

My kid's are angels? – Internet and kids, a Portuguese case study

By Gonçalo Jorge Morais da Costa and Nuno Miguel Araújo da Silva

Abstract

New information technologies provide tools and ways of thinking that shape every aspect of our lives. The Internet, taken as a tool, assists one in specific tasks associated with study, communication, or leisure. But taken as a whole technology, a unified world of systematic processes, they come to dictate one's perception of reality and to dominate every sphere of life. The aim of this research is to understand the behavioural divergence between kid's and adults as Internet users in Portugal, through out a field questionnaire, in order to address the theoretical gap regarding literature.

Introduction

As a major factor in the information highway, the Internet is a vast network system that processes data and information between innumerable sites in the virtual electronic world called cyberspace. Because the Internet "personality" has been characterized as everything from free and egalitarian to wild and anarchic, it is no wonder that it has generated tremendous excitement, promise, and fear in the popular imagination. What was launched to ensure that essential information for national security could continue to be distributed if any part of the system failed, today offers a wider scope of tools used for information transmission and retrieval, communication and interaction (December, 1996). Plus, these technologies have formed the capacity to enhance synchronicity, asynchronicity and interactivity in computer mediated communication (Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1996; Weiser, 2001; Conde, Torres-Lana and Ruiz, 2002). In a study concerning the causal motivations for Internet use (Weiser, 2001) it appeared two full-bodied scopes that absorb 50% of the variance: a relational and affiliative motivation (socio-affective regulation), and a functional and utilitarian motivation (acquisition of information). Other authors still defend a third reason: entertainment.

This amazing growth also lead that a substantial number of scholars concerning multiple research fields tried to comprehend the Internet and its users. However, some researchers plead the following idea: guidelines concerning ethical research on human subjects written before the Internet, could engage serious problems regarding Internet users (Reid, 1996; Waskul and Douglass, 1996; Frankel and Siang, 1999; Eysenback and Till, 2001). So, such assumption implies that Internet has two levels of arguing: it can be seen as a "tool" for research; and, it can be seen itself as the "research". Moreover, the aim of this research is to understand the second level of arguing, through out a field study that analysis the behavioural divergence between kid's and parent's as Internet users in Portugal, having in consideration the ethical dimensions stated by Pimple (2002). Plus, we may claim that such research is a following up of our previous work (Costa, 2005; Costa and Silva, 2007), and simultaneously, makes an important contribution to the theoretical gap regarding literature.

As a concluding remark, we acknowledge the arguments concerning the paper structure that will allow such debate: kid's versus Internet; society versus Internet; the research methodology; the questionnaire analysis; and, finally the conclusions regarding such matter.

Development

Kid's versus Internet

Literature acknowledges several metaphors for youth culture such as: "transitional space", "moratorium" or "free zone". Through such metaphors, researchers seek to address two related characteristics concerning youth life in our contemporary society: the biological and

time period that illustrates innocence and dependence upon others in childhood, and the freedom but also responsibilities of adult life; and, the quest for a space of their own, outside the control of adult society or, increasingly, commercial interests (Ziehe, 1994). Plus, several studies point out that the biological process of growing and culture influence socio-cognitive development. However, the biological process for itself does not engage entirely the socio-cognitive development process, and it is difficult to understand as values arise (Sprinthall and Collins, 1988).

Children and youth are generally quick learners and passionate adopters of the Internet for various goals such as communication, entertainment or education. They tend to regard the Internet as a flexible and multi-function medium. Research has identified several motives for children's Internet use: affinity with computers, information, entertainment, boredom avoidance, on line social interaction, and off-line social interaction (Valkenburg and Soeters, 2001), and they are more comfortable and knowledgeable with a technology than are their parents' (Tapscott, 1998).

However, such affinity engage a considerable amount of time spent on line (Sparks, 2005), which can lead to depression and other mental health problems due to the lack of meaningful interactions and relationships with friends and family. Young people who spend hours on line and limit their social interactions with their peers can become socially isolated, as they lack opportunities to improve their social skills (Bostick, 2005). More important, the age concerning Internet use is rapidly descending, being now under 12 years old (Wartella, Vandewater and Rideout, 2005).

In conclusion, the widespread availability and use of the Internet has opened up to children a fantastic world of information and experience that parents' of previous generations can hardly understand or cope with. Considerable attention and concerns are now focusing on children and Internet, because as the first "the digital generation" they are in the vanguard of new communication technologies, yet also vulnerable to the risks associated with it (Livingstone, 2003).

Society versus Internet

Although children seem to be mostly enjoying their digital experiences with the Internet are dangers, both real and potential. According to the research literature, there are three categories of on line danger (UCLA, 2001; Williams, 2002): exposure to improper content; the incidence of exploitative and dangerous contacts; and, issues of privacy, advertising and commercialism.

Corresponding to these dangers, parental concerns center on their children's Internet use, particularly in relation to values, commercialism, privacy and, above all, sexual material (Livingstone, 2002; Parenting SA, 2007). Pornography on the Internet has been especially troublesome. In late 2003, one research firm estimated there were over 1.3 million sites serving up about 260 million pages of erotic content (Legon, 2003). Illegal downloads have also become a concern for parents', as various countries and organizations begin to crackdown on offenders. In early 2003, The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) filed 532 lawsuits against individuals who shared songs using programs like Kazaa (Evangelista and Hoge, 2003). Some of the actual penalties and fines were listed in the millions of dollars (although most expect the suits will be settled for far less), and some of the defendants were as young as 14 years old (Levy, 2003). Still, the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) has filed suits against 247 individuals in Italy, Germany, Denmark, and Canada (Ma, 2004).

Thus, the body of literature on parental concerns of children's Internet use is growing. Although most of the published research has been conducted in western countries (Lenhart, Rainie and Lewis, 2001; Livingstone and Bober, 2003), as for example: Germany (Digitale

Teilung, 2003), UK (Livingstone and Bovill, 2001); the issue, is increasingly at a global level (see for example: Wei, 2003; Chand and Shen, 2004).

Due to such problems, the EU is concerned and for that it has promoted a study that aggregates all the available information regarding the EU countries (Staksrud, Livingstone and Haddon, 2007). Such study demonstrates that 50% of children (<18 years old) in the EU25 have used the Internet, rising from just 9% of those under six, 3% between 6-7 years old, 2% between 8-9 years old and more than 5% in teenagers aged between 12-17. Cross-national differences are substantial, ranging from less than a third of children in Greece and Bulgaria to over two thirds in Estonia and Denmark. The EU Kid's On line network has identified 235 separate research studies and entered these into the on line data repository. Some studies are small, producing a single report; others are substantial, resulting in a series of publications.

Plus, such study shows that all countries had several studies concerned with parents' knowledge of their children's Internet usage and parents' style of regulating their children's use. In general there were fewer studies in each country regarding children's response to regulation, and some countries did not cover this at all. Nor was it just the countries with few overall studies that did not cover this topic (it was not addressed in Austria, Estonia, Greece and the Netherlands). The majority of countries had some data on parents' media/information literacy.

As a concluding remark, we should state that from the following study it is possible to acknowledge that in Portugal there is a considerable lack of literature, namely the parent's awareness of on line risks or parents' knowledge of their kid's activities (see for example: Abrantes and Piètte, 2002; Monteiro, 2007; Gomes, Valente and Dias, 2007; Montalvo e Monteiro, 2007).

Research methodology

According to Zikmund (2000), it is somewhat of an over simplification to state that every research that follows the same path. Therefore, he presents the phases of the research process in a cyclic manner: defining the problem; planning the research design; planning a sample; gathering the data; processing and analyzing the data; formulating conclusion and preparing the report; defining the new problem.

But how can we define research? The term "research" as used in everyday language has a multitude of meanings. For example, some see it as the mere gathering of collection or information, or the moving of factual knowledge from one location to another, or the carrying out of investigations into a subject or problem (Collins English Dictionary, 1994). However, in scientific inquiries research is a systematic investigation to find answers to a problem (Macionis and Plummer, 1998), which means can also be seen as an act with an objective. Social research, to be considered as such, has to follow a scientific approach. This entails that the conclusions of a determinate social research are achieved through a consistent method. Despite its consideration as science, social research is subcategorized as soft science, its subject matter, human social life, is fluid, formidable to observe, and hard to measure precisely with laboratory instruments (Neuman, 2000).

Research is interpretive if it is assumed that our knowledge of reality is gained only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, documents and other artefacts. In information systems interpretive research is aimed at producing an understanding of the context of the information system and the process whereby the information system influences and is influenced by its context (Walsham, 1993). Or, according to Terre Blanche and Kelly (2002) the interpretative lens through which the study is carried out presumes that people's subjective experiences are real, that we can understand others experiences by interacting with them and listening to what they tell us, which means including the following

assumptions: human action is meaningful; there is an ethical commitment to respect and be faithful to the life world; there is a desire to emphasize the contribution of human subjectivity of knowledge without forgoing its objectivity.

The case study as a research design method has been explored by a number of authors (Yin, 1994; Perry, 2001; Alkout and Khalfan, 2004). Yin (1994), for example, defined a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. According to Stake, (1995) a case study is intended to catch the complexity of a single case, however other authors like Lee (1989) disagree regarding the necessary number of case studies to produce reliable findings, considering such issue a key feature.

However, as a final remark we may affirm that Myers (1997) guidelines regarding case study method will be use in this research project:

- determining the present situation- in this study achieved through the unstructured interviews and questionnaires;
- gathering information about background to the present situation- in this study achieved through interviews and observation and by referring to documentation and other sources available from the case study organisation;
- gathering more specific data- in this study achieved through the exploration of the interviews and companies information;
- presenting an analysis of findings- in this study achieved through the production of the final research report.

A questionnaire, which Webster's new collegiate dictionary (1990) defines as a set of questions for submission to a number of persons to get data offering several important advantages over other methods or instruments for collecting data, and the data collected should be as accurate as possible. The questionnaires were filled by the respondents and considering multiple choice questions in accordance to Macionis and Plummer (1998). Moreover, the questionnaires were conducted in Portugal, more precisely in Caldas da Rainha (Colégio Rainha D. Leonor) in December 2007. Such school has more than 1100 students, whose ages are K12 (9-18 years old). Our questionnaire entails into a sample value of 25% regarding the student's universe, which is highly representative. Such questionnaires will allow answering the research questions of this paper: which is the on line behaviour of each focus group? And, do parents know their kid's on line activities? Plus, the questionnaires present three different dimensions (Internet access, actions analysis and behavioural analysis) in order to obtain information that clearly allows good arguing concerning such research problem.

Findings

Concerning the questionnaires results analysis we will engage a dichotomist analysis in order to obtain better results, as well as to allow a comparison between on line behaviour of kid's, and parental attitudes towards such technology. To achieve such analysis, we will introduce some of the most important questions by category, which characterizes such research:

1. Internet access

This sample represents a wide range of ages concerning kid's and parents' allowing us to compare results between different age groups (see figure 1 and 2). Plus, regarding kid's gender it is still possible to acknowledge a considerable gap, because male represent 61% of our sample.

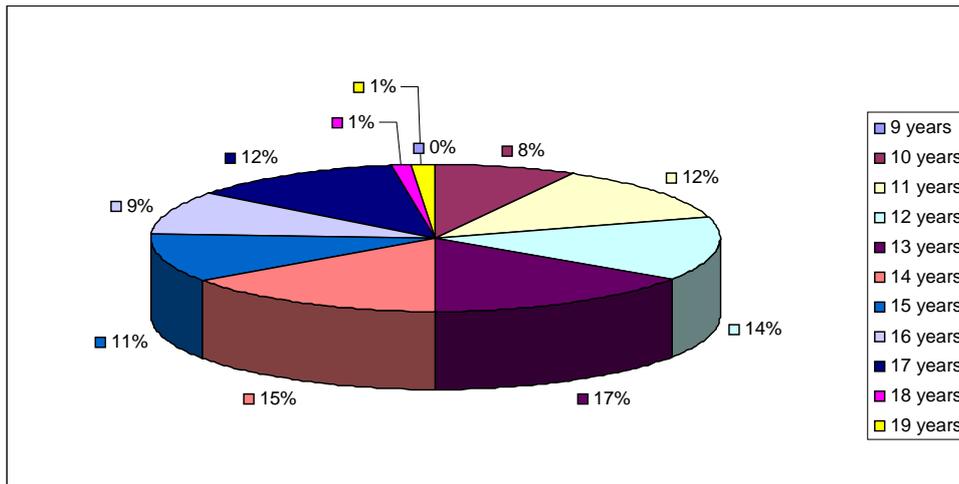


Figure 1- Age (Kid's)

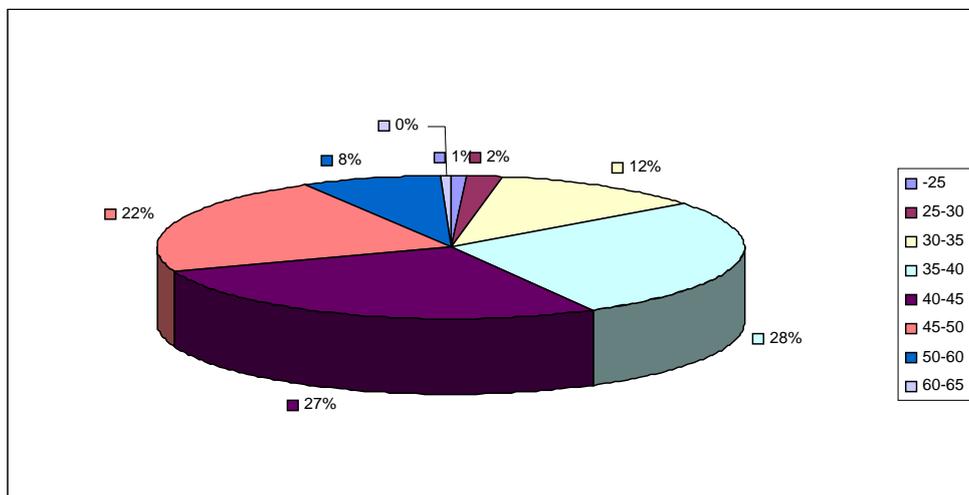


Figure 2- Age (Parents')

Such wide range was expectable due to characteristics of Colégio Rainha D. Leonor (K12). Moreover, the background of their parents' is extremely different namely concerning income and education level, which allow us to conclude that our sample fairly represents Portuguese society.

Another important conclusion of this research is linked to parent's recognition that the best Internet users at home are kid's (71%). Plus, while only 2% of kid's states that needed a lot of lessons on how to use the Internet, and 32% answers none; parents' results, demonstrates that around 66% of them needed a lot of lessons! Such results clearly encompass kid's affinity with such technology. However, it is impossible to disregard how much time each group spent on line: 51% spend more than an hour a day, and half of this number spends more than 3 hours a day; while more than 60% of parents' stated that only spend an hour on line, and only 3% more than 3 hours.

Finally, the level of confidence concerning information in Internet presented some interesting results: 6% refers that believe in most of it, and 75% in some of it. However, if we analyze the age groups it is possible to verify that kid's with less than 12 years old represent almost 80% of this answer, kids between 12-15 years old 15%, and finally, kid's older than 15 years old represent only 5% of it. And, the opposite reality arises concerning the analysis of some confidence in Internet information.

2. Actions analysis

When questioned about their unethical behaviour, kid's presented a wide variety of answers in accordance to the literature: illegal downloads (13%); hacking (2%); hacking e-mail (3%). However, 65% answered none of these, which demonstrates a certain ethical behaviour. Moreover, considering Internet functions (chats, e-mail, etc.) the answers were: chats (35%); e-mail (38%); blogs (9%); photolog (10%); and, none of these (8%), as figure 4 illustrates.

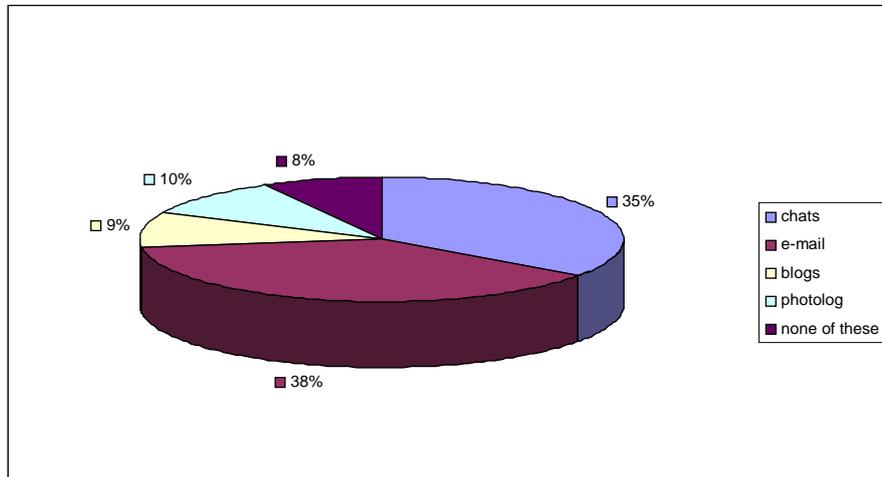


Figure 3- Internet functions use (Kid's)

But, when questioned about software's some of these numbers growth exponentially: chats (70%); blogs (10%); and, photolog (20%). Plus, when the theme in discussion is the information given the scenario is extremely worrying, because 73% stated their intention of providing information, in which: e-mail (24%); name (25%); age and birth (12%); phone (9%); hobbies (10%); photos (15%); and, school name (5%).

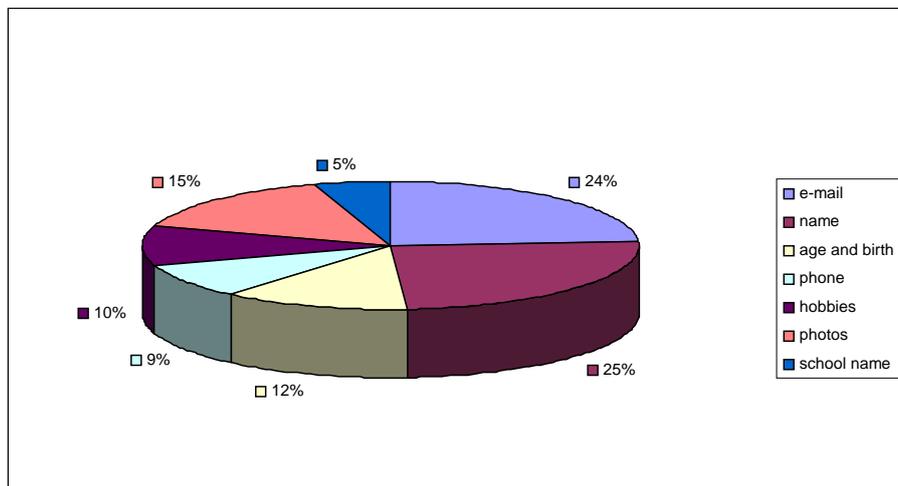


Figure 4- Information given (Kid's)

Once again, the results differ into the several age groups: kid's with less than 12 years old obtained more than 60% of this answer, kids between 12-15 years old almost 25%, and finally, kid's older than 15 years old represent 15%.

On the other hand, parents' impose some rules about Web use namely concerning: given personal information (30%); e-mail (1%); chat rooms (18%); instant messaging (2%); illegal downloads (10%); buy on line (35%); and only, 3% do not allow the use of such functionalities. These results also reinforce the idea why Internet is more common to kid's

than adults, because almost 65% did not know that is possible for a company acquire personal information through e-mail or through the privacy policy of chat rooms (see for example Messenger and Skype). Plus, in spite of the prohibitive action most kids do not comply with such action, especially regarding chat rooms- 70% of use as stated above!

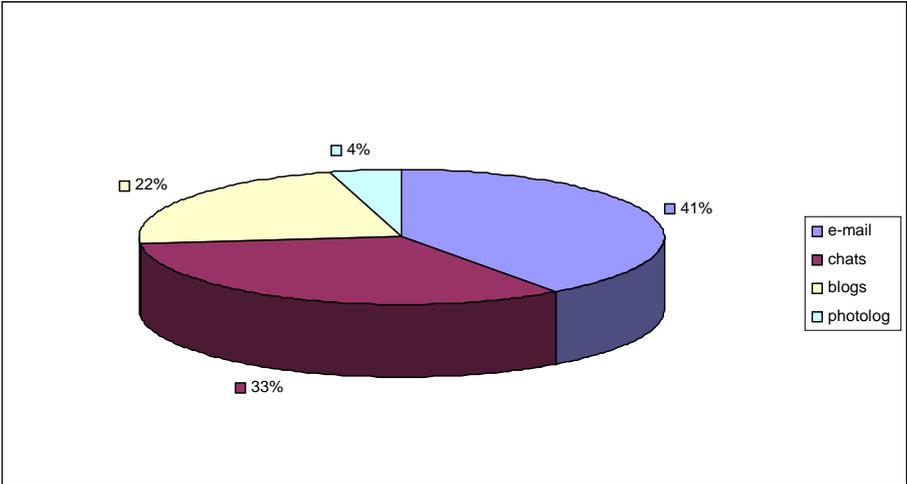


Figure 5- Forms of acquiring private information through privacy policies (Parents')

3. Behavioural analysis:

Regarding the possibility of forming new relationships with on line users 28% answered never, 33% rarely, 20% occasionally, 17% frequently, 2% always. Such reality is extremely positive regarding the defensive behaviour against sexual predators, however such question given its importance should be reanalyzed over different period of times (milestones), in order to compare possible behavioural changes by kids. Such argument relies on the analysis by age groups, where kid's between 12-15 years old represent more than 80% into the frequently and always hypothesis.

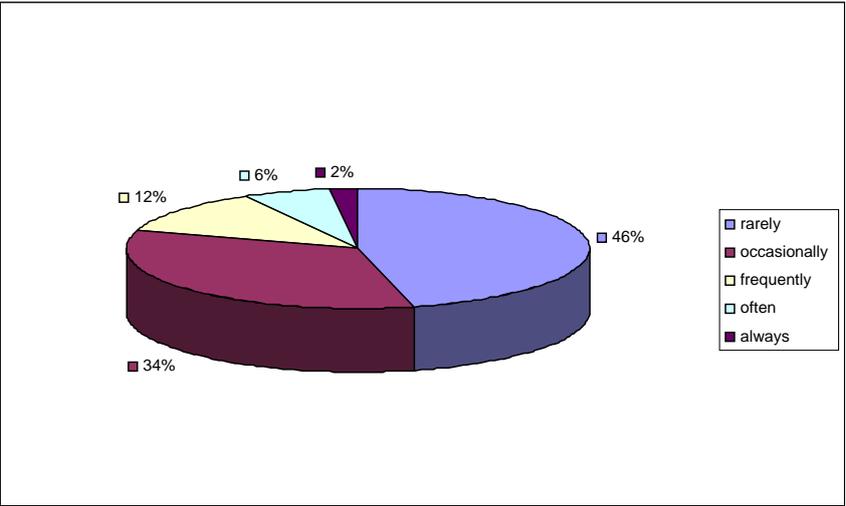


Figure 6- New relationships (Kid's)

And, how can we classify parent's perception on such matter? 80% responds that their kid's rarely engage new relationships, and 10% considered it but only occasionally, which once again demonstrates the lack of knowledge concerning their kid's activities on line if we consider the information provided by figure 7.

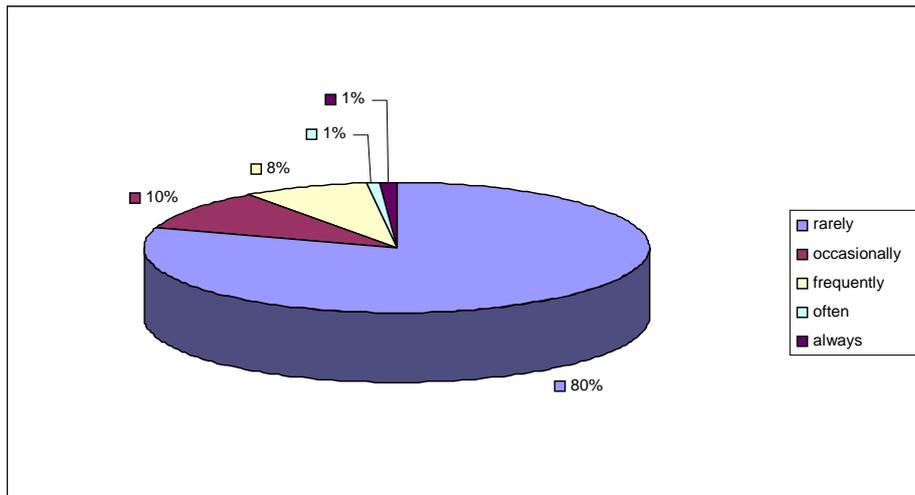


Figure 7- New relationships (Parents')

Regarding the other questions it is possible to acknowledge three different sets of analysis, but with a gradient level of concern regarding kid's behaviour: the diminishing of social interactions (question 2); defensive behaviour (questions 3, 4 and 5); and, depressed behaviour (questions 6 and 7).

For the diminishing of social interactions, after the questionnaires analysis we concluded that never engages (26%), rarely (20%), occasionally (34%), frequently (12%), often (6%), and always (2%). These numbers may be considered risky, because 20% of the sample seems to prefer on line interaction to social interaction, however the Internet evangelists may state that such number is low, and it corresponds to the need of independence that characterizes youth culture (see kid's versus Internet). However, in our opinion such analysis demonstrates already a worrying reality given the importance of social interaction, and that is enhanced if we draw our attention to the different group ages. Similar to the previous analysis, kid's between 12-15 years old represent more than 60% into the frequently ahead level.

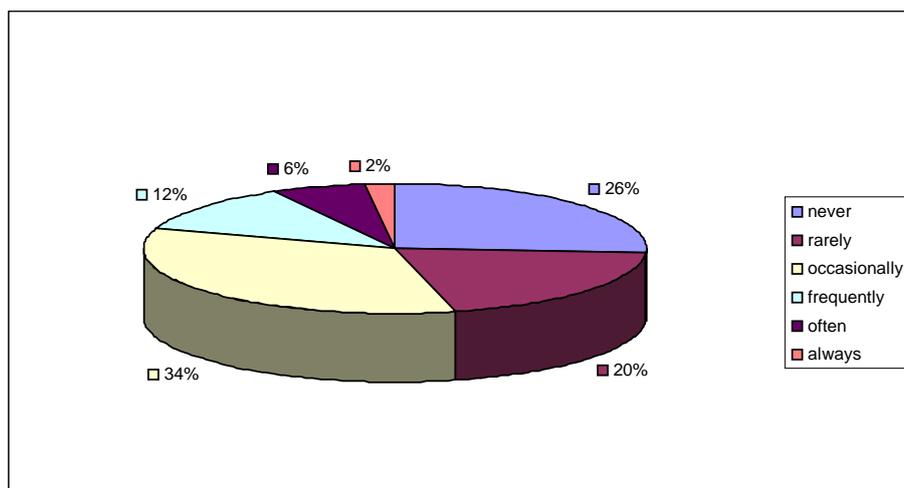


Figure 8- Social interaction diminishing (Kid's)

Moving on to the next gradient, defensive behaviour, the results concerning the three questions that tried to understand such phenomenon embrace the following results: never (23%), rarely (53%), occasionally (14%), frequently (6%), often (1%), and always (3%), which seems to demonstrate a less problematic behaviour when compared to studies conducted in other western societies. In spite of such reality we tend to consider such results

problematic, because the gradient level is higher and the risky behaviours increased 5%, if we compared to previous level. Moreover, such claim is enhanced if we observe the results by group ages: kid's under 12 represents 40% and between 12-15 years old represents more 50%, which means that individuals under biological and socio-cognitive evolution hold up 90% of such value!

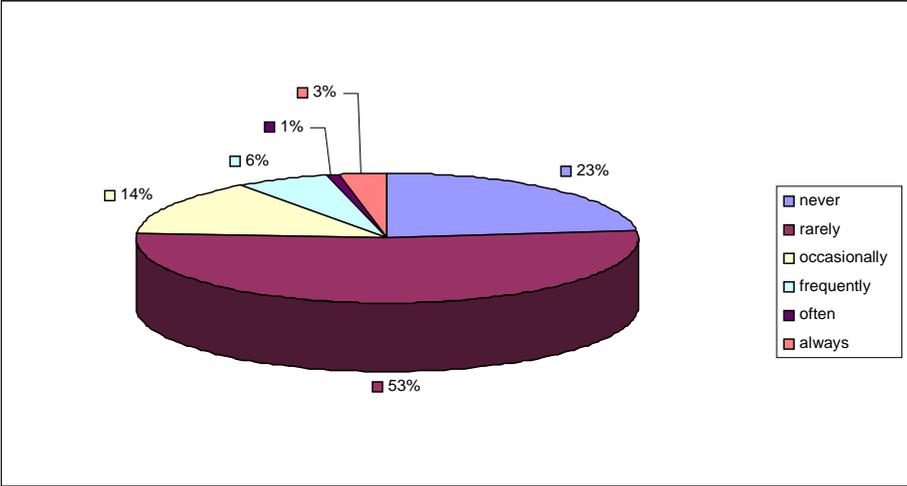


Figure 9- Defensive behaviour (Kid's)

Finally, depressive behaviour analysis allows us to plead the following results: never (31%), rarely (40%), occasionally (12%), frequently (1%), often (3%), and always (3%), in which positively diminishes the percentage regarding problematic behaviours to 7%, demonstrating once again a minor percentage when compared to other western societies. In spite of the considerable difference between the last two levels, the true is that kid's under 12 hold once again more than 40% and between 12-15 years old represent more 50%, which may lead to serious problems in a near future.

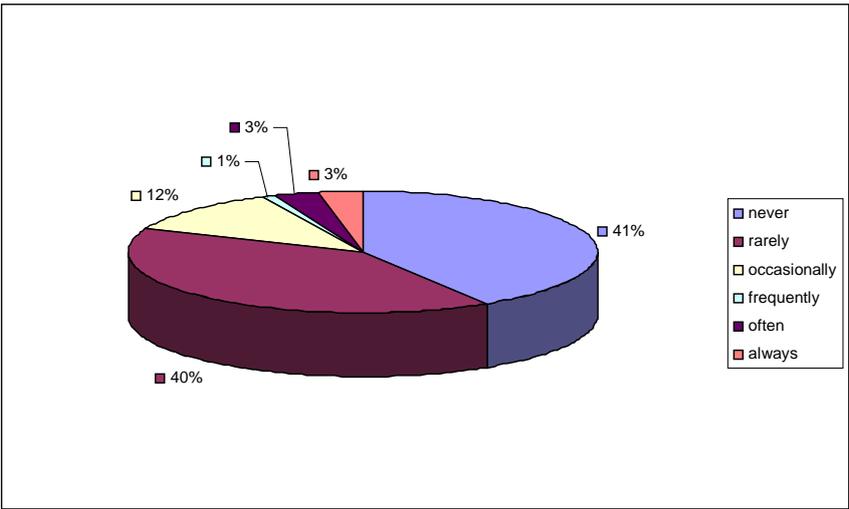


Figure 10- On line preference (Kid's)

And as a final remark for our analysis, how can we define parent's awareness regarding these three levels of behaviour? Unlike to our expectations, parent's encompassed similar results to their kid's in all the three levels. Therefore, future research should try to understand the limits and motives for such results.

Conclusion

The conclusions drawn up from the questionnaires entail some interesting thoughts: Portuguese kids may be considered angels, when compared to other western societies. Even their behaviour on line into a first glass seems similar (as for example: using chats and performing illegal downloads); however, the true is that some important differences arise between age groups namely concerning: the amount of information given on line; the level of trust concerning Internet information; their feelings, which can in a near future easily change the answer to the research question. Plus, gender gap regarding Internet use still occurs, however at a minor level if compared with the study conducted by Abrantes and Piètte (2002). On the other hand, it is suggested by previous research that parental attitudes toward the Internet are not stratified by education or income but rather depend on prior experience with the Internet (Loher and Meyer, 1999), which is also observable into the results. This evidence suggests that the “digital divide” is an influential independent variable, reflecting parent’s proficiency and knowledge of computers and the Internet. This influence is linked to parental notions about positive and negative attitudes toward children’s Internet use, which can influence their decision about their kid’s, be angels or not. Based on these concerns, a number of research questions can arise and should be explored in the following research, as for example: to examine differences within groups of parent’s to identify interaction effects, because it seems that younger parent’s tend to be more concerned about making mistakes; older parent’s tend to be more reflective and even more permissive (especially in multiple-child families); in terms of the severity of the dangers on line, parent’s will probably have some concerns that outweigh others.

In conclusion, this research clearly engages an important contribution for understanding Portuguese kid’s on line behaviour and their parent’s insights, but also demonstrates that the theoretical gap is tremendous, and for that, Portuguese society should pay greater attention to such problem.

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