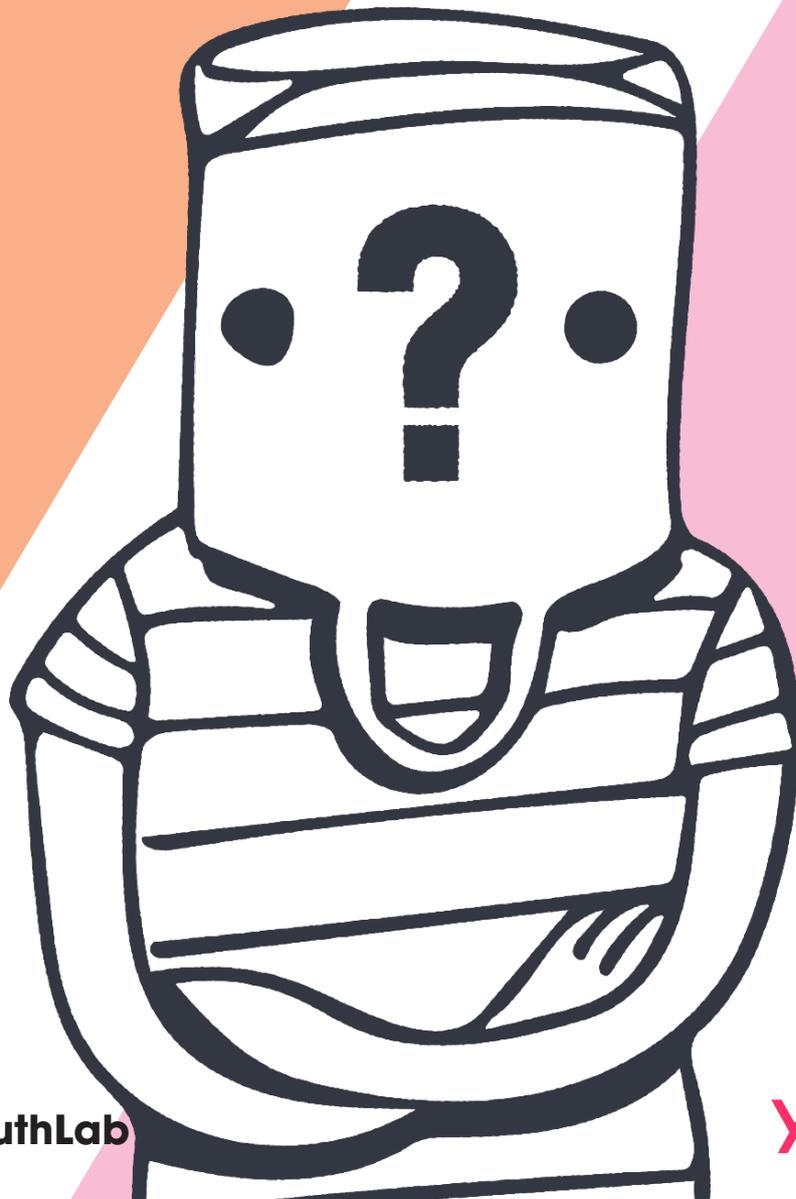


Love / Hate / Meh.

Young people's on-going relationship with social media.



Introducing YouthLab

YouthLab is revolutionary ethnographic research project created by YouthNet and DigitasLBi that was designed to capture the voices, opinions and concerns of young people engaging with social media in the UK today.

Introduction

Today's young people may have grown up with social media, but they're still the guinea pigs for its development. The social networks they use to connect with each other are constantly changing, but are not equipped to support their emotional needs and maturity.

We wanted to examine whether the journey taken by young people through social reflected their journey to adulthood; to find out whether online interactions matched those in the real world; to see what they learned along the way; and, whether social had helped or hindered this journey.

The outcomes of this research are presented via the behaviours of four persona types: Microfame Seekers; Expression Seekers; Independence Seekers; and Inclusion Seekers.

We believe this insight can help support agencies and commercial brands to engage with young people safely and creatively through digital as they enter adulthood.

Methodology

YouthLab is revolutionary ethnographic research project created by YouthNet and DigitasLBi. It was designed to capture the voices, opinions and concerns of young people engaging with social media in the UK today.

The project was delivered through a blend of data analysis, ethnography and the innovative use of tracking technology. Using these methods, our researchers were able to immerse themselves in the lives of 17 young people over a three week period.

Participants

Our participants were recruited from an unbiased sample of UK-based young people aged between 16 and 24, covering a cross section of age, ethnicity, sexuality and social background.

Data gathering

The qualitative and quantitative data gathering process had four key strands:

Ethnography – Each participant used EthOS (a Mobile Ethnography app) on their smartphone to record videos, audio files and photos in response to focus tasks set by our researchers then uploaded the outcomes to a central data repository.

The immediacy of this methodology enabled us to learn how the group behaved in different contexts – be it alone in their own homes or socially with their peer groups.

Activity – Aware that young people can often be unreliable in reporting their own behaviour, mobile activity was recorded via a number of passive app trackers, installed on their smartphones to monitor the apps they used.

To examine physical activity, we issued every participant with a FitBit Flex wearable activity tracker to record their sleep patterns and movement.

Social listening – As the project focussed particularly on young people's use of social media our researchers monitored each participant's social media profile. In particular, we examined frequency of posting and reposting, as well as the sentiment and semantics of the content created.

Peer review – The findings of the YouthLab project were shared and verified with an independent group of 12 young people drawn from TheSite's online community to identify synergies in the findings with YouthNet's work.

All four vantage points were used to inform each other, making a unique way for us to capture the texture and tone of the events and activities in the young people's lives.

Four personas

For many young people their journey within social media reflects the ups and downs of their journey to adulthood. While dominant behavioural types may be identified, the personas we have suggested are not fixed states, nor are they exclusive of one another: one young person might move through all four stages consecutively, while another might remain at one stage for the majority of their formative years.

What these personas provide us with is a set of guidelines that can help shape engagement strategies – whether for social marketing, or for providing information, support and advice.

Meet the Microfame Seekers

“I dominated on Twitter, building a following of 1500, but notifications drove me crazy. I now use the skills learnt back then on Instagram and Facebook.” Tyler

Microfame Seekers consciously work to build their social profile. They place more value on indiscriminately collecting followers and posting content that elicits return than using social media to express their own ideas and feelings. Not unsurprisingly, by favouring quantity over quality, they were the most visibly active group we identified due to the large networks they had amassed.

Microfame Seekers do not take time to engage in the content of others deeply. Instead they will actively study how people more ‘famous on social’ behave in an effort to build profile. They often mimic content and behaviours from social stars, prominent brands and celebrities. They seldom express negativity on social media because they realise it doesn’t get them as many likes and retweets as positive content.

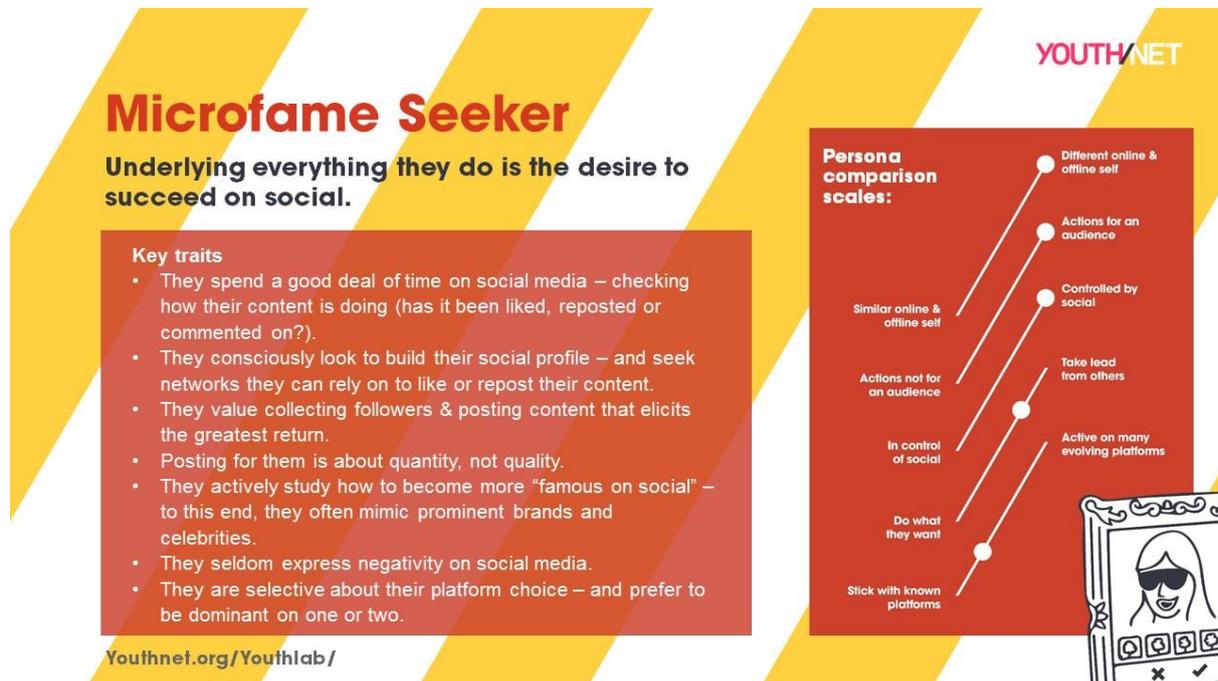
They will seek to build networks of people they can rely on to like and repost their content to boost their profile. They will often set aside time for ‘mass retweeting’ sessions to nurture these relationships, and treat the management of their personal profile like a professional job.

Mobile connectivity further enhances the workman-like activity of this group. It allows Microfame Seekers to continually check how often their content has been liked or reposted and respond accordingly.

They are selective about the platforms they engage with, preferring to dominate on one or two than to simply exist on many.

While the size of Microfame Seekers' networks may be appealing to those looking to engage young people, their lack of engagement means they tend to collect 'ghost followers' who are also looking to build profile over genuine interactions. As a result, referrals and recommendations made by Microfame Seekers will be of lower value.

Fig 1: Key considerations for Microfame Seeker



Meet the Expression Seekers

"I post songs or poems I've written on Soundcloud. I'll check in quite a lot to read people's comments to know more about what parts of my sound they like. It's quite addictive." Jared

Expression Seekers use social platforms to share their point of view or promote content or activities they've been directly involved in creating.

They're not motivated or influenced by the norms of their audience. They seldom repost the content of others, choosing instead to post original content. This not only satisfies their need for self-expression, but ironically also makes their posts popular due to their originality.

The ultimate goal of Expression Seekers is to stand out and be recognised for their achievements. They would rather see brands and other users celebrate their posts than work to promote the interests of others.

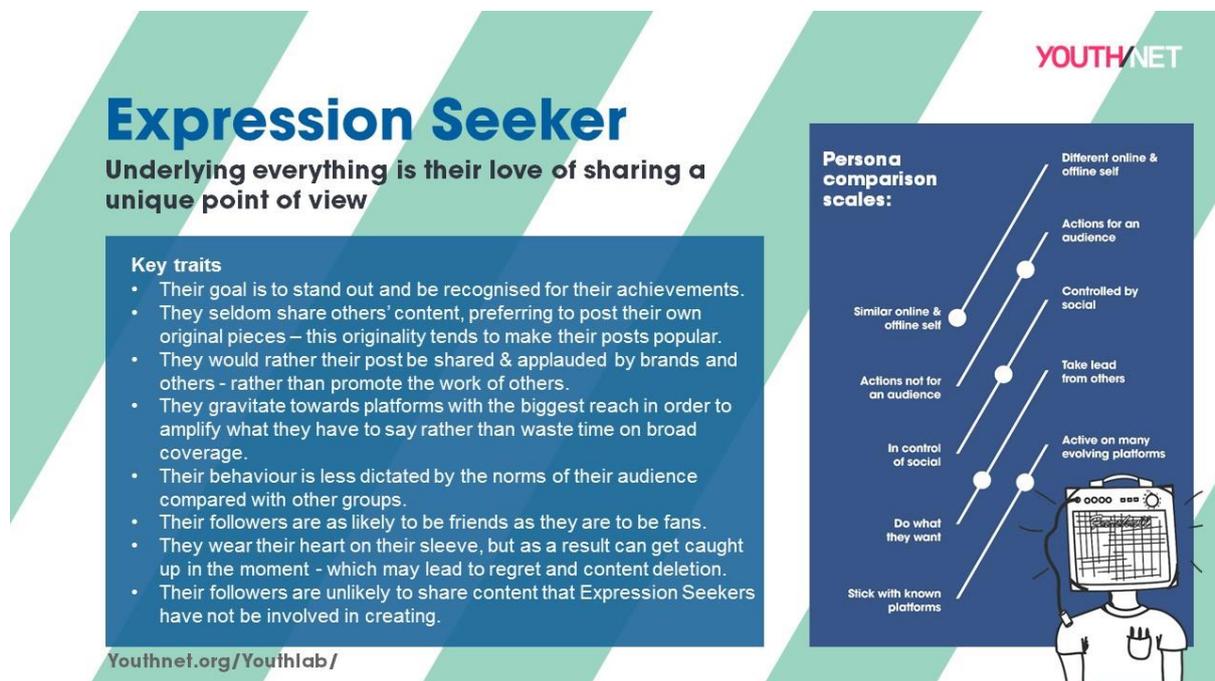
Expression Seekers will gravitate towards platforms with the biggest overall reach in order to amplify what they have to say, rather than waste time on broad coverage.

This desire for influence means Expression Seekers will quickly move beyond their real world social group and seek to influence those they perceive to share their cultural values. Their followers are as likely to be friends as they are to be fans of a song they have written or a photo they have uploaded.

Expression Seekers wear their heart on their sleeve, but as a result they can sometimes get caught up in the moment, posting content that they may subsequently regret and delete.

As their networks are strong with a high level of trust and integrity, Expression Seekers are valuable to those seeking to engage young people. However, a cultural currency is key so they're less likely to support any content that they have not been involved in creating.

Fig 2: Key considerations for Expression Seeker



Meet the Independence Seekers

“Digital let me break out of quiet village life through music platforms and chat forums.” Matt

Independence Seekers have an innate need for integrity in online interactions. As a result, they tend to dismiss interactions they feel to be disposable or insincere.

They guard their privacy on social and are wary of oversharing in public arenas. More than any other group, they're drawn to private messaging spaces or closed social groups. They seldom appear active in open feeds and do not take part in public resharing activities.

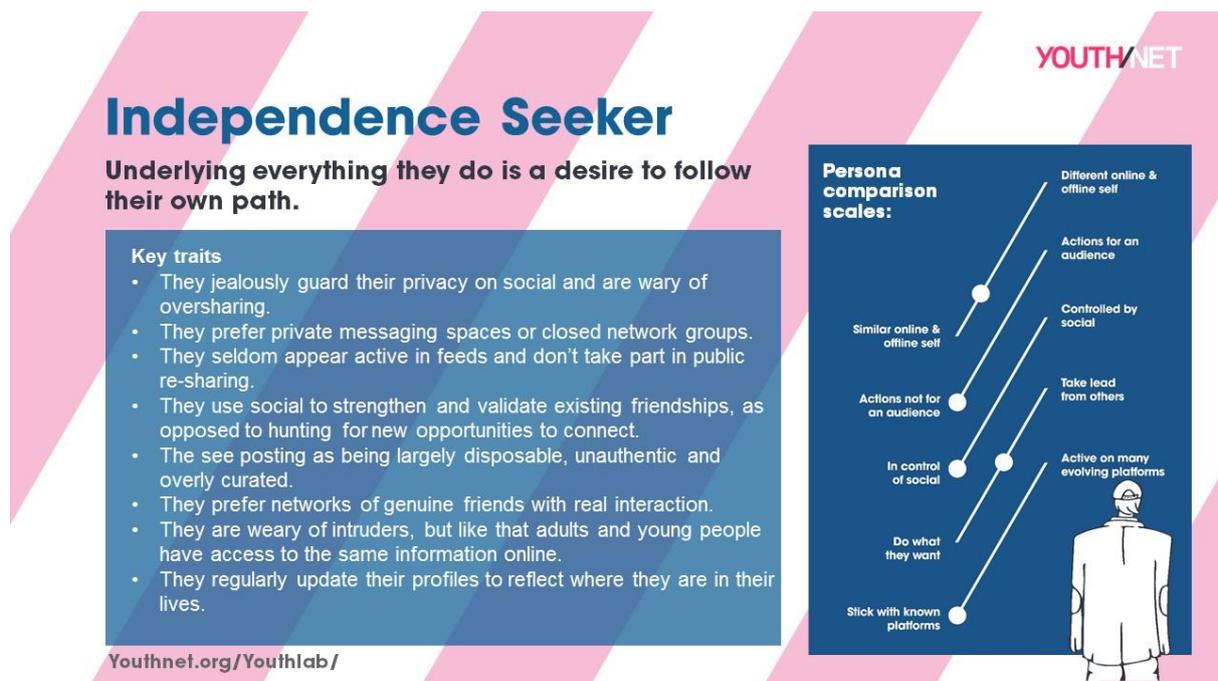
Independence Seekers find social can help them communicate with others where they may struggle in the real world through shyness or location. They seek to use social to strengthen and validate existing friendships as opposed to hunting for new opportunities to connect with large anonymous audiences. As such, they view most social posting as unauthentic and overly curated.

They value the ability of social to give them access to specialist information and will subscribe to newspaper and magazine feeds. However, they prefer their interactions to be with genuine friends. This desire to be rooted in reality means their online activity is more closely connected to events and interests in the real world than many others.

They are aware that adults, in the form of parents, teachers and potential employers, have the same access to information online as young people. As a result, they're wary of intruders into their personal network. This caution leads them to regularly update and edit their social profiles to reflect where they are in their lives – for example, deleting historical content perceived to be babyish or embarrassing.

Independence Seekers are ambitious about their future on social feeling they will do more and learn more as they confidence grows with it. They believe that one day it will allow them to reach beyond their local networks and to connect with employers.

Fig 3: Key considerations for Independence Seeker



Meet the Inclusion Seekers

"I used to get panic attacks and worry about popularity." Holly

Inclusion Seekers, above everything else, want to fit in with their friends. They tend to follow more than create and are constantly on the lookout for opportunities to join conversations. When it comes to building a network on or offline they tend not to look far beyond their immediate real friendship or family groups.

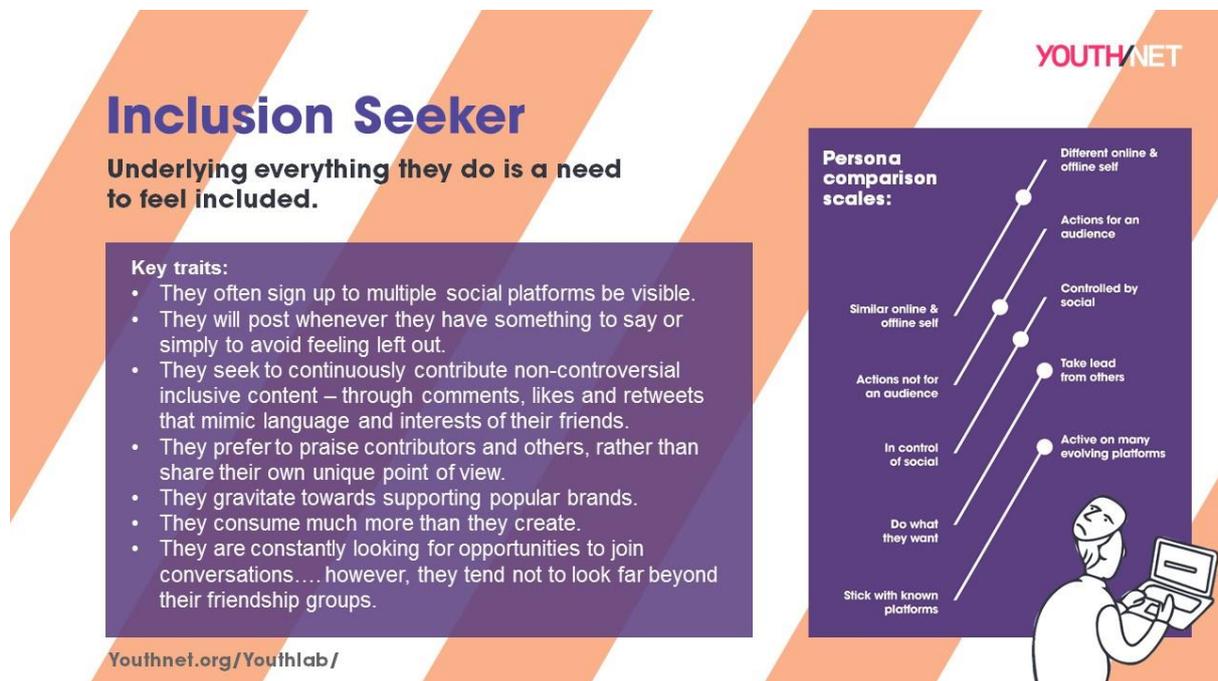
Inclusion Seekers are worriers. They are concerned about not fitting in with their groups, missing conversations, and where their future might take them. They will sometimes lose sleep over these worries, but will use digital to seek answers to key questions.

They seek to contribute continuously to these familiar groups with non-controversial, inclusive content. They do this through comments, likes and retweets that mimic both the language and interests of the friends in their network.

Despite their limited social spread, Inclusion Seekers are often signed up to multiple social platforms to ensure they're visible in any arena where their friends might congregate. Moreover, they'll reinforce their presence by posting anything simply to confirm their existence on these platforms and avoid feeling left out.

Inclusion Seekers prefer to praise the contribution of, or agree with, others rather than share their own point of view. This need for conformity is also manifested outside their direct social circle. For example, they tend to support popular brands rather than risk being associated with niche or controversial brands.

Fig 4: Key considerations for Inclusion Seeker



Insights

Young people are prolific and skilled digital marketers. Through YouthLab, we looked to identify insights into shared behaviours that could be used to engage with young people in the social space and to celebrate the diversity of youth culture.

1) I learn from others that positives are more easily shared.

“You get a concept of what the norms are from seeing what other people post and don’t post. The reactions they get to posts, and the reactions you get.” Giles

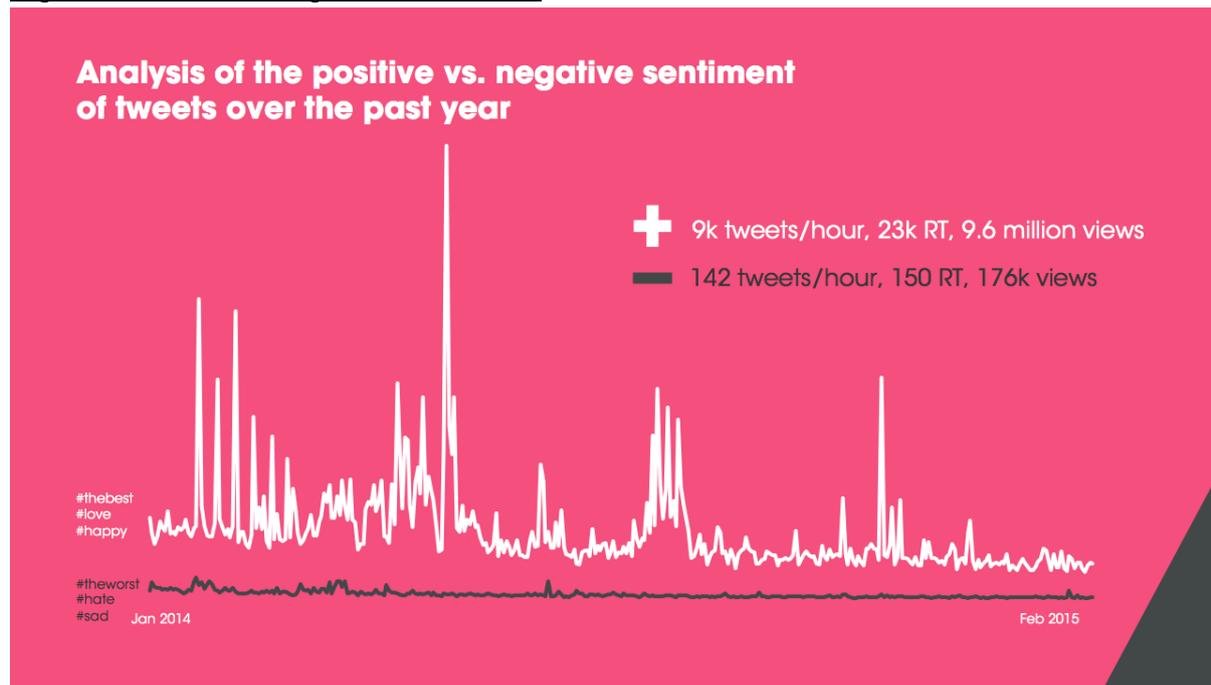
“Everyone I know puts their better self forward on social media – that’s just the way it is!” Cassie

Young people learn how to behave on social media from others in their network. Their role models on social are commonly other young people with a strong social presence, high-profile brands and media celebrities.

Our participants reported that content from brands and influential people was universally positive in tone. To achieve a similar level of popularity, our group felt that they too should present their lives through a positive filter, regardless of reality. This glossy, positive sheen on life was applied to both written content and to images where artificial poses and filters were commonly applied to mimic the production values of magazines.

Group insight: All of our group had been affected by this positive culture; for some it was conscious, but for most it was unconscious. Cerys claimed that she was "not a selfie-taker". When we asked her to guide us through her Twitter profile she was shocked by how the majority of her photos were smiling selfies taken from exactly the same angle.

Fig 5: Positive vs. negative sentiment



Analysis of Twitter posts revealed a dramatic skew towards positive sentiment. Analysing the average number of tweets over the past year, the results showed around 9k tweets/hour were likely to be positive compared to 142 negative tweets/hour; 23k RT with 9.6 million views compared to 150 RT with 176k views respectively.

Brand insight: Young people accept that the positivity of brands is ubiquitous, yet perceive it to be insincere. There may be an opportunity for brands to stand out in social by delivering content that better reflects reality.

2) It is safer to express my negative side through the work of others.

“When I miss home I share a BuzzFeed quiz with fellow Liverpool lovers.” Jessie

Young people largely conform to a dominant culture of positivity in public social spaces, but they’ve learned to use memes to counter it.

The social media profiles of our participants and TheSite users showed that when they wanted to express darker feeling on public platforms they used ‘Trojan Horse’ content found in popular memes and hashtags (sharable content that’s created by someone else). This sharing of memes serve to release young people from the responsibility of being the sole creator of negative material while allowing them to express their true feelings.

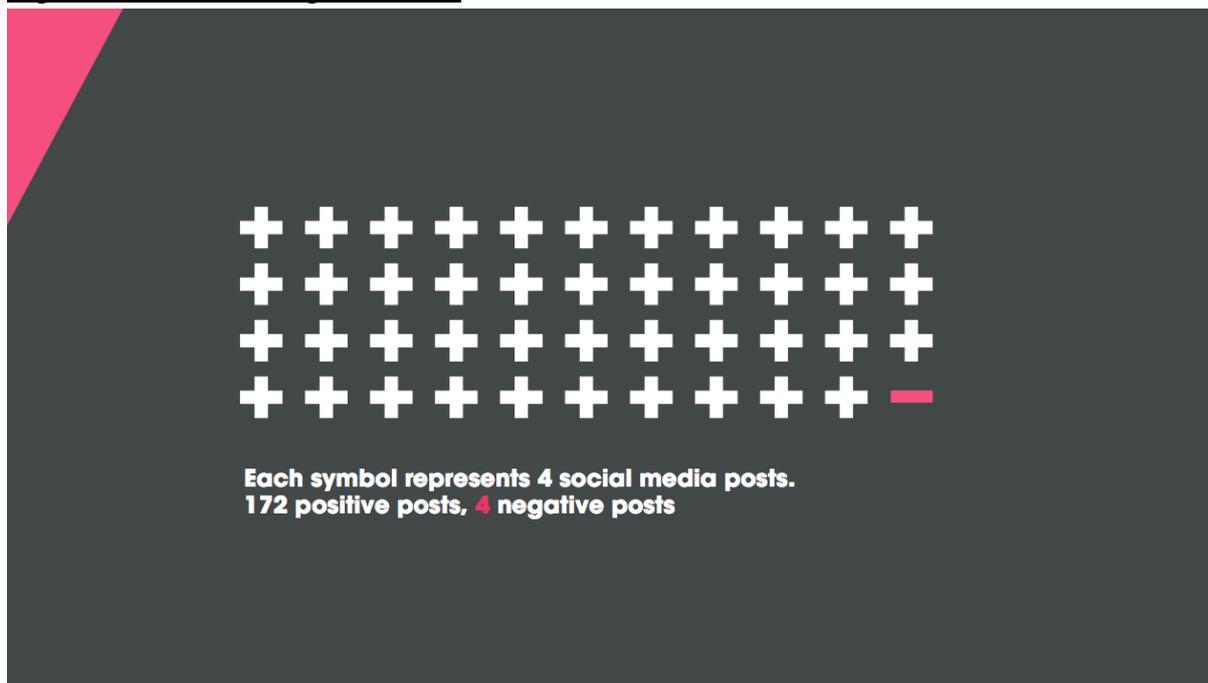
The sharing of quotations, song lyrics, links and images that express more negative or dark feelings is the dominant activity – both positively and negatively – on

platforms like Tumblr. However, we also saw similar behaviours being displayed on Facebook and Twitter.

While it seems that young people might struggle to articulate negative feelings on their own, it's more likely that they prefer to associate themselves with content that has an audience behind it, hence lessening the risk of personal criticism.

Group insight: Of our 17 participants' posts on multiple platforms over a three week period of fieldwork, there were only 4 negative posts out of 176 posts.

Fig 6: Positive vs. negative ratio



Brand insight: The overly positive tone of social means that brands may struggle to convey harder messages to young people. The use of sharable memes will allow young people to engage and share more serious content without taking responsibility for its downbeat nature.

3) I feel compelled to constantly check social feeds as a way of controlling how I'm perceived.

"You don't want to know what someone did a day ago, you want to know what's going on right now." Holly

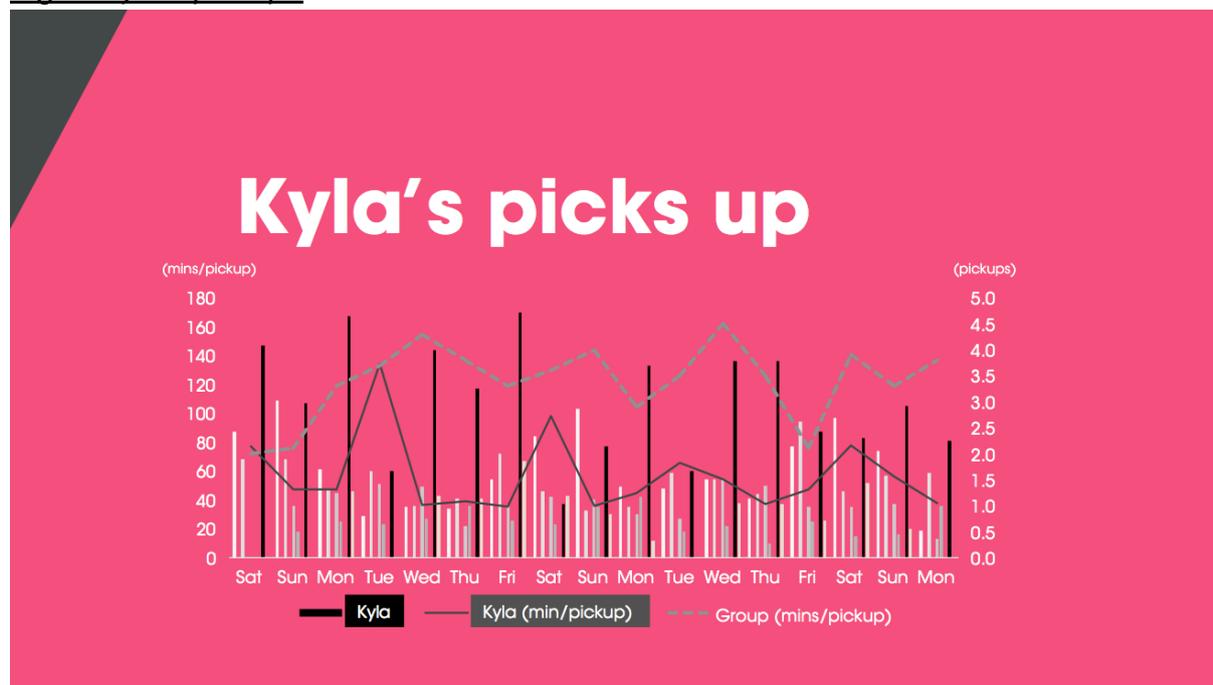
Trying to stay up to date with new content posted by friends, or posting themselves to remain present to others, places considerable stress on young people. This is amplified by the speed and addictive 'always on' nature of social.

The 'feed' (the stream of new content on any social platform) placed particular pressure on young people. Most of our group primarily accessed social media via their mobile phones. Responding to the notifications they received was a common obsession. Notifications were described as a source of stress and irritation. But instead of switching them off, they put up with the pressure because it allowed them to feel in control of their feed.

The compulsion to monitor and respond to notifications was most common among Microfame Seekers, for whom each notification was potentially a small step towards expanding their networks. They were most likely invite feedback by tweeting celebrities, adding comments to a trending topic, or posting higher-stake original content.

Group insight – Over the course of our fieldwork Kyla, a student from Glasgow, picked up her phone the most – some 170 times per day. However, compared to the group average of time spent on their phone during a pickup, Kyla's average was much lower. Kyla was 'snacking' through short compulsive bursts of checking her social feed.

Fig 7: Kyla's pickups



In our research, the average number of daily pickups was 55 per day, the highest being 177 in one day.

Brand insight: High-frequency posting is the default position of brands trying to respond to the fast moving feed. This behaviour was criticised by our group. Instead

brands should be confident that high-quality posts are unlikely to be missed due to mobile snacking of young people

4) I have no power over what my network might say about me.

“I just hate it when someone posts an old photo and it’s in the feed without me realising. That’s really annoyingly because you come late to something that’s about you.” Ellie

Young people will try to curate their posts to control how they present themselves. However, they cannot control other people’s behaviour. Content posted by others means that they might be presented in a bad or embarrassing light to their entire network at any time.

Within our group, most of our participants had edited their profiles or posts to improve their public image. However, all felt vulnerable to content posted by others.

The most common area where people wished they could control was around relationships. One participant, Jade, remembered feeling humiliated when she found out on social media that her ex-girlfriend had moved on. The public nature of the ‘relationship status’ announcement was a shock; she felt like she deserved to be privy to the news before “everyone else found out”.

Group insight: The fact that they can never feel fully in control of their social media feed places pressure on young people and makes them highly conscious of the vulnerability of their personal brand. Whilst they will continue to participate on social, they are still building their identity and fear being misrepresented.

Brand insight: Young people are deeply concerned about their reputation within their social groups and how outsiders might perceive them. Brands must be careful how they use the profiles of young people. Associating their name with your content without permission will quickly alienate a potential supporter.

5) I can spot when brands try too hard to be ‘my friend’ on social.

“My feed can feel saturated with messages, deals and promotions from brand pages.” Matt

Young people are aware of marketing by brands and social is no exception. Having been over exposed to advertising from a young age, young people are increasingly indifferent to attempts to engage them in the social space.

Display advertising was often seen as a ‘given’ of online life and even perceived it as a sign of quality on websites and apps. However, exposure to advertising over years

of interaction online had led young people to be acutely aware of the strategies brands use to connect with them.

Our group were quick to critique brands and celebrities that 'try too hard' on social platforms, such as posting too much in a single day or posting the same content over and over.

*"It's a bit of a let-down when your favourite clothes company posts tweets that are clearly written by a 20-year-old community manager, probably on an internship."
Jade*

Group insight: Young people have learned to block irrelevant 'feed spam' from brands. However, few will stop following the brands and celebrities they deem guilty of this 'try hard' behaviour. When analysing our own participants' profiles, the strongest critics tended to replicate the behaviour they saw in brands.

Brand insight: Brands need to be aware that young people are increasingly critical of brand interactions that do not feel genuine. While young people will not stop following these brands, they will simply ignore their posts.

6) The more my network grows the more I post for them rather for me.

"Over time, my posts became less about my own opinions and more about what I felt I was supposed to write as a beauty blogger." Ellie

Eventually, young people who are successful in social will become influenced by the need to respond to their audience. A hobby that was once enjoyed can quickly feel like a time consuming job with no financial reward.

There were two driving forces behind this shift. The first was young people's increasing sophistication using the medium. The second was the inherently addictive nature of social that rewarded its users with constant information on their success with hard data on the reposting and favouriting of their content.

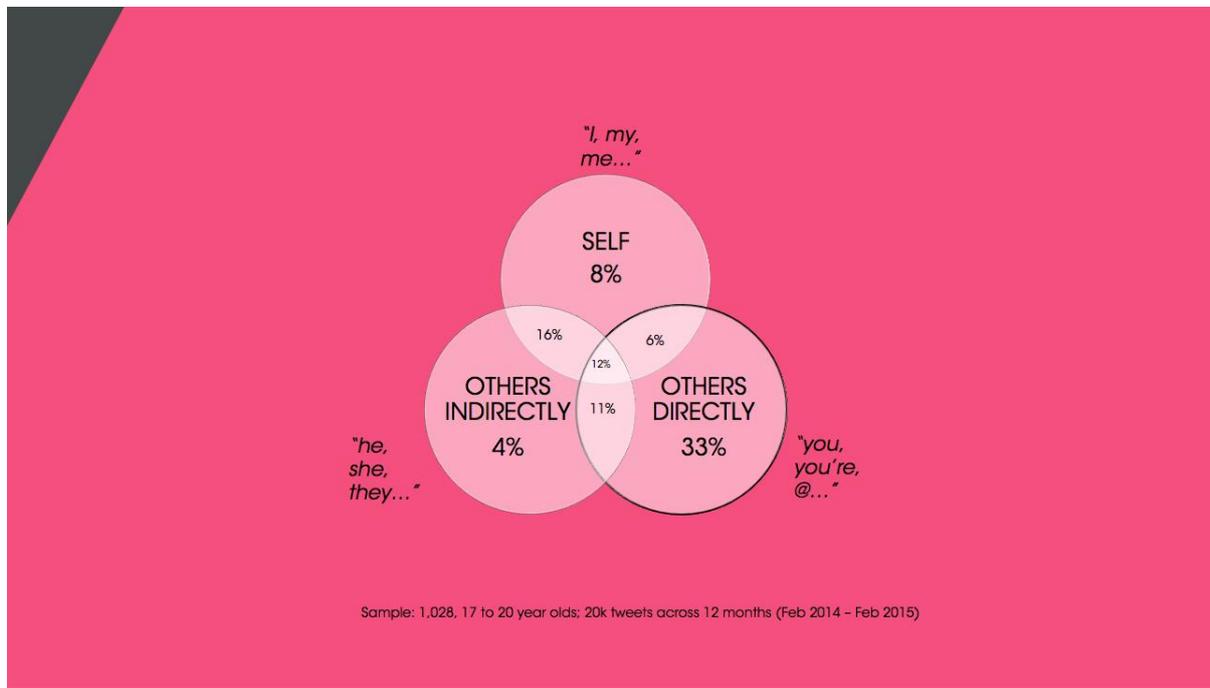
As young people began to monitor site analytics and social validation features, such as likes and retweets, they naturally attuned themselves to content that was more popular with their audience to receive greater rewards.

When those who began posting on social to express themselves became conscious of what their audience wanted to read, they found themselves on a treadmill of production in which their self-expression could be at odds with their network's appetite:

"When you post something on Instagram you're waiting for the likes to come in. People say they only got x amount of likes and are annoyed by that." Holly

Group insight: Analysis of our group and users of TheSite showed that young people primarily direct their tweets to someone else, to encourage social engagement rather than self-expression.

Fig.8: The direction of young people's tweets



Brand insight: Young people thrive on validation and are driven to post more when they receive acknowledgement. This creates opportunities for brands to think about how they reward the value of young people's contributions to their pages.

7) Whether I realise it or not, I am a sophisticated digital marketer.

"There are ways to build followers on different platforms. Facebook is about conforming to notions of masculinity... posing at the gym and muscle definition, whereas on Instagram I can show off my interest in women's fashion." Tyler

Young people are considerably more sophisticated in their use of social than they're given credit for. They develop the skills of professional digital marketers without formal training.

While the individuals in our group varied in how much time they spent on social, each had strong opinions about how to behave, with the more active participants

acquiring specific strategies for each platform and tricks to build their networks and followers.

For example, Ellie invested time in helping others to build their following on Twitter as a strategy to receive support in return. She devoted time to 'bulk retweeting sessions' to encourage people to do the same for her.

Group insight: All our young people played the role of not just of actor in social, but also agent and publicist. However, their level of expertise in doing this was varied and largely dependent on what they could learn from brands and the behaviour of their close friendship group.

Brand insight: In trying to fit young people into broad segmentations like 'digital natives' or 'millennials' brands need to be aware of the nuances that drive individuals to behave in specific ways on social platforms are complex and change over time.

8) I see digital as a tool to help me make something of myself.

"I've spent so long chatting with people in forums that without realising it I think I've become really good at listening and offering support and advice. I'm beginning to realise I could do this kind of thing for a living." Matt

Young people are constantly reminded that they are 'digital natives' by the adult world. The media's celebration of other young people 'making it' online builds their belief that digital should play a key part in attainable opportunities for their future.

Our young people believed that their use of social would – at some point – be related to their route to work. They felt social would provide both a way to demonstrate skills and interests and a method to connect with future employers.

Charlotte regularly posted psychology articles on Twitter in case companies she would like to work for in the future looked at her profile. Others had used social to contact companies in the hope of creating a relationship. In case of Tyler, this had been successful, he noted: "I worked my magic to get the placement I deserved".

Group insight: Our young people wanted to use the tools of social media to build future opportunities – often posted directly to prominent figures in their industry of choice. However, their actual understanding of its potential impact on their employment prospects was still unclear.

Brand insight: Young people want to learn and demonstrate meaningful skills through digital and build the connections with brands that help them in the world beyond social media.

9) People don't show their real selves on social media, so head to private messaging spaces for more meaningful connections.

"She'll share 'I hate the world right now' and I know it's just that she wants people to ask what happened... whereas in private spaces I feel me and my friends can be more open and honest and not have to perform a certain role." Rose

Young people want to play, perform and experiment in social but they know that curated public interactions can often lack true emotional connection. Private messaging feels more honest and has an increasingly important role in their lives.

As young people began to consciously curate their content to protect their reputations online and become more aware of curation by others, they will seek to express themselves in real time environments where a lack of digital footprint allows greater honesty.

Group insight: A shift towards more private messaging spaces like Whatsapp and Snapchat was noticeable in our group, but young people had not deserted public platforms. For Expression Seekers and Microfame Seekers, these still played a key role.

Brand insight: Young people are moving away from public posting in a quest to find digital environments where they can express themselves more freely. Brands should seek to mirror these personal interactions or risk young people disappearing from their view.

10) I am aware I have revealed a lot about myself and I fear for my privacy.

"The fact that employers can access your photos makes you more cautious." Ellie

Young people are mindful of their privacy and the information they have shared publically. This has been magnified by stories of leaked photos and tarnished reputations in mainstream media.

Media stories such as the hacking of the iCloud and the resignation of the UK's first youth PPC, Paris Brown, have made young people aware of the risks of personal exposure through social. All our participants reported that apocryphal tales of hacked accounts and the posting of embarrassing pictures were passed among their friend groups.

Without exception, our group had their accounts set to the highest possible privacy settings to allow them to monitor and control traffic to personal information. Despite

this, they were still worried influential outsiders might access their content or photos with a negative effect on their prospects.

Group insight: Romily, Ellie and Rose – all young women at different ages and life stages – regularly edited photos on Facebook. They did this ‘just in case’ a potential future employer might see them.

Brand insight: Brands must be aware that young people are nervous about external agencies accessing their content and the negative effect that may have on their future careers. Clear statements on how personal information is handled and used are essential.

11) *I feel like the fun of connecting outweighs any bad experiences I’ve had.*

“In a way, it’s a bad thing being so aware of what other people think of you – micro-managing your life and making sure you have a nice profile and all that. But the positives outweigh the negatives; you can find new things and share stuff with your friends.” Romily

Negative experiences do not drive young people away from social platforms. Rather they seek to learn from these experiences and take steps to avoid them

Our group spoke of finding themselves on websites that shocked them; seeing disturbing links appear in their feed and being bullied online. However, bad experiences were experienced uniformly by young people and had – to degree – become perceived as a badge of honour or valuable learning experience.

While Louise reported finding surprise sexual imagery on Tumblr that had shocked her, she was proactive in changing her settings to avoid it happening again. Experiencing negativity online made the individuals in our group feel they were more prepared, alert and capable of avoiding the same thing happening in the future.

Group insight: Jade spoke of seeing her ex-girlfriend starting a new relationship through open feeds and how upsetting it had been. However, while she took steps to reduce the impact of these posts by blocking them, she did not delete connection with her profile.

Brand insight: Young people are pro-active agents for responsible marketing and publishing.

Our Predictions...

Chicken and egg – young people and brands

Young people are highly influenced by brands trying to engage them in this space. Exposure to advertising over years of interaction online has led to a hyperawareness of the strategies and tactics brands use on them. Without necessarily realising it, young people are showing immense prowess in understanding successful brand management, largely because they are playing the role of actor, agent and publicist of their own personal brand, across multiple devices and platforms.

What we are left with here is a warped cycle: young people are influenced by how brands behave on social, while brands plan how to market to youth based on how they see young people act on social platforms.

Though these two worlds seem to be feeding off each other, brands are moving further away from their target because young people are becoming acutely aware of their predatory nature. It is as if young people are consciously choosing to 'opt in' to play with brands on social, as opposed to being led or manipulated by marketing efforts.

I want to be me – the move to messaging

This dominant digital culture of positivity makes the public social space – traditionally a platform to broadcast unique points of view – somewhere young people increasingly feel like they can't express themselves fully.

If young people want to vent, they do so through meme-style content that has often already 'gone viral' with an audience behind it. This reduces the personal risk of a backlash from the anonymous masses against a post in which they may have honestly revealed themselves.

The feeling that it is not safe to fully express themselves online often stimulates in young people a search for more meaningful connections and opportunities to be themselves. Most commonly, this leads them to real time, private messaging spaces such as Facebook messenger, Whatsapp and SnapChat – the latter in particular is celebrated by young people for encouraging less curated and entirely temporary posting.

A secret society – the use of hashtags

Young people are searching for more meaningful ways to connect and express themselves online. Within our research, we discovered realms of interest-based networks that use the mechanisms of a social platform, yet operate quite exclusively from them.

The passport to these communities is most commonly hashtags. Unlike the trending hashtags often used by brands to mark particular events or offers, young people use

interest-based hashtags to quickly connect with other young people for example the superficially meaningless #yolo (you only live once).

It's difficult for brands to engage on this ever-changing micro level, not least because a trend may have passed before they spot it. However, the benefit could be greater because the unique content within these communities is subject-specific, as opposed to content that has trickled down the hierarchies on Facebook and Twitter from brands.

Glossary

Below is a list of definitions of technical, slang and reference terms used within this research.

- Brand-An organisation providing products, information or services seeking to engage through social.
- Comment- To add a short text based addition to another post.
- Feed – The stream of new content on a social platform; eg a Facebook timeline.
- Feed spam – Advertisements and sponsored content within a Feed.
- Favourite- To publically endorse content on Twitter.
- Ghost followers – Followers of a profile with no interest in genuine interaction.
- Hashtag – A label or metadata tag applied to social media posts; commonly used to emphasise content or navigate to associated posts.
- Meme – An idea or behaviour spread virally across the Internet. This may be an image, video or a phrase.
- Like-To publically endorse content on Facebook.
- Mobile snacking – Short, compulsive checking of activity on social media via a mobile device.
- Notification – Indication that content has been added to the social feed, usually pushed to the user via an icon carrying a number, an email or an alert sound.
- Pick up – A single session on a mobile phone.
- Pick up neurosis – The compulsion to check and recheck a mobile device for updates from social feeds.
- Post – To publish a piece of content to social network. Also a piece of content published on Facebook; eg a Facebook post.
- Retweet – To republish a Tweet by someone else.
- Social – Common collective term for social media
- Social media – Websites or mobile apps that support the publishing, viewing and sharing of content between networks of people; eg Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.
- Tweet – To publish a piece of content to Twitter. Tweet also refers to the piece of content itself (eg an image, video or 184 characters of text).

To set up your own YouthLab contact:

**development@
youthnet.org**

