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Cult phenomenon that is Bebo.com attracts 500,000 Irish teenagers

LARISSA NOLAN

IT'S officially the most popular website in Ireland - but the chances are, you've probably never heard of it. Unless you're a teenager, that is.

Teenagers have made social networking site Bebo.com the fastest-growing internet site in the world, with an astonishing 22 million members across the globe.

For such a small country, Ireland can claim a significant percentage of Beboworld, with company figures estimating that there are 500,000 Beboers in the Republic.

If their figures are correct, that would mean virtually every teenager in the country has their own page on Bebo.

But what exactly is Bebo? And why has it become such a cult phenomenon?

Bebo is a free online community where each member has their own personal page, on which they can tell the world about such things as their likes and dislikes, their favourite films and music and post up photos of their lives.

It can be updated all the time and the online diary aspect gives it a live, reality TV-like feel.

Beboers log on to view new messages. The more hits you have registered, the more popular you are.

But crucially, each member has their own list of friends and each links on to another list, so the potential of meeting new people is endless. A complete set of pals can connect to one another, whole schools to whole schools.

One teen from the High School in Dublin's Rathgar said almost every student in the school has their own webpage.

"It's the cool thing to do. It's amazing how quickly it has taken off - a few months ago, no one had heard of it but now, it's a bit weird if you haven't got a page on Bebo."

He explained: "People spend hours and hours online, checking messages, sending messages and making new friends through their other friends on Bebo.

"And it is a great way to hook up with someone you fancy - just check them out on Bebo and send them a message."

Those in the internet industry say that Bebo's rise is nothing short of phenomenal, particularly given that it is only in place for eight months.

Bebo's chief executive Michael Birch told the Sunday Independent that its success is all down to word of mouth.

"We are waiting for the official figures, but our own internal studies show Bebo can boast more page uses a day than any other site, including the Google search engine.

"I wish I could explain how it took off," he said. "We had predicted its popularity, but could never have imagined it would become as big as it has.

"The whole idea behind bebo is linking friends to friends so we can only imagine that it has spread from person to person."

As Bebo is free, the company make their money through advertising.

At this point, it is estimated that up to 80 per cent of teens in schools across the six Bebo regions - the UK, Ireland, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand - are Bebo regulars.

However, the website gives an alarming insight into the behaviour of Irish teenagers.

Students as young as 14 tell online tales on wild nights out drinking and boast of how much they can knock back.

The main focus of much of the Beboers in the Dublin area is the twice-weekly discos at Old Wesley Rugby Club in Terenure, or Wez as it is popularly known.

One Irish member boasts: "Happiest when: I'm locked at Wez! Drinks: Hino! Dutch Gold! I swear to god it's actually nice! Cans are mingin', bottles all the way."

But Bebo vice-president Jim Scheinman shrugged off any accusations of the site encouraging underage drinking through peer pressure.

"If members are talking about this on the site, then it is an issue in real life, not just on the site," he said. "We monitor these things and educate users on safety tips and bullying. Moderators called Bebo helpers watch what is going on."

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pleasure?

