



Life Support

Young people's needs
in a digital age

Life Support: Young people's needs in a digital age

Foreword

Far from being the mute, uncommunicative strangers they are often portrayed as, this report shows that young people are creative, sophisticated communicators who trail-blaze new ways to converse with those near and dear to them. And forge authentic online relationships too.

This timely report proves that the internet is increasingly where young people turn for advice and information - and with the huge number of unregulated and unmoderated websites, blogs, networks and groups that exist online, the need for a safe, trusted place has never been greater.

This challenges all of us, whether we're parents, carers or service-providers - or simply have the interests and welfare of young people at heart.

That's why YouthNet will be using the insights in this report to plan the redevelopment of TheSite.org, its trusted and popular service for young people, which must be responsive not only to the ever-changing needs of today's 16 to 24 year-olds but also to tomorrow's.

I believe it is crucial to ensure that we understand how people behave online – and understand that changes in technology will mean a seismic shift in online behaviour in the future that must be monitored carefully.

As Professor Michael Hulme – the author of this report – says in his conclusion: 'In the future as access becomes ever more mobile, multi-platform, faster and with richer media formats, in other words ever-on and everywhere, the need and demand for advice through the internet will become ever more critical'.

That's why I urge you to read this report and to give real consideration to its findings.

Fiona Dawe OBE
Chief Executive, YouthNet

A message from the Nominet Trust

The Nominet Trust believes YouthNet's *Life Support: Young people's needs in a digital age* report is an extremely valuable piece of research. It provides deep insight into how today's younger generation acts and interacts online and unveils important issues confronting the young when online. The report will undoubtedly lead to better understanding and ultimately better advice and support provided by YouthNet to today's and tomorrow's young internet-enabled society. The Nominet Trust is delighted to have been able to support this project and help YouthNet have a positive impact on people's lives.

Introduction from the author

Understanding how today's young people (16 to 24 year-olds) communicate, interact, access information and make decisions represents a challenge for everyone involved in providing support or advice to this group.

Young people straddle an uneasy zone between adolescence and adulthood. In terms of policy and support, the younger young people are still subject to the initiatives of the various child/adolescent support agencies, whilst at the upper end of the age range they are part of the adult support process. Their experience ranges from dealing with the challenges of being a teenager to becoming an adult, moving into the workplace, taking on new responsibilities, and being subject to social and environmental changes and other pressures. They are also experiencing a time when simply seeking help and advice may be problematic as they come to terms with often quite sudden changes in networks of relationships and the many associated challenges.

This is further complicated by the fact that these young people are the first of the so-called 'Digital Natives' to move into full adulthood. Digital Natives is far more than a term for marketing segmentation. Rather, it is a term that represents a group which has grown up with the internet and mobile phone and who are fundamentally different from previous generations in the way they communicate, seek information, engage, interact and entertain themselves. As they become adults their need for help, advice and support may change, but the language and way they are supported needs to reflect their experiences and be

engaging in new and relevant ways. Of course the online world does not exist unconnected to the physical world. Indeed, it is precisely the 'hybrid' nature of the lives of these young people – the interaction of the virtual or internet world and the physical world – that needs to be understood in order to ensure that advice, support and information are available in forms they want and can relate to. This represents a significant challenge to all involved in their support.

This report provides an overview and analysis of digital access in the context of advice and support-seeking for young people and provides an insight in to three key areas:

- How young people communicate and use digital media
- How young people approach issues of trust and security online
- How young people seek online advice in the context of their 'hybrid' lives.

It is important to acknowledge, at this stage, that a minority of young people will, at least, be partially excluded from the scope of this report as a result of their limited access to digital technologies and communication. It is hoped that this report will add to the understanding of the depth of the exclusion faced by those young people who are digitally excluded.

Whilst there is a great deal of excellent literature and research in the area of young adult behaviour and attitudes to access, trust and security online, the reviewed work has tended to focus upon children or adolescents rather than young people (several of the empirical research projects examined had an upper age limit of 17). Nevertheless, where comments from these papers and reports have been viewed as particularly appropriate or of more general significance to the 16 to 24 year-old age group, they have been included here. However, for the purposes of this report, the vast majority of the reference material draws from documents with direct reference to the specific age group – 16 to 24 year-olds. The report aims to put young people at its heart and to explore issues from their perspective rather than from the point of view of the older adult commentator.

In addition to the literature review, the report includes results from a new quantitative research survey commissioned by YouthNet and undertaken by The Futures Company (the Survey). The survey of 994 respondents between the ages of 16 and 24 examines issues primarily from the perspective of advice-seeking in stressful situations and through the direct response of young people. In addition, the report contains previously unpublished research and interviews with young people conducted by the Social Futures Observatory as part of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Lancaster University. Please note that all the ‘vox pops’ are sourced from Social Futures Observatory research unless attributed to a third party and are taken from the forthcoming report *Assembled Worlds*.

This report is an overview. There is certainly scope for far more detailed analysis of specific areas in the future, but it does provide a broad understanding and introduction to the territory. It begins with a section looking at how young people communicate using digital media and how they present themselves online. It then addresses some particular issues of safety and how young people assess the credibility of the information they find online. The main section examines advice-seeking online. As well as background research, this section makes use of the Survey and compares:

- Where young people get information and advice
- The role of the internet as a source of information and support
- The role of peers in providing information and advice.

As advice-seeking behaviour is not divorced from the issue on which someone needs help, there is also a section on seeking advice during stressful times. This looks at how various modes of advice support are used in relation to specific issues and the perceived importance to the individual.

The report closes with conclusions and recommendations. In addition, and for those involved in creating websites, there is an afterword briefly highlighting some of the specific challenges and opportunities in creating such sites.

Hon. Professor Michael Hulme
Associate Fellow of the Institute for
Advanced Studies, Lancaster University

Executive summary

75% of young people claimed they could not live without the internet while 86% loved how new technology helps them communicate with people.

What stands out from the research undertaken for this report is that the internet is a 'natural' space for young people. It is fully integrated into their lives and is as commonplace for the vast majority as walking down their local high street. It is the first place that many of them will go to search for information and provides unparalleled opportunities for communicating and engaging with others. The fact that young people can interact, maintain their anonymity and compare information sources empowers them. It can give them a sense of purpose and control, especially at difficult and challenging times in their lives. At such times, feelings of being in control may on occasion be misplaced and can lead to risk of exposure to unwanted danger. However, the vast majority of young people are able to minimise risk through cross-checking information sources against one another.

Negotiating the vast amount of information available on the internet presents its own challenges. The ability to locate appropriate information quickly and which is in a language and format that a young person can relate to is not always easy. Equally, as young people's needs have changed so too have their expectations of how they should be able to interact with individuals, organisations and companies. This report endeavours to highlight some of these issues and suggests ways in which advice-providing organisations and internet sites can respond to meet these changes.

The following are some of the key points from the report:

The Digital Native generation

Young people, aged 16 to 24, are often referred to as Digital Natives. They are fundamentally different to previous generations in that they have grown up with digital communications and have different expectations and needs in terms of how they engage, converse and expect information to be presented.

The internet is a key part of young people's lives today – it is completely natural to them. It is so much a part of them that they can be said to be living hybrid lives, combining the physical and virtual in a seamless network of communication, information, entertainment and sharing.

Young people use a number of digital devices, and different modes of communication, at the same time – a mobile phone, a television, a laptop – to build very complex and deep 'tapestries' of connectivity to one another and internet locations.

“Over three quarters of young people thought the internet was a safe place as long as you knew what you were doing.”

For the vast majority, the digital world is a far from isolating experience. It extends reach and connectivity, building on physical or close relationships as well as providing opportunities to interact and build friendships with people who are not geographically close to them.

Young people associate the internet with a strong sense of community and as a place where similar people can meet and share together.

84% of young people said that the internet brought communities of similar people together. It is likely that young people have far wider and more varied support communities than previous generations had.

They are the ‘ever on’ group. They demand fast and immediate access to both information and friends. 76% felt the internet ensured their friends were available whenever and wherever they needed them. As access to the internet becomes ever more mobile this trend will continue.

Digital Natives are not just different to their parents in using digital media in a natural and hybrid way. They are a highly visually literate group who are used to seeing and conveying information in visual formats which, in turn, provides opportunities for others to engage, modify or share on.

Trust, security and internet awareness

Over three quarters of young people surveyed thought the internet was a safe place as long as you knew what you were doing. In fact, most believed they were reasonably internet-literate and, more generally, technologically aware.

On occasion this may represent a degree of misplaced trust. However, it must be acknowledged that a high percentage of these young people are now young adults and have over ten years’ experience of using the internet. As such, they have developed strategies for proof verification that go beyond those practiced by both younger and older groups and use multiple sources of information, both on and offline, to sense-check claims being made. In the Survey, 71% stated that when looking for help and advice it is best to find as many sources of information as possible. Equally, young people tend to be most trusting of well-known, established information providers or brand names where they can see the presence of a significant number of other lay or participating individuals who they recognise as similar to themselves.

Young people are far from unaware of the risks of the internet. They have a clear understanding that individuals can and do misrepresent themselves on occasion.

“82% of young people said they had used the internet to look for advice and information for themselves – with 60% stating they had looked for information for someone else.”

Advice on the internet

Young people believe the internet provides both more and better sources of information than was previously readily available.

The internet plays a key role in the full process of advice gathering, exploration and action and is consistently rated alongside family (in certain specific incidences it can take precedence) and friends as a source of advice in stressful situations. In fact, 82% of young people surveyed said they had used the internet to look for advice and information for themselves, with 60% stating they had looked for information for someone else.

Whilst there are many sources of information available on the internet, signposting to key locations to enable credible, accurate, trustworthy and fast access remains an issue. Young people want to search for information but they need support to assist them in the process of doing this.

The internet plays a greater role than merely providing information. It is seen as an opportunity to learn from/engage with others in similar situations and as a direct source of expert support.

Anonymity was perceived to be an important benefit of internet advice-seeking. Young people could be searching for general information initially, then move through to incidents involving more personal trauma.

The benefit of anonymity was stronger for women when seeking advice on personal issues than for men who tended to favour ease of access – although both factors were significantly important to men and women when considered against other forms of advice-seeking.

Evidence indicated that individuals were more likely to be honest about challenging situations on the internet than in other environments.

The opportunity for individuals to give back to others from their own experience or knowledge was a significant finding. Just as opportunities for conversations with like-minded others was highly regarded (even if this involved viewing rather than full participation), individuals also sought the opportunity to directly engage and share their personal experiences with others in a similar situation.

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CHAPTER ONE

WHO ARE THE DIGITAL NATIVES?

**“Just under
half (44%)
of all 16 to 24
year-olds have
a social
network profile.”**

Chapter 1 Who are the Digital Natives?

“45% of young people said they felt happiest when they were online.”

They are experiential, shift their attention from one task to another with great rapidity, are highly digitally literate in how they use the media and are well connected in a social context.

Young people today use a variety of digital means to communicate and interact with others. Their life experience and the context in which they use the media inevitably contain many differing behaviours and emphasis. At a general level they are often labelled in a variety of ways, the most established terms being ‘Digital Natives’ or perhaps ‘M-Agers’ (short for ‘Mobile Agers’). The implication in these terms is that this group has grown up surrounded by digital media with access to computers, the internet, mobile phones and digital video games from pre-school ages.

As an age group they are normally defined as being under 25. They are often characterised as being visually literate and as having highly developed visual-spatial skills. Indeed, it has been argued that through this age group we are moving toward a more visual right-brain orientated society with an emphasis on ‘creators...and meaning makers’ and that young people represent the vanguard.ⁱ They are experiential, shift their attention from one task to another with great rapidity, are highly digitally literate (in how they use the media) and are well connected in a social context.ⁱⁱ

Importantly, whilst older groups may judge online against an ideal of face-to-face communication (although this is changing), young people evaluate against a wide range of options including instant message, chat, phone, SMS and face-to-face according to their communication needs. These might range from immediacy, message complexity, mobility to cost, privacy, or embarrassment.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is a response to both the simple presence and availability of technology and to social and environmental change. In combination it demonstrates how young people use today’s tools and communication opportunities to connect to the world and to establish and maintain their identities. Although there is much debate, it should be considered that this virtual communication and connectivity is not necessarily to the detriment of more established physically rooted behaviours. Rather, it represents the degree to which, particularly this group, lives what we today might term hybrid lives – lives that combine digital access and virtual communication into their physical lives.

Use of digital media	Young people (aged 16 to 24)	Adults (general adult population)
Likely to live in a household with digital television	87%	82%
Likely to have internet access	71%	62%
Likely to regularly use mobile phones	95%	77%
Likely to use MP3 players	61%	25%
Likely to use the internet for study or work	60%	48%
Likely to use the internet for social networking, downloading software or maintaining a website	55%	22%
Hours a week use of the internet	14.7hrs	12.1hrs

Young people have enthusiastically embraced digital media

It should be borne in mind in the following section that the overall figures for the young adult group mask many age, gender and socio-economic differences. The basic data in this section, unless attributed elsewhere, is drawn from *The Media Literacy Audit – Digital Lifestyles: Young Adults aged 16-24*, Ofcom Report (May 2009). This report should be visited for further analysis of the various sub-groups.

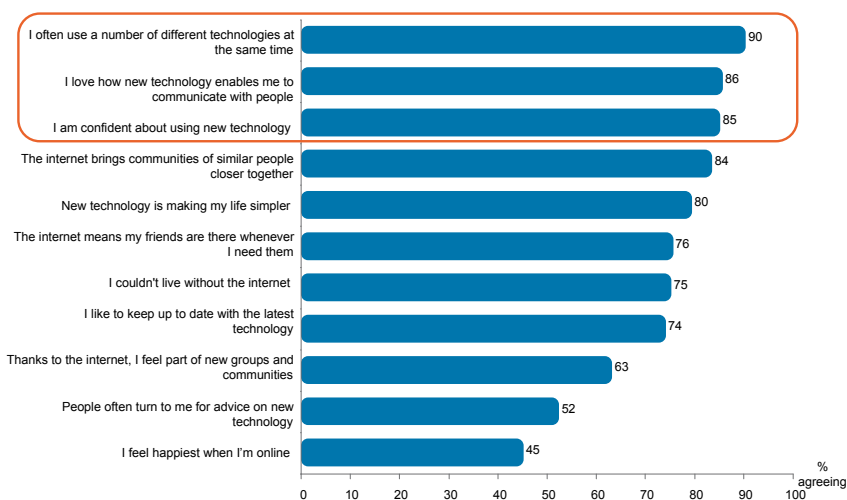
The table above shows how young people have embraced digital media compared to the general adult population. Young people are more likely to live in a household with digital television and internet access. They are also more likely to use mobile phones and MP3 players. When it comes to internet usage they are more likely to use a wider range of functions or activities, combining communication with activities such as work or study information.

As stated previously these Digital Natives differ significantly from older groups in their use of several media devices at the same time. While three in four of all internet users (74%) say they use another media device whilst using the internet, this rises to over nine in ten (96%) of 16 to 24 year-olds, with use of the mobile phone while doing other things particularly prevalent. For example: *“I’ll always have my phone with me in case I get any texts while I’m watching TV although it does annoy my step-dad”* (Female 21).^{iv}

Given this mix of media use it is hardly surprising that they are less certain than older adults as to which of the media they would most miss if it was taken away. 50% of adults comment that withdrawal of television would be most impactful whereas 16 to 24 year-olds claimed that they would miss new media modes more; such as mobile phones, internet access and MP3 – with mobile phone being the device they would miss most. Also noteworthy is that 16-24s are in general less likely than adults to say they regularly use the more traditional media of television (93% vs 97%) and radio (59% vs 69%) although the majority still, of course, do use these things.

Figure 1.

Young people are likely to embrace technology as part of their lives: 75% said they 'couldn't live without the internet'



the coming together of
Herley Centre, Headlight, Zoom
and Tanktouch

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futures
company

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Source: The Futures Company
/YouthNet Survey July 2009

Turning specifically to the internet, it is hardly surprising that a picture of confident usage predominates amongst young people. Indeed, their overall confidence in their ability to use the medium is greater than the general adult population, although their levels of confidence in using email and buying online are broadly similar. Figure 1 taken from the Survey clearly demonstrates the core role played by the internet in the lives of young people. Indeed 86% stated that, 'I love how new technology enables me to communicate with people' and 75% said they 'couldn't live without the internet'.

Just under half of all young people (44%) have a social network profile and, of those, more than half only use three sites with Facebook, MySpace and Bebo predominating.

The 'more confident' and 'higher interest' variations amongst young people, when compared with the general adult population, occur in the areas of transferring photographs, joining in debates online and listening to music. Interestingly, involvement in debates online is strongest amongst older young people, being at its most pronounced in the 20 to 24 year-olds. Just under half (44%) of all 16 to 24 year-olds have a social network profile and, of those, more than half only use three sites with Facebook (65%), MySpace (55%) and Bebo (51%) predominating (no other site has more than 10% of users).

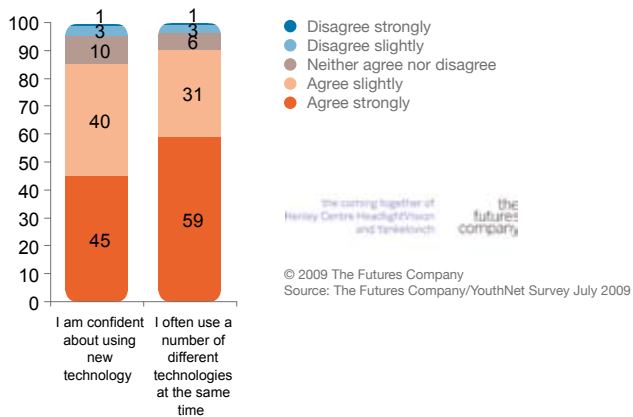
There are clear age preferences with Facebook being stronger in the 20 to 24 year-old sub group and Bebo amongst the 16 to 19 year-olds. Of those with a profile on a site (54% have a profile on more than one site), close to half (48%) say their profile can be seen by anyone rather than limited to friends. *"You don't have to find something to strike up a friendship or find something in common. Just have a general are you alright type conversation"* (Female 17). Related to this is the relatively low use of privacy settings with females demonstrating more awareness and use than males (60% vs 34%).

Young people visit these sites at least twice a week with the most popular uses being to talk to friends and family they see a lot (80%) and to those they rarely see (68%). One in five users (22%) uses the sites to talk to someone they do not know. One of the key uses of the internet is to listen to music video clips or longer videos. 83% have listened to or downloaded music; 77% have watched or downloaded video clips and 60% have watched or downloaded longer video content such as films or television programmes.

A picture emerges of a group that is both interested and confident in using digital media. Whilst interest and confidence in using email and purchasing online is similar to the general adult population, there is more confidence in transferring photographs and, significantly, in joining in debates online. In general the young adult group tends to be more explorative and participative in their use of media, particularly the internet.

Figure 2.

Young people in the UK are confident and experienced users of technology



- 85% of 16-24s said they were 'confident using new technology', and 90% said they 'often use a number of different technologies at the same time'.
- It is young men who are most interested in keeping up to date with the latest gadgets: 43% strongly agreed that they like to do so, compared with 22% of women.
- 66% of male respondents said 'people often turn to them for advice on new technology' (compared with 38% of female respondents).

However, there are significant differences within the 16 to 24 age group. For instance, the 20 to 24 year-olds show more interest in joining in debates than younger members. Interestingly, while perhaps seeing themselves as digital-savvy one-in-four young people shared the views of adults in being interested in but not confident in installing security features and filtering software.

Young people and converging digital media

Digital Natives can build rich tapestries of communication and access from fixed and mobile locations using several modes of contact in a single extended conversation.

The empirical data clearly demonstrates that across the whole social and demographic spectrum there has been an exponential growth in mediated person-to-person communication, both via mobile phones and the various communication options available via the internet. This expansion is linked to the rapid and awe-inspiring growth of internet access and the parallel growth in mobile phone penetration. Most recently, the two have converged in the growth and use of smart phones such as the iPhone. Indeed Figure 2 taken from the Survey clearly demonstrates how confident the 16 to 24 year-olds are.

However, this has not occurred in some kind of vacuum. Rather, it is part of a social change that has been gathering pace over several decades. These changes have been well described as: 'Distances between places and people again seem to be dramatically reducing... time and space are dematerialising,

as people, machines, images, information, power, money, ideas are all, we might say 'on the move'.^v As such, they represent the increasing speed, mobility and complexity of modern life. This complexity is often linked to technological change and progress. In part, internet and mobile communications are seen as a technological response to social change while at the same time being seen as a catalyst that helps bring about increased mobility and virtualisation. In other words it is both cause and effect. After all it is not so long ago that the idea of instant communication across vast distances was the province of gods. Today: '... the hoi polloi of the twenty-first century enjoy ease of communication far beyond the ken of the nineteenth century's richest potentate'.^{vi}

Indeed, it appears the more we can communicate the more we will, and do, communicate. If we just take the mobile phone as an example, already as we move through the first decade of this century, the potential for communication from this single device continues to grow. First we saw text added to voice, then photographs and now social networks and more general search access. Increasingly these services are acting in combination through applications which can be accessed, for example, on the Facebook website or on their mobile phones. Applications may feature services such as geo-tagging and the sharing and blending (known as 'mashing') of both given and user-generated content.

“My Facebook isn’t necessarily me. It’s an extension of me.”

Such possibilities provide all of us, particularly the Digital Natives, with the ability to build rich tapestries of communication and access, both from fixed and mobile locations, using several modes of contact in a single extended conversation. As we have already seen, young people are more likely than adults as a whole to use more than one media device at the same time.^{vii} What they choose to use will often depend on the purpose of the activity, the emotional involvement or the content of the specific communication. A typical attitude might include: *“I like face to face and calling and texting but at work prefer Facebook and MSN. If it’s long term plans then MSN”* (Female 19). The complexity of communication is well illustrated in the self-created pictogram, Figure 3.^{viii}

Figure 3 shows us the amazing tapestry of communication and information-gathering opportunities open to a single person. Of course, accessing and mobilising these possibilities requires the exercise of choice. How and why do 16 to 24 year-olds choose when to speak, when to text or indeed send a picture? Such choice appears to be closely coupled to the emotional nature of the content and/or context of the sender and potential recipients. Using and controlling this rich fabric of opportunity in a variety of social relationships and settings requires its own special learned or developed behaviours for both senders and receivers.

How young people want others to see them

As we examine various forms or modes of usage of media it is important to constantly remind ourselves that much of the importance of this usage is derived from the play of identity creation and representation that is so very important to young people going through a time of immense personal and contextual change. Too much data concentrates on what young people are doing or using to communicate and not enough on why. The ‘why’ is, at least, partially represented in Figure 4.^{ix}

Many studies have shown that much communication and online interaction is closely correlated to identity performance (Turkle, 1995; Markham, 1998; Sunden, 2003; Thomas, 2004). For example: *“My Facebook isn’t necessarily me. It’s an extension of me”* (Male 20). Indeed, commentators have argued that the opportunities afforded through new technologies, modes and contents have created not just new identity performances but at some levels ‘a new kind of person’.^x

People have always sought to establish and represent identity or identities, particularly young people. What is perhaps new is the extent and scope of the opportunities to do this through using new technologies. There should be a note of caution here as, in fact, much non face-to-face contact is predicated upon sustaining or even deepening relationships that have a very strong face-to-face or physical basis.

Figure 3.

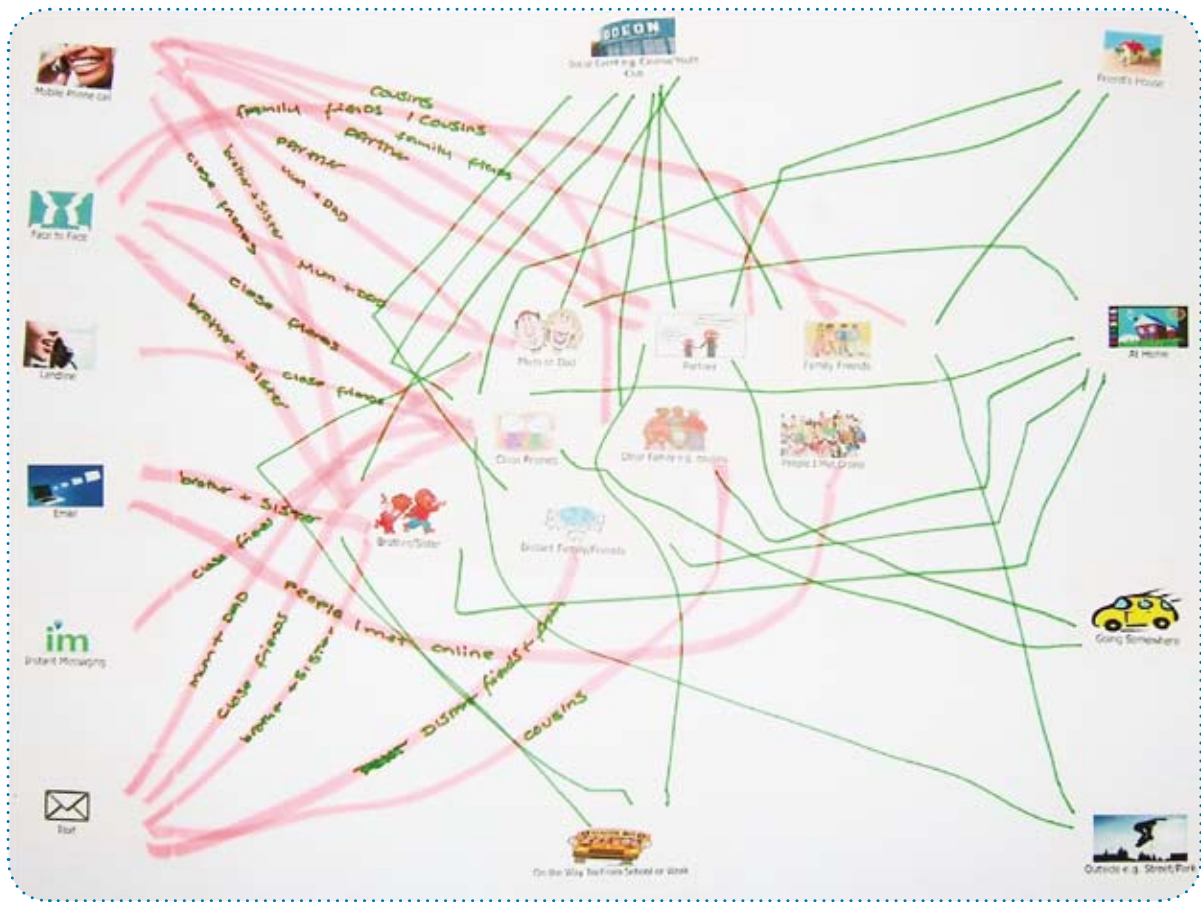


Figure 4.
Communication Complex

Communication

Self-Authoring

"Yes, I have very strong views of myself. If I feel strongly about something then I'll tend to do something about it, even if it is only on a very small scale" (Female, 20)

"Mine doesn't say I hate the world, it says that's me in the picture" (Female, 16)

Learning/Being Informed

"it all depends on the moment I'm in, I hardly ever read the newspaper... if there's a fight or something my friends will just tell me about it" (Male, 19)

Networking tools e.g. 'Own your friends'



"Bebo, yes, that's good because it's got lots of kind of interactive things as well, rather than you just write about yourself" (Female, 16)

Sharing

Q. What makes you want to upload in the first place?

"to show our friends I think...it's like an online scrapbook I think cos we all sort of comment" (Female, 16)

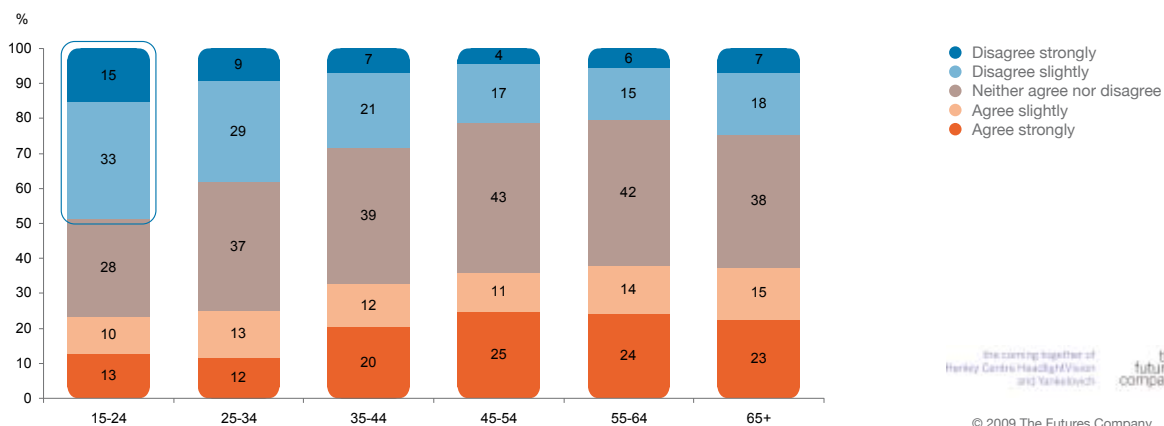
Social Networking

"(Facebook) It's more for social networking and contacting people" (Male, 19)

Figure 5.

Young people are also most likely to feel part of a ‘virtual community’

‘Thanks to the internet, I feel part of a ‘virtual community’”



the coming together of Henley Centre HealthVision and YouGov

the futures company

© 2009 The Futures Company
Source: The Futures Company
‘Planning for Consumer Change’, May 2009

Figures 5 and 6 demonstrate how young people are more likely to see their identity as part of a virtual community and how the internet acts to bring groups of similar people together. For example, 38% stated they have good friends online who they have never met in real life. This to some extent opposes some research and to a limited extent the earlier point, however it does support a second alternative line of thought which views such identity plays as more socially rooted, a response to changes in economic, political and the social order which have both global and local impact, and have created the desire to create and maintain new kinds of social networks.

^{xi} *‘It’s like a little online gathering place where everyone you know is’* (Female 20s). This requires both the development of communication tools and probably more significantly new social identities; identities that are more accurately defined by lifestyle, media consumption and affinity spaces than by the more traditional markers of race, class, gender and place.^{xii}

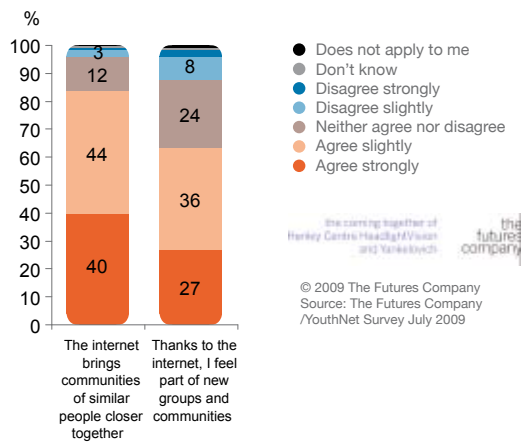
In either case the opportunities offered by new multi-modal communication for identity creation and performance are well established. These allow young people to ‘speak to’ an actual or imagined audience that prompts them to think about what they wish to show, or how they would like to represent themselves.^{xiii} *‘I find out what’s the theme for the party on Facebook...I see what everyone is going to wear, decide what I’ll go like, that sort of thing’* (Female 20s).

The sense of audience – an audience to whom one is presenting a particular narrative (or narratives) of the self influences^{xiv} behaviour. In this context Slater^{xv} distinguishes between ‘self-presentation’ and ‘self-representation’ behaviours. Self-presentation is how we present ourselves without reflection or intention in the moment, whilst self-representation entails some reflection or intentionality. As such, some reflection or intentionality must be present in almost all internet based communication as each key depression has a degree of intentionality, for instance, the posting of a photograph or text response.

The way identity can be represented is, to an extent, always limited during any performance by the actual mode of access or communication i.e. website, email, text, voice etc. It is also influenced by the nature of a relationship or emotional importance assigned by the individual to the task and/or intended recipient. Therefore, young people may choose to use a general search on the internet for information about a challenging issue or take part in an anonymous chat or forum group but when, in more extreme or personal need, they may turn to an advice helpline or the direct physical intervention of a ‘professional’.

Figure 6.

84% of 16-24s said ‘the internet brings communities of similar people closer together’



- Young people were more likely to say that the internet brings communities together than claim they are part of one themselves.
- 38% said they ‘have good friends online who they have never met in real life’, and 38% said that their ‘online friends are the same to them as their offline friends’.

Although many communication choices are available today they each contain their own strengths and constraints relating to the medium and the social conventions that emerge around that particular form of communication^{xvi} Young people are particularly adept at understanding these issues and selecting the appropriate mode of access or communication (see later examination of stressful issues). It is, therefore, most likely that we will see a continual rise in internet access through mobile devices as this represents a perfect example of combining several differing communication modes – text, voice, pictures, email or virtual social networks – with their associated differing conventions in one ever-present device.

Key to the importance of mobile or highly personal devices is, as Wellman suggests, that the person rather than the place becomes the locus of connectivity: *‘With the internet and the mobile phone, messages come to people not the other way round. Individuals are connected by their phones, but their phone is not tied to a place and its environment (such as family or office).’*^{xvii} So, *‘...to a certain extent this communication has been abstracted from the constraints of physical space – people can be reached anytime, anyplace.’*^{xviii} Indeed, all becomes *‘...permeated with communicative relationships which transcend system boundaries,’*^{xix} as such creating and sustaining identity becomes entwined with the availability of individuals and others for communication.

Just like the ever on/connected culture, stressful situations do not respect time constraints, availability to the advice seeker therefore becomes an increasing issue.

The ideas of identity representation discussed thus far takes place within the context of relationship building and sustaining. In other words – through bonding with others to varying degrees of intensity or ‘tightness’. This is well supported in the data. Many of the respondents in the Survey saw the internet as a place of community, where young people with similar interests (or concerns) could meet up. Here, at its deeper level and following Ainsworth (1989),^{xx} we may define such bonding as a tie between two or more individuals that is relatively stable over time and across contexts. It has a highly organised and dynamic memory structure that produces a relatively stable affinity for another individual.^{xxi} Building and sustaining such bonds takes both time and effort and represents an individual’s identity support network.

Breakdown in this network can be traumatic for the individual. Seeking help from other individuals or organisations therefore becomes, at least in part, a search for identity re-establishment. This is important as there can be a tendency to see offering advice and indeed advice-seeking as merely a response to an issue rather than a matter of identity. The quality of such relationship ties or bonds has usually been assessed through the strength of such ties. These are normally associated with a combination of factors such as perceived closeness, intimacy and trust. Weaker ties are therefore evinced in more casual relationships and in sparser exchanges.^{xxiii}

Digital communication, particularly the internet, allows the individual to consistently make choices as to the content, context and form of interaction. In so doing it supports a spread of bonds from the weak to the intense. Significantly the status and importance of these can, and will, vary over time as situation and context changes. By implication, support structures likewise need to accommodate a range of ties from the weak, when perhaps only information is required, through to the stronger when more support is needed. This may be during periods of great intensity and significance for the individual and has obvious implications in terms of the need for availability and trust engendering structures and support.

Implications for people engaging with Digital Natives

Digital Natives are constantly in touch with friends and family, people they often see day-to-day, building elaborate tapestries of communication of great depth and often emotional intensity.

What emerges from this brief review is a picture of young people living highly connected hybrid lives. Far from how they are characterised by some of the doomsayers, they are not friendless individuals locked in darkened rooms tapping away on games consoles or computer screens only making contact with the odd stranger through chat rooms. They are for the most part constantly in touch with friends and family, people they often see day-to-day, building elaborate tapestries of communication of great depth and often emotional intensity.

Their use of 'new media' allows them to create a continuous stream of multiple conversations, interweaving differing media formats – text, voice, photos, video, social networks – while swapping and exchanging content as part of the reciprocity and 'gift giving' of relationship building. They are able to move seamlessly from relatively shallow contacts with many to deep and focused conversations on a one-to-one basis. Arguably, the availability and their use of the new tools gives this group a range and depth of conversation not available to previous generations.

“They are active seekers of interaction and expect feedback as part of their navigation and relationship with others.”

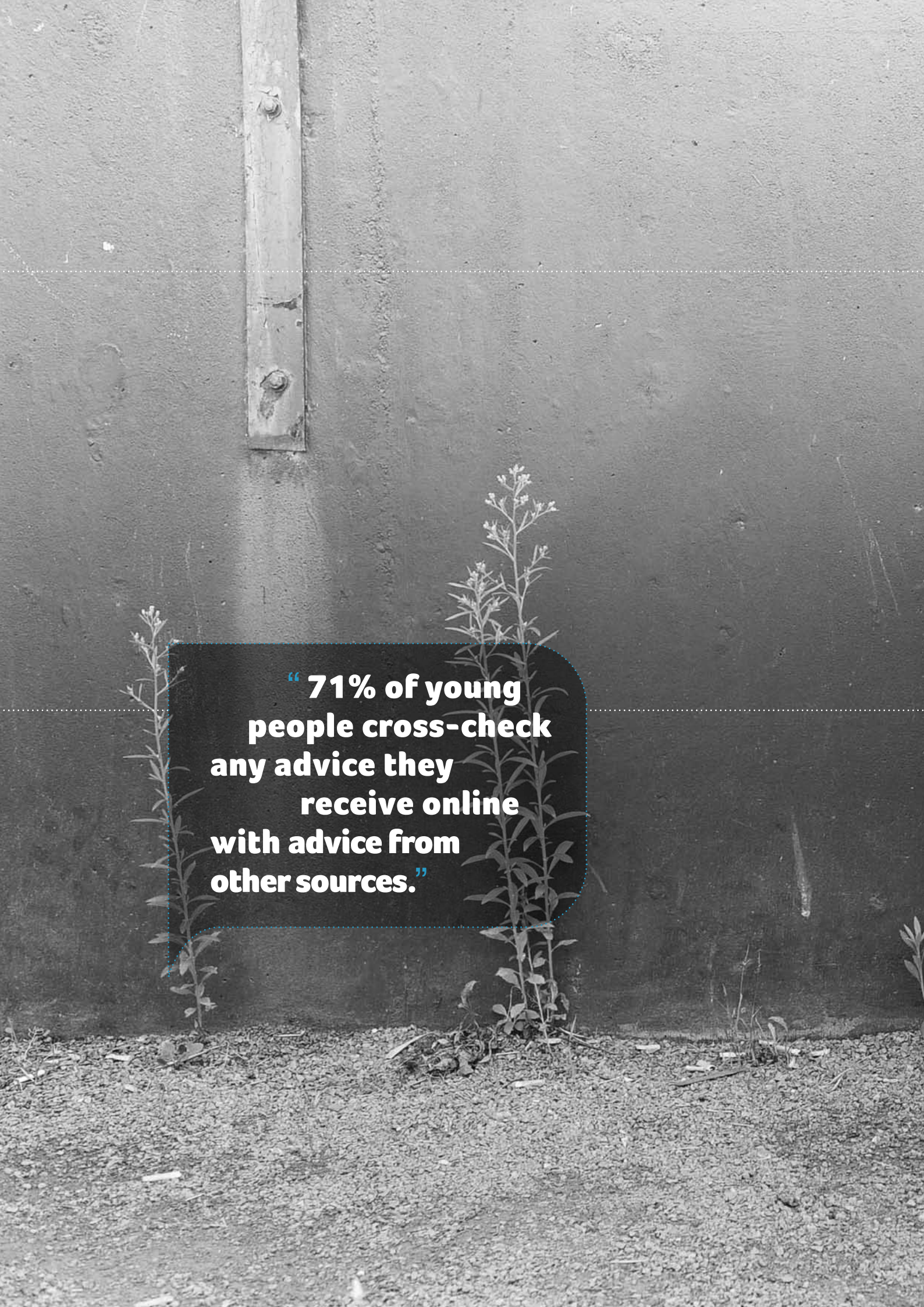
Much of what they do can be seen as identity creation or affirmation. For instance: *“Sometimes I try to work out what people expect me to be. If I’m feeling confident I’ll try something new”* (Female 17). They also experiment, although we have to be careful when talking of experimentation as, for the vast majority, the representations of the self that are created are seen more as opportunities to put the ‘best case’ forward rather than more radical treatments.

They are used to assembling conversations, downloading, mashing, formatting and reformatting, creating content (although there is less genuine user-generated content and more assembly from given contents or forms). In other words, they are used to interactive engagement with content and with their peer group. Indeed, just as their peer groups are important in many of the issues of identity creation, so peers can become the most trusted sources of information. They certainly act as significant arbiters of the veracity of information. What is being demonstrated is a highly experiential and sharing form of behaviour: *“I sometimes share my photographs... with my friends and relevant people who might have been at the event, often post them to my MySpace site”* (Male 21).

Young people’s experience of playing electronic games may have contributed, in some part, to their highly contingent views of futures: *“Just take it one step at a time, not wanting to plan too far ahead”* (Male 18). Although not too much should be made of this as they do at the same time embrace more conventional

views: *“...getting a degree in computer science, getting a good job, moving out of my mum’s...”* (Male 19) while possessing a more experiential attitude towards learning. In short they have embraced the tools of new media and, to a significant extent in so doing, have fashioned a model of engagement radically different from earlier generations.

They are active seekers of interaction and expect feedback as part of their navigation and relationship with others. They record and share significant elements of their lives and, in a similar manner, use both given and created contents as part of the reciprocity of exchange that functions within their identity plays and maintenance. They are confident and interested but this interest and confidence may mean they are willing to take risks and develop few security strategies outside of continually exercising choice and judgment. Significantly these behaviours create specific challenges in terms of how to build a dialogue and presence with this group, how to be part of the conversations when needed and how to communicate in a language young people can relate to and can engage with whilst still retaining credibility.



**“ 71% of young
people cross-check
any advice they
receive online
with advice from
other sources.”**



**CHAPTER
TWO
TRUST &
SECURITY
ONLINE**

Chapter 2 Trust and security online

Much has been written on the subject of making digital media a safer and more secure place for young people. There have been many notable and significant contributions to thinking and policy in this area particularly ‘*Safer Children in a Digital World*,’ the report of the Byron Review,^{xxiv} the Eurobarometer Studies,^{xxv} as well as the extensive body of work led by Professor Sonia Livingstone at the London School of Economics. Much of this work is targeted toward a slightly younger age group than is the subject of this report. Nevertheless, many of the comments, recommendations and observations still have resonance with young people.

Whilst it is not the role of the report to explore this general area, issues of trust and safety need to be addressed in terms of younger young people given that 16 and 17 year-olds are not legally classified as adults. In some sense these young people represent a particularly vulnerable in-between group. They may still be, potentially, confronting many of the identity issues and vulnerabilities of youth such as interpersonal victimisation, depression and related issues, whilst being under pressure and looking to take on many of the responsibilities of adulthood. They will also be doing this whilst moving beyond the reach of many of the formal support agencies that support children. The following section explores some of the more general issues of trust online from a young person’s perspective.

Sharing personal information online

The nature of trust is difficult to define although most of us feel we have a common sense grasp of the term. Indeed as Koehn (2003)^{xxvi} suggests: ‘*Authors disagree as to the type of thing trust is.*’ He then goes on to suggest there are several forms of trust: goal based, calculative, knowledge based and respect based. Handy argues that ‘... *trust needs touch.*’^{xxvii} This begs the question as to what touch is in an online environment. It may be related to physical foreknowledge of the location or site from an external party. “*I’d trust my friends more than the internet ‘cause then it’s more than one source telling you what it is*” (Male 19).

“To a great extent young people have the ability to see through posted information. They are well aware that people’s profiles can just be a front.”

The foreknowledge could be based on brand awareness. *“Facts and news that’s BBC... sports is Skysports...MSN for concerts and stuff.”* (Male 18). Or perhaps it is something a little less tangible, a combination of factors such as apparent shared social norms, repeated interactions and shared experiences as the facilitators of trust.^{xxviii} This line emphasises a highly active, proactive and generative style of action which strengthens trust.^{xxix} In practice it is likely that all of these have some bearing on how trust is built and maintained.

The action element appears to have particular strength when examining the levels of trust that many individuals appear to demonstrate when posting and recording personal data. This is particularly the case in relation to social network sites where the familiarity of constantly posting update messages may lead to a build-up of interactions and responses that, in turn, increase competence, confidence and trust. Such trust may build to the point where it often appears that participants are happy to disclose as much information as possible to as many people as possible in order to build and maintain identity and social relations. This is hardly surprising as 63% of young people who took part in the Survey said they felt *‘part of new groups and communities thanks to the internet’*.

However, this idea of the seemingly irresponsible posting of personal data has been challenged. Several academic researchers concluded that the *‘...overwhelming majority of adolescents are responsibly using the website,’* (in relation

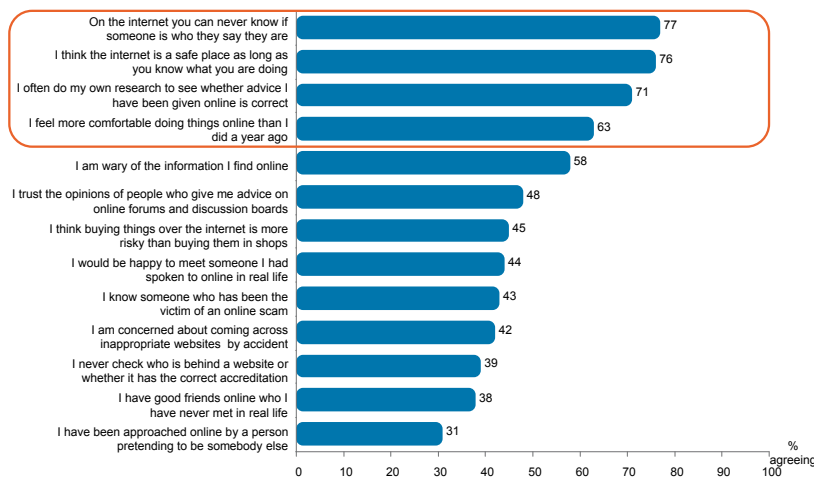
to MySpace).^{xxx} It should also be borne in mind that the vast majority of contacts are local with the stronger ties relating to pre-existing study or work contexts.^{xxxii} It should also be acknowledged that young people do, to a great extent, have the ability to see through posted information. They are well aware that people’s profiles can just be a front.

It seems that position in the peer network is more important than the personal information provided rendering the profile a place-marker more than a self-portrait. Implicit within this is a notion of being able to read and understand the language of the internet – a capacity based on knowledge and experience. This capacity to read has, at its heart, a predominantly confident yet cautious approach to the online environment from young people.

77% those surveyed agreed that: *‘On the internet you can never know if someone is who they say they are.’* This is further supported by 58% of the sample being wary of the information they find online and 71% cross-checking any advice they receive with advice from other sources. Some 36% say they cross-check who is behind, or the accreditation of, websites they visit. If anything, this is a smaller than expected percentage given that some 43% state they have known someone who has been a victim of an online scam. Figure 7 demonstrates the perceived importance of knowing what you are doing and its relationship to the management of trust and risk to young people.

Figure 7.

Savvy young people are confident yet cautious online



the coming together of
Herley Centre Health & Vision
and Yorkshire
the futures
company

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Source: The Futures Company
/YouthNet Survey July 2009

76% of those surveyed felt the internet to be a safe place as long as you know what you are doing, with very low percentages actively disagreeing with this statement. There are variations between both gender and age groups. This may be through propensity to answer more confidently or perhaps over confidence which may itself contain risks, although the overall 'agree' findings show broad similarity. It is hardly surprising that the overwhelming majority of respondents classified themselves as confident with technology with some 85% agreeing they were 'confident about using technology' and 63% agreeing that they felt more comfortable doing things online than they were a year ago.

What emerges is a young adult group embracing the internet. 75% claimed they could not live without it. 86% loved how new technology helps them communicate with people. The emphasis upon living in a virtual community and the importance of digital communications places young people under particular pressures to place personal information in online areas to ensure they are both accessible and, in turn, able to access others.

They are confident and continually gaining in confidence. Yet at the same time they are somewhat more circumspect and wary than some popular mythologies would have us believe. In part they believe their knowledge and competence is sufficient to manage risk. In part they probably have little alternative other than to engage. However, this engagement is, as the data indicates, not necessarily without risk mitigation strategies such as seeking out

several data sources or looking for 'mass' corroboration – hence the importance of well-populated chat or discussion groups, or a simple skepticism to the face value of individual entries.

Assessing the credibility of online information

It is important to see others being active on a site especially those that can be seen as identifiably in one's peer group or undergoing a similar experience.

When assessing websites for signs that signal credibility or deception young people point to aspects of a site's content such as balance and objectivity, provision of basic facts, accuracy and perspective. The existence of these within a site appear to be determined by certain cues:

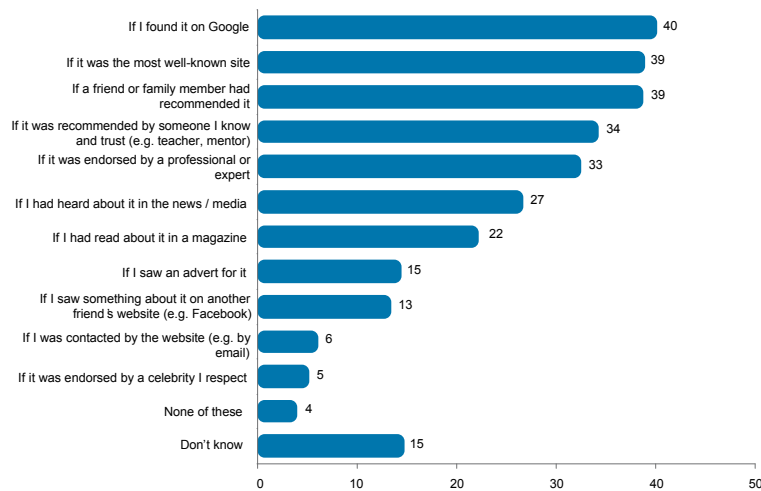
- Professional reputation
- Offline reputation (including having professional staff with resources to gather definitive and credible information)
- Previous personal experience with the site
- Proof of neutral affiliation (.gov for government site; edu for education; .org for non-profits)
- Tone of the writing (neutral versus opinionated)
- Elements of style (use of quotes, pictures, by-lines, newspaper layout).^{xxxiii}

All these appear to combine together into what one might term tone of voice, often cited by respondents, but most likely combining elements of all the foregoing. Importantly the wisdom of crowds appears to be significant. It is important to see others being active on a site especially those that can be seen as identifiably in one's peer group or as undergoing a similar

Figure 8.

Young people are most likely to choose the sites that appear on Google when they are looking for advice

If you had a problem, what would lead you to visit a particular website or community over any other?



experience (see earlier identity comments). Here the opportunity to pass information or advice through several prisms, often combining the off and online in an active verification process, becomes of great importance.

Participation and sharing with others becomes part of the verification process. Thus, rather than always being pioneers, young people, in many instances, are using new information and communication opportunities to seek and, perhaps to a lesser extent, extend established areas and locations. Hardly surprising then that young people were most likely to choose sites that appear on Google when seeking advice (Figure 8).

This remains the case if the question is restructured to ask what the single most important factor is, with Google once again being most significant determinant (16%) but other sources of direction also ranked highly. This is in line with other research which tends to emphasise the importance of Google as the key search engine. *'All searches carried out by the young people in our workshop started on Google... in spite of the computers being set up with a variety of search engines. It's well known and it gives you a billion options to choose from. You are spoilt for choice. It's pretty easy.'*^{xxxiv}

The emphasis on Google is not as an information source in its own right but as the aggregator of information and as the introduction to more specific sites. Indeed, as referred to later, this tends to lead to an artificial down playing of the actual sites which can be misleading.

More generally well-known brand news sites such as the BBC, CNN or Fox, and additionally Wikipedia and blog sites, are widely regarded as conferring credibility to information. Wikipedia gains authority from its open access, that it is available to open modification and censorship rather than emanating from a single authority. This is in spite of some well-publicised issues relating to the credibility of some information on the site.

Digital Natives assemble their views and understandings using new and old technologies and from on and offline relationships to build a personally verified position.

Figure 8 clearly demonstrates that, in fact, credibility or trust is likely to be built through several key areas of endorsement acting to support one another and in exhibiting consistency with other sites. This process is about young people acting as active and demanding enquirers who sample 'a wide variety of opinions and perspectives'^{xxxv} drawing them together to confer trusted status upon key sites and locations. When addressing a particular problem or issue they build what they regard as reliable information from several sources. Indeed, 71% of young people stated that when looking for help and advice it is best to find as many opinions as possible. In other words Digital Natives assemble their views and understandings using new and old technologies and from on and offline relationships to build a personally verified position.



**CHAPTER
THREE**

**HOW YOUNG
PEOPLE
SEEK ADVICE
ONLINE**



“ 71% of the total sample agreed that when looking for advice, it is best to find as many opinions as possible.”

Chapter 3 How young people seek advice online

The internet represents a natural space for young people – as normal to them as meeting in a coffee bar or street corner. However... the internet possesses several characteristics that make it particularly powerful as a means of seeking advice during what can be highly personal and traumatic life stages.

This section looks at advice-seeking in the online environment. However, as previously highlighted, the reason why an individual goes to a particular space for information, advice or assistance and what confers legitimacy upon such a space is highly complex, involving many sources of influence both on and offline. We will return to several of these themes as we seek to locate the importance and impact of online support within a broader context.

As noted before, the young adult group is far from being homogenous. At the lower age range individuals are probably at school and dealing with many of the issues of later adolescence, whilst older young people are coming to terms with college, employment or unemployment, developing new relationships and the many responsibilities associated with this time. All are confronted by stressful life events. Not everyone will handle these as well as others and indeed, the link between such events and potentially harmful behavior such as substance abuse has been well made in several studies.^{xxxvi}

Each individual will make use of a wide range of support networks and opportunities to cope with these events and online support should, therefore, be assessed from within this context. As noted earlier in the report the internet represents a natural space for young people, a space which is as normal to them as meeting in a coffee bar or street corner. However, that is not to say that all spaces are equal. Indeed, the internet possesses several characteristics that make it particularly powerful as a means of seeking advice during what can be highly personal and traumatic life stages.

Figure 9 from the Survey clearly demonstrates the core role of the internet as an information provider.

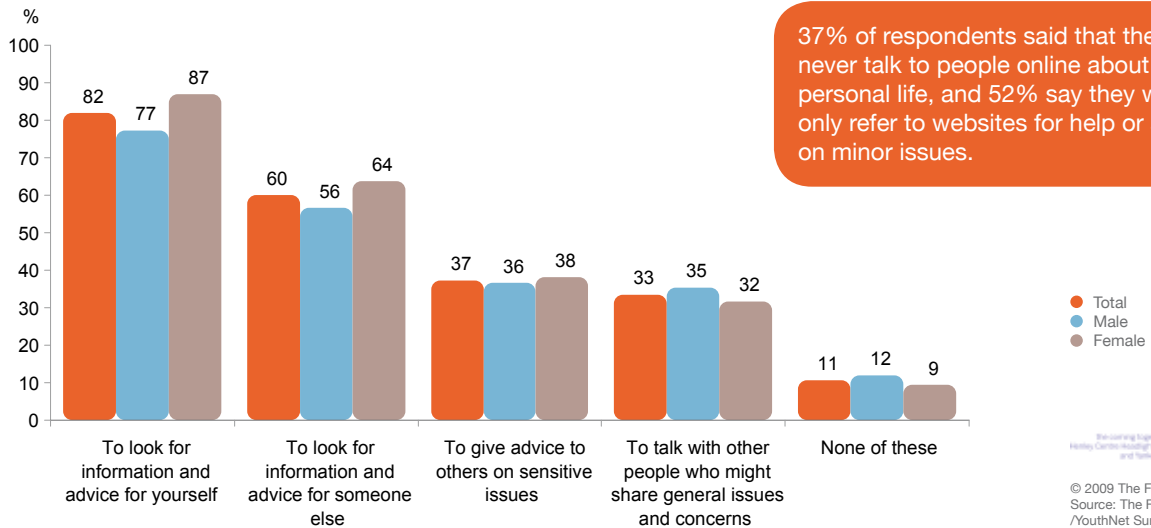
Where young people get information and advice

One potential error is to assume that young people do not know where to look for advice when confronted by stressful life events. In fact, American studies report that almost as many young people (73 to 75%) as adults (79 to 84%) use the internet to search for health information.^{xxxvii}

Figure 9.

Most young people have used the internet to look for information and advice

Have you ever used the internet to...



An earlier study demonstrated that a keyword search on 'health' on Google as long ago as 2005 generated 473,000,000 results.^{xxxviii} In the same research 53% of youths between the ages of 15 and 17, who had looked for health information online, reported that they had had a conversation with their caregiver about what they had learned. In fact, they are very aware that there are many sources of information and the use of any one source is not seen as a substitute for others.^{xxxix}

If anything there appears to be almost too much information and too many information sources. For young people there are often two difficulties. Firstly to select from the opportunities available and secondly, to move from seeking general information or understanding towards deeper knowledge and the opportunity for personal action. Such difficulties highlight the need for the signposting of services or areas of support.

It is also an error to view the various potential sources of advice as in any way competing. Rather, they are complementary, playing different roles at different stages of the advice seeking, comparison and action processes. Often they will act in verification and support of one another. This is confirmed in the Survey,

where 71% of the total sample agreed that when looking for advice, it is best to find as many opinions as possible.

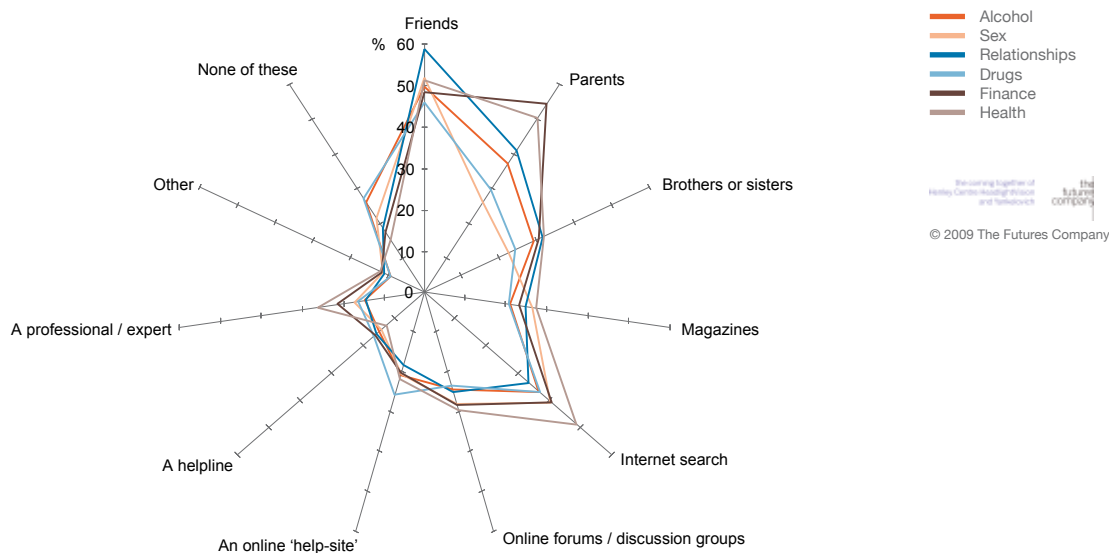
However, seeking as many sources as possible does have its problems with some 53% of those young people surveyed stating: 'There is so much information out there that it is impossible to know what is good advice and what isn't.' In practice, it appears that the individual assembles a view of the veracity of advice by comparison with multiple sources and then opts for different modes of engagement during differing stages of the process.

These, in turn, are tested against and with one another to produce a composite view or set of advices. There are two further considerations to bear in mind. Firstly, the nature of the advice sought changes in relation to the subject matter on which someone is enquiring – for example whether it is advice on alcohol, sex, relationships or drugs etc. Secondly, the nature of the advice sought changes dependent upon the degree to which the individual is personally challenged by the issue.

Figure 10.

Cross topic comparison

When it comes to....., which of the following sources would you consider turning to for information or advice about everyday worries that are on your mind?



The following Figures 10-13 taken from the Survey demonstrate how differing forms of advice are used in relation to both different issues and the relative importance of that advice to the individual.

Figure 10 explores everyday worries, and clearly illustrates the general role played by a diverse range of sources, in particular, friends, parents and internet search (internet is discussed in more detail in the following section). Most noteworthy here is the relatively low importance attributed to magazines, compared to internet search. Online forums/discussion groups also play significant roles. At this stage the role of the professional or expert is limited in comparison say to friends and internet.

Figure 11 looks at sources of information consulted regarding personal issues that concern young people. In this, the advice-seeking has become more personal and of elevated status.

The same key sources of advice still retain their position but the professional/expert gains in importance. However, it is important to note that professionals or experts can also be accessed online. Indeed, 27% of the sample cited the availability of experts online as a key reason for internet use.

This is particularly important when combined with issues of anonymity and ease of access.

Figure 12 looks at advice-seeking in relation to critical and sensitive issues that young people are very anxious about.

Here the role of the professional/expert is considerably more important as advice-seekers are addressing highly specific issues and may be seeking a more one-to-one support relationship.

What is particularly interesting about this sequence of data is the way in which differing issues appear to be more closely associated with certain support sources. For instance, when one compares finance with sex, young people are relatively willing to engage with parental sources for financial advice-seeking but not so readily in relation to sex. Friends and the internet are far more consistently consulted regardless of the topic. Additionally, although there are some changes in the data, most individual stressful issues appear to track a similar advice profile irrespective of the relative importance of the advice-seeking. The one obvious variation is the move towards professional help as the significance of the situation develops.

Figure 11.

Cross topic comparison

When it comes to....., which of the following sources would you consider turning to for information or advice about personal issues that sometimes concern you?

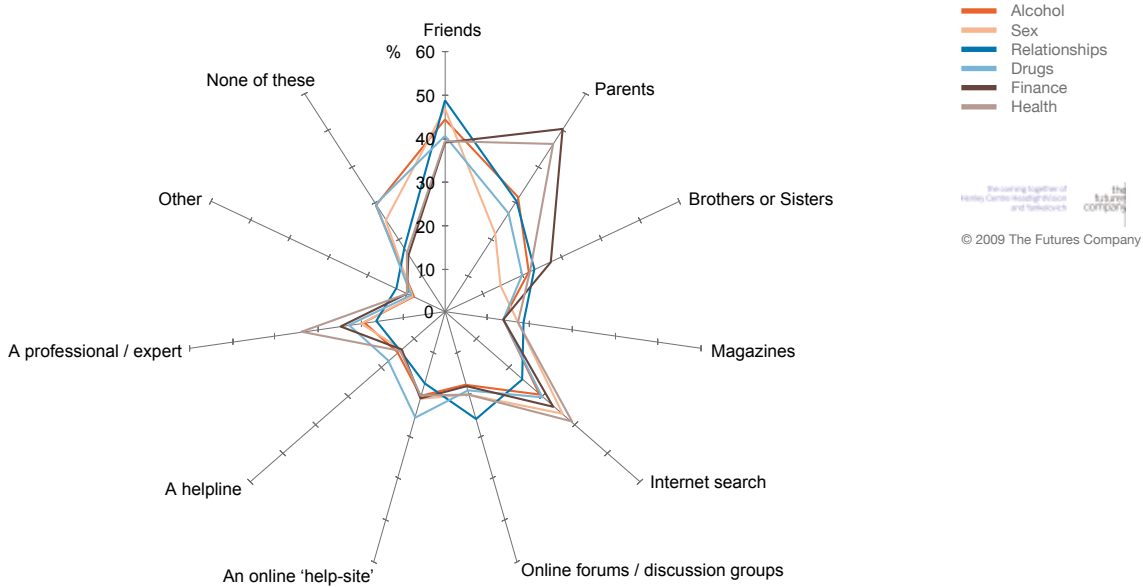


Figure 12.

Cross topic comparison

When it comes to....., which of the following sources would you consider turning to for information or advice about critical and sensitive issues that you are very anxious about?

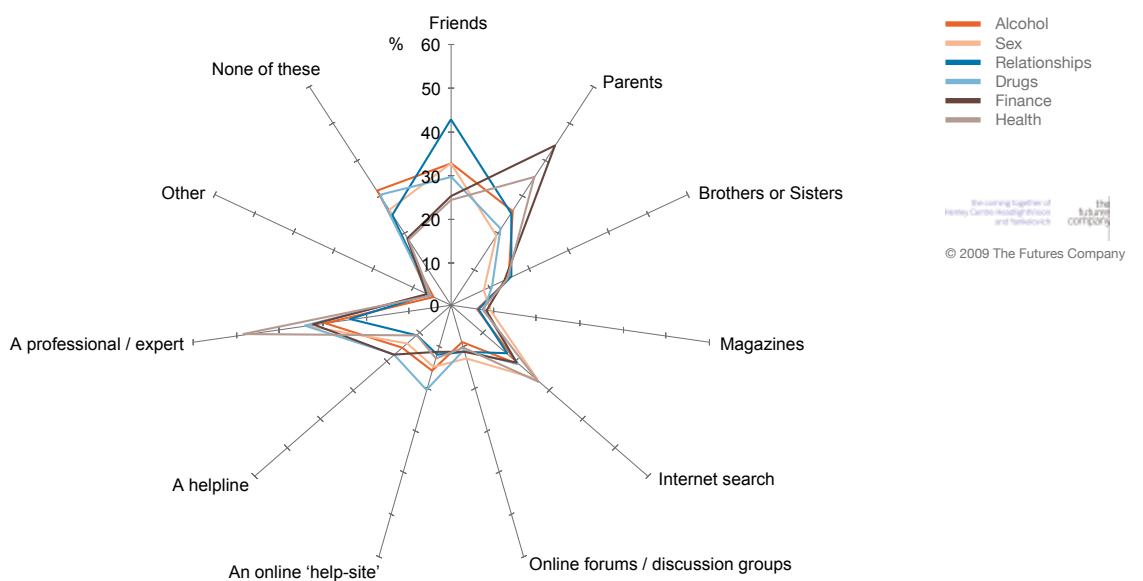


Figure 13.

Cross topic comparison

Which one source of advice would you turn to first for information or advice about very sensitive concerns relating to...?

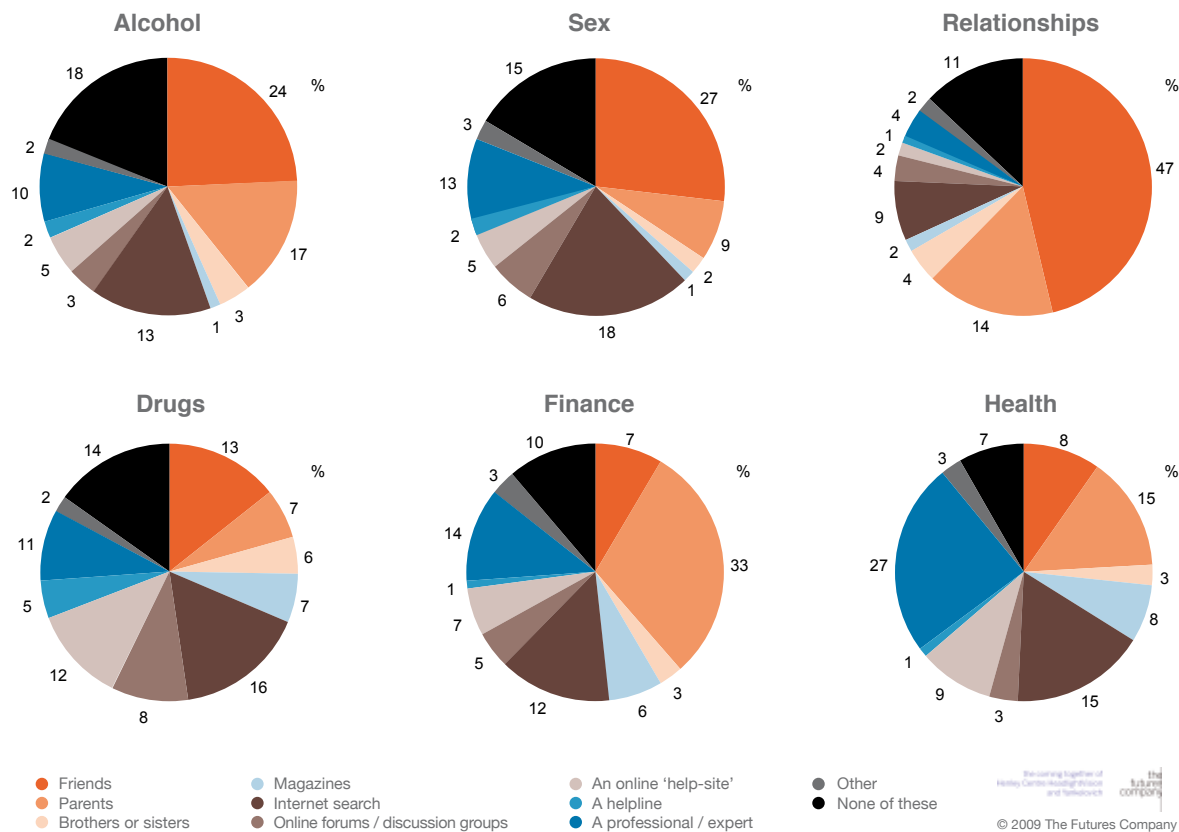
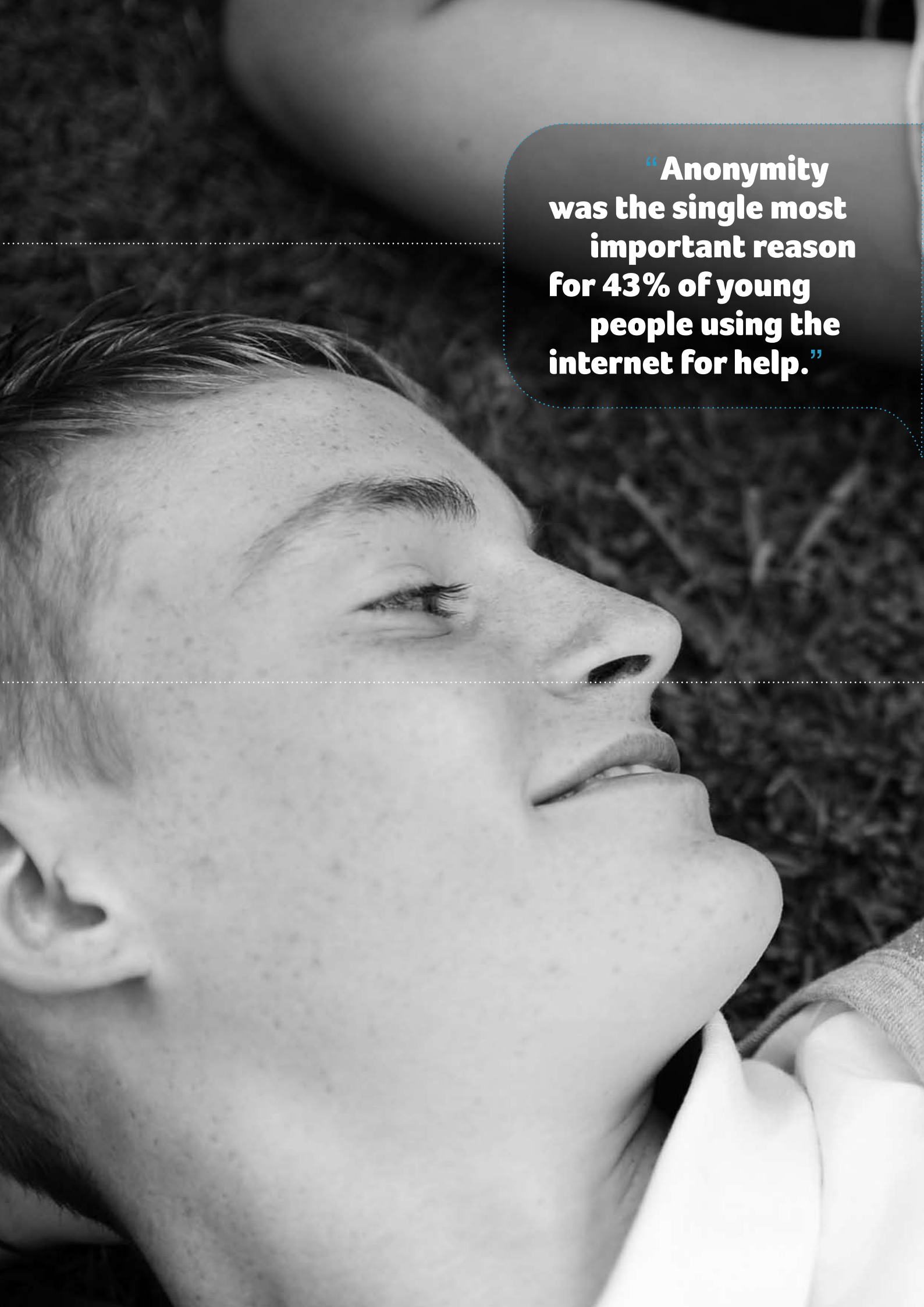


Figure 13 examines the same stressful issues from the perspective of the one single source of advice that young people would first turn to.

We see how young people clearly relate sources of advice to specific concerns. For example 47% of the sample would turn to friends in the first instance to seek advice about relationship issues, with only 4% seeking professional advice. For health matters 27% would seek professional advice (in part relating to health professionals being amongst the most known and easily accessed), and only 8% would go to friends.

The significance of the internet as the single first-advice source is illustrated by its ranking in the top three sources across all issues. When one takes search, online forums and online help-sites together the internet is first source for a quarter of the sample in the case of each issue. (Apart from relationships which is dominated by friends as an advice source with the internet a secondary source.)

“The significance of the internet as the single first-advice source is illustrated by its ranking in the top three sources across all issues. When one takes search, online forums and online help-sites together the internet is first source for a quarter of the sample in the case of each issue.”



**“Anonymity
was the single most
important reason
for 43% of young
people using the
internet for help.”**



**CHAPTER
FOUR**

**WHAT ISSUES
DO YOUNG PEOPLE
SEEK ADVICE ON VIA
THE INTERNET?**

Chapter 4 What issues do young people seek advice on via the internet?

82% of young people stated they had at some time used the internet to look for information and advice.

The Survey clearly demonstrates that the internet plays a key role in advice-seeking and searching for information for young people. Using search engines as an initial way of looking for information appears particularly strong as many online sites will be visited via search engines rather than through direct access or bookmark.

The importance of Google positioning in influencing visits to a particular website has been mentioned previously. However, in terms of general internet use, 82% of young people stated they had at some time used the internet to look for information and advice for themselves with only 2% stating they would never use the internet to look for help or advice. Of the sample, 60% stated that they had looked for information and advice for someone else. 37% had looked to give advice to others on sensitive issues – a significant finding given the high importance given by the sample to the role of friends as sources of advice.

This statistic also demonstrates the co-operative way in which many young people use the internet. They expect to be able to receive advice and give it to others. Indeed this sharing of advice, examined later in the report, appears to play a key role in establishing a site's credibility. If opportunities for sharing within the peer

group are not available the site may appear authoritarian and distanced from the group. Sharing appears to create notions of ownership and commitment.

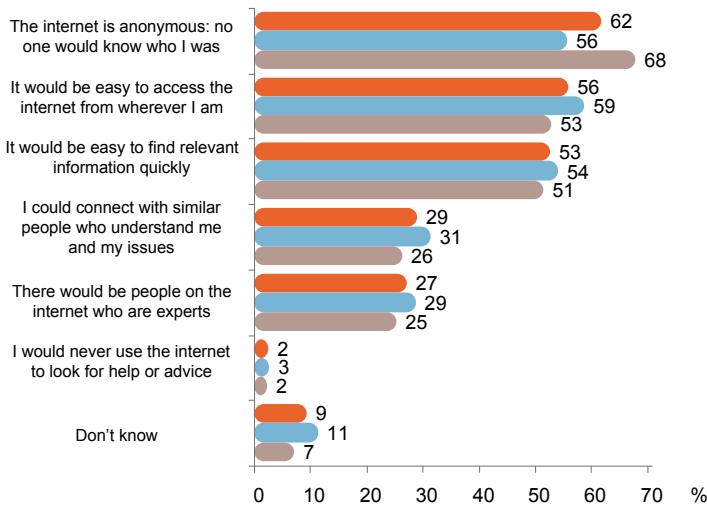
Why is the internet so important? In part because it is seen as a natural tool for the young adult group. It is where they naturally go for information and communication. 56% of those surveyed said that the fact that it would be easy to access the internet from wherever they are was an important factor in their choice to use it as an information source. This is particularly important given the personal nature of much advice-seeking and, of course, will only be aided by the rise in smart phone availability and mobile internet more generally.

A recent study in Australia indicated that internet access to health information (in the context of mental health), was rated helpful by 70% of respondents. However, the single most important reason for 42% of those using the internet for advice-seeking in stressful situations, as highlighted in the Survey, was that the internet was anonymous. Figure 14 demonstrates the importance of anonymity and convenience. It also illustrates a gender difference with females placing a stronger emphasis on anonymity whilst males rate convenience.

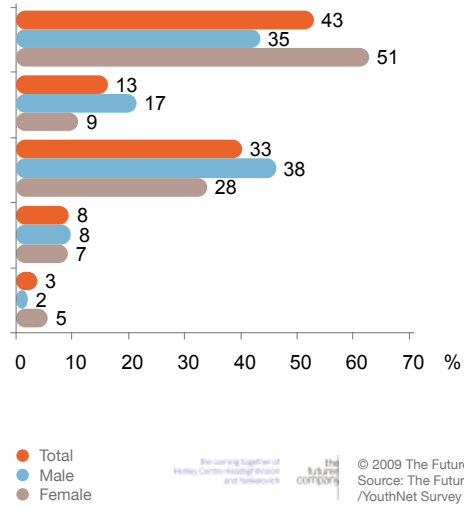
Figure 14.

Anonymity is the primary reason young women would have for seeking advice online whereas for men convenience is more important

If you had a problem that was worrying you, which of the following would make you look for advice on the internet rather than speaking to someone face-to-face?



And which is the single most important factor?



The single most important reason for 43% of young people using the internet for advice-seeking in stressful situations was that the internet was anonymous.

When the question was asked on the basis of the single most important reason, anonymity was the reason most likely to be cited. Closely allied to this was the perception that it was possible online to talk about issues that individuals couldn't talk about face-to-face. "Yeah, because there's no embarrassment... say whatever you want and it's not to their face. It becomes quite difficult to say stuff to someone's face" (Female 20). Some 50% agreed with this.

Closely allied to this, 37% agreed that they would never tell people online about their personal life, with 11% disagreeing strongly and 33% disagreeing overall. This is a more ambivalent result and indeed representative of behaviour for personal postings on social network sites and the known use of advice sites. However, this should be set against a general feeling of being more honest about feelings when talking to people online than when talking to people face-to-face. 50% agreed with this while only 20% disagreed. The data clearly demonstrates that the online environment is immensely powerful and important to young people

in terms of its ability to provide anonymity and opportunities to express difficult personal issues. It is also significant in the range of both formal and informal information/advice sources, combined with the ability to cross-check content to self-assemble verified understandings.

However, it is important not to overstate the importance of advice websites outside the overall mix of support and advice sources. Stand alone websites should not, at this stage, be seen as a substitute for other forms of support particularly, as explored earlier, when an issue becomes more acute. In response to the statement: 'I can access all the information I need online. There is no need to speak to a real person about my problems,' 32% of respondents agreed, with 8% agreeing strongly.

“43% of young people prefer sites where they have the opportunity to provide advice as well as receive it.”

Of course, this does in itself represent a significant percentage willing to state the internet could be their only information source. However, the response should be read in conjunction with the other data that clearly indicates the key role of offline relationships and sources. In fact, 13% disagreed strongly and 36% disagreed overall. Closely allied to this and emphasising the initial information/advice-gathering role of the stand alone website is the response to the statement: ‘I would only refer to websites for help on minor issues.’ 42% agreed overall and 16% disagreed overall.

The response to the statement: ‘I would rather tell people that I was getting emotional support through an online service than tell them I was seeing a professional for face-to-face support,’ produced a related response with only 22% agreeing and 33% disagreeing. It is important to see web presence as one vital part of the support and advice structure. It is, along with key offline personal relationships, one of the first points of call for information/advice both for the self and to help others.

How deeply internet support will be used by an individual at times of stress appears to depend on access and links to more personal advice support such as telephone access or perceptions of being professional. To some degree the acuteness of the enquiry and where it sits in the act of information/advice cross-verification is also significant. However, the importance of the internet as part of an integral process of advice-seeking to the young adult group cannot be over

emphasised. Indeed, the importance of the medium becomes increasingly self-fulfilling as 69% of young people surveyed for the Survey strongly believed that more people would use this medium for advice/information in the future. Many of the previous points regarding the key attributes of advice in online media have been well summarised by Gilat and Shahar (2007) in their review of relevant literature, observing four prime features:

- Anonymity, which reduces psychological barriers to seek help
- Ambiguity of the receiver, which facilitates projection according to the callers’ preferences
- Lack of distracting environmental cues, which helps focus on relationships
- Minimisation of the prohibitive role of time and distance.

Consistent with this supposition, empirical evidence indicates that the (online) environment enhances self disclosure and induces disinhibition of emotional expression, both positive and negative.^{xli}

The role of friends and peers

The Survey has already highlighted the value of friends to young people as a primary source of advice and information. There is a danger when reading the results to see friends as purely physical and separate from the internet. For this group much advice may well be given and displayed in online environments and friends may include many individuals that have only limited, or no, physical co-presence with one another.

In addition, the use of social network sites, bulletin boards and chat is very developed throughout the young adult group. They are more interactive in the way they learn and see online conversation or chat as learning opportunities. Research has demonstrated that there are differing and distinct types of individuals utilising advice on the internet: '...while some posted one or two targeted questions or responses, 'super-users' posted many replies in response to peoples questions and countless others read questions or responses without ever participating.'

^{xliii} In other words, and something of an over-simplification, there are those who directly solicit information, those who dispense and those who learn by watching peer-to-peer conversations with individuals probably adopting differing behaviours as appropriate to changing circumstances.

The Ofcom data cited earlier draws attention to the younger element (16 to 18 year-olds) of the young adult group making more extensive use of chat facilities whilst the older segment tend to use social networks more. Of the survey sample, 29% thought the opportunity to connect with similar people who understood them and their issues was a key reason for advice-seeking via the internet. 33% saw it as an opportunity to talk with other people who might share general issues and concerns. A much smaller 8% saw this as the single key reason to use the internet.

This kind of opportunity was explored in the Reach Out! (www.reachout.com.au) online community created for young people addressing mental health issues in Australia where the site received in the region of 230,000 individual visits each month.^{xliiii} This ability to communicate with and to view the conversations of others is not just about seeking advice/information, it is also about being able to participate by giving advice or help. 43% stated: 'I would prefer a help-site where I have the opportunity to provide advice as well as receive it'. This act of giving and receiving advice/information is both core to the online behaviour of this group and is, at the same time, a way of verifying information. By facilitating engagement in the responses of others and direct participation a website gains credibility, knowledge veracity and associated perceived levels of expertise.

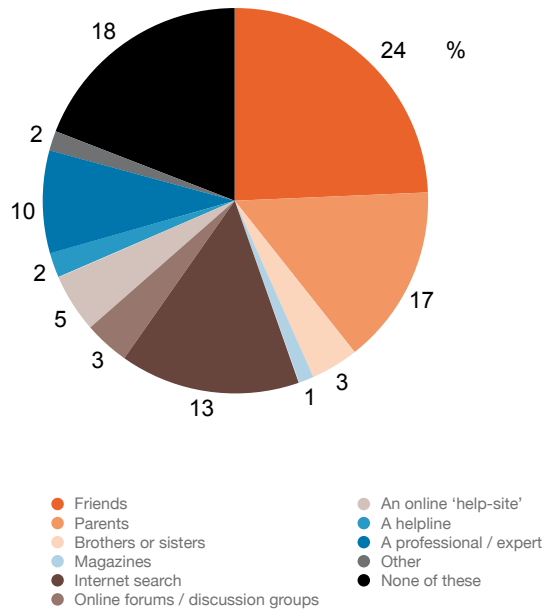
Figure 15.

Alcohol

When it comes to alcohol, which of the following sources would you consider turning to for information or advice?



Which one source of advice would you turn to first for information or advice about very sensitive concerns relating to alcohol?



Earlier analysis demonstrated the important role of the expert or professional. A number of researchers have described the difficulties that young people have in communicating health concerns to professionals^{xliv} and highlighted the need for alternative information services for young people, including peer support, helplines and online services.^{xlv} However, it is probably wrong to see the expert or professional in the eyes of a young adult as being restricted to what others might regard as a traditional professional. Whilst the professional may indeed be this traditional type, they could also be an expert or professional internet location. They could be a space where advice/information is sought through common use and where individuals can visit, watch or participate, thereby building, verifying and sustaining knowledge.

Seeking advice during stressful times

Just as it is erroneous and dangerous to view sources of advice as discrete rather than working within a complex framework (and also to fail to differentiate between elements of the advice journey from more general information-seeking to chronic), so it is important to draw distinctions between particular stressful events.

Results from the Survey indicated that each type of event had a slightly different advice/support profile and that this profile changed as the journey changed in emotional significance to the individual. In the research we were able to examine six stressful event issues – Alcohol, Sex, Relationships, Drugs, Finance and Health.

Figure 13 provided a comparison of the relative importance of advice sources regarding sensitive concerns of different topics. The comparison clearly and simply demonstrates the very different profiles for each of the examined events based on a single source of information. The following sets of data explore each of these events in a little more depth and with reference to the nature of the advice sought.

Alcohol

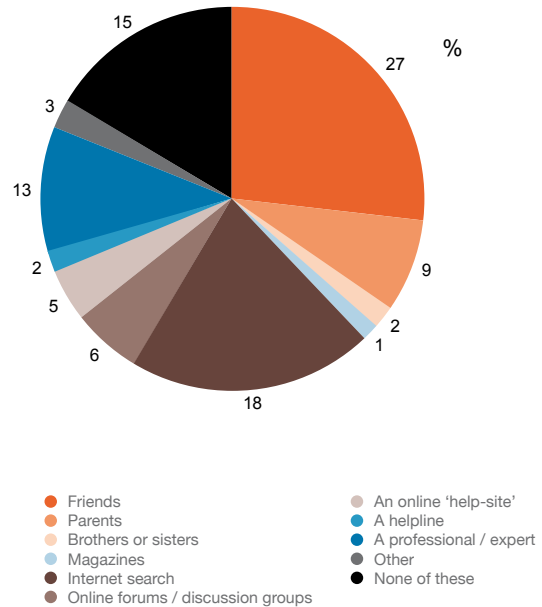
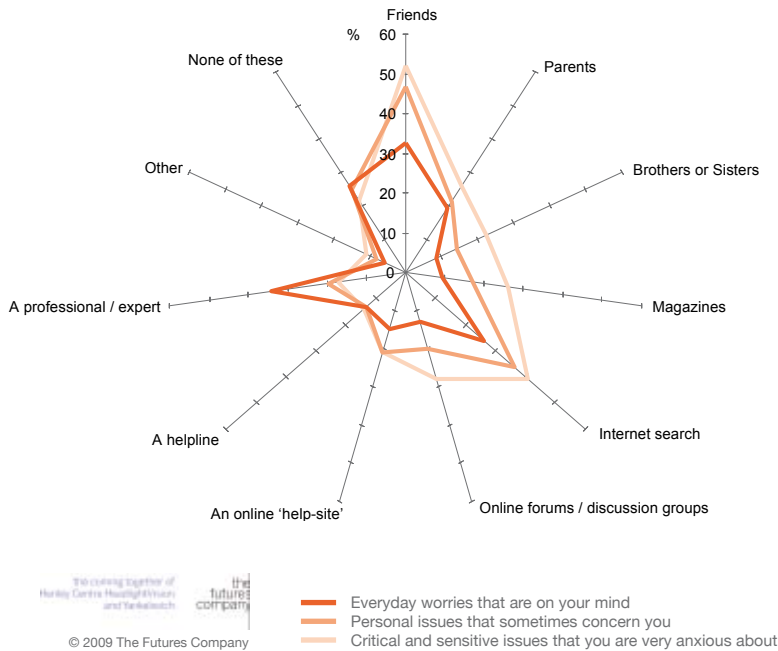
Figure 15 displays both the single source of advice chart seen earlier and maps this on to three types of concern or advice-seeking – everyday worries; personal issues that concern young people; and critical and sensitive issues that people worry about.

Figure 16.

Sex

When it comes to sex, which of the following sources would you consider turning to for information or advice?

Which one source of advice would you turn to first for information or advice about very sensitive concerns relating to sex?



What is immediately striking is the manner in which advice sources are used in combination, particularly in the more everyday stages of exploration. This time is much more about information-gathering, comparison and verification than the critical phases. The internet, in contrast to magazines, (particularly from the perspective of search and online help-sites), remains significant throughout the three advice types explored. Indeed in this instance it remains strong compared with brothers and sisters in relative importance. Online forums/discussion groups appear to be most important at the more general stages of enquiry becoming less important as the event becomes more critical.

Helplines are particularly interesting in this analysis in that across the examination of all six stressful events the helpline rating is almost identical for all three of the types of advice sought. This possibly indicates that the emotional commitment required to engage with a helpline is broadly similar across the event spectrum. If this is correct then it may mean that it requires greater commitment from the enquirer to use a helpline. Research has indicated that helplines are primarily associated with specific advice-seeking^{xlvi} and may also account for

the relatively low percentages of engagement across all the stressful events and the sample as a whole. This is not to say the role of helplines is not of considerable importance. Indeed most support/advice services which offer more than general information probably need to provide or link to a helpline. As mentioned earlier, there is a marked rise in the importance of professional/expert advice as the advice-seeking becomes more critical.

Sex

Parents are a much reduced source of advice in this area.

In this stressful situation friends and the internet are the most important sources of advice, with the internet in its various forms most significant. By contrast with the other issues, parents are a much reduced source of advice in this area. Indeed, given the spread of data across the three advice types it would appear that parents are almost as likely to be an advice source in an acute situation as for a more general enquiry. It should be noted that the importance of friends reduces rapidly when an issue becomes critical. The same can be said of online forums.

Figure 17.

Relationships

When it comes to relationships, which of the following sources would you consider turning to for information or advice?

Which one source of advice would you turn to first for information or advice about very sensitive concerns relating to relationships?

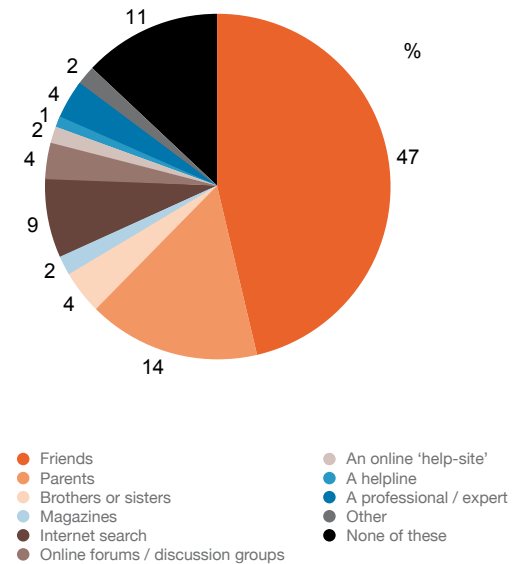
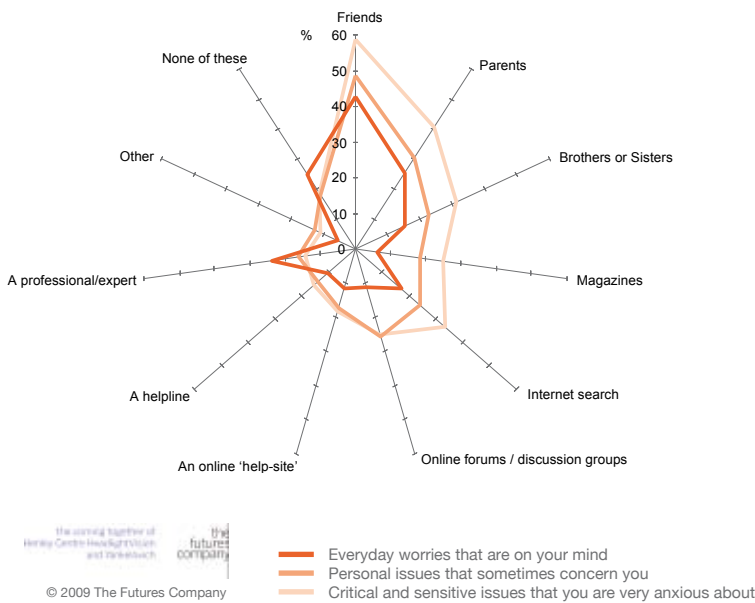


Figure 18.

Drugs

When it comes to drugs, which of the following sources would you consider turning to for information or advice?

Which one source of advice would you turn to first for information or advice about very sensitive concerns relating to drugs?

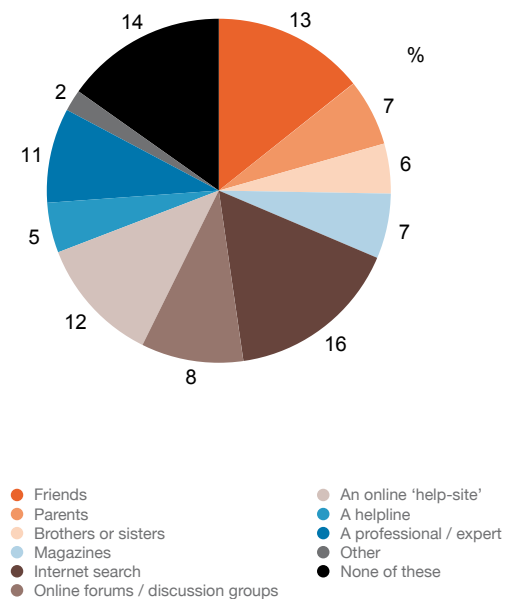
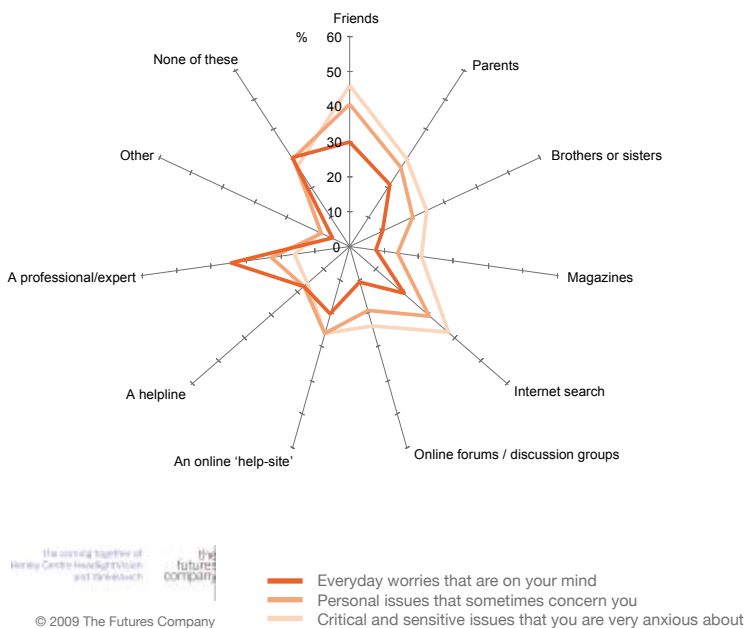
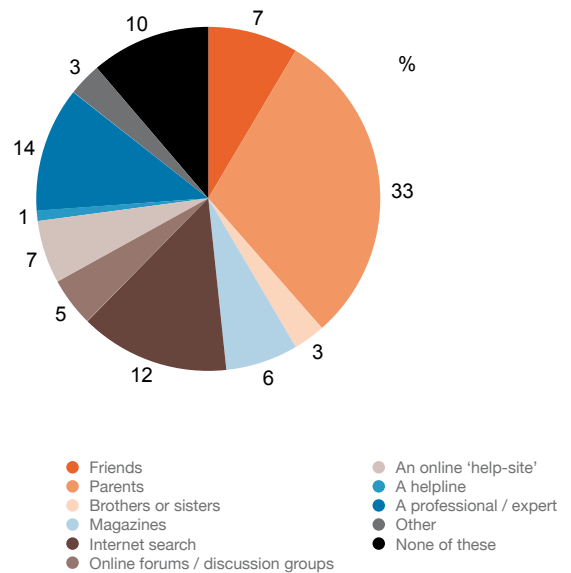
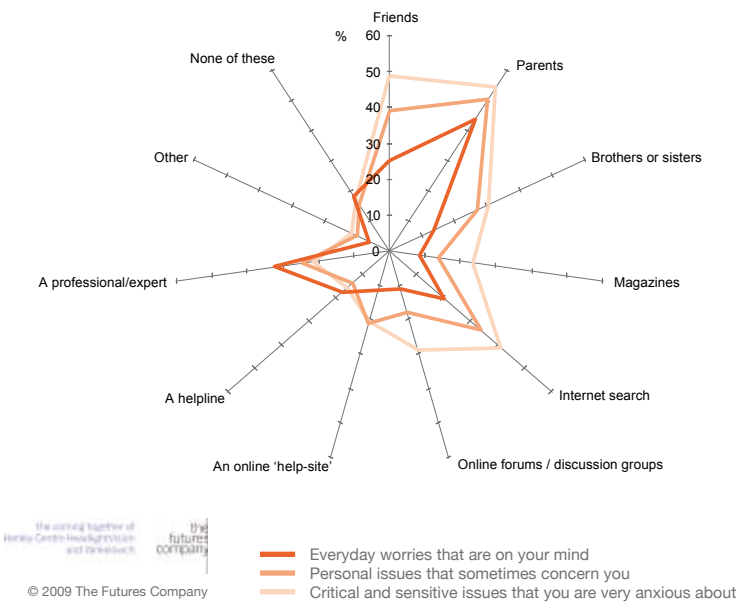


Figure 19.

Finance

When it comes to finance, which of the following sources would you consider turning to for information or advice?

Which one source of advice would you turn to first for information or advice about very sensitive concerns relating to finance?



Relationships

The most important source of advice for issues relating to relationships is friends.

The most important source of advice for issues relating to relationships is friends. Indeed, of the six events, this is the most clearly defined with friends being some considerable way ahead of parents and the internet. Friends maintain their relative importance even as issues become more critical. Interestingly professional/expert advice is perceived to be at its least important when compared to the other stressful events. In a similar manner internet search is relatively less important. Online forums are almost of equal status to internet search and fade less in value when advice is sought for personal issues but then do diminish markedly when the issue becomes critical.

Drugs

The internet is the single most influential source of advice for issues relating to drugs.

The internet is the single most influential source of advice for issues relating to drugs. This may in part relate to the anonymous nature of the internet and many drug-related activities being illegal. Internet search is most important closely followed by friends and online help-sites. Internet forums/discussion groups are also regarded as more important for this issue than any other. In total, as a single source, and including all online forms, the internet was seen as most important single source by 36% of the sample. Unlike the other internet advice sources, that reduce quite markedly as advice seeking becomes more critical, online help-sites are relatively consistent as advice becomes more critical.

Finance

This data very clearly illustrates the way in which advice is drawn from many sources. However, only the parental source is fully consistent across all the event types. The internet plays a valuable informational/advice role when issues are less critical and is still one of the more significant sources when issues do become critical. Likewise, as in general across the other issues, professionals/experts become increasingly important. However the main source of advice (and one would suspect practical support) is parents.

Health

Again the great spread of information/advice seeking relating to everyday worries is very well illustrated. The most important single sources are parents and the internet. Indeed, all forms of internet interaction account for the most important single source in 27% of the sample. Whilst parents and the internet remain influential, even when issues become critical, professional/expert advice becomes very pronounced – which is unsurprising given that we know they are both available and of high status.

Conclusions

What emerges from this brief analysis of data relating to six stressful life events or issues is a clear indication of how one size does not fit all. Each stressful event has a different advice-seeking profile which is modified according to the personal acuteness of the enquiry. Within the profile is the use and mix of several data sources which the individual assembles and verifies into some form of composite advice structure.

The data clearly indicates how important online sources are to the young people. Nevertheless, it highlights the difficulties of building and maintaining sites and structures that can handle several stressful issues when each will require different approaches and the advice requirements of individuals will vary significantly. An additional issue is the need for signposting to ensure users can find areas of appropriate interest quickly. Without this

it is difficult to see how populations of users can be established. As has already been referred to, the visitors and activity available on a site play a key role in enabling individuals to verify content and in encouraging new participation. Finally, it should also be borne in mind that the data highlighted is aggregated data whilst to each individual seeking advice it is a single, immensely personal experience.

Reflections on young people seeking advice

Young people, have different sources to turn to for advice, many of which are informal. They might turn physically to friends or family or virtually via the internet or telephone. Most young people are more than capable of seeking and locating advice and information. This is, after all, the search engine generation.

The issue for this group is probably not one of information availability but rather of finding signposts – ways of locating information, assembling several accounts, meeting others who appear to have similar needs and experiences. This may be active, participative meeting or a more voyeuristic engagement with the chat/inputs of others, and testing for veracity and utility. They are relatively unlikely to trust a single source of advice and are deeply skeptical of the authority or information that is pushed at them. Rather, they seek to discover and build.

Young people who are making the transition from childhood to adulthood are far from being a homogenous group. It may be that changes arising from their innate Digital Native behaviour make them particularly well equipped to make this transition, at least from the perspective of seeking out virtual advice. The challenge for the providers of such support and advice is to be in a position to offer that advice in formats and structures that both captivate and are seen to be credible by a young adult audience.

The following conclusions are based on consideration of literature and research that has been reviewed by the author in the preparation of this report and on the new commissioned research by the Futures Company undertaken on behalf of YouthNet.

Summary – How Digital Natives behave

- Digital Natives are used to accessing a range of media simultaneously and moving content between differing modes of access
- They have multi-modal forms of communication, choosing mode to suit emotional and convenience issues
- They obtain information by direct discovery, interaction and assemblage
- They are the search engine generation. Internet search is a first port of call for information gathering
- Whilst information from branded or recognised sources is mostly trusted, this group rely to a greater extent upon the wisdom of crowds
- Data sources are compared with wider sources and against other sites to achieve consensus or agreed views
- Young people engage significantly in social media. Younger young people are more likely to take part in chat than older young people who are more likely to engage in social networking and forums
- They seek out locations that are well connected, that may act as portals for exploration of issues
- Many seek opportunities to express their opinions and to interact with others of similar opinions
- They have personal connection devices that are private to them – particularly mobile phones, PCs or laptops. Such devices also enable individual to switch communication mode as the emotional nature of the conversation changes in intensity
- They are highly visually literate and increasingly use pictures and video as well as text to communicate.

Implications for those providing advice

- Much advice-seeking will be conducted online
- There is a strong need for effective signposting to encourage the population growth of advice locations
- Young people verify information by using several sources
- Part of the advice process should involve participation and some element of self-discovery. Discussion, often anonymously with peers is not only a source of advice but indicates the credibility of a site
- Traditional notions of expertise are still in use. However, these now operate alongside more celebrity-based ideas of the professional
- Individuals or sites/locations gain status from broader media involvement, from both new and traditional media and from the perceived status amongst peers and peer groups
- Each level of information seeking requires differing modes of connection while differing stressful events appear to have differing advice profiles. This requires advice structures and services to have extraordinary flexibility to reflect the range and way support is needed
- The relationship between the internet and the ability to move to direct physical support via a helpline or face-to-face is significant
- Even when offering advice for a single stressful issue it is moot whether experience on a site can be made sufficiently relevant and interesting for both a 16 and 24 year-old at the same time.

Conclusion

Conclusion

The internet is central to the lives of young people, it exists for them as part of the fabric of the world. Unlike older groups, the internet is not a place they purposively go to in a self-conscious manner, it is just part of the natural behaviour of life. It does not exist in isolation from the physical world, rather it operates as a fully integrated element. It is hardly then surprising that it plays such a prominent role in advice-seeking, even during some of the most stressful of moments. It naturally extends the individuals reach – allowing them to visit, interact with, verify and assemble a composite understanding of almost any given subject. Additionally depending on the situation or emotional and personal engagement, it offers equally the prospect of anonymity, one-to-one dialogue or indeed to be part of a social group of similar interests. In the future, as access becomes ever more mobile, multi-platform, faster and with richer media formats – in other

words ever-on and everywhere – the need and demand for advice through the internet will become even more critical. Already there is not a shortage of advice locations, but there is a need to ensure these can be found quickly and have authority and a voice and tone that is relevant. This authority will need to come from the young people themselves. It is an authority based on involvement and user group agreement, it cannot be manufactured, but it can be facilitated. Sites need to be locations where young people can move from basic information-seeking to actively working through problems or situations as individuals, through peer support or to more structured expert or professional advice as is required by the individual. To a large extent such sites will be structures that, whilst the framework is provided by formal organisations, are made relevant by the use and participation of young people themselves.

“In the future, the need and demand for advice through the internet will become even more critical.”

Afterword

The report gives rise to several issues of design that impact upon advice/support internet sites more generally. As these may be of interest for those involved in the provision and creation of such services we include below a far from exhaustive set of points that are worthy of consideration.

Site design points

Advice sites have to be well positioned on search engines – particularly Google.

Sites should facilitate multi-modal communication including text, email, voice, links to main social networks and Twitter (although this is still relatively minor to this group at moment). It should be possible to switch modes within an extended conversation.

Multi-mode communication is very likely to include helpline provision.

Sites need to be significantly interactive, but should also have plenty of space for simple viewing i.e. collection of private data.

To some extent the advice seeker should participate in their discovery of information. They should be able to explore levels and depth of knowledge. Formats appropriated from electronic and augmented reality gaming have proved successful.

The site should be as accessible to the mere information seeker as to the more voyeuristic visitor or those wishing to positively engage either with specialist support staff or other visitors to the site.

The role of the site within the overall support/advice network will vary in relation to the particular stressful event, although there is, in almost all circumstances, a general information role. Information and formats should acknowledge this and vary between issues. Acknowledgement of this will aid the credibility of the site.

Sites need to possess many clear links to related sites and sources of information.

There should be extensive areas available for user-created content, posting and sharing of experiential data in both text and pictorial forms.

There should be very clear policies in relation to anonymity but these should not restrict the opportunity for conversations to develop between advice seekers, either as groups or as a one to one in both public and private zones.

Young people represent one of the key user groups of downloadable and shareable applications. Creation of relevant applications may not only facilitate advice-seeking but also sharing and awareness within this group.

‘Feedback’ is important to this group. In part, online conversation or forums allow them to experiment and receive feedback in non-challenging situations. Sites should therefore provide many and varied opportunities for expression and feedback.

It may be necessary to provide sub-communities to address specific stressful issues relating to age groups as the age spread within the young adult grouping is significant.

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