Young people who meet online acquaintances in real life [1, 2]

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INTRODUCTION

Social media, online gaming, internet-based recreational pursuits, as well as dating apps provide opportunities for social interactions which first occur in an online environment. For some people, the development of online acquaintances may lead to meeting up in real life. Such online-initiated encounters are advantageous where people can meet a broader range of individuals with similar interests and enjoy positive real-life encounters. However, the use of technology to facilitate meetups has also been associated with a growing trend of virtual and in-person harms such as sexual violence, abuse, stalking, and harassment. Since the meeting of an unknown person in the real-world can also carry personal safety risks, it is important to investigate the characteristics and behaviours of young people associated with meeting face-to-face with others for whom the origin was a cyber contact. Online safety issues, and privacy protections has received a considerable amount of attention from parents, advocacy groups, government bodies, and the European Union in recent years.

DATA AND METHODS

This study uses data on over 4,300 young people from the *Growing Up in Ireland '98 Cohort* to investigate the characteristics and behaviours of young people who at 20 years reported they had met a person face-to-face that they first got to know on the internet within the previous year, captured in in 2018-19. This investigation examines such activities by gender, where multiple regression models control for

household social class, whether the young person was living in the family home, and whether they were located in Dublin.

RESULTS

More than one in three (34.9%) 20-year-olds reported having met someone face-to-face with whom they had originally encountered online. There was a marked gender differential, where a substantially greater share of males (37.1%) had met online acquaintances compared to females (27.1%).

Regression analysis revealed that females had half the likelihood of a face-to-face encounter with someone that they first met in a virtual setting than their male counterparts. Of the 'big five' personality characteristics, 'openness' was associated with a higher likelihood of meeting someone from online, while emotional stability was associated with a reduced likelihood. For males only, a high risk-taking score was greater associated with online-offline meetings. For the female-only sample, reporting a low number of friends (2 or fewer) was linked to meeting an online acquaintance.

Heavier computer use was associated with reporting having met up with someone from online. Using dating apps at 17 was found to double the likelihood of reporting having met someone from online at 20. Being sexually active at 17, as well as reporting being non-heterosexual, was associated with meeting online contacts. For males, early mobile phone ownership (at 9 years) was also linked to meeting internet contacts.

CONCLUSIONS

Meeting people from online is common practice among young 'digitally native' adults in Ireland. More than one-in-three 20-year-olds surveyed in 2018-2019 met a virtual contact face-to-face, though the practice was lower for females. The paper highlights the roles of risk appetite, online engagement, online dating, and sexual-related matters in young people's encounters with online acquaintances. Important distinctions by gender were uncovered.

While the virtual world offers beneficial opportunities for in-person encounters with people with common interests, internet-facilitated activities are of relevance from a public policy perspective in the areas of protecting the safety and privacy of users of internet-based apps and websites. Policy can have a role in providing education and awareness raising of safety risks as children and young people grow up. Guidance can be provided on negotiating risks, being responsible online, as well as resilience building and coping strategies to prepare for online-offline encounters. Schools have featured online safety as part of social, personal and health curriculums where students have undertaken information projects and received external talks from policing and online security experts.

The results of this study suggest that particular groups may merit special attention, such as young people who report they have a non-heterosexual sexual orientation. Support groups for people whose sexual identity is non-heterosexual (LGBTI+) may provide a forum for awareness raising, as well as discussing experiences.

Given the estimated associations between the use of online dating apps, sexual activity at 17 and meeting online acquaintances at 20, places which offer sexual health, relationship and counselling services may also provide information and advice.