Semi-anonymous question and answer platforms from a teenager’s point of view

Beyond Internet abuse on Sayat.me: the bigger picture

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Abstract

This master thesis studies teenage users that are common to the semi-anonymous question and answer platform Sayat.me. Sayat.me offers users with a profile the possibility to receive questions and feedback from friends and peers. What is so special about the platform is that the commenters’ identity remains undisclosed, which means that all messages are by default anonymous. Previous research has demonstrated the frequent occurrence of cyberbullying or online abuse on these platforms. Adults are puzzled as to why semi-anonymous question and answer platforms are so popular amongst teenagers. Departing from a theoretical framework with key concepts from digital and social media theories, the analysis tries to create a better understanding of this phenomenon from Belgian teenagers’ point of view. The results of the interviews show that, first of all, Sayat.me is not considered as an independent social media site, but rather as an extension of it. On social media, ‘sociality’ and ‘connection’ is what matters, but on Sayat.me sociality mainly plays an indirect role where users receive compliments from and are comforted by friends. Compliments, approval and admiration is what teenagers keeps coming back to the platform. Although teenagers often encounter online abuse, they do not feel cyberbullied, even so they consider this abuse as ‘natural’ on the platform. In addition, it appears that the way you are handling Sayat.me says a lot about you as a person, which is why teens use Sayat.me to present themselves or to portray a certain image. However, teenagers only imagine their friends or peers as the audience and do not consider their Sayat.me for their parents’ eyes. The situation is that parents are confused and do not understand their children’s online behaviour, whilst teenagers are annoyed with their parents’ incomprehension and overprotectiveness.

Keywords

Semi-anonymous question and answer platform, Sayat.me, social media studies, anonymity, online abuse
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND ME, MOM!

I'M GOING BACK TO THE INTERNET WHERE MY REAL FRIENDS ARE.

YOU LOOK LIKE YOU[BLANK] YOURSELF.

YOU SUCK YOURSELF.

STFU LOSER.

PLEASE DIE.

I'LL BET YOU NEED TO GET LAID.

YOU OBVIOUSLY DON'T KNOW ANYTHING.

CHECK OUT MY PAGE FOR FUNNY VIDEOS.

@maritsapatrinos, 2018
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1. Introduction

The year 2018, where living without the Internet is unimaginable for many. Today, teenagers grow up with all kinds of applications, platforms and websites on which their participation is not unusual. Individuals get the exciting opportunity to be electronically connected with others at all times without physically having to transport themselves anywhere. Although most teenagers are delighted with these new technological advancements, many adults are puzzled or disturbed with the generation that has, according to Livingstone (2008), “many friends but little sense of privacy and a narcissistic fascination with self-display” (p 1). The past few years however, there has been a growing concern about a new particular phenomenon called ‘semi-anonymous question and answer platforms’.

Briefly said, these platforms offer individuals with a profile the possibility to receive questions or feedback from friends or peers. This may sound very much like other known social media, but what is special about these platforms is that the commenter’s identity remains undisclosed, which means that all messages are by default anonymous. Despite the fact that the pioneering version of these so-called social media rose 9 years ago, by this time a great deal of adults has never heard of it and of those that know it, many have no idea how to understand the phenomenon. This unawareness and lack of understanding amongst adults is not so surprising. With semi-anonymous question and answer platforms, teenagers are prone to act in another way than they normally would. In fact, the feature of anonymity makes people feel less accountable for what they write and send. Thus, anonymity may cause an increase in harshness or cyberbullying. The latter has been the main research topic for many specialists and academics that have studied the phenomenon. However, despite the abuse that teenagers may encounter online, semi-anonymous question and answer platforms continue to be popular and coveted amongst teenagers and variations keep cropping up.

During this thesis, the focus will be on one of the latest versions of semi-anonymous question and answer platforms, namely Sayat.me. Sayat.me has been trending since the summer of 2017 in different countries, including in Belgium. The purpose of this thesis is to create a better understanding of Sayat.me in a broader online existence in relation to theories about teenagers and their digital media use. By means of interviews with Belgian teenagers that have created a Sayat.me-profile, the intention is to go further than the mere analysis and
discussion on the occurrence of cyberbullying on the platform and thus to create a bigger picture of it. In a nutshell, the objective is to know what attracts them, what motivates them, what they like, what they hate, how they deal with everything and what they could or could not miss, despite the online abuse. Although this master thesis aims to create more academic knowledge, it could also help parents and other adults to better understand the whole phenomenon of semi-anonymous question and answer platforms from teenagers’ point of view.

Following thesis consists of seven chapters, beginning with the introduction and the background to provide some context. The second chapter comprehensively explores significant previous research done on semi-anonymous question and answer platforms. The previous research chapter is followed by essential theories and key concepts on sociality, identity, self-presentation, the generation gap, cyberbullying and addiction that are considered as characteristic for social media. In the fifth chapter, the used methodology is clarified, together with its limitations and advantages. Subsequently, significant results from interviews with Sayat.me users are thoroughly discussed, analysed and related to theories and previous research presented in the third and fourth chapter. Given the anonymity on Sayat.me, which is not a common feature on social media, the intention of this subchapter is to bridge the academic gap there is regarding semi-anonymous question and answer platforms. Finally, in the last and seventh chapter, a conclusion is given and the study is critically evaluated.
2. Background

2.1. Semi-anonymous Q&A platforms

When hearing or reading the term ‘semi-anonymous question and answer platforms’ for the first time, it is not unreasonable to frown. There are two reasons that explain the lack of awareness concerning these platforms. First of all, researchers and media have been divided when it comes down to the conceptualization of the platform, which naturally creates a lot of confusion. Some call it ‘anonymous social media’ while others name it ‘semi-anonymous sharing platforms’. Nevertheless, they all refer to the same kind of platform. For the sake of clarity, the term ‘Semi-anonymous Q&A platforms’ will be used throughout this thesis. A second reason is that, despite the fact that semi-anonymous Q&A platforms are not new, they generally have stayed under the radar of most parents and educators.

Meanwhile, it is still unclear what semi-anonymous Q&A platforms are. Well, simply put: semi-anonymous Q&A platforms are seen as a subcategory of social media. Most of these platforms offer both a website version as well as an application. The idea is rather straightforward: you register, thus you create a profile and from then on anyone has the chance to post a question or give feedback strictly anonymously on your profile, without the obligation of registration. What is rather special on these platforms is that user profiles are public, with a profile picture and the name of the user appearing, but people posting to these profiles, other than the owner, are by default anonymous (Hosseinmardi et al., 2014a). The platform pushes teenagers to place the URL that leads to their profile on other social media accounts, like Facebook or Instagram, to attract visitors. On most similar platforms, questions or feedback are sent privately and it is up to the user to decide to make it visible on their profile when they answer the comment on the platform. Usually, it is not possible to trace back any comments or posts to an actual name or identity if the question was sent anonymously. What is striking, is that users can adapt settings on their profile and thus have the power to reject anonymous questions/feedback, which means that they could only accept comments from known visitors, but most teenagers simply dismiss this feature. The reason why however, will gradually become clear in the analysis of this thesis.
There are dozens of semi-anonymous Q&A platforms, with all types of variations. The best known and most popular examples of these semi-anonymous Q&A platforms are Formspring, Ask.fm, Sarahah and Sayat.me. Formspring was the creator of the anonymous “ask me anything”-format in 2009 and accordingly their success skyrocketed. Since people did not have to register in any way to send anonymous messages, this feature was often abused. According to a former executive of Formspring, teenagers used the site in horrific ways. Subsequently, in March 2010 a girl committed suicide because of abuse and bullying on the platform and the same happened the year after. As a result, the platform was redesigned to reduce bullying. Unfortunately, this was not enough and only a year later another boy committed suicide after being bullied on Formspring (Newton, 2013, September 17).

In 2013, Formspring was shut down and Ask.fm took over Formspring’s role and status (Taylor, 2013, March 15). Ask.fm is an exact Latvian copy of its predecessor. Some would have thought that Ask.fm would learn from Formspring’s mistakes, but unfortunately, according to several news sources, seven suicides have been linked to Ask.fm (NoBullying.com, 2016, August 14). Unlike Formspring, Ask.fm did not want to curtail the anonymous messages because it would probably drive the teenage users away (Newton, 2013, September 17). In November 2016 a similar but new platform popped up in Saudi Arabia: Sarahah. To prevent bullying, Sarahah reminds its users to “leave a constructive message” on others’ profile and filters keywords to obviate certain messages from being sent (Carpenter, 2017, August 28).

Overall, it is noticeable that those various semi-anonymous Q&A platforms are very similar, beside some minor adaptations and varying lay-outs. To a certain extent, some are even copies of competitors. Withal, as mentioned above, this thesis will focus on the semi-anonymous Q&A platform Sayat.me.

2.2. Sayat.me

Sayat.me is exactly the same as previously described platforms and was founded in the summer of 2016 in Estonia. According to Alexa (2018, February 9), Sayat.me is most popular in Saudi Arabia, Libya and Russia, but many European teenagers use it as well, including Belgian youth. At present, there seems to be no public data regarding Sayat.me’s user counts.
To promote their platform, they use the tagline: “get anonymous and honest feedback. Become a better you” (Sayat.me, n.d.). In addition, they emphasize that the feedback must be honest and sincere. Anonymous users have to keep in mind that “you may write almost anything - what you like about the person or what you dislike; what type of characteristics he or she should develop further or what sort of character traits it would be better to suppress” (Sayat.me, n.d.). According to the founders of Sayat.me, honest feedback helps the users to figure out how their self-image varies from what other people see and enables users to work on their self-development.

To attract more users and to generate more traffic to their website, Sayat.me offers the possibility to ‘friend’ people. That way, individuals can develop a newsfeed, where all posts that their friends received on Sayat.me are collected. Another feature they added is that profile owners can create a ‘poll’ or ask questions themselves, upon which visitors can answer anonymously. Currently, the platform is only available as a web app since no mobile application has been made yet. Like other platforms, Sayat.me pushes users to post their personalized URL that leads to their profile on other social media in order to attract the greatest amount of visitors or commenters possible. Furthermore, it so happens that all anonymous comments on Sayat.me are first sent privately to the user so that he or she can choose to answer and thus publish it on their profile (Sathiya, 2017, March 30).

Whereas the platform can be used in 15 different languages at the moment of writing, the policies can only be found in English. Official word is that to use the platform, the user has to be minimum 18 of age or have a valid authorisation from their legal representative. Furthermore, it is also mentioned that the website “may not be used for any purposes or in any manner that can be construed as unlawful, malicious, in bad faith, abusive or discriminatory” (Sayat.me, 2017, April 21).

All the same, like its predecessors, Sayat.me causes some concern and controversy. Dutch media have tried to warn adults by calling Sayat.me a ‘bullying app’ and by claiming that the platform earns money through the insecurities of others. As a consequence, numerous adults bode ill and are wondering why teenagers use these platforms (Baars, 2018, January 16; Zitvast, 2018, January 17). Unfortunately, Sayat.me too has taken its toll: a 15-year-old boy committed suicide in May 2017 after being bullied on Sayat.me (Joseph & Burford, 2017, May 19).
3. Previous research on semi-anonymous Q&A platforms

Although semi-anonymous Q&A platforms are nearly a decade old, there is a limited amount of research done regarding this phenomenon. Finding research about fully anonymous social media or anonymity online is in general easier than research on semi-anonymous Q&A platforms. Furthermore, since Sayat.me is a fairly new platform and not (yet) trending in bigger Western countries like the United States, there seems to be no research done about this specific platform either. Nonetheless, we can say that findings from studies regarding other semi-anonymous Q&A platforms (i.e. Formspring or Ask.fm) can be generalized and applied to other comparable platforms, since most semi-anonymous Q&A platforms are, as mentioned above, so similar or even copies of competitors. One notable observation is that nearly all previous research regarding these platforms deals with the ubiquity of cyberbullying and online abuse on it.

Two in some way similar and highly important studies for this thesis are those of Amy Binns (2013), senior lecturer of the school of Journalism, Media and Performance at the University of Central Lancashire and Rachel Simmons (2011), writer, educator and cofounder of the American non-profit ‘Girls Leadership’. In first instance they give useful (background)-knowledge about semi-anonymous Q&A platforms and additionally they are highly relatable to the underlying study, method and aim of this thesis. Both theorists analysed and discussed semi-anonymous Q&A platforms within the context of cyber cruelty and focused on teenage girls. Binns examined the abuse on Formspring and Ask.fm and compared it with other sites that are popular amongst younger girls: Facebook and Twitter. In addition, she investigated how girls behave on the platform as well as how these girls think of their own and others’ behaviour. In her article she refers to Simmons’ qualitative study on Formspring that is reported and discussed in Simmons’ book ‘odd girl out’.

With their research, both state that through semi-anonymous Q&A sites there is a greater power to wound than on other online platforms. In her book, Simmons (2011) calls semi-anonymous Q&A platforms the parasites of the social media world. It appears that they invite people to be cruel without really owning up, and users often exaggerate, lie, attack and hurt others. When it seems that there are no consequences connected to certain acts, people abandon their ethics and good sense (p. 133).
Most teenagers with a profile hope to receive positive comments or compliments, but they usually get worse. Simmons (2011) indicates that “the more you look outside of yourself for self-worth, by visiting the website, the more personal authority and confidence you give up” (p. 133). Each moment of insecurity, jealousy, anger or anxiety online could ignite into something bigger (p. 123). In addition, she points out that “the site takes cyber cruelty to a new low by making it appear consensual: when you register for your account, you literally invite others to bash you with their “honest” opinions. Because it appears consensual, it no longer seems like cyber cruelty at all” (p. 132). Having a profile, however, is some point of pride, an indication that you can take it (p. 134).

Binns (2013) concludes that the levels of abuse on Formspring and Ask.fm are much higher than on other social media:

The abuse is not only vulgar and sexual, but also personally targeted, thus more wounding than the flaming commonly traded on anonymous forums. This personal abuse also causes distress and distrust in offline social circles. Young people commonly experience these sites as a game, or as being relatively unimportant until they receive abuse. Then, they experience it as real. (p. 13).

Simmons (2011) claims that teenage girls flock to Formspring because “the site offers the illusion that users can do an end run around the girl underground” (p. 133). Many of her respondents indicated that they believe that the anonymous comments tell the truth. This can be confirmed with a study done by Ellison et al. (2016) that demonstrated that anonymous comments were perceived to be more authentic or true than comments from identified users. Therefore, often teenagers buy into the fantasy that these comments tell the truth. In addition, Simmons (2011) writes that they do not consider that a comment is offered without any responsibility of the source. It seems that people experiment with others’ feelings as a ‘game’, to see how they would react or answer (p. 133).

The fact that users feel like it is a game, often comes back in both authors’ analyses. On this matter, Binns (2013) states that users feel like they are obliged to play the game until the end (p. 9). Respondents of her study indicated that they generally did not delete or deactivate profiles even when they had caused distress. Most had considered deleting their profiles, but
only a small amount actually did (p. 12). Binns’ research, however, did not profoundly investigate what the motives are to keep these profiles, which is partially what this thesis will try to understand.

What puzzles several theorists is why teenagers choose to make cruel questions/feedback that they receive public and thus for everyone to see. Binns (2013) points out: “this extreme form of self-disclosure, in which girls’ reveal the opinions of their enemies, seems new. It is hard to see any benefit to them” (p. 8). Her interviews demonstrated that girls decide to publish mean comments because of several reasons. First of all, when posting a mean comment, it made the girls come across ‘as if they did not care’ (61%). Another frequent given reason is ‘because they were angry or upset and wanted to disagree with or contradict the comment’ (47%). Other reasons were: ‘because they wanted other people to comment and be on their side’ (47%), ‘because if they decided not to post the comment, the abuser would know that they hurt the user’ (46%) or lastly ‘because they wanted other people to talk about them, since it makes them more interesting’ (41%) (p. 8).

Danah boyd (2014), one highly important theorist when it comes to teens’ online behaviour, never thoroughly investigated the phenomenon of semi-anonymous Q&A platforms. However, she seemingly did have smaller discussions with teenagers about it and she too was puzzled as to why teens would choose to respond and post atrocious questions. Within this subject, boyd identified the phenomenon “digital self-harm”, which she explains rather shallowly in her famous book, ‘it’s complicated’. With digital self-harm is meant someone’s infliction of self-harm online in a quest for sympathy, admiration or attention. Similarly, Elizabeth Englander (2012) recognized this phenomenon amongst her patients and identified it as “Digital Munchausen”. Boyd came up with this idea or concept after investigations of cyberbullying on Formspring that discovered that victims of cruel messages were actually also the ones that posted these hurtful comments (p. 141). Accordingly, boyd (2010) hypothesized three motives for this behaviour, namely: because it is ‘a cry for help’, because they want to appear ‘cool’ or because they are ‘trying to trigger compliments’. Englander on the other hand indicated with her study that most teens self-harmed themselves online to “prove they could take it” or to encourage others to worry about them.

Hinduja and Patchin (2017), both directors of the Cyberbullying Research Center, researched this occurrence as well after self-harm caught the eye when Hannah Smith, a 14-year-old girl,
committed suicide after what appeared to be online bullying on Ask.fm, but afterwards turned out to be digital self-harm. 98% of the messages sent to Hannah came from the same IP address as the computer she used (Bragg, November 9, 2017). From the 5600 high school students Hinduja and Patchin researched, approximately 6% have anonymously posted something online about themselves that could be considered as callous (p. 764). Englander (2012) on the other hand, reported that 9% of the teens she surveyed used the Internet to bully themselves, to feel better afterwards.

Staying within the same subject-matter, Preece (2015) claims that teenagers carry out dangerous offline and online behaviours to attract and maintain the attention or ‘gaze of others’. “To fail to do so is to commit what I term ‘social suicide’” (p. 138). In addition, he indicates that negative interaction attracts attention of other users, who are presumed to add or ‘friend’ the recipient to easily see and read interactions. As a result, ‘the victim’ accumulates a great amount of friends on the platform (p. 148). Nevertheless, boyd (2010) also reminds her readers that it is crucial to clarify that digital self-harm is probably not the only explanation behind the majority of negative anonymous comments out there. Either way, the truth is that these abovementioned occurrences make it harder to detect real bullying.

In another interesting study done by Homa Hosseinmardi et al. (2014a), the occurrence of negative words on Ask.fm as well as the ‘likes’ on questions and answers are examined rather technically. Their analysis led to many examples of cyberbullying. On the other hand, Hosseinmardi et al. (2014b), examined users who are common to two popular social networks: Instagram and Ask.fm, that are often used for cyberbullying. Negative and positive words in posts were analysed on both social network sites and negative user behaviour was analysed and compared. Furthermore, they explored the relationship between anonymity and negativity on Ask.fm. They discovered that there is more negativity on Ask.fm than on Instagram, which is similar to Barlett’s (2015) study that proves that anonymity is an important feature in social network sites (SNS) that frequently leads to negative behaviour. Barlett concluded that the results “show strong support that anonymity is an important predictor of CB\(^1\) behaviour (…) when individuals learn that CB is anonymous and the negative consequences are rare (given said anonymity), CB is likely to occur” (p. 75).

\(^1\) CB = Cyberbullying
Given the abundance of cyber cruelty that occurs on semi-anonymous Q&A platforms, associates within a Belgian research project, AMiCA, perceived the need for intelligent systems to identify potential risks automatically (Van Hee et al, 2015). For their research they collected 91,370 Dutch posts on Ask.fm. It quickly became clear that although the detection of cyberbullying is necessary, it is not a simple task. Similarly, and for the same reasons, Ashktorab et al. (2014) introduced a tool named iAnon. They had the intention to help victims of cyberbullying by supplying anonymous support through their social networks. In fact, iAnon automatically identifies Ask.fm users who are likely to get cyberbullied and allows good Samaritans to anonymously send friendly encouraging messages to victims. Finally, another similar research was done by Huang and Raisi (2016) who proposed a method to simultaneously discover vocabulary of words that indicate bullying, victims and instigators (p. 49).

Vis à vis other previous mentioned studies, some theorists tried to stress the positive aspects of anonymity. First of all, Kang, Dabbish and Sutton (2016) researched anonymity platforms like Wisper and Yik Yak (now shut down). Yik Yak and Wisper are, in contrast to Sayat.me, fully anonymous, which means that users do not have to make up a (pseudonym-) name or have the possibility to add a profile picture. They found out that being anonymous, participants seek the crowd for social validation, avoiding social risk or context collapse or to make short-term connections. Similarly, Ellison et al. (2016) demonstrate with their study the ways in which anonymous interactions assist in key developmental tasks during adolescence, for instance, to achieve social goals. One of their findings was that Ask.fm was used to bypass strict rules around socialization (i.e. who can talk to whom) and information-seeking (i.e. who can ask what). It is clear that anonymity allows more honesty, openness, diversity of opinion and that it can contribute to positive social dynamics (Ellison et al. 2016; Kang, Dabbish & Sutton, 2016).

To conclude, it is noticeable that almost all of the research done on semi-anonymous Q&A platforms have a certain correlation with cyberbullying or online abuse. Besides, most previous studies on these platforms are usually policy or applied research that address problems and therefore looking for a solution. With this thesis however, the purpose is to go further than the mere analysis and discussion regarding the occurrence of cyberbullying on
Sayat.me and accordingly to try and create a bigger picture or a better understanding of this considerably confusing phenomenon. From previous research it cannot clearly and unequivocally be understood what motivates teenagers to use these platforms, how and in what context they use it and how teens comprehend and deal with the ‘abuse’ on Sayat.me.
4. Statement of purpose

Whilst discussing the phenomenon of anonymous Q&A platforms with friends and other adults, an enormous lack of awareness and a lot of incomprehension were notable. For many, the whole idea of these platforms and teenagers’ use are a mystery. That is why this study attempts to create a better understanding of semi-anonymous Q&A platforms in a broader online existence and in relation to theories about teenagers and their digital media use. Nearly all previous research is focused on the ‘anonymous’ side of the platform and most with regard to cyberbullying. The truth is that online abuse indeed plays a prominent role on semi-anonymous Q&A platforms, which subsequently means that it will also be a leading subject within this thesis. Nevertheless, this study goes beyond the normative problematizing of the abuse on Sayat.me and tries to create a bigger picture of it, from teenagers’ point of view.

With this in mind, the research questions for this thesis are the following:

1. What attracts or motivates teenagers to create a profile and use the semi-anonymous question and answer platform Sayat.me?

2. How and in what context, particularly in relation to other social media, do teenagers use Sayat.me?

3. How do teenagers understand and deal with the ‘abuse’ encountered on Sayat.me?
5. Key concepts and theories

Semi-anonymous Q&A platforms occupy a special position in the digital world because of their feature of anonymity. However, as explained before, these platforms are considered a sub-category of social media. Therefore, theories on social media and teenagers’ online behaviour are treated as useful. The main concepts that are introduced in this chapter are ‘sociality’, ‘identity and self-presentation’, ‘cyberbullying’, ‘addiction’, ‘Fear of Missing Out’ and ‘parents and privacy’. Additionally, throughout this chapter some valuable and still applicable ideas from the late 1990s or early 2000s, when ‘the Internet’ was discussed differently and the capability of anonymity was more deliberated, will be discussed as well.

5.1. The ubiquity of social media

The latest theories concerning teenagers and their Internet use, often concern social media. The typically used definition for social media is given by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010): “social media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (p. 61). Boyd and Ellison (2007) complete this definition by describing social media as “web-based services that allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profiles within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p 211).

According to Mayfield (2007), the general characteristics of social media are: participation and openness. With this is indicated that most social media encourage and are open to feedback, information sharing and comments from all users. Two other characteristics are ‘conversation’ and ‘community’. Social media provide a place for two-way communication with an audience, often with common interests. Finally, social media also thrive for ‘connectedness’.

In her well-known book, ‘It’s complicated’, danah boyd (2014) offers insights from more than a decade of field work interviewing and observing teens in the United States. Boyd explains that teenagers yearn for social connection and a place of their own in society. For most
theorists, ‘sociality’ and ‘connection’ are the most important aspects of social media. For teenagers, friends are a source of companionship and entertainment.

5.1.1. Sociality

As key theorist within the field of social media, boyd (2014) tried to understand why teenagers are so drawn to social media. She found that the most common and widespread reason for teenagers’ attraction to social media is because they want to establish a ‘connection’. The Internet is an easy way to access friends and offers the opportunity to be with a broader public while being physically in a bedroom. In addition, according to Slevin (2000), the Internet brings people together that would otherwise never have been connected and it provides experiences that would normally not fit in everyday routines. Moreover, the Internet can offer information or channels of communication that are otherwise not accessible (p. 176-177, p. 179).

For some teenagers, living without social media would mean that their social life would decidedly shrink (boyd, 2014, p. 20). According to boyd (2014), everything comes back to ‘sociality’. Teens want to socialize with friends they know from physical settings and want to be informed about “interpersonal interactions” (p. 38; p. 144). A big amount of teens also indicates that they employ social media because it gives them things to talk about with peers or friends. They preserve and retain their affiliation by keeping each other up-to-date about all kinds of things that happened in their lives (p. 144). Teenagers want to initiate and develop relationships. Given the anonymity on semi-anonymous Q&A platforms, it is less obvious how sociality would emerge. Semi-anonymous Q&A are different from other social media platforms with regard to sociality. The question that consequently rises is: do they represent a complete deviation from these SNS and how could they be understood in that context?

It is clear that social media services can play an important role in the formation of popularity and status. They facilitate the spread of information and empower teens to meet evolving school dynamics. Sharing is some sort of currency online, which adroitly indicates one’s popularity. Teenagers look for content that could be interesting and engaging for their targeted audience (boyd, 2014, p. 143; p. 145). Sometimes, the more embarrassing the content is, the more attention it gets. However, boyd writes that teenagers restrict the visibility of content and switch to another platform or medium when they feel something might be
sensitive. Withal, it may occur that teenagers mess up to get attention and intentionally or unintentionally post an unsuitable comment that they know will cause a fuss (p 62).

Since social media is a place where friends, peers and sometimes strangers, with all different norms and different social expectations are compiled together, teenagers frequently have to deal with something that boyd (2014) calls collapsed context (p. 31). In this respect, Meyrowitz states (1985): “(…) By bringing many different types of people to the same ‘place’, electronic media have fostered a blurring of many formerly distinct social roles. Electronic media affect us, then, not primarily through their content, but by changing the ‘situational geography’ of social life” (p. 5-6).

On social media, teenagers usually have a certain audience in mind and for most part they imagine their audience online to be their actual friends. It is impractical and futile to take into consideration all thinkable interpretations. Often, teenagers have a different targeted audience in mind and forget that there are also others simply watching. For some it can be distressing to see their social groups converge. By any means, it is clear that the Internet makes it far from easy for teens; they have to find out where in society they fit in, while handling and interacting with networked and collapsed contexts, invisible audiences and having the strong possibility that what they say can be taken out of context (boyd, 2014, p. 53). Nowadays, online interactions occur in a place that is “neither distinctly public nor distinctly personal” (Gilpin, 2011, p. 233). Nevertheless, social media offer people the opportunity to express their opinions or to vent.

5.1.2. Identity and self-presentation

Notwithstanding, friends and thus social media play an utterly important role in teens’ way towards adulthood. As a matter of fact, social media affect impressionable teenagers: interests are shaped and self-images are adjusted. Teenagers learn how to engage in vital aspects of maturation like developing an understanding of the world, deal with social relationships and self-presentation (boyd, 2014, p. 95).

The idea of self-presentation is not a new one. Erving Goffman describes in his book ‘The presentation of Self in Everyday Life’ (1956) his concept of ‘impression management’. Although his theory dates from more than 60 years ago, it remains important and relevant
today to analyse online behaviour. With impression management Goffman means to express the conscious process of social rituals involved in self-presentation, or in other words the process in which people try to influence the perception of their image. He considers ‘identity’ as an endless performance. Goffman argues that people can be seen as actors on a ‘social stage’ or ‘frontstage’, where they create an impression of themselves for an audience. Like actors, people navigate ‘frontstage’ and ‘backstage’ areas.

Goffman (1956) makes a distinction between expressions given by someone (i.e. verbal actions) and expressions given off to others (i.e. facial movements or expressions). In contrast with expressions given, people can hardly control expressions given off. Together, they form the impression that people give to others. What others see of you depends on what you choose to share. Goffman points out that based on the social stage in which we find ourselves in and with whom we are, we put on diverse fronts. Impression management is all about the idealised image we want to portray of ourselves. We have to decide which aspects we want to conceal and which we want to highlight. Based on their imagined audience and the specific context, teenagers make decisions about what they share and post to guarantee the preservation of their image (boyd, 2014, p. 48)

However, some consider self-presentation as collaborative where, as Marwick and boyd (2011) explain, “individuals work together to uphold preferred self-images of themselves and their conversation partners” (p. 123). Boyd (2014) points out that when teenagers create profiles online, they are both individuals and part of a collective. What they share online constructs their self-representation, but also what their friends share and how other respond to posts online. Similarly, Livingstone (2008) argued that teens’ identity choices are conditioned by some norms and actions of their peer group.

With the subject of impression management also comes the idea of ‘authenticity’. ‘Honesty’ is what Sayat.me promises and we have to acknowledge that sincerity can be a possibly important aspect on semi-anonymous Q&A platforms. Of regular social media, like Facebook and Instagram, is often said that there is a lack of authenticity. Within the context of Twitter, Marwick and boyd (2011) claim that consciously speaking to an audience is perceived as inauthentic. In contrary with known social media, which can be seen as frontstage, considering Goffman’s theories, it seems that Sayat.me lets commenters be more themselves due to the anonymity. Hence, Sayat.me may in some sense give room for backstage and
could, in a way, complement the frontstage of social media, which is exactly the selling point of the platform.

Sherry Turkle, who spent the last 30 years researching the psychology of people’s relationships with technology, wrote two memorable books before the rise of social media: ‘The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit’ (1984) and ‘Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet’ (1995). Turkle celebrated life on the Internet as a place where we could explore different aspects of ourselves. One of her findings was that people had an intimate bond with computers because of ‘how it made them feel’ (1984, p. 186). In addition, she thought that individuals online “become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction” (Turkle, 1996). What excited her most was the idea that people would use all things they learned in the virtual world about themselves or about their identity, to live better lives in the real world. There was this idea of using the Internet to ‘escape the real world’ and many seemed to do this by taking on an avatar identity. Turkle (1995) believed that virtual worlds between humans and computers were becoming progressively blurred and that people would be able to escape limitations of their real life or ‘offline identities’. In other words, it was thought that the Internet could free people of the issues of their real life identities, thus having the possibility to become a better version of themselves, which is exactly what Sayat.me promises with their tagline “…Become a better you”. As a matter of fact, technology gives people more freedom to portray themselves how they want. Slevin (2000) adds to this that people are in some way selective in their Internet use, because some information or interaction is relevant for the project of the self, while other is not (p. 175). In any way, many thought that the Internet would bring a highly positive and auspicious future.

Remarkably, years later it seemed that Turkle had a change of heart and expressed this in her book ‘Alone Together’ (2011). It was clear that she was still excited about technology, but in a TEDxTalk (2012) she stated that she believes technology brings us places we do not want to go. After hundreds of interviews and years of research, Turkle discovered that our phones and computers are so psychological powerful, that they do not only change what we do, they change who we are. In addition, she claims that we are setting ourselves up for trouble because of the excessive use of technology. We seem to have more and more difficulties to relate to each other or ourselves and we seem to be struggling with our capacity to self-reflect (Turkle, 2012). Likewise, recent studies have discovered that empathy has declined amongst
teenagers. They show less concern for others the more they disconnect from real-life interactions (Adler, 2017, p. 46). We do not want to have conversations anymore because we are afraid to lose control over what we are going to say. When we text or post something, we can present ourselves the way we want, similarly to what Goffman implied with his presentation of the self.

Constant connection changes how people think about themselves. Moreover, most of the things people do today are things that only a few years ago would have been seen as odd or not done. This could partly explain why there is a generation gap between parents and their teenage children (Turkle, 2012). However, teenagers are making every effort to shape and mould an identity of their own that is not strictly defined by family ties. In doing so, they want to overcome the position between childhood and adulthood, dependence and independence (boyd, 2014, p. 17).

5.1.3. Parents and privacy

Boyd (2014) explains that “teens want access to publics to see and be seen, to socialize, and to feel as if they have the freedoms to explore a world beyond the heavily constrained one shaped by parents and school” (p. 202). What attracts curious teenagers to social media is the access to value and information that contradicts what their parents teach them (p. 98). Social media offers them a place to talk with friends, easily get acquainted with peers or to experiment without their parents knowing. An issue for most teenagers, however, is that we live in a world where parents can be overprotective.

Speaking of parents, teenagers do not want them to view their online profiles or look over their shoulders while socializing. Interactions on social media leave traces, which triggers disputes with parents regarding messages and pictures that are inappropriate in their eyes. In addition, parents often feel that teenagers share too much information. Similarly to what parents said when discussing semi-anonymous Q&A platforms, boyd (2014) explains that adults are horrified by what teenagers are willing to share and they do not understand “why anyone who cared about themselves and their privacy would be willing to be actively engaged online” (boyd, 2014, p 56). Given the fact that they share as much, parents assume that teenagers do not care about their privacy. Boyd, however, claims exactly the opposite.
As a matter of fact, according to boyd (2014), teenagers care about and seek privacy vis-à-vis those who hold power over them, which means that they avoid surveillance from parents, teachers and other authority figures. Some teens use certain social media because their parents do not know about it and in doing so, they try to avoid the control and meddling of adults (p. 56-59). Moreover, boyd claims that when teenagers post and share so broadly “it’s not that every teen is desperate for widespread attention; plenty simply see no reason to take the effort to minimize the visibility of their photos and conversations” (p. 65). She adds that teens are happy to publicly perform their social dramas on social media in front of their classmates and acquaintances because only their good friends that are up to date will understand and those that are not familiar with the drama will be socially isolated (p. 69).

Lastly, the difference between parents and teenagers is further expanded by Prensky’s (2001) distinction between digital natives and digital immigrants. In his article, Prensky declares that teenagers think and process information completely differently that adults do. He claims that teenagers’ thinking patterns have changed. Teenagers are labelled as ‘digital natives’ because they are ‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computers and the Internet. Adults, on the other hand, are not born in a digital world but they showed interest and embraced many aspects of new technology. These adults are what Prensky calls ‘digital immigrants’. Although this theory dates from before the social media era, this belief is still frequently referred to.

### 5.1.4. Bullying versus drama

Although many parents are considered to be overprotective of their children, some of their concerns are justifiable. For many theorists in the realm of social media, cyberbullying is a leading theme. Diverse studies discuss online bullying and sexual predators lurking. This has, however, never deterred teenagers to go online, says boyd (2014). In this regard, boyd claims that “technology does not create problems, even if it makes them more visible and even if news media relishes using technology as a hook to tell salacious stories about youth” (p. 24). This claim may be convincing for known social media, but less so when looking at semi-anonymous Q&A platforms. Further in her book, however, boyd adds that cruel interactions online leave traces, which heightens the visibility and consequently increases the emotional duress of a bullying incident (p. 133).
It is noticeable that many theorists seem to define cyberbullying differently. Although there is no general consent about the definition, cyberbullying is often defined similarly to traditional bullying, which is: “an act of aggression that is intentional, repetitive and towards an individual of lower power” (Olweus, 1993 cited in Görzig & Ólafsson, 2011). This description is generally extended with: “using electronic forms of contact, specifically mobile phones or the internet” to cover the ‘cyber’-aspect (Smith et al., 2006 cited in Görzig & Ólafsson, 2011). Swedish psychologist Dan Olweus (1993) identified three components that are central to bullying: aggression (psychological, physical or social), repetition and imbalance of power (social or physical). Only if all these components are at the scene in a certain situation, it is seen as bullying. Victims of bullying may suffer all kinds of consequences: low grades, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts, self-harm behaviour, mental health issues, truancy, social anxiety, delinquency, hostility and so on (boyd, 2014, p. 235). As boyd (2014) points out, “accepting Olweus’ definition means recognizing that individual acts of harassment or one-off fights are not bullying” (p. 131). In addition, she explains that a lot of parents and news media use the concept of ‘bullying’ far more loosely than teenagers who mostly use the term like Olweus (2012) described it (p. 132).

It so happens that teenagers rather use the word ‘drama’, according to boyd (2014, p. 137). She defines drama as “performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media” (p. 138). Calling it drama allows teenagers to distance themselves from emotional expenses connected with what happens. Apparently some teenagers incite drama out of boredom and to gain attention (p. 138). Bazelon (2013), on the other hand, claims that the Internet has changed bullying: when drama between friends goes public, anyone can join in, which makes it a bullying situation. Being involved within drama itself may also be a mark of popularity (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

It is important to note that it is more than the act itself that classifies an act as cruel. It is also about how it is intended, perceived and experienced. In some communities, you are supposed to have a thick skin and you need to accept some hurtful harshness from friends (boyd, 2014, p. 140). Moreover, boyd (2014) points out that:

 Teens may not accept the mantle of bullying because they don’t want to position themselves as victims, but that does not mean that they don’t feel attacked. They smile and laugh off the pain in public because they feel this is what their community
expects. They try to ignore any negative emotional response to drama because they don’t want their peers to see them as weak (p. 140).

As a teenager, the difference between ‘drama for pleasure’ and ‘hurtful drama’ may not be clear (p. 148). Often, this creates conflicts over reputation, attention and status. According to boyd (2014), attention may become a commodity for which teenagers are not shy to dirty their hands for. But bearing in mind all negative and/or harmful matters online, why do teenagers continue using social media, what motivates them to come back?

5.1.5. Motives for going and staying online

Although it is considered as self-evident by many ‘why teenagers go online’, it was an understandable question before the rise of social media. With her book ‘Internet Society – The Internet in the Everyday Life’, Maria Bakardjieva (2005) offers knowledge on motives of people’s consideration to invest time and money on Internet. First of all, she noticed that some started to reach for the Internet due to work or studies, for many the Internet can assist in learning things. Secondly, some went online because they wanted to fit in a certain group or community or because they felt they had to, out of pressure from friends and family (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Thirdly, for some the Internet can be a place where you can find people with shared interest, advice and expertise or a place just to forget your troubles and worries (Bakardjieva, 2005, p. 111). Despite the fact that media consumption activities are taking place in solitude (Bengtsson, 2006), Bakardjieva points out that there is a particular ‘feeling of togetherness’ that arises online. Individuals that go on the Internet out of social isolation or solitude, quickly discover the “socializing affordances embodied in the medium” (p. 123). Whether it is to connect with friends and family far away or to create new relationships online, the Internet seems to be there to save the day. However, according to Turkle (2011), the problem is that when we connect more and more online, we isolate ourselves more as well.

Furthermore, Bakardjieva (2005) distinguished three ways of approaching the Internet. The first category, the infosumption category, are the users that go online strictly for the sake of finding, accumulating or sharing information. These users find human contact or connections not necessary and not a motive to use the Internet. Secondly, she introduces the users that go online out of instrumental interaction motives. These users want to interact with others in
order to gain knowledge, information or to get a question answered, but not to get to know other users or to create any bond. Lastly, there are users that go online to explore ideas in virtual spheres, these people want to gain knowledge out of discussions but also want to socialize with others and want to build alliances with like-minded people (p. 170-173).

Bakardjieva (2005) found that having experts in the sense of possessing working knowledge of technology and having certain skills in terms of the Internet around, can be beneficial for the uptake and use of technology. These people are what Bakardjieva calls ‘warm experts’, often also the early adopters of the Internet. This means that new users are not facing technology and everything around it as an isolated individual (p. 190).

When it comes to reasons ‘why teenagers stay online’, many theorists and specialists claim that ‘addiction’ demonstrates why teenagers have the tendency to continue to use social media. It is not easy to delete a profile on social media and when finally deciding to do so, the specific platform often tries to retain you from leaving. Facebook, for instance, discourages users by portraying pictures they posted and giving a note of what they would leave behind.

In light of the above, Turkle (2011) explains that even if you want to leave, you cannot imagine it because you feel like a part of your life is there (p. 243). In his recent book, ‘Irresistible’, Adam Alter (2017) writes that social media is modelled on the system of uncertain reward, designed in that way to make sure we keep returning to the platform over and over again, just to check the responses. We are anxious about the success of posts or comments, the hit of dopamine when we receive another sign of approval is the very thing that keeps us clicking (Merritt, October 6, 2017). According to Alter, a behaviour is addictive “only if the rewards it brings now are eventually outweighed by damaging consequences” (p. 26). Moreover, from multiple studies it appears that people who use social media for distraction or to escape are more likely to have an unhealthy or dysfunctional relationship with it (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Davis, Flett & Besser, 2002; Masur et al., 2014). Rather extremely, and for some rather far from media theoretical interests, psychologist Kimberly Young, director of the Centre for Internet Addiction Recovery says that “it is just like any other addiction, it is hard to wean yourself” (cited in boyd, 2014, p. 77). Boyd admits that there are teenagers that have an unhealthy relationship with social media and some of her respondents explained that they have difficulties taking a step back from social media and subsequently suffer from the consequences of addiction (e.g. no sleep) (p. 16; p. 77; p. 96; p.
However, boyd writes that most teens are not addicted to social media, “if anything they’re addicted to each other”, since it is a healthy desire to be aware of environment and to relate to their society (p 80). In first instance, this specific claim seems to not exactly fit when looking at semi-anonymous Q&A platforms.

Correlated with addiction is ‘Fear of Missing Out’, also known as FOMO. According to Blackwell et al. (2017) fear of missing out is one amongst the main predictors of social media use and may cause addiction. FOMO is often described as the fear that friends are having fun without you or as Przybylski et al. (2013), pioneers of the FOMO-study, define: “a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent and is characterized by the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing” (p. 1841). People with high FOMO might feel the urge to check their social media more often and repeatedly ask affirmation of their identity by spending time online (Oberst et al., 2017).
5.2. Theoretical summary

Given the fact that Sayat.me is considered as a subcategory of social media, the logical response is that corresponding key ideas and theories would be appropriate to understand this phenomenon too. Likewise, a few relatable and still applicable ideas from before the rise of social media have been discussed as well.

The most decisive and typical feature of SNS is the opportunity of ‘socializing’ or ‘connecting’ with people easily. Becoming a teenager often means that friends occupy a prominent place in their lives and that their yearn for companionship is granted, without having to transport themselves anywhere. Social media also brings different social groups with contrasting norms and social expectations together, which can lead to context collapse. In addition, teens want to shape and mould an identity of their own. On social media, they share and spread information with an audience in mind, to portray a certain idealised image of themselves. Sharing online can be a sort of currency in the teen-world and plays an important role in the formation of popularity and status. What others see of you depends on what you choose to share, in order to make a good impression and at the same time to come across as authentic. In essence, teens struggle to make sense of who they are, how they fit into the world and their friends are an important piece of the puzzle.

Adults are often confused and concerned with their teens’ online behaviour, which creates a generation gap. Teenagers desire a place of their own, without their parents’ control. Nevertheless, sometimes parents’ concern is justified given the fact that the Internet is more than puppies and sunshine. One of the issues that some teenagers have to face is cyberbullying. Remarkably, theories have found that there is a difference in the understanding of this notion between adults and teenagers. Apparently teenagers rather use the term ‘drama’, to distance themselves from the emotional expenses of bullying. All in all, it is understandable that teenagers are more than fond of social media. Some theorists claim that the youth is addicted. Social media are modelled on the system of uncertain reward, which makes people anxious for signs of approval, which keeps them clicking. But not everyone agrees with this idea, some believe that teenagers are addicted to their friends. Lastly, it appears that some teens are afraid to miss out, which is also considered a reason why teenagers are heavily active on social media.
6. Methodology

Since this topic has not yet been investigated thoroughly, the aim of this thesis is to create a general understanding of semi-anonymous Q&A platforms in a broader social media existence. Specifically, the intention is to find out what attracts teenagers to these platforms, how and in what context they use it and how they deal with the abuse they encounter.

For this thesis, empirical material through semi-structured in-depth interviews with Sayat.me-users has been collected. The aim with this qualitative study is not to generalize but rather to explain this phenomenon as thoroughly as possible. Therefore, six individual interviews were conducted in the beginning of March 2018, each taking up at least an hour and a half. All interviews were recorded and transcribed subsequently. Additionally, when the interviewees allowed to do so, the use and navigation of the platform was observed to get a better grasp of the platform and users’ interactions with it. Notes were taken about observations, documenting possible physical communication. The discourse was thoroughly analysed afterwards, based on Creswell’s (2009) guide for data analysis that proposes an analysis through a coding process with identified themes. In preparation for the interviews and the analysis, Sayat.me was used and several user reviews of the platform were looked at as well.

6.1. Advantages, disadvantages and limitations to the chosen method

Interviews seemed the best method for this study given that it is the most common way to explore views, experiences and motivations of individuals. In fact, semi-structured interviews are useful to obtain more details and individuals’ perspectives. Moreover, previous studies demonstrate that interviews contribute to a profounder understanding of social phenomena. This method is after all also most appropriate when analysing delicate matters, which in this thesis would be the occurrence of online abuse or cyberbullying (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

Another advantage when conducting interviews is the possibility to probe both in a direct as well as in an indirect way. Probing is used when a certain question has not been answered correctly or if the interviewer wants a more in-depth answer. Direct probing is done by repeating the question, giving a summary of the participant’s answer (e.g. “so if I understand
it correctly…” or asking questions to explain something more concretely. Indirect probing on the other hand is mirroring the question (i.e. repeating the answer with a question mark), functional silence or non-verbal communication (e.g. nodding).

However, conducting face-to-face interviews also has some disadvantages or weaknesses which may cause limitations to the study. As Berger (2011) explained, during interviews respondents do not always tell the truth and sometimes express themselves the way they think the researcher expects. Besides, it can happen that respondents do not remember or explain events accurately. Furthermore, it is known that the quality of the data also depends on the ability of the interviewer and as a researcher, it may occur that there is an existing bias due to certain assumptions, personal ideas or previous research. A researcher can always oversee certain aspects or clear views can be blurred (p. 149-150). Lastly, the psychological nature of the subject may cause delicate or sensitive moments during the interviews.

6.2. Justification of the method

Why Sayat.me?

Although there are several semi-anonymous Q&A platforms, the underlying study is based on Sayat.me. Choosing for one specific platform has several reasons. First of all, it helps to narrow down the study as a whole and thus investigate deeper. However, as mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, all these different semi-anonymous Q&A platforms (i.e. Ask.fm, Formspring or Sarahah) are extremely similar and some are even copies of others. In comparison with Ask.fm and Formspring (shut down), Sayat.me is simply a younger platform. As the analysis below will indicate, the choice of platform does not necessarily affect the general findings and ideas. Rather, there is a focus on Sayat.me because a growing number of young Belgian teenagers started using the platform in the summer of 2017, which ignited the idea of this study.

Selection of respondents and setting

Semi-anonymous Q&A platforms seem to be most popular amongst younger teenagers. Therefore, for this specific study, teenage girls between 12 and 15 years old have been interviewed. The girls are in their first year until the third year of Belgian high school. At that
age most are already in their adolescence which means that several may be struggling with themselves and their identity. When discussing the phenomenon with a group of teenagers aged 16 or 17 years old, it quickly became clear that they were less interested in these semi-anonymous Q&A platforms, notwithstanding they all knew it. One 16-year-old teenage boy said it was something for “insecure attention-seeking ‘children’”, upon which the others reacted with approving nods and hums.

But why limiting this research to girls? First of all, both studies done by Binns and Simmons, which are considered as significant bases for this study, have targeted girls. Simmons (2011) claims that for young girls, semi-anonymous Q&A platforms may seem the perfect way to get all kind of nice and sweet comments (p 133). Secondly, previous research regarding anonymously sending hurtful messages has indicated that girls are more likely to suffer this way. Besides, Simmons points out that girls live in a social universe where truth is concealed and conflict or rivalry is evaded.

The interviews were conducted in Belgium due to the language barrier, thus all interviews were conducted in Dutch or in French. Although most teenagers presumably have the ability to speak and understand English at a satisfactory standard, for some the subject can become sensitive or delicate. In case this happens, it is better to be able to talk in a native language. Another reason why this study is based on Belgian teenagers is because Sayat.me is not (yet) as popular in other countries. The quotes in following analysis have all been translated from Dutch or French and try to remain as close to the original expressions as possible.

When looking for participants, it did not matter if they knew each other or not. The respondents were found through certain friends, the participants’ parents or their siblings. All interviews were conducted individually, on separate moments and at different locations. Four out of the six interviewees were rather popular at school and on social media, with two of them even having more than 1000 followers on Instagram. This difference could be considered as crucial during this study, given the importance of popularity during high school and its possible influence on their use of Sayat.me.

Where the interviews took place depended on where the teenagers preferred to meet and where they felt most comfortable. Five out of six participants chose to do it at home, in their bedrooms. One girl did not want to do it at home, so she asked to meet in the city. It quickly
became clear that all teenagers absolutely did not want for their parents to hear them discussing this subject. Two parents proposed to do it in the living room, but the teenagers argued or refused and quickly closed the door. Given the subject, it also seemed better to do it without parents, so that the teenagers would not hold back and would answer more truthfully.

*Strategies on approach*

Since the participants of this study were all young teenage girls between 12 and 15 years old, it was necessary to have a certain strategy to approach them and to make sure they would open up. Some teenagers may not be used to interviews, so it was important to make sure there was a familiar and relaxed atmosphere.

At the beginning of each interview, the girl and her parent(s) were informed of what the study would be about and what the data would be used for. In addition, it also seemed crucial to explain that each participant could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time. Since some teenagers may sometimes have the feeling that they have to give ‘correct’ answers, it was made sure that they understood that there was no right or wrong during the interview. Moreover, the respondents and their parents were reassured that all collected data would remain anonymous.

6.3. **Ethics**

Working with teenagers on such a possibly sensitive topic is not always easy. Since the respondents are all minors, each girl got a pseudonym name throughout this study. All collected data and recordings will, other than with this study’s supervisor, not be shared and will be kept confidential at all times. Although there is no clear regulation about parental consent and age groups in Belgium, all participants and their parent or guardian have been asked their consent explicitly to this study and were given contact information in case of follow-up questions.
7. Analysis

Throughout this analysis chapter, all results from the conducted interviews are given and compared with key concepts and theories explained above. Various aspects concerning the semi-anonymous Q&A platform Sayat.me, are discussed in detail. There are six subchapters beginning with a brief overview of who the respondents are. Then, the practical usage of the platform is discussed followed by a subchapter on the hurtful comments and abuse these Belgian teens encounter on Sayat.me. The fourth and fifth subchapters discuss and analyse the friendship performance and the teenagers’ personal journey on the platform. Finally, the teenagers’ privacy management and the reason for their continued use on Sayat.me are addressed.

To recapitulate, the aim of this thesis is to create a general understanding of the semi-anonymous Q&A platform, Sayat.me. More particularly, this thesis tries to gain a better insight in what allures Belgian teenagers to Sayat.me, how and in what context they use the platform and how these teenagers understand and deal with the abuse they encounter on it.

7.1. Who is who?

For the benefit of this following analysis, the six interviewed Belgian girls will shortly be introduced, under their given pseudonym.

Emma is 14 years of age and of all participants, she was the most subdued and demurred. Emma thought long and hard before answering questions as she tried to appear as mature as possible. Throughout the interview, however, she came off as rather insecure. Emma declared herself “not as naïve as other girls” but also “unpopular”. Emma has 264 followers on Instagram. She is only authorized to add real friends she knows in, what she calls, ‘real life’ from her parents. She lives in a terrace house with her mother who is a night nurse and visits her father in the city almost every weekend together with her brother.

Lucy is the same age as Emma and they know each other from taking the bus to school together. As a matter of fact, they even had some similar personality traits. Lucy was mostly

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3 The reason why the amount of followers on Instagram is specified will become clear at the beginning of the following subchapter
shy, cautious and worried that her parents would hear what she said. She does not like drama and has incredible grades in school. Lucy has 383 followers on her Instagram and carefully selects the pictures she posts on her profile. Lucy’s parents seem to be very protective and would offer their children whatever their heart desires. Her mother works part-time as a translator and her father works in the car industry. The family lives in the countryside, just outside the centre of a small town.

Of all participants, Claire was the youngest one with the age of 12, nearly 13, years old. Claire seemed to have an answer for everything, a remarkable sharp tongue for her age and appeared precocious. With her 1172 followers on Instagram, she was also one of the most popular teenagers of her school. Her followers were something Claire was proud of and she considered herself a ‘trendsetter’. Like most children of her age, she used Sayat.me in the way she thought was best. As an only child, Claire gets a lot of attention at home. Since her father works in the traveling industry, she proudly explained that she has visited all continents in the world already. Her mother teaches yoga classes in a studio at home, so Claire is barely home alone.

Katherine is 13 years old and from what she said ‘a good friend of Claire’. The interview started off a bit stiff and she explained she could be shy sometimes. After a brief conversation, Katherine started to feel more comfortable and opened up quickly. She did not want to meet at home, out of fear her mother and step-dad would interfere. With her 621 followers on Instagram, she is considered to be rather popular and most of her content on her profile are with her boyfriend and other friends. Katherine’s domestic situation can sometimes be complex, she explained, with her father living abroad because of work and her mother recently remarrying. She decided to stay with her mother in Belgium, where she currently lives in a large apartment in the city with her stepdad and two stepsisters.

A second popular participant, with her 1239 followers on Instagram, is Alice. Alice is 13 years old, loves make-up and dancing and smiled throughout the whole interview. Compared to Emma, Alice answered very quickly and even seemed to contradict herself sometimes. She made a lot of jokes, discussed things coolly and wanted to appear confident and ‘fun’. Like Claire, Alice is an only child and both her parents work in the family business they have created in the beauty industry. Besides that, her father works as an energy consultant from home. Together they live in a manor at the centre of a small town.
Lastly there is Sarah, a 13-year-old girl that loves sports. During the first minutes of the conversation, Sarah explained that she thinks that “**social media feels sometimes as an obligation, but a fun one**”. Sarah was a bit rougher in her language than the others, yet expressed herself very well. She also pointed out that she did not really care how many followers she had on Instagram, but smiled when showing that she had 502. Sarah’s father travels for work since he has several firms all over the world. The family lives in a villa at the countryside, surrounded by woods.

### 7.2. Sayat.me in the eyes of teenagers

#### 7.2.1. The practical usage of Sayat.me

To start with this analysis, one of the most striking observations during this study was the large gap between the intended idea that Sayat.me producers had given on their webpage of how people would use the platform and the actual usage of Sayat.me by teenagers.

Let us first recapitulate the basic characteristics of Sayat.me. To create a profile, the only thing you need to do is choose a username and a password and indicate that you are older than 16. This is odd given the fact that Sayat.me’s terms of use indicate that to use the platform “you must be at least 18 years of age or have valid authorisation from your legal representative” (Sayat.me, n.d.).

![Figure 1: Signing up on Sayat.me](image)
The design of the platform is rather simple and spare. Following image is what your own profile looks like:

![Profile Image]

Figure 2: Example of own profile Sayat.me

As a user, you get the option to personalize your account with a picture, your date of birth and a question to ‘find out more about yourself’. Users get four suggested questions or can choose to create a question of their own. By default, all users have the question ‘Please tell me what you really think about me, honestly and anonymously’ on their profile. To keep the website safe, the platform asks the users’ e-mail address. Through their e-mail address, users could get notifications about new feedback or questions they received. Since Sayat.me only exists as a webpage and there is no application available, users can only receive notifications if they register their e-mail address. Nevertheless, teenagers do not seem to do this, mainly because they do not see any benefit from it.

When creating a profile on Sayat.me, everyone receives a personal URL. The idea is that the users post this URL on their other social media profiles, such as on Facebook and Instagram. Anyone that clicks on this URL, gets redirected to that individual’s Sayat.me profile and is offered to ask a question or give feedback completely anonymously. Following image is what visitors get to see:
So far, when going through the platform, all respondents indicated that they mostly followed what Sayat.me said. But that is about it.

Let us begin with the biggest difference between Sayat.me’s idea of how the platform should be used and the teenagers’ actual use of the platform. First of all, founders had expected that when receiving an anonymous question or feedback, users would answer and consequently post the question on the Sayat.me platform itself, by which the question and its specific answer are made public. But this is far from the truth. When reading the who is who of the participants above, one might have wondered why the number of followers on Instagram is given. This is actually because it appears that Instagram plays a significant role in the practical usage of Sayat.me.

Easily explained, after your profile has been created and your personal URL received, that URL is placed in your ‘bio’ on Instagram. Usually, teenagers take a screenshot of their bio and add this photo on their Instagram story, to announce that they are active on Sayat.me and to incite people to send them an anonymous comment. The feedback and questions that users receive on Sayat.me are initially private and it is up to the user to decide what to do with the message. The biggest surprise when the respondents demonstrated their use of Sayat.me was the way they publish and answer to these anonymous messages. Claire explained: “If you decide to answer the message, you take a screenshot, you put it on your Instagram story and you type on your story the response you want to give”.

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4 The column where you present yourself on your profile on Instagram
5 Instagram stories are a way to show different video’s and photos to your followers and appear in a ‘slideshow format’. The stories stay visible for 24 hours on your profile.
Katherine pointed out that “Nothing really happens on Sayat.me, other than receiving questions and feedback and taking a screenshot of it”. All respondents indicated that to use Sayat.me, Instagram is key. Emma even thought that if Instagram would not be used anymore, it would definitely mean the end of Sayat.me as well. Claire added to this that she uses Sayat.me to make Instagram more interesting. The anonymity on Sayat.me is clearly the most important and appealing feature on the platform, which provides experiences that would normally not occur in teenagers’ daily lives. Sayat.me is considered to be an independent platform, but teenagers do not really use it that way, for them it is simply said an ‘add-on’ for Instagram, which actually changes the concept and sense of the platform in a way.

Aside teens’ ‘bio’, there is another way to generate visitors to your Sayat.me profile according to Sarah. Although all girls indicated that using Facebook to promote or to post screenshots of ‘their Sayat’s’ is ‘not done’, it can happen that people use Snapchat to boost their number of visitors. Sarah showed me how: “You just take a picture on your Snapchat, it can just be a black one or just anything and then you can add your URL. Usually you post that picture on you Snapchat story and people can swipe up to get to your profile” However, this way, Sarah added, is less frequently used than Instagram stories.

The discussions about how the platform actually works also brought up some discontentment towards Sayat.me. Since there only is a webpage, the girls were annoyed with the fact that they had to open a webpage, surf to ‘www.Sayat.me’ and sign in every single time. Nonetheless, Lucy, who is one of the best students in school, commented that in comparison with regular social media, Sayat.me is less a distraction due to the lack of notifications. She did, however, agree with the fact that it could also trigger curiosity, which would cause even more regular checking of your Sayat profile.

When asking how they would position Sayat.me in respect to other social media, most of the girls said that they did not consider it as ‘usual’ social media (i.e. Instagram, Facebook, Twitter). It seems that for these teenagers, Sayat.me is merely treated as an extension of Instagram. Since Instagram plays such a major role in the usage of Sayat.me, it is not surprising that all six girls indicated that they got in touch with Sayat.me through other peers’ Insta-stories.
Another surprising observation was that the teenagers indicated that they never used the feature that offers users to create a ‘poll’ or ask questions themselves, upon which visitors can answer anonymously. All girls knew that this feature existed, but none used it. One of the most popular girls, Alice, said that this was because “not a lot of people would look at your question, people that do visit your Sayat.me just go there with the intention and a certain idea of what feedback they want to give you, they are not there to answer a question”.

Additionally, Sayat.me created the option for users to ‘friend’ other people on the platform. In doing so, teens would develop a newsfeed where all posts to friends’ Sayat.me profile are collected. When asking the girls about this feature, half of them, namely Sarah, Lucy and Katherine, were not aware of the possibility to ‘friend’ others on Sayat.me. However, during the discussion, every single girl indicated that she was not interested in this ‘friending’ feature. The reason for their lack of interest will be explained further under the subchapter on ‘Friendship performance’.

7.2.2. Hate comments

Nearly all previous research done on semi-anonymous Q&A platforms have been focusing on the subject of cyberbullying or online abuse. The fact remains that this is a prominent actor on these platforms. Boyd (2014), however, made it clear that a lot of adults and media use the concept of bullying far more loosely than teenagers.

With this idea in mind, it was surprising to see that during all six interviews, the girls spontaneously started discussing the prevailing occurrence of online abuse or ‘bullying’ and specifically how this appears on Sayat.me. To show you the kind of abusive messages teenagers receive on Sayat.me, following are some examples that each girl showed or told me:

“You are really an attention-whore and when you open your mouth, people instantly roll their eyes. No one likes you, bitch” and “You really think you are pretty but wtf, I can tell you that you are fucking ugly. You just think you are too good, but you are not. Fat slut.”. – Received by Alice

“Haha you are so ugly and your forehead is huge. How is it even possible that Ryan likes you, you two are the most pathetic couple ever. He really likes you and you are just a stupid ugly
“bitch” and “You’re such a chi-chi slut, I fucking hate you” and “sluuut” – Received by Katherine

“Hey nerd, you literally have zero friends. You should know how people talk about you in school hahaha” and “you’re such a sad person” – Received by Lucy

“A friend of mine, her father passed away because of cancer a few months ago and she got a message on her Sayat saying ‘good that your father died, now your mother just needs to kill herself’. It was really sad” and “You feel way too good about yourself, bitch why though? You should just shut the fuck up. Thanks” – Story/received by Claire

“Wtf, I am sure you are a dyke. No boy wants you” and “why are you always with guys? Is it because you have 0 girl-friends?” – Received by Sarah

“Heyyy, I just wanted to tell you what everyone thinks about you: You’re FAT. Okay bye” and “wajow, fatso” – Received by Emma

Abovementioned comments personally attack the owner of the profile, but in addition it appears not to be uncommon to ‘hate’ on other or third people through individuals Sayat. Along with the dispersion of rumours about peers, many teenagers apparently receive questions where they have to judge, choose between or give scores to other individuals. Alice declared that she receives these kind of comments quite often, “I have to cross out the people I don’t like for instance, give boys or girls a score of one to ten or give a top ten”. Emma made it clear that she had been affected by this too and explained how this may hurt others: “1) if you are in it and you are at the bottom of the list 2) if you get a bad score or 3) if you are not even considered to be good or important enough to be in the lists”. The most disturbing feeling teenagers in this situation get is the feeling of ‘powerlessness’.

It took a while to realise that teenagers had a specific term for this online abuse, namely ‘hate’. Surprisingly, all said that ‘hate’ is just a part of the whole Sayat.me experience. As Simmons (2012) explained regarding Formspring, all interviewed girls hope to receive positive comments, but contradicting Simmons, all were also very realistic and declared they knew very well beforehand that they would receive negative comments. Claire expressed that “everyone gets hate, from the most popular to the sweetest girl in school”. It is like receiving
hate is the most natural thing for these girls, it goes without saying. Maybe this has become a new cultural norm? Sarah said that it is self-evident that anonymity leads to hate, exactly confirming Bartlett’s (2015) findings. She added that youngsters send these kind of messages “just to make others feel bad and to entertain themselves. They’re probably just jealous or insecure themselves”. Moreover, all interviewees believed that if you cannot handle hate or if you are too insecure, you just should not have a profile: “You have to understand the risks of Sayat.me”, Emma says. It was Claire, the most outspoken teenager of all, that pointed out that “to have Sayat.me, you have to be able to handle the hate”. In addition, all six girls declared that some of their friends decided not to create a profile, out of fear for this ‘hate’. This contradicts boyd’s (2014) claim that all the negative consequences of the Internet never deterred teenagers to go online. These teenagers seem to realise that the correlation between Sayat.me and ‘hate’-comments cannot be avoided. But if truth be told, it does appear that not having a profile on Sayat.me does have some consequences on others’ idea of you. This, however, will be further discussed under the subchapter ‘personal journeys: a quest of finding themselves and portraying an image’. Remarkably, Alice explained that whenever she receives some negative messages, it seems as though others follow this example which increases the number of abusive comments.

While testing the platform, two precautionary measures the website takes to prevent bullying were noticeable. First of all, similarly to Sarahah, if the visitor uses some curse words, the website prevents the message to be sent. It is however, way too easy to override this measure. Apparently teenagers just use an asterisk (*) or abbreviations to hide certain letters so that the message could either way be sent. Nevertheless, the words can still be understood: for instance, ‘fuck’ would be sent as ‘f**k’. Secondly, an animated image of a puppy pops up quite randomly on the website to persuade teenagers not to “be a heckin’ bully” (see figure 4).

Figure 4: Anti-bullying measure

The logical subsequent question was if they considered this hate to be cyberbullying. Lucy, Emma and Sarah had to think a while before answering but in the end all girls said they did
not feel as they were being cyberbullied. Nevertheless, they explained that they thought others sometimes were. Most of the girls acknowledged cyberbullying the way traditional theorists like Olweus (1993) defined it. Emma and Katherine even mentioned the components ‘aggression’, ‘repetition’ and ‘power imbalance’ in their own words and on that note, Lucy explained: “sometimes I feel really helpless. You have no clue who sent the message and you cannot do anything”. In addition, each girl pointed out that it also depends on how the hurtful messages were intended and perceived, like boyd (2014) explained. On the other hand, Sarah, Lucy, Alice and Claire mentioned that if this behaviour would happen in ‘real life’ or when they actually know the abuser, it would be a lot more hurtful and in that case they would indeed feel bullied. Similarly to both Binns’ (2013) and Simmons’ (2012) findings, it appears that the whole experience on Sayat.me is more than a game. After a while, when talking about specifics, every single girl admitted that some messages make them feel bad, “everyone does feel a bit bad” according to Emma.

Anyway, in her book ‘it's complicated’, boyd (2014) wrote that teenagers rather use the word ‘drama’ than cyberbullying to distance themselves from emotional expenses connected with what happened. She defines drama as “performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media” (p. 138). It may be due to the difference in language, although ‘drama’ is a loanword from English, but ‘drama’ is not considered to be the right choice of word for these interviewees. Belgian teenagers do not consider all cruel words and painful comments they and many other receive as ‘drama’, that would be an understatement of what really happens, they explained. Moreover, for them, drama seems to be something that occurs between people. Hate, on the other hand, is attacking someone in a very personal way. Then again, maybe Belgian teenagers use the term ‘hate’ also to distance themselves from all emotional expenses.

Although teenagers do not use the word drama to name or discuss abuse on Sayat.me, the interviews made it abundantly clear that Sayat.me is a platform where drama begins or is maintained. This drama can subsequently worsen in real life. Alice, for instance, described a situation that got out of proportion because of Sayat.me: “Suddenly I received several Sayat’s telling me I abandoned my friend Hellen for another friend and that I only thought about popularity. I did not understand at all where that came from, I just hung out with another girl during break time. It was a whole discussion on Sayat and at school, which even led to a fight”. Following Bazelon’s theory, the fact that anyone can join in when drama between
friends go public, would make of this a bullying situation. The interviewees, however, did not agree with this.

However, in contrast to what Binns (2013), Ellison et al. (2016) and Simmons (2011) claim, these teenage girls do not have the feeling that hurtful anonymous comments are more authentic or true than comments from identified users. On the contrary, the girls relativize this whole negative occurrence with the thought that the abusers are just weak and hiding behind a screen. It was Katherine that explained that “it’s so easy to send mean feedback, okay they want to hurt you and even find your breaking point, but literally anyone can send it so you just cannot take it too much to heart”. This contradicts exactly Simmons’ finding saying that teenagers do not consider the fact that these comments are offered without any responsibility of the source. The interviewees pointed out that because ‘abusers’ do not have to own up, the whole encounter with hurtful messages feels less real than if it would happen on other social media. However, they claimed that if they received similar negative comments several times and if they were able to recognize themselves in it, then they would consider the message to contain some truth. Then again, positive messages were seen as authentic and true because anonymity does not prevent people to be honest and genuine either. In any way, although this specific discussion about what is true and what is not was a bit confusing for both parties, it is clear that whether it is considered as a truthful positive comment or just a hurtful message from some peer, each and every one of these girls cares about what others think.

Further noticeable was that for these 13- to 14-year-old teenagers, messages of a sexually explicit nature seem to go quite far. Alice, for instance, received a Sayat involving her breasts and suggesting in an explicit way what he, the sender, would want to do with her. Both Claire and Katherine heard about this incident and were the ones that brought up how unacceptable this was. Claire explained that this was the main subject matter in school for days and that many peers appeared to be judgemental towards Alice for this. It is as boyd (2014) explained that the more embarrassing the content is, the more attention it gets. This kind of sexual innuendo is clearly not accepted, but it seems that it does not occur as much as ‘hate’.

Even though these girls all denied to be cyberbullied, ‘hate’ also clearly causes distress and negative feelings. It is not because they feel like these hurtful messages are less real sometimes, that it does not affect them. The most evident reaction to all ‘hate’ is insecurity within themselves. Both Lucy and Claire admitted that some nights they worried about some
feedback they received and if others thought the same about them. Moreover, Emma declared that she often has felt nervous or stressed due to Sayat.me: “It’s like... you know that you will receive some nasty comments, but still... you just don’t know how bad they will be, so I’m a bit stressed sometimes”. Besides all stress and insecurity that Sayat.me can cause, each girl also explained that she felt paranoid sometimes. Whenever they received a hate-comment, they would go through all their Instagram followers that viewed their stories. Their ‘hater’ is supposed to be in that list. In addition, they often had a feeling of distrust towards peers. Lucy, for instance, said that some days she could walk on the playground and wonder about everyone if he or she was the one that sent hate, even about some of her friends. Of course, most teenagers also feel frustrated because of the anonymity-aspect on Sayat.me, the fact remains that it is nearly impossible to identify who sent the messages.

It was in the beginning of her book that boyd (2014) claimed that “technology does not create problems, even if it makes them more visible and even if news media relishes using technology as a hook to tell salacious stories about youth” (p. 24). As mentioned before, this claim is less convincing with regard to semi-anonymous Q&A platforms. It is clear that social media empowers people to be more confident and to express themselves more than they would in real life. But in first instance, empathy can be hard to find on these semi-anonymous Q&A platforms. This type of platforms, however, simply offers a perfect cover and can bring out the worst in people. It is true that teenage drama, or in this case ‘hate’, has always existed, but anonymity seems to take this behaviour to a next level.

Each girl was asked how many of these ‘hate’ comments they had received compared to positive messages. Claire, Katherine and Alice, the rather popular girls, roughly estimated it had to be around 60% positive comments for them, depending on certain situations, while Emma, Sarah and Lucy thought they personally received around 80% nice comments. Is it a coincidence that more popular teenagers seem to receive more ‘hate’ than others? Logically, the more followers you have on Instagram, the more Sayats you receive. Lucy, Sarah and Emma seem to be less conspicuous and have been obliged by their parents to restrict or chose themselves to limit their followers to friends and people they actually know. This may result in a smaller amount of people with bad intentions. Besides, sending hate to less popular teenagers also means that your message reaches a smaller audience than if you would attack a more popular peer.
However, besides all negativity that comes with anonymity, the girls stated that it also gives courage to people that otherwise would not dare to speak up. It seems that positive things can also come out of their activity on Sayat.me. It is more than doom and gloom; why would they otherwise keep coming back to it?

### 7.2.3. Friendship performance

The previous section on ‘hate comments’ has proven that the semi-anonymous Q&A platform Sayat.me more is than puppies and sunshine. One might wonder what on earth keeps them on these platforms given how they receive such spiteful messages they call ‘hate’. Firstly, all six teenagers said that being on Sayat.me could also be highly entertaining. As mentioned in the theoretical chapter, for boyd (2014) ‘connection’ is the main reason why teenagers go on social media. It is questionable however, if this aspect of ‘connection’ even remotely occurs on Sayat.me. Moreover, boyd wrote that teenagers want to socialize with friends they know from physical settings. How would this happen, given the anonymity of the commenters? The girls gave several examples of how socializing or signs of friendship occur on Sayat.me. It will, however, quickly become clear that the ‘social’-aspect on Sayat.me not as axiomatic as on other social media, like Facebook or Instagram.

First, it needs to be mentioned that teenagers do not constantly use their Sayat.me, unlike other social media. As previously explained, teenagers post their personalized URL in their ‘bio’ on their Instagram profile. Now, it appears to be that teens do not have that URL in their bio all the time. When asked what that depends on, Claire answered: “*if you see that others use it as well, so if you see it again in others’ bio or stories, then you usually follow and put it in your bio too*”. Seemingly, people that start with Sayat.me again are usually the most popular. Lucy added to this: “*sometimes I feel a bit pressured, if you see that no one uses it anymore then you have to stop as well, otherwise you’re like the only one that still has it in your bio*”. Popular teenagers that lead the use of Sayat.me could be understood as to what Bakardjieva (2005) identified as ‘warm experts’. It turns out that every two or three weeks Sayat.me hypes up again for a week or so and afterwards most erase the URL from their bio. It seems to be some kind of unspoken rule. Nevertheless, this does not mean that teenagers do not use Sayat.me often. As a matter of fact, as soon as they have their URL in their bio, they are awfully active on the platform, most teens posting an Instagram story every hour or so. To give you an idea of the magnitude of this, some received hundreds of messages in the course
of just a few weeks: Alice has received 543 ‘Sayat’s’ or comments, Claire 591, Katherine 414, Sarah and Lucy more or less around 300 and Emma 162.

Within this subject, Alice added that “if there’s like a huge fight, you’ve done something in school or there’s just something special going on, then you usually also post your URL again in your bio”. It may be as Slevin (2000) stated, that teenagers are selective in their Internet use because some information or interaction is relevant for the project of the self, while other is not (p. 175). Nevertheless, this specific dynamic use of the platform is unfamiliar, especially when looking at other SNS. Moreover, it also seems that this interplay has a certain impact on how teenagers attach importance to Sayat.me. This latter finding will be further addressed and clarified in the last subchapter concerning teens’ long-lasting commitment to Sayat.me.

Secondly, besides all the vicious comments, teenagers naturally receive positive feedback or compliments. “No one would stay on Sayat if it wasn’t for the compliments, that’s logical”, said Claire. The girls’ faces lit up when we discussed these positive comments. Compliments are mostly in the following nature; “you’re so sweet” (received by Lucy), “you’re really pretty” (received by Alice), “I’m jealous of how well you play basketball xx your admirer haha” (received by Sarah). At first sight these compliments seem rather shallow, especially in contrast with the dire comments they receive. Surprisingly, it appears that these small positive comments from strangers are considerably important for teenagers, it seems to lift them up. For them, it is proof that there are people out there that like them.

Furthermore, the interviewees explained that each time they receive some ‘hate’ comments and they post it on their stories, they could count on their good friends to comfort them, have their back and contradict the abusive message. Examples of these support-comments were the following: “don’t mind those haters, Ryan loves you and you’re really pretty. Everyone knows how easy it is to send those message. Say it to the face if you dare, pussies” (received by Katherine), “You’re one of the nicest persons in school, don’t beat yourself up!” (received by Lucy), “Wow you stupid assholes, you should just shut the fuck up. You haters are probably just so insecure and ugly yourselves that you need to diss someone else” (received by Alice), “You guys don’t even know Emma, leave her alone, she’s awesome” (received by Emma). It was Turkle (2011) who explained that when we make ourselves vulnerable, we expect to be nurtured and repaired in intimacy (p. 235). For these girls, these messages seemed to be very
important. Katherine explained that “Thanks to those comments of friends, you get the feeling that ‘it’s not that bad’. Like it covers the hate a bit, you know what I mean?”. They feel relieved by the idea that the hate is not actually what people really think. Moreover, it does not only prove that they have friends, it proves they have friends that got their back.

Sometimes, they do know who sent the positive messages. Teenagers receive comments with insiders, jokes or stories they made or shared with certain people they know from offline settings like school. Sarah and Lucy have received a lot of these messages and looked pleased with them. Following is one of the many examples the girls showed: “Remember the time we went swimming and your towel flew away and you lost your sock? Had some epic times with you during summer. Hopefully the next one will be even better xxx” (received by Sarah). Additionally, according to Emma, sometimes messages from good friends can be recognized by the use of certain nicknames. Lastly, both Lucy and Katherine added that some of the commenters leave their initials at the end of the messages, to make it more interesting. These messages are a sign of friendship, a sign of devotion for these girls.

In addition to this, as mentioned above, the girls stated that anonymity also gives courage to people that otherwise would not dare to speak up. As Slevin (2000) wrote, the Internet connects people that otherwise never would. As one of the popular teens of her age, Alice said she received multiple kind and admiring messages from unknown peers. Following is one of the most heart-warming messages that she treasures and keeps as a screenshot on her phone: “Hi Alice, you don’t know me and we’ve never talked, but I just wanted to say that I think you’re really cool and pretty. I’m only in the first year, but I hope that if I’m your age I’ll be like you”. As a matter of fact, all girls said that they had received a couple of messages from peers that expressed their friendship and admiration. For most part, messages were not as idolizing as the example given above, but often they were in the nature of “hey, we don’t know each other, but you seem nice... So I would like to get to know you better”. It seems that some use Sayat.me, and especially its feature of anonymity, for social validation, to avoid social risk and to make short-term connections as Kang, Dabbish and Sutton (2016) pointed out with their research.

These accreditations satisfy the girls, which indicates that this semi-anonymous platform does play a socializing role. Strangely, it seems that the girls do not attach particular importance to it. Claire explained why most teenagers feel this way: “When you receive these kind of
messages where people say they want to get to know you, you post a screenshot of it on your Instagram, right? And then you usually just write ‘DM\(^6\) me’ on that screenshot and you post it on your story, as usual. The thing is that you will never receive a DM, you will never actually get to know that person. People don’t have the courage to do that I guess”. Similarly, Lucy thinks that people do not answer because “they’re afraid to be a disappointment, who knows they send a DM and the owner of the platform does not want to be friends and then they come off as pathetic”. It is clear that they like the appreciation and the short connection they made with these strangers, but apparently, unlike on other social media, they do not expect any new friendships out of it. Katharine said: “It’s not a chat or anything. It’s not reciprocate because you don’t know the commenters, so it’s just different”. Nevertheless, whether it is a compliment or hate, all girls are craving to know who sent it.

As previously mentioned, Sayat.me also causes trust-issues or distrust amongst friends. According to Lucy the anonymity exacerbates this process of making friends. Claire explicitly pointed out that there is no sort of Sayat-me community and Sarah explained that Sayat.me does not bring people together: “it’s actually more often people that are already a group of friends that go on Sayat.me and then the whole group has it”. However, it seems there is a certain feeling of ‘togetherness’, like Bakardjieva (2005) identified, when it comes to the hate because everyone receives it, which creates the feeling that ‘they are not alone’. All in all, every interviewed girl said that the element of ‘connectedness’, ‘socializing’ or ‘making friends’ is not the point on Sayat.me. When asked why not, they all answered: “Because for that you have the usual social media like Facebook or Instagram”. Nonetheless, it is clear that Sayat.me indirectly plays a socializing role.

The girls indicated that they have used Sayat.me solely when they were alone, at home. When asked why, Sarah responded: “imagine that you’re looking at your inbox together with friends and there are only hate messages, or worse you don’t have any messages”. Either way, according to Lucy, being on Sayat.me is a personal activity that nearly all do out of loneliness and boredom after school. Teenagers seek their friends’ companionship and entertainment. Alice added to this that for her, Sayat.me could also be used to relax or escape after a long day at school: “when I feel bad, sometimes I scroll through my list of Sayat’s and I read all nice comments. It cheers me up I guess”. Similarly to what Bakardjieva (2005) claimed,

\(^6\) DM = Direct Message
Sayat.me could help to cope with certain concerns they encountered during the day. It is questionable though, if Sayat.me is the best place to overcome offline issues, given the hate-messages. However, as will be discussed in the next subchapter about identity, there is no denying that there is some emphasis on ‘me’ as well, which is another reason why teenagers use Sayat.me.

Be that as it may, the entire aspect of friendship and connectedness seems a bit double sometimes. What boyd (2014) writes about teenagers using social media to socialize with friends is undisputable. They want to keep their friends up to date about everything that happens in their lives, but Sayat.me is just not the place for that; in this case, Instagram is. All girls declared that having a profile on Sayat.me is also for entertainment-reasons. They want to entertain themselves when they are bored, but also their friends. Emma said that “that’s the reason why we put it on Instagram”. According to Claire, everyone in school that is not considered as ‘too weak’ uses or has used Sayat.me before: “in the first place you’re curious about what kind of comments you’ll get, but on the other hand you’re also a bit pressured to have a profile, if you don’t want to be seen as a pussy at least”. Moreover, it is clear that they think about their friends and their friends’ entertainment when posting their stories. Sarah declared that most only post new stories with Sayat’s every hour or so, so that the amount of new stories is balanced.

Of course, the whole experience and teens’ activity on Sayat.me is also in part to get attention and to make themselves look more interesting. Some Sayat’s can turn you into the ‘hot topic of the week’ in school. Alice admitted: “I think it’s fun to be the subject of a conversation, if it’s not in a super bad way at least”. Surprisingly, except for the very uncommon (e.g. explicitly sexual) or egregious comments, Sayat.me was not considered as something the girls talked about very often with their friends. Emma explained that if people have an opinion about some of the comments or answers, they generally give it on Sayat.me as well. Lucy, Claire and Sarah added, however, that sometimes they consulted their best friends to try to find out who some haters were. So in that way, they did talk about it with their friends, but merely with their very good ones. Anyhow, it seems that there is another underlying reason why teenagers decide not to discuss Sayat.me-comments in real life with friends. This will be reviewed in the next section about ‘personal journeys’.
Not only was this discussion of the ‘social aspect’ a bit double, it was also frequently confusing. Nevertheless, Alice stated it clearly: “It’s not about friends, because you do it on your own and also for your own, to know what people think about you. But on the other hand it also revolves around friends because you do post it on your story for them and you want to receive nice comments and support from them. You wouldn’t be on the platform if it wasn’t for your friends”. Therefore, it is not entirely clear which way teenagers approach Sayat.me, built on Bakardjieva’s (2005) approaching categories. In any case, these interviewed teenagers seem more inclined to go online because of instrumental interaction motives, where teenagers want to interact with each other in order to gain knowledge or information, without necessarily getting to know other users or to create a bond.

By now it is settled that this appearance of ‘sociality’ on semi-anonymous Q&A platforms different is than general social media. As Mayfield (2007) and boyd (2014) claimed, social media thrives for ‘connectedness’, but with Sayat.me it appears to be more than that. Moreover, two of the main characteristics of social media, ‘conversation’ and ‘community’ are not met with Sayat.me. In addition, opposite to the definition of SNS, given by boyd and Ellison (2007), teens do not articulate a list of users with whom they share a connection on Sayat.me and they do not view and traverse this list. It is not because the platform does not offer it, but rather because the teenagers do not have the urge to use it that way. They have other social media for this. Sayat.me, however, indirectly plays a socializing role, by which is meant that teenagers can are comforted or complimented by friends. On the other hand, individuals that seek friendship through comments could point to a direct way of socializing on Sayat.me, despite the fact that actual friendships nearly never develop afterwards.

7.2.4. Personal journeys: a quest of finding themselves and portraying an image

Being a 13 or 14-year-old means for most being adolescents, struggling with their personal identity and independence. This can be a highly confusing time for some teenagers, a time where they wonder who they are and what place they have in society. Sayat.me promises teenagers to ‘become a better you’, assures these teenagers that they can finally know how their self-image varies from what others see and that they can work on their self-development. For some, this sounds idyllic and who knows maybe Sayat.me could help them through the struggle of adolescence. These promises, may be a reason why Belgian teenagers flock to these platforms and specifically to Sayat.me from the summer of 2017 until the moment of
this writing. In addition, Sayat.me seems to be an easy way to learn about yourself and at the same time to promote yourself amongst peers. How this exactly occurs and how teenagers are thinking of and handling this whole experience is something that the six interviewees tried to make as clear as possible.

First of all, as mentioned, it seems that teenagers desire to discover or learn something about themselves and to know what their friends and other schoolmates think of them. Alice declared that “the first reason why I made my profile was because I wanted to know what people really thought and what kind of messages I would receive”. It is true that all six respondents initially hoped that somehow most of the comments would be positive, as mentioned in the subchapter about ‘hate comments’. Yet, they were also realistic and not too naïve to think that they would be loved by everyone. Emma praised Sayat.me by saying that “thanks to Sayat I’ve learned that I talk too loudly in public places for instance and now I try to pay more attention to it”. Similarly, Sarah learned thanks to Sayat.me that she “plays too selfishly during the physical education hours”. Some teenagers really think that they can become a better version of themselves through Sayat.me, which makes it understandable that teenagers would want this. On other SNS, most people would never dare to give candid critique or their honest opinion, which is what the anonymity induces. However, it may be that the way these six girls positively promoted Sayat.me, could be because they wanted to sound like they could handle it and thus soothe the whole downside of the platform to justify their use.

It is part of the deal to post the received comments on Instagram stories. But what is most puzzling about this whole deal is the fact that these teenagers decide to post (painful) critique, false accusations and ‘hate’ comments as well. As a matter of fact, except for Emma that admitted that she held back a few of the ‘hate’ comments, every single one of the comments, of whatever kind, they received has been posted on the girls’ Instagram stories. This means that comments that vilify third people or where peers are ranked are posted as well. Alice explained: “I don’t really think about it”. That means in Alice’s case that all 543 comments have been posted on her Instagram-stories. Maybe it is as boyd (2014) claims, because they simply see no reason to take the effort to minimize the visibility of their posts. However, it seems there is more going on than meets the eye. Similar to Binns’ (2013) study, there are a couple of reasons why these girls decided to post all of their Sayat’s.
To start, they have the feeling they have to post every message. Similarly to Binns (2013), Lucy explained: “If you’re not posting the hate, the hater knows you’re being weak”. Some of the girls even received follow-up comments from the hater, asking why they did not post their question and if they were too scared or a loser. It appears that for these teens, being regarded as a loser is the absolute worst. Since everyone receives hate, there is no shame in posting all hate they received as well. In fact, Claire added that “everyone receives hate, so if you’re not posting any hate on your story, people will think of you as fake or sad” and similarly Alice thought that people would be liars if they would deny and withhold hate. Besides, the girls said they posted their hate because, as explained in the previous chapter about friendship performance, they wanted their friends to comfort or defend them publicly. They want to get the feeling that they are not alone. Additionally, these girls posted hate because they liked being the subject of conversations. On page 49, Sarah is quoted saying “… imagine there are only hate messages, or worse you don’t have any messages”. The words ‘or worse’ indicate that if they had to choose between hate or no message at all, they would choose hate because it is a sign of popularity: you are important enough for people to make the effort to go on your Sayat.me-profile and write a comment. Claire confirmed this: “even if you receive a lot of hate, which isn’t nice, it shows that you’re still on their minds so it means you mean something. Plus, people can always see on your Sayat-profile how many comments you’ve had in total before, so if you have had a lot, it’s also a sign that you’re popular I guess”. As boyd (2014) pointed out, sharing is some kind of currency online. Maybe these girls post every comment to be more interesting and thus accumulate their amount of followers on Instagram as well, as Preece (2015) thought. Lastly, the most notable reason given by these six girls is that they post these ‘hate’ comments on their stories because they want to look as though they do not care about the hate and that it does not affect them in any way. There is a certain image they want to portray.

This last given reason is something teenagers considered to be accomplished with the help of Sayat.me. As Goffman (1956) explained, teenagers want to manage or influence impressions that others have of them. In this sense, Sayat.me is more a matter of frontstage than backstage because they use Sayat.me to give an impression of themselves for an audience. This discussion of frontstage versus backstage will be argued further under the subchapter of teens’ long-lasting commitment to Sayat.me. Either way, teenagers want to portray a certain image of themselves, posting all comments they receive. Coming across as tough or resilient seems to be extremely important for these teenage girls. This is the identity they want to adopt
online, maybe to hide and/or escape from their ‘soft’ side because our culture compels us to have a ‘thick skin’. Similarly to what Turkle (1995) explained, the girls could escape limitations of their ‘offline identities’ through Sayat.me. They come across as tough not only by posting hate, but also with their reactions or answers on these abusive messages. Emma explained that “Sayat.me says a lot about someone, I mean the way you’re handling it”. Sarah said that she tried to answer as “dry and short” as possible “so that it’s like I’m not giving it a lot of attention”. The best option according to all six of the respondents is to look indifferent to hate and other people’s opinions. Alice thought that “if you answer in an emotional or lenient way, you’re just making yourself look weak so I just answer something like “what do you want to achieve?” or ‘wtf are you talking about’” and Lucy added to this that the last thing you should do is “sound like a victim”. That being the case, Katherine shared that once she answered a hate-comment with a long message, arguing and recognizing that her feelings were hurt. Immediately after, she received various messages from her best friends saying that it was better not to respond that way and that her response was too sentimental. Ever since, Katherine just answers “‘haha’, ‘okay then’ or ‘shut the fuck up’ or whatever, because I don’t care and I want to show that they don’t hurt me with their stupid messages and that they are not worth it. It’s better that way”. Furthermore, Claire explicitly explained that for her Sayat.me was also a way to ‘advertise’ herself. Sometimes it felt as if the girls were a bit caught in the middle of their eagerness to maintain positive impressions and the need to be authentic and real. They post every comment, regardless of the content, to show what everyone thinks and to show that they are not fake, but on the other hand they react in the way that gives the best impression to other peers.

Most of the girls feel like the ball is in their court when responding to hate, they are the ones with the power in the end. However, the fact that teenagers post every single one of the messages is in contrast with what boyd (2014) claimed that teenagers would switch to private conversations when they felt something might be sensitive, which is not the case with comments they receive through Sayat.me. Hundreds of embarrassing and hurtful messages are posted because having a profile proves that you can take it, that you are one of the “tough ones” in school, which is the image teenagers want to have today apparently. Following are examples of Instagram stories that a young Dutch speaking Belgian posted:
The comments shown in the figures above are clearly what the respondents would consider as ‘hate’. In a nutshell, the comment in figure 1 says: “dude please get real, you’re feeling so tough with all your dots at the end of your sentences like as if your life would possibly matter...”. The users’ answer is the coloured text that is given through Instagram, directly on the screenshot. She coolly contradicts the comment and one of her answers is: “if I want to add dots at the end of it, I do so. If you have a problem with it, bugger off with your talk that doesn’t please me”. In the second and the third figure, the comments say that she “feels too good/tough”. Once again, the girl dryly answers: “You got a big mouth to be anonymous, but words mean nothing to me ;)” and “I don’t feel too tough”.

It has quickly become clear, however, that most of these tough reactions are a façade. Emma, who received a number of messages concerning her weight and her appearance said that “sometimes it’s hard to act indifferent and cool, but I have to”. The interviewees also mentioned that they worried sometimes if their reactions were tough enough and not too ‘weak’. As mentioned before, teenagers do not discuss Sayat.me very often with friends or other peers. The reason why also involves this façade: “I think I don’t discuss it with others because who knows others will think I’m hurt or offended, It’s different when it’s just online”. This is exactly what Turkle (2012) explained, saying that we do not want to have conversations anymore due to the fear of losing control over what we are going to say.
Teenagers today are afraid that the real ‘me’ will appear when they talk in real life and they do not want to come across as a ‘weakling’ at any cost.

It seems uncommon that teenagers do not contemplate which comments they want to conceal in order to meet the idealised image they want to portray, as Goffman declared. Would posting ‘hate’ comments not drag down this image that others have of them? “No, no... The message you receive doesn’t really say something about you, but your answer to it does!” claimed Claire, “Everyone knows how easy haters can just invent and send hate, so it’s more about how you react to it”, said Katherine and “People don’t really look at the hate, they are interested in the answers you give I think”, responded Alice. So does that mean that the abusive messages do not influence how others view and think about you? Alice, Sarah, Claire and Katherine thought so, but Emma and Lucy were rather sceptical about these claims. Emma explained that “If I see a Sayat about, for example, the way someone walks, the next time I’ll see that girl I’ll definitely check out the way she walks, that’s just how people are”.

Similarly, Lucy said: “I think it’s a bit naïve if people think that the messages do not influence people’s opinions about you a bit”. Either way, Lucy and Emma also posted all received messages, no matter the content of it, because they felt like “regardless of the hate, my real and good friends will know better”. But like the other four girls, Lucy and Emma also considered their answers as being most important for their image. Remarkably, respondents thought that positive comments do have an impact on people’s image of you in contrary to the ‘hate’ comments that do not. Or in other words, according to these girls, only the positive comments count and are significant for their self-presentation. In that way, like boyd (2014) stated, friends help with these teenagers’ self-presentation or guarantee the preservation of teens’ image with comforting or contradicting comments.

What is more, as mentioned in the chapter on previous research in this thesis, it appears that some teenagers send messages to their own Sayat.me. Boyd (2010) identified this phenomenon as ‘digital self-harm’, where teenagers send cruel messages to themselves. When discussing this phenomenon with the six interviewees, they thought of it differently. All six girls admitted that they could imagine people sending positive Sayat’s to their own profile to enhance their image and they were all sure they knew a couple of people who did it. But unlike boyd (2010), Englander (2012) and Hinduja and Patchin (2017) stated, they could not understand that someone would send ‘hate’ to themselves. They thought that it was the worse way to draw attention and that it would only trigger more ‘hate’. Claire and Emma admitted
that they have sent a positive message or compliment to themselves before. Laughing, Claire said: “Once I just received like 3 hate comments or whatever and I simply sent a message saying ‘Don’t bother the haters, the people that know you know that it’s not true. You’re a really cool person!’ I know some may think it’s a bit pathetic but I did not see any harm in it I guess”. 

On the whole, all six girls claimed that they used Sayat.me for self-improvement and self-presentation. Although these teenagers do not practically use the platform like the founders had expected (e.g. Sayat.me as an extension for Instagram), teenagers seem to express themselves similarly with how Sayat.me markets the platform. To briefly recapitulate, overall they decide to post all comments they received on their Instagram stories because they feel like they have to and because the way they answer on them is most important. The way teenagers cope and react says more than all the ‘hate’ comments they receive. They have the feeling they have to act tough and resilient, that is the image teens want to portray. The best option is to act as indifferent as possible and to come across as if the hate does not hurt them in the slightest. Moreover, all six respondents declared that Sayat.me also makes them stronger and in a way they learn to fight for themselves, which they consider as highly important. But it may not be forgotten that although teenagers can name many benefits from Sayat.me, not everyone is as happy with the idea of this platform.

### 7.2.5. Teen privacy management: peers, strangers and parents

To find someone on Sayat.me, there are two options: either you click on their personal URL or you can enter their username in the search bar on the website. This means that anyone, friend, foe or even a stranger, can access a profile and thus send a comment. Surprisingly, the interviewees did not fully realise this and no girl was aware that their profile was also accessible through the search bar on the website. Moreover, the girls did not comprehend that even though they put their Instagram-account on ‘private’, people could still see their ‘bio’ and thus their personal Sayat.me URL. This means that you do not necessarily have to be one of their Instagram followers to see their URL in their bio.

It is safe to say that there were a few misconceptions. First of all, they thought that they had full control over when they received messages and from whom. Nonetheless, after making this clear, the girls were not affected and were still confident that only their known peers or
followers were the ones that posted comments. Alice explained: “you can tell that it’s people you know because of the content of the messages. Why would strangers bother to send a message, they can’t even see my answer on my story since they don’t follow me on Instagram”.

When teenagers post their Sayat comments on their stories, they imagine a certain audience that is mostly limited to their actual friends. On this matter Sarah said: “I think that the people that read the messages and my response to it, are mainly my friends. Maybe a few acquaintances read it as well when they’re bored, but I think most others are not interested in it?”. However, it seemed that most teenagers realised and considered the occurrence of ‘context collapse’, where all kinds of people with different social expectations and norms are brought together. Both Instagram and Sayat.me are a good example of a place where social groups converge. The youngest respondent, Claire, explained: “when I get like a message about a certain gossip or an insider and I put it on my story, sometimes a lot of other people see it as well, from the scouts for instance, and that’s a bit annoying because they don’t understand that insider and sometimes I need to explain it or something”.

Coming back to context collapse on Sayat.me itself, as mentioned in the subchapter about ‘hate comments’, anonymity gives people courage to interfere in disputes and to give their opinions or weigh in on things they have absolutely nothing to do with. Think about the example given on page 43 by Alice, explaining that she received Sayat’s saying that she abandoned her friend Hellen, which led to more drama in school. On Sayat.me, strict rules around socialization are bypassed, which means that truly anyone can ask what he or she wants, as found out by Ellison et al. (2016). A good example was given by Claire: “when I broke up with my ex-boyfriend, I received dozens of messages from people saying that I was a bitch for dumping him and that I would never find someone else and that he’s better off without me and stuff like that while they didn’t even know the real story and reason”. Sayat.me makes sure that no one is really socially isolated from knowing what is going, which is opposite of what boyd (2014) claimed about teenagers performing their social drama’s online because ‘outsiders’ would not understand. Sayat.me offers a say to anyone that wants and users have the feeling that they have to answer anyway.

Anyhow, as unaware as teenagers may seem, they did not gave the impression of being bothered with the fact that mysterious or unknown peers send messages. As a matter of fact,
strangers may always send them kind messages or displays of friendship, as long as it is no ‘hate’. Apparently, having the possibility to receive love from strangers, is part of the perks of Sayat.me. However, as demonstrated on page 46, teens’ Sayat.me usage fluctuates and depending on popular peers and special events or happenings, their URL in their Instagram ‘bio’ (dis)appears. Alice explained that when there is a fight, people usually post their URL back. If they would be bothered by the meddling of peers, why would they be active on Sayat.me again and encourage people to send anonymous messages at that particular time. It seems as if teenagers like the meddling and the convergence of social groups in a way, unlike boyd (2014) wrote, and perhaps it is because they like getting the attention and being in the spotlight. It may be as boyd stated that teenagers mess up or in this case post unsuitable comments to get attention and to cause a fuss.

As explained above, all teens’ different followers that originate from contrasting social groups can see their stories and hence their Sayat.me profile. Given the difference between their imagined audience and their actual audience, some of the messages or their stories can be taken out of context as boyd (2014) wrote. It also has to be said that teenagers do not always realise that there are people just watching as well. The perfect example for this is one that Katherine gave:

Katherine: “The thing is, my dad saw my stories on Instagram and he was veeery angry with all the comments that I received and the way I answered them”

Juliette: “How was he able to see your stories?”

Katherine: “He follows me on Instagram because he lives abroad and we stay in contact that way. But I didn’t think of it when I posted the hate. And there were also words like ‘slut’ and ‘cuntwhore’ and things like that in it. When he saw those messages, he sent them to my mum and then they were all crazy pissed and I had to show every single message I ever received and then I had to delete my profile. They said ‘if you’re posting things like that on your story, it means that you can’t handle it’ and I was banned from Instagram for a whole month as well. They were super angry and paranoid.”

The above situation given by Katherine, where parents get mad and punish their children because they get nervous with teenagers’ behaviour online, does not seem that uncommon. However, after discussions with several parents, it seemed most of them barely knew a thing about Sayat.me, while it goes without saying for most young Belgian teenagers. Like Prensky
(2001) explained, adults are and think differently from teenagers or what he calls, from digital natives. Furthermore, it seemed as if teenagers were doing everything they could to avoid parents. This is no unnatural behaviour, but it is remarkable how hard some of them tried. Firstly, all teenagers solely accessed their Sayat.me through their phone even though there is no application and they have access to a computer, which would facilitate the use of Sayat.me considerably. However, they refused because the computer is often shared and in the living room and they were afraid that their parents would look over their shoulder. Emma said: “I’m not using the computer, I’d be caught quicker and by the way my phone is private while the computer is shared”. Claire expressed: “no way that I show them what I’m doing on my phone, that’s private. Otherwise they would be so concerned”. It is not that teenagers have something to hide, but they all had the same believe: “parents, they just don’t understand it”. Secondly, it is not uncommon for parents to check upon their teenager through social media. Lucy’s, Emma’s and Alice’s parents ask them to show their social media, while Claire’s, Sarah’s, Katherine’s mother or father have “obliged” their teenager to let them follow them on social media. But remarkably enough, some have found a way to avoid scrutiny. For instance, Claire and Emma accepted their father’s follow on Instagram, but both have made sure that they could not see any posts. Moreover, Alice made sure to block her parents and occasionally changes her passwords on her phone to evade them. She added that: “it’s like they don’t trust me, I know what I’m doing and I’m not doing anything wrong”. Lastly, the fact that there is no existing application and that they have to open a webpage also benefits teenagers trying to hide the platform and avoiding annoying questions.

Teenagers get very nervous or annoyed with adults’ behaviour towards their children’s online actions. According to Emma, parents are too old-fashioned and overprotective, she says that “they judge before they even know about it and they immediately say it’s wrong or dangerous”. Moreover, Katherine said that she is very annoyed with her parents sometimes: “when they ask me ‘of all those 621 followers, how many do you actually know’ I get really mad. They worry about nothing. I’m not stupid and I know very well how to behave. It’s not like I’m posting an inappropriate picture” and Katherine even thought that her punishment for using Sayat.me, “was not a good way to learn a lesson to a teenager”. Lucy, who has quite protective parents revealed that: “my parents would NEVER accept what Sayat.me is or why I use it. They will never get it, so I will never explain it to them”. Furthermore, since parents are considered as being overprotective, none of the girls went to their parents when they felt bad after receiving ‘hate’, probably out of fear for losing their right to be online.
Moreover, boyd (2014) explained that teenagers want a place of their own, to socialize with their friends. This remains true, but now that most parents are on social media as well, teenagers are irritated and would love to find and use platforms of which parents do not know anything about. Sarah explained that she hates it when parents are also on SNS, “they don’t understand that I don’t want to have them there”. Sayat.me has stayed off adults’ radar, which could partly explain youngsters appeal to it. Moreover, whether it is unconsciously or not, teenagers know very well that Sayat.me would not be sought-after by parents, which may also be a reason why they are attracted to it.

Many adults are puzzled or horrified by what teenagers are willing to share. It may be difficult to understand for parents because, according to Turkle (2011), most things people do today are things that only a few years ago were seen as odd or not done. But does this mean that teenagers do not care about their privacy? Although Boyd was fairly certain that the answer to this question was ‘no’, it seems that the interviewed teenagers did not care about it as much as boyd (2014) thought. It is true that teenagers try to avoid their parents’ control because often parents would think their behaviour is inappropriate. But other than that, they did not consider any privacy-measures for their Sayat.me, never mind thought about it apparently. On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that they do care about their privacy in a way too. Otherwise they would not decide to make their Instagram ‘private’, which consequently makes the posts and answers private as well. But having more than 600 or even 1000 followers on Instagram, including a number of what seem to be unfamiliar peers, does not exactly convince adults of their yearning for privacy. Maybe it is as boyd claims that teenagers only seek privacy in relation to those who hold a certain power over them, like parents and teachers.

7.2.6. Teens’ long-lasting commitment to Sayat.me

Although this would be incomprehensible for many parents, teenagers continue to appreciate and use Sayat.me despite the ‘hate comments’. From multiple previous subchapters in this analysis, it has gradually become clear that teenagers identify distinct advantages with Sayat.me, most concerning sociality, their self-presentation and their identity. Many academics and theorists have analysed teens’ obsessive use on social media and large numbers make the assumption that most teenagers are addicted. One thing is certain, for these
girls the good clearly outweighs the bad, which according to Alter (2017) would give grounds to addiction.

After the long discussions with all six girls, it turned out that they really like Sayat.me, but could it be stated that some of them are addicted? In a way, yes but also no. Claire, Alice, Emma and Katherine claimed that they have a hard time to stay away from the platform and Claire even said “sometimes I really have to check it, it’s like it calls me back or something”. Confirming Alter’s (2017) ideas, Katherine stated that “it makes me happy when I see that I received questions and even more if they’re positive”. Like other social media, Sayat.me is also modelled on a system of uncertain reward. It seems as teens are anxious to go check if they have received any comments and, as Alter explained, they are yield for signs of approval. According to boyd (2014), teenagers are addicted to being in contact with their friends and she claims it is a healthy desire to be aware of your environment. It should, however, be mentioned that teenagers today are addicted to recognition and approval. Nevertheless, saying that they are obsessed about Sayat.me itself would go too far. Sayat.me is replaceable and it is imaginable that when the hype is over and a new variation is discovered, teenagers will quickly move on. Therefore, they are merely obsessed about the concept, especially with the feature of anonymity and its perks.

However, the fluctuating use of Sayat.me would disprove the claim of addiction. If they were to be obsessed, why would they delete their URL from their bio? The need to follow the group or mass is stronger than their constant need of ‘honest affection’. But as soon as they post their URL in their bio on Instagram again, they do have the urge to check their Sayat.me profile repeatedly.

When asking the respondents how they would feel if they had to delete their account, all of them had mixed feelings. On the one hand, as a logical response, they would miss the compliments, the admiration and the affection. Subsequently, the next question was: “couldn’t you receive compliments and love from friends on other SNS as well?” and all respondents answered that it was different. Different, they said, because the compliments on Sayat are anonymous and thus considered as the truth, while on social media people are more ‘fake’ because teens want to appear in a good light. This is again referring to what Goffman (1956) implied with frontstage, in this case people on other SNS where they have to be nice, versus backstage, people commenting on Sayat.me and thus being able to be completely honest.
Lucy described that “it can really give me a nice feeling that I don’t have on Facebook or Instagram”. This is understandable given the fact that these girls consider anonymous compliments (not hate) as truthful, as explained in the subchapter on ‘hate comments’. Hence, they realise that this means that someone out there genuinely likes them. Additionally, the girls indicated that they would miss out on things they could have learned about themselves as well.

Additionally, some girls indicated that they have had moments where they considered not to use Sayat.me anymore due to the ‘hate’. However, they remained active because in first instance they were afraid that they would be seen as “pussies”, “losers” or “weakling” if they would delete their profile. As Binns said, they are obliged to play the game until the end. There is a lot of social pressure that stipulates how and what teenagers do. Moreover, these girls did not delete their profiles because the thought this would be too definitive. Claire stated that “deleting your profile is like a step further but when you delete it from your bio you can always go back to it”. Furthermore, the girls indicated that they did not want to be the first one without Sayat.me, while their friends still had it. Similarly to theories of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) implied by Przybylski et al. (2013), these girls seemed reluctant of the idea that others would enjoy or have rewarding experiences on Sayat.me and that they would not because they deleted their profile. This feeling of FOMO, however, is not the exact same thing as on other SNS, where they would miss out on pictures, events and ways of communication with friends.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, currently Sayat.me is a hype and who knows how long it will remain popular amongst teenagers. Once new variations will emerge, as happened before, or if other social media incorporate the feature of anonymity, Sayat.me will probably be forgotten.
8. Conclusion

To develop a better understanding of semi-anonymous question and answer platforms, this thesis analysed teenagers’ behaviour on and use of the platform Sayat.me. Based on communication theories both from the field of social media as a few from before this era, the phenomenon and teenagers’ activities on Sayat.me in terms of ‘sociality’ (i.e. friendship performance on the platform), cyberbullying or online abuse, identity or ‘impression management’, the generation gap (i.e. parents and teens’ need for privacy) and addiction and Fear of Missing Out was explored. Although little research has been done before on semi-anonymous Q&A platforms and nearly all revolved around the subject of cyberbullying, this study complements and goes beyond studies done by Amy Binns (2013) and Rachel Simmons (2011).

Through in-depth interviews with Belgian teenage girls that created a profile on Sayat.me, the aim was to create a better understanding of the platform and of teenagers’ behaviours on it. Keeping in mind the wide theoretical framework, the intention was to answer the research questions that addressed 1) the comprehension of what persuade teenagers to create a profile and thus use Sayat.me and 2) in what way and in which context they use the platform, particularly in relation to other social media. Moreover, given the occurrence of abuse on the platform, the third question addressed how teenagers grasp and deal with the abuse or bullying they encounter on Sayat.me. Through the conducted interviews, it was possible to identify various characteristics that correspond with other SNS and thus social media theories, whilst also derogating from the abovementioned ideas.

The chapter where the results have been discussed and equated with key concepts and theories was classified into six subchapters, in which all research questions were gradually addressed. In the first category, the practical usage of Sayat.me was discussed. The most important finding was that teenagers do not use Sayat.me as the creators had imagined or hoped. Instead of seeing it as a separate platform, teenagers use it as an extension from the popular SNS Instagram, which changes the concept and sense of the platform in a way. This subchapter relates greatly to the second research question about the way and context of teens’ use.

Furthermore, previous studies have made clear that semi-anonymous Q&A platforms are not innocent or harmless. Although the website takes some precautionary measures, from the
interviews it quickly became clear that teens realise that online abuse is a prominent actor on Sayat.me and that teenagers encounter plenty of abuse through anonymous comments from ‘friends’ or peers. In this subchapter is thoroughly explained how teenagers understand and deal with the ‘abuse’ they have encountered on Sayat.me. Nevertheless, this ‘abuse’ is not considered as cyberbullying by teenagers, but it can withal cause feelings of insecurity, feelings of paranoia, stress, distrust, frustration and powerlessness. Surprisingly, Belgian teens seem to have a specific name for it: ‘hate’, and it turned out that teenagers did not take this hate too seriously either. In their eyes, anyone could send hate and therefore hate was seen as inauthentic, while they considered positive messages as the truth. The way the interviewees discussed hate made it seem as though it has become a new cultural norm. In fact, it is something that every single user receives, it is just part of being a teenager on Sayat.me.

The fact that teenagers continue to appreciate Sayat.me after all the ‘hate’ they receive, may be difficult to understand. Surprisingly, results have indicated that the good outweighs the bad. With this ‘good’, teenagers imply the friendship, affection, admiration, entertainment and approval they receive through the platform. Sayat.me enhances existing friendships through compliments and support, it is a way to entertain their friends, it says something about popularity and status and even provides the possibility for short connections. Nevertheless, it seemed that for teenagers on Sayat.me ‘sociality’ is not the sole and most vital characteristic because to socialize they have other social media at their disposal.

Additionally, teenagers seem to use Sayat.me for personal reasons. Besides the pressure of peers, their curiosity to know ‘how they fit in’ has compelled them to create a profile. The most surprising aspect on Sayat.me, is that teenagers seem to share every single comment they receive, regardless of the nature of the message. This is mainly because teenagers want to portray an image of themselves and present themselves in a certain way. Coming across as ‘tough’ or ‘cool’ seems to be of utmost importance for these teens and they consider Sayat.me to be a good way to portray this image. It appeared that the way they used Sayat.me says a lot about them as a person. In addition, teens did not consider ‘hate’-comments to dominate others’ images of them, their answers say much more. Together with the subchapter about ‘friendship performance’, this subchapter discusses the second research question addressing the main motivations for teenagers to create a profile and to use Sayat.me.
Furthermore, one of the findings was that with Sayat.me strict rules around socialization are bypassed. Everyone gets a say thanks to the anonymity, which means that two-persons disputes or gossips can easily ignite in something bigger. However, it did not seem that teenagers really mind, given the fact that they have promoted their Sayat.me explicitly when they thought they would receive many Sayat’s. Nevertheless, it remains a complex phenomenon that confuses and disturbs many adults. For Belgian teenagers, contrarily, it is part of their digital activities. Parents do not understand that teenagers share that much information and teenagers are annoyed that their parents do not understand.

The last subchapter discussed teenagers’ commitment to Sayat.me and thus addresses the desire of teenagers to use the platform. Teenagers have the urge to check if they received new messages and they get a feeling that they cannot find anywhere else. As mentioned in discussed theories, teenagers seem to be addicted to their friends, but it should be added that teenagers genuinely desire recognition and approval. Nevertheless, this discussion about addiction on Sayat.me can be questioned given the fact that teenagers are not constantly active on the platform and much rather follow the mass than grant their constant need of ‘honest’ affection.

This thesis was meaningful since it could be considered as a novelty. There has not been any previous study done regarding Sayat.me and neither on Belgian teenagers in this context. In addition, the objective of this study was to create a bigger picture from teenagers’ point of view and to go beyond the mere discussion of Internet abuse on Sayat.me, which has not been researched before either. In that sense, this thesis can be considered as a complement to previous research on semi-anonymous Q&A platforms. However, there are also some limitations to this study. First of all, although the respondents have been more than cooperative and have given incredible insights, the sample size could have been larger. Secondly, it may be difficult to accept the extrapolation of these results to other countries since this study was limited to Belgian teenagers. Moreover, it was difficult not to have any bias before the interview. For further research it may be interesting to look into other semi-anonymous Q&A platforms and maybe in particular within the subject of media literacy amongst teens. In addition, it may be interesting to expand the population to boys as well, possibly to compare boys to girls within the scope of semi-anonymous Q&A platforms and to investigate youth from other countries likewise.
9. References

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