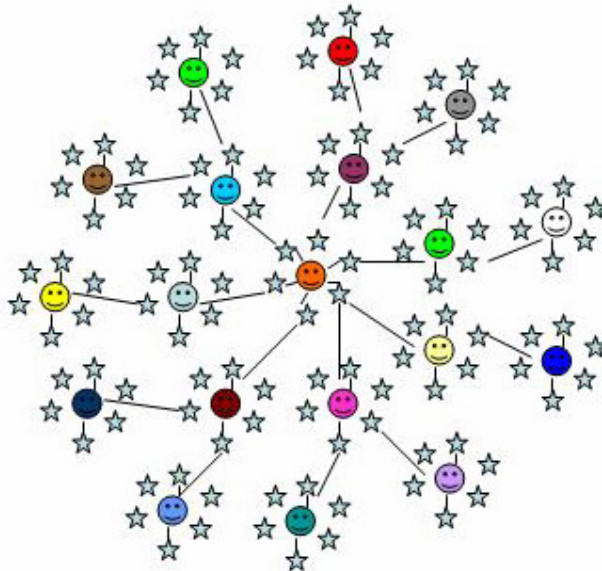
The target group for this research consisted of young people in two age categories: students from the last years of secondary education and college students, mostly from INHOLLAND. Two research instruments were used: a questionnaire with 33 questions, which was returned by a total of 573 people, namely 241 students from various colleges and 332 students from the secondary school Onze Lieve Vrouweyceum in Breda. In addition, thirteen students – ranging from 15 to 22 years of age- were interviewed to gain a more personal insight into habits, opinions and feelings, and also to find out more about the motives behind certain behaviour that emerged from the questionnaires. The questionnaires, the replies and a transcript of the interviews have been processed in two reports, which may be consulted on [www.inholland.nl/elearning](http://www.inholland.nl/elearning)

## Profile sites?

Profile sites are popular internet sites on which young people in particular create their own 'profile' and establish and maintain social networks with friends. These sites are generally referred to as social networking sites, as they enable users to have contact with others by means of interactive software.

A profile contains a short description of yourself –including your name, age, relationship status, length and hair colour-, but also a description of the things you like to do and your preferences regarding music, film, tv and sports, for example. Your heroes, your favourite food, etcetera. Then you upload one or more photos and choose one of them as the most important one, which will not only be seen on your site, but everywhere within the network where your name will pop up. After all, the aim is to see and be seen in order to build a network of friends and other people with whom you will be able to easily make contact and communicate.

Creating a profile is free of charge, it is easy to do, and since there probably are friends and acquaintances online already, the step to join in is easily taken. Once you have registered, you start creating your profile, then you invite your friends to your site and you go look for friends and acquaintances who are already active. Since the friends of your friends also have their own networks, you quickly find yourself in a web with various layers of friends and acquaintances.



**Friends of your friends' friends**

To explore this network you then visit the profiles of your friends (*Top Friends*) and click on the photos of the owners of other profiles. You can invite anybody to your friends list, and once the invitation has been accepted, the 'fun of communication and sharing' may begin.

It is not easy to give a complete survey of all the communication activities that are available once you have registered, as there are quite a number of different social networking sites. Below is a short list of some of the possibilities:

- Sending and receiving e-mail
- Publishing photos and video clips
- Keeping a web log
- Creating a website with its own URL
- MSN/chatting
- Search engines based on name, e-mail address or school connections
- Importing your entire address book
- Entering into new relations by browsing with criteria like age, sex and city
- Discussion on forums about specific subjects, such as games, parties, culture, literature, food and drink
- Joining special groups formed around hobbies and shared interests
- Sorting the profile photos of others in order of importance
- Evaluating teachers
- Keeping and consulting an agenda with local events
- Playing games
- Placing and browsing advertisements in categories
- Discovering new artists and music

### **Comments or 'scribbles'**

The 'engine' behind profile sites are the sections where you can comment on others. Young people are in a period in their lives in which they are looking for their own identity. Profile sites offer the possibility to experiment with their own preferences, opinions and looks. The photos they publish, their comments and the comments they receive, and the web logs they keep are all various forms of such experiments. On profile sites they find confirmation (or not) from peers, friends, acquaintances and strangers. Furthermore, it is a way to get the latest information, on everything from parties and concerts to what is going on at school, what others have seen on television and who might know a room for rent in the city you are going to go to college. Or a (temp) job! Wouldn't it be great if you could do all these things with your cell phone<sup>1</sup>!

### **Well-known profile sites**

Worldwide, there are over a hundred social networking sites for you to join. Some are intended for specific target groups, others are popular in certain regions or countries. *BlackPlanet.com*, for instance, is intended for Afro-Americans and has over 16 million users, and *Cvworld* is used by an equal number of South-Koreans. In Japan, *Mixi* is very popular, with 8 million users. *Facebook* (19 million) is intended for college and high school students, *Faceparty* (6 million) for British teenagers and twens. In the Netherlands *Hyves* is the most popular, with 3 million users. *MySpace* from the United States, which was started in 2003, has by far the most profiles: 175 million users, supported behind the screens by a staff of no less than 300!

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<sup>1</sup> But that might take a while. See: Fred Stutzman, <http://chimprawk.blogspot.com/2007/01/social-networking-in-2007.html>, *Social networking will not go mobile in 2007. Sure, lots of vendors are going to offer SNS on mobiles in 2007, but it won't catch on to become a major force. With data plans and handsets as they are, mobile use just doesn't match our use expectations of SNS. SNS is about browsing - and until mobiles let people richly and cost-effectively browse, our phones are going to remain glorified address books.*

### **Limits to what is possible and what is allowed**

MySpace and other profile sites are open to everybody and do not exclude activities beforehand. But naturally there are limits that should be observed. Limits that are determined by ethical and moral values are hard to guard. Individual users will have to (learn to) observe those limits themselves. The matter is a lot simpler in the case of copyrighted material. MySpace, for instance, is experimenting with a video filtering system that is designed to block clips that are copyrighted.

In April 2007<sup>2</sup> a version of MySpace was launched in China. As was to be expected, this local site also contains a filtering system that makes it impossible to use certain words (such as: Dalai Lama, Falun Gong and the independence of Taiwan). There is also a button for users to report subversive texts on other sites.

In the Netherlands too, more and more attention is being paid to the risks and boundaries of profile sites. The Justice Department, for instance, has launched a special site to inform and warn young people, amongst others for the dangers of the internet. The site is called *Vet Verkeerd* ('Wickedly Wrong'): [www.vetwerkeerd.nl](http://www.vetwerkeerd.nl). There, articles can also be found on the dangers of profile sites. A survey<sup>3</sup> amongst 1100 members of the association of computer users shows, for instance, that 90% of those questioned are convinced that young people with a profile are running a considerable risk. Parents should be the ones to point out the dangers of such sites to their children, say 75% of the respondents.

### **Music and politics**

Presently, two social sectors benefit (or would like to benefit) from profile sites. The first is the world of music, where you can not only easily play the background music of your choice for free (searchable by artist, genre, 'sounds like'), but also find the latest news about bands and artists you enjoy listening to. Numerous artists have sites like MySpace to thank for their growing popularity and success.

But politicians and political organizations also turn to profile sites to win votes or support. This already happened during the last elections in the Netherlands, when party leaders like Jan-Peter Balkenende, Wouter Bos and Mark Rutte made many Hyves-'friends'. In the United States, all kinds of possible candidates for the presidential elections in 2008 have established their own profile sites on MySpace<sup>4</sup>. They show photos, blogs and video clips and try to win the voters over for their campaign.

One might wonder whether schools and education shouldn't make more use of profile sites, as the music world and the world of politics clearly benefit from their presence on these platforms. The question remains whether young people are looking forward to profile site activities from their school. This is one of the questions this study should find an answer to.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://texyt.com/MySpace+China+censors+politics+religion+064>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.vetwerkeerd.nl/seks\\_in\\_de\\_wet/\\_nieuwsberichten/29180/](http://www.vetwerkeerd.nl/seks_in_de_wet/_nieuwsberichten/29180/)

<sup>4</sup> <http://impact.myspace.com/>

## RESULTS OF THE INHOLLAND SURVEY

The written answers to the 33 questions that were posed to the participating college students (21 years old on average) and students from secondary education (16 years old on average), together with the results of the thirteen interviews, have resulted in data that show clear trends and provide insight into the pros and cons of profile sites. Of course, the research group is too small and too select to be considered representative of all young people in the Netherlands, but the trends are clear. Below follows a summary of the most important findings.

### Use

Over half of the secondary school students questioned spend one to three hours a day on the internet. Amongst college students this percentage is slightly lower: 43.2%. 12% of the secondary school students and no less than 19.5% of the college students spend over three hours a day on the internet. 66% of the college students and 64.8% of the secondary school students indicated they have a profile site. College students spend more time on profile sites than secondary school students, as the data below show.

How often?	College students %	Secondary school students %
Once a month	15.2	23.7
Once every two weeks	9.5	10.2
Once a week	19.0	14.9
2 to 3 three times a week	25.9	25.1
Every day	30.4	26.0

How long?	College students %	Secondary school students %
0 – 30 minutes	84.8	87.9
30 – 60 minutes	10.1	9.8
1 – 3 hours	3.8	0.9
Longer	1.3	1.4

One striking finding is that amongst secondary school students, almost twice as many girls have a profile site as boys: 82.0% against 47.3%! Amongst college students girls are also in the majority, but the difference is smaller: 58.1% against 41.9%.

- (Aimée, 18): *I spend about an hour a day on the internet, usually right after school or after dinner. I use the internet to find information for school, MSN is usually on the whole time and I like to download music. My friends and I also frequently exchange music through MSN.*
- (Saskia, 21): *On average I spend 1.5 hours a day on the internet, mainly for work and school. I surf a lot. I also spend a lot of time on MSN and Hyves.*
- (Remco, 21): *I spend about three hours a day on the internet. I surf a lot and like to tinker with my own website. I don't do much else on it.*
- (Maarten, 22 and Bas, 23) spend an average of 3.5 hours a day on the internet. Maarten: *I check my mail, of course, and I also like to play games on my computer. I particularly like to play online poker.* Bas: *I surf a lot. I like to listen to bands on the internet, and I also MSN and chat a lot.*
- (Sven, 18): *I spend an average of four hours a day on the internet. I'm not actually on the internet the whole time, but the internet has to be on for online gaming with my Xbox. MSN is also running the whole time. Yes, I use the internet mostly for online gaming, in the second place for MSN and I also use the internet to find information for school. The rest of the time I just surf a bit. I play games, look for new music and check if there are any parties planned.*

### Reasons

Why do they have a profile site? The reasons differ greatly between college students and secondary school students: 32.6% of the secondary school students have a profile in order to keep in touch with friends. For college students this reason is far more important: 59.5%. 17.7% of the secondary school students join in 'because everybody has one.' Amongst college students it appears to be less important to 'be accepted': 8.9%. 3.3% of the

secondary school students admit that they like to be noticed; college students don't mention this reason at all! The argument 'to exchange information' is equally important for both groups: secondary school students 15.3%, college students 15.2%. Furthermore, 4.7% of the secondary school students say they have a profile to expand their circle of friends (college students: 4.4%). Other reasons that were mentioned include 'out of boredom', 'just because it's fun', 'a friend of mine made this site for me' and 'I was going crazy with all those invitations'.

- (Aimée, 18): *Most of the time when I'm on the internet, I'm also logged in on Hyves. I spend half an hour a day there. But I'm not actively on Hyves the whole time. Between MSN and school work I read my messages and send scribbles to friends. I use Hyves mainly to keep in touch with my friends. I also frequently upload new photos and view photos from my friends.*
- (Sven,18): *I have a profile on Hyves because many of my friends also have a profile, and to view photos, because you usually have to have a profile in order to view photos. I visit Hyves every day. 15 minutes a day, I'd say. I read my messages, send messages and view photos.*
- (Linda, 22): *I have a profile on Hyves and I also have some profiles on dance sites, like Djguide and Partyscene. I don't use those very much. I mainly have them to be eligible for free tickets and to keep informed of the latest parties. I spend a quarter of an hour a day on Hyves. I spend 5 or 10 minutes to send a message or two and read my messages. So I read my messages, and then I check the profiles of my friends. I mainly view their new photos. The main reason for getting a Hyves account was that I thought it would be fun to give it a try. I had never before had a profile like that, on sites like CU2 or Sugababes. Now that I have a profile, I find it fun to send and receive messages. And it's a convenient way to see each other's photos.*

### Which profile sites?

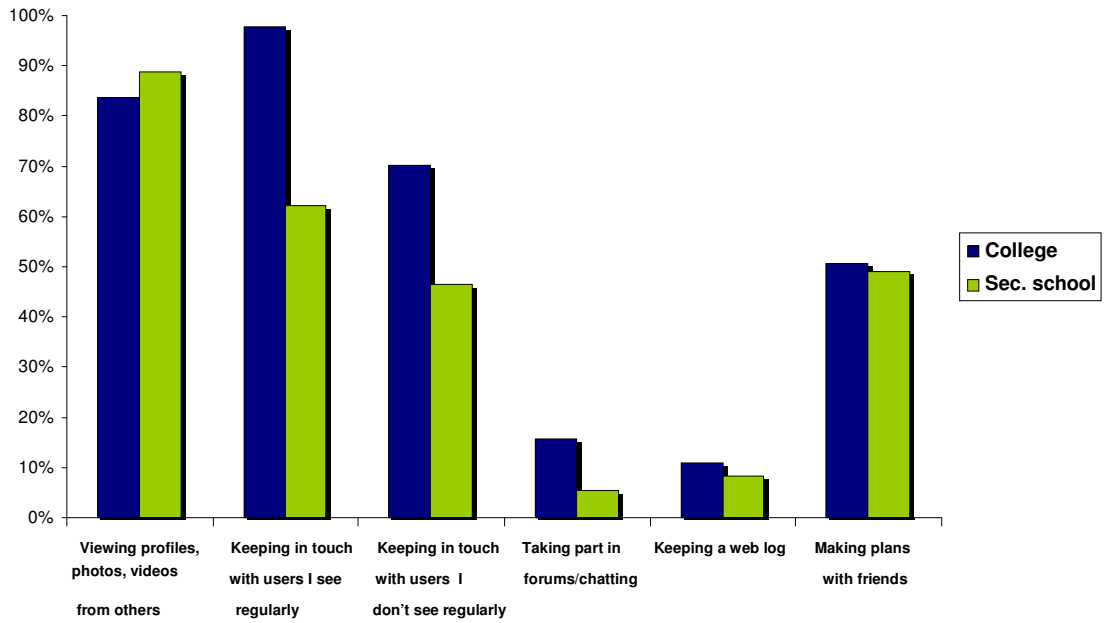
The students were asked which profile sites they know and on which they had created an account. Their answers resulted in the table below.

Profile site	Known by college students %	Known by secondary school students %	Used by college students %	Used by secondary school students %
Hyves	92,9	95,7	90,5	87,0
Sugababes/Supadudes	38,2	56,2	2,5	5,6
Connected2friends	2,5	1,2	0,6	0
CU2	55,2	62,9	3,8	7,4
Whoozz	2,1	1,8	0	0
MySpace	68,9	86,0	22,8	26,0
Partypeeps	45,2	19,1	7,0	3,3
Hi 5	31,5	17,6	7,6	4,2
Facebox	18,7	48,0	6,3	11,2
Other	11,2	16,1	6,6	12,1

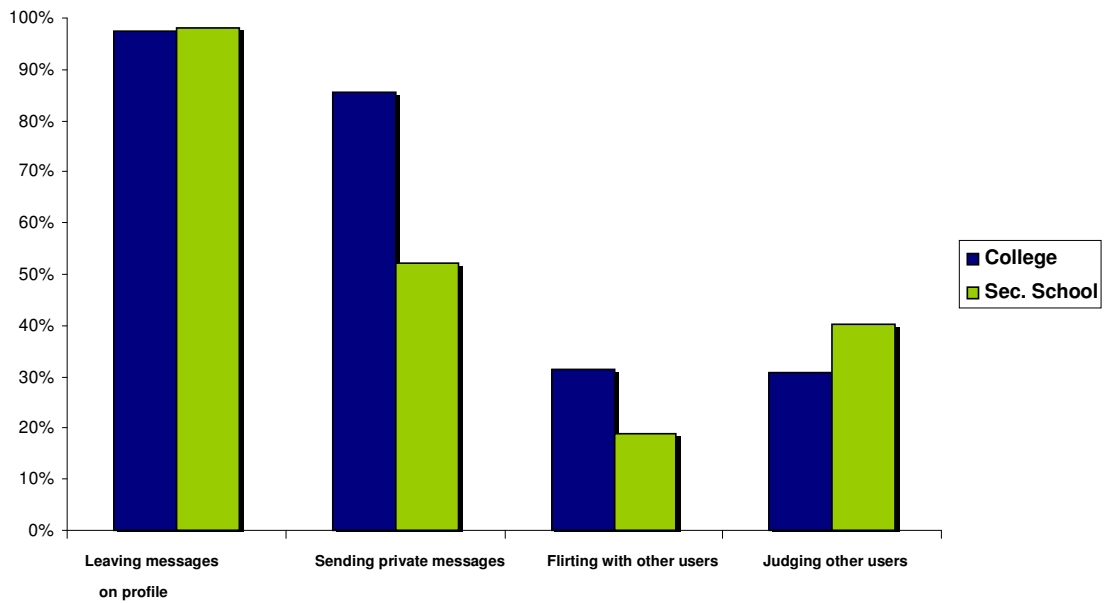
### Activities

But what exactly do those young people do on their site? They were given a list of activities to choose from, and what is striking is that college students are 'more interactive' than secondary school students, while the latter are more prone to give their opinion on other people:

Activity	College Students %	Secondary school students %
Viewing profiles, photos, video clips from others	83.5	88.8
Keeping in touch with friends I see a lot	97.8	62.1
Keeping in touch with users/friends I rarely see	70.3	46.6
Taking part in forums/chatting	15.8	5.3
Keeping a web log	10.8	8.3
Making plans with friends	50.6	49.0



Have you ever	College (%)	Sec. school (%)
left a message on someone else's profile?	97.5	98.0
sent a private message?	85.4	52.2
flirted with other profile users?	31.6	18.9
judged other profile users?	20.9	40.3



## Contacts and friendships

A couple of questions from the questionnaire dealt with the number and nature of the contacts. It turned out that secondary school students have an average of 120 contacts, and college students almost 109. When asked how many of those contacts could be considered real friends (*'close friendships with people you regularly have contact with'*) the secondary school students answered 50 and the college students almost 38 on average!

New friendships are also established on profile sites. In this area, college students accomplish more than secondary school students: 42.4% and 29% respectively. Half of the college students (50.7%) call these contacts superficial (secondary school students: 54.8%), but 46.3% (secondary school students: 43.5%) indicate these are good contacts with people they keep in touch with regularly. Some close friendships also emerge: college students: 3% and secondary school students: 1.6%. And not only new friendships emerge, but relationships as well. 7.6% of the college students and 6.9% of the secondary school students indicate to have a relationship with someone they met through a profile site. 23.4% of the college students (secondary school students: 25.1%) know someone who has found a partner through a profile site.

- (Aimée, 18): *The people on my contacts list are my friends I see every day, but also a few people I don't see regularly. People I met on holidays, or from other cities, for instance. It's fun and useful to exchange messages with them every once in a while. On MSN you often feel obliged to start a lengthy conversation and on Hyves you can just exchange photos and send a funny scribble every now and then. That's enough. 40% of the people on my list are real friends, I think. 50% are acquaintances and the other 10% are not really strangers, but people I vaguely know. Right now I've got about 270 friends. Yes, it's nice to have a lot of friends in your list, but I don't consider it that important that I'd start adding people just to expand my list... I haven't built up any close friendships through Hyves. Or perhaps I have, a little. I do talk more with people I wouldn't normally have a real conversation with if I met them. So through Hyves I now have more contact with people in real life. That's fun, this way you get to know more and more people.*
- (Bas, 23): *They're all friends and acquaintances. Five people at the most I just vaguely know.*
- (Maarten, 22): *My list also includes people I've met in a bar once, but rarely talk with. So those wouldn't really be good friends.*
- (Eelco, 22): *I've met someone through a friend of mine once. We've kept in touch on Hyves and it's grown into a close friendship. A girl had seen me once in a club. Afterwards she looked me up on Hyves and approached me there. We agreed to go on a date, the chemistry was there and we ended up having a relationship for a couple of weeks. In real life she turned out to be less fun and spontaneous than on the internet. At the moment we only have superficial contact on Hyves and MSN. So in hindsight that was a bit disappointing. In the past a good friend of mine has had a relationship with a girl he met on the internet. If there's a connection, and if it's still there in real life and a relationship evolves from that, I think it's a good thing. I think the rise of the internet and profile sites has helped people who normally have trouble making contact, to enter into relationships more easily..*

## Risks

In the United States in particular quite some controversy has arisen in recent years concerning the risks that young users of profile sites in particular are exposed to. This involves young people who publish (potentially) provocative photos that might attract paedophiles and other characters with sexual intentions. Other issues are cyber bullying and discrimination. Research<sup>5</sup> shows that the vast majority of young people use profile sites with

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.uwec.edu/newsreleases/06/dec/1204MySpaceresearch.htm>: *A majority of teenagers are responsible when using the online social networking site MySpace, but a number of adolescents still share personal information that could put their safety at risk, according to a first-of-its-kind analysis of teenagers' MySpace profiles.*

great care and are well aware of the risks<sup>6</sup>. Yet there will always be worrisome cases of young people who don't know what they do: approximately 5% of the profiles of teenagers studied showed photos of them in swimming gear or underwear, and 15% had such photos of their friends on their site. Almost 40% of the profiles mentioned the first name of the user, 9% revealed their full name. 81% mentioned the city or town they live in and 28% the school they go to. Less than one percent gave their phone number.

A couple of questions in the INHOLLAND-questionnaire also dealt with the negative sides of using profile sites, and the risks it involves. 11.4% (college students) and 9.4% (secondary school students) have at one point been confronted with negative responses, such as bullying, gossip or insults. 3.8% and 3.7% with discrimination, and 6.3% and 8.9% have had problems with sexual harassment.

When asked whether they themselves have ever discriminated against someone, sent someone a negative comment or sexually harassed someone 15.2% (college students) and 18.7% (secondary school students) indicate they have sent a negative comment to someone. Of the college students, none say they have ever discriminated against someone or harassed someone sexually. Some secondary school students do admit to this: 1.4% for discrimination, 1.9% for sexual harassment.

When young people need to talk with someone about these sorts of bad experiences, 15.8% (college students) and 32.7% (secondary school students) approach their parents or other members of their family. 32.9% and 56.5% respectively try to sort things out with friends or acquaintances. Independent institutions or guidance counsellors at school are rarely sought out. Only two secondary school students mentioned their guidance counsellor.

- (Aimée, 18): *Everybody can see my profile, but information I want to share is only accessible for my friends on the site. I don't include a lot of personal information, because those who need to know such things, already know them. I'm not going to put everything on the internet...*
- Eelco, 22): *I think I've learned to formulate my opinions more carefully. I've also become more careful with giving my opinion without thinking first.*

## Identity

Most young people, by the way, also say they are themselves on profile sites and don't hide behind a fake identity. Only 4.4% of the college students and 3.8% of the secondary school students say they sometimes present themselves as someone they are not. Reasons for pretending to be someone else include:

- *'I like to joke around'*
- *'I didn't trust Hyves right away'*
- *'I want to appear cooler than I am'*
- *'Because I was bored'*
- *'Because I didn't want to be recognized'*

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<sup>6</sup> The *Crimes Against Children Research Center* in New Hampshire also carries out regular studies regarding internet safety, and their results show the same trend. Most users are careful, but there is a small group that is at risk as a result of their own behaviour. [http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/second\\_youth\\_internet\\_safety-publications.html](http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/second_youth_internet_safety-publications.html)

- (Sven, 18): *No, I don't pretend to be someone I'm not. But I know people who do. Two girls in my class create profiles of stars like Brad Pitt. And then they add those stars to their friends list, and then Brad Pitt sends a scribble asking them for their phone number. That's kind of funny...*
- (Linda, 22): *No, I never present myself as someone else. But I know someone who does. I only have people I know in my Hyves friends list, I never add people I don't know at all. So I always know who someone is before I accept them. If other people want to experiment with their identity, that's up to them. As long as they don't go too far. If someone is shy and wants to appear more relaxed through a profile site, that's fine. Perhaps it really works for them. This way they are less afraid to approach people and make friends. But when it comes to experiments in the sense of 'I'm a woman and I'm pretending to be a man', that's going too far, in my opinion. Then you're just taking the piss out of people.*

When asked 'Do you think you take up a vulnerable position on your profile site?' only a small percentage responded with 'yes' (college students: 12.7% and secondary school students: 20.0%). A small group of college students (15.8%), but over three quarters of the secondary school students (75.7%), however, do mind what other people say about them! When asked 'Do you think you have become more critical of yourself?', 37.1% of the secondary school students and 11.4% of the college students responded with 'yes'.

### **Advertising**

College students are less annoyed with the advertising than secondary school students. 55.7% of the college students consider the amount of advertising offered 'just right', but only a small percentage (13.3%) consider the content useful. 42.4% think there is too much advertising and 47.5% call the content 'useless'. Secondary school students are more critical: 62.4% think there's too much advertising and 7.1% say 'just right'. Three quarters of the secondary school students consider the advertising 'useless', while 4.2% think the content is 'useful'.

Still, there are young people who respond to various forms of advertising: 10.4% of the secondary school students and 8.9% of the college students. Most of them have responded to advertising less than six times in the past six months (secondary school students: 90.9%, college students: 100%). 9.1% of the secondary school students were enticed more often than that.

### **School**

School and profile sites are two separate worlds and a vast majority of college students (88.0%) and secondary school students (79.7%) think things should stay that way. One fifth of the secondary school students do see possibilities for a merger. Almost all respondents would like their school to use profile sites to provide information concerning changes in the schedule and grades, for instance. A few would like their school to discuss the phenomenon of profile sites in class. Furthermore, two college students indicated they would like to have a blogspace for graduate students to download documents<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Susan McLester, Technology Literacy and the MySpace generation, in: *Technology & Learning* March 2007, 17-22. She says that during the Sun Worldwide Education and Research Conference 2007 in San Francisco, students sent out three clear messages, including: *Social networking hubs are here to stay and should not be constrained by schools. Sites such as MySpace and Facebook are the avenues of daily commerce for the digital native and therefore the most efficient means of communication. Students check these sites several times a day, circumventing more sluggish institutionalized avenues to accomplish tasks quickly and efficiently. 'It's easier to go to a student's Facebook entry than to have to dig up their e-mail through the university system.'*

The following example shows that schools and colleges in some cases are perfectly aware of what's going on on their students' profile sites<sup>8</sup>: In April 2007, Stacy Snyder, a graduate student of a teacher training college, sued Millersville University because they refused to give her her diploma because of a photo on her MySpace site. The photo showed Stacy on a Halloween party with a pirate's hat and a plastic drinking cup in her hand. Because of this photo, the school director accused her of promoting drinking to minors. The outcome of the trial is still unknown at the time of writing of this article.

- (Sven, 18): *On occasion I have used Hyves to discuss school matters, and also to check if someone had notes from a particular class. It's quite useful for that, because you wouldn't approach people from your class, let alone from another class, that easily in real life. The school doesn't have to do anything else. There are already some initiatives from students, and there's a common Hyves site you can join. For if the school is going to interfere, pretty soon you'd have to go to Hyves, because otherwise you might miss a school outing. I'm not looking forward to that. It's for fun, it shouldn't become an obligation... But the school might give a class about profile sites, for the parents too. I think both the school and the parents still know too little about it.*
- (Aimée, 18): *Hyves is quite useful when you need help from your network. That's true. When I need a report for a certain class, it's easier to send a message to people I don't know so well, rather than calling them on the phone. And usually it works! So yes, I collaborate with others in school by exchanging reports and the like.*
- (Eelco, 22): *I think the school should watch carefully how many students use a profile site and how much time they invest in them. Since the vast majority of students use a profile site, schools should look at ways to take advantage of that. For instance, by publishing trainee posts and graduation projects on profile sites, so that students can easily find them online. The school might for instance create a school profile site. That way, students have a common place where they can get to know other students, collaborate on homework or share opinions and experiences.*

## Parents

The students consider it an important task for parents to inform themselves better about what is going on in the digital world. Especially for parents with children up to about sixteen years old. Although there are exceptions, many parents don't know exactly what sorts of things are possible on the internet<sup>9</sup>. The students also think, however, that their parents learning more about the internet should not lead to a violation of their privacy.

- (Sven, 18): *My parents don't know what I do on the internet. Okay, they know that I use MSN and play online games, but I don't think they've even heard of Hyves. Perhaps they've heard of it, but that's about it. I don't think they should know more about it. I don't do much with it anyway. At least nothing shocking. On the other hand, perhaps they should know what can be done there in general. But I don't want them to know exactly what I do there. That's private, isn't it?*

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2007-04-29-myspace-school-suit\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2007-04-29-myspace-school-suit_N.htm)

<sup>9</sup> See also: *Social networking sites: A Parent's Guide*, containing all kinds of facts and tips: <http://www.onguardonline.gov/socialnetworking.html>

## Theses

De questionnaire ended with some theses. The students were asked to indicate whether they agreed with them or not. Below are the results.

Thesis 1: I find it important that people can see who I am in my profile			
College students %	agree	neutral	disagree
	35.4	43.7	20.9
Secondary school students %	agree	neutral	disagree
	27.8	50.9	21.2

Thesis 2: I find it important to have many contacts in my friends list			
College students %	agree	neutral	disagree
	14.6	36.7	48.7
Secondary school students %	agree	neutral	disagree
	10.4	37.3	52.4

Thesis 3: I find it important that I can express my creativity on a profile site			
College students %	agree	neutral	disagree
	20.9	50.6	28.5
Secondary school students %	agree	neutral	disagree
	29.2	41.0	29.7

Thesis 4: I find it important that I get to know new people on profile sites			
College students %	agree	neutral	disagree
	19.6	43.0	35.4
Secondary school students %	agree	neutral	disagree
	15.6	36.8	47.6

Thesis 5: I find it important that a profile site is user friendly			
College students %	agree	neutral	disagree
	84.8	12.0	3.2
Secondary school students %	agree	neutral	disagree
	82.1	14.6	3.3

## Associations

Finally the participants were presented with a list of pairs of words and asked to choose one from every pair, namely the word that they thought suited profile sites most. Below is shown how many percent of the respondents chose for which word.

Word	College students %	Secondary school students %
Easy	94.3	95.1
Difficult	2.5	4.9
Entertaining	94.4	98.9
Informative	1.9	1.1
Essential	15.2	9.7
Unessential	79.1	90.3
Assertive	72.2	74.6
Vulnerable	21.5	25.4

Old	1.3	3.2
Young	96.2	96.8
Insecure	12.0	14.6
Confident	84.2	85.4
Forward	83.5	83.2
Shy	10.1	16.8
School	9.5	3.2
Home	88.0	96.8

It is obvious that most young people emphatically associate certain words with profile sites: **easy, entertaining, unessential, assertive, young, confident, forward** and **home**.

### Conclusion

The survey shows clear trends regarding profile sites. At the moment, these social networking sites are extremely popular amongst young people. They offer a very convenient way to organize contact with friends and acquaintances. Viewing other people's photos and writing 'scribbles' as a comment on what you see or read elsewhere, is a popular activity. The ease with which you make and maintain contact, and the entertaining way to do so (with photos, video clips and music) create a world that is both practical and challenging. College students and secondary school students do appear to emphasize different aspects, when you look at their activities on profile sites. 32.6% of the secondary school students have a profile in order to keep in touch. For college students this aspect is much more important: 59.5%. 17.7% of the secondary school students have a profile *'because everybody's got one'*. For college students it seems to be less important to be accepted by the group: 8.9%.

It is striking that amongst secondary school students almost twice as many girls as boys haven a profile site: 82.0% against 47.3%! Amongst college students there is a difference too, but it's considerably smaller: 58.1% against 41.9%.

Young people are perfectly aware that life *can* go on without these sites, but think they would miss an entertaining and informative medium that enables them to take part in the culture and social environment of today's youth. Besides, there is no other place where you can find (temporary) accommodations and jobs, or keep informed of the latest music trends this easily.

MySpace and other profile sites are open to everybody and do not exclude any activities beforehand. But naturally there are limits that should be observed. Limits that are determined by ethical and moral values are the hardest to guard. Individual users will have to (learn to) observe these themselves. The vast majority would like to keep profile sites the way they are and don't consider the risks they're exposed to when revealing too much information about themselves very important. It's your own responsibility and you should know the limits. Most users say they're careful on the internet and are well aware of the risks.

Young people realize that profile sites could definitely be an informative environment, but would not like to get their school involved, because according to most users the schools should keep away altogether from this digital world. Yet some schools appear to be successful with their profile site activities<sup>10</sup>.

The students consider it an important task for parents to inform themselves better about what is going on in the digital world. Especially for parents with children up to about sixteen years old. Although there are exceptions, many parents don't know exactly what sorts of things are

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.hyves.nl/index.php?l1=al&l2=hm&module=almanac&action=showItem&id=9559>

possible on the internet. The students also think, however, that their parents learning more about the internet should not lead to a violation of their privacy.

The full research report can be found on the website of the INHOLLAND eLearning Lectorate: [www.inholland.nl/elearning](http://www.inholland.nl/elearning).