

**TEENAGERS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
ADVERTISING IN THE ONLINE SOCIAL  
NETWORKING ENVIRONMENT:**

**An exploratory study**

**A Master of Business (Research) Thesis**

**By**

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# Keywords

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Advertising, avoidance, online social networking, perceptions, privacy, teenagers, trust

# Abstract

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This study explores teenager perceptions towards advertising in the online social networking environment. The future of online social networking sites is dependant upon the continued support of advertisers in this new medium, which is linked to the acceptance of advertising on these sites by their targeted audience. This exploratory study used the qualitative research methods of focus groups and in-depth personal interviews to gain insights from the teenager participants.

The literature review in Chapter Two examined the previous research into advertising theories, consumer attitudes and issues such as advertising avoidance, advertising as a service and trust and privacy in the online social networking environment. The teenage consumer was also examined as were the influences of social identity theory. From this literature review eleven propositions were formed which provided a structure to the analysis of the research. Chapter Three outlined the multi-method research approach of using focus groups and in-depth interviews. The key findings were outlined in Chapter Four and Chapter Five provides discussion regarding these findings and the implications for theory and advertising practice.

The main findings from this study suggest that teenagers have very high levels of advertising avoidance and are sceptical towards advertising on their online social networking sites. They have an inherent distrust of commercial messages in the online social networking environment; however they are extremely trusting with the information that they disclose online. They believe that if their site is classified as private, then the information disclosed on this site is not accessible to anyone. The study explores the reasons behind these views. This research has resulted in the identification of seven motivations behind online social networking use. A new model of advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment is also

presented and discussed. This model makes a contribution towards filling the gap in available research on online social networking sites and advertising perception. The findings of this study have also resulted in the identification of the characteristics of online social networking sites as an advertising medium. The newness of online social networking sites coupled with the enthusiastic adoption of online social networking by the teenage demographic means that this exploratory study will be of interest to both academics and practitioners alike.

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# Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where the due reference is made.

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**Louise Kelly**

**August 2008**

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

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## 1.1 BACKGROUND TO RESEARCH

Since its introduction four years ago, the growth of online social networking sites has been both rapid and dramatic, changing the purpose and the functionality of the internet (Vogt and Knapman 2008). The potential to reach consumers directly and in their private environment has meant that marketers are keen to advertise in this new medium (Boyd and Ellison 2007).

Advertising on Australian social networking websites is expected to reach \$30 million by the end of 2008 (Sinclair 2008). Globally, advertising on this new medium is predicted to have reached \$1.2 billion in 2008, which is an increase of 155% from the previous year (Sinclair 2008). Facebook and Myspace are the two most popular online social networking sites in Australia, and in the past twelve months, the number of Australian Facebook users has increased 1000% to 2.6 million. Worldwide there are 26 million Facebook users (Dahdah 2008).

In terms of internet users there is considerable academic research into the motivations behind consumers' attitudes towards and perceptions of advertising (Dutta-Bergman 2006; Homer 2006; Schultz 2008; Shavitt, Lowrey and Haefner 1998; Speck and Elliott 1997; Weilbacher 2001; Wellbacher 2003) and the internet (Grant 2005; Ko, Cho and Roberts 2005; La Ferle, Edwards and Lee 2000; Namiranian 2006; Rappaport 2007). However, owing to the rapid growth in the area of online social networking sites over a very short period of time, there is little academic research published in the area of consumer perceptions of advertising on social networking sites (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Therefore the aim of this research

is to address this gap and explore consumers' perceptions of advertising in the online social networking environment.

As online social networking sites are considered personal spaces, their usage is often driven by friendships and relationships (Knapman and Vogt 2007), and they provide an outlet for creative and personal expression (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Many of these sites are classified as being private, which suggests to the users that they have control over who has access to the information on their site and gives the illusion of privacy (Barnes 2006). This study also explores whether this expectation of privacy of one's personal space influences how online social network users perceive the advertising on their sites.

Teenagers with their 'early adopter' attitude (Tufte 2003) have embraced online social networking, with 70% of girls and 50% of boys in Australia aged between 14 and 17, having a Myspace site (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007). This age group is the first truly digital generation (Goldgehn 2004) and their usage of online social networking has become an important element of their social system (Lee and Conroy 2005). Therefore the age group of 13 to 17 year old male and females are the focus of this study, which seeks to explore how teenagers perceive advertising in the online social networking environment, and investigates issues such as trust and privacy on these sites.

## **1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION**

In order to explore how teenager perceptions towards advertising in their online social networking sites, the research question to be addressed in this thesis is:

**What are teenagers' perceptions of advertising in the online social networking environment?**

### **1.2.1 Research objectives**

In exploring the research question, the following objectives will be met:

1. Gain an understanding of the attitudes and perceptions that teenagers have towards their online social networking sites
2. Gain an understanding of the attitudes and perceptions that teenagers have towards the advertising on their online social networking sites
3. Explore their beliefs regarding privacy and trust and their online social networking sites

## **1.3 JUSTIFICATION FOR THE RESEARCH**

Understanding online social networking sites and how advertising is perceived on these sites is an important area of research for academics and marketers alike, providing improved media efficiency and creative direction to advertisers and understanding for consumers.

### **1.3.1 Benefits to advertisers.**

As advertisers come to terms with the rapid adoption of online social networking, they have recognized that these sites provide what could potentially be a very effective medium to engage the difficult to reach

teenage market. By engaging teenagers while they are in their personal spaces, marketers should feel confident that their message is being positively received. Advertisers are demonstrating their confidence by spending in Australia nearly \$30 million a year on online social networking sites (Sinclair 2008), yet there is very little academic research available as to the perceptions of these advertisements and whether they are noticed by consumers. Research in advertising avoidance (Cho and Cheon 2004; Schultz 2007) suggests that clutter, disruption of tasks online and previous negative experiences can influence advertising avoidance. These studies have previously related to internet advertising and not specifically to the personal spaces of online social networking environment. This study seeks to provide evidence that advertising in the online social environment is perceived differently to advertising on other types of internet sites and traditional media. A greater understanding of these perceptions will lead to improvement of advertising planning decisions.

### **1.3.2 Understanding consumer expectations of advertising in social networking sites**

New technologies have changed the way that consumers view advertising (Rappaport 2007). Rappaport (2007) suggests that marketers must provide information and services to the consumer in order to compete in the internet marketplace. If consumers are seeking information, are they receiving the information that they need when they engage the services provided by commercial Myspace and Facebook sites? Do they trust the information that they receive on these sites? Do they trust the advertising on these sites to link them to reputable websites? This study will explore the issues of consumers using advertising as a service and whether there is consumer trust in advertising in the online social networking environment. This information is important to advertisers as it could help formulate media and message strategies.

### **1.3.3 Unexplored area of targeted advertising and privacy concerns**

Online social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace have become goldmines of data with information disclosed by site users. Information regarding users' preferences in music, food, entertainment as well as details regarding birthdays, engagements and relationship status (Blakely 2007) all offer marketers the opportunity to specifically and directly target their potential consumers. As a result, privacy concerns have become a contentious issue. If online social networking site users are comfortable disclosing such personal information (Barnes 2006), does that suggest that they have an inherent trust in the organizations such as Myspace and Facebook to use this information ethically (Dwyer, Hiltz and Passerini 2007)? Do teenagers fully appreciate the implications involved with their disclosure of information? Do they know they are disclosing it? In order for advertisers to act in an ethical and responsible manner, it is important that they have an understanding of consumers' beliefs especially if they are dealing with underage teenagers.

## **1.4 METHODOLOGY**

Chapter Three details the methodology used in the study and provides justification for its use and implementation. As this is an exploratory study and the two qualitative methods used are focus groups and individual in-depth interviews.

### **1.4.1 Focus groups**

Focus groups are an effective method of qualitative data collection (Stokes and Bergin 2006) and offer many benefits in this study, because:



- They are a very effective way of gaining insight and exploring the issue to be addressed especially if there is limited information available (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran 2001; Cooper and Schindler 2006)
- Group dynamics provide quality data regarding participants' views and expectations (Hair, Babin, Money and Samouel 2003; Krueger and Casey 2000; Stokes and Bergin 2006).
- The flexible format of the focus group encourages discussion and allows the researcher to explore areas initiated by the group (Cavana et al. 2001).
- Focus groups are considered to be relatively inexpensive to organize and analyse with the benefits of gaining data from several people simultaneously (Beyea and Nicoll 2000; Zikmund 2003; Sekaran 2000; Greenbaum 2000).

In this exploratory study four focus groups, each with six participants were conducted. The participants were males and females aged between 13 and 17 years.

#### **1.4.2 In-depth Interviews**

The second form of qualitative research used in the study, was a series of eight in-depth interviews. The interviews were used to gain deeper insight into the issues identified in the focus groups (Cooper and Schindler 2006; Hair et al. 2003; Davis 1997).

In-depth interviews are of benefit to this study for the following reasons:

- Participants are able to freely discuss feelings or beliefs about the subject of interest and provide a more detailed response (Davis 2000; Stokes and Bergin 2006; Cooper and Schindler 2006; Hair et al. 2003; Davis 1997)
- They are useful for exploratory research studies (Cooper and Schindler 2006).

- The interviewee is more likely to be comfortable about being candid in their opinions and often the data received has depth and comprehensiveness (Hair et al. 2003).
- In depth interviews provide the opportunity for building of trust and rapport between the interviewer and interviewee which in turn improves the quality of the data (Davis 1997).

The use of multi-method research design provides qualitative data from different sources which in turn adds rigor to the research (Sekaran 2000).

As outlined in section 1.3 and confirmed in Chapter Two, there is little published academic research into the area of advertising perception in the online social environment. This thesis will aim to provide qualitative research into this new and significant area of advertising.

## **1.5 OUTLINE OF REPORT**

This thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter provides background to the research, briefly outlining the gaps in the research that this study seeks to explore. It introduces the research question and research objectives and then outlines the methodology chosen to explore the research question.

Chapter Two reviews the literature in the areas of advertising, the internet as an advertising medium and online social networking as a relationship building part of the online environment. It also investigates teenagers as a unique group of consumers. Emerging from this literature review, 11 propositions have been identified for further research.

Chapter Three provides an outline and justification behind the collection of data for this study. It presents the methods and describes the sample and outlines the research process.

The findings of the study are presented and summarized in Chapter Four, using the 11 propositions as the organizing structure for analysis. The key findings are identified and summarized.

Chapter 5 discusses the key findings from the data and conclusions are reached. The motivations behind online social networking use are discussed and outlined, the perceptions of commercial online social networking sites are detailed, and issues such as teenagers and their perceptions relating to trust and scepticism and privacy in online social networking sites are outlined. Advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment is discussed and a new model presented. Based on the findings from this study, the characteristics of online social networking sites as an advertising medium are outlined. This chapter also discusses the implications the results of this study will have on theory and advertising practice. The limitations for this study are addressed and the recommendations for future research are detailed.

## **1.6 LIMITATIONS**

There are a number of limitations within this study.

### **Geography**

The participants in this study are all residents of the Brisbane area, and as such are not representative of all teenagers living in Australia.

### **Target Market**

The participants of the focus groups and in-depth interviews are aged between 13 years and 17 years. The use of this age group can be justified as they are heavy users of online social networking sites (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007) and are also a difficult target for advertisers to reach. However, their perceptions of advertising in the online social environment may not be representative of all site users.

### **Generalisability**

Owing to the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample size the findings of the study can not be generalized.

### **New technology**

The online social networking world is incredibly dynamic in nature and today's experiences and perceptions may be superseded by new technology. Therefore, the findings represent the current technological environment.

Despite the limitations listed above, this exploratory study will provide an insight into how teenagers view advertising in the online social environment as well as explore issues of service, trust, privacy and social identity. These insights will be of benefit to advertisers who are seeking to engage with teenagers in the online environment.

## **1.7 CONCLUSION**

This chapter outlines the background to the research question by introducing online social networking and its rapid growth in the internet marketplace. Owing to the newness of online social networking, there is little published

research on the topic of perceptions of advertising in the online social networking environment. Hence, this research explores teenagers' perceptions of advertising in the online social environment. The justification for this research was presented, as was the qualitative research methodology. The outline of the report was detailed and the limitations of the study acknowledged. A review of the literature begins in Chapter Two.

## Chapter 2: Literature review

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The process by which individuals approach social networking and communication has significantly changed since the introduction of online social networking and 'personal web spaces' such as MySpace and Facebook (Lee and Conroy 2005). The internet now provides individuals with the tools and opportunity to be part of international communities that share opinions and content and communicate directly with one another or to large communities. These online social networking sites are funded by the selling of advertising specifically targeted to the individual, as well as the selling of statistical data collected from the profiles of the site users (Barnes 2006).

Advertising in online social networking sites is expected to reach \$30 million in Australia this year (Sinclair, 2008). Globally, advertising revenue on online social networking sites is expected to have increased by 155% from last year to \$US1.2 billion (Sinclair 2008). The 'rules' of communication are evolving and issues of credibility, privacy, trust and advertising avoidance may influence site users' perceptions of the advertisements that they see. More importantly, the financial viability of these online sites depends upon the faith that advertisers have in the effectiveness of the media as well as the positive perceptions of those viewing the ads.

This chapter begins with a review of the literature regarding advertising and the communication process. It outlines how changes in the media landscape and consumer expectations have seen marketers move from a push strategy in advertising to a pull strategy. A review of previous research into attitudes

towards advertising and the media is undertaken with attention given to scepticism towards advertising and media. The issue of advertising avoidance is discussed followed by an outline of the new models of advertising which consider advertising as providing a service. Consumer privacy and trust issues are discussed followed by an examination of the internet and the online social networking sites. The chapter concludes with information on teenagers and their use of social online networks and how this new method of communication influences their sense of social identity.

The following section examines broad theories of advertising and how advertising messages are communicated to the consumer.

## **2.2 ADVERTISING AND THE CONSUMER**

Richards and Curran (2002:74) define advertising as *“a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future”*. To assist with clarity, they include a footnote to define the term mediated communication as being *“that which is conveyed to an audience through print, electronics or any method other than direct person-to-person contact”* (Richards and Curran 2002:74). This definition has been designed to embrace the technology that has provided new ways of communicating to consumers so that both the traditional methods of advertising and the new media can be included (Richards and Curran 2002). Advertising is considered to be a very important component of the marketing communication mix, with its ability to reach a wide audience in a cost effective manner, create brand awareness and, depending on its purpose, incite reaction or action from customers (Belch and Belch 2004). Advertising expenditure in Australia now exceeds 13.4 billion dollars in 2007 (Ad spend booms in '07 2008). Such an investment suggests that marketers still feel confident in the power of advertising and its ability

to influence consumers needs, opinions, attitudes and buying behaviours (Helgesen 1996).

Much of the literature on advertising stems from the basic communication model which outlines the process of communication from advertiser (source) to consumer (receiver). This model outlined in Figure 2.1, consists of two participants, the sender (in this case the advertiser) and the receiver (in this case the customer). Linking these two participants are the communication tools, which are the message (the advertisement) and the channel (the medium). After the sender encodes the message via the channel, the receiver will then decode the message and provide response or feedback. During the communication process the message can be misinterpreted or interfered with by noise (clutter, message conflict and inconsistency) which may alter the meaning of the message (Duncan 2002; Belch and Belch 2004).

**Figure 2.1 Basic communication model**

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**Source: Duncan 2002:139**

The basic communication model resembles the Push Marketing Model (Schultz 2007) which sees the one way messages being sent from the marketer to the



consumer via the advertising agency and media channels, sending messages and incentives to the consumer to purchase the product (Schultz 2007). The Push Marketing model sees the marketer in control of the messages and in control of who the message is sent to. The information regarding the product is pushed to the client to encourage them to make a purchase decision (Schultz 2006a). In a competitive environment, this model is further complicated by a number of competitors, with me-too products, who try to push their message to the same audience, as shown in Figure 2.2. Consumers can become overwhelmed by the influx of messages and find it difficult to differentiate between brands.

**Figure 2.2     Push Marketing model**

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**Source: Schulz 2007**

The early 1990's saw the introduction of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) theory where advertisers recognized the value in presenting a comprehensive advertising and marketing communication programme that coordinates the many communication disciplines such as advertising, direct

response, personal selling, sales promotion and public relations (Duncan 2002). These disciplines work in synergy to provide clarity, consistency and maximum message impact (Schultz 2007) in an effort to have their product stand out from the crowd. The IMC Model included the provision for customer feedback and two-way communication. It acknowledges the importance of brand relationships and customer interaction and is customer focused rather than market focused.

In an IMC strategy, as with any customer focused marketing strategy, it is important to understand how attitudes towards advertising can influence a consumer (Neal, Quester and Hawkins 2004; Shavitt et al. 1998). The following section discusses consumer attitudes towards advertising and media.

### **2.3 CONSUMER ATTITUDES TOWARDS ADVERTISING AND MEDIA**

Many researchers have studied the effects that consumer attitude towards advertising has on the effectiveness of advertising (Homer 2006; Speck and Elliott 1997; Dutta-Bergman 2006; Homer and Yoon 1992; Shavitt et al. 1998; Mehta 2000). Dutta-Bergman's study on the demographic and psychographic antecedents of attitude toward advertising (2006) found that demographic (age, income, education and gender) and lifestyle factors (such as whether the consumer was product, price or brand conscious) influence a consumer's attitude towards advertising and suggests that younger people rely less on advertising for decision making than their older counterparts. Consumer attitudes are considered to have three elements which are cognitive, affective and behavioural (Neal et al. 2004; Homer 2006). To better understand the attitudes of consumers towards advertising, marketers need to consider their beliefs and feelings about advertising as well as the way they behave towards it (Wellbacher 2003).

While most people agree that advertising is informative, they still do not trust advertising (Shavitt et al. 1998). They feel that advertising contributes to the cost of the products that they buy and believe that they get better value from products which are not advertised (Shavitt et al. 1998). Consumers believe that products do not perform as well as portrayed in advertising and that much of the advertising is more manipulative than informative (Mehta 2000). Shavitt, Lowrey and Haefner (1998) also studied the psychographic variables related to attitudes towards advertising. They found that younger people were more likely to have a positive attitude towards advertising and were less likely to feel offended or insulted by advertising. This often translates to better message recall (Mehta 2000).

Studies that examine the attitudes and perceptions held towards various media often include evaluating the level of scepticism towards the advertising messages (Obermiller, Spangenberg and MacLachlan 2005; Moore and Rodgers 2005) and avoidance of the advertisements (Speck and Elliott 1997; Cho and Cheon 2004). The believability or trustworthiness of the medium also influences how the consumer will view the credibility of the information offered (Moore and Rodgers 2005). If consumers do not trust or believe the media then they are less likely to pay attention to it (Johnson and Kaye 1998).

Media and advertising credibility can be defined as the extent to which the consumer believes or trusts in the media or advertising claims (Moore and Rodgers 2005). Johnson and Kaye's earlier study on media credibility (1998) found that online and traditional media sources were both considered 'somewhat' credible and that younger people are more likely to view online information as credible. The study acknowledged that even though the internet has an unregulated flow of information and that the quality of information was not subject to the same scrutiny shown to traditional media;

it still was considered a more credible source of news information. Kiouisis's study (2001) found that newspapers were considered the most credible medium while the internet was a more credible news source than television. Moore and Rodgers (2005) also found that newspapers were considered the most credible medium, followed by television advertisements, magazines, radio.

Even though online news is viewed as being credible (Johnson and Kaye 1998), the internet was found to be the least credible medium to advertise in, with consumers regarding it with the highest level of scepticism. Moore and Rodgers (2005) found that the consumers did not feel comfortable about surfing the online advertisements and although as college students they fell into the demographic that shops online the most, they still did not find the internet advertising trustworthy. They were hesitant when required to give credit card details or personal information and only purchased from sites that they knew and trusted (Moore and Rodgers 2005).

When consumers are sceptical of the advertising messages they are receiving, or are sceptical of the media source of the message, they will not be motivated to process the information they are receiving. This may lead to coping responses from consumers such as gathering information from other sources or avoidance of the advertising message altogether (Obermiller et al. 2005). Newspaper articles suggest that revenue gained through online social networking sites such as Facebook are not as profitable as anticipated with many marketers viewing advertising in this area as experimental (Vascellaro 2008). If the internet is considered to be the least credible medium for advertising (Kiouisis 2001; Moore and Rodgers 2005) then advertisers in this medium must consider how they can overcome issues of distrust and scepticism, or risk avoidance of their message, and wastage of their advertising dollars. The following section explores how consumers are now

able to control the messages that they receive and the issues pertaining to advertising avoidance.

## **2.4 ADVERTISING AVOIDANCE**

Each day consumers are exposed to at least 1000 commercial messages (Gritten 2007). Consumers are not only receiving messages via traditional media and the internet but are also experiencing new marketing trends such as guerrilla media campaigns, sub viral marketing online, brand installations (Gritten 2007) and consumer generated media such as blogs, podcasts and online social networking sites (Schultz 2006a). This over-saturation of advertising messages makes cutting through the clutter a challenging proposition for marketers. Televisions are now multifunctional and can be connected to the internet, for listening to CDs and on demand movies and sport. Online newspapers mean that only articles of interest are being viewed. Consumers have increasingly become editors of information and have the technology to avoid the advertising messages that do not interest them (Gritten 2007). The traditional push driven market is now being replaced with a pull marketplace where the consumer can select the information they require from a multitude of sources.

Consumers can go direct to the marketer for information via web searches, find out about the product via word of mouth or investigate information via new media options such as the internet. This is best illustrated by the explosive growth of search based media such as Google or Yahoo where the customer initiates the investigation of the product and the marketer has to respond (Schultz 2006a). The customer is now in control of how and when the product will be received, not the marketer (Schultz 2006b). Schultz (2006a) suggests that consumers are reacting to over-saturation of messages by resisting or avoiding advertising messages in both traditional media and

non-traditional media such as the internet. Figure 2.3 illustrates Schultz's theory.

**Figure 2.3      Consumer response to over saturation of messages**

This figure is not available online.  
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available from the QUT Library

**Source: Schultz 2007**

Advertising avoidance includes “*all actions by media users that differentially reduce their exposure to ad content*” (Speck and Elliott 1997:61). Consumers are able to avoid advertising by cognitive, behavioural and mechanical means (Speck and Elliott 1997). Ignoring newspaper or magazine advertising is considered a cognitive method of avoidance. Flipping through television programs or leaving the room during the advertising break are behavioural techniques of avoidance. An example of mechanical means would refer to deleting popups on the internet.

The predictors of advertising avoidance are demographic characteristics, media related variables, advertising perceptions and communication problems (Speck and Elliott 1997). Speck and Elliott's (1997) study of advertising avoidance found that television suffered from advertising avoidance more than print media as consumers found television commercials unbelievable and annoying. The predictors of advertising avoidance in television were age (younger people are more likely to avoid advertisements) and the perception that advertisements are annoying and disruptive. Age was also a predictor to avoiding advertising on radio with younger people listening to numerous stations, and are more likely to avoid listening to the advertisements. Younger readers of newspapers are less likely to avoid advertising when compared with older readers, however as younger individuals are less likely to read newspapers they may have less opportunity to avoid the advertising (Speck and Elliott 1997).

Advertising clutter is the term given to the perception of the consumer when they believe that there is too much advertising within a given media at a given time (Cho and Cheon 2004). Getting through the clutter and noise of advertising is not only a challenge for traditional media but is also providing concern in internet advertising where declining customer responsiveness is

blamed on the large number of click through advertising and banner ads (Cho and Cheon 2004).

Interruption of task, perceived clutter on internet sites and negative past experiences with internet advertising are all antecedents explaining avoidance of advertising on the internet (Cho and Cheon 2004). Figure 2.4 outlines this model of advertising avoidance.

**Figure 2.4      Model of advertising avoidance**

This figure is not available online.  
Please consult the hardcopy thesis  
available from the QUT Library

**Source: Cho and Cheon 2004**

**Perceived goal impediment**



The internet is considered to be more goal and task oriented when compared with traditional media so when the speed of data retrieval and processing is reduced or interrupted by advertising, consumers may react in a negative way towards the advertisement or product (Cho and Cheon 2004). Pop up advertisements, distracting advertisements or advertisements that require an action from the consumer before they are able to resume their online activity, may encourage consumers to delete the message immediately and therefore avoid the advertising completely.

### **Perceived advertising clutter**

While many consumers will choose to click onto internet ads that they find interesting or useful, some consumers will avoid these ads as they are irritated because of the clutter and the amount of advertising online (Cho and Cheon 2004). Internet consumers discriminate, avoiding ads which are not relevant or important to them (Ingram 2006). When consumers perceive that there is excessive advertising they will find it difficult to differentiate between advertisements that they are interested in and those that they are not, which may result in the consumer disregarding all messages in this medium (Cho and Cheon 2004)

### **Prior negative experiences**

The third variable for advertising avoidance is prior negative experience with advertising on the internet (Cho and Cheon 2004). Prior negative experiences or learning from experience theory includes incidences where messages were deceiving or exaggerated or led them to inappropriate sites. Many people view online marketing campaigns as intrusive and time wasting and have a particular dislike for junk emails and pop ups on web sites (Cho and Cheon 2004). Inappropriate targeting techniques implemented by marketers (for example receiving emails for old age pension plans) and concern over possible virus contamination lead to a lack of trust and disengagement with potential customers. The deceptive nature of the marketing techniques have led teens to feel that that the internet is a distrustful medium (Grant 2005). A previous negative experience with online

advertising may cause consumers to avoid advertising online (Cho and Cheon 2004).

Cho and Cheon's study of advertising avoidance is based on advertising on the internet, and not specifically advertising in the online social networking environment. This study seeks to understand the perceptions of advertising in online social networking sites. From the above discussion about negative reactions to online advertising and antecedents explaining advertising avoidance, the first three propositions are derived:

***Proposition 1: Teenagers avoid advertising on online social networking sites when they feel it disrupts their goals online***

***Proposition 2: Teenagers will ignore advertising on online social networking sites when they perceive that there is too much clutter in the medium***

***Proposition 3: Teenagers avoid advertisements on online social networking sites if they have had negative experiences with previous online advertisements.***

As previously outlined, consumers now have increased control of the information they receive. Consumers expectations have changed and they now believe that advertising should provide a service, the information must be available on demand and should be presented in such a way that it engages the consumer and makes consumer decision making easier and safer (Rappaport 2007), as detailed in the following section.

## **2.5 ADVERTISING AS A SERVICE**

In an effort to reduce advertising avoidance on the internet, new strategies need to be developed to advertise in this new media environment and to understand consumer perceptions and expectations. Rappaport (2007) suggests that the adoption of new technologies has changed the way marketers should plan their advertising objectives and to embrace three new models of advertising. These models are the Advertising on Demand model, the Engagement model and the Advertising as a Service model.

The On demand model is based on consumers having the ability to select and choose the content that they want to see, when they want to see it. This means that marketers must not only stimulate demand for their product but also stimulate interest in the product itself. Internet search tools and digital recording devices such as TIVO support the On Demand model by allowing the consumer to view content at a time that suits them. Home pages can be managed to provide information from many different areas e.g. weather, football scores from the previous weekend, updates on celebrity gossip and stock prices. As consumers have more power over what they will accept and reject, marketers need to change their focus to targeting the person rather than the demographic (Rappaport 2007).

The second Rappaport model (Rappaport 2007) is the Engagement model. This centres on two key components: the high relevance of brand to the consumer and the emotional connection between brand and consumer. Marketers aim to involve consumers with brands via their internet sites and to interact with the brand regardless of their location (Ko et al. 2005). This form of relationship marketing is made easier due to new technologies and when executed correctly can deliver the right message to the right people at

the right time (Cho and Cheon 2004) which increases engagement and customer loyalty.

Rappaport's third model, the Advertising as a service model, suggests that marketers need to provide information and capabilities that increase engagement or make the decision making process easier for the consumer (Rappaport 2007). Marketers need to identify the consumer's needs and preferences and use them to provide appropriate services. Consumers are demanding transparency from their brands; they want purchasing made simpler and competitive advantages communicated clearly. Also purchasers desire to experience the product prior to purchasing (Namiranian 2006). For example web sites selling clothing often come with virtual models in the consumer's size and proportion to allow the purchaser to see what the garment will look like on them.

Whilst Rappaport has presented these three models separately, there is considerable overlap of the three concepts with the main theme being that marketers need to provide information and service to the consumer in order to pull consumers to their sites. This supports Schultz's concept of the pull marketplace, where service is the hook. While Rappaport applied these concepts generically to the online environment, it is likely, although not tested that they should translate to online social networking sites.

Advertising on online social network sites such as Myspace and Facebook would seem to support all of Rappaport's models. Advertising and information is available on demand, the use of corporate social networking sites aid in engaging the consumer and the information provided by the online users through their profiles and search patterns allows marketers to tailor their advertising to a receptive audience. Marketers know the age, locations and interests of those online and with this information can provide the service

of advertising without the consumer even being aware that they are being targeted. In consideration of the three models presented by Rappaport the following propositions are made.

***Proposition 4: Teenagers seek information from online social networks***

***Proposition 5: Teenagers feel engaged when they interact with brands in online social networks***

***Proposition 6: Teenagers use the services on online social networks to aid in consumer decision making***

When considering teenagers' increasing use of online social networking sites, issues such as privacy and trust need to be addressed. The following section presents a review of the studies done in these areas.

## **2.6 THE INTERNET AND PRIVACY ISSUES**

There are five key motivators that lead individuals to become involved with personal spaces and online social networks (Vogt and Knapman 2007).

These are the need for personal achievement or recognition, the need to be individual or creative, the need for friendship or belonging, the need to discover, explore or have new experiences, and finally the need for sex and relationships. For these very personal and private reasons, youth culture has embraced online social networking, and they are now publicly sharing very personal information on these sites (Barnes 2006). Lenhart and Madden's (2007) study on Teens, Privacy and Online Social networks found that teenagers are aware of the dangers of releasing too much personal information on the internet, and that girls were generally more aware of

restricting personal information than boys. Nearly half of the teens surveyed said they used online social networks as a way of meeting new friends. However a third of these found that they had been contacted by total strangers on-line and many felt scared or uncomfortable about the contact. Whilst they are aware of sharing too much information on their personal spaces, girls are more likely to post photos of themselves and their friends on their profile while boys were more likely to post their mobile number, last names and the town that they live in (Lenhart and Madden 2007). Many teens naively believe that their site is private as long as it is not viewed by their parents (Barnes 2006). Moreover, they are largely oblivious to the potential privacy issues that their online profiles may create.

The concept of a private online personal space is a paradox. Teenagers believe that the information they put on their personal spaces is private yet they are unaware of the high level of surveillance placed on these sites by marketers, government agencies, the law and potentially school officials and employers (Barnes 2006). Prior to registering for a Myspace or Facebook site users must agree to the terms of the web sites' privacy policy. This policy states that information may be collected and used and that web sites will track the user's online behaviour. The policies also state that others may view your profile if required (Hodge 2006). What many teenagers do not appreciate is that even though their Myspace or Facebook sites are classified as being private, schools, universities and possibly potential employers have access. These sites are, in fact, public diaries (Barnes 2006) and interactions on social networking sites are all recorded and retained for future social data mining (Dwyer et al. 2007).

Notably, Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, had to apologise to Facebook users when a revenue generating advertising system known as Beacon was introduced in November 2007. This system allowed third parties to broadcast the purchasing activities of Facebook users to all their friends. Originally

designed to store data regardless of whether the users opted in or out, Beacon has now been switched off due to public outcry. However third parties are still able to send information regarding users' activities (2008).

Prior to the Facebook issue, Myspace lawyers threatened legal action against an organization that had created a code that tracked the relationship status of Myspace users, so that when their status was changed from "In Relationship" to "Single" they would be notified by email (Kirk 2006). These examples highlight the potential commercial misuse of the data disclosed on these sites.

A study of college students examined their views of Facebook and privacy. It found very neutral attitudes towards most privacy issues except for the suggestion that 'everybody should know about everyone else' to which they strongly disagreed (Barnes 2006). Having a neutral attitude towards privacy suggests that little consideration to the ramifications of loss of privacy and data mining, which leads to the following proposition.

***Proposition 7: Teenagers have a limited understanding of the privacy issues and policies of the online social networking sites***

Whilst it is evident that users of online social networking sites may not be fully aware of privacy issues when they use these sites, the fact that they reveal such personal information would suggest that they have high levels of trust in the site and trust in those who view the site (Dwyer et al. 2007).

Awad and Krishnan (2006) found that while many users of online social networking sites are very vocal in expressing concerns about the privacy of information, they are less vigilant about safeguarding their personal

information. Dinev and Hart (2004) found that the antecedents to privacy concerns are perceived vulnerability, personal interest and trust in the site. If users of online social networking sites are showing limited concern over privacy then it is reasonable to assume that they feel that the personal information contained on their sites does not place them in a vulnerable position or go against their personal interest. From this information the following proposition is presented.

***Proposition 8: Teenagers do not fear that the information that they present on their online social networking sites puts them in a vulnerable position or goes against their personal interest***

The third antecedent of privacy concern is the level of trust in the site. The three types of trust are deterrence based trust, knowledge based trust and identification based trust (Robbins, Millet, Cacioppe and Waters-March 2001). Deterrent-based trust is based on the concept that there are reprisals if the trust is violated for example site users believe that the online social network sites will not use their information for any other purpose. Knowledge based trust centres on the idea that trust is given based on previous behaviour for example they have used online social networking sites and have not had any reason to distrust the site. Identification based trust is based on trust through an emotional connection for example using a particular online site because all your friends use that site. When online social networking site users place personal information on their personal sites they are exhibiting trust in the online social network which leads to the next proposition.

***Proposition 9: Teenagers trust the online social networking sites***



Understanding the attitudes towards online social networking sites goes some of the way to understanding how consumers view the advertising on these sites. The following section considers the motivations behind use of the internet and online social networking sites.

## **2.7 ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING**

Consumers are connected to the rest of the world through traditional media and networked communications such as mobile phones, the internet, email, instant messaging, chat rooms and video sharing. Most Australian families own three or more televisions and have a computer in the home with internet connections (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007). In 1995 less than 10% of Australian families had access to the internet and in 2007 that figure has increased to 90% (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007). User generated sites such as You Tube, MySpace and Facebook have continued to gain popularity with 70% of teenagers aged 14 and over generating their own material on an internet site (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007; Moore and Rodgers 2005).

Online Social networking sites were first launched on the internet in 1997 with limited success. However it was not until 2004 when teenagers began joining the MySpace site en masse that marketers started to consider the huge potential in reaching this elusive market (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Social networking sites (SNS) can be defined as a web based service that allows individuals to construct a profile, present a list of users or 'friends' with whom they share a connection and view each other's profiles (Boyd and Ellison 2007; Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007). When a new user joins a social networking site they create a profile and contact their friends and people that they meet on their friends' sites to join too. The profile presented by the user contains information such as real name or pseudonym, birthday, religion, ethnicity and personal interests (Dwyer et al. 2007) and usually

includes a photo. The profile is modified to reflect the user's personality and style and can include additional applications and web links. Once the user is in the online system they can create or join groups with special interests and announce events to a wide audience (Hodge 2006). The social networking sites can provide opportunities for self-expression, sharing and connection and when combined can become global communities (Knapman and Vogt 2007).

The internet provides marketers with the opportunity to not only present information to their customers, but also to effectively target potential new customers in new and engaging ways (Faber, Lee and Nan 2004). White (2005) outlines the characteristics of the internet as an advertising medium as being:

- An interactive medium
- Highly measureable
- Synergistic – supports advertising in other mediums
- Targetability – target markets can be reached effectively and efficiently
- Flexible
- Multi- media – film and audio messages can enhance the advertising message.

Some of the motivations for this new media usage have been identified by Grant (2005) in his study on young people and their relationship with the internet. He identified five motivations behind their use of the internet - enhancement of their mood, to learn by experience, as passive escapism, for information and advice and finally for social interaction. His studies found that mood enhancement (being entertained or being given a 'lift' in mood) was a very powerful motivator of internet use. The second most powerful

motivator was experiential learning, where internet users are learning and exploring the internet and are able to exchange ideas and discuss findings with others via email, bulletin boards and social networking sites. Notably the least powerful motivator of internet use was searching for information and advice. This is in contradiction to the findings in previous studies by La Ferle, Edwards and Lee (2000) which suggested that information searching was the primary motivation behind teens' internet use.

As research by La Ferle et al was conducted five years previous to that of Grant, this may be a reflection of the shift in consumer behaviour, internet content and broadband penetration in this short period of time. Given that there were no online social networking sites in 2000 and that online marketing has dramatically evolved since then it is an example of the maturity of the medium going from being an information provider to a source of mood enhancement and entertainment. Grant (2005) suggests that the primary motivation behind young people's use of the internet is to enhance their mood, thus the following proposition is presented.

***Proposition 10: Teenagers will go on online social networking sites to enhance their mood***

Teenagers (aged 15-17) spend two and half hours each day online (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007) and much of this time is spent engaged in user generated web sites such as You Tube or social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook. The following section investigates the teenage consumer and their use of the internet.

## **2.8 THE TEENAGE CONSUMER**

Teenagers with their 'early adopter' attitude towards media (Tufté 2003) have readily embraced the internet. Today social networking sites have become a way of life for teens and have been included into their daily routine (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Today's teens are included in the Generation Y group of people (i.e. those born between 1981 and 2000). This generation is considered as being better educated, more affluent and more brand loyal than previous generations. They place a high value on quality and research their products before purchasing. They prefer to find information on their own rather than being told and are not easily swayed by clever advertising campaigns. Teens influence parental purchases to the value of US\$278.1 billion a year and spend US\$105.1 billion on day to day purchases (Bao and Shao 2002) so as a consumer group they are an important market.

This generation has been raised on digital technology and while Goldgehn (2004) suggests that teens spend most of their recreation time on the web this contradicts the findings by the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) which found that television was still the electronic media that consumed most of their recreation time (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007). Teens tend to multi task their activities more than previous generations and spend time listening to music, being involved with physical activity, in addition to watching television and spending time on the internet. One in five Australian children have a television in their bedroom and one in five children aged between eight and 17 have a computer in their bedroom (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007). This suggests that today's teens have far greater control over their personal media consumption than previous generations of the same age.

Research has estimated that teenagers use their online social networking sites an average of one hour 22 minutes per day (Barnes 2006). Roughly 70% of girls between 14 and 17 have a Myspace site compared with 50% of teenage boys (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007) and one is

six have their own blog. Teenagers use the internet primarily as an avenue for social learning and communication, sharing similar interests, nurturing friendships and developing a sense of belonging (Lee and Conroy 2005). Girls tend to use the internet to communicate with others, while boys spend more of their time on the internet playing online games with others (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007).

With such large numbers of teenagers embracing online social networking, advertisers are keen to reach them in the environment that they feel so at home in. How they respond to the media is dependant upon the individual (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007) and the following section examines the influence that online social networking sites has on teenagers perceptions of social identity.

## **2.9 TEENAGERS AND SOCIAL IDENTITY**

Online social networks provide a structure for teens to feel in control of their internet environment and allow them to actively participate in a social system (Lee and Conroy 2005). Teens will use the internet and personal spaces to communicate and interact with their peers in the same way their parents would have used the telephone. Today's teens will begin and end relationships via the internet, they will discuss what they have been doing and how they feel, they will bully and be bullied, they will be confronted and confront and they will most likely share very personal thoughts with people that they may not have even met in person. Teens will use the internet to make friendships and explore and develop their identity formulation (Barnes 2006). Their social networks are broadened and are not limited by geography. They can relate with people all around the world with similar interests regardless of whether these interests are positive or unhealthy. They can, via the internet, enter a world of no boundaries.

Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals derive their identity from the social groups that they belong to (Stryker and Burke 2000). Successful development of social identity in adolescence is generally considered to be important for social identity as an adult (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007). The influence that the social group has includes the beliefs and values, the societal norms and the group's communication style (Stets and Burke 2000). If these social groups are without boundaries and devoid of 'in the flesh' contact how does this influence the members' social identity? Stets (2005) suggests that an individual's emotions are influenced by the degree of congruence between how they view their own identity compared to the identity standard of the group. Given that many teens view their online social networks as their primary social groups (Barnes 2006), it would seem that these social networks have a huge influence on the emotional health of the users and whether they will eventually view themselves in a positive or negative light. Teenagers benefit from the opportunity to be creative and present themselves in a multimedia fashion and online social networking sites provide opportunities to youths who may feel marginalized in their own communities to find support and friendship online (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007). Researchers suggest that for some teenagers experiencing low levels of self esteem and life satisfaction, the opportunity to interact with others online can be of great benefit (Ellison et al. 2007).

The negative elements of online networking such as potential threat from bullying or 'cyber stalking' can cause anxiety or depression and have a detrimental effect on the social identity of teenagers. From the above discussion regarding the influence that social groups can have on social identity, the eleventh proposition is presented.

***Proposition 11: Teenagers' social identity is influenced by their experience on online social networking sites***

## **2.10 SUMMARY**

This chapter has reviewed the literature regarding advertising and the communication process. It considers how changes in the media landscape and consumer expectations have prompted marketers move from a push strategy in advertising to a pull strategy. By reviewing previous research into attitudes towards advertising and the media the issue of scepticism towards advertising and media was examined. The literature on advertising avoidance was detailed followed by an outline of the new models of advertising which consider advertising as providing a service. Consumers' privacy and trust issues were discussed followed by an examination of the internet and the online social networking sites. The chapter concluded with information on teenagers and their use of social online networks and how this influences their social identity.

## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The chapter explains the research methodology used to explore the research question in this study which is “*What are teenagers’ perceptions of advertising in the online social environment?*” For this study two methods of data collection have been utilized. Focus groups were initially used to explore the topic and generate new ideas, followed by in-depth interviews for further investigation. The justification for using these two methods is outlined in Section 3.2.

This chapter explains the research methodology by covering:

Justification for this methodology

Research procedures

Ethical issues

Conclusion

### 3.2 JUSTIFICATION FOR THIS METHODOLOGY

#### 3.2.1 Methodological approach

This study seeks to understand teenagers’ perceptions of advertising in the online social environment. It is exploratory in nature, which is appropriate given the popularity of online social networking sites is a relatively new phenomenon (Cavana et al. 2001; Zikmund 2003) and there is little research available regarding consumer perceptions of these sites. Exploratory research is most useful in situations where limited information is available and the researcher wishes to have the flexibility to future explore areas of research (Polonsky and Waller 2005; Cooper and Schindler 2006). The primary goal of exploratory research is to gain better understanding of an issue or situation and it is an appropriate way to provide ground work for later more rigorous



studies at a later date (Davis 2000; Zikmund 2003; Cooper and Schindler 2006).

Zikmund (2003) notes that the first step in exploratory research is to analyse the existing studies in the subject area then transform potential issues into more defined problems to develop research objectives. Chapter Two has provided an analysis of the previous research into the area of advertising perceptions and online social networking and has in turn, outlined eleven propositions for further research.

Cooper and Schindler (2006) define exploratory research is typically qualitative. Qualitative research is often referred to as interpretive research as its intention is to build an understanding of an issue rather than prove a theory (Cooper and Schindler 2006). This type of research has the potential to provide the researcher with rich and useful data (Cavana et al. 2001; Cooper and Schindler 2006) and involves high level of researcher involvement and interpretation (Cooper and Schindler 2006). The researcher is interested in the perspective and the beliefs of the respondents being interviewed and places emphasis on their words and actions, with an aim to identify patterns through observations, documentation and analysis (Cavana et al. 2001). Ticehurst and Veal (cited in Cavana et al. 2001) suggests that qualitative research is valuable for gaining quality data from relatively few people, by allowing the researcher to develop the research question or hypothesis throughout the research process.

The research question posed in this study is “What are teenagers’ perceptions of advertising in the online environment?” This study seeks to identify the thoughts and feelings of the teenagers when they are exposed to advertising on their Myspace and Facebook social networking sites. The literature review identifies eleven propositions regarding the research question and the

data collected from the study will be analysed to ascertain whether they can be supported or not. The research strategy was developed so that the information required to evaluate the propositions could be generated in a timely and cost effective fashion.

The research method meets the following criteria:

1. Involving teenagers who use the internet and have or have had an online social networking site.
2. Facilitating the expression of thoughts and beliefs of the teenagers which in turn will provide large amounts of interpretative data
3. Providing the opportunity to gain deeper insights into concepts and issues that may be identified

These criteria have led the researcher to adopt a multi-method research strategy consisting of qualitative research through focus group interviews and in-depth personal interviews. The following section provides justification for the use of these two research methods.

### **3.2.2 Focus Groups**

Zikmund (2003:117) defines the focus group interview as '*an unstructured, free-flowing interview with a small group of people*'. A focus group allows the researcher to collect information from a small group, while observing non verbal behaviour, and guiding and probing the participants so that all the information required can be uncovered (Cavana et al. 2001). Focus groups have become a popular form of qualitative data collection (Stokes and Bergin 2006) because they are considered to be easy and inexpensive to organize and execute, flexible and relatively quickly analysed (Zikmund 2003; Sekaran 2000; Beyea and Nicoll 2000).

Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest that focus groups should be considered when

1. The researcher wishes to understand the ideas and feelings that the sample have towards something
2. To understand differences in perspectives of groups of people
3. To uncover factors that influence opinions
4. To encourage ideas to develop from the group
5. To capture the comments or language of the target audience.

Focus groups are justified in this study for the following reasons.

Focus groups are a very effective way of gaining insight and exploring the issue to be addressed especially if there is limited information available (Cavana et al. 2001; Cooper and Schindler 2006).

The focus group facilitator can encourage the group dynamics to emerge and with it achieve some quality data regarding their views and expectations (Hair et al. 2003; Krueger and Casey 2000; Stokes and Bergin 2006).

Answers may be more spontaneous as no individual feels pressured to make a comment (Zikmund 2003). The open ended style of discussion in focus groups allows participants to comment and share experiences with their peers (Garrison, Pierce, Monroe, Sasser, Shaffer and Blalock 1999; Stokes and Bergin 2006; Krueger and Casey 2000).

The flexible format of the focus group encourages discussion and allows the researcher to explore areas initiated by the group (Cavana et al. 2001).

Sometimes a single comment can trigger a chain of other responses.

Respondents, once they become comfortable within the group, will often express their ideas and feelings at a deeper level (Zikmund 2003).

Focus groups are considered to be relatively inexpensive to organize and analyse with the benefits of gaining data from several people simultaneously. Another benefit is that the time involved to organize and implement focus groups is often much less than other forms of research (Beyea and Nicoll 2000; Zikmund 2003; Sekaran 2000; Greenbaum 2000).

The previously outlined advantages of using focus group, justify their use in this study.

### **3.2.3 In-depth Interviews**

The in-depth interview is the second form of qualitative research used in the study and is used to gain deeper insight into some of the issues identified in the focus groups. Burgess (cited in Mason 2000:38) refers to interviews as '*a conversation with a purpose*'. The potential for in-depth interviews to 'fill in the gaps' of information and to clarify ideas and concepts gleaned from the focus groups aids in strengthening the findings of the study (Cooper and Schindler 2006; Hair et al. 2003; Davis 1997).

In-depth interviews are justified in this study for the following reasons:

The in-depth interview seeks to get the respondent to freely discuss feelings or beliefs about the subject of interest and provide a more detailed response (Davis 2000; Stokes and Bergin 2006; Cooper and Schindler 2006; Hair et al. 2003; Davis 1997). It is particularly helpful for exploratory research studies (Cooper and Schindler 2006). Being able to discuss issues in greater detail provides the researcher with the opportunity to clarify and expand on issues arisen from the focus group discussions (Hair et al. 2003) and also provides significant amounts of data for analysis (Hair et al. 2003).

The benefits of using in-depth interviews includes the opportunity to discuss particularly sensitive topics with participants (Hair et al. 2003; Stokes and Bergin 2006). The interviewee is more likely to be comfortable about being candid in their opinions and often the data received has depth and comprehensiveness (Hair et al. 2003). If the interviewee has views which are non conforming, they are more likely to express them in an in-depth interview (Stokes and Bergin 2006; Davis 1997).

The researcher has greater control over the selection of the participants in in-depth interviews (Stokes and Bergin 2006; Cooper and Schindler 2006). Interviewees are selected for their knowledge, experience and opinions on the subject matter (Cooper and Schindler 2006). The nature of in-depth interviews allows researchers to explore the views of individual respondents for more precise interpretation (Stokes and Bergin 2006).

The in-depth interview often provides the interviewee with a feeling of empowerment as they enjoy the fact that their opinion is being sought (Stokes and Bergin 2006). In-depth interviews also provide the opportunity for building of trust and rapport between the interviewer and interviewee which in turn improves the quality of the data (Davis 1997).

The previously outlined advantages of using in-depth interviews justify their application in this study.

### **3.2.4 Multi-method research design**

By using a multi-method approach for this study, the researcher has the opportunity to use in-depth interviews to gain greater insight into the issues and ideas identified in the focus groups. The interactive nature of the focus groups provides the researcher with a comprehensive overview of the topic,

with participants stimulating the thoughts of others in the group, achieving more spontaneous responses and potentially introducing new ideas and views of the topic (Davis 1997). In-depth interviews allow the researcher to take a different approach to that of focus groups. Once an overview of ideas and insights are gained from focus groups, in-depth interviews provide the interviewer with the opportunity to create additional questions and explore in more detail issues that arise during the interview which is not always possible or appropriate in focus groups. This type of multi-method research strategy provides the researcher with data from different sources, allows the researcher to further investigate areas of interest, as well as providing triangulation of the data collection method (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2003). Triangulation is the term given when data collection methods are combined (Saunders et al. 2003; Cooper and Schindler 2006; Mason 2000) and provides rigor to the research (Sekaran 2000). If data collected from several sources is similar, then the goodness of the data can be assured (Sekaran 2000).

Each data collection method has its unique strengths and weakness and by utilising the multi-method research strategy the reliability and validity of the study is strengthened (Saunders et al. 2003; Sekaran 2000; Mason 2000).

### **3.2.5 Data quality**

In order to ensure that quality data is collected for this study the following issues need to be addressed

- Reliability of information
- Forms of bias
- Generalisability and validity of data (Saunders et al. 2003)

#### *Reliability*

Data is considered reliable when it is consistent (that is when other researchers would uncover the same information when assessing the same data) (Saunders et al. 2003; Cavana et al. 2001; Sekaran 2000; Zikmund 2003). The circumstances that surround most qualitative studies are complex and dynamic in nature and the flexibility that is inherent in semi-structured interviews makes it more difficult to ensure consistency (Saunders et al. 2003). In this study the use of focus groups combined with in-depth personal interviews provide a triangulation to the research and therefore improve the level of reliability (Cooper and Schindler 2006; Saunders et al. 2003). The responses from questions asked in the focus groups were supported by the responses from the in-depth personal interviews.

#### *Interviewer and interviewee bias*

Bias is the term given to inaccuracies or errors in data (Sekaran 2000). The following strategies were employed by the interviewer to avoid any bias in this study;

- The interviewer was well prepared for the interviews and had pretested the questions prior to the focus groups and in-depth interviews (Saunders et al. 2003).
- The interviewer was conscious of not leading or responding to questions in a positive or negative manner (Cavana et al. 2001).
- The interviewer ensured that the interviewee is comfortable with the setting for the interview (Sekaran 2000).
- The interviewee was assured that the information discussed would remain confidential (Sekaran 2000).

#### *Generalisability and Validity*

Given the limited number of focus groups and interviews in this study, the results cannot be equated to the broader population and are therefore not generalisable (Saunders et al. 2003). Validity is concerned with the trueness

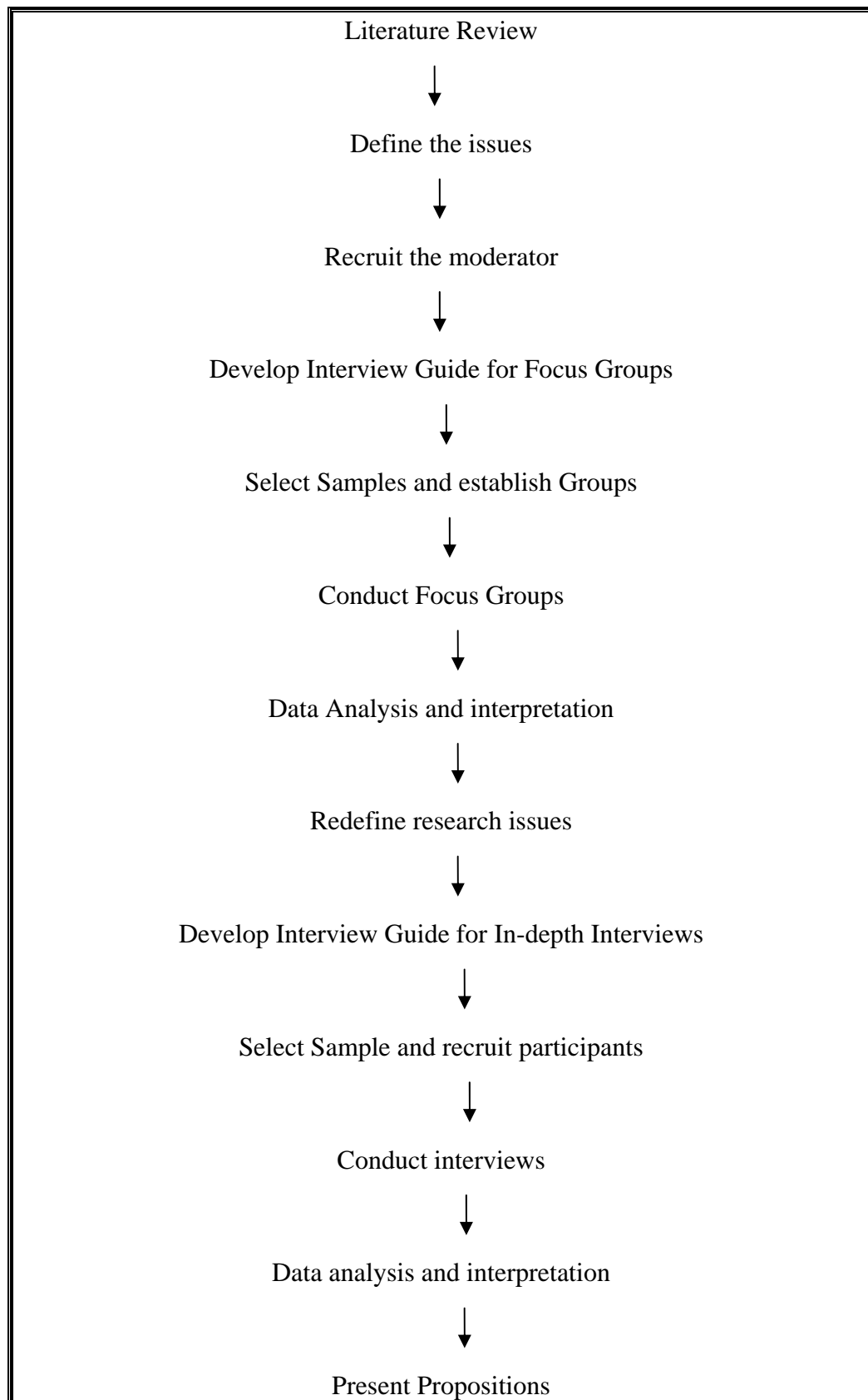
or how valid the results of the study are (Haskins and Kendrick 1993; Cooper and Schindler 2006; Saunders et al. 2003). In this study validity of the data is strengthened as the interviewer has the opportunity to probe and question the participant in the focus groups and interviews and is able to be very clear as to the intended meanings of the participant (Saunders et al. 2003).

### **3.3 RESEARCH PROCEDURE**

This study employed the multi-method approach to data collection, with the focus groups being the initial data collection method followed by the in-depth interviews. Table 3.1 illustrates the research procedure.



**Table 3.1      Research Procedure**



Developed for this study based on Polonsky and Waller (2005)
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### **3.3.1 Focus Group planning and procedure**

#### **3.3.1.1 Defining the problem**

The research question as outlined in Chapter One is:

**What are teenagers' perceptions of advertising in the online social networking environment?**

Objectives of the focus group research are:

1. To generate an understanding of how and why teenagers use online social networking sites
2. To investigate whether they notice the advertisements on these sites
3. To evaluate how they react to the advertisements on the online social networking sites
4. To explore the way teenagers think and feel towards advertising on the online social networking sites

The interview guide was developed using these research objectives coupled with the information gathered in the literature view. An interview guide for the focus groups is provided in Appendix A as well as an outline of the academic sources which aided in the construction of the questions.

#### **3.3.1.2 Role of the moderator**

The role of the moderator in the focus group is to encourage discussion and ensure that the group remains on track (Hair et al. 2003). The moderator of the focus groups must ensure that all participants are involved in the discussion and prevent more forceful personalities dominating the group (Cavana et al. 2001; Zikmund 2003; Beyea and Nicoll 2000). In focus

groups it is important that the interviewer or facilitator operates on three levels, that is on a content level (listens to and records the process), a process level (ensuring that all the information is uncovered) and an executive level (keep moving the interview forward and ensuring that the interview runs to time) (Cavana et al. 2001). The term focus group describes both the method of research and the role of the moderator which is to focus the group on the area that is to be discussed (Zikmund 2003)

Effective moderators possess the following characteristics:

- Personality – possess good people skills and communication skills (Zikmund 2003; Hair et al. 2003; Davis 1997)
- Attention – to be able to maintain attention to the task throughout the entire focus group session (Hair et al. 2003)
- Professional training – background in communications, psychology, advertising and marketing (Hair et al. 2003)
- Organisation – to be able to lead the group according to the focus groups outline (Hair et al. 2003)
- Objectivity – the ability to not let the moderator's personal opinion influence the discussion (Hair et al. 2003; Davis 1997)
- Listening skills – possess the ability to listen carefully and the ability to paraphrase (Zikmund 2003; Hair et al. 2003; Davis 1997)

For the purpose of this study, the researcher will act as the moderator. Her background in teaching at an academic level, coupled with years of advertising industry experience have provided the opportunity to develop the characteristics identified above. She also has had many years experience in communicating with teenagers. While argument can be made that an outside moderator can provide appropriate objectivity, Morgan (1998:48) suggests that 'an outside professional might actually detract from what your own

research team is able to do best'. Therefore the decision is justified for the researcher to be the moderator of the focus group.

### **3.3.1.3 Developing the interview guide**

The focus group interview guide provides the moderator with an outline to direct the flow of discussion. It also allows the moderator to deviate from the guide where appropriate (Greenbaum 2000; Zikmund 2003). The design of the interview guide is based around theoretical frameworks that surround the research question (Polonsky and Waller 2005). A copy of the interview guide is detailed in Appendix A.

The interview guide consists of open ended questions which are designed to gain the participants' views, experiences and opinions about advertising on online social networking sites (Polonsky and Waller 2005; Saunders et al. 2003). These types of questions allow the participant to determine how they wish to respond (Krueger and Casey 2000) reducing moderator bias and increasing reliability (Saunders et al. 2003).

The focus group interview is based on semi structured questions which are designed to cover a range of topics relating to the research subject. The use of semi structured questions allows the moderator to vary the questions from interview to interview depending upon the responses from each group (Saunders et al. 2003). Semi structured interviews provide the opportunity to probe and lead discussion into areas not previously considered and are considered to be very effective for collecting data for exploratory research (Saunders et al. 2003).

In preparation for the focus groups the following issues were addressed;

- Does each question have a purpose? (Polonsky and Waller 2005)
- Are the questions open ended? (Saunders et al. 2003; Polonsky and Waller 2005)
- Will the participants understand the language and technical terms? (Saunders et al. 2003; Polonsky and Waller 2005)
- Are the answers to be written or verbal and how will they be recorded? (Polonsky and Waller 2005)
- How will the data be collected and analysed? (Polonsky and Waller 2005)
- Have the questions been pretested? (Polonsky and Waller 2005; Davis 1997)

The interview guide was developed with the first questions helping the moderator build rapport with the group and make the participants feel comfortable (Krueger and Casey 2000; Zikmund 2003). The questions then become more specific in nature (Krueger and Casey 2000; Zikmund 2003; Cooper and Schindler 2006). Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest that about twelve questions are appropriate for a two hour focus group. For the purpose of this study, the focus group will run for one hour each and therefore the interview guide consists of six core questions that are based around theoretical framework. Each question is supported with pre-planned probes.

The questions were pre-tested on three people who fitted the profile of the sample providing the moderator with the opportunity to revise questions where necessary (Cooper and Schindler 2006).

#### **3.3.1.4 Sample design and recruitment of the participants**

Focus groups are composed of people who have a degree of homogeneity or sameness (Garrison et al. 1999; Cavana et al. 2001). The sample design is

based on a non-probability and convenience sampling strategy. Non probability sampling '*does not use chance selection procedures but relies on the personal judgment of the researcher to decide who will be included in the sample*' (Polonsky and Waller 2005:116). In selecting participants for the focus group, Morgan (1997) suggests that the goal should be minimizing sample bias rather than achieving generalisability.

This study will comprise of a segmented and homogenous sample based on the following criteria:

- Participants must be aged between 13 years and 17 years
- Participants must have access to the internet
- Participants must have had (at some stage) their own online social network page
- An even mix of male and female participants should be achieved

The high level of homogeneity of this sample will allow for free flowing ideas and provide opportunity to investigate differences in perspectives within the group (Morgan 1997; Cavana et al. 2001).

Some researchers believe that it is preferable that the sample group do not know each other well as this may inhibit some of their responses (Garrison et al. 1999; Cavana et al. 2001). However, Morgan (1997) argues that focus groups with acquaintances are sometimes difficult to avoid, and the priority of the sampling technique should be that the sample feel comfortable within the group. If the participants are acquainted then they may converse more readily which is the aim of the focus group (Cavana et al. 2001). In this study, owing to geography, age and schooling of the participants, many of the sample were acquainted either through mutual friendships or they had met via their online social networking sites. This did not seem to have an adverse

influence on the flow of conversation in the focus groups and the participants seemed very comfortable about expressing themselves in this setting.

#### **3.3.1.5 Establishing and conducting the groups**

Four focus groups were held and each session was one hour long. Morgan (1997) recommends that three to five focus groups per project are sufficient, however Cooper and Schindler (2006) recommend that researchers keep conducting focus groups until no new insights are gained. It is expected that after four focus group discussions (with a total of 24 participants) a saturation of themes will be achieved (Krueger and Casey 2000).

The focus groups are designed to take one hour to complete. Polonsky and Waller (2005) suggest that this is sufficient time to conduct the focus group. The sample size for each group is six which is considered an optimal size for a focus group (Garrison et al. 1999; Cavana et al. 2001; Zikmund 2003; Cooper and Schindler 2006; Morgan 1997). This size allows for all participants to make a contribution to the discussion.

For this study, the parents of the participants were contacted via email (the parents being known to the researcher) and asked if they would discuss the possibility of taking part in this study with their teenage children. Details regarding the focus group, where it would be held, what areas would be discussed and a parental and participant consent form was sent to the participants' parents the week before the focus group. A reminder telephone call was made the day before the focus group to confirm participation and

participants were asked to arrive ten minutes before the focus group was to begin (Polonsky and Waller 2005) .

It is also important that the participants understand that the comments that they make are confidential and that they respect the confidentiality of other people's statements in the focus groups (Silverman 2006 :323). Participants' parents were asked to read and sign an informed consent form which outlined how the information would be used and included a brief outline of some of the questions that would be discussed (Silverman 2006 :324).

The location of the focus groups was the moderator/researcher's private residence as it was central location to all the participants and free of distractions (Garrison et al. 1999). Being in a home situation, the atmosphere was very relaxed and comfortable (Zikmund 2003; Morgan 1997). It also provided the parents with the opportunity to wait in another section of the house if they wished to.

To ensure that the data collected is reliable and valid, member checks were done by the moderator summarizing the data and checking with the group to ensure that they agreed with the interpretation (Zikmund 2003). By recording the focus group discussions, the moderator was able to keep the conversation moving and focus on the process rather than taking down notes (Garrison et al. 1999; Morgan 1997; Cavana et al. 2001). At the end of the focus group each participant was asked to fill in a form giving some demographic details and information regarding their use of the internet (Morgan 1997).



### **3.3.1.6 Data analysis**

The use of propositions based on theoretical frameworks are an efficient method of organising the analysis of the data in qualitative research (Saunders et al. 2003). The literature review has identified eleven propositions which have provided the structure for the analysis of the data from the focus groups.

Krueger and Casey (2000) advise researchers to always refer to the purpose of the study when beginning analysis of focus groups. They suggest that focus group analysis should be systematic and continuous.

#### *Systematic analysis*

'Systematic analysis is deliberate and planned' (Krueger and Casey 2000:128). If it is ensured that the results are a reflection of what was shared by the group, the data can be documented, understood and be transparent to others involved in the research. Transcripts of the focus groups, along with the moderator's notes, are analysed with major themes and subthemes identified (Garrison et al. 1999; Saunders et al. 2003). Appendix B provides a brief summary of the focus group discussions.

#### *Continuous*

Analysis of the data begins at the first focus group, with the moderator being aware of the questions that the group were enthusiastic in discussing and the areas where they were more reluctant to reveal their thoughts. Each group's data is analysed and compared with the others in an ongoing process (Saunders et al. 2003; Krueger and Casey 2000).

For this study the researcher has undertaken a transcript based style of analysis, where the transcripts and notes from the focus groups are read through and coded so that issues and themes can be identified (Krueger and Casey 2000; Saunders et al. 2003). A report was then developed writing a descriptive summary of the responses for each of the questions illustrating the points with quotes from the transcripts (Krueger and Casey 2000; Saunders et al. 2003). Krueger and Casey (2000) recommend that the analysis of the transcripts is undertaken by someone who was present at the focus group, in this case the researcher, as they are able to not only make note of what is said but also factor in the other influences during the focus group, such as talking over or laughing at particular issues.

### **3.3.1.7 Limitations of Focus Groups**

The limitations of focus groups as a research method include:

- Participants may feel concerned about confidentiality issues (Stokes and Bergin 2006)
- Participants may be worried that they might say something to embarrass themselves in front of the group or may be reluctant to discuss sensitive issues (Stokes and Bergin 2006)
- 'Overclaiming' of those within the group can occur due to social pressures within the group (Stokes and Bergin 2006)
- Respondents may publicly agree with issues while privately disagreeing (Stokes and Bergin 2006; Davis 1997)
- Possibility of interviewer bias needs to be considered (Garrison et al. 1999; Sekaran 2000; Davis 1997)
- Generalisability is low (Polonsky and Waller 2005; Davis 1997)
- Analysis of data is subjective and open to interpreter bias (Zikmund 2003)

As the participants of the focus group were teenagers, the researcher reinforced the importance of confidentiality regarding what was discussed

during the focus group and ensured that all participants felt included in the discussion and that no one person dominated the forum.

Despite the limitations, focus groups provided data that assisted in gaining insights into how teenagers view advertising on their online social networking sites and was an appropriate research method for this study.

### **3.3.2 In-depth Interview planning and procedure**

#### **3.3.2.1 Redefining the research question**

The original research question for this study was reassessed following from the focus group studies and evaluation of the data received in these groups. While the question itself did not alter, several areas of additional interest were identified for further investigation. These areas included the concept of trust as viewed by teenagers in their online social networking sites and the influence that this trust or lack of trust has on their perceptions of the medium and the advertising it carries.

#### **3.3.2.2 Development of the interview guide**

The in-depth interview guide provides the moderator with an outline to direct the flow of discussion similar to the focus group interview guide. It outlines the areas and topics for discussion, while also allowing the interviewer to probe the interviewee in an interactive way (Greenbaum 2000; Zikmund 2003; Polonsky and Waller 2005). Again the interview guide consists of open ended questions which are designed to gain the participant's views, experiences and opinions about advertising on online social networking sites (Polonsky and Waller 2005; Saunders et al. 2003).

The in-depth interview questions were designed to clarify and further investigate the concepts identified in the literature review and focus groups. The eleven propositions as outlined in the literature review chapter provided the direction for the interviews. A copy of the in-depth interview guide is detailed in Appendix C.

The in-depth interviews were based on a semi structured question format in which the interviewer asks specific questions and then uses probing questions to clarify the interviewee's thoughts (Cooper and Schindler 2006; Davis 2000; Polonsky and Waller 2005; Rubin and Rubin 2005). It is important to elicit the experiences and understandings of the interviewees and that the questions are easy for them to understand and relate to (Rubin and Rubin 2005; Mason 2000). The probing questions can be in the form of clarification probes, steering probes to get the interview back on track, evidence probes which aid in assessing the knowledge of the interviewee, and elaboration probes to encourage the interviewee to expand more about the topic (Rubin and Rubin 2005). All these probes were used in this study.

Interview questions are developed to relate to the situation of the interviewees and be sensitive to their needs and feelings. The questions are designed to encourage the flow of information and ensure that they are focused on the issues and topics relevant to the research question (Mason 2000).

As with the focus groups, the in-depth interview questions were pretested on two people that fitted the sample group profile. This pretesting provided the interviewer with the opportunity to practice the interviewing approach, review the questions and consider feedback and develop a greater understanding of the process (Polonsky and Waller 2005)

### **3.3.2.3 Recruitment of interviewees**

The sampling strategy for the in-depth interview was also non-probability and convenience sampling. The criteria for selecting the interviewees for the in-depth interviews were the same as those used in the focus group recruitment:

- Participants must be aged between 13 years and 17 years
- Participants must have access to the internet
- Participants must have had (at some stage) their own online social network page
- An even mix of male and female participants should be achieved

The participants for the in-depth interviews were selected as they are regular users of online social networks so they are able to speak with some experience and their thoughts and beliefs are of value to this study (Cooper and Schindler 2006).

All participants were known to the interviewer and the participants and their parents read and signed consent forms. As with the focus groups, the participants were contacted prior to the interview to confirm the interview time. Appendix D provides a copy of the letter sent to the in-depth interview participant's parents.

### **3.3.2.4 Conduct of the interviews**

In-depth interviewing relies upon the interviewer and interviewee developing a trust and dialogue. The in-depth interviews component of the study consisted of a series of eight personal interviews that were about 40 minutes in length. Morrison, Haley, Bartel Sheehan and Taylor (2002) suggest that personal interviews can take between 30 minutes to two hours to complete

depending upon the person being interviewed and their interest in the subject matter.

In order to gain rich data from the interviews, the interviewer employed the following strategies;

1. active listening (both what is being said and the unstated messages being sent) (Morrison et al. 2002; Cavana et al. 2001)
2. questioning (using open and closed questions in combination) (Cavana et al. 2001; Morrison et al. 2002)
3. paraphrasing (repeating back what was said to ensure validity) (Cavana et al. 2001)
4. probing (Cavana et al. 2001)
5. observation of non verbal behaviour (Cavana et al. 2001)
6. making the interviewee feel comfortable and at ease in the interview environment (Cavana et al. 2001).

It is important that the interviewer allows time to build a rapport with the participant and to share the purpose of the interview (Cavana et al. 2001). It is also vital that the interviewer does not lead the interview as it will bias any conclusions drawn from the interview (Davis 2000; Morrison et al. 2002).

### **3.3.2.5 Data analysis**

Analysis of data gained from in-depth interviews '*entails classifying, comparing, weighing, and combining material from interviews to extract the meaning and implications, to reveal patterns, or to stitch together descriptions of events into coherent narrative*' (Rubin and Rubin 2005:201).

Rubin and Rubin (2005) outlines the characteristics of data analysis for in-depth interviews as being:

- Analysis is ongoing from the first interview to the last
- The aim of qualitative research is to explore complexities of thought and meanings rather than aiming for numeric summaries
- Analysis requires systematic coding
- Analysis also requires the immersion of information

Data analysis for the in-depth interviews was performed in two stages. Analysis of data from transcripts requires an open mind and immersion in the text (Morrison et al. 2002). Stage one consisted of the preparation of transcripts, the finding of themes, concepts and events and coding these in order to retrieve information on specific ideas (Polonsky and Waller 2005). The process of coding the themes required the researcher to engage with the data and fully understand the meanings and insights that relates to the data (Polonsky and Waller 2005).

The second phase used the data to formulate a description of the setting (Rubin and Rubin 2005) and interpret how these themes and insights relate to the research questions and in the case of this study the eleven propositions (Polonsky and Waller 2005).

### **3.3.2.6 Limitations of In-depth interviews**

The challenges in using in-depth interviews include the following:

- they are considered quite costly in terms of time and resources (Zikmund 2003; Davis 2000)
- much of the success of the interview is dependant upon the experience and ability of the interviewer (Davis 2000; Zikmund 2003; Cooper and Schindler 2006)
- data is more difficult to interpret (Stokes and Bergin 2006)

- analysis and interpretation of data can be highly subjective (Zikmund 2003)

### **3.4 ETHICAL ISSUES**

There are six ethical issues that need to be considered when undertaking research of this nature. They are:

- informed consent of the participants
- voluntary participation without coercion or deception
- confidentiality and anonymity
- potential for harm
- communicating the results and
- ethical issues specific to the study, in this case the collection of data from individuals who are under the age of 18 years

(Polonsky and Waller 2005; Cooper and Schindler 2006; Davis 2000).

Before any primary data was collected, an application was made to the QUT Ethics committee and approval was given by this committee to proceed with the study. Prior to their involvement the participants were advised about the nature of the research (Sekaran 2000; Cavana et al. 2001; Davis 2000; Cooper and Schindler 2006) and an assurance was given that all data will be treated confidentially (Sekaran 2000; Cavana et al. 2001; Davis 2000; Cooper and Schindler 2006). The focus groups and individual interviews are all audio taped and transcribed to assure correctness of information (Polonsky and Waller 2005). Information of a personal nature was not asked and the participants had the opportunity to cease involvement with the study at any time (Sekaran 2000; Cavana et al. 2001; Davis 2000). There was no potential for harm as a result of being a participant for this study (Polonsky and Waller 2005).



As the participants of the study are under 18 years of age, their parents as well as the participants were required to sign an informed consent form (Cooper and Schindler 2006).

### **3.5 CONCLUSION**

The chapter outlined the research methodology used to explore the research question in this study which is “*What are teenagers’ perceptions of advertising in the online social environment*” This chapter provides justification for the use of focus groups and in-depth interviews and outlines the procedures for both research activities. The research has provided rich and varied data on teenagers’ perceptions towards advertising in the online social network environment. The results from this study are detailed in the next chapter.



## Chapter 4: Results

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the data gained from the focus groups and in-depth interviews will be analysed in order to explore the research question which is:

*What are teenagers' perceptions of advertising in the online social environment?*

This chapter will detail the sample characteristics and present the analysis of the data to assess whether the propositions outlined in Chapter Two can be supported.

### 4.2 SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

This study seeks to understand teenagers' perceptions of advertising in the online social networking environment and to achieve this a non probability sampling strategy was utilized to form four focus group, two with five participants and two with six participants. Table 4.1 summarises the sample for the focus groups. This sample consists of teenagers who have access to the internet although not all of the sample had a current online social networking site. The two males in the focus group who did not have a Myspace or Facebook site had previously had an online social networking site but had not used it for some time. Most of the sample has had an online social networking site for one year and the majority used Myspace.

**Table 4.1** Sample characteristics of focus group participants

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Hours per week spent on the internet</b>	<b>Facebook or Myspace</b>	<b>Years that online network site has been active</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>10 months</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>1 year</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>1 year</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>3 months</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>1 year</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>1 year</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>1 year</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>1 year</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>1 year</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>1 year</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>Facebook</b>	<b>9 months</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>1 year</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>Myspace and Facebook</b>	<b>1 year each</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>No</b>	
<b>Female</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>Facebook</b>	<b>1 year</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>1 year</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>No</b>	
<b>Male</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>10 months</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>2 years</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>2 years</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>18 months</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>Myspace and Facebook</b>	<b>Both 1 year</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>2 years</b>

The average age of the focus group participant was 15, and the average time spent online each week was about 11.5 hours, with the weekly use ranging from one hour per week to 30 hours per week. The majority of the focus group participants had a Myspace site as opposed to a Facebook site. Most of the participants had had their online social networking site for one year.

The second stage of the research consisted of eight in depth personal interviews with teenagers who were current users of online social networking and Table 4.2 summarizes the sample group. This group are enthusiastic users of Myspace and none of the sample used Facebook. This is to be expected as Facebook is generally seen as being an online site used by university students rather than school students.

**Table 4.2 Sample characteristics of in depth interview participants**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Hours per week spent on the internet</b>	<b>Facebook or Myspace</b>	<b>Years that online network site has been active</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>18 months</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>2 years</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>18 months</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>18 months</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>6 months</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>2 years</b>
<b>Male</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>9 months</b>
<b>Female</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Myspace</b>	<b>12 months</b>

The average age of the in-depth interviewee was about 14.5 years old and the average time spent online was 5 hours per week, which was much less than the average of 11.5 hours of the focus group sample. The average time that each participant has had an online social networking site was 16 months, which was four months longer than the average participant of the focus group. However the interviews were held five months after the focus groups which would suggest that the majority of the participants of the focus groups and interviews had begun their online social networking sites around the same time.

#### **4.3 ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUPS AND IN DEPTH INTERVIEWS**

The following section analyses the data gained from the four focus groups and eight in depth interviews and links the findings and statements to the eleven propositions outlined in Chapter Two. A summary of their comments and attitudes towards online social networks precedes the analysis of the propositions.

##### **4.3.1 Teenager attitudes towards online social networking sites**

###### **Key findings:**

- **Online social networking sites have become an important element of the way they communicate with their friends**
- **They feel that they spend too much time online**

The information gained from the focus groups and in depth personal interviews shows that teenagers are very enthusiastic about Myspace and Facebook and its role in the way they communicate with each other. The majority of teenagers have only used online social network sites for the past

year yet it has quickly become an important part of their everyday lives. Many suggested that they spend too much time online and that they go on it to relieve boredom.

One participant went so far to state that he '*wished it had never been invented*' and found that it was so distracting that '*it makes you fail school and stuff*'. Other comments such as '*I feel guilty if I go on it if I had a big test*' and '*I'll just turn it on for comments and an hour later you are still on it*' suggest that teenagers may struggle with the responsibility of controlling the amount of time they are online.

A few participants called online social networking a 'time waster' but said that if they were not online for a few days they felt a little isolated from the social group. When asked what they would do if they could not use online social networking for six months the general consensus was that they would cope with one female participant stating '*We did do without it. We did without it for so long and now it has come in and suddenly it is our whole life*'. One male participant summed it up by saying '*We kind of see Myspace like as a bit of a joke, like to have a bit of a laugh and fun about but aren't so much obsessed by it. Usually girls just find it more addictive than boys*'.

The first proposition for investigation suggests possible reasons for teenagers avoiding advertising on online social networking sites.

#### **4.3.2 Proposition 1: Teenagers avoid advertising on online social networking sites when they feel it disrupts their goals online**

##### **Key findings:**

- **Teenagers avoid advertising on social networking sites**
- **Teenagers were annoyed by advertisements that suddenly pop up or make noise**
- **They accept advertising as the cost of being able to use the sites for free**
- **They enjoyed the advertisements that engaged them with games**
- **They would not give out personal information to win prizes from these games**

When the respondents in the focus groups and in depth personal interviews were asked how they felt towards advertising on the online social network sites, the participants were consistent in their responses that they were annoyed by the pop up advertisements and that they didn't take any notice of the majority of advertisement on these sites. Comments such as *'I don't really notice them', 'There's so much dodgy stuff that you can't take any of it seriously'* and *'I don't pay any attention to them'* consistently appear in the transcripts. Throughout the study, teenagers showed little interest in the advertising and recall was minimal. The only advertisement to gain any recollection was for ring tones and cursers for use on the computer. The participants only recalled specific brands when prompted by the focus group moderator.



Previous studies of advertising avoidance on the internet (Cho and Cheon 2004) suggest that users avoid advertising when they feel that they are interrupted by advertisements. This study showed that while most of the participants go on their online networking site to fill in time and relieve boredom, once they enter their home page their main focus is checking to see if anyone has left any comments.

Some advertisements were distracting with many of the participants in the finding the 'smiley face' advertisements annoying and were particularly irritated when the advertisements suddenly pop up or make surprising noises. They felt that they could not do anything about the ads and that they only noticed the advertisements when they annoyed them. The best strategy appears to be to avoid them.

*'I mean yeah, they're kind of annoying because they're just like always there and they're like, play this game and they make all these noises and like, have you ever seen those ads that have like all these emotions and they talk? They annoy me sometimes.'*

In contrast, participants liked advertisements that engaged them, for example playing games to win ring tones. However the majority of those who played the games also said that they shut them down without giving out any personal information (which is required to win the prize). These advertisements that engage the participant fit with the concept of online social networking sites being used to fill in time and relieve boredom.

*'Really what I'll do is I'll just play the game and I'll actually try and make it harder for myself as possible because they have like race games, so I'll try and like, just because I'm bored and really have nothing better to do, I'll give the computer a head start and just see how long it takes before I lose. And*

*then I'll just shut the window when I win. So I don't really take it that seriously because it's a My Space ad and it's usually for the same stuff. It's for, it's almost always for ringtones and like its stuff for your phone, pretty much.'*

Another male participant when asked if he noticed the advertisements on his Myspace replied, *'Not as much, not as much as the ringtone ads, simply because I take the ringtone ads as a joke and it's something interesting because they're always changing and it's like because I notice them more, I'm never going to use any of the stuff that they give us but I just notice it because it's a fun game to click'*

The data from the focus groups and interviews would suggest that teens dislike pop-ups and noisy advertisements, yet enjoy playing the games on the advertisements. None of the participants suggested that the advertising on their Myspace or Facebook site slowed down their use of the features on the site or disrupted their time on the site. They saw the pop-up and noisy advertisements as being mildly irritating, but as their time on social networking sites is not specifically task driven (when compared to other internet activity such as using search engines or downloading information), the distraction was minimal. These findings would suggest that the research supports Proposition 1 in part, in that teenagers sometimes find advertising in online social networking sites disruptive, however this distraction is minimal.

#### **4.3.3 Proposition 2: Teenagers ignore advertising on online social networking sites when they perceive that there is too much clutter.**

##### **Key findings:**

- **Advertising on their sites is not relevant to them**
- **Most did not feel that there was too much clutter of advertising on their sites**

As previously discussed, the teenagers in the focus groups and interviews found that, apart from advertisements for ring tones and computer cursors, they did not notice the advertising on their online social networking sites.

*'It doesn't really bother me because I never really notice the advertising.'*

Many of the participants felt that advertising on their online social networking sites was acceptable as it kept the use of the site free of charge, but few of the participants could name any of the brands advertised unless prompted. Many of the participants expressed disinterest in the advertisements and felt that they were not for products that were relevant to them.

When a male participant was asked about the advertising that he could recall on his Myspace site, he replied, *'Generally they're more real estate. Most of the genuine company ads are real estate companies for who sell for whatever reason, so I find it a lot more difficult to relate to the real company ads because they don't really put like food advertising or something like that on My Space; it's just not the kind of thing I guess.'*

This statement indicates that the relevance of the product being advertised is an important issue. Once the participants viewed an advertisement that was not specifically targeted to their age group they made the assumption that all of the advertisements in this medium would not be relevant to them, so they

ignored them. Some participants said that as the ads were always there, and they didn't feel that they were relevant to them, so they ignored them.

*'You just don't really take notice of them (the advertisements), because they are there all the time. It is like a conditioned response.'*

This statement suggests that advertising clutter may be the cause for the avoidance of the advertising message, however relevance of the advertising message was the more consistent concern of the participants in this study.

*'So I don't really take it seriously because it's a Myspace ad and it's usually for the same stuff. Then there is the Myspace job (advertisements) and I don't really need a job.'*

While some participants acknowledged that the advertisements on their site were specifically targeted to them by utilizing the information that they had provided on their site, the majority did not see a link between their information (for example the type of sport, books and movies that they are interested in) and the type and brand of advertisements appearing on their site. One female participant believed that if the site was private, then Myspace could not use the information and target the advertisements to the site owner

Many of the participants were dismissive of the advertising, because they felt that it was not relevant to them. None of the participants indicated that they avoid the ads because of undue clutter of advertising on the sites. This would suggest that perceived clutter of advertising messages is not the main reason that they avoid the advertising on their sites and that relevance of the advertising message was a more important issue. The following section provides an examination of the third possible reason behind advertising avoidance on online social networking sites.

**4.3.4 Proposition 3: Teenagers avoid advertisements on online social networking sites if they have had negative experiences with previous online advertisements.**

**Key findings:**

- **Teenagers are distrustful of online advertisers**
- **Most of this distrust comes from word of mouth, from parents, teachers and peers**
- **They are reluctant to give out personal information**
- **They see advertising as a risk and a threat**

Many of the participants were particularly distrustful about the motives of advertisers on the internet. Most had been warned by parents and teachers about the possibility of catching a computer virus if they click on an advertisement. When asked if she had ever clicked onto an advertisement on her Myspace one participant said, *'I probably have when I was a bit younger because I know about them I don't really click them at all because I just know that they'll either give me a virus or be some sort of scam thing.'*

Even though most participants had a strong distrust for the advertisements, the majority had not had a bad experience themselves with online advertising. Their beliefs were based on stories that they had heard.

*'Because anyone can really do anything on the internet, whereas on TV, have to have like, yeah, licences and codes and things. Just like so many things have happened with those kind of things, like just give away your information on the internet and then bad things happening.'*

*'If an ad says click on this to do something, I usually don't click on it. I pretty much just ignore them.'*

Many of the participants had experienced the situation where they did not realise that they were clicking onto an advertisement and felt fooled into responding. Sometimes brands will send advertisements as comments on users Myspace sites causing the Myspace users to feel tricked and used by the company.

*'Sometimes ads get sent through comments. Like the company sends it through comment, like to every person on your list, they'll send, it forms a virus on your page, so it's all the ads and stuff.'*

*'They get your email address and your password and then they make bulletins from your space and it just has a random heading and you click on it and just shows you the ad.'*

The participants were distrustful about advertisements that make outlandish claims regarding prize winning or potential prizes and as a result were distrustful of most of the advertisements on their site.

*'Well, most of the ads that say you will win \$100 if you do this game or if you do this or you answer this question. I really just think they're kind of, like I don't even touch them because I know what they're all about but I can imagine the people who don't know anything about them like doing it and they're very annoying and it frustrates me.'*

Participants were reluctant to give out personal details to companies and were concerned about giving mobile phone numbers for fear of accumulating charges for purchasing ring tones.

*'I don't trust them. In case you gave them your mobile number and they could send you heaps of stuff and you'd have to pay for it and everything'.*

The data gained from the focus groups and in depth interviews consistently showed that teenagers were very distrustful towards advertising on their online social networking site. The majority of this distrust emanates from hearing stories from others regarding the potential risks from giving out personal details or unwittingly catching a computer virus. One participant summed up the feeling of many in the group when she said, *'So many people post dodgy bulletins, like spam bulletins, that if you see one that looks real, you don't bother clicking on it because you know it's probably going to be a spam. So you sort of lose your trust in it.'*

The lack of trust in the advertising on online social networks because of previous negative experience (experienced by their family and friends and in some cases personal experience) supports the third proposition that teenagers avoid advertisements on online social networking sites as they have had negative experiences with previous online advertisements. The following section considers how teenagers use online social networking sites and whether they use these sites for information searching.

#### **4.3.5 Proposition 4: Teenagers seek information from online social networks**

##### **Key findings:**

- **Teenagers see social networking sites as a personal space, not a commercial one and therefore do not use their online social networking sites to search for product information**
- **They are reluctant to make commercial purchases off the internet**
- **Use online social networking sites for seeking information about their interests (for example social causes, music, movies)**

The overall consensus from the focus groups and personal interviews showed that the participants did not consider Myspace or Facebook as somewhere that they would go to, to find information about a product. As a group they were very reluctant to purchase anything from the internet, as they were not sure that you would get what you had anticipated and also none of the sample had credit cards which made purchasing more difficult. Some of the participants felt concerned that when they clicked on a link in a Myspace or Facebook site, they had the potential to be connected to anywhere in the world. One focus group participant said they wouldn't buy anything from a Myspace site as there *'is so much dodgy stuff on Myspace that you can't take it seriously'*.

When asked about using online social networking sites to find information all the participants said that they had not. When asked about finding information about bands on Myspace however, most of the participants agreed that they have gone on to band's Myspace sites to download music for their own site or looked at movie trailers promoting a movie. Many teenagers in the study did not see that the bands and movie companies had commercial motivations in setting up these sites.

*'I've gone to a couple of bands, yeah, My Spaces, because that's where you get your music when you're on My Space, from'.*

*'I mean it's a good way of looking at, you know, learning it like researching them and seeing about them and you can actually like talk to them but usually they don't reply to you.'*

One of the participants in the personal interviews had gone on sites such as the ANTAR site for Indigenous rights, the Make Poverty History site and the Find Madeleine McCann site and had included their links on his site. By



having a link for social causes on his site, he felt that it was his way of helping the cause to get their message to a greater audience. It also portrayed him as being a person interested in social issues.

*'Because I first found the ANTAR one at the time of the 'sorry' thing, so they were making this real push for people to put into their status, I'm, is sorry. Like a whole country wide movement kind of thing, but that's the first time I noticed ANTAR but the others I just found through friends really.*

*I guess, kind of like its good to get the message around because it's such a communal site. It's good to get it to the younger generations.'*

The data from the focus groups and personal interviews would suggest that teenagers do not consider that they go on online social network sites to seek information, but in actual fact they do use these sites for information about music, movies and social issues. This would then suggest that the proposition that teenagers seek information on online social networking sites can be supported when dealing with social causes and special interests such as music and movies. However they are less inclined to seek information about commercial purchases on their online social networking sites. The following section considers how teenagers interact with brands in online social networking sites.

#### **4.3.6 Proposition 5: Teenagers feel engaged when they interact with brands in online social networks**

##### **Key findings:**

- **The level of acceptance from the teenager towards the Myspace site is dependant upon the strength of the relationship between consumer and brand/organisation**

- **They feel comfortable about being added as a friend on the sites of small organisations that they have had personal contact with**
- **They feel less comfortable being 'befriended' by larger organizations**
- **They expect interaction and feel a little disappointed if they make an enquiry or comment on a site and do not receive a response**
- **They feel very comfortable about visiting music Myspace sites**
- **Personalizing the message does not have an effect on the teenagers**
- **Most teenagers can tell the difference between a message left by a friend and one left by an organization**

Online social networking sites provide brands with the opportunity to speak directly with their target market and provide information specific to the target's individual needs and interests. The majority of participants had visited branded online networking sites for personal interests, specifically for music and some had started to receive information from these sites.

*I've been onto bands with Myspace because you can browse through their music and set a song for your profile. And so I've been through that and it's good because it kind of gives the band a way to get out into the public's eye and yeah, I think it's really good that you can browse through and listen to their music that they've uploaded.'*

When the participants were asked whether they thought that it was appropriate for a brand to try to befriend them, some felt that it was acceptable for a company to include them on their Myspace if it was a smaller organization that they had personally visited and had developed a relationship with. They were less comfortable about larger organizations befriending them as it seemed false. They felt that the organizations were pretending that they were a friend when in reality the teenagers know that

they are really just a data entry to the organization. The participants also felt more comfortable if a brand that they knew well contacted them as opposed to one that they were not so familiar with. Most participants said that they deleted the information if it was not of interest to them.

*'I think if you have a large organization and they're like sending you comments, that's really strange, but if it's like a small sort of shop and they have a personal relationship with you, like a customer you are of them, then that's sort of okay.'*

When asked if they had been sent comments by companies, the participants said that they receive comments from companies pretending to be someone that they know but they don't sound like their friends. One participant was sent an ad for Marijuana from an overseas site. Most were confident that they could tell the difference between an advertisement and a real comment, mainly through the language used. One participant said, *'it is quite odd how they word it – it doesn't sound real'*. Another participant said that they could control the advertisements by changing the settings to delete the ads as they appeared but not all members of the group knew this and all agreed that if they could stop the advertisements they would.

Sometimes the information is personalized to include their name. However, the participants said that it did not make it seem more personal and they expected it to happen.

*'I don't even bother reading them. It is only there because I have iTunes.'*

The participants said that the personalization of the content did not have any effect on their level of commitment to the product. A few participants mentioned that they had left messages for some of the bands on their

Myspace site but did not receive a reply, which made them feel disappointed. One participant visited a politician's site before the federal election and received a personal reply from him, which '*made his day*' and increased his respect for the politician even more. This would suggest that if corporations commit to developing a Myspace site, they need to ensure that it is properly maintained and that potential customers are not 'disengaged' by not receiving replies to their queries.

The data gained from this study suggests that teenagers use online social networking sites to communicate with their friends and also to hear music from new and up coming bands, however unless there is a pre-existing relationship between the consumer and the product or organization, there was little evidence to support the proposition that teenagers feel engaged when they interact with brands on their online social networking site. The following section investigates whether teenagers use online social networking sites to help with consumer making decisions.

#### **4.3.7 Proposition 6: Teenagers use advertising as a service on online social networks to aid in consumer decision making**

##### **Key findings:**

- **Teenagers trust the information on a brand's websites more than the brand's Myspace site**
- **They believe that anyone can develop a Myspace site and give false information about a brand**

Many of the study's participants said that if they were looking for consumer decision making information they would go on to the brand's website rather than click on the link on the Myspace advertisement or go to the brand's Myspace site. They trusted the credibility of the brand's official website more

than their Myspace site. When asked if they were looking to buy a new mobile phone for example, would they go on the phone company's Myspace site and one participant replied, *'Not unless you actually go to the company site 'cause then you know it's actually real. You can see an ad and go, "yep, okay, I'll get that phone". I wouldn't trust the Myspace site 'cause you know it's probably fake.'*

Participants also expressed concern that the Myspace site might be from anywhere in the world and they wanted information and prices that were relevant to Australia.

*'Myspace is like open to the world, so you might be looking for a laptop and then you'll be looking on America, and then when you try and get it you can't in Australia'.*

The study highlights the fact that many of the teenagers believe that anyone can create an online social network site, containing false and unauthorized information. Participants tended to have faith and trust in the official branded website for product information, which would suggest that the proposition that teenagers use the services of online social networking sites to aid in consumer decision making can not be supported. The following section considers the privacy issues pertaining to the use on online social networking sites.

#### **4.3.8 Proposition 7: Teenagers have a limited understanding of the privacy issues and policies of the online social networking sites**

##### **Key findings:**

- **Teenagers do not read the privacy policies of the online social networking sites**
- **They believe that if your site is private no one is able to access your information**
- **They do not believe that the information they disclose is used to target them**

The participants in this study self reported that they spent between two and thirty hours each week online, sharing information and communicating with their peers online. Given that they are spending such prolonged time online, it would be reasonable to expect that they would understand the rules of the environment; however this is not the case. The teenagers in this study had very little understanding of the privacy policies in place in online social networks. Although they ticked the box that confirmed that they had read and understood the policy, only one participant in the in depth interviews said that he had quickly read the policy prior to signing up for a Myspace site. The others had not. When asked why they did not read the policy they said,

*'I don't really know, I mean to be honest, I don't think many teenagers read the privacy policy. I think it's just kind of there so they don't get in trouble for not having one.'*

*'No, I scrolled right through that and hit accept Yeah, I felt that yeah, I knew what the website was about and just using it, you kind of pick up on the things and you work out how to use it safely.'*

The participants in the study felt that if you made your Myspace or Facebook site private, no one could have access to your site. They had little understanding of how online social networking sites were funded. Few of the sample understood that the sites made their revenue from advertising. The teenagers did not appreciate that the information they disclose online is used

to target them specifically and to generate advertising revenue from marketing organisations.

When asked about privacy issues, the participants expressed concern and awareness that they should not give out information that could lead to unwanted attention from paedophiles and stalkers. They were very clear that mobile numbers and information that might identify them should not be given out. However when discussing the information that they supplied to their online social networking site, it was revealed that they had provided very personal information regarding where they go to school and their interests and posted many photos of themselves and their friends. They all felt very confident that no one other than their friends could see their online social networking sites. One participant said that she didn't put any personal information on her site,

*'It's pretty much just my name and my grade and my date of birth I think.'*

Most of the participants did not believe that advertisements on their site were targeted to them based on the information on their site. They believed that if they had their site as 'private' then no one had access to it. One participant said that he would *'feel a bit scared that they were bothering to read my profile and I would want to know how they got on my Myspace.'*

When the participants were told that some online social networking sites track the online movements of their users, many felt uncomfortable with the concept that someone was 'watching' what they were doing. The majority of participants had not given any thought to the privacy issues involved with online social networks which would support the proposition that teenagers do not understand the privacy issues and policies of online social networking

sites. The following section investigates whether teenagers believe that the information that they include on these is of value to organizations.

**4.3.9 Proposition 8: Teenagers do not fear that the information that they present on their online social networking sites puts them in a vulnerable position or goes against their personal interest**

**Key findings:**

- **Teenagers are not aware of the potential for corporate misuse of the information they disclose on their site**
- **They do not believe that there is a link between the advertisements they receive on their site and the information they disclose on their site**
- **They believe that their information would be of little interest to marketers**

The participants in this study were very aware that when they accessed online social networking sites, there was a risk to personal privacy from people they do not know finding out information about them. They were not so aware of the potential for corporate use or misuse of the information that they supplied on their site. As previously mentioned they believed that because their sites were private, this prevented anyone, including the online social network, having access to that information.

When told that the information on their site is aggregated with others of their age, to provide information to marketers about the likes and interests of their age group, some of the participants did not believe that that was possible because their site was private. Others expressed concern about the silly information that they had on their sites and the fact that people could see it.



None seemed concerned that their information was being retained for corporate use.

Most of the participants did not think that the information that they placed on their online social network sites had anything to do with the ads that they received on their site. They simply did not believe that the site would use that information to target advertisements to them.

*'I've seen ads that have, I don't know if it was just for me though, because I like skating and body boarding and surfing and stuff, and I've seen ads that come up that actually offer skating and body boarding and surfing. And I don't know if they just put them on for me or if it happens to other people too'*

When asked if they thought it was a coincidence that they mentioned on their site that they are interested in something and then they begin receiving advertisements for that type of product on their site one participant said,

*'Probably yes (that it was a coincidence). I'd sort of think that if they were going to advertise it, they wouldn't say we want it specifically (sent to) people who like rugby, because the thing is, it would be kind of hard to find every single person (that liked rugby).'*

The majority of the participants did not feel that the information that they put on their sites would be of interest to anyone in a corporate sense. They felt that the information that they supplied (for example favourite music and television programmes) did not represent any risk to them if the information became public.

*'Yeah, basically I've got nothing to hide, not ashamed of showing myself around.'*

*'Well, there are certain boxes where you can say all this stuff but most of the time they don't have anything in them. But at the moment I do have a couple of movies and TV shows that I watch in there.'*

*'Well I don't put anything on there that's too personal. I only put stuff on there like my interests, but nothing, like I wouldn't put on what happened, like things about me and what's happened to me.'*

When asked how they felt about companies using their information as aggregated statistics about their age group, most were comfortable with this position because it was not personal information being exposed.

*'I think that would be okay because it's nothing personal. Like I think it's okay for people to know what 14-year-old boys enjoy, except if it started getting into copying what we've written about ourselves and that sort of thing, I think that would be taking it too far'.*

The study then supports the proposition that teenagers do not believe the information they place on their online network sites makes them vulnerable or puts them at risk. The following section considers the teenagers and the trust that they place with their online social networking sites.

#### **4.3.10 Proposition 9: Teenagers trust the online social networking sites**

##### **Key findings:**

- **Teenagers trust social networking sites as a communication medium and give them their personal information**
- **Teenagers believe that their site could not be tracked because it is a personal space**

Having already established that teenagers do not read privacy policies prior to setting up online social networking sites, and that they believe that the information that they place on these sites does not put them at risk, it would seem that teenagers are very trusting of the information supplied to their online social networking sites.

When asked if they trusted their online social networking site not to use their information, one participant replied,

*'Sort of but not really at the same time. Because I wouldn't want them to be using some information about me but I wouldn't mind them using maybe movies. So long as they weren't, (the participant's name) liked these movies. As long as it's just like you know they said 50% (of 14 year old girls) like this movie.'*

Participants gave very little thought to the concept that their online social networking site might track their movements on the internet and sell this information. Some believed that their site couldn't be traced because it was private. One participant said,

*'I mean I never actually really thought about it. I mean I understand people who like track people and use it as information but I'd never actually really thought about it in terms of me but I think – no I don't really because I don't really understand how they can do it, you know, track you. But I know that people do, some people do it at the My Space site. I think My Space probably does know what I do all the time.'*

The study revealed that while teenagers are generally sceptical about issues such as purchasing products online and giving out mobile numbers they are very trusting about the security of their information on their online social networking sites and how it is used which supports Proposition 9. The

following section considers online social networking and if teenagers go online to enhance their mood.

#### **4.3.11 Proposition 10: Teenagers will go on online social networking sites to enhance their mood**

##### **Key findings:**

- **Teenagers go online to relieve boredom**
- **They use online social networking sites to stay connected with their friends**
- **Teenagers feel that they waste time by going on their sites**

Boredom is a key driver that encourages teenagers to access their online social networking sites.

*'Pretty bored, generally pretty bored. Like usually if I come home from school and I'm going to get into assignments, all I'll do is I'll just like, sort of kind of like ease the transition, I'll log on Messenger and go get on My Space. Just like I won't use it but it's just there.'*

*'It depends, normally I'm bored because it's not something that I set aside time to do, it's just something I do in my spare time, and so I only really go on if I have spare time.'*

Some participants said that they used their online social networking sites to stay connected with friends and at times to ease loneliness.

*'Yeah, I go on when I'm bored a fair bit or if I need to talk to someone.'*

*'It's like a comforting thing almost which sounds really, really sad I know but I just use it for a comforting thing.'*

*'Yeah, it's a good way to keep in touch with people but there's no real emotion that comes through unless someone said something that's annoying.'*

Participants reported they felt a bit excited when they checked their comments. If they were having a disagreement with someone they would sometimes feel anxious and worried to see what had been written.

Many participants expressed a concern that the time spent on online social networking sites was time wasted and that they didn't really achieve anything by being online.

*'It's almost a useless kind of thing, so it's just something to do when you're kind of bored.'*

*'It's a time waster because it's like, it's almost pointless, like when you look at it, it doesn't achieve anything but you do it anyway. At the end of the day, it's not that, it doesn't get you anything, it's just there and you enjoy it.'*

*'Yeah, you can do a lot better things. Like instead of sitting there on the computer you can be outside running or something.'*

The study shows that teenagers use their online social networking sites as a way to alleviate boredom and stay connected with their friends, which supports the proposition that teenagers will go on online social networking sites to enhance their mood. The following section considers the influence that online social networking sites have on teenagers' sense of social identity.

#### **4.3.12 Proposition 11: Teenagers social identity is influenced by their experience on online social networking sites**

##### **Key findings:**

- **Teenagers are more likely to engage in conversation and develop friendships with an acquaintance online**
- **Teenagers believe how their site looks and sounds is a reflection of themselves**
- **People misrepresent themselves in their site**
- **Unkind comments can make teenagers anxious about going to their site**

This study seeks to evaluate what influence online social networking sites have on the social identity of teenagers. Teenagers derived their social identity from the groups that they belong to. Primarily most of the participants used their online social networking sites to keep in touch with the friends that they have and also help develop friendships with people they do not know as well. The friendship groups online have become an extension of teenagers social group.

Most participants said that they wouldn't include anyone on their site as a friend if they didn't know them. However many were prepared to accept someone if they were a friend of a friend. They felt that they more likely to chat online with people that they didn't know well, more so than if they saw them in real life.

*'I don't accept people I don't really know, or if I don't know them, I accept them and if I look at their space and if I don't like the sound of them I just delete them.'*

Some participants found that it was easier to initiate communications with the opposite sex online and this had broadened their friendship base.

*'I wouldn't say that meeting girls specifically would be better or is easier on My Space but it's easier to follow up on. Like if we meet someone, say if you go to the city with a friend and they bring a few of their friends, then if they then follow it up and add you on My Space, that kind of gives you the chance to follow it up and become better friends*

The study shows that teenagers are more inclined to develop friendships and initiate conversation online, which in turn increases their friendship base and also provides opportunities to meet those outside their 'normal' social circles.

The participants saw their site as being a reflection of themselves and spent a lot of time ensuring it projected the right image.

*'The point of the My Space is that it kind of reflects you. It's your space, so it reflects your ideals, your beliefs, so if you have something that people think, wow, that's really cool, they're going to respect you.'*

*'Yeah, it's a lot of work, because you know how people have all these really nice backgrounds and everything on My Space and all this stuff. It takes a lot of time. I spent like an hour or so looking all three layouts and how I can make my text a different colour and all this stuff. Yeah, it is a lot of work.'*

How teenagers perceived they are viewed in their social groups influences their social identity. If teenagers feel that their site does not conform with the norms of the group this may have an influence on how they view their social identity. The way teenagers communicate within their group also has an influence on their social identity.

Online social networking sites have the potential for misunderstandings. Participants discussed how it was sometimes difficult to interpret feelings behind the comments left on their sites and that comments that were meant to be amusing sometimes were taken the wrong way. Many felt that people lied on their sites (regarding age and what they had been doing) and put photos on their sites that were misrepresentative.

*'Like some girls, do you look at their space and you're like, "they're pretty" and then you actually see them in real life and you're like "whoa!"'*

Some participants had had unkind comments placed on their site and this was difficult for them and made them a bit anxious about checking on their site.

*'A couple of times I've had someone say something about me, like in a comment and I could just see it and they were just like, you know, I don't know, it was just like, I could see it and they were talking about me when I can see which is kind of like a bit upsetting. So I just get out of it. So usually a couple of times My Space has made me upset about things and I just get out of it and I stay out of it.'*

*'I kind of just – yeah, I'm a bit nervous because I'm just like upset and I just ignore it and just pretend it wasn't there and I just talk to someone else, because I mean some people use My Space really inappropriately, then some people use appropriately.'*

The participants in the study generally enjoyed using their Myspace site and were comfortable with the way they communicated with others on their site. Even those who had had negative experiences online felt positively towards the use of their online social network. Misuse of online social networks was discussed with the participants. All knew people who had too much information on their site, or friends that used the site too much. In general the



sample in the focus groups and in depth personal interviews all had positive experiences with their social networking sites. “

*What are the positives (of having a Myspace site)? It's good for reputation, like if I put on a profile song, if I change the song on my profile and someone comes up to me and says, "you know, that song's really cool", I feel kind of nice about that, it's kind of like, yes! I did well! It's self rewarding in that sense, it improves your reputation.*

The study has showed that teenagers use their online social networking sites as an important communication tool, which has similar risks and benefits associated with face to face communication. The findings of this study would suggest that the proposition that teenagers' social identity is influenced by their experience on online social networking sites can be supported.

#### **4.4 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS**

This chapter has detailed the results of the study in relation to the 11 propositions outlined in the literature review, and has identified the key finding relating to these propositions. The research topic for this study is an exploration of teenagers' perceptions of advertising in the online social environment. The following section summarizes the key findings in terms of the motivations behind the use of online social networking sites, the perceptions of commercial online social networking sites, issues of trust, scepticism and privacy and finally advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment.

##### **4.4.1 Key findings regarding motivations behind online social networking use**

- Online social networking sites have quickly become an important part of the way they communicate with their friends
- Teenagers feel they spend too much time online and that their time online is wasted

- Teenagers go online to relieve boredom and to stay connected with their friends
- Teenagers view their online social networking sites in a positive manner
- Teenagers believe how their site looks and sounds is a reflection of themselves and appreciated that people misrepresent themselves in their site
- Teenagers unkind comments can make teenagers anxious about going to their site
- Teenagers are more likely to engage in conversation and develop friendships with an acquaintance online
- It is a personal space

#### **4.4.2 Key findings regarding perceptions of commercial online social networking sites**

- Teenagers do not use their online social networking sites to search for product information and are reluctant to make commercial purchases off the internet
- Use online social networking sites for seeking information about their interests (for example social causes, music, movies)
- beginning to open up to the concept of contact with brands through their Myspace sites
- They feel a little disappointed if they make an enquiry or comment on a brand or music site and do not receive a response
- Personalizing the message does not have any effect on the teenagers
- They seek product information which is relevant to Australians and do not want to receive information from overseas sites
- They feel very comfortable about visiting music Myspace sites and are beginning to open up to the concept of contact with brands through their Myspace sites.

- They feel comfortable about being added as a friend on the sites of small organizations that they have had personal contact with but feel less comfortable being 'befriended' by larger organizations
- The level of acceptance from the teenager towards the Myspace site is dependant upon the strength of the relationship between consumer and brand/organization
- Most teenagers can tell the difference between a message left by a friend and one left by an organization

#### **4.4.3 Key findings regarding advertising on online social networking sites**

- Teenagers do not take notice of most of the advertising
- Teenagers were annoyed by advertisements that suddenly pop up or make noise
- Teenagers accept advertising on online social networking sites, feeling that there is little that they could do about advertising in this medium
- They enjoyed the advertisements that engaged them
- They did not feel that advertising disrupts their time online.
- They felt that many of the products advertised on their sites are not relevant to them
- Most did not feel that there was too much clutter of advertising on their sites
- They do not believe that there is a link between the advertisements they receive on their site and the information they disclose on their site

#### **4.4.4 Key findings regarding teenagers: trust and scepticism towards online social networking sites**

- Teenagers have little trust in the motives of online advertisers
- They distrust online advertising because they have been warned about viruses
- Teenagers trust the information on a brand's websites more than the brand's Myspace site

- They distrust advertising even though the majority have not personally had a bad experience and believe that anyone can develop a Myspace site and give false information about a brand
- They are reluctant to give out personal information and would not give out personal information to win prizes
- They see advertising as a risk and a threat and are sceptical about purchasing online

#### **4.4.5 Key findings regards privacy and online social networking sites**

- Teenagers do not read the privacy policies of the online social networking sites and are not aware of the potential for corporate misuse of the information they disclose on their site
- They believe that if your site is private no one is able to access your information
- They do not believe that the information they disclose is used to target them
- They believe that their information would be of little interest to marketers
- Teenagers believe that their site could not be tracked because it is private

### **4.5 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has presented the findings and the key issues raised from the teenage participants regarding their perceptions of advertising in the online social networking environment. Following on from these findings, Chapter 5 provides a discussion on the implications for theory and practice of advertising as well as making recommendations for further research

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

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### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The body of this thesis has thus far identified the aim of the study and research question in Chapter One. Chapter Two has presented a review of the literature relating to the research question and has identified eleven propositions. Chapter Three outlined and justified the methodology used to explore the topic area and Chapter Four has presented the key findings as they relate to the propositions. In this final chapter, the primary and secondary research data is discussed and conclusions reached. The motivations behind online social networking use are discussed and outlined, the perceptions of commercial online social networking sites are detailed, and issues such as teenagers and their perceptions relating to trust and scepticism and privacy in online social networking sites are outlined. Advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment is discussed and a new model presented. Based on the findings from this study, the characteristics of online social networking sites as an advertising medium are outlined. This chapter also discusses the implications the results of this study will have on theory and advertising practice. The limitations for this study are addressed and the recommendations for future research are detailed.

### **5.2 CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE EXPLORATORY STUDY**

The 11 propositions as outlined in Chapter Two and listed below, provided an organizing structure for analysis of the data, and assisted in identifying the key findings from the focus groups and in-depth interviews. The propositions are as follows:

- Proposition 1: Teenagers avoid advertising on online social networking sites when they feel it disrupts their goals online
- Proposition 2: Teenagers will ignore advertising on online social networking sites when they perceive that there is too much clutter
- Proposition 3: Teenagers avoid advertisements on online social networking sites if they have had negative experiences with previous online advertisements.
- Proposition 4: Teenagers seek information from online social networks
- Proposition 5: Teenagers feel engaged when they interact with brands in online social networks
- Proposition 6: Teenagers use advertising as a service on online social networks to aid in consumer decision making
- Proposition 7: Teenagers have a limited understanding of the privacy issues and policies of the online social networking sites
- Proposition 8: Teenagers do not fear that the information that they present on their online social networking sites puts them in a vulnerable position or goes against their personal interest
- Proposition 9: Teenagers trust the online social networking sites
- Proposition 10: Teenagers will go on online social networking sites to enhance their mood
- Proposition 11: Teenagers social identity is influenced by their experience on online social networking sites

These results from this study have lead to discussion in the following areas of interest:

1. Motivations behind online social networking use (incorporating the findings from Propositions 10 and 11)
2. Perceptions of commercial online social networking sites (incorporating the findings from Propositions 4, 5 and 6)
- 3 Teenagers and the online social networking environment: trust and scepticism (incorporating the findings from Propositions 3, 6, 8 and 9)
- 4 Privacy and online social networking sites (incorporating the findings from Propositions 7, 8 and 9)
- 5 Advertising avoidance on online social networking sites (incorporating the findings from Propositions 1, 2 and 3) and a model of advertising avoidance will be presented and discussed.

From the findings of both the primary and secondary research, the characteristics of online social networking sites as an advertising medium are presented. This chapter will also outline the implications to theory and the implications to advertising practitioners and outline potential areas for further research.

## **5.3 DISCUSSION**

### **5.3.1 Motivations behind online social networking use**

Online social networking sites have quickly become a significant part of teenagers' lives, although most teenagers would agree that they spend too much time online and that this time online is wasted. This study has shown that boredom is the key driver behind respondent's use of online social network sites; however most will say they primarily use the sites to stay in contact with their friends. They believe how their site looks and sounds is a reflection of themselves and their personality. The majority of teenagers accept that people deliberately misrepresent themselves in their site. Teenagers are more likely to engage in conversation and develop friendships with an acquaintance online. Many teenagers have been anxious about negative

comments placed on their site but the majority view their online social networking sites in a positive manner.

The majority of the participants in the study had used their online social networking site for little over one year. However in that short period of time teenagers have incorporated 'online social networking time' into their daily routine. Heavy users in the study spend up to 20 and 30 hours online per week. The average time focus group participants spend online was 11.5 hours per week. This figure is a little more than the 10.5 hours per week estimated by Barnes (2006) and the much less than the 17.5 hours estimated by the Media and Communications in Australian Families document (Media and Communications in Australian Families 2007).

It is evident that once the teenagers begin to use online social networking, it quickly becomes a vital connection with their peers and if they stop checking their sites they can feel at a social disadvantage. Many struggle with the responsibility of monitoring their online time and feel guilty if they spend too much time online and guilty if they don't attend to it.

This research has identified seven key motivations behind the respondents' use of online social networking sites. These motivations are:

1. **Mood enhancement or relief of boredom.** The majority of the respondents suggested that they go on their online social networking sites when they are feeling bored. This is supported in part by studies by Grant (2005) who identified mood enhancement as a motivation behind internet use.
2. **The need for belonging and for social interaction** – the teenagers interviewed felt that social interaction was one of the main reasons for having an online social networking site. This was also identified by Grant



(2005) as a key motivation behind internet use. Their involvement in online interest and social groups provides a sense of belonging for the participants. Given the large amount of time spent online, and that teenagers repeatedly return to these sites on a daily basis, online social networking sites have become an important component of their lives and the way they interact with their peers. They feel comfortable about developing friendships and communicating and rely upon these sites for social interaction.

3. **The need for recognition** – the teenagers enjoy the recognition and the attention that their site provides. Need for recognition was also identified by Vogt and Knapman (2007) as a motivation for online social networking use.
4. **Creative outlet** – teenagers in this study spent considerable amounts of time and energy updating and fine tuning the look and sound of their sites with the belief that their site had become an indicator to others about the personality of the site user. Vogt and Knapman (2007) also support this finding that online social networking sites provide users with the opportunity to be creative.
5. **New Experiences** – the respondents enjoyed receiving new comments and adding new friends on their site. The opportunity for new experiences from the safety of their own home was appealing to them. These findings are supported by both Grant (2005) and Vogt and Knapman (2007).
6. **The need for relationships** – the teenagers felt very comfortable engaging in conversations with acquaintances online and these findings are again supported by Vogt and Knapman (2007). The respondents felt that they were more comfortable talking to acquaintances online than if they met them in person. They would accept someone that was a friend of a friend online however, wouldn't accept someone if they didn't understand the friendship connection. The teenagers felt a strong emotional connection to their online social networking sites. It was not only a source of entertainment for them but also a connection with the outside world.

7. **Information seeking** – the respondents indicated that they use their online social networking sites to seek information regarding their interests but not to make commercial decisions or transactions. Grant (2005) suggested that information seeking was a motivation behind internet use. When teenagers go to a Myspace site that is designed to give information about music, movie or a charitable cause, they rarely question the reliability of the information on these sites. These sites support Rappaport's model of advertising providing a service (2007) as the respondents believe that they are designed to provide information without asking for anything commercially in return. This knowledge can be valuable for advertisers who are wishing to engage with teenager consumers.

The motivations listed above are supported by the findings of this study, as well as Grant's (2005) research of online motivations and Vogt and Knapman's (2007) study of motivations behind online social networking use. Grant's (2005) research centred on motivations behind general internet use and did not specify online social networking sites. Vogt and Knapman's (2007) study was specifically related to online social networking sites, however their findings did not indicate that boredom was a motivation behind online social networking use. This is in contrast to the findings of this thesis which has showed that most participants mainly went online when they were bored. As the sample in Vogt and Knapman's research were aged over 18 years this may suggest that younger users of online social networks use online social networking for boredom relief where as older users have differing motivations. This may be because the younger site users are generally at home more and are less mobile than the older site users and therefore use the online social networking sites to relieve boredom at home.

### **5.3.2 Perceptions of commercial online social networking sites**

One of the key findings from this study is that the teenagers viewed online social networking sites as personal spaces not a commercial one. The respondents did not use their online social networking sites to search for product information as they do not trust the validity of the information on social networking sites. They are also concerned that the information might come from another country and therefore not be relevant to Australia or local conditions.

Teenagers use online social networking sites for seeking information about their interests (for example, social causes, music, and movies); however they do not view these sites as being established for any commercial purpose. They believe that these sites are an extension of a service provided by the organization.

Personalizing the message to teenagers does not have any effect on them, as they know that it is personalized by a computer program. They are reluctant to make commercial purchases from the internet, as most teenagers do not own credit cards and they are concerned about giving out financial details. They feel disappointed if they make an enquiry or comment on a brand or music site and do not receive a response.

Teenagers are comfortable about being added as a friend on the sites of small organizations if they have developed a relationship with them, but feel less comfortable being 'befriended' by larger organizations. It was clear that the level of acceptance from the teenager towards a Myspace site is dependant upon the strength of the relationship between consumer and brand/organization. Most teenagers could tell the difference between a message left on their site by a friend and one left by an organization. The style of writing and the language used by the organisations were the main indicators.

Organizations of all sizes are setting up Myspace sites and using their contact lists to develop a list of friends or data bases. The consumers they are targeting view their online social networking sites to be private and believe that the only people to have access to their sites are those they have approved as friends. They will only notice commercial messages if it is specifically related to their own personal interests and are relevant to them. Teenagers in the study rarely give consideration as to the commercial motivations behind the establishment of online social networking sites and therefore do not question the motivations of those running the sites. They are aware that some organizations have developed Myspace sites, but they are sceptical about the commercial information that they will find on these sites. They would prefer to go to the company's official web site because they believe that the information on the web site is more reliable. Brands have developed Myspace sites in an effort to further engage with their consumers. This supports Rappaport's model of Engagement (2007) which suggests that marketers need to engage with their consumers online. This study found that teenagers are very sceptical of information on these sites, so marketers must address how to make them seem more credible and reliable to this group

The success of an online social networking site is dependant upon the number of 'friends' associated with the site. This study showed that teenagers are prepared to be included in the Myspace sites of brands which they have had a previous relationship with. The smaller and more intimate the brand, the more likely they are to accept being included on to the friends list. Teenagers are very sceptical about large organizations pretending to be their friends especially when the brand speaks to them in a manner that would suggest that they are friends. This makes the teenagers distrustful of the motivations of the brand and the message the brand is sending. They are not influenced by messages that are personalized; in fact they are sceptical about most email and internet messages.

The respondents in this study had no concept or had not given any consideration to the fact that some of the advertisements that they were receiving on their social networking sites were specifically targeted to them and their disclosed interests. They felt that because they had classified their site as being private no one had access to the information. Some participants felt very concerned that access was available; others simply did not believe it was possible. Most participants had not given any thought to how the online social networking sites made money and had an assumption that it was provided as a service which was funded by advertising. Many respondents found the advertisements had no relevance to them, e.g. advertisements for housing loans or real estate and therefore took no notice of any of the advertisements believing that they all would have no relevance.

This study found that teenagers were reluctant to make purchases online. This finding supports the research done by Moore and Rodgers (2005) who found that the university students involved in their sample were also uncomfortable about making online purchases. The reasons for their reluctance was that they did not like giving out personal or credit card information, and did not feel that internet advertising was trustworthy (Moore and Rodgers 2005). Given that teenagers are such avid users of the internet, it is note worthy that they are not prepared to give out personal information to make a commercial purchase, yet are prepared to disclose such personal information on their online social networking sites.

Once a commercial Myspace site is established, care should be taken that it is correctly monitored and that enquiries are answered. The teenagers in the survey expressed disappointment when their comments or enquiries were not responded to. Conversely they were very appreciative when they did receive a reply.

### **5.3.3 Teenagers and the online social networking environment – Trust and Scepticism**

The respondents were very sceptical towards the claims and the authenticity of advertising on their online social networking sites. They have been warned by their parents not to click onto unknown sites and are concerned about the consequences if they did. They assume that the information will originate from another country and therefore not be relevant to Australians.

They have been warned about viruses and have little trust in the motives of online advertisers. Even though the majority have not personally had a bad experience with online advertising they are concerned about the reliability of advertising on their online social networking sites.

A brand's official websites is deemed as being more trustworthy than the same brand's Myspace site. The respondents believe that anyone can develop a Myspace site and give false information about a brand. They are reluctant to give out personal information to commercial organizations online and would not give out personal information to win prizes.

The concept of consumers trusting their online social networking sites and the information that they receive from these sites is a complicated one. On one hand the users of the sites are prepared to disclose very personal information and photos, yet they are reluctant about giving out information to commercial entities. They distrust advertising online yet trust the same organization's web sites. Teenagers see online social networking sites as being accessible to everyone and therefore lacking credibility. This supports the findings of Moore and Rodgers (2005) who suggest that internet was the least credible medium in which to advertise.

When consumers are sceptical about the advertising message or the media source, they are less inclined to process the information that they are receiving (Obermiller and Spangenberg 2000). The participants in this thesis's study have shown that they are very wary and sceptical about the validity of the information and advertising found on online social networking sites. Their scepticism stems from various sources. Most teenagers had been warned by their parents not to click onto any unknown advertisements and this was possibly the beginnings of their scepticism towards the advertisements online. Lack of standards of online advertising claims has also lessened the credibility of advertising in this medium.

Teenagers are sceptical about the claims made by their peers online, and have learnt to second guess the credibility of statements made. This means that online social networking users have developed inherent techniques to evaluate the credibility and the desirability of people online based on what is presented on their site. This scepticism has an effect on how they perceive many messages online and may also influence how they perceive the credibility of advertisers in this medium.

Online social networking sites are not viewed as having any type of permanence. The respondents believe that comments can be deleted, photos removed and sites manipulated without any evidence left behind. Although they say they are aware of the type of information they put online they do not seem to appreciate that once it is online, it can be saved by others and kept for future use. This belief that nothing online has permanence may be the reason why they are sceptical about advertising online. The belief that anyone can set up an online social networking site has lessened the credibility of these sites and the teenagers don't have faith in the checks in place for online advertising.

Whilst the study showed that consumers are sceptical about advertising in the online social environment, they show enormous trust in the sites themselves and are comfortable disclosing very personal information on their sites. This is primarily because they are classified as being private and give the perception that no one has access to the information. Robbins, Millet, Cacioppe and Waters-March (2001) propose that there are three types of trust and examples of deterrent based, knowledge based and identification based trust were exhibited towards the online social networking sites by the participants in this study. Deterrent based trust was shown by the teenagers when they disclosed information with a belief that the information would not be used inappropriately. Previous experience with online social networking sites (limited as it was) proved that information had not been misused to their knowledge (knowledge based trust). Finally identification based trust relies on the emotional connection, which in this case sees the teenagers trusting their innermost thoughts and personal photos online to share with their friends. Based on the findings in this study, it would seem that the participants had considerable trust in their online social networking sites. So it seems somewhat contradictory that they express such inherent scepticism and distrust in advertising messages on these sites.

#### **5.3.4 Privacy and online social networking sites**

The respondents have an absolute faith in the privacy of their site and most have not considered that their information is accessible by anyone. The respondents do not read the privacy policies of the online social networking sites and are not aware of the potential for corporate misuse of the information they disclose on their site. They believe that if your site is private no one is able to access your information or track your navigation history. They also believe the information they disclose would be of little interest to marketers and they are not specifically targeted by brands because of this information. Most felt uncomfortable with the realization that someone had access to their site.



The respondents showed high level of scepticism towards advertising messages in the online social networking environment; however they have complete faith in the privacy of their sites. Even though they do not read the privacy policies of their online social networking site, they believe that they understand the privacy and safety structures in place. They have all heard the stories of unwanted viewers of young people's sites; however do not believe it is an issue for them as they have their site on the private setting. This finding is supported by the research of Barnes (2006) who also suggests that that teenagers are not aware of the privacy issues that their online information might create.

Respondents said that they were very conscious about how personal the information was that they disclosed on their sites, however as one respondent said "It's pretty much my name, and my grade and my date of birth I think". This type of comment would suggest that teenagers do not really have an appreciation of what constitutes personal information. This finding is confirmed by Awad and Krishnan (2006) who also found that online users are very vocal about how concerned they were about the disclosing private information on their site, but were less concerned about safeguarding this information. Lenhart and Madden's (2007) study of teenagers and online social networks and privacy issues confirms that teenagers are aware of what they disclose on their sites, with girls more likely to post photos on their site.

Their belief that any information they may disclose on their sites would not be of interest to anyone stems from the level of teenagers perceived risk in using these sites. Dinev and Hart (2004) outline the three antecedents for privacy concerns. The first antecedent is perceived vulnerability. Teenagers in this study do not believe that their information will cause any financial fraud or will have any influence on their future. They believe that once comments and photos are deleted then they no longer exist. The second antecedent is personal interest. This study revealed that teenagers do not believe that any of their information and photos posted on their sites goes against their personal

interest. The third and final antecedent is trust in the online site. This study confirms that teenagers have a strong faith in the privacy of their sites.

This faith in the privacy of their information is in direct contrast to the scepticism that they show towards advertising on their sites. None of the participants had considered the implications of corporate misuse of their information. They felt that it was not presenting a risk to them that people could view their information, as they believed that they did not really have anything to hide on their site. They did not consider the potential for invasion of privacy, which might be the first concern of an adult, but teenagers did not think that it was an issue. This suggests that the guidelines for online social networking use should be explained in a clearer fashion to those under 18 years old, in order to protect them from potential issues arising at a later date

### **5.3.5 Advertising avoidance on online social networking sites**

The respondents in the study took very little interest in the advertising on their site. They either did not notice the advertising or only noticed it when it was irritating or made a surprising noise. They felt that many of the advertisements were not relevant to them. They did not believe that there is a link between the advertisements they receive on their site and the information they had disclosed on their site. They enjoyed playing the interactive games that appeared on their site but most did not view this as advertising. However they would not give out any personal information to receive prizes from these games.

The respondents understood they are able to use the online social networking sites for free because of the advertising on it. They did not feel that there was too much clutter on their sites or that the advertising disrupted their time online. The majority have not personally had a bad experience with online

advertising but are still distrustful of the validity of the information or the potential consequences of clicking onto an advertisement.

On the surface, advertising in the online social networking environment should be a very attractive proposition for marketers and advertisers. Advertising messages can be sent to specific targets based on their disclosed interests and demographics. These messages appear in an environment which is designed and controlled by the receiver of the message and is considered to be their private space. The receiver of the message is generally in a relaxed frame of mind and has chosen to be in the online networking environment to relieve boredom or to socialize. However, if the advertising message is ignored or dismissed then advertising dollars are wasted and the future of online social networking sites as an effective advertising medium is in question.

This study showed that teenagers have very high levels of avoiding advertising on online social networking sites. Generally the avoidance is because they see the advertising on their sites as not being relevant to them and not being credible. These findings are supported by Ingram (2006) who confirms that people are most likely to avoid advertisements that are of no interest to them and Johnson and Kaye (1998) who suggest that advertising has less credibility when it is viewed in a medium that isn't perceived as being trustworthy. Advertising avoidance due to scepticism is supported by Obermiller, Spangenberg and MacLachlan (2005) who suggest that consumers are not motivated to process information when they are sceptical about the message. They also suggest that consumers are generally sceptical about all forms of advertising, however Shavitt, Lowrey and Haefner (1998) note that younger consumers are more likely to have a positive attitude towards advertising messages.

The study shows that the teenagers notice advertisements that provide entertainment such as games; however they use these games without any

intention of accepting the potential prizes. They were not prepared to disclose personal information to the company that supplied the game to collect the prizes. They had a fear that if they did provide personal details they would then be inundated with advertising messages. Most had heard of a situation where this had happened to someone else.

Cho and Cheon's (2004) research into advertising avoidance on the internet outlines the theoretical model that suggests that consumers exercise advertising avoidance because of the perception that the advertising may disrupt their time online, because of a perception that there is too much advertising clutter online and finally because the consumer has had prior negative experiences with advertising online. Evidence to support Cho and Cheon's theory was not found in this study, as the teenagers in the sample did not believe that there was too much advertising clutter online and did not feel that the advertisements disrupted their time online, yet they still exhibited high levels of advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment. Whilst the participants did not like the advertisements that surprised them and popped up on screen, they did not feel that these advertisements disrupted their time online.

The participants in the study were distrustful of the information and motivations behind the advertising online. Most of them had heard of people who had negative experiences such as getting a computer virus or receiving incorrect information and were therefore reluctant to click onto any advertising. This supports in part Cho and Cheon's (2004) theory that consumers avoid advertising because of previous negative experiences, however in this study most of the participants had not personally had a negative experience but knew someone who had.

#### **5.4 A NEW MODEL FOR ADVERTISING AVOIDANCE IN THE ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING ENVIRONMENT.**

Much of the previous academic research has focused on advertising on the internet rather than specifically considering the online social networking environment as an advertising medium. This study has shown that young consumers are not noticing or responding to advertising in the online social networking environment. Understanding the reasons why the advertising is not being noticed can assist advertisers in developing strategies to overcome these obstacles. Cho and Cheon's (2004) research in advertising avoidance on the internet (as discussed in section 2.4 of this thesis) was used as a starting point to develop a model for advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment. Cho and Cheon's (2004) research looked at advertising avoidance in the general internet environment not specifically the online social networking environment and it asserts that perceived goal impediment and advertising clutter were significant antecedents to advertising avoidance. This thesis' study found that other factors had more of an influence on advertising avoidance for teenagers in the online social networking environment. It found that clutter and goal impediment were considered, however issues such as relevance and scepticism had more influence on advertising avoidance. The third antecedent of prior negative experiences with online advertising could only partly be supported as most of the respondents in this study had only heard of previous bad experience or had been warned by their parents about viruses and had not actually had the negative experience themselves.

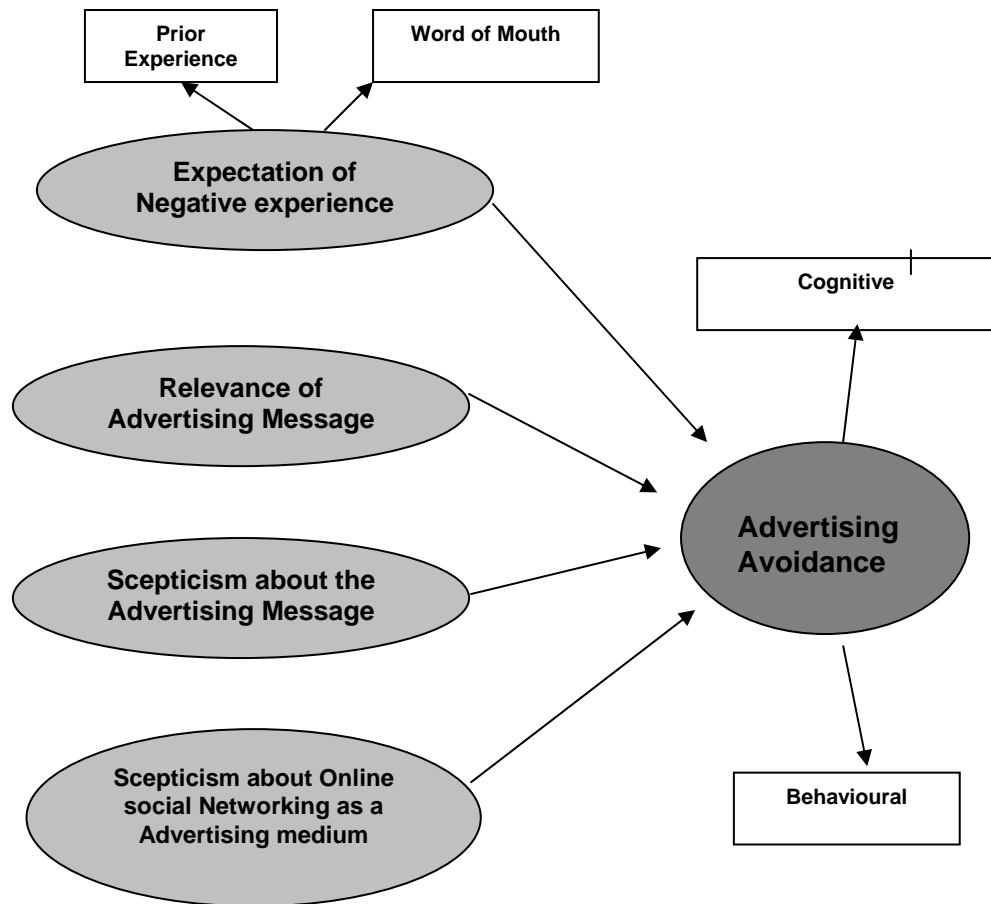
As a result of the analysis of this study's primary and secondary research, a new model of advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment is presented. This model consists of four antecedents to advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment as outlined in Figure 5.1. These antecedents are:

1. **Expectation of negative experiences** with advertisements in the online social networking environment. This expectation can be as a result of prior negative experiences or expectation of negative experiences due to word of mouth by others.

2. **Perception of relevance of advertising message** – if the advertising message is not of interest to the receiver of the message, then the information is likely not be processed.
3. **Scepticism of advertising message claims** – if consumers are sceptical of the claims made by the advertisement then they are likely to ignore the message and potentially disregard other messages in this medium.
4. **Scepticism of online social networking sites as a credible advertising medium** – consumers do not trust the information gained from online social networking sites. They believe that online social networking sites lack credibility and perceive that there is little policing of advertising claims in this medium.

This model would suggest that if one or more of the antecedents are present then the advertising message is likely to be avoided. The avoidance of the advertising message may be cognitive (ignoring the message) or behavioural (deleting the message without reading it). This model is of importance to both academics and practitioners as it provides a starting point to understand why advertising in the online social networking environment is not as successful as originally anticipated. By understanding the reasons why advertising is being avoided, strategies can be developed to lessen the possibility of avoidance.

**Figure 5.1 Model of advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment**



## 5.5 CHARACTERISTICS OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AS AN ADVERTISING MEDIUM

In Section 2.7 the characteristics of using the internet as an advertising medium are outlined as providing interactivity, measurability, synergy, targetability, multi-media options and flexibility (White 2005). This study has found that there are additional characteristics that are specific to online social networking sites as a medium for advertisers which propose very unique opportunities and considerations. As a result this study has identified eight characteristics of online social networking sites as an advertising medium.

**Table 5.1      Characteristics of online social networking sites as an advertising medium**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Application for Advertisers</b>
<b>Targetability - Potential for niche marketing</b>  (White 2005)	Advertisements are able to be specifically positioned to reach target markets based on demographic profiles and personal interests.	Selective targeting of consumers offers advertisers the opportunity to develop creative for very specific markets and aids in minimising wastage of media dollars
<b>Facilitates interactive advertising and is able to incorporate multi-media</b>  (White 2005)	Advertising in these sites has the potential benefit of providing an interactive experience for the site user. Many online social networking users go online in an effort to relieve boredom and are generally receptive to the prospect of being amused and entertained.	This ability to be interactive not only provides measurement of the effectiveness of advertising, but also establishes the first step in the engagement process between consumer and product.  The ability to use video and audio provides additional creative opportunities for advertisers.
<b>Synergistic by supporting advertising in other mediums</b>  (White 2005)	Advertisements on online social networking sites are able to reinforce and support messages in other advertising mediums	The use online social networking sites within multi-media strategies allows advertisers to reinforce messages with specific target groups
<b>A flexible medium allowing for changes and updates as required</b>	Advertisements are able to be updated with minimal expense.	Additional flexibility of media placement and creative message provides advertisers with



<b>(White 2005)</b>		opportunities constantly interact with their target group with new and up to date information
<b>Highly measurable</b> <b>(White 2005)</b>	Site activity can be measured	Advertisers are able to assess the effectiveness of the medium and plan media strategies accordingly
<b>It is a social medium, not a mass medium</b>	Advertising on online social networking sites differs from the internet advertising as the online social networking sites provide the users with the opportunity to socialise and to develop relationships and friendships	Relevance of message and product is vital if the message is to be responded to. As it is primarily a social environment, users are not generally interested in, or are receptive to commercial messages unless they relate to their interests and beliefs
<b>It is a personal space</b>	Within the online social networking site personal details are disclosed, photos are displayed and conversations are detailed. These sites are designed to reflect personal beliefs and personalities, and users see online social networking sites as being a reflection of the individual or a personal brand.	Advertising within this medium needs to be sensitive to the personal nature of the medium. Products and advertisements should be relevant to the user.
<b>Perception of risk</b>	Users of online social networking sites are generally distrustful about	Advertisers must ensure that they do not make outrageous claims in their advertising as

	the reliability and validity of the messages on these sites and the potential consequences of interacting with the advertising. Risks include the potential to catch a computer virus, receiving unwanted follow up emails or receiving incorrect information.	this will reinforce the sense of distrust from consumers. Strategies need to be developed to ensure that risk is minimised for consumers.
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## 5.6 IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

This study has explored the perceptions of advertising in the online social networking environment. Cho and Cheon (2004), Grant (2005), Ingram (2006), Ko, Cho and Roberts (2005), Mehta (2000), and Obermiller, Spangenberg and MacLachlan (2000) all discuss internet advertising yet do not directly address online social networking sites as an advertising medium because they are a relatively new phenomenon. This research has made the following contributions to theory regarding online social networking sites as an advertising medium. These contributions are as follows:

### 5.6.1 Seven motivations behind use of online social networking sites

Analysis of the primary and secondary data in this thesis has resulted in the identification of seven motivations behind the use of online social networking sites and is explained in section 5.4.1 of this chapter. The motivations behind the use of online social networking sites are:

1. Mood enhancement or relief of boredom.
2. The need for belonging and for social interaction
3. The need for recognition
4. Creative outlet

5. New Experiences
6. The need for relationships
7. Information seeking

#### **5.6.2 New model of advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment**

Advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment is an issue of interest to academics and practitioners alike. This study has developed a model of advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment which consists of four antecedents, which are:

1. Expectation of negative experiences
2. Perception of relevance of advertising message
3. Scepticism about advertising message claims
4. Scepticism about online social networking sites as a credible advertising medium

#### **5.6.3 Eight characteristics of online social networking sites as an advertising medium**

Online social networking sites have proved to be a very unique type of medium, and advertising within this environment should be approached in a very different manner to advertising on other media such as television or the internet. The characteristics of online social networking sites as an advertising medium is explained in section 5.5.1 of this chapter. These characteristics are:

1. Targetability - the potential for niche marketing
2. Ability for interactive advertising
3. Synergistic by supporting advertising in other mediums
4. It allows flexibility of media placement and creative message
5. It is an easily measurable medium
6. It is social advertising medium not a mass medium
7. It is a personal space

## 8. Perception of risk

### **5.7 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS**

This thesis proposes some important issues for advertisers regarding advertising in the online social networking environment. These issues pertain to online social networking sites as an advertising medium and the relevance of the advertising message to the target market.

#### **5.7.1 Online social networking sites as an advertising medium**

Advertisers cannot approach advertising within online social networking environment in the same manner as they approach advertising on the internet. The internet is generally viewed by consumers as a supplier of information. It is perceived as being vast and global. Consumers understand that there are internet sites that are trustworthy and have developed strategies to determine which sites are not as trustworthy.

This is in direct contrast to online social networking sites, which are viewed as being very private and personal spaces. Users go into online social networking sites to socialise and to build their own image. Their online social networking sites have become their personal brand and to that end users can become protective of any intrusion into this private space.

Teenagers are not supportive of commercial online social networking befriending them. The perception is that the organisations are trying too hard to enter the consumers' private social world. In addition they are losing credibility when they try to sound like an individual wanting to be their friend when it is obvious to the consumer that it is in fact a computer generated message not aimed directly at them. Consumers would prefer to go directly to the product's official website rather than seek information from the product's Myspace site. Consumers' attitudes towards commercial Myspace sites are that they are useful if they relate to their interests however they would not trust the information on them if they needed to make a commercial decision.

### **5.7.2 Advertising messages in the online social networking environment**

The Model of advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment as outlined in Figure 5.1 details the four antecedents for advertising avoidance as being

1. Expectation of negative experiences
2. Perception of relevance of advertising message
3. Scepticism about advertising message claims
4. Scepticism about online social networking sites as a credible advertising medium

Advertisers can minimise advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment by developing strategies which can reduce the likelihood of these antecedents.

Unlike television and radio and other forms of traditional media where no action is required by the consumer to receive the advertising message, advertising in the online social networking environment usually necessitates the consumer taking action to click onto the advertisement to receive the full advertising message. Consumers in this medium are reluctant to do this as they are concerned about the consequences that may result from clicking through. They are concerned that they will inherit a computer virus or possibly click through to a disreputable sites or a site that does not supply reliable information. Advertisers need to be conscious of this attitude when they are selecting the media for their advertising messages. To reduce the potential expectation of a negative experience, advertisers must ensure that the integrity and security systems in place in the online environment are monitored and constantly upgraded.

Teenagers are not receptive to messages in the online social networking environment unless it specifically reflects their interests or engages them. The main consideration for advertisers when using online social networking sites as an advertising medium is they must ensure that what they are advertising is of relevance to the user of the online social networking site. The product or message needs to reflect the user's interests and be relevant to their social and friendship needs. This is the reason why the downloading of music and video has been successful on Myspace and why social interest sites are supported in this environment. Any product or message that has no relevance to the site user will most likely be ignored.

Advertisers should remember that when they advertise in this medium, they are advertising in a social medium that has unwritten rules and norms that users inherently understand. The online social networking user has little tolerance for those who wish to deceive them, as it only confirms their negative suspicions towards advertising within this medium. Advertisers who are attempting to reach the target that uses online social networking sites need to understand that this group are very computer savvy, they are sceptical of messages in general but are particularly sceptical about advertising in their personal spaces. They do not like to be deceived and will resent organisations that try to trick them. It is important that advertisers present a consistent and very clear brand message on their site and do not make claims or promises that will diminish their brand credibility. Understanding the characteristics of online social networking sites as an advertising medium and the motivations behind online social networking use can aid in developing advertising strategies that are credible and relevant to their target audience.

### **5.7.3 Motivations and advertising strategies**

How teenagers perceive their online social networking sites, influences their perception of messages that they receive on these sites. Advertisers, who wish

to engage with consumers within the online environment, need to be aware of the motivations behind online social networking use. This study has identified the seven motivations for online social networking use. These motivations and the implication to advertisers are as follows:

1. **Mood enhancement or boredom relief** - advertisements must be entertaining, engaging with new advertising approaches to maintain the interest of consumers.
2. **Belongingness and social interaction** – advertisements online should support this belief and acknowledge importance of the online community. Advertisers also need to consider ways in which their advertising can support social interaction and the development of friendships. This may be done through quizzes or information that users can send to their friends. This will help them engage with the consumer in a positive manner and help to develop a sense of trust.
3. **Recognition** – Campaigns could be designed to involve and acknowledge the achievements of their consumers (either social achievements e.g. involvement in charities or worthy causes or as a product user)
4. **Creativity** –advertising in the online social environment should be highly creative and innovative in order to support the newness and dynamic nature of the medium
5. **New Experiences**- The opportunity to have access to the target market online for such long periods of time is invaluable for advertisers, so advertising must have variety and be interesting and provide a new experience for the consumer.
6. **Relationship building** - advertisers can develop new ways that friends can interact via their online social networking and provide avenues to engage with friends e.g. quizzes and questionnaires that can be sent to friends online.
7. **Information seeking** – advertisers need to be very strategic in where they place their advertisements as credibility can be

jeopardized if an advertisement is viewed in a site that lacks credibility. As consumers use their online social networking sites to seek information about their interests rather than for commercial decisions, advertisers should consider supporting or sponsoring sites where their target might seek information e.g. movie or music information, worthy causes etc.

#### **5.7.4 Credibility**

Advertisers need to present their product in a credible environment. Teenagers are more accepting and trusting of the information supplied by sites that provide information on movies or music or worthy causes. If advertisers are associated with a Myspace site that provides valued information, their product will be viewed as being more credible and reliable. Advertisers wishing to engage with teenagers in the online social networking environment need to consider ways in which they can become credible and gain the trust of this very sceptical market. By linking campaigns online with advertisements on more credible media (e.g. television) advertisers may be able to decrease the level of scepticism. They must not attempt to disguise their marketing attempts as messages from friends, as this will only lessen their credibility and position their organization as being deceptive. In order to gain credibility with online consumers, advertisers should ensure that any advertising presented online does not make outrageous and unbelievable claims and that the advertisements treat the teenagers with respect.

Advertisers need to develop strategies to improve the perceptions of their Myspace sites with consumers. Associating these sites with the main web sites may increase credibility. The use of opt out indicators allow the consumer to feel that they have some control over the receipt of unwanted messages. Advertisers can highlight these opt in and opt out indicators and explain that no additional advertising will be sent if the opt out is selected. They might also indicated the amount and type of information that would be sent if the opt in



indicator is selected e.g. discount vouchers will be sent each month, updates on new products etc. This increases the desirability of using the opt in response.

Inappropriate advertising online has had an influence on the credibility of all advertising online. If the standards that are expected for other mediums e.g. television, was applied to online advertising, the consumer may find it more credible and reliable.

#### **5.7.5 Trust**

All consumers dislike feeling like they have been deceived and advertisers need to ensure that they do not pretend to be consumers friends online in order to be allowed on to their online social networking site. Advertisers need to be very clear to their consumers about where the information that they supply is relevant to. Country specific Myspace sites and country specific advertising would eliminate the concerns regarding the relevance of the information. Teenagers have the potential to become a very profitable market if they can be encouraged to make purchases online. Advertisers need to develop strategies that will build trust with the consumer and make the purchasing process easier and less risky in the eyes of the purchaser.

#### **5.7.6 Privacy**

As teenagers show very high levels of faith in their online sites, it is important that advertisers do not misuse this trust. It should be made very clear to consumers what their information will be used for and who will be utilising the information supplied.

### **5.7.7 Consumer relationship building**

Advertisers have an opportunity to develop productive relationships with a consumer if their response to requests for information is prompt and helpful. The ramifications of ignoring an enquiry can do considerable damage to the consumer brand relationship and in fact reinforce lack of trust of brands and the site. It is therefore imperative that online social networking sites are correctly and reliably maintained.

## **5.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

As with any qualitative study, there are limitations as to the generalisability and reliability of the findings. As this study is exploratory, many of the findings may not be generalisable to all online social networking users or to teenager online social networking users. However this study provides a starting point for future research into the area of advertising in the online social networking environment. The participants of the study are all from the Brisbane area and as such are not representative of all teenagers living in Australian. In addition not all Myspace or Facebook users are teenagers therefore some advertising messages may be relevant to older users.

## **5.9 OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Given that online social networking only introduced over four years ago, much of the research available relates to general online advertising or web sites, with little academic research published on online social networking. Three areas of research have been identified as potential topics for further research.

The previous section identified that the use of teenagers in the Brisbane area was a limitation for this study. Consequentially, understanding the perceptions of advertising on online social networking sites using participants from a larger

number of respondents around Australia would be a suggested area for further research. Within this study having respondents of all ages would also provide the opportunity for comparison in perceptions of advertising by teenagers and those over 18 years.

This exploratory research has identified seven motivations behind online social networking use. Further research into the motivations of Australian online social networking site users is suggested to see if this study's findings were applicable to the wider Australian audience. Researchers could utilize the networking and systems capabilities of online social networking sites and establish a large sample size of online users. Grant's (2005) research into young people's perceptions online could provide a starting point for a similar study into online social networking sites.

Finally, this research has presented a new model for advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment. Figure 5.1 outlines this model. Further investigation into this model is suggested to clarify and confirm the findings of this research. Again the use of the online social networking systems provides an opportunity to speak directly to the required sample and gain immediate data. The use of a greater number and a much wider range of participants would aid in the generalisability of the findings and also provide rigor to the research.

## **5.10 CONCLUSION**

This chapter has provided discussion into the findings from the focus groups and in-depth interviews. These findings have lead to discussion in the following areas of interest:

1. Motivations behind online social networking use
2. Perceptions of commercial online social networking sites

3. Teenagers: trust and scepticism towards online social networking sites
4. Privacy and online social networking sites
5. Advertising avoidance on online social networking sites
6. Characteristics of online social networking sites as an advertising medium

This chapter will also outline the implications to theory and the implications to advertising practitioners and presented a new model of advertising avoidance in the online social networking environment. Finally the limitations for the study were outlined and recommendations for future research were presented.

# Appendices

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## APPENDIX A FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

*Focus groups from 24<sup>th</sup> November and 25<sup>th</sup> November 2007*

*How teenagers' thinking and feeling towards advertising is affected in an online social network environment.*

### *Introduction*

The participants will be asked to fill in a brief questionnaire, which asks for demographic information. The purpose of the focus groups is explained and how the information from the focus group will be used. It is also important that the participants understand and respect the confidentiality of the information discussed in the focus groups (Silverman 2006 ). Participants' parents will be asked to read and sign an informed consent form which will outline how the information will be used and give a outline of the questions that will be asked. The participants will also be asked to sign consent forms.

The focus groups will begin with a general discussion based on the following questions:

- Who has a Myspace (MS) or Facebook or any other site?
- How long have you had that page?
- Is it private or open? Why?
- How often do you go on MS?

The questions in the focus groups will become more specific with discussion based on research done by Grant (2005) who outlines the five motivations behind internet use. These motivations are; mood enhancement, experiential learning, passive escapism, social interaction and information/advice. Within each of these areas of motivation, discussion will be guided to investigate the participants' views of online social networking sites, their thoughts regarding advertising as a service (Rappaport 2007) and whether they view advertising as a corporate intrusion (Grant 2005).

## ***1. Mood enhancement***

### ***Online Social Network***

- How do you feel when you check you MS? What kind of emotions?
- When have you been really pleased you've been on MS?

### ***Advertising as a Service***

- Do you notice ads on MS? Do you ever find them entertaining or even useful?

### ***Corporate Intrusion***

- Do you think it's appropriate to have advertising on MS?
- Do you find it an intrusion, or is it the price you pay for being on the site?  
Similar to how you'd expect to see ads on TV.

## ***2. Experiential learning***

### ***Online Social Network***

- What kinds of new things have you learnt on MS?
- Are there any particular experiences you remember?

### ***Advertising as a Service***

- Have you ever bought something as a result of seeing it on someone's MS?

- Do you think the product must be OK if it is on their site?

### ***Corporate Intrusion***

- Do you ever find it confusing to work out what is the website and what is the advertising? Do you ever find yourself responding to something then realizing that it's an ad? How can you tell it is an ad? How can you control ads?

## ***3. Passive escapism***

### ***Online Social Network***

- If you couldn't use MS for 6 months, what would you miss most? Why do you really go on MS?

### ***Advertising as a Service***

- Have you ever posted an ad just for fun? Do you know anyone who has? Are there any funny ads you pass on?

### ***Corporate Intrusion***

- Are any kinds of ads more annoying than others? What about pop ups?
- How does the standard of ads in MS compare with those on TV? Do you think they are just as creative?

## ***4. Social interaction/personal involvement***

### ***Online Social Network***

- Have you formed any new friendships outside your normal group through MS? How did this happen? Does it happen often?
- Are there any people you would definitely not want on your space? What about your parents?

### ***Advertising as a Service***

- Do you ever talk about advertising or share an ad in MS?
- Have you ever had a conversation or interaction with a product site? Have they ever tried to be your friend? Or asked your advice? Have you ever felt part of a community around a product or a brand or a service?

### ***Corporate Intrusion***

- Do you feel it's appropriate for brands to try and befriend you on MS?
- How do you feel about companies using your information online? What if they actually do it to provide you with a better service?
- If it is on your site, how private do you think the information really is?
- How accurate do you think most of the information is on MS? Do people tell lies to impress others?

## ***5. Information and advice***

### ***Online Social Network***

- Do you have any particular links to products on your page? Why or why not?
- Is there a brand that you like to champion? Or you like to be associated with?

### ***Advertising as a Service***

- What brands do you have on your website? Why did you choose them?
- Would you ask your friends on MS to recommend a brand or a product?

### ***Corporate Intrusion***

- How well do you think the ads are targeted? Are they relevant or meaningful?  
How useful do you find the advertising on MS?
- Is MS a place where you would go for information and advice?



## **APPENDIX B**

### **SUMMARY OF RESPONSES FROM FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

*Focus groups from 24<sup>th</sup> November and 25<sup>th</sup> November 2007*

*How teenagers' thinking and feeling towards advertising is affected in an online social network environment.*

#### ***Introduction***

- Who has a Myspace (MS) or Facebook or any other site?

Most participants in all four focus groups had MySpace or Facebook. Generally it was the 16 year olds who had Facebook and it was generally believed that Facebook was for older people (Uni students). In each group there happened to be one person who didn't have a personal site generally because they couldn't be bothered. They all had one but then didn't follow up on it.

- How long have you had that page?

Most have joined within the last 18 months

- Is it private or open? Why?

Most of the personal spaces were private with some of the boys saying that they had an open space.

- How often do you go on MS?

### ***Mood enhancement***

#### ***Online Social Network***

- How do you feel when you check your MS? What kind of emotions?

F1 felt excited and nervous before checking emails depending upon whether they were expecting someone to leave a comment. Used MS to say sorry.

F2 felt the same and one member stated that it was disappointing to find that a comment was advertising.

F3 felt hopeful that someone might put a comment on their space.

F4 would get excited about a comment but if they were having a fight with someone they said that they would feel anxious and worried to see what had been written.

Many in the group said that they would say "*I am board, lets go on Myspace*" (4/8)

- When have you been really pleased you've been on MS?

F1 was happy to hear about social activities

F2 liked to spy on others comments but doesn't like it when it becomes bitchy or back stabbing (7), then debated when a boy said that it was just girls that get bitchy then the girls said that the boys get involved too and take sides.

F3 were happy when they got news about what their friends have been doing.

F4 loved it when they got comments from someone that they haven't seen for a long time and another participant was happy when another 'friend' was added. One participant enjoyed 'pimping out his Myspace' (4/9) and another was happy when he found out his favourite band was coming to town.

### ***Advertising as a Service***

- Do you notice ads on MS? Do you ever find them entertaining or even useful?

F1 noticed if you can click on something and one participant mentioned an interactive basketball ad. Mentioned ring tone ads and said that they expect it to cost them money in the long term. They find them entertaining if it is a game.

F2 said that they noticed the ads when they get sent to you in a comment. Many of the ads are misleading and suggest that the owner of that particular ms page is talking about Macy's or another organization when it really is just spam. They didn't find them entertaining or useful.

F3 said that they noticed the 'game ads' and that they liked the basketball games. A discussion about how you could get ringtones and why would companies give them out for free.

F4 noticed the ads on Ms but skipped them and would never click on them for fear of getting a virus.

### ***Corporate Intrusion***

- Do you think it's appropriate to have advertising on MS?
- Do you find it an intrusion, or is it the price you pay for being on the site?  
Similar to how you'd expect to see ads on TV.

F1 said that advertising made the page look better, but suggested that 'no one cares about the ads' as they have no control. They didn't feel that advertising was an intrusion.

F2 didn't seem to care about the advertising, they found the banner ads at the top of the page unobtrusive but they really get annoyed with the spam ads.

F3 was happy to have the ads on the site if it kept M/S free although they found it annoying when the ads keep popping up.

F4 accept that the ads help keep the Ms free but don't take any notice of them. This group couldn't name an ad that they had seen on Ms

### ***Experiential learning***

#### ***Online Social Network***

- What kinds of new things have you learnt on MS?

F1 learnt how to use codes on MS and how to make your page more interesting (computer skills) like changing background colours.

F2 said that they learnt that most people fight on ms and that 'girls take heaps of rude photos' (said by a male participant)

F3 said that MS has improved their computer skills

F4 said that they learnt to touch type and use computer codes

- Are there any particular experiences you remember?

F1 regretted being on MS when they have done poorly in a school exam because they spent time on MS when they should have been studying. They also discussed how it was difficult to interpret feeling behind the words and sometimes you think someone is angry with you when they aren't.

F2 discussed how girls make them selves look older and prettier on their ms so that people add them as friends. Discussed the unwritten rule of having too many friends on your ms makes you seem that you are trying too hard.

F3 couldn't recall any particular experiences

F4 liked the birthday reminders.

### ***Advertising as a Service***

- Have you ever bought something as a result of seeing it on someone's MS?

F1 hadn't bought anything as they don't have credit cards. They all agreed that they don't trust buying anything on the internet as it might not be the right size or the product that you thought it was going to be.

F2 F3 and F4 hadn't bought anything or seen anything that they might buy.

- Do you think the product must be OK if it is on their site?

F1 didn't know anyone with products on their sites.

F2 didn't have any opinion about friends endorsing products or brands on their site.

F3 said that they wouldn't buy anything as there 'is so much dodgy stuff on MS that you can't take it seriously' (3/14)

### ***Corporate Intrusion***

- Do you ever find it confusing to work out what is the website and what is the advertising? Do you ever find yourself responding to something then realizing that it's an ad? How can you tell it is an ad? How can you control ads?

F1 have had ads sent as comments on their MS (for iPhones, bags and pornographic sites) which they just delete or ignore, however one participant said that you can ask for no junk mail in setting and it seems to work. They say that they can easily recognize ads and don't really care much about them. When asked if their friend endorsed a product on their MS how would they know if they were being paid and they said that they wouldn't expect that anyone would do that. They said that sometimes companies send them comments pretending to be someone that they know but they realise that they don't sound like their friends. One participant was sent an ad for Marijuana.

F2 didn't really consider that branded ms where there for a commercial reason but understood that some sites just want your information to bombard you with offers and text messages. They said that they could tell that it was an ad by the colour and movement. They just ignore the ads.

F3 found it confusing but usually felt that the ads were obvious saying 'it is quite odd how they word it – it doesn't sound real' (3/15). One participant said that they could control the ads by changing the settings to delete the ads and not all members of the group knew this and all agreed that if they could stop the ads they would.

F4 got 'bogus ads' and were very wary of getting viruses through ads. One participant had responded to a site not realizing it was an ad. They received ads that were written like it was from a friend but the language used made it seem suspicious (very American). They delete the ads when they come through and were confused how viral ads come on to private sites.

### ***Passive escapism***

### ***Online Social Network***

- If you couldn't use MS for 6 months, what would you miss most? Why do you really go on MS?

Most of the group in F1 said that they wouldn't worry too much they couldn't go on MS for 6 months and only go on it when they are bored. One male said that he 'wished it had never been invented' because of the distraction and 'it make you fail school and stuff'. Other comments included '*I'll just turn it on for comments and an hour later your still on it*', '*its like an addictive thing*', '*I feel guilty if I go on it if I had a big test*'. They said that they can study while they are on MSN but not MS.

F2 said that if you knew anyone else would be on ms then it would be difficult not to go on it but another participant said that they didn't really need it 'it was an extra' and a time waster and that 'time goes really fast on ms'. It has become a habit for many of them and they felt that they needed to check if any comments had been added. The participant that didn't have MS said that he sometimes felt a bit left out of things that happen sometimes. The group felt that msn was more distracting than MS.

F4 said they would miss '*everything. I wouldn't last a week!*' (3/16). They would miss the interactions and reading of comments and knowing all the gossip and speaking to people.

F4 said they would feel very anti social and would wonder what they were missing out on. They would miss msn more than MS. They thought that it was a free way of communicating and was cheaper than using the phone. Many felt that it was a 'time waster' Male participant said '*I am sure that you could do without it. It is not an necessary factor*' and a female participant said '*We did do without it. We did without it for so long and now its come in and suddenly its our whole life*' (4/24)

### ***Advertising as a Service***

- Have you ever posted an ad just for fun? Do you know anyone who has? Are there any funny ads you pass on?

F1 they thought that the Calton Flashdance ad was funny but wouldn't consider putting it on their MS.

F2 said that none had ads linked to MS but had seen people who do. They said they might if the ads were funny enough.

F3 said No but when reminded about the Summer Heights High ad (trailer) they thought that they might post an ad if it was unique or funny enough.

F4 didn't know that you could post ads on your site and said they wouldn't know how to. a discussion was held about earning money from click throughs on your site.

### ***Corporate Intrusion***

- Are any kinds of ads more annoying than others? What about pop ups?
- How does the standard of ads in MS compare with those on TV? Do you think they are just as creative?

F1 find the 'smiley face' ad annoying (it is for icons on your computer) and also ads that make sound. F1 didn't think the online ads were as creative but liked the fact that the MS ads don't have people talking. They felt that they couldn't do anything about the ads and that they didn't notice the ads. When asked if they would click on an ad that they found interesting they said that they would go direct to the website rather than click on so that they have no faith in the ads.

F2 thought most ads on MS were also on TV so they don't feel that they are particularly special. They disliked the popup ads especially if they can't close them. Sometimes they get a fright when ads suddenly pops up. They wouldn't buy the



cursors or smiley products and see them as being a waste of time. They thought the MS ads looked cheaper and were not as creative.

F3 disliked the popup ads that annoy everyone and also dislike the ads that pretend that they are your friends. Thought MS ads were cheaper looking.

F4 didn't like the ads that you have to skip through or the ones that say you have one something. They thought that the ads were put together well but would not open them for fear of getting a computer virus. If they were interested in a product that would Google the product rather than click through the ad.

### ***Social interaction/personal involvement***

#### ***Online Social Network***

- Have you formed any new friendships outside your normal group through MS? How did this happen? Does it happen often?

F1 agreed that they have found new friends on MS, including 'some people that I have met once but probably never see again'. They were more inclined to ask someone for their MSN to chat rather than their MS. They said that they stay in contact with people more.

F2 had made new friends (through friends of friends) and some of the people that they talk to on MS they wouldn't know if they saw them in person.

F3 have formed friendships on MS and felt that they were more likely to talk on MS than if they met them in person and said '*its awkward when you meet someone on Myspace first and then you see them in real life*'.

F4 had met friends through friends.

- Are there any people you would definitely not want on your space? What about your parents?

F1 all agreed that they are ok with their friends' parents on their MS but not their own. They would block or delete someone that they didn't want on their MS. Most were not sure whether they have been blocked or deleted themselves. Most agreed that they weren't comfortable with their parents seeing what their 'friends' have put on their site.

F2 didn't want paedophiles on their MS and usually just block whoever they don't want on their site. They said that they would know if they had been blocked. They wouldn't want their parents on their site as there were things on it that they wouldn't want them to see. They thought that it would be strange for a parent to have a MS.

F3 wouldn't want their parents on their site and would feel uncomfortable if their parents had a MS. They wouldn't like the parents reading the comments as they had little control over what their friends write there.

F4 didn't want people who randomly wanted to be added as friends and mentioned one girl who had 3500 friends and had comments on her site that said "Hey do I even know you?". Discussed how people accept friends on their site. Most were ok with their parents seeing their site and said that they delete rude comments.

### ***Advertising as a Service***

- Do you ever talk about advertising or share an ad in MS?

F1 hadn't talked about advertising or shared an ad, but agreed that they had sent funny pictures that had a web site down the bottom of it. When I suggested that that was an ad they seemed confused as they saw them as just pictures.

F2 and F4 said the only comments might be how annoying the ads are.

F3 said they didn't talk about advertising. One participant worked as Baskin and Robbins and they had a MD for employees.

- Have you ever had a conversation or interaction with a product site? Have they ever tried to be your friend? Or asked your advice? Have you ever felt part of a community around a product or a brand or a service?

F1 participants had emails giving them info about concerts or specials. iTunes also send info but they don't bother reading them. Having the messages personalized doesn't make any difference. Napoleon Purdis sent out info and the participant felt good about being associated with that brand.

F2 has seen corporate MS and one participant's hair dresser has one for his salon.

F3 had talked on MS to a band called Mussels and also knew that NRL and cinemas had MS.

F4 hadn't been contacted by MS brand but knew that Facebook had social groups and one participant felt a connection with DC skate shoes.

### ***Corporate Intrusion***

- Do you feel it's appropriate for brands to try and befriend you on MS?
- How do you feel about companies using your information online? What if they actually do it to provide you with a better service?
- If it is on your site, how private do you think the information really is?

F1 felt that it was weird that it was a company trying to befriend them and just delete the message, *'I don't pay any attention'* Most of F1 didn't consciously fill in forms giving their personal details but are ok if they do it in store because they see that it is the real company. They believe that the information on closed MS is private and can't be accessed by people they don't want to see it.

F2 are ok with brands contacting them if it is a small business which you had visited and given your details but were less comfortable with a large organization befriending them. They felt it was ok to get information from organizations if you have supplied your email address and had faith that if you asked them not to send emails they would. They felt it was the individual's choice to supply as much information they felt comfortable with.

F3 received information about movies from Birch Carroll and Coyle and the message sounded very personal. They were ok with getting info if they had supplied the email address but don't like giving out postcodes or too much personal information.

F4 felt it was ok to get information if you have given your email details and that you should expect that but weren't comfortable with getting information from organizations that they didn't know. Were ok if the info was to their benefit (eg concert info) but delete if not interested.

- How accurate do you think most of the information is on MS? Do people tell lies to impress others?

F1 were all very reluctant to trust giving out information on the internet. When asked why one participant replies *'My parents told me not to trust it. As a little kid*

*on the computer probably*'. The group agreed that most people lie about their ages (a lot of 80 year olds are on MS), and occupations.

F2 said that people lie on MS and have fake photos to make them seem better looking.

F3 believed that the information on MS is secure and private but they think people lie and exaggerate and use false photos.

F4 one participant said *'Yep the way you set out your Myspace is pretty much to impress other people.'*

### ***Information and advice***

#### ***Online Social Network***

- Do you have any particular links to products on your page? Why or why not?

No one in F1 had links to products on their site but have photo bucket for their photos. When the page is changed (colour or design) a small logo is included. Some people had seen links to You Tube on peoples MS.

No one in F2 and F3 had links but some had seen people use a Chanel background or Napoleon Purdis background.

F4 had DC Skate shoes link

- Is there a brand that you like to champion? Or you like to be associated with?

None in F1 had a particular brand that they would champion but one participant knew of someone who had a link to a fashion business and agreed that a lot of music artists are using MS now.

### ***Advertising as a Service***

- What brands do you have on your website? Why did you choose them?
- Would you ask your friends on MS to recommend a brand or a product?

F2 used the backgrounds supplied by a site linked to google.

F3 had no brand connections. They couldn't recall any ads on MS but once prompted they remembers Flight Centre and Nokia and JB Hifi.

All groups wouldn't ask a friend on Ms to recommend a product.

### ***Corporate Intrusion***

- How well do you think the ads are targeted? Are they relevant or meaningful?  
How useful do you find the advertising on MS?

F1 believe that the ads that they receive are targeted towards them. When questioned as to whether someone older might have a MS and receive the same ads I was told that people my age are weird if they have a MS. One participant suggested that he liked skating and body boarding and was wondering why he receives ads about skating and body boarding on MS. Even though his site is closed he has clicked on to skateboarding and body boarding sites so he thinks he may have been tracked. They had a general unease about having their movements tracked as it disagreed with the level of privacy that they originally accepted. They said that they avoided 'dodgy sites' that were out of date or likely to keep sending you information.

F2 couldn't remember any ads on MS but when prompted agreed that they had seen the ads but didn't take any notice of them (as they are always there). If you want to see the cool videos on some web sites then you have to see the ads first (usually for careers, VW or real estate)

F3 didn't think that the ads were credible or truthful. Don't know if ads are from Australia or USA.

F4 think that MS ads are credible to a certain degree and targeted to their age group however they conceded that they might have selected viewing.

- Is MS a place where you would go for information and advice?

F1 agreed that they learnt about MS mainly from their friends.

F2 wouldn't use links from MS and would trust MSN more. They felt that if you clicked on a link in MS then you could end up anywhere in the world. They would be prepared to advertise a product or link on their MS for payment.

F3 would go on MS for information but wouldn't trust the information to be correct.

F4 feel that information is private and weren't happy to hear that Facebook have been tracking sites visited by members. They didn't feel they would go on MS for advice or information.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **INDEPTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

*An exploratory study into teenagers perceptions of advertising in the online social environment.*

#### ***Introduction***

- Do you have a Myspace (MS) or Facebook or any other site?
- How long have you had that page?
- Is it private or open? Why?
- How often do you go on MS?

Proposition 1: Teenagers avoid advertising on online social networking sites when they feel it disrupts their goals online

- Explain to me an average session on Myspace or Facebook
- Do you go to these sites with a bit of a plan of what you are going to do
- What can disrupt your online session
- How do you feel about that?
- Are there any ads that annoy you and why and what do you do

Proposition 10: Teenagers will go on online social networking sites to enhance their mood

- How do you feel when you check you MS? What kind of emotions?
- If a new social networking site was started what would make you change to that one?
- Would you try it if none of your friends did?
- Have you ever tried Facebook or another social network group?



Proposition 2: Teenagers will ignore advertising on online social networking sites when they perceive that there is too much clutter

- Tell me a bit about advertising online
- Do you think it is clever and why?
- If you were doing the advertising what would you do differently?

Proposition 3: Teenagers avoid advertisements on online social networking sites as they have had negative experiences with previous online advertisements.

- Have you ever clicked on an ad online?
- Do you know anyone who has?
- Why wouldn't you click on an ad?
- What do you think will happen?
- How does that influence you when you see an ad in an osn?
- Have you felt that you were at risk of getting a virus by clicking onto a link?  
Did you click on to it and why?

Proposition 4: Teenagers use seek information from online social networks

- Have you even used an osn to find out about something or a particular product?
- Music or movie or brand
- Do you think that osn are just for communicating with your friends?
- Do you think that in the future they may be used for other things?

Proposition 5: Teenagers feel engaged when they interact with brands in online social networks

- Have you ever gone on a osn site that promotes a product, song, movie, brand of clothes car etc?
- What did you think about it?
- Would you/have you gone on it again?
- Why?
- If you had a business that needed to reach your age group would you set up a osn site?
- How would you promote it?

Proposition 6: Teenagers use the services on online social networks to aid in consumer decision making

- If you were wanting to buy something that required a lot of research before you bought it like a phone or car or camera would you get info from a osn?

Proposition 7: Teenagers do not understand the privacy issues and policies of the online social networking sites

- Have you read the privacy policy of Myspace or Facebook? Why?
- Do you think that your information that you include on your site is being used by organizations? Why?
- Who do you think can access your site?
- Do you understand that you are being 'tracked' when you visit particular sites?
- How do you feel about this?

Proposition 8: Teenagers do not believe the information that they present on their online social networking sites is putting them in a vulnerable position or goes against their personal interest

- Do you think that people worry too much about private information being made available to organizations?
- Do you know anyone who has had problems with information on osn?

Proposition 9: Teenagers trust the online social networking sites with their personal information

- Do you think your information is of interest to companies?
- Do you think that your parents personal information is of interest to companies?
- Do you feel that you can trust all the people on your 'friends' list?

Proposition 11: Teenagers social identity is influenced by their experience on online social networking sites

- If you didn't have Myspace for 6 months what would happen?
- Have you ever had a situation that made you wish that you didn't have a Myspace?
- If so why are you still on it?
- What are the benefits of Myspace and what are the negative?
- Have you ever felt that you might be made fun of on Myspace?
- Have you ever put something on a friend's comments space which you have regretted?

## **APPENDIX D**

### **LETTER TO PARENTS OF PARTICIPANTS**

Dear .....

I am currently in the final stages of research for my Masters in Business (Advertising) at QUT. My research topic is 'An investigation into how teenagers thinking, feeling and behaviour towards advertising is affected in the online social network environment', so basically I am looking at teenagers who use Myspace or Facebook and what they think about the advertising on it.

I was hoping that you would consider letting me interview ..... for my study. I would be asking her a series of questions in a 40 minute interview, which would be taped and transcribed. The questions would be based around her experience using Myspace and how she views advertising. The information would be completely confidential.

If acceptable to you I would like to do the interviews on Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> February and I have attached with this note a Consent form for you to sign.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions

Regards

**Louise Kelly**

**0418783482 or 38497930**

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